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GLOBAL FORMATIONS OF RACE IN CLOSE QUARTERS:
IRISH AND AFRICAN AMERICAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN NEW YORK,
1880-1940

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Global Formations of Race in Close Quarters:

Irish and African American domestic workers in New York, 1888-1940

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My dissertation investigates the experiences of southern African American women migrating to New York after emancipation and Irish women, who became heavily concentrated in domestic service positions there as a result of the migration that followed the devastating potato famines of the 1840s and 1850s. Although both groups of women were clearly marginalized because of their racial, gender, and class status, they moved to the center of debates about the meanings of citizenship, blackness, non-whiteness, whiteness, and the ideals of domesticity in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As southern Black, immigrant, and white women came into greater contact in the domestic sphere, the supposed “bedrock” of American civilization, it became a site of contention as groups negotiated modes of power and definitions

of who was white and who was an “American.” Native-born white employers and Irish and southern African American domestic workers used personal interactions, letters to the editor, satirical images, and newspaper and journal articles as platforms to construct identities that would allow them to claim the material and ideological promises of the “American Dream.”

Debates about the “domestic service problem” in New York City did not occur in isolation, of course. *Harper’s Bazaar* and other periodicals carried these discussions overseas, featuring transnational conversations between employers in the U.S. and London who exchanged tips about how to deal with the “belligerent” domestic workers who were “invading” their homes and providing “inadequate” service. This study also examines how Black intellectuals including W.E.B. Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper inserted their own theoretical contributions into this global debate about domestic service and the particular interaction between Irish and southern African American female laborers in the North.

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Preface

I began my journey following the lives of Irish and African American domestic workers while I was an undergraduate student participating in a domestic exchange program at New York University. One August morning while walking through Washington Square Park to my “Gender and Globalization” course, I witnessed a striking scene. I saw women speaking to each other in what sounded like Caribbean dialects as some pushed young white children in swings and others sat on the park benches looking after strollers holding white babies. These Afro-Caribbean women were apparently responsible for domestic labor in the homes of white New Yorkers.

These scenes were particularly powerful for me as a twenty year old African American woman from Atlanta, Georgia. I had certainly read about African American women in domestic service during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the South and thousands of contemporary immigrant women employed as domestic workers across the United States. But in Atlanta, at least, one rarely saw women of African descent caring for children other than their own anymore. Perhaps, such scenes were not familiar to me because Atlanta now has a large Black middle class population. Vibrant memories of African American women working in the homes of white families in the city still exist, but mostly in the minds of blacks who lived during the segregation era.

Such memories of southern African American women were passed down to me by my mother, who talked about my great grandmother working as she would put it, for “the white folks on the mountain” in Chattanooga, Tennessee. My great grandmother, along with countless other Black women, would board an incline train every day that carried them to the top of the mountain to work in the homes of wealthy white families. After reading Bonnie Thornton Dill’s *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class*, Gerda Lerner’s *Black Women in White America*, Jacqueline Jones’ *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, and Judith Rollins’ *Between Women: Domesticity and their Employers*, I learned that southern Black women in the early twentieth century not only travelled up mountains to perform domestic work, but also up north to New York City and other urban areas to find employment as household laborers.

Thus, after seeing the Afro-Caribbean women in New York I immediately thought of their African diasporic predecessors, the thousands of southern Black women who migrated to New York in search of domestic work. I wondered: How might the history of Black women’s migration to the North connect to the lives of other migrant women in New York? I was pushed to explore this question further when I was introduced to the history of Irish domestic workers in my “Gender and Globalization” course. I was struck by the similar histories the two groups shared.

I investigated these connections further while participating in an undergraduate domestic exchange program between New York University and Spelman College. After conducting archival research at the Bobst Library, I came across domestic service manuals written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by women employers in England and the northern United States that described Irish women who worked in their homes. These employers especially denigrated their Irish employees, often complaining that the women were “dirty” and “inefficient” servants. These same ideas followed me down South when I returned to my home institution Spelman College. I joined a team of student researchers collectively known as SIS (Spelman Independent Scholars), which conducts an annual oral history project that collects the stories of African American women over the age of sixty-five. I interviewed four women from the cities of Atlanta and Newtown, Georgia who labored as domestic workers for the majority of their lives. When I asked the women about their relationships with their employers, some remembered a good deal of tension. And they recalled their employers using words similar to those used to describe Irish domestic workers in the North.

My research in New York and Georgia revealed that although employers complained about other groups of European migrant women, they offered a litany of complaints targeted especially at Irish and Black women. Employers described both groups of women as “uncivilized,” “dirty,” “immoral,” and “lacking intelligence” while others such as white American, Swedish, and German women

were often regarded as efficient workers who were highly recommended in newspaper advertisements and domestic service manuals. It was mostly these “white” groups who employers sought to fill governess positions while racial minority women such as the Irish and Blacks were generally asked to fill lower paying and lower status positions such as general house worker. Yet, domestic service was considered honest and respectable work in Irish and Black communities. Some Irish and Black domestic laborers held leadership positions in their families, churches, and communities at large.

Considering the distinctive labor experiences of these women, it is still difficult to ignore the resounding evidence that suggests connections between their experiences as domestic workers. As a Women’s Studies scholar, I was struck by the similar, yet distinct ideas associated with Irish and African American domestic workers in the United States. I was also intrigued that some of the ideas seemed partly rooted in England’s colonial history with Ireland and what later became the United States. I wondered: Why did employers use similar ideas of race to describe two distinct groups of women? How might have England’s colonial history with Ireland and what later became the United States helped form similar ideas about Irish and Black women? How did such ideas circulate between England and the United States? What is the relationship between domestic service, as a particular form of labor, and the formation of racialized ideas about its workers? How did Irish and African American domestic workers and their employers negotiate ideas

of race through the writings and oral histories that they left behind. To answer these questions I embarked on a journey as I “moved” with Irish and Black migrant women through the archives and oral histories of England, New York, and the U.S. South.

Introduction

At first glance, the labor and migration history of Irish and southern African American women might seem to be worlds apart. Yet, their migration to the North was instrumental in the transition of paid domestic work from a form of labor mostly occupied by poor white American women to a ghettoizing form of labor for racial minority women.¹ Similar to concepts of race used to describe African Americans, the Irish were perceived to be a ‘separate race’ that had a distinctive biology from White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASPs). According to David Roediger in The Wages of Whiteness, “A variety of writers, particularly ethnologists, praised Anglo-Saxon virtues as the bedrock of liberty and derided the ‘Celtic race.’ Some suggested that the Irish were part of a separate caste or a ‘dark’ race, possibly originally African.”² Thus, it was the distinct, but overlapping, status as racial subordinates that helped channel Irish and African American women into low-paid, low-status forms of employment.

Discourses that drew parallels between Irish and southern Black female laborers became especially pronounced shortly before and after slavery was abolished in 1865. Articulating the views of employers in New York City, local periodicals and domestic service manuals routinely characterized new comers

¹ I will use the terms “Black women” and “African American women” interchangeably throughout the dissertation.

² David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991) 133.

from the American South and from Ireland as either the “best” or “worst” domestic workers in the history of the United States. Evaluations of Irish and African American women were embedded in deeply entrenched as well as newly formed ideas of race that were simultaneously gendered, classed, and sexualized.³ Fluctuating characterizations of Irish and southern Black women signaled that domestic labor, despite its lowly status, was positioned at the heart of debates about what it meant to be an American during a period when racial conceptions and hierarchies were in the midst of upheaval.

By focusing on the similar, yet distinct representations of Irish and southern Black women who worked as domestic laborers after having migrated to New York City between 1880 and 1940, this study traces how the women’s migration and their concentration in a particular niche of labor both shaped and was shaped by processes of racialization that were central to nation building projects in the United States.⁴ Although this study focuses on the process of racialization, it is not my intention to subsume other social categories such as class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. I investigate precisely how these social categories developed racial meanings.

³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. Racial formation is a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.

⁴ The time period of the study is between 1880 and 1940 because this was when both groups of women were heavily concentrated in domestic service. Irish women had mostly transitioned into other types of employment after this period while the majority of African American women continued to work in domestic service.

The concept of racialization emphasizes how racial meanings are constructed in relation to time and space and how signifiers are attributed racial meanings that organize terms of exploitation, exclusion, and privileges in a society. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, “Racialization is an ideological process, a historically specific one. Racial ideology is constructed from pre-existing conceptual (or, if one prefers, ‘discursive’) elements and emerges from the struggles of competing political projects and ideas seeking to articulate similar elements differently.”⁵ During the nineteenth century in the United States race was defined as a natural or biological division of the human species based on physical distinctions including skin color, hair, and facial characteristics. Omi and Winant also assert that there is no legitimate scientific basis for racial classification. Geneticists have proven that members of the same racial group have genetic profiles that show more similarities with individuals outside than within the same racial group. While scientific studies conducted in the latter half of the twentieth century have demonstrated that race is a myth, it has historically and continues to bear real consequences.

By the early nineteenth century racial categories had been developed in the United States to establish a social order that served as an organizing tool for its political, economic, and cultural institutions. This notion of race positioned white, Anglo Saxon, Protestant (WASP) males as the model American citizen

⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 64-65.

while other groups such as women, enslaved Blacks, Native Americans, and some groups of European immigrants were deemed unfit for American citizenship. According to Raymond Scupin, “WASP ethnicity became preeminent in the United States through the establishment of its language, symbols, and culture. The English language was the fundamental underpinning of the cultural legacy that was bestowed by the WASPs on American society. It became the acceptable written and spoken language for the building of the nation-state and country...”⁶ The emancipation of enslaved African Americans, the Reconstruction Era, the Industrial Revolution, African American migration to northern, southern, and western cities, and waves of immigration from Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century marked a period in which the hegemony of the WASPs and the overall racial order were disrupted.

Omi and Winant note, “Particularly during the nineteenth century, the category of ‘white’ was subject to challenges brought about by the influx of diverse groups who were not of the same Anglo-Saxon stock as the founding immigrants. In the nineteenth century, political and ideological struggles emerged over the classification of Southern Europeans, the Irish and the Jews, among other ‘non-white’ categories.”⁷ Reorganizing social, economic, and political institutions in ways that protected the privileges of the WASPs involved the process of

⁶ Raymond Scupin, *Race and Ethnicity: An Anthropological Focus on the United States and the World* (Prentice Hall: New Jersey, 2002) 103.

⁷ Omi and Winant 64-65

marking racial differences among the population to locate which individuals deserved access to the material and ideological promises of American citizenship. Thus, during the late nineteenth century citizenship became a hotly contested topic as the United States received waves of immigrants from Europe and as formerly enslaved Blacks migrated into previously white-dominated cities. Groups who were considered white and male were granted the privileges of citizenship such as the right to vote, to pursue formal education, and to gain access to decent housing and livable wages. The court system was essential to defining and enforcing these racial classifications through laws that cited skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, and ancestry as well as scientific, and popular opinion as measurements of U.S. citizenship.⁸

The type of labor people performed was also an indicator of their racial and citizenship status. According to historical sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "...labor and citizenship are intertwined institutional arenas in which race and gender relations, meanings, and identities have been constituted and contested."⁹ Thus, the workplace became a site where boundaries of race, class, gender, and citizenship were negotiated daily. As Black, immigrant and Anglo-American women came into greater contact in the domestic sphere, the supposed "bedrock" of American civilization, it became a site of contention as groups negotiated

⁸ Haney Lopez 2

⁹ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) 2.

modes of power and definitions of who was “white,” “non-white,” “black,” and “American.” Native-born white employers and Irish and African American domestic workers used personal interactions, letters to the editor, satirical images, and newspaper and journal articles as platforms to construct identities that would allow them to claim the material and ideological promises of the “American Dream.”

My research in these archival sources indicate that white Protestant employers helped shape early processes of racialization by targeting Irish and African American female laborers as racially subordinate and undeserving of livable wages and secure employment. Domestic service employers frequently commented that African American women and Irish women were biologically prone to “deviant” behavior that set them apart as a race from domestic workers who were considered “white,” such as native born Anglo-American, English, French, German, and Swedish women. Employers often cited the lack of a work ethic, morals, and intelligence as evidence that Irish and Black women embodied racial inferiority and were biologically incapable of performing skilled wage labor. The serving women were described as “immoral,” “unintelligent,” “uncouth,” “dirty,” “lazy,” and “hostile.” Employers attributed these personal characteristics to employees’ religious beliefs, skin color, sexuality, facial features, brogue, and region of origin as well as the type of labor they performed. Yet, depending on the socioeconomic climate, some employers, scholars, and

journalists praised newcomers from the U.S. South and Ireland as the “best” domestic workers in the history of the nation.

Debates about Irish and southern Black domestic workers in New York City did not occur in isolation, of course. Periodicals published across the nation reveal that journalists and employers offered their opinions about what should be done to address the “problem” of Black and Irish women as well as that posed by female employers who were incapable of caring for their homes without such help. *Harper’s Bazaar* and other periodicals carried these discussions overseas, featuring transnational conversations between employers in the U.S. and London who exchanged tips about how to deal with “belligerent” domestic workers who were “invading” their homes and providing “inadequate” service. In discussing their plight, employers, domestic workers and their critics drew upon ideas of “blackness,” “whiteness,” and “non-whiteness” that were forged over centuries of British and American colonial ventures. These ideas were also deployed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in relation to enslaved Blacks and Irish indentured servants. Although conceptualizations and discourses changed over time, core formulations still informed conversations about domestic labor and laborers into the twentieth century.

Yet, gendered ideas of race were also used to explain why Irish and Black women were the “best” domestic workers. Racial minorities participated in these early processes of racial formation by writing articles in periodicals such as *The*

Chicago Defender and *The Southern Workman* that proclaimed Black women were the most professional workers in the occupation and should be paid livable wages and granted vacation and sick time. Through publications written by Black intellectuals, including Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper, African Americans also inserted their own theoretical perspectives into the global debate about race, gender, and domestic service and the particular interactions between Irish and southern African American female laborers in the North.

Simultaneously, Irish servants provided their views by writing letters to local periodicals in which they claimed to be the most elite group of workers in domestic service. Using oral histories from the Ellis Island Historical Museum and interviews conducted with African American domestic workers and their family members, I seek to provide a more comprehensive understanding of southern African American and Irish women's experiences of domestic service by incorporating their perspectives about the "domestic service problem" into my analysis. In addition, the discovery of letters to *The Brooklyn Eagle*, *The Amsterdam News*, *The Crisis* and other newspapers allows me to explore the attitudes of domestic workers unfiltered through the haze of memory.

To be clear, it is not my intention to dilute the racial differences between Irish and African American women. They were born in different countries, had distinct ethnic identities, and one group had an intimate connection to enslaved

domestic labor in the South whereas the other group worked as either indentured servants or paid domestic servants in the South and the North. In addition, domestic work did not remain a ghettoizing occupation for Irish women. As they became increasingly identified as white, Irish women gained access to higher status and higher paying jobs.¹⁰ However, northern employers' incessant and racially charged complaints about Irish and African American domestic workers and the women's concentration in domestic service in the North at the turn of the twentieth century suggests that some transnational and discursive connections developed between the two groups of women. It is important to recognize that despite their distinct ethnic origins, they shared certain experiences of racism, classism, and sexism within domestic service, and it is these intersections that I examine here.

Drawing from critical race studies, post structuralism, theories of intersectionality, and social constructionist theory, I have developed an integrated theoretical framework to guide my textual analysis of archival sources that range across periodicals, diaries, domestic service manuals, and women's labor organization records. To gather these archival materials, I have conducted extensive research in archives in England and New York City. My examination suggests that particular kinds of racialization circulated across the Atlantic,

¹⁰ Please see chapter three for a more in-depth discussion of how Irish women transitioned out of domestic service.

shaping understandings and expectations of domestic labor in both England and the United States.

I trace how these racial constructs were formed in relation to larger socioeconomic and political processes, including the Industrial Revolution, the Reconstruction Era, and England's colonial relationship to Ireland and the U.S. My dissertation also tracks the migration of racial minority women at the turn of the twentieth century and explores identity formations during a period when what it meant to be an "American" was in flux. Thus, my project builds upon racial formation theory by tracing how ideologies of race both shaped and were shaped by women's labor and women's migration. In addition, this study extends racial formation theory by tracing how racialized ideas of gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity developed meanings over time as they circulated through different countries.

Although this study traces how ideas of race "moved" between England and the United States, New York City is the primary site for this investigation. Focusing on a single city where Irish and Black women comprised the highest percentage of women in domestic service allows a fine-grained study of interactions and relationships between the two groups as well as between each one and their employers.¹¹ It is difficult to measure accurately the number of Irish and

¹¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant women in the nineteenth century* (Baltimore:

Black women who worked as domestic servants in the city because census takers did not accurately record these female workers. Therefore, published statistics regarding the migration of these women are probably lower than the actual numbers. Still, it is clear that they formed the bulk of domestic workers over many decades. New York, a “hot bed of cultural diversity,” is a rich site in which to study the development of ideas as members of its diverse migrant population were struggling to define themselves in a society that privileged white native-born Americans. Ideas were constantly negotiated as migrants from Europe, the U.S. South, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were striving to create more economically stable lives for themselves and their families.¹²

Early census reports suggest that the immigration of Irish women to the Northeast increased in the 1830s, and by the 1840s the concentration of Irish women in domestic service became noticeable. Moreover, by 1845, women comprised nearly fifty percent of Irish immigrants to the United States.¹³ Faye Dudden in *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* notes the long history and prominence of Irish women in domestic work. She states, “...in Kingston, New York in 1860, of the 254 Irish women of all ages for

The John Hopkins University Press, 1983); Nancy Foner, *Islands in the City: West Indian migration to New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

¹² Early New York was first described as a “hot bed of cultural diversity” by David Narret in his article “Ethnicity and Race in Early New York,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* Summer 1993; 61.

¹³ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840-1930* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009) xix.

whom occupations were listed, 240 were domestic servants...in Buffalo, New York between half and two-thirds of Irish-born women aged eighteen to twenty-one were servants.”¹⁴

Although other groups of European women such as Germans and Scandinavians were employed in domestic service and were highly sought after by employers, they did not migrate in large enough numbers to outweigh the Irish.¹⁵ After all, Irish women began migrating decades before other groups of European women settled in the United States. Only African American women, many migrating from the South, seriously challenged Irish in the domestic service labor market. Dudden notes the connections between the employment of Irish immigrant women and African American women. She states, “In New York City in 1855, the entire Negro labor force was concentrated in just four occupations—laborers, waiters, laundresses, and domestic servants. Yet, blacks constituted only one thousand of the thirty-one thousand domestics in the city.”¹⁶

Dudden suggests that northern African American women’s preference for living in their own homes during this period was partly influenced by the intense competition from Irish servants who were generally hired for live-in positions. Interesting questions about race arise from these statistics when one asks why Irish women were preferred to African American women even though employers

¹⁴ Faye Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983) 61-62.

¹⁵ Dudden 62

¹⁶ Dudden 63

often complained about the “sloppy” work of “Irish Biddy.”¹⁷ Even as the number of southern African Americans employed as household laborers increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish women remained prominent in the occupation. The concentration of the two groups of women in paid household work created an array of responses from both employers and the workers themselves as they devised strategies to define their racial and class status in a transitioning society.

So, why were women of distinct ethnic groups described in such similar ways? While employers wrote emphatic letters to New York newspapers complaining about domestic workers of other ethnic backgrounds, Irish and African American women were targeted the most frequently. Nonetheless, statistics reveal that Irish immigrants and African American migrants were the groups most often employed in domestic service in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Stephen Steinberg, 71 percent of immigrant Irish women in the labor force in 1900 were classified as “domestic and personal” workers. Bonnie Thornton Dill notes that the percentage of African American domestic workers steadily increased beginning at 41.9 percent in 1900 and rising to 54.9 percent by 1930.¹⁸ Why then did employers who targeted these women as

¹⁷ “Biddy” was a stereotypical name commonly used by employers to refer to Irish domestic workers.

¹⁸ Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) 16;

“bad” domestic workers continue to employ them in record numbers? What can explain the gap between the constant complaints and the concentration of these two groups of women in domestic work?

Historical Background

Prior to the mass migration of southern African American women to northern cities in the 1870s and 1880s, their predecessors were discursively linked with Irish immigrant women in the colonial imaginaries of the English. Ideas of race that were developed by the English during the colonial era drew close parallels between Africa and Ireland. The English identified what they viewed as race, language, and religious inferiority as reasons to colonize Ireland during the sixteenth century. The colonizers claimed Ireland was a “backward” society, and it was their responsibility to civilize the Irish by converting them to Protestantism.

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Bronwen Walter in *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women* compares the racialization of the Irish to Africans, arguing that the English colonized both groups to extract cheap labor and similar ideas of race were used to explain why the labor of Irish and Africans was exploited in England and its colonies.²⁰ Such ideas also informed how the English perceived African and Irish

Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001) 154.

¹⁹ Steve Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience* (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 73.

²⁰ Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, place, and Irish women* (Routledge: New York, 2001) 110.

women as inefficient laborers in the domestic sphere in both England and its colonies. According to Walter, “In both cases, portrayal of unkempt and slovenly houses contrasts with the cleanliness and order of British homes where the cult of domesticity underpinned industrial capitalism. Although Irish and African women were not necessarily included in the images, domestic scenes directly implicated them in the disorder.”²¹

Colonial records in the Caribbean and England and diary entries of English planters suggest that the racial positioning of the Irish in North America was shaped by an earlier history that included African laborers in the Caribbean. Irish laborers were described as “non-white” not only because of their economic and social relationship to African Americans during the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, but also because they shared a labor history with people of African descent in the Caribbean as early as the seventeenth century. In other words, the Irish had a long history of encountering ideas of race around the globe before migrating to New York during the famine period of the mid-nineteenth century.

The Irish were implicated in the construction of ideas of race when they were recruited by English planters in the seventeenth century to work as indentured servants alongside people of African descent in the Caribbean and North America. The Irish were promised the cost of their steerage, food, and

²¹ Walter 110

shelter in return for up to seven years of labor in English colonies including Barbados, Jamaica, St. Kitts, and Antigua. However, the Irish were soon perceived by English masters as a “principal internal enemy—at times more dangerous and feared than blacks” due to the long history of hostility between the two nationalities.²²

At the same time, the images of Irish and Africans were both tied to ideas of race which linked the fate of Irish immigrants and enslaved black women in the early nineteenth century. Deirdre Cooper-Owens’ study, “‘Courageous Negro Servitors,’” reveals that white male physicians in the United States experimented on the bodies of enslaved Black women and poor Irish immigrant women to develop medical cures for illnesses among white American women during the antebellum period. Doctors would vaginally examine women from these racially subordinate groups when such practices were considered immoral if done on Anglo-American women. As Cooper-Owens puts it, “Their [Irish women’s] medical treatment indicates that the assignment of a racially degraded status was not only for black and enslaved women.”²³

²² Hilary McD. Beckles, “A ‘riotous and unruly lot’: Irish Indentured Servants and Freemen in the English West Indies, 1644-1713” *The William and Mary Quarterly Journal* Oct. 1990: 504.

²³ Dierdre Cooper-Owens, “‘Courageous Negro Servitors’ and Laboring Irish bodies: An Examination of Antebellum-Era Modern American Gynecology,” Ph.D. Dissertation. Los Angeles: University of California, 2008; 9.

Physicians also displayed nude representations of both groups of women in public. Although they came from distinct ethnic groups, Irish immigrant and African descended women were often lumped together by physicians. Medical discourses circulated during the early nineteenth century that deemed enslaved Black women as incapable of feeling pain. Thus, they were considered fecund and were expected to perform the arduous and inhumane demands of slaveholders. Although Irish immigrant women worked mostly as indentured servants and paid domestic servants, they were also implicated in such ideas and had similar experiences to those of enslaved women. According to Cooper-Owens, “To be both a black slave woman and an impoverished Irish-immigrant woman, considered by many Americans as ‘white niggers,’ was to occupy society’s lowest position...As distinct as they were, American gynecologists bounded Irish and black slave women together as gynecologic patients because of racist assumptions about how these women experienced physical pain.”²⁴

While African American women mostly worked as enslaved laborers in the South during the early nineteenth century, northern U.S. families hired mostly white native-born women and a smaller percentage of free African American and European immigrant women to work as “help” on small farms. The advent of industrialization and urbanization after the 1820s expanded the white middle class thereby creating a larger market for domestic servants. Some white women who

²⁴ Cooper-Owens 18

used to work as “hired” help became members of a burgeoning middle class and wanted to hire women to work in their own homes. As domestic labor became more of a profession, workers were no longer referred to as “help” but were considered “domestic servants,” or “domestics.”²⁵ Considering the decline in white female servants by the mid-nineteenth century and the small percentage of African descended servants in the North, families in northeastern cities increasingly sought domestic servants from overseas.

Immigrant women from various parts of Europe answered the help wanted ads circulated by American families and domestic service agencies. Although the Great Famine encouraged mass migration from Ireland, a large percentage of Irish Protestants migrated to northeastern U.S. cities prior to the Famine. In 1816 and again in 1817, between six and nine thousand Irish people left for America to work as domestic servants. Increased literacy in the English language, a developing culture of emigration, encouraging letters sent to Ireland from family members who had already settled in the U.S., and the desire to earn more money than was possible in Ireland encouraged women to migrate to the U.S. The number of Irish immigrants in New York steadily increased as the nineteenth century progressed. In 1825, sixty percent of the more than two thousand applications received by the New York Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants were submitted by Irish women. Early census reports suggest

²⁵ Dudden 44

that female Irish immigration to the Northeast continued to increase in the 1830s, and by the 1840s the concentration of Irish women in domestic service became noticeable.

By 1840 approximately forty thousand Irish emigrants settled in the United States, most of them Roman Catholic. By 1845 women were nearly fifty percent of Irish immigrants in the United States and the vast majority sought employment opportunities in domestic service.²⁶ Other groups of European women such as Germans and Scandinavians were also migrating during this period to work as domestic servants in American homes. Largely Protestant and considered members of the same Anglo Saxon ancestry as white American Protestants, employers considered these women closer to occupying a white racial status than the Irish.

Although Germans and Scandinavians were highly sought after by employers, they were not available in sufficient numbers to outweigh the incoming Irish.²⁷ By 1855 Irish women's emigration to the U.S. began to affect the employment of approximately thirty-one thousand free northern Blacks who mostly worked as laborers, waiters, laundresses, and domestic servants.²⁸ Employers preferred to hire Irish women, and northern Blacks found it increasingly difficult to find domestic service employment. Therefore, free Black

²⁶ Lynch-Brennan xix

²⁷ Dudden 62

²⁸ Dudden 63

women increasingly occupied live-out positions, sometimes at their own insistence, as mostly Irish women worked inside employers' homes. To avoid racial conflict between Irish and free Black workers, most employers preferred to hire servants from the same ethnic group.²⁹

At this time, enslaved African American women in the South were required to perform domestic labor, but they were not compensated for their work in homes any more than in fields. Interestingly, Irish women were also living in poverty stricken conditions in the North. Irish immigrant women who did not live in their employers' homes were concentrated in the poorest areas of the city which included the First, Fifth, and Sixth wards. These areas provided dangerous living conditions in which many Irish women contracted chronic or terminal illnesses. Irish families were found living in cellars without light or drainage. The deplorable living conditions of some Irish families helped facilitate the development of ideas of Irish women as the source of medical epidemics across the nation.

According to Cooper-Owens, "By the mid-nineteenth century, native-born Americans viewed Irish immigrants as financial burdens and carriers of disease."³⁰ Some of these perceptions were also attributed to the high percentage of Irish women in prostitution in New York. By the 1840s Irish women comprised the largest ethnic group in the sex trade in northern cities. Due to poverty and

²⁹ Dudden 64

³⁰ Cooper-Owens 183

discriminatory hiring practices, most Irish women could only find employment as domestic servants or prostitutes. Many of the prostitutes were former domestic servants and might have found some degree of financial independence in sex work.³¹

The discursive and physical proximity between Irish and southern Black women was heightened after emancipation in 1865, as both groups became increasingly concentrated in domestic service. Statistics collected by the Census Bureau reveal that during the last three decades of the nineteenth century until the first three decades of the twentieth century, African American women joined their Irish counterparts by migrating to northeastern cities and working in the service industry. Southern Black women migrated to claim the promises of the “American Dream” in a young country that they helped build as enslaved laborers. They sought educational and employment opportunities that had been denied them during slavery. Irish women also migrated to claim opportunities that had become available in the booming industrial North after facing the draconian policies of England, which left the Irish with severely limited educational and employment opportunities in their homeland.

³¹ Cooper-Owens 194-195

Employment patterns began to shift in the late nineteenth century and were transformed with the “Great Migration” of African Americans to the North during the early 1900s.³² Between 1870 and 1910, an average of 6,700 southern Blacks migrated to the North annually in search of employment. By 1920, 1.5 million blacks left rural areas for southern, northern, and western cities, and female migrants often found themselves competing with the Irish for domestic employment. Most of the African American women migrants were young, single, separated, or widowed, and their destinations usually included Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, or Boston.³³ As early as 1905, one-quarter of all adult Black women in New York lived alone or in a lodging house and ninety percent of Black women in the city were domestic workers.

Yet, the percentage of Irish women in domestic service did not decline during this period. In fact, the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century was a time of increased migration for both groups of women. Between 1885 and 1920 nearly 700,000 women migrated from Ireland to the United States. In 1900, according to the United States Immigration Commission, 71 percent of Irish immigrant women in the labor force were classified as ‘domestic and personal’

³² It is difficult to accurately measure the number of Irish and Black women who worked as domestic servants in the city because many women did not report to census takers. Therefore, published statistics regarding the migration of both groups of women are probably lower numbers than the actual percentages.

³³ Phillips 40

workers; 54 percent were specifically classified as ‘servants and waitresses.’³⁴ In 1912 and 1913 alone, nearly 87 percent of the Irish women who migrated to America worked in some form of private or public domestic service.³⁵ And as late as 1920, Irish-born women still constituted 43 percent of white, female, foreign-born domestic servants in the United States.³⁶

Still, while transitioning into a white racial status, Irish women gained access to higher paying and higher status jobs as an increasing percentage of migrating African American and Afro-Caribbean became concentrated in domestic service. Between 1930 and 1940, more than 145,000 Black migrants entered New York City, including growing numbers of women from the West Indies.³⁷ In 1930, the U. S. Department of Commerce census reported that of 79, 221 Black women in the labor force, the largest proportion worked as domestic servants.³⁸ Hence, while white immigrant women appeared in growing numbers in other occupations, Black women—immigrant and native-born--remained concentrated in domestic work.³⁹

³⁴ Steinberg 154

³⁵ Lynch-Brennan 42

³⁶ Lynch-Brennan xvii

³⁷ Brenda Clegg Gray, *Black Female Domestic during the Depression in New York City, 1930-1940* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) 16.

³⁸ Gray 11

Irish and African American women were greeted by mixed emotions in the North. Employers alternately praised and complained about the Irish and southern African American women they hired. Key socioeconomic and political developments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century precipitated such sentiments. The North had established economic and political dominance over the South after the Civil War and the country was adjusting to the abolition of slavery, which had structured the economy, social relations, and political systems of the nation as a whole. Thus, Irish and African American women were migrating during a period in which ideas of race, class, and gender, laws, and social interactions were being re-negotiated.

At the same time, anger among the Irish in Ireland about England's colonial dominance over the country was growing. Gendered and racist ideas about the Irish were sustained through England's insistence on maintaining its economic and political dominance over Ireland. Walter asserts that the "contested relationship with Britain" placed Ireland in a "position of feminized dependence... Britain represented Ireland as Erin, a young, beautiful but weak woman who needed 'marriage' to her strong masculinised neighbor for control and protection. The feminine position of dependence was popularized in the second half of the nineteenth century... Celts were constructed as a feminized

‘race,’ characterized as artistic and charming, but impractical and unreliable.”⁴⁰

Such ideas circulated to the United States and were used by white Americans to describe their own frustrations with the Irish women who worked in their homes. Drawing from British ideas of the Celts as culturally recalcitrant, U.S. employers often complained that Irish women were incapable of cleaning homes and caring for children. The mainly rural Irish immigrants were also described as incapable of operating modern home appliances.

Escalating tension between employers and their servants was also fueled by the reaction of white Americans to the changing demographics of northern cities precipitated by increased migration. While African Americans and European immigrants had worked in the North prior to emancipation, growing populations of both groups appeared in the region during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This movement increased tension between the various ethnic groups in the North as white Americans, European immigrants, and African Americans competed for jobs and housing. Furthermore, industrialization and urbanization created a new white middle class that was trying to figure out how to establish wages and standards for employees in an expanding labor market while also maintaining racial and class hierarchies in the midst of large-scale migration.

⁴⁰ Walter 19

Some employers took a cue from the growing body of racist scientific literature that emerged during the nineteenth century. White ethnologists concluded that Blacks and the Irish were among the lowest on the evolutionary scale and had innate characteristics that would prevent them from adjusting to a modern society. According to Melissa Stein in *Embodying Race*, “At turns embraced and contested, science was at the center of debates over the meanings of race, gender, and sexuality and the nature of power and privilege in the United States.”⁴¹

Developing ideas of race were integral to the expanding domestic service labor market as racial distinctions were drawn between groups of domestic workers and their employers. Northern employers and journalists often wrote articles and letters to local periodicals comparing the various ethnic groups who had migrated to the North to work in domestic service. Northern families were pleased about paying low wages to the migrant residents of New York while also resenting the decline of what they considered to be “qualified” white American domestic servants. Hiring racial minority women helped maintain racial and class hierarchies that existed prior to emancipation. Yet, some employers thought Irish and Black women were unable to adhere to the changing standards of domestic service, standards created and practiced by employers to elevate and publicize their class status.

⁴¹ Melissa Stein, “Embodying Race: Gender, Sex, and the Sciences of Difference,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, May 2008; 18.

Some female employers, for example, preferred to hire French, English, German, and Swedish women who could help raise “cultured” children by teaching them how to speak and write European languages. An employer explained her preference for employing French women by asserting, “The highest priced servants, the men, as a rule, are English. They, at least, are the most in demand, though we have Scotch, Irish, French, and Italian butlers. There are not as many Italians, and they are more difficult, as their English is apt to be poor. There is occasionally a demand for an Italian maid where some woman speaks Italian and wishes to keep it up, but as more women speak French the great demand is for French ladies’ maids.” She continued by noting that the highest priced workers were English maids and butlers because they were fluent in the English language and received training in a country that taught women and men the best way to serve.⁴²

While such standards discriminated against Irish and African American women, other employers held romantic notions of the loyal, self-sacrificing “mammies” of slavery and preferred to employ southern Black migrants. The director of an employment agency for domestic workers explains the growing preference for southerners over Irish women in the early 1900s: “...it is true that the class, the Irish, who are the principal supplies whence servants are drawn, are on the average getting to be intolerable. They exhibit the essential qualities of

⁴² “Good Servant Girls Are Now Plentiful,” The New York Times 8 Sep 1909.

docility, fidelity, truthfulness, honesty and industry in less and less amount every year...” But southern black women, she continued:

...do not have to learn to keep their ‘places,’ or anything especially now in affairs culinary. What they may lack in expedition and tidiness they well make up in the docility with which they will hear suggestions...Slavery was an excellent serving school beyond doubt, though a mighty bad moral school, and not the least condemnation of it survives in the ability with which these people, accused of working poorly for others, now work for themselves.⁴³

Still some employers considered Irish women attractive employees because they preferred to live inside the place of employment and had years of experience working in domestic service in Great Britain. In 1909, the director of an employment placement agency exclaimed, “The girls who are coming over this Fall are most of them Irish girls, and they are girls whom I like to place, because they are honest, good hearted, and faithful...Some of them have already filled good positions in England, Scotland, and Ireland...”⁴⁴

The Hierarchical Organization and Wages of Domestic Service

Domestic work itself was defined by a hierarchical organization in which four main positions constituted a rank order of skill: cooks, laundresses, nurses, and general house workers. A small percentage of families with more than three children might hire nurses and laundresses to care specially for the youth. In general, cooks prepared meals and washed the family’s clothes while wealthy

⁴³ “Domestic Servants,” The New York Times, 7 Jul 1872.

⁴⁴ “Good Servants Girls Are Now Plentiful,” The New York Times 8 Sep 1909.

families employed upstairs girls who waited on the door and table, made the beds, and watched over the children. Yet, most families hired general house workers who cooked, cleaned, made beds, answered the door, prepared the dinner table, and cared for the children of a small, middle class family.

With some exceptions, Irish and Black women were generally hired to perform general housework. Although general housework required more labor than what was expected of cooks, the latter usually received higher wages. The stigma attached to general housework and domestic service in general was reinforced by Irish and Black women's concentration in the occupation. According to Brennan, "For native-born Americans, the influx of Irish immigrants into domestic service in the second half of the nineteenth century caused both the status of the Irish and the status of service to decline further..."⁴⁵ The low-status of live-in general housework positions is reflected in the stagnant wages. In New York in 1845, all-purpose maids earned about \$4 a month and experienced maids earned about \$5 to \$6 a month. From 1901-1916, the average wage increased to around \$3 per week and \$5 per week. Almost thirty years later, the average weekly salary increased to only \$5-\$7 per week.⁴⁶ The low wages were partly based on the perception of employers that women who lived-in were already provided with lodging and food. Furthermore, "maids of all work," whether or not they lived in the house of employment, were considered unskilled laborers.

⁴⁵ Brennan 89

⁴⁶ Brennan 90

A director of an employment agency explained: “If it be asked why ‘cooks,’ who at most only cook and wash, command more than ‘girl for general house-work’ who assume to do all the work of a family? The answer is that the cooks are the aristocracy of the kitchen. What goeth into the mouth may defile a man...Cooks, moreover, profess to be able to do things quite beyond the abilities of ‘general house-work girls.’ The latter only hire out for ‘plain cooking.’ Pies, pastry, and custards, desserts in general, are quite in advance of their pretensions.”

⁴⁷ Wealthy families, who mostly lived in upper Manhattan and some parts of Brooklyn, displayed their prosperity by hiring a cadre of servants and a white American woman to serve as governess to manage the cooks and general house workers. The cook positions were mostly occupied by French and English women who were knowledgeable about how to prepare meals popular in western Europe.

Beginning in the 1930s, Irish women gained access to higher paying jobs outside of domestic service such as the needle trades and other branches of manufacturing. However, this does not indicate that they received the full benefits of whiteness. Other European immigrant groups, including Italian and Jewish women, were leaving manufacturing jobs to enter higher paying occupations as saleswomen, teachers, bookkeepers, and clerks while Irish women were only beginning to transition into manufacturing trades. According to Stephen Steinberg in The Ethnic Myth, “In a sense, Irish women started out on a lower occupational

⁴⁷ “Good Servants Girls Are Now Plentiful,” The New York Times 8 Sep 1909.

threshold than either Italians or Jews, and remained one generational step behind.”⁴⁸ While Irish women remained behind other European immigrant groups and white American women, Black women were still concentrated in domestic service and remained behind all other groups, native or foreign born. As the percentage of immigrants declined in the 1930s due to strict immigration policies, Black women from the South were heavily recruited to fill domestic service positions in the North. Black American women remained concentrated in the occupation well into the 1970s. It was not until the early 1980s when there was a ten percent decrease in the number of Black American domestic workers in the United States.

Literature Review

My project is deeply informed by Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor. Glenn conducts a comparative study of low wage men and women workers from three ethnic groups between 1870 and 1930: African Americans in the South, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Asian Americans in Hawaii. She argues that a comparative study of these groups allows us to draw a larger picture than is possible with localized studies, to capture variability as well as overall trends, and to refine our theories of race and gender inequality.⁴⁹ Similar to Glenn, I argue

⁴⁸ Steinberg 165-166

⁴⁹ Glenn 4

that although the women I analyze are from distinct ethnic groups and are studied by scholars individually, their lives are deeply connected through low wage labor, in this case domestic service. The time is ripe for a comparative study that examines those connections.

My research is also informed by scholarship about paid domestic work as a distinct form of women's labor and the political and economic contexts that shaped domestic employment. Serving Women, by Faye Dudden, traces the transition of household "help" to "domestic" service in New England, the Middle Atlantic States, and the Old Northwest from 1800 to 1890. She examines how the growth of industrial capitalism, the rise of feminism, and the ideology of domesticity facilitated shifts in the demands and cultural meanings of domestic work for middle class women as well as those they employed. She asserts, "In the context of rapid economic development, social identity rested more and more upon proper social observances and effective status competition, while according to the ideology of domesticity middle-class women were to achieve their fulfillment in the elaboration of domestic space and rituals."⁵⁰

While Dudden's study is important to understanding the political economy of domestic work and how developing ideologies of gender, class, and race influenced it, other scholars have investigated how these factors shaped the specific experiences of African American domestic workers. Feminist scholars in

⁵⁰ Dudden 7

this area have challenged claims about black women's work based on the labor experiences of white women or African American men. This scholarship also challenges interpretations offered by women labor historians like Alice Kessler-Harris, who focus primarily on industrial labor. Lastly, several scholars, beginning with Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, have argued that studies of African American domestics comprise a rich site for interrogating inequalities among women and the relationship between labor markets and racial, class, and gender inequalities.⁵¹

Scholars of African American domestics have used an intersectional analysis to uncover their distinctive labor experiences by documenting and analyzing the exploitative experiences they faced in the homes where they worked and how they actively negotiated the often inhumane demands of their employers. They have also documented the complicated relationships domestics formed with their employers that could not be entirely described as exploitative as well as the ways that domestic work shaped their lives as mothers, wives, sisters, and church members in the communities where they lived. Pioneering works include Jacqueline Jones' Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present and Gerda Lerner's Black Women in White

⁵¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of wage-earning women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living in, Living Out: African American domestics in Washington D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1994).

America: A Documentary History.⁵² Both studies use periodicals, private family letters, plantation records, and interviews to trace the labor experiences of Black women in the U.S. South from slavery through the latter half of the twentieth century. Both also examine the experiences of southern women who migrated to the North and worked in domestic service and other occupations. These studies emerged at a time when Black feminist theory was developing in response to the marginalization of Black women in the women's movement and the marginalization of research about Black women's lives in academia.

Three important studies continued the work of these pioneering scholars. Bonnie Thornton Dill's, Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants, Judith Rollins' Between Women: Domestic and their Employers, and Brenda Clegg Gray's Black Female Domestic During the Depression in New York City, 1930-1940 were especially useful in exploring the lives of African American household workers.⁵³ Gray's historical study focuses primarily on Black domestic workers in New York City during the Depression era. She explores their treatment as

⁵² Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

⁵³ Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Domestic Servants* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domestic and Their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Brenda Clegg Gray, *Black Female Domestic during the Depression in New York City, 1930-1940* (New York: Garland, 1993).

workers, as women in a field dominated by women, as wives and mothers, and as major contributors to the development of a northern urban black community.

Women of multiple racial groups were deeply affected by the Depression.

However, Gray argues that the economic turmoil of the period and deeply entrenched racial prejudices created a set of employment circumstances that were particular to, and particularly severe for, Black women.

According to Gray, Black women were more susceptible to being hired by housewives who were not far removed from being domestic workers themselves. In addition, Black women were left with few options but to stand on street corners in the Bronx and wait for employers to come by and hire them to perform day work. These street corners were referred to by journalists, activists, and local private citizens as the “slave markets.” White native and foreign-born domestic workers were not seen on these corners, which suggests how race differentiated the experiences of working-class and poor women in this period. My dissertation extends Gray’s study by exploring the history of southern Black women’s migration to New York over a longer period and how it shaped experiences during the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, by comparing African American and Irish women, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how race both shaped and became shaped by racial minority women in domestic service. In other words, African American women were not alone in negotiating ideas of race.

Dill and Rollins suggest the potential for exploring the relationship between Irish and African American domestic workers. Dill examines the relationship between race, class, and gender and how African American women in the North perceived and negotiated their multiple relationships to domestic work, their employers and family, and members of their own community. Rollins studies African American domestic workers and their white employers in Boston, Massachusetts, to analyze how their ideas, attitudes, and thoughts helped maintain the hierarchical relationship endemic to domestic service. She argues that research about the social-psychological dimensions of domestic work was necessary to disrupt the forms of inequality produced within it. Both Dill and Rollins make references to Irish women, noting some connections between the two groups of women, but also asserting major differences rooted in race. For example, Rollins observes, “As with blacks in the South, class prejudice, ethnic prejudice, and the degradation of menial labor interplayed to reinforce anti-Irish and anti-servitude sentiments: The Irish seemed more lower-class because they were in domestic labor, and the work itself seemed more menial because the Irish dominated it.”⁵⁴

Dill, on the other hand, notes racial differences between the two groups when she makes the assertion that European immigrants were preferred by most employers over African American women for higher status positions such as

⁵⁴ Rollins 52

governesses and cooks.⁵⁵ Thus, although German and Swedish women were preferred among employers for these positions, Irish women could access these ranks more easily than Black women. Still, no scholar has researched these connections more deeply. Instead, research on African American domestic workers continues to focus largely on individual case studies. Considering the long history of marginalizing the study of African American working class women in the U.S. academy, it is understandable why Black feminist scholars have positioned African American domestic workers at the center of their analyses. But, now the time is appropriate for comparative studies that will develop an even more complete understanding of Black women's labor and migration history by comparing their experiences with those of other racial minority women.

Studies of Irish women, on the other hand, rarely analyze how race and gender contributed to their relegation to household labor. Similar to studies about African American women, scholars were driven to produce scholarship about Irish women because studies about their lives had often been subsumed under studies about Irish men. According to Margaret Lynch-Brennan in The Irish Bridget, "Irish emigration was unusual in the high number of women who participated in it...still much of the scholarly literature on the Irish in America

⁵⁵ Dill 14

continues to focus on Irish immigrant men.”⁵⁶ Lynch-Brennan along with Hasia Diner in *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* and Stephen Steinberg in *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* sought to change this trend.

Diner and Steinberg argue that Irish women were concentrated in domestic service because employers could pay them low wages as immigrants. They also argue that domestic service was a convenient arrangement for Irish women because it did not disrupt their lives. Irish women were already responsible for domestic duties in Ireland. Many migrated as single women without children, and their employers provided them with food and lodging in a country where they initially had few relatives or friends.⁵⁷ It is important to note that there were some drawbacks as well. Domestic work could be very isolating considering that many families in New York City only hired one servant and because there were strict social boundaries between the workers and the employers. Live-in servants were also constantly at the beck and call of their employers twenty four hours a day.

Some scholars of Irish women’s history focus on domestic work to trace the acculturation process by which the Irish became Irish Americans. Margaret Lynch-Brennan’s “Ubiquitous Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic

⁵⁶ Lynch-Brennan xxi

⁵⁷ Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant women in nineteenth century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, ethnicity, and class in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

Service in America, 1840-1930” argues that Irish women became Americanized through domestic work. She explores how the intimate contact between Irish servants and their American employers created an opportunity, as she puts it, for “Irish women to learn and internalize American middle-class values and social conduct, which they could in turn apply as a means of propelling their families up the social scale.”⁵⁸ Brennan suggests that complaints about Irish domestic workers as “dirty” and “stupid” were partly rooted in religious differences between Catholic workers and Protestant employers. Employers often complained that Catholic commitments conflicted with the length of time they wanted Irish women to work. Brennan concludes, “To what extent various domestics deserved this censure, we can only speculate.”⁵⁹

Faye Dudden has begun to question how race shaped the working experiences of Irish domestic workers and their relationship to their African American counterparts. However, she hypothesizes that the large number of Irish women in domestic service relative to other immigrant groups made them especially vulnerable to complaints from employers. She argues, “Differences in the availability of the different groups helped to make ethnicity the medium through which employers expressed dissatisfaction,” and justified paying lower wages.⁶⁰ Therefore, Dudden concludes that blaming the Irish “Biddy” for servant

⁵⁸ Lynch-Brennan 332

⁵⁹ Lynch-Brennan 335-336

⁶⁰ Dudden 62

problems had more to do with the changing relationship between employer and employee as Irish women began to demand higher wages. Thus, the tension between employer and employee was not rooted solely in their ethnic differences. While these factors might explain in part why Irish women were concentrated in domestic work, they also became domestics because other job opportunities were foreclosed to them as racial minority women.

This study examines how the tension Dudden describes was rooted in the growing number of African American women in the occupation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The relationships between Irish servants and their employers began to shift after southern migrants made their way northward. As recently emancipated laborers, southern Black women were assumed to be more attractive employees because employers believed that they would accept lower wages than their Irish counterparts who were already settled in the North. A *New Yorker* comments, "...they [southern Black women] are so unconscious of the indignity of fully earning their wages that they are likely to do twice the work of other kinds of servants without regarding themselves overtaxed."⁶¹ Gendered, classed, and sexualized ideas of race like those that relegated African American women to low-wage, low-status jobs, helped position Irish women as domestic workers as well. Such ideas were integral to incessant complaints about both groups of workers.

⁶¹Domestic Servants," *The New York Times* 7 Jul 1872.

Noel Ignatiev in How the Irish became White and David Roediger in Wages of Whiteness have documented how race contributed to the concentration of Irish immigrants in low wage work and shaped the tense relationship between southern Blacks and the Irish in northern cities, but their work focuses mainly on men. Roediger examines the formation of racial and class categories, particularly in the North during the first sixty five years of the nineteenth century, to trace the process by which working class Irish immigrants eventually became classified as white workers. He draws from scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois and Frantz Fanon as well as the historiography of slavery, arguing that the formation of the white working class in the United States cannot be interrogated without a racial analysis. As a group whose racial classification was initially ambiguous, Irish immigrant workers actively participated in the construction of racist images of African Americans to establish themselves more firmly as members of the white race. Roediger also points to instances in which the Irish attempted to distance themselves from West Indians by organizing a mob to attack Blacks who gathered for the celebration of West Indian emancipation.⁶²

Similar to Roediger, Ignatiev interrogates the relationship between African Americans and Irish immigrant workers to trace the process by which the Irish moved from being classified as “non-white” to being categorized as “white.” He argues that the Irish participated in this change by devising strategies to disrupt

⁶² Roediger 135

the common comparisons drawn between themselves and African Americans. As a group of people who migrated to the U.S. to escape religious persecution and harsh economic conditions, the Irish wanted to gain the privileges of whiteness. These sought after rights included access to jobs that paid livable wages, the right to elect and be elected, to live wherever they could afford, and to consume without racially imposed restrictions.⁶³

While Ignatiev and Roediger have begun important work about the connections between Irish and African American labor history in the United States, they leave gender and forms of women's low wage labor largely unexamined. New insights about Irish labor history in the U.S. are revealed when similar ideas about Irish racial inferiority are applied to analyses about the working lives of immigrant women. The final section of this dissertation suggests the value of extending the comparison offered here to show how Afro-Caribbean women shared an English colonial history with Irish and African American women. All three groups encountered and negotiated ideas of race that helped relegate them to paid household labor in the United States. At the same time, these women's labor and migration helped cultivate ideologies of race during a period of unrest in the United States, the Caribbean, and England.

⁶³ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge: New York, 1995) 3.

Methodological Framework

The overarching questions guiding this study are: How did racialized ideas of gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity both shape and become shaped by Irish and African American women's migration and their concentration in domestic service? How was the formation of such ideas about Irish and Black women also integral to larger processes such as industrialization, emancipation, England's colonial dominance over Ireland, the history of English colonialism in the U.S., Black women's migration from the U.S. South to the North, and European women's migration to the United States? What new perspectives on the historical relationships among women's labor, women's migration, and the formation of racialized ideas can be gained through a comparative study of Irish and African American domestic workers?

My project employs a methodological approach similar to that used by Evelyn Nakano Glenn in *Unequal Freedom*. She develops an integrated framework which draws from critical race studies, post structuralism, theories of intersectionality, and streams of social constructionist theory within feminist studies. The theory of intersectionality was developed by women scholars of color who critiqued early feminist studies that posited race, class, sexuality, and gender as social categories that operate independently. African American, Latina, Asian American, and Native American scholars asserted that these social categories shaped their lives simultaneously. The concept of intersectionality expresses this

process. Glenn asserts, “It is a theory that neither subordinates race and gender to some broader set of relations such as class nor substantially flattens the complexity of these concepts.”⁶⁴

Simultaneously, social constructionist theory developed within feminist studies to explain that gender and sexuality are not biological traits, but socially learned behaviors. Glenn argues that the amount of scholarly attention toward gender within feminist studies has not been replicated on race. Therefore, she draws from the works of scholars such as Ann Stoler, Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, and Howard Winant to examine race as a social construction that assumes specific forms in particular historical and geographic contexts. Using theories of intersectionality and social constructionism within an integrated framework allows me to subject the social categories that shaped domestic workers’ lives to historical analysis. These theories thus enable me to trace why and how racialized ideas of class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality formed, changed, and remained stable under the specific historical and geographic context of my study.

Post-structural analysis offers another useful approach. This theory asserts that meanings in the Western context have historically been constructed in terms of dichotomous oppositions. Such oppositions make meanings relational, but in a bifurcated and often rigid way. Post-structuralists argue instead that meanings and

⁶⁴ Glenn 7

relations are always multiple and never fixed. This perspective thus allows us to see black not only and always in opposition to white, but also as a category constructed in relation to class and gender and to colonial relations of power.⁶⁵ Thus the Irish, though they will become white in the twentieth century, were often considered “non-white” in earlier centuries.

This expanded notion of relationality is particularly important in comparative studies of racial minority groups. Glenn states, “The concept of relationality suggests that the lives of different groups are interconnected, even without face-to-face relations. Thus, for example, a white person in America enjoys privileges and a higher standard of living by virtue of the subordination and lower standard of living of people of color, even if that particular white person is not exploiting or taking advantage of a person of color.”⁶⁶ Similarly, I can examine the relationships among two distinct ethnic groups of women who might never have worked in the same homes or met at the same employment agencies, yet shaped each other’s lives. Examining social categories as relational allows me to trace the similarities and differences among the groups, as well as how the differences point to connections between them. Although social categories are referred to as ideas throughout the dissertation, they are not simply

⁶⁵ Joan Scott, “Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference or the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism,” *Feminist Studies*, Spring 1988: 33-50; Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity crisis in Feminist Theory,” *Signs*, 1988: 405-436.

⁶⁶ Glenn 14

figments of the imagination. They shape the materiality of people's lives as they organize relations of power in social institutions such as the labor market.

My framework also draws from St. Clair Drake's anthropological study *Black Folks Here and There*, which uses ideas of "blackness" as a framework to examine the socioeconomic and political relationships between people of African descent and other racial groups. He states, "The adoption of a black perspective in history, philosophy, or the social sciences deliberately restricts the frame of reference within which people and events are observed and evaluated. The focus is narrowed so as to concentrate on the Black Experience, with full awareness, of course, that social class, nationality, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, and/or religious orientation all make the experience different from person to person.... Such partial perspectives are not an obstacle in the pursuit of truth about social situations; in fact, they are necessary in order to know the *entire* truth. An approximation to total knowledge if data are not available that reflect ethnic, racial, national, class, and age- and gender-related special experiences."⁶⁷

In a similar vein, I argue that a comprehensive labor history of African American and Irish women must involve tracing how gendered, classed, and sexualized ideas of race connected their experiences. A full understanding of why Irish women were targets for the complaints of many American employers cannot be attained without examining their relationship to African Americans, another

⁶⁷ St. Clair Drake. *Black Fold Here and There: An essay in History and Anthropology, Volume I* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, 1987) 1.

targeted group of women. When Irish women began migrating to the United States, they were entering a form of labor that had already developed particular racialized meanings as a “black” form of “servile” labor. People of African descent had performed unpaid domestic labor in the South as enslaved workers and some free African Americans performed domestic labor in northern cities from the colonial era until well into the nineteenth century. As Judith Rollins notes, “All immigrant servants were considered inferior to native white Americans, but the Irish were particularly despised as ‘vulgar,’ ‘childlike,’ ‘barbaric,’ ‘ignorant,’ ‘unclean,’ and, worst of all, not Christian.”⁶⁸

Such ideas had developed prior to the mass migration of Irish women to the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. Slaveholders a century earlier often used such descriptions to explain why they needed people of African descent to serve as slave laborers. Irish women entered what was already considered a menial form of labor because a “black” population, which was not even considered human by law, dominated it. I argue that it is important to examine Irish women’s labor history through a framework that foregrounds ideas of race since Irish laborers had encountered such ideas before the late nineteenth century. My discussion assumes that race is not an effect of domestic labor and other forms of capitalist development, but rather these ideas were formed in a mutually constitutive process that involved larger contextual events.

⁶⁸ Rollins 52

Howard Winant's racial formation theory is especially useful for this study, which traces how ideas of race developed different meanings as groups of women competed for jobs in domestic service during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Reconfigurations of such ideas are reflected in archival sources including letters that employers wrote to New York periodicals, domestic service manuals, and interviews with Irish women. According to Winant, "To interpret the meaning of race in a particular way at a given time is at least implicitly, but more often explicitly, to propose or defend a certain racial policy, a specific racialized social structure, a racial order. By studying the range of racial projects in given historical contexts it becomes possible to study given racial formation processes in detail..."⁶⁹ The examination of Irish and African American women's laboring experiences in the "home" illuminates these larger process even as they are shaped by them.

Archival Sources

The integrated framework used here guides the textual analysis of archival sources. Archival sources on socially marginalized women are often scarce and scattered and most materials in the archives are written from the perspective of employers, public intellectuals, journalists, clergymen, and government officials. Thus, I had to read "against the grain" to elucidate information about the lives of domestic workers from those who were privileged enough to serve in such

⁶⁹ Howard Winant. *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 21.

capacities. Considering that the groups of women being studied share an English colonial history and that the rudimentary practices of domestic service in the United States were instituted by English settlers, I traveled to England to begin tracing the “roots” of racialization in domestic service. The Fawcett and British Libraries and the British National Archives include in their holdings domestic service manuals written by English women employers, clergymen, and some domestic workers. These sources have allowed me to trace how ideas of race were formed within domestic service and as they circulated between England and the United States.

Then, I traced how African Americans contributed to processes of racialization through various archival collections in New York City. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture was a rich source to examine the lives of southern African American migrant women. Still, explicit information about their lives are scattered throughout the archive, hidden in the margins of documents, which are often poorly preserved. Thus, information was pieced together from various types of sources, including fictional literature, organizational records, and black-owned periodicals that circulated in New York City. In addition, the Schomburg houses the financial records, newsletters, and party programs of the West Indian Ladies Aid Society, which was created to provide financial support for West Indian women who migrated to New York. These records allowed me a glimpse into the ways that West Indian domestic

workers were also at the heart of racial formations in nineteenth century America. Such sources also provided future directions for my second project that will include the study of West Indian domestic workers in New York.

Lastly, the Schomburg held some information and photographs from the White Rose Industrial Mission Home. This was an organization created by social service reformer Victoria Earle Matthews, who was born into slavery in the South and migrated to New York City after emancipation. She thought of the Home as a way to help Black women find “respectable” positions as domestic servants. Black-owned periodicals also published volumes of articles about the experiences of Black women, often with the hope of exposing and thereby changing the sometimes inhumane working conditions within private homes. Journalists for newspapers such as The Crisis and The Amsterdam News were committed to reporting the abuses of Black women at the hands of mostly white male and female employers. Journalists also made a point of exposing Black men and women who participated in migration schemes that involved deceiving southern women into migrating to the North with promises of higher paying domestic service jobs than those available in the South. However, the women soon found that the jobs required them to perform arduous labor for slave-like wages while some women were not paid at all.

Universities throughout New York City hold Master's theses written by students dating back as early as the 1920s. Theses filed at Columbia University between 1912 and 1935 offered particularly detailed accounts by students who travelled to employment agencies and interviewed southern Black and Caribbean women there.⁷⁰ The National Household Employment Committee Records housed at Cornell University and the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College house archival materials about the Young Women's Christian Association and its interventions into domestic service. The "Y" created employment services and training classes to help women from various racial groups find stable employment.

Oral histories offered an important avenue for hearing the voices of domestic servants themselves. The Ellis Island Oral History Project was a rich site for these materials. The Project, which was directed by Janet Levine, contains plentiful interviews conducted with Irish women who passed through Ellis Island before entering private homes as domestic servants. Interestingly, some of the interviewees spoke explicitly about their position as second-class citizens of both the United States and Great Britain and their relationships to African Americans. Institutions such as Fordham University are beginning to collect the oral histories

⁷⁰ Barrington Dunbar, "Factors in the Cultural Background of the American Southern Negro and the British West Indian Negro That Condition their Adjustment to Harlem." Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1935; Frances Gunner, "A Study of Employment Problems of Negro Women in Brooklyn," Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1930; Elizabeth Ross Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service in the United States," Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1923; Paul Seymour, "A Group of Virginia Negroes in New York City," Ph.D. dissertation, 1912.

of southern African American and Caribbean women and men who migrated to New York City beginning in the 1930s. The Bronx African American Historical Project (BAAHP), which is directed by Mark Naison and Peter Derrick, provided instructive interviews as well. Lastly, digital collections of periodicals including the *New York Times* and *The Brooklyn Eagle* contained advertisements for domestic help and letters written by employers and domestic workers that provided the perspectives of the women who were most intimately involved with domestic service.

Chapters

The chapters are organized by the four central questions of this study. These questions include: How did racialized ideas of gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity both shape and become shaped by Irish and African American women's migration and the women's concentration in domestic service? How was the formation of such ideas about Irish and Black women integral to larger processes such as industrialization, emancipation, England's colonial dominance over Ireland, the history of English colonialism in the U.S., Black women's migration from the U.S. South to the North, and European women's migration to the United States? What new perspectives on the historical relationship among women's labor, women's migration, and the formation of racialized ideas can be gained through a comparative study of Irish and African American domestic workers?

The opening chapter of my dissertation, entitled “Moving with the Women: Tracing Migration, Labor, and Domestic Workers in the Archives,” invites readers to follow the methodological journey that I embarked on at New York University that led me to explore the history of African American and Irish domestic workers. The expedition began in the archives of England and ended in the archives of New York. While travelling to the various sites, I discovered that women’s socioeconomic and political status and the specific niche of domestic labor made it difficult to trace processes of racialization that were central to their lives. I present the argument that sources in the British archive actually offered unforeseen, yet important interventions throughout the research process and aided my analysis of archival materials housed in U.S. archives. The British sources revealed that following discourses of race in the lives of working class and racial minority women required tracing the racializing mechanism of domestic work itself. Thus, this chapter explores the need for an innovative methodology to negotiate the racial, gender, and class politics of the archive while also tracing the racializing nature of domestic work.

The second chapter entitled “Constructing ‘Black women’s labor’: Irish and African American Women as Colonial Subjects,” provides the critical context for understanding racial formations in the household and the larger society. While drawing from W.E.B. DuBois’s Black Reconstruction, I argue that Irish and Black women’s labor and migration were positioned at the heart of transnational

conversations about race, gender, and labor. I examine how representations of both groups of women were embedded in discussions about industrialization, growing unrest in England's colonies, the need for both white northerners and southerners in the United States to renegotiate racial boundaries in the midst of large scale immigration from Europe, the shift in economic relations between the U.S. South and North, and newly emancipated African Americans entering the paid labor force for the first time in America's history. Thus, racialized ideas were not simply imposed on Irish and southern African American women when they migrated to New York. Rather, the ideas were continually transformed through a complex process that challenged the perceived stability of race and citizenship.

The third chapter, entitled "Too Close to ignore; Too close for comfort: African Americans, the Irish, and their Employers React to their Conditions," explores how all three groups responded to their shared experiences. I assert that it is impossible to have a comprehensive understanding about marginalized groups without looking at how they contested dominant conceptions of race, class, gender and sexuality and how they constructed alternative meanings. In this chapter, I examine how resistance to hegemonic ideas of race developed as workers articulated their own perspectives about domesticity, race, and gender through interviews and letters. The fourth chapter entitled "Who wants to be an 'English' mother?: Lessons from Irish and African American domestic workers" explores how a focus on the ideology of "mothering" provides alternative

explanations for the infamous “domestic service problem.” While the shortage of servants might have been a reason why employers complained about the quality of servants, I advance the argument that the domestic service problem was also rooted in ideas of “mothering,” which were embedded in particular racialized meanings of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

This chapter traces how ideas of “mothering” circulated between the homes of England and New York thereby shaping and being shaped by the daily interactions and public discussions between domestic workers and their female employers. These ideas of “mothering” pressured both employers and employees to attain ideals that were difficult for either of them to fulfill. The tension between workers and employers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century continues today and is partly rooted in the impossibility of either group of women to reach the goals that the idea of “mothering” deems mandatory for both employer and the employed.

Lastly, this study concludes with a discussion of future directions for this project, which includes a study of Afro-Caribbean women who migrated from Anglophone countries in the Caribbean to New York from the late nineteenth until the early twentieth century. While conducting archival research, I have come across sources which offer evidence that Afro-Caribbean women had similar racialized and gendered experiences to those of Irish and southern Black migrant women in New York. Hence, a study of the relationship between ideas of race,

colonialism, and domestic service is incomplete without an analysis of Afro-Caribbean women's lives.

Overall, this study aims to position African American women's labor and migration history within understandings about world history. African American women's northern movement remains concentrated in discussions about the "Great Migration" of African Americans to southern, northern, and western cities in the United States. Through this dissertation, I assert that African American women's movement was part of a global labor history that must be examined within an analytic framework that considers socio-economic and political events "outside" of the United States as well as Black women's relationship to other migrations within the United States during the same period.

In addition, this project seeks to give voice to women who were largely invisible, sometimes even to the families whose homes they were cleaning. Their personal stories offer rich possibilities for explaining the intricacies of racial formation in the labor sector and how inequalities are formed among women laborers across ethnicity in the United States. These stories, which remain buried in the archive and in personal or family memories, can transform our understandings of the interplay of race, class, gender, sexuality, domesticity, and labor.

Chapter One

Moving with the Women:

Tracing Racialization, Migration, and Domestic Workers in the Archives



(Left photograph- Group of Irish women who just arrived at Ellis Island circa early 1900s, Courtesy of the Ellis Island Library. Right photograph- Charles W. James and Mattie L. James, married couple who migrated from South Carolina during the early 1900s and worked for a college president in upstate New York. Courtesy of their niece Mrs. Sharon E. Robinson)

In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Toni Morrison discusses the challenge of excavating ideas about race and the experiences of racial minorities from canonic literary texts written by white males during the early twentieth century. According to Morrison, we can retrieve information about how ideas of race were articulated through literature even

though the authors did not write these texts with this intention. She argues that the “significant and underscored omissions” and “startling contradictions” regarding the “real or fabricated Africanist presence” in the texts serve as a rich source for exploring the larger process of how ideas of “blackness” and “whiteness” were central to hegemonic understandings of Americanness.⁷¹

I, too, discovered ideas about race and gender both “loudly” voiced and hidden in the “shadows” of archival sources while conducting research about the similar, yet distinct representations of Irish and southern African American women. As racial minority women who were concentrated in a form of labor that demanded arduous labor and extensive time, many Irish and African American women rarely left behind diaries and personal letters describing their labor experiences. Thus, extracting information about their lives required tracing ideas of race, class, and gender through domestic service manuals and periodicals written by employers, government officials, and clergymen.

Yet, as Morrison eloquently explains, examining the lives of racial minorities from texts written by those who inhabited socioeconomic and political privileges can serve as valuable sources for investigating how racial minorities helped shape developing discourses of race in American history. Hence, these types of material revealed how Irish and African American women laborers were

⁷¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 6.

integral to processes of racialization central to nation building in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Similar to Toni Morrison's findings, some sources in the archive and the organization of the archive itself initially appear to have no relevance to the study of race and gender. Yet archival sources that initially seemed irrelevant to this study actually revealed "hidden," yet important racializing processes that expand notions of "race" beyond phenotype. These materials reveal that examining the racialization of racial minority women in domestic service demands tracing two simultaneous processes of racialization that were mutually constitutive. Domestic work, as a specific niche of labor, is racialized along with the workers who end up in the field. In addition, to this form of racialization there were still specific racial parallels drawn between Irish and African American domestic workers. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to examine the quagmires of tracing the process of racialization within domestic work, a form of labor that lent itself to particular racial, class, and gender meanings, while also negotiating the politics of the archive.

The archival materials also signaled the importance of placing Irish and African American women's migration in a global context that explored their shared history with English colonialism. Thus, following racializing processes in the context of women's labor and migration required that the analysis of the texts also "move" with representations of the women back and forth across the

Atlantic, between England and the United States, along intersecting routes of ideas buried in domestic service manuals, letters to the Editor of newspapers, journal articles, and periodical images. While understanding the importance of working class and racial minority women's actual voices when rewriting their history, this article shifts the focus to how developing ideologies of race that were central to their lives can be extracted from historical evidence left behind by those whose privileged status depended upon their labor.

Evidence of things not seen:

Exploring the "loud" silences and omissions of the archive

The English "roots" of racialization in American domestic service can be found in numerous archives, including the British Library, Fawcett Women's Library, and the British National Archives. While excavating the archives for domestic service manuals and periodicals written by English employers about Irish domestic servants who worked in England and letters written by English colonists about Irish and enslaved African descended women who labored in England's colonies, I encountered the "politics" of the British archive. After inserting several terms into the library search engines such as "Irish women," "African servants," "African women," "Irish servants," "Irish domestics," and "Ireland," the only sources that appeared were manuals written about English servants.

It eventually became apparent that the archive is not an objective preservation site immune to larger social processes outside of the libraries' doors. The politics of race, class, and gender that left many Black and Irish women with few economic opportunities outside of domestic service during the colonial era and afterwards also shaped the availability and organization of sources about their lives in the archive. Bronwen Walter captures the problem regarding Irish servants: "the absence of migrant Irish women from public discourse [in England] has been matched by a resounding silence in academic study,"⁷² and in the sources for such studies. Therefore, the history of Irish and African descended household workers in England and its colonies is buried in archival sources that are not readily recognized by library search engines.

At first glance the sources about English servants seemed irrelevant to the study. Yet, after taking a closer look, they revealed how domestic work, as a specific niche of labor, operated as a racializing mechanism. One such manual was authored by Ann Ritchie, who wrote about her experiences as a founder of the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants in Upstairs Downstairs. The Association was formed in the late 1800s to encourage young and poor English girls to seek refuge in domestic service as a way to save them from being lured into prostitution. Ritchie, who left domestic service for a respectable marriage, states:

⁷² Walter 2

It is a hard life at best for some of them; so hard that they break down utterly in the struggle with temper and other tempers, with inexperience, with sexual temptations of every sort. [They] have no one to look to for praise if they are good, or for blame if they are naughty... Little by little they learn better things and gain some experience in the ways of the civilized world. What a campaign it is for them—a daily fight with the powers of darkness and ignorance, with dust, with dirt, with disorder. Where should we be without our serving little girls?”⁷³

Although Ritchie is describing the cognitive development stage of young girls, she also communicates that poor girls at the Association are perceived as having innate sexual temptations that would prevent them from providing adequate domestic labor. The girls “needed” upper class women, of more respectable character, to offer a “word of real friendship” to guide these girls to domestic service. Despite the actual age of servants, all women who ended up in the domestic labor force were treated as children who needed the moral guidance of their female employers. Maternalism has been a feature of domestic service throughout history and has helped both create and reinforce the subordinate status of servants. Employers rarely referred to servants using deferential terms such as “Mrs.” or “Ms.” Servants were often called upon by their first names as if they were the children of the employers while other employers addressed servants by using generic terms such as “girl.”

⁷³ Anne Ritchie Thackeray, *Upstairs and Downstairs: By Mrs. Ann Ritchie* (London: Council of the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants 18, Buckingham Street, 1882) 9.

Although maternalism was perceived as a biological instinct of women to express forms of protection and care for children, it is a type of behavior that created and reinforced relations of inequality in the domestic workplace. Sociologist Judith Rollins notes, “The ‘caring’ that is expressed in maternalism might range from an adult-to-child to a human-to-pet kind of caring but, by definition (and by the evidence presented by my data), it is not human-to-equal human caring. The female employer, with her motherliness and protectiveness and generosity, is expressing in a distinctly feminine way her lack of respect for the domestic as an autonomous, adult employee.”⁷⁴

What further reinforced this universal characteristic of domestic service was the Industrial Revolution era in England. During this moment in history, gendered discourses arose that positioned males as physically and mentally stronger and therefore fit to work outside of the home while more fragile middle class women were responsible for working inside the home.⁷⁵ This idea of separate public and private spheres increasingly confined both White middle class and poor women to the domestic sphere.⁷⁶ Hegemonic notions of the cult of true womanhood helped organize the relationship between female employer and female employees in the home.

⁷⁴ Rollins 186

⁷⁵ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 14.

⁷⁶ Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 4.

Middle class women were the managers because they were considered naturally fit for the supervisory position as “ladies,” who could teach poor women “civility” as well as domestic duties. At the same time the role of middle class housewives depended on the denigration of household tasks that were unbecoming a “true” lady.⁷⁷ According to historian Phyllis Palmer, “...the model wife needed another woman to do the hard and dirty physical labor. She needed a woman different from herself, one whose work and very identity confirmed the housewife’s daintiness and perfection.”⁷⁸

These terms and practices of inequality that became ingrained in domestic service both shaped and became shaped by the racial order of English society. Rollins argues, “This ideological function—based in rituals of deference and maternalism that are as integral to this occupation as are low pay and low prestige—cannot be overestimated in its importance to the perpetuation of the occupation and the perpetuation of a social system of class, racial, and gender stratification.”⁷⁹ Thus, Ann Ritchie’s manual reveals that even poor English who were forced into service might find themselves subject to the same racial descriptions as Irish and African descended women.

⁷⁷ Valenze 158

⁷⁸ Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 128.

⁷⁹ Rollins 203

According to Deborah Valenze in The First Industrial Woman, “For in the eyes of many masters and mistresses, class operated in ways parallel to racial categories; lower-class people were closer to nature and less pure and clean than the more civilized middle-classes. Female servants suffered from the double stigma of gender and class, and the effect was a foreignness approaching racial difference.”⁸⁰ While this complicates any analysis of racial minority women, it intensifies the sense that domestic work itself, as a particular niche of labor, was racialized along with all those who ended up as workers in that field. The fact that people of African descent in England’s colonies dominated domestic service apparently tainted any woman in the occupation, including poor English women.

Anne McClintock in Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest illustrates how England’s colonial relationship to Africa helped produce these racialized perceptions of poor English women through the sketches of Arthur Munby. Munby, a Victorian barrister and man of letters, became obsessed with working class women and produced a volume of sketches. He embarked on long walks for nearly sixty years, searching for and questioning milkmaids, circus performers, domestic servants, and other working women about their lives as poor women. What is particularly interesting about his sketches is that he draws the women he encounters with dark, masculine, and animalistic physical features. McClintock suggests that the circulation of Saadjie Baadman

⁸⁰ Valenze 174

and other images of African women in England associated with “unbridled, lascivious sexuality” informed Munby’s representations of poor English women. Thus, “Munby’s association of working-class women with Africans is thus far from idiosyncratic.”⁸¹ Ritchie’s manual also helps explain why poor English women were considered among those segments of the population suitable to perform domestic service. Their poverty like the racial background of African American women meant that they lacked sexual restraint and would thus easily fall prey to prostitution.

While Ritchie and other middle class housewives in England were devising strategies to “save” poor women from their innate and immoral temptations, many American employers looked toward England as a country that had effectively managed domestic servants. As the middle class expanded in both the U.S. and England, employing “effective” servants was deemed critical to embodying this newly acquired status.⁸² Periodicals housed in archives throughout New York City make it apparent that housewives in the United States sought advice from employers in England to help make sense of the “belligerent” Irish women who were “invading” their homes. In fact, Irish women who labored in New York homes found themselves being compared unfavorably to English servants as ideas

⁸¹ Anne McClintock. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 113-114.

⁸² Dill 14

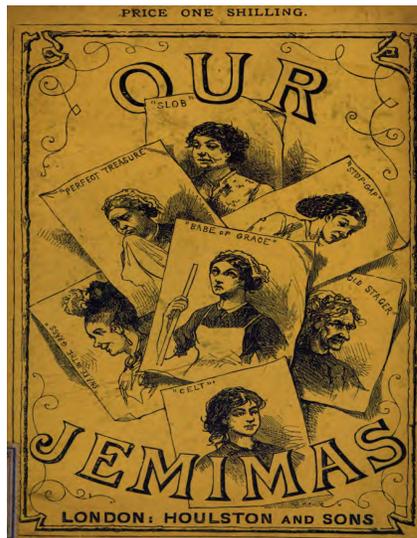
about the best household help continued to circulate between England and the United States. A New York City employer wrote:

...oh how smoothly life passes in such an English home! How brightly every inch of brass shines! How noiselessly your servants move about!...They [Irish women] domineer over the real mistress of the house, order her out of the kitchen, and give her the full benefit of a temper spoiled by early brutality. They reserve all of their affections for their own country-people, and never have the slightest attachment to the families with whom they live. Regarded philosophically, they are excellent patriots; but regarded practically they are bad servants, in every way inferior to those of England and Europe.⁸³

Yet, contrary to the beliefs of American employers, English women had not discovered “solutions” for employing “difficult” Irish servants. After returning to the archive and inserting more generic, stereotypical terms in the library search engines such as: “Bridget,” “St. Patrick,” “Celtics,” manuals appeared that featured the complaints of employers who looked toward racial epithets developed in the United States to describe their woes with Irish women. Our Jemimas: Respectfully Addressed to the Middle Class by a Victim, a manual originally published in London and written for both English and American readers, reveal that racialized descriptions of domestic workers circulated across the Atlantic.⁸⁴ This manual also provides evidence that while domestic work operated as a racializing mechanism for all its workers, there were still specific racial meanings assigned to Irish and African American women.

⁸³ “English Domestic and Their Ways,” *Brooklyn Eagle* 2 Dec 1877.

⁸⁴ *Our Jemimas: Respectfully Addressed to the Middle Class by a Victim* (London: Houlston and Sons, 1880).



The anonymous male author of this manual drew from ideas of race in both England and the United States to make an instructive parallel between Irish servants in England and African American household workers in the United States. The title “Our Jemimas” resonates with the term “Aunt Jemima,” which had already begun circulating in the United States when this manual was published. The “Aunt Jemima” figure represented the reminiscent memories of slavery in the white imagination as it represented the ideal African American household servant who was happy and loyal to the family for whom she worked. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders explains, “Aunt Jemima was a Reconstructionist alter ego to the mammy who was created in the late nineteenth century and continues to be featured on pancake mix boxes today... The popular icon offered northerners the southern antebellum experience of having a mammy, without actually

participating in slavery. In this way, her popularity bolstered the romantic mythology of the southern plantation.”⁸⁵ Perhaps, adopting such racial understandings was not unfamiliar to British readers. After all, the image of Aunt Jemima was born as a reminiscent representation of the colonial era for white American audiences. Thus, it is not coincidental that the author would draw comparisons between Irish and African American women who both have ties to English colonial history.



“Aunt Jemima”⁸⁶

Yet, the author of “Our Jemimas,” a husband and father of two children, discusses the irony of the Aunt Jemima figure in his tales of employing Bridget Hanlan. He describes a range of signifiers including dirt, language, and nationality as evidence that signaled the servant’s inferior status as a “race” apart from the “white” English. The author recalls, “As for Bridget’s much-vaunted knowledge of the art of cookery, that was one of the most outrageous fictions—at least,

⁸⁵ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008) 4.

⁸⁶ <http://www.siegelproductions.ca/foodfiends/images/auntjem.jpg>

according to English ideas—that I ever came across. She had no conception of what proper boiling signified, she was entirely ignorant of the meaning of roasting a joint, she destroyed vegetables utterly and completely...puddings, or pies, or other ‘sweets,’ were beyond her comprehension...”⁸⁷ After firing Bridget, the author vowed to never hire an Irish woman again and would only hire English servants.

The author wrote this manual in a particular context that helped these ideas of Irish servants rest comfortably in the imaginations of employers. Growing resistance among the Irish to British colonial rule over Ireland and fears among the English that Irish immigrants would take their jobs coalesced to form a hostile environment toward Irish servants. English employers took cues from racial ideologies developed overseas that were used to describe enslaved laborers and employed similar ideas to describe their frustrations with the English colonial subjects who worked in their homes. As Phyllis Palmer notes, “Western Europe’s imperial experiences produced racial hierarchies similar to those in the United States. Settlers, colonial administrators, and military families had black servants in quantity, and the images of that life were brought home to Europe.”⁸⁸

In addition, increased immigration of Irish Catholics to England during the Potato Famine of the mid-1800s revived anti-Catholic sentiments among English Protestants. Catholicism was viewed as a religion that demanded its followers

⁸⁷ *Our Jemimas* 60

⁸⁸ Palmer 140

remain loyal to Rome and non-scriptural theology, which posed “a threat to British liberties.”⁸⁹ England’s weakening control of its colonies must have also increased agitation toward the Catholic immigrants. Suspicions of Irish women’s wavering loyalty to the British nation state prompted fears that they would not be loyal to the employing families.

Racializing complaints about Irish women were written during the Industrial Age when women’s domestic labor was becoming increasingly perceived as subordinate and unskilled labor. Industrial and commercial activity performed by male laborers outside of the home was designated as productive and skilled work. Toward the nineteenth century “...domestic service would reinforce an association of working-class women with nonproductive activity...domestic chores were tainted by their association with perhaps the most unacknowledged form of women’s work, that of simply attending to the needs of others...”⁹⁰

The influx of English colonial subjects into the cities of England during the nineteenth century prompted fears and animosity thus encouraging employers to complain incessantly about Irish servants while drawing from racialized representations of the Irish developed during the early years of England’s colonial conquest of Ireland. Considered an “uncivilized” race of people, Irish women in England were especially considered incapable of maintaining modern industrialized homes. These ideas about the unimportance of women’s work and

⁸⁹ Garner 115

⁹⁰ Valenze 156-157

the colonial status of Irish servants were mutually reinforced and shaped perceptions of Irish women as racially inferior.

Bridget's employer did not end his litany of complaints with her cooking. He continued to articulate his frustration by accusing her of possessing "savage" instincts which made her incapable of cleaning his home properly. The author's home, located in the upper class Peacock Terrace neighborhood, "speedily resembled nothing so much as one of the worst and filthiest of Dublin lodging-houses... Thus, under Bridget's influence, the house-work came to be disgracefully neglected. Dirt accumulated, till it became utter filth."⁹¹ The author's description of this tense but comical moment with Bridget echoes the sentiments of U.S. employers who claimed that Irish women were particularly rude, dirty, horrible cooks and servers, and failed to adhere to their social rank.

Associating the Irish with dirt was integral to this process of positioning the Irish as racially subordinate to the English. Palmer argues, "Dirtiness' appears always in a constellation of the suspect qualities that, along with sexuality immorality, laziness, and ignorance, justify social rankings of race, class, and gender."⁹² Dirt literally means "out of place" and was used to describe the condition of Irish households to which their class and racial status confined them.⁹³ Such ideas about Irish households directly implicated serving women

⁹¹ *Our Jemimas* 60-61

⁹² Palmer 140

⁹³ Walter 88

such as Bridget Hanlan. Irish women were blamed for the depravity of their employers' homes as well as their own and were ridiculed for lacking domestic skills. They were also accused of spreading diseases in the urban cities through their "immoral propensities" and their resistance to practice hygiene codes.

Hegemonic ideas of Irish women as "dirty" were also intricately tied to the psychology of domestic service relations between female employers and workers that depended upon biologically based claims of superiority and inferiority. According to Judith Rollins, "The domestic must remain ignorant and in poor material conditions; to do otherwise is to threaten the employer's basic belief about herself, the people around her, her entire social world."⁹⁴ Arguments about the inherent "dirty" practices of Irish servants were reinforced through the daily physical requirements of caring for the bodies of their employers. Servants came into contact with unsanitized substances by performing daily tasks such as scrubbing floors, cooking meals, cleaning dishes and clothes, and emptying chamber pots.

Irish women performed this type of labor during a period when developing discourses that associated cleanliness with bodies and Christianity were circulating in Europe. Women who came into contact with "dirty" substances were perceived as biologically prone to immorality through excessive sexual desires. Palmer notes, "The work of cleaning up the 'bad' body was given to 'bad'

⁹⁴ Rollins 198

women, and this work distribution confirmed the dominant belief that class and race differences were due to the moral superiority of middle-class white women...”⁹⁵

Tracing Gendered Racialization in the United States

Similar representations of race, class, gender, and domestic service can be traced in the archives of New York City through manuals and letters written by employers who passionately described the “domestic service problem,” or what they considered the declining quantity and quality of domestic workers in the United States. According to David Katzman in *Seven Days a Week*, “The servant problem was the bread and butter of women’s organizations between the Civil War and World War I, and it filled volumes of general-circulation weeklies and monthlies as well as the earliest issues of social-science journals.”⁹⁶ The complaints, of course, were rooted in their preference for white American-born female servants, which were (as always it seemed) less available than before. White women were gaining access to jobs in factories, stores, offices, and schools. Although some domestic service positions offered higher wages than these occupations, white women refused to enter domestic service.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Palmer 147.

⁹⁶ David Katzman, *Seven days a week: Women and domestic service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 223.

⁹⁷ Katzman 225

Meanwhile, Black and Irish women, due to racial inequalities in the labor sector and the lack of educational opportunities for racial minority women, found it difficult to find employment outside of domestic service. Rather than offering northern housewives a solution to the decline of white American women in domestic service, these groups were regularly targeted as sources of the perceived problem. Letters expressing complaints about Irish and Black servants were popular and were often featured as front page news stories in local papers including the *New York Times*, the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and the *Amsterdam News* as well as such national periodicals as *The Crisis* and *Harper's Monthly Magazine*.⁹⁸

Traditional practices of domestic service, intense job competition between Irish and African Americans in northeastern cities, widely held suspicions about newly emancipated African Americans planning to rebel against white Americans, fears that Irish-Catholic immigrants would betray the U.S. nation-state by expressing their loyalty to Ireland and Rome, and ideas of race and modernity developed during the Reconstruction and Industrialization eras aided the development of ideas of race articulated by domestic service employers. Noel Ignatiev notes, "In the early years Irish were frequently referred to as 'niggers turned inside out'; the Negroes for their part, were sometimes called 'smoked Irish,' an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended

⁹⁸ *The Crisis* was a major publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was edited by scholar and activist William Edward Burghardt Dubois.

to be.⁹⁹ Thus, in the eyes of “WASP America” the two groups were comparable if not interchangeable and considered unfit for citizenship.¹⁰⁰

An employer of domestic help wrote to the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1883 and declared, “Oh dear, what shall we do about servants...The colored servant grows steadily worse. She is uncleanly wasteful, pilfering, careless and story-telling...The old time, well tried servants of slavery days are disappearing, and soon will be entirely gone. The present generation of servants is almost worthless, and getting worse.”¹⁰¹ Fourteen years later, another employer revealed much the same concerns about an Irish employee. She wrote, “...much against my will, I took an Irish girl. I should have known better and will never have another in my house if I have to crawl to get the meals...dirty, impudent, careless, wasteful and for incompetence they take the premium, but what can you expect when most of them are just off the bogs?”¹⁰²

Although from distinct ethnic groups, Irish and African American women were often described by their employers in remarkably similar ways during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by American employers. The second quote above, excerpted from an 1897 letter written by the employer of an Irish domestic worker, echoes complaints in the first, an excerpt from an 1883 letter written by the employer of an African American domestic in the South. Both

⁹⁹Ignatiev 41

¹⁰⁰Garner 98

¹⁰¹Untitled, *The Brooklyn Eagle* 8 April 1883.

¹⁰²Untitled, *The Brooklyn Eagle* 12 March 1897.

employers use the same words to describe the women who work in their homes: “careless,” “dirty,” and “wasteful.” These descriptions reflect the racialized ideas of class, gender, and sexuality held by employers.

Such ideas developed in the colonial South and followed African American women when they migrated to northern cities in search of employment. The editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* published the complaint about African American women in the South to explain why employers in New York were having what they considered problems with the Black migrant women they employed. Employers then used such complaints to justify the low wages paid to African American domestic workers. Indeed, in some cases, they refused to pay them at all. Their status as racial minority women and laborers in domestic service mutually shaped racial stereotypes. An 1889 edition of Harper’s Bazaar entitled “Bridget’s Suggestion,” highlights the simultaneous processes of domestic labor operating as a racializing mechanism while also drawing comparisons between the racial status of Irish and African American servants. The conversation reads¹⁰³:

Mistress: “Bridget, I wish you would refill my ink stand for me.”

Bridget (upstairs girl): “ Please mum, ivery tolme il fills that inkshtaud ol-girs me hands that black they don’t git clane for a wake.” [Please mam, every time I fill the inkstand I get my hands black and they don’t get clean for a week.]

Mistress: “But you surely do not expect me to do it?”

¹⁰³ “Bridget’s Suggestion,” *The Brooklyn Eagle* 10 Aug 1889.

Bridget: “No, mum; but ol was thnkin yet might ax th’ colored cook.” [No, mam, but I was thinking you might ask the colored cook.]

Harper’s *Bazaar* often featured dialogues between fictional employers and domestic workers that were read by both British and American audiences.

However, the dialogues provide a lens to consider possible attitudes toward race that circulated between England and the United States. The employer’s decision to ask Bridget to fill the ink stand discloses that the employer thought it was a “dirty” job that was equally suitable for an Irish woman. In addition, the author intentionally uses broken English to describe Bridget’s responses, thereby offering evidence of how Irish women were racialized as “non-white.” Elite English and white American women used similar strategies to describe how enslaved African descended women spoke in the American colonies. However, Bridget insinuates herself in ideas of race as blackness when she asserts that refilling the ink stand is more appropriate for a colored servant. The dialogue suggests that Bridget was aware of the racial implications of coming into contact with “dirty” or “black” substances that was also integral to performing household work.

Marina de Regt argues in her study of domestic workers in Yemen that notions of cleanliness were used to establish racial and class differences between employers and workers. She states, “‘Cleanliness’ and ‘reliability’ are two central elements in the racialization process of domestic workers...Stereotyping domestic

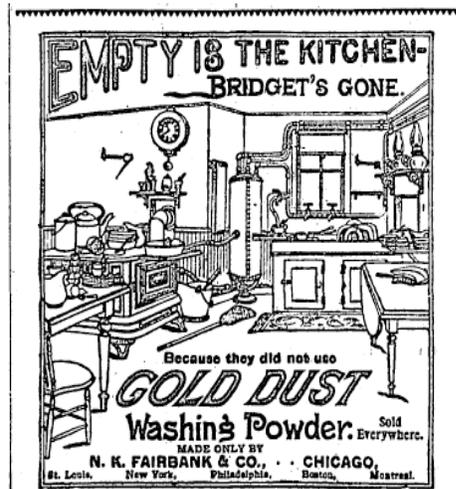
workers as unclean and unreliable is related both to the extent to which domestic are socially close to their employers and also to issues of control and authority. Domestic workers who are socially close are seen as threatening by the new middle class...”¹⁰⁴ Apparently, domestic workers in the U.S. also participated in discourses of cleanliness to mark racial differences amongst themselves.

Other ideas echoed those in England, especially regarding the ability of Irish women to adapt to the introduction of modern appliances into the home ushered by the Industrialization era. Perceived as the descendents of Catholics who settled in southwest Ireland during the reign of Caesar and who still retained culture from that “barbaric” age, Irish women were described by English employers as persons who looked “wild” and lived in “mud cabins.”¹⁰⁵ The perception that Irish women would fail to adjust to the introduction of modern appliances led to predictions that newly invented household products would eventually push them out of domestic service in the U.S. These assumptions were reinforced by the increase of African American women concentrated in domestic service in northeastern cities. Such perceptions about Irish women and the ethnic transition of domestic service are illustrated in the image below:¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Maria de Reget, “Preferences and Prejudices: Employers’ Views on Domestic Workers in the Republic of Yemen,” *Signs* 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Garner 94

¹⁰⁶ Untitled, *The North American (Philadelphia)* 4 January 1894: 5.



Interestingly, the front cover of “Gold Dust Washing Powder” boxes that is referenced in the image “Empty is the Kitchen-Bridget’s Gone” contained stereotypical depictions of two Black children who were referred to as the “Gold Dust Twins” and appeared eager to do household work. The boxes read: “Let the Gold Dust Twins do your work. If you would ‘get through’ your work quickly, satisfactorily and economically, summon Gold Dust to your aid.” The boxes also featured descriptions of household chores that the Gold Dust Twins could perform efficiently.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷< <http://theoldentimes.com/golddust03nm.html>>, <<http://www.the-forum.com/advert/GOLDDUST.HTM>>



The Gold Dust Twins were featured on Gold Dust Washing Powder boxes beginning in 1883 until the N.K. Fairbank Company folded in the 1930s. The name of the powder references its bright yellow color at the time of its invention and it was instant success in England and the U.S. The original drawings of the Twins featured two white boys sitting in a tub. At the suggestion of Paul E. Derrick, the London-based advertising manager, the Twins were darkened and “put to work” in efforts to represent the uses of the powder. The playful twins communicated that housework could be easy and fun.

Although there was a low percentage of African descended servants in England, advertising Black “serving” children on the boxes might have fit comfortably in the colonial imaginaries of slavery for British consumers. Considering the long history of Black servitude in the United States, the new image of the twins was also a success for the American market. According to

journalist Lynn Wright, “The Gold Dust Twins have a certain comic quality that has hit the American sense of humor, and has got them into many newspaper cartoons.”¹⁰⁸ Bessie Smith, a popular blues singer from Chattanooga, Tennessee, wrote a song entitled “Washwoman’s Blues” in 1928, which explained how the actual lived experiences of Black women contradicted the message on the washing powder boxes. She sang: “Lord, I do more work than forty-eleven Gold Dust twins. Got myself a-achin’ from my head down to my shins. Rather be a scullion, cookin’ in some white folks’ yard. I could eat up plenty, wouldn’t have to work so hard.”¹⁰⁹

Smith’s lyrics reveal that although the Gold Dust twins were featured on the boxes, the washing powder shaped the everyday arduous demands of household labor for Black women. Considering that Black women were implicated in the washing powder’s symbolism, the “Bridget’s Gone” image suggests that there was a transition of paid domestic service in the U.S. from a predominately Irish to a form of Black female labor. While these products helped define the position of Blacks and the Irish in the labor sector, they were simultaneously defining the new role of housewives as consumers who were primarily responsible for buying domestic products in an advancing industrial age.

¹⁰⁸ Lynn G. Wright, “Uses and Abuses of Advertising Characters,” *Printer’s Ink*, 1910: 37.

¹⁰⁹ Gloria T. Hull, et al., *All the women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but some of us are brave* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982) 132.

Although some employers preferred to hire the southern migrants, both Irish and Black women were subject to complaints about their work because they were laboring during an age of advanced industrialization that made women's labor less visible. Ideologies that guided the developing capitalist economy drew boundaries between the workplace and the place of residence. Social reproduction became women's work that remained cloistered in the home and the production of goods outside of the home was considered men's work. Evelyn Nakano Glenn states, "In an evolving economic system in which value and independence were measured by earning, unpaid productive and reproductive labor did not count as real work."¹¹⁰

The invention of household technology also supported some perceptions that Irish and Black domestic workers were not necessary for maintaining the home. Women's organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) devised strategies to debunk these perceptions of women's labor. The YWCA created the National Committee on Household Employment, which provided training courses for domestic workers. According to the Committee, "Contrary to popular opinion, household employment is a highly skilled occupation. The concept prevails that 'anyone can do housework' and consequently domestic service has become the 'dumping ground' for the incompetents who have not made the grade in other occupations. To the

¹¹⁰ Glenn 71

thoughtful it is obvious that household employment demands intelligence, initiative, stamina, character and a high type of manual skill.”¹¹¹

The efforts of the YWCA were more beneficial to Black women as they remained concentrated in domestic service while Irish immigrant women and their daughters moved into higher paying forms of work outside of domestic service beginning in the 1930s. The de-skilling of reproductive labor reinforced racist ideas of Black women that confined them to low wage work much longer than Irish women. Black women continued to remain the center of employers’ concerns about race and women’s labor while Irish women transitioned into members of a race that provided an exit from racially stigmatized forms of labor.

Conclusion

As a Women’s and Gender Studies researcher who is aware of the marginalization of poor racial minority women in academic studies and the larger society, I entered the archives with the desire to locate diaries and letters actually written by domestic workers to locate data about their lives from their own perspectives. These materials are scant in the archive and I had to rely on the sources written by those with racial, class, and sometimes gender privileges. Extracting information about racial minority women concentrated in a form of stigmatized labor necessitated an interdisciplinary and multi-media approach.

¹¹¹ Jean Collier Brown, “Concerns of Household Workers: Program with Household Workers in the Y.W.C.A.,” The Woman’s Press 1941: 29.

Considering the stereotypical views many employers and journalists articulated in their writings, I was not expecting to acquire more data than just that. Moreover, the organization of the archive itself made mostly manuals written about only English servants readily accessible.

Yet, these manuals revealed much more than simply the perspectives of employers. Hegemonic ideas about English, Irish, and Black women that were articulated by employers provided a lens to examine racial formation processes during a moment of unrest on both sides of the Atlantic. Dark representations of English servants provided an analytic framework to trace domestic work as a racializing mechanism. Domestic service manuals and periodical images highlighted paths to trace the multiple and mutually constitutive processes of racialization in the lives of racial minority women laborers that were intimately tied to the de-skilling of women's labor during the Industrialization era, the cult of domesticity, notions of cleanliness and dirt, slavery, the racial hierarchy of the larger society, England's colonial relationship to Ireland, England's colonial history in the United States, and practices of subservience endemic to centuries of traditions in domestic service. In addition, the shared colonial and labor history of Irish and African American women prompted employers in both England and New York to draw specific racial parallels between them. Thus, the racial status of Irish and Black women outside of private domains shaped and became shaped by the domestic labor that they performed.

Following the circulation of these ideas within the context of women's labor migration also required the research methods to "travel" between the archival materials housed in England and New York. The movement between archival texts housed in these sites provided a way of exploring African American women's labor and migration history in a global context. As the sources reveal, Black women's experiences of racialization were not bound by the geographical limits of the United States. Discourses of race were informed by English colonialism and African American women's migration to northern cities after emancipation. While this topic necessitates further studies to collect more information that might be buried in the margins of the archive, what has become most clear during this methodological journey is that rewriting the history of domestic labor and racial minority women requires "moving with the women" of domestic work along a global circuit of ideas across the Atlantic.

Chapter Two

Constructing Racialized Women's Labor:

Irish and African American Women as Colonial Subjects

When Ellen Brady, an Irish woman who arrived at Ellis Island during the early 1900s to search for household work, was interviewed in the 1970s, she commented on the colonial relationship between England and Ireland. Reflecting on her childhood and young adulthood in County Antrim, she concluded,

They [the British] didn't do anything for Ireland. They took everything from us. Sure, it's what the English do. They took all the good homes away from the Irish and gave the Irish nothing...Nobody ever hears about how the British treated the Irish. I didn't have the mind to think about those things when I was young. If I had been, God knows what I would be today. I'd be a rebel of some kind.¹¹²

Although Brady does not use the word "colonialism" to describe the relationship between the two countries, she recognizes that England's political and economic dominance created persistent inequalities. She makes clear how the English exploited the Irish by asserting control of vital resources and giving nothing in return. Moreover, she claims, if she had been more cognizant then of the colonial dynamic, she might have openly resisted these draconian policies.

Ann Walsh, an Irish woman who migrated to New York in the 1920s, extended Brady's observation by asserting that there is a shared colonial history between England, Ireland, and Africa. While talking vividly about her childhood

¹¹² Ellen Brady, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 7 March 1977.

in Ireland, she remembered a former English army official telling her about his experiences in Africa. She concluded from these intersecting stories that England was to blame for political and economic destabilization in both parts of the world: “I think really they [the English] were responsible for the state that Africa is in today, and the way they have treated Ireland.” Then she concludes, “But, we won’t get into that.”¹¹³

Brady’s and Walsh’s observations may help explain why enslaved women of African descent who worked for the descendants of English slaveholders in America had similar experiences with Irish women in Great Britain. While Brady and Walsh witnessed the detrimental effects of British policies in Ireland, women of African descent encountered colonial conditions in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Black women faced racial and gender discrimination in the labor and housing sector, education, and many other aspects of life in the South and North.¹¹⁴ Thus, Irish and African American domestic workers in New York City shared a long colonial history that included labor migration, household servitude, and racialized ideas of class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

¹¹³ Ann Walsh, Ellis Island Oral History Project, 26 June 1986.

¹¹⁴ Angela Davis, Women, Race, and Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: the impact of Black women on race and sex in America (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black women, work, and the family from slavery to the present (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Gerda Lerner, Black Women in white America: a documentary history (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

In this chapter, I argue that the similar racialization of Irish and African American domestic workers in New York was partly rooted in their positioning as colonial subjects; Irish women as colonial subjects of England and African American women as colonial subjects of the U.S. South and then of Anglo North America. Moreover, Black women's labor in New York City and other urban centers was implicated in the North's economic dominance of the South after the Civil War. Irish and Black women's parallel positioning as colonial subjects can be illuminated through a historical analysis of the larger political and economic conditions that positioned Ireland as a colony of England and the U.S. South as a "colony" of the North.

Colonialism is defined here as the practice of social, political, and economic domination, which involved the subjugation of one people or country to another. Colonial elites are defined as the white middle and upper classes that benefited from England's relationship to Ireland and the North's relationship to the South. In both cases, these relationships resulted in the migration of colonized women to work in the homes of white elites. Colonialism involved a number of distinct processes, two of which are highlighted here: the formation of racialized ideas of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality used to justify England's domination of Ireland and the U.S. North's dominance of the South; and the movement of women to meet the demand for labor in the homes of colonial

elites.¹¹⁵ While Irish women and African American women labored in countries with a history of English colonialism, they also became implicated in these colonial processes.

In particular, ideas of race were formed during England's occupation of Ireland and during the colonial era in the United States to explain why both groups of women were both the "worst" and "best" possible laborers. Formations of such ideas resurfaced after the racial hierarchy of the United States had been disrupted due to the Civil War. Editorials and journal articles published in the United States' southern and northern regions reveal that not only African Americans, but also the Irish were integral to the economic and political transformations that followed the war. Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, "The war, which was going to entail some revisions in the notions of American citizenship, was a most fitting occasion for some reflection upon the civic virtues of the Celtic immigrants and their contribution to the republic."¹¹⁶ This chapter explores how racialized ideas developed during the late nineteenth century that drew comparisons between particularly Irish and southern Black domestic workers during one of the most contested periods of citizenship boundaries in United

¹¹⁵ My discussion about the synergy of ideological formations and race, class, and gender inequalities in the labor sector are informed by several important works including: Howard Winant, The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II (New York: Basic Books, 2001); David Roediger, The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class (London: Verso, 2007); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹¹⁶ Jacobson 55

States history. Racialized discourses formed about Irish and African American women were not just constructed within the geographical boundaries of New York City, of course. They coalesced with and emerged from ideas about Irish women that circulated throughout England and in cities across the United States. Domestic service manuals and newspaper articles published in London and New York discussed the “domestic service” problem, or the declining quantity and quality of domestic servants, which often implicated Irish and Black women.

As noted earlier, the domestic sphere is an apt location to examine colonialism because developing racial, class, and gender distinctions in the “home” was integral to colonial projects. Although laws were created with the intention of drawing clear social boundaries between people, human behavior was central to the operation of those divisions. Ann Stoler argues, “...it was in the disarray of unwanted, sought after, and troubled intimacies of domestic space that colonial relations were refurbished and distinctions made...Assessments of civility and the cultural distinctions upon which racial membership relied were measured less by what people did in public than by how they conducted their private lives—with whom they cohabited, where they lived, what they ate, how they raised their children, what language they chose to speak to servants and family at home.”¹¹⁷ The laws yielded power through the acquiescence and resistance performed by participants in the racial order. Hence, the gap between

¹¹⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) 6.

prescription and practice in the home creates an opening to more clearly trace the development and practice of racialized ideologies.

In addition, discourses of colonialism that travelled from England to the United States highlighted the domestic sphere as the “bedrock” of civilization. Brownwen Walter argues, “The language used to describe the conquest and annexation of the colonies showed their feminized relationship and the aim was ‘civilisation’ through domestication...as domestic space became racialized, colonial space became ‘domesticated. Irish women were implicated in both spaces, reinforcing their association with degeneracy.’”¹¹⁸ The centrality of the “home” in colonial projects is further articulated through the missionary domesticity movement during early nineteenth century England.

The movement was born out of growing concerns among elite English women that the decline of morality and education among housewives in the colonies was stifling England’s economic and political growth. These missionaries travelled to the colonies spreading messages to housewives on how expanding their knowledge about political affairs and devoting more attention to the physical maintenance of the home would enable them to become “better” wives and mothers. Allison Twelis comments, “Missionary domesticity drew upon Enlightenment theorizing of the relationship between the separation of the spheres and the attainment of civilization, as well as, more fundamentally,

¹¹⁸ Walter 99

scriptural espousal of women's domestic role, to propose the domestic woman as a signifier of an advanced, civilized, Christian society."¹¹⁹ Enslaved laborers were not exempt from these domestic reform efforts. Missionaries also urged them to adopt doctrines of Christianity that would rescue them from their "savagery." Considering Irish and African American women's shared colonial history, it is the domestic sphere that we can most easily trace the similarities and differences in their colonial experiences.

And there were clearly differences. For instance, by the 1920s, Irish women began to transition into the white racial category and eventually gained access to jobs outside of domestic service. They also gained membership in labor unions, which protected their rights as white workers. Black women had a far more difficult time accessing such resources and remained relegated to the lower ranks of domestic service well into the late twentieth century.¹²⁰ However, when both groups were concentrated in domestic service jobs--from the colonial era to the early twentieth century--there were some striking commonalities in their racial, class, and gendered labor experiences, and those intersections are the focus of this chapter.

¹¹⁹ Allison Twelis, "Missionary Domesticity, Global Reform and 'Woman's Sphere' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Gender and History Journal*, Aug 2006: 267.

¹²⁰ Please see chapter three for a more detailed explanation about the different mobility outcomes between Irish and Black women.

Negotiating Colonial Boundaries: Irish and African American Domestic Workers as Colonial Subjects

England had a long history of asserting colonial control over Ireland which dates back to the medieval period. However, England gained a more permanent authority over Ireland at the end of the sixteenth century under the leadership of Elizabeth I. During this time, England was not only interested in asserting colonial control over Ireland, but also over other countries including parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. Therefore, the conquest of Ireland must be viewed within the context of England's imperial expansion around the world. The English wrote numerous books and articles regarding strategies for "civilizing" the Irish, whom they considered a foreign population.¹²¹

Similar strategies were employed to colonize indigenous Americans and Africans and to justify their acquisition of African nations and what later became the United States. According to Nicholas Canny, "Both Indians and blacks, like the Irish, were accused of being idle, lazy, dirty, and licentious, but few serious efforts were made to draw them from their supposed state of degeneracy."¹²² Such ideas were heavily influenced not only by the physical conquest of land, but also by the intellectual conquest of ideas, particularly developing concepts of cultural evolution that circulated throughout Europe during the Renaissance period. These

¹²¹ Nicholas P. Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America," *The William and Mary Quarterly Journal*, Oct. 1973: 575.

¹²² Canny 596

ideas were racialized and gendered and shaped the way English colonizers thought particularly about Native American and African women they encountered.¹²³

Although the foci of this study are Irish and southern African American women in the U.S., there is evidence that the racial positioning of the Irish in the United States was shaped by an even earlier history. Irish laborers were described in slippery terms that could be characterized as “non-white” not only because of their economic and social relationship to African Americans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also because they shared a labor history with people of African descent in the Caribbean as early as the seventeenth century. In other words, the Irish had a long history of encountering ideas of race around the globe before migrating to New York during the famine of the 1840s.

The Irish were implicated in the construction of “non-whiteness” since they were recruited by English planters in the seventeenth century to work as indentured servants alongside people of African descent in the Caribbean and North America. The Irish were promised the cost of their steerage, food, and shelter in return for up to seven years of labor in English colonies, including Barbados, Jamaica, St. Kitts, and Antigua. However, the Irish were often perceived by English masters as a “principal internal enemy—at times more

¹²³ Jennifer Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle Over their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” *The William and Mary Quarterly Journal* Jan. 1997: 191-192.

dangerous and feared than blacks” due to the long history of hostility between colonized and colonizer.¹²⁴ Both groups were described as rebellious “races” by English officials while the Scottish were considered the “perfect” and “loyal” laborers. English officials wrote diary entries complaining about the disloyalty and lack of work ethics among Irish and enslaved Black laborers. The English also instituted disciplinary measures to control what they suspected were alliances forming between the Irish and Blacks to engage in violent acts of resistance toward the English administrators.

These ideas emerged as England was facing a similar economic and political dilemma in both the Caribbean and England. English administrators and officials became preoccupied with anticipated backlash to the transition of the West Indies from a slave economy to capitalist free labor and the economic transition in Ireland from subsistence farming to wage labor. These emerging modes of capitalism displaced a large percentage of Irish laborers in Ireland and left former slaves landless and underemployed in the Caribbean. English fears of resistance among the Irish and Blacks fostered the emergence of racialized representations of both groups that portrayed them as incapable of governing themselves independent of English rule. David Lloyd argues, “In these parallel contexts, descriptions of the emancipated Black slave resonate profoundly with

¹²⁴ Hilary McD. Beckles, “A ‘riotous and unruly lot’: Irish Indentured Servants and Freemen in the English West Indies, 1644-1713” *The William and Mary Quarterly Journal* Oct. 1990: 504.

those of the Irish. Given the way in which the problems of Ireland and the West Indies were seen to converge across the Atlantic—as simultaneously problems of race, and of the management of populations and labor—it should not surprise that there was a convergence in the solutions found by policy makers for both colonial populations.”¹²⁵

The English continued to compare the “innate” characteristics of the Irish and African descendants well into the nineteenth century. This comparison served as evidence that England should continue exerting colonial dominance over the economies of the Caribbean and Ireland. Ideas that the Irish and people of African descent in the Caribbean were mentally and financially incapable of working for themselves formed in conjunction with the emergence of the nineteenth-century British state and organized resistance to colonial rule in Ireland and Jamaica. According to Lloyd, “... both its [Britain’s] Caribbean Black and its Irish populations were subject to a strikingly similar matrix of racialization... The Irish functioned as non-white in relation to Britain (and continue to do so in uneven ways) not simply because they were colonial subjects, but because as colonial subjects they posed analogous problems for the rule of the state to those posed by Jamaican Blacks, once they were emancipated.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ David Lloyd, “Black Irish, Irish Whiteness, and Atlantic State Formation,” *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, ed. Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2009) 11.

¹²⁶ Lloyd 13-15

These ideas curtailed the possibilities of the colonized populations in Ireland and the Caribbean establishing economic and political independence from England. Such ideologies also reinforced a racial hierarchy that created modes of inequality in the labor sector. Lloyd continues, “ The logic of development accordingly introduces the notion of the ‘not yet ready’: the Irish and the West Indian Blacks are ‘not yet ready’ for that labor discipline that leads the worker to ‘work by himself’ any more than they are ready for self-government and political independence.”¹²⁷

Irish indentured servants continued to confront ideas of race when they were introduced to the North American labor market during the late seventeenth century. The majority of these early migrants were identified as the Scotch –Irish, of the Protestant religious tradition, who had earlier migrated to northern Ireland from England in the twelfth century. Yet, one-third of the Irish who settled in the U.S. South and the eastern coastal region practiced Catholicism and converted to Protestantism after arrival. Government officials in England were instrumental in creating a labor supply of Irish laborers for the United States.¹²⁸ The Council of State in England granted a license for four hundred Irish children to be taken to New England and Virginia. Another contract was signed with Boston merchants to transport two hundred fifty women and three hundred men from ports along

¹²⁷ Lloyd 12

¹²⁸ Scupin 109

Ireland's southern and south-eastern coast to the United States for refusing to attend a Protestant church.¹²⁹

Irish women's entrance into the United States economy as an indentured labor force positioned them in close discursive proximity to enslaved Blacks. Since the beginning of the American Republic racial status was linked to labor. According to Glenn, "Certain kinds of tasks had become so clearly racialized as black that they were considered too 'servile' and degrading for whites."¹³⁰ Gradations of whiteness were formed as white workers occupied a range of independent and dependent labor positions including apprenticeships, tenant farming, indentured servitude, and hiring out of convicts. While Irish laborers were considered "non-white" since they mostly worked as indentured servants, enslaved African Americans were considered "black" since they performed the most extreme form of dependent labor.

Upon arrival in mainland North America, many Irish women worked as domestic servants even though evidence suggests that some colonial families complained that they disrupted the homes in which they worked. In 1688 in Massachusetts, "Goody" an Irish washerwoman for the Goodwins, an English Puritan family, was accused of performing witchcraft by initiating "demon attacks" upon the Goodwin children and their friends. Goody's failure to recite

¹²⁹ Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, *White cargo: The forgotten history of Britain's Whites slaves in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2008) 151.

¹³⁰ Glenn 61-62

the Lord's Prayer in English, as opposed to Gaelic, along with knitted dolls found in her possession provided the Puritan family with what they considered sound evidence to execute her.¹³¹ The Goodwins and other families then pursued other "witches" in their community, leading ultimately to a series of witchcraft trials in Salem.

It is important to note that by the twentieth century, Goody had been erased from histories of the Salem witch trials. According to later retellings Tituba, an enslaved woman from Barbados who was transported to Boston to work as a servant in the Goodwins' home, was the center of the Trials. During the 1930s, African American clergy, academics, and politicians wrote articles arguing that Goody, not Tituba, initiated the panic that led to the trials. An article in the Chicago Defender, for instance, described the film "The Maid of Salem" "as another instance of the habit of producers to defame the Race by sinister implications on screen... History is distorted to make it appear that a slave called Tituba started the witchcraft at Salem...As a matter of fact, the person whom Goodwin's young daughter hated and falsely accused of stealing family linen was an Irish servant woman."¹³²

¹³¹ Jordan and Walsh 151-152

¹³² "Maid of Salem Film Twists History to Disparage Race," The Chicago Defender 13 March 1937: 28.

According to the author, Tituba existed, but was in fact Native American and even if she had been Black she would have been “clean” and “kempt” unlike her portrayal in the film. While it is clear that some problematic notions of Black nationalism shaped this response to the film, it is noteworthy to highlight the colonial history of race that tied Irish and Black servants so closely that they were interchanged in the re-telling of the witchcraft trials. Simultaneously, the article points to differences in racialization between the two groups as the author accuses the producers of the film for disparaging Blacks through claims that a “black, filthy, and foul” servant started the demon spells in Massachusetts.¹³³ Moreover, it suggests that by the 1930s, Irish servants were considered fully white and therefore unlikely culprits in such devilish endeavors.

While Irish women were sent as servants to New England, the English also continued to assert colonial control in Ireland. Indeed, the Act of Union passed by the British parliament in 1800 joined the governments of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the British provinces of Upper Canada and Lower Canada. The merged countries became known collectively as the United Kingdom. However, Ireland was never completely integrated into the Union. English politicians coerced their Irish counterparts to abolish the parliament in Dublin and send representatives to London instead. But the Irish were allowed

¹³³ Although the *Defender* was a local African American newspaper in Chicago, it frequently reported upon Irish and African American labor relations in both New York City and Chicago. I predict that the large population of Irish-Americans and African Americans in Chicago encouraged the journalists to focus on the relationship between both groups.

only thirty two members in the British House of Lords and one hundred members in the House of Commons, ensuring they would have little power to effect legislation there. The Act also reinforced the power of the Anglican Church in what was a predominately Catholic Ireland.

As a consequence, Ireland did not benefit economically or politically from the Union, and the Irish repeatedly planned revolts against their British overlords.¹³⁴ Playwright and civil rights activist James Baldwin comments on the history of this colonial relationship when discussing the history of Black people's experiences with racism in the United States. He states, "This [North American] civilization has proven itself capable of destroying peoples rather than hearing them...But a dreadful day is upon us, and, as nobody's going to give us any straw—Ireland was raped, and the Irish were allowed to starve to death, in order to protect the profits of British merchants—people, we best make ourselves ready."¹³⁵

Within fifty years of the passage of the Act of Union, Ireland's economy was plunged into chaos when the nation confronted the infamous potato famine. Most of the rural Irish depended on the potato crop for income and nutrition. In 1845, a fungus destroyed over eighty percent of the crop, which resulted in

¹³⁴ Christine Kinealy, "Was Ireland a Colony: The Evidence of the Great Famine," Was Ireland a Colony?: Economics, Politics, and Culture in Nineteenth Century Ireland, ed. Terrance McDonough (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005) 49.

¹³⁵ James Baldwin, The Evidence of things not seen. (New York: Buccaneer Books, 1995) 90.

widespread starvation, poverty, and unemployment in Ireland.¹³⁶ While England created successive relief policies to help Ireland survive, the British media portrayed the Irish as “the idle and ungrateful recipient of British tax payers’—and imperial generosity.”¹³⁷ Such ideas were used to justify the government’s decision to cease relief policies. Moreover claims about Irish workers were deeply gendered. The “Paddy” stereotype portrayed Irish men as small and weak figures who allowed their wives to dominate them in the home. At the same time, “Paddy” reflected what was perceived as Ireland’s feminized or subordinate position relative to England. Irish women, on the other hand, were portrayed as uncivilized characters who assumed male attributes through their aggressive attitudes toward their husbands and their employers, many of whom were English mistresses of households.¹³⁸

Due to the famine and the British parliament’s refusal to provide further financial assistance for Ireland, employment and marriage opportunities for women were severely limited. Growing agitation among the Irish with England’s colonial rule over Ireland encouraged English officials to develop organized ways of sending the Irish to work in the United States. Voluntary migration also offered an attractive opportunity for Irish women who faced ethnic and religious

¹³⁶ Scupin 109

¹³⁷ Kinealy 49

¹³⁸ Mary J. Hickman and Bronwen Walter, “Racializing the Irish in England: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity,” *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Ireland*, eds. Marilyn Cohen and Nancy J. Curtin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 274.

persecution in Ireland. Ellen Brady remembers that there were clear socioeconomic distinctions made between the Irish who identified as Catholic and those who identified as Protestants. Brady claims that the Protestants had access to vital resources such as jobs that paid decent wages and houses outside of destitute areas. But she states, “If you were a Roman Catholic you didn’t stand a chance in Ireland...They [protestants] had beautiful homes. There was not one of them livin’ in a thatched house...They didn’t work herding the cattle.”¹³⁹

With the assistance of British colonial administrators, mass numbers of Irish women migrated to New York City between 1845 and 1849. British colonial administrators created organizations, including the London Female Emigration Society, the British Ladies Emigration Society, the Girls’ Friendly Society, and the Travelers’ Aid Society for Girls and Women, to aid these female migrants.¹⁴⁰ The organizations paid for the women’s passage and secured jobs for them as domestic servants in cities throughout the United States and in British colonies like Australia and Canada.¹⁴¹ Tina Vanderpool remembers the continued transportation of Irish labor to the Caribbean during this period as well. Vanderpool’s mother, Louisa Kelly Vanderpool, migrated from Samana in the Dominican Republic to work as a domestic servant in New York City in 1921.¹⁴² Samana was settled by former U.S. slaves from Pennsylvania who journeyed to

¹³⁹ Ellen Brady, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 7 March 1977.

¹⁴⁰ Steinberg 161

¹⁴¹ Untitled, Boston Daily Advertiser 3 March 1882: 4.

¹⁴² Tina Vanderpool, Interview by author, Atlanta, GA, 9 Jul 2009.

the Dominican Republic, thereby insinuating that Louisa was a descendent of slaves. Moreover, the settlers in the region encountered both Irish and Black laborers who moved island to island to help cultivate sugar and coffee.¹⁴³

There is also evidence that suggests the mission of “civilizing” Irish women through domestic service was shared by British and American housewives by the mid-nineteenth century. A reporter for The Liberator, an anti-slavery newspaper published in Boston, writes:

For, observe, the servants that are complained of are mostly from Ireland, wronged by politicians, darkened by priests. So the *world* swarms with the benighted victims; and we, in civilizing them, part necessarily with a degree of our own civilization. . . Ireland, in bonds and in ignorance imposes on the world the task of blessing it. So are we linked together, in weal and woe, on this planet.¹⁴⁴

England and the United States collaborated to sustain the migration of Irish women well into the nineteenth century. By 1850, in New York City, three serving women in four were Irish- Americans while African American women dominated domestic service in the homes of slaveholders in the South and some wealthy white families in the North. Upon arrival some Irish women would discover that they were met with racialized descriptions and illustrations of Irish laborers published in northern periodicals. Jacobson observes, “. . .beginning in the 1840s American comments on the ‘Irish character’ became not only more

¹⁴³ Considering the long history of Irish labor migration to the Caribbean, the transportation of especially Irish women’s labor in the Caribbean demands further research.

¹⁴⁴ Untitled, The Liberator [Boston], 4 May 1855: 72.

pejorative but also more rigidly cast in a racial typology...Negative assessments of Irishism or Celtism as a fixed set of observable physical characteristics, such as skin and hair color, facial type, and physique.”¹⁴⁵

The influx of Irish labor for the service industry compelled local writers to draw comparisons between Irish and northern Black workers. *Eliza Leslie's Behavior Book*, published in 1855, warns white middle class women that whenever they are being served by Black servants in a house they are visiting they must “refrain from all conversation in their presence that may grate harshly on their feelings, by reminding them of their unfortunate African blood. Do not talk of them as ‘negroes,’ or ‘darkies.’ Avoid all discussions of abolition, (either for or against).” Shortly after this warning, the author continues, “When the domestics are Irish, and you have occasion to reprove them for their negligence, forgetfulness, or blunders, do so without any reference to their country.”¹⁴⁶

The author’s comments indicate that some Northerners thought similarly about the ethnic origins of both Black and Irish servants. According to the author, both groups were members of subordinate ethnic origins that could prompt employers to make discriminatory comments about either group. These comments insinuated sentiments about race as the manual specifically instructs employers to refrain from discussing racial signifiers including “blood,” “negroes,” and

¹⁴⁵ Jacobson 48

¹⁴⁶ Miss Leslie, *The Behavior Book: A Manual for Ladies* (Philadelphia: Willis P.Hazard, 1855) 104-105.

national origins. The comparison that the author draws between Irish and Black workers suggests that they were at the center of conversations among white Americans about ethnicity, class, and race. The passages also insinuates that Irish and Black servants might have “talked back” or exercised some resistance upon hearing disparaging comments about their respective countries. Ironically, the servants’ subordinate position as the caretakers of the home put visitors in a precarious position when thinking about how they exercised their privileges so as not to disrupt the domestic routine.

Irish women were in high demand because they were discursively produced as “cheap” and “exploitable” workers well into the nineteenth century. During the same time period a large percentage of Germans were migrating as well. White Americans closely aligned the Irish with African Americans and associated the Germans with near “whiteness.” Such perceptions were linked to discourses about ethnicity and race that were circulating in the United States as early as the eighteenth century. These ideas traced the cultural roots of white Americans to the history of Anglo Saxons in Europe, which included the Germanic people. Matthew Jacobson notes, “In popular perception German immigrants generally remained the less racially distinct—or dangerous—of the two.

By longstanding tradition in the high discourse of race, the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic traditions were closely aligned; indeed, by many accounts Anglo-Saxons traced their very genius to the forests of Germany—Anglo-Saxondom represented one branch of a freedom-loving, noble race of Germanic people.”¹⁴⁷ The racial positioning of German immigrants is reflected through their experiences in the service industry. Domestic worker ads published in New York’s newspapers illustrate that Germans were preferred for higher paying governess positions while Irish and Black women were generally hired for the lowest paying position of general house worker.

Roman Catholicism also factored into the racialization process of the Irish as “non-white,” especially in comparison to other groups of European immigrant women. Anti-catholic sentiments were brought with English protestant settlers to what later became the United States. Such beliefs endured well into the nineteenth century and shaped popular representations about the Irish. Similar to the Germans, the Irish Catholics transported some of their religious beliefs and institutions when they arrived to America. Anti-catholicism among white American Protestants was partly fueled by their suspicions that the Pope would take control of the institutions and religious traditions in the United States as the percentage of Irish immigrants increased. Thus, the Irish Catholics revived memories about religious conflicts in Europe between the Protestants and

¹⁴⁷ Jacobson 47

Catholics, which encouraged the white American Protestant majority to target the Irish for discriminatory hiring practices.¹⁴⁸

Irish immigrant entry into forms of service labor also contributed to how they were racialized. Definitions of white manhood dating back to the eighteenth century in America were based on concepts of free labor and wage labor. Such conceptions supported ideas that enslaved Blacks were not qualified to receive the full benefits of American citizenship unlike white workers who received compensation for their labor. Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues, “Just as the United States developed a duality in the structure of citizenship, it also developed duality in the labor system: free labor for whites and un-free labor for blacks and other subordinated minorities, such as Native Americans, Mexicans, and Asians. The demarcation between free and un-free labor evolved over time, and the line was drawn differently in different periods.”¹⁴⁹

Similar to the subordinated minorities that Glenn describes, Irish women were considered cheap and exploitable service workers. This perception is reflected in the numerous articles that appeared in New York periodicals pleading with organizations to stop exploiting Irish immigrant women. In 1883 a journalist for the New York Times demanded that swindling houses “stop targeting women.” The author accused some employment agencies of luring immigrant

¹⁴⁸ Scupin 110-111

¹⁴⁹ Glenn 58

women to the United States and Canada with promises of jobs in domestic service. When the women reached New York, they soon discovered that the tickets were counterfeits and many had to remain in the City with little possibility of returning home.¹⁵⁰ While the author mentioned that agencies targeted immigrant women, he made a point of discussing Irish women specifically, whom he claimed were often found drunk in saloons because they were duped into coming to New York and left with little money. While Irish women thus contributed to the immoral aspects of New York life, this reporter at least suggested the fault lay with the fraudulent agencies, not the women themselves. Yet, white Americans still did not consider Irish immigrants as fit for American citizenship and such ideas were articulated through religious institutions.

Local missionaries including Charles Loring Brace, who helped found the Children's Aid Society in 1858, complained, "It is another marked instance of the demoralizing influence of emigration, that so large a proportion of the female criminal class should be Irish-born, though the Irish female laboring class are well known to be at home one of the most virtuous in the world."¹⁵¹ Brace continues by delineating what he considered a marked difference between Irish women and other poor European women. He asserts, "Our visitors and myself at once gathered in a needy-looking assembly of the poor German girls of the Eleventh

¹⁵⁰ "New Phase of Immigrant Swindling," *New York Times* 19 Oct 1860: 4.

¹⁵¹ Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and twenty years work among them*. (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck Publishers, 1872) 36.

Ward, not as ragged or wild as the Irish throng in the Fourth Ward, but equally poor and quite as much exposed to temptation.”¹⁵²

A domestic worker, who identified herself as a white American woman, further reveals how Irish women were perceived in comparison to other groups of European immigrant women. She recalls: “My employers were very nice to me, but the other servants were unbearable. When I first went there to live I found an English cook, a German chambermaid, and a Swedish laundress. They were all so kind to me that I never felt so happy in my life. But, alas! The chambermaid and laundress married and the cook went to England for a vacation. Three Irish girls took their places; three of the dirtiest and most grossly ignorant people I ever met.” The author continues to disparage the Irish workers by criticizing their inability to clean the kitchen and cook meals. Drawing from racialized ideas of republican ideology, the author associated independence and “good” work ethics with the “near white” English, German, and Swedish women while reserving “non-white” descriptions of dependence and poor work ethics for the Irish women.

She furthers her complaints by making suggestions that fit within the colonial history of Irish labor migration. She recommended “that the [U.S.] President annex Hawaii and then on the 17th of March charter enough steamers to send all the Irish servants in New York out there and leave them where they could

¹⁵² Brace 150

fight among themselves, which they would do until they were exterminated. The servant question then might be settled.”¹⁵³ Although such ideas about Irish women prevailed in New York City, the demand for Irish domestic laborers never faltered.

Ironically, representations of Irish women fueled the demand for their labor. Stereotypes about the newcomers from Ireland helped justify the exploitative practices of employers who issued low wages to their employees, if any at all. In addition, the images of the Irish fit neatly within the racial lexicon at the time. The privileged racial and class status of white American employers and the “near white” racial status of immigrants from Germany and Sweden depended on the subordinate racialized ethnic status of the Irish.

Between 1899 and 1910, forty percent of Irish immigrants in New York City were still classified as “servants.” Only fourteen percent of Irish immigrants were classified as having ‘no occupation,’ a category that consisted mostly of children and women who considered themselves homemakers.¹⁵⁴ What reinforced the racially subordinate status of the Irish in domestic service was its association with enslaved African American women in the South. Thus, Irish women found that their position in the field was intricately tied to the history of these southern women.

¹⁵³ “Ex-Lady,” The New York Times 17 Feb 1895.

¹⁵⁴ Steinberg 161

African American women

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction 1860-1880*, which sought in part to explain how the agricultural South had become economically and politically subordinate to the burgeoning power of the manufacturing North.¹⁵⁵ The noted intellectual and writer claimed:

With all its fine men and sacrificing women, its hospitable homes and graceful manners, the South turned the most beautiful section of the nation into a center of poverty and suffering, of drinking, gambling and brawling; an abode of ignorance among black and white more abysmal than in any modern land; and a system of industry so humanly unjust and economically inefficient that if it had not committed suicide in civil war, it would have disintegrated of its own weight.¹⁵⁶

Du Bois dedicated his life to examining how the experiences of Blacks revealed racial and class inequalities in the United States and throughout the world. *Black Reconstruction* provided a compilation of his ideas about the South's colonial relationship with the North based on detailed archival research. Du Bois was inspired to write the book by a paper he delivered to the American Historical Association twenty five years prior to its publication. In "Reconstruction and its Benefits," Du Bois interrogated beliefs among white historians and sociologists that emancipated and "unruly" Blacks led to the downfall of the South's economy. He asserted that the larger issue was the failure of the government to

¹⁵⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Athenaeum, 1935) 53.

provide more stable institutional support for African Americans after emancipation such as not creating a more effective Freedmen's Bureau. Du Bois concluded that despite these difficulties "the Negro governments in the South accomplished much of positive good."¹⁵⁷

In addition, he argued that southern planters destroyed the southern economy long before Blacks were emancipated. According to Du Bois, the South developed a quasi-colonial status, by which they became economically and politically subordinate to the North, when white southerners refused to adjust their agricultural production methods to the demands of the emerging Industrial Revolution. While slavery was deemed necessary by southern planters to maintain their economic stronghold, it eventually proved to be an impediment to strengthening the region's economy. Furthermore, racist ideologies developed to help justify slavery prevented white southerners from cultivating a labor force that could withstand the industrial changes of the mid-1800s. He notes, "The economic difficulties that thus faced the planter in exploiting the black slave were curious. Contrary to the trend of his age, he could not use higher wages to induce better work or a larger supply of labor. He could not allow his labor to become

¹⁵⁷ David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919 (New York: H. Holt, 1993-2000) 384.

intelligent, although intelligent labor would greatly increase the production of wealth.”¹⁵⁸

Du Bois’s analysis of white southerners converged with those of white republican northerners. Guided by the republican ideology that hard, honest, and free labor determined white American citizenship, northern republicans became increasingly critical of white southerners who enslaved African Americans. A writer for The New York Times reports: “...And this is the kind of lesson which intelligent and educated Southerners were constantly teaching the slaves. A slave owner sent his negro out in the world deprived him of his care and protection, compelled him to work for strangers, and then regularly, every month, pocketed the fruits of his industry, and assured him that ‘to lie and steal, and to break the wise regulations which the peace and welfare of the country required, was to sin against God!’”¹⁵⁹

The author’s claim that white southerners were earning a “dishonest” living by solely depending on the labor of slaves called into question their privileges as white citizens since they had violated the doctrines of republicanism. Critiquing the racial and class status of white southerners illustrates that not only European immigrants and enslaved African Americans, but also white Americans were vulnerable to being positioned on the margins of American citizenship after

¹⁵⁸ Du Bois 40

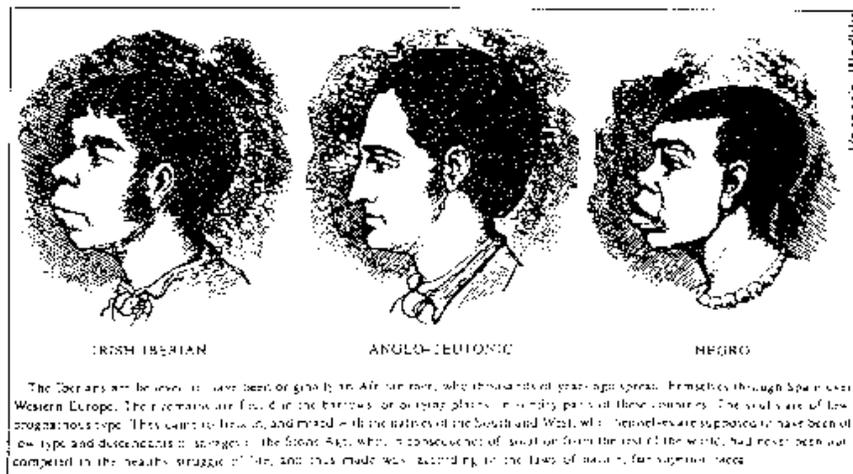
¹⁵⁹ “The Negroes of the South,” The New York Times 25 Nov 1864.

the Civil War. It was no longer assumed that their heritage as descendents of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant settlers granted them ready access to privileges of whiteness.

During this same time period pro-slavery coalitions were working to counteract ideas of an anti-slavery society that Du Bois describes in Black Reconstruction. In fact, the Irish became increasingly implicated in the conflict between anti-slavery and pro-slavery organizations. During the 1860s parallels were drawn between Irish immigrants in the North and enslaved Blacks in the South to encourage support for a Northern pro-slavery coalition. Some white northerners argued that millions of dollars that had been sent to the U.S. from Britain to support anti-slavery efforts should have been allocated to the Irish laborers that Britain sent to the U.S. According to these coalitions, the Irish immigrants deserved some remuneration for enduring harsh living conditions and working low-wage jobs since they abandoned their immoral traits of excessive drinking and sexual activities after living for some time in the United States.

Yet, these ideas were circulating at the same time racist scientific discourses were developing, which positioned Irish immigrants and African Americans as biologically similar. López notes, “Such ‘scientific evidence’ rationales justified racial divisions by reference to the naturalistic studies of

humankind.”¹⁶⁰ The caption of the image below cites similar skin tone, hair texture, and skull measurements as evidence that Irish and Blacks shared the same racial ancestry.¹⁶¹ It reads: “The [Irish] Iberians are believed to have been originally an African race, who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain over Western Europe... They came to Ireland and mixed with the natives of the South and West, who themselves are supposed to have been of low type descendants of savages of the Stone Age, who, in consequence of isolation from the rest of the world had never been out competed in the healthy struggle of life...”¹⁶²



¹⁶⁰ Haney López 5

¹⁶¹ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 48.

¹⁶² < http://philosophycompass.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/scientific_racism_irish1.jpg > 13 Jun 2010.

Discourses of scientific racism also shaped the ways in which Irish domestic servants were represented in print media, especially after the Civil War. The photo below displays a representation of a “lazy” Irish servant who is close to dropping a burning candle. The servant was drawn with animalistic and broad features similar to the “Irish Iberian” presented in the image above. The image connotes what was perceived to be the uncivilized nature of Irish servants. The caption for the photo below, which appears in *Harper’s Bazaar*, read: “Bridget was of a retiring disposition.”¹⁶³



It is not coincidental that the representation of an Irish domestic servant in particular would carry ideas of race similar to those developed about African Americans. Domestic service was a particular niche of labor that was most closely

¹⁶³ “Bridget was of a retiring disposition,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 22 Dec 1894.

associated with African Americans who had been largely concentrated in this type of work for more than a century by the time this image was published. Evelyn Nakano Glenn observes, “Because the labor market was so segregated, jobs themselves took on race-gender meanings. Work associated with racialized minorities was viewed as ‘dirty’ or ‘servile,’ and that associated with women as ‘unskilled’ and ‘feminine.’ Epithets such as ‘nigger work’ were attached to servantry, field labor, and cleaning.¹⁶⁴ It was these descriptions that coalesced with ideologies about which segments of the population were fit for citizenship status. López notes, “ To be unfit for naturalization—that is, to be non-White—implied a certain degeneracy of intellect, morals, self-restraint, and political values; to be suited for citizenship—to be White—suggested moral maturity, self-assurance, personal independence, and political sophistication.”¹⁶⁵

After the Civil War, Northern merchants and manufacturers continued exerting dominance over the South by coercing the region to lower the prices of cotton, sugar, and tobacco, which resulted in lower profits for southern planters. The subject status of newly emancipated African Americans continued after the War as well since many faced limited employment options outside of sharecropping. As the main source of agricultural labor, southern Blacks were coerced into working arduous hours with little to no pay to meet the product demands of the North. At the same time, even a couple of decades after the end of

¹⁶⁴ Glenn 82

¹⁶⁵ Haney López 16

slavery, Black women still found it difficult to find stable employment due to racial and gender discrimination in a weakened southern economy that had not recuperated from the Civil War.

Some women found it difficult to find employment among whites who believed that freed Blacks from the South had abandoned their work ethics after emancipation. Talks about transporting Black women to the North and bringing in domestic workers from Europe were prevalent in some white southern communities. An employer wrote to *The New Orleans Times*: “There are too many low-grade cooks, dirty nurses and lazy house girls. They have demoralized the better class of negro servants, to be found here before the war, and at that time one of the features of the Southern households...If we could ship annually some 10,000 or even 100,000 negro servants North it would be better for all hands.”¹⁶⁶

An employer from Savannah, Georgia discusses similar plans:

Housekeepers in Savannah are trying to solve the perplexing servant question by importing white women from countries in Europe to take the place of the lazy and unsatisfactory negroes, Baron H. H. D. Hooft, agent of investment companies of the Netherlands, Belgium and France, was recently in Savannah to arrange for the location of a colony from the Netherlands. It is planned for the colonists to bring sufficient women with them to take the place of colored women.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ “Domestic Service in the South,” *The New-Orleans Times* 30 Nov 1889.

¹⁶⁷ “White Servants in the South: Housewives in Georgia Plan to Dismiss the Negroes,” *The New York Times* 5 Jul 1912.

Declining economic privileges and racial resentment toward freed Blacks made it difficult for these women to find employers who would pay them decent, livable wages. They also found it difficult to move out of domestic service because the segregated school system provided Blacks with few educational or occupational resources. Some women such as Eleanor Owens, who migrated from Virginia, and Hannah Moses, who migrated from Bishopville, South Carolina—both single teenage mothers--needed to earn a living to support their children. Hannah “Hammie” Moses migrated to New York from Bishopville, South Carolina in 1932 to start a new life. She was positioned as the outcast of her family as a young, single mother who had mothered a child at the age of sixteen with a married man. Robinson remembers that her grandmother “Hammie” refused to talk about her life in South Carolina. She says, “She was very close lipped about her early years in Bishopville. I got the sense as a child that she was considered the black sheep of the family. In fact we didn’t even know when her real birthday was. She led us to believe that her birthday was the same as Abraham Lincoln’s... She was considered the wild one. The outspoken one.”

It is important to note that some Black women remained working as domestic servants in the South, which reveals that southern race relations were more complicated than northern abolitionists described in pamphlets and newspaper articles. Some southern Black women preferred to stay in the South where they had established their own terms of respectability with southern whites.

Robinson's paternal grandmother, Lilly, owned three houses in South Carolina and made a living renting the property and working as a domestic servant. She was well-respected by both blacks and whites in her small community. She would walk around her neighborhood with a rifle gun in case any type of racial conflict occurred in her neighborhood.¹⁶⁸

Yet, rumors still circulated among family members about higher paying domestic service jobs in the North, stories about Harlem and other exciting black cultural centers, the rise of industrial jobs, and the comparatively lower rate of violence between blacks and whites. These stories encouraged many Black women to seek a better life in the economically vital North. By 1900 there were 60,666 blacks scattered throughout New York's five boroughs and by 1910 approximately 91,709 Blacks lived in the city, the majority of whom were southern born. Most of these migrants came from Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. More women than men migrated as the years progressed and by 1920, there were 94, 418 black males and 103, 065 black females in the city.¹⁶⁹ In addition, between 1900 and 1930, the number of white native-born

¹⁶⁸ Eleanore Owens, Interview by author, Piscataway, NJ, 18 Nov 2007; Sharon Robinson, Interview by author, Atlanta, GA, 7 Jul 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Brenda Clegg Gray, Black Female Domestic Workers During the Depression in New York City, 1930-1940 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) 14-15.

domestic workers fell by 40 percent in the North while the number of Black domestic workers rose by 43 percent.¹⁷⁰

Blurring the Boundaries of Citizenship:

Irish and Black women's migration after Emancipation

Eleanore Owens migrated from Williamsburg, Virginia during the 1930s and worked as a domestic laborer in New York City and New Hampshire. She linked her experience as a migrant worker to those of immigrant women. Indeed she remembered, "I used to call us the immigrants [laugh] before I even knew what an immigrant was because we didn't live there. We didn't belong there. That was for the white folks."¹⁷¹ Brown's story suggests that her racial status was shaped by her migration. According to her, the North was a region that was culturally and racially distinct from the South since white Americans were more predominant in the North. Thus, in a sense she considered herself like an immigrant entering a new country.

An article published in the *New York Times* titled, "Work to Domestic Service," confirms Brown's analysis. It states, "The Women's Municipal League thinks that the chief need for lightening the domestic problem is to furnish training to both negroes and immigrant girls...they must be in an elementary way

¹⁷⁰ Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 35.

¹⁷¹ Eleanore Owens, Personal Interview, 28 Nov 2007.

Americanized before they can properly go into American homes.”¹⁷² Some northern employers were delighted to employ the southern migrants because they thought the women could provide cheap domestic labor. However, what complicated this notion was that Black women were positioned outside of the boundaries of American citizenship as the *New York Times* article highlights. This precarious positioning of southern Black women as “foreigners” made them susceptible to complaints that they would not know how to maintain a middle class American home.

Newspapers across the country indicate that New York City was not the only destination for southern women, especially soon after the Civil War. For instance, associations were created in western cities to bring African American women there to serve as domestic workers in urban homes during the late nineteenth century. William Walton, a writer for The Daily Register Call in Central City, Colorado reported:

In compliance with the information and suggestions contained in Governor St. John’s letter which you kindly published in yesterday’s Tribune, I hereby request all citizens who wish to employ colored refugees from the South, to write the name, address, number of male or females needed, kind of labor to be performed, or the number of children they would like to bring up...¹⁷³

¹⁷² “Work to Domestic Service,” New York Times 20 Oct 1907.

¹⁷³ Wilmer Walton, “Colored Servants,” The Daly Register-Call (Colorado) 4 Aug 1879.

The article reveals that African American women developed an immigrant-like status--as “colored refugees”--and were transported to the northern and western cities to provide cheap labor. The women’s colonial subject status was also revealed in the growing demand for southern Black women to work in countries colonized by the English. Similar to the labor scheme designed for Irish women during the mid-nineteenth century, some southern African American women were sent to Australia and other British territories during the late nineteenth century.

According to a journalist for The Chicago Defender:

As there seems to be a delay on the plantation managers to employ negro field labor, Mr. Gardner, who came to the Island for the purpose of supplying that class of labor, has yielded to the requests made by a number of householders and will supply them with colored house servants direct from the South. Only bona-fide orders will be filled, and the number depends entirely upon the orders handed into him before his departure from Australia. The servants will include cooks, coachmen, yard-men, and nurses. Anyone who has traveled in the South remembers with pleasure the delicious fried chicken and corn bread.¹⁷⁴

The plans to send African American women to Australia suggests that Great Britain and the United States still shared a colonial interest in supplying homes with laborers from what they considered excess populations. Considering the complaints of employers about Irish women and other “inefficient” sources of help in the North, agencies were created to encourage and transport southern

¹⁷⁴ “Negro House Servants” The Daily Inter Ocean (Chicago) 1 Oct 1892.

Black women to work in the homes of northern families beginning in the late nineteenth century. Some migrants found themselves working in slave-like conditions for New York employers who refused to pay them while others were coerced into working in brothels. With little to no money, the women could not reach their families to inform them about the circumstances, and they could not afford to return home.

The popularity of such plans encouraged Black men, who had limited employment opportunities, to participate in the profitable venture as well. A journalist for San Francisco's Daily Evening Bulletin reports:

A phase of the labor question of present local interest is the introduction of colored help from the South, through the agency of one of their nationality. This is an intelligent man, William Hughes by name, with the double occupation of gardener to Rev. H.M. Parsons and shoemaker at the shop of Hitchcock & Brewster... He has been to Richmond twice recently for the immigrants... bringing a dozen or more at first, and then twenty-three men and women, the last installment arriving late in June... Five more, who have places already secured, will arrive at New York to-day, and Mr. Hughes will go down to pilot them hither.¹⁷⁵

The journalist labels these workers as “immigrants” while the women’s status as former slaves presented employers with the prospect of cheap labor similar to their Irish counterparts. Their “immigrant” status also made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and some migrants reported to courts in New York that they had been raped by men who worked for corrupt agencies.

¹⁷⁵ Untitled, Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco) 28 July 1879.

Referring to Blacks as “immigrants” fit neatly within the sociopolitical context in which this article was written. Black women were migrating to the North during the same time period as government officials and the courts were trying to establish racial differences among the influx of European immigrants in the United States. According to Haney Lopez, “Naturalization laws figured prominently in the furor over the appropriate status of the newcomers and were heatedly discussed not only by the most respected public figures of the day, but also in the swirl of popular politics.”¹⁷⁶

Yet, Black women’s history as laborers in the U.S. complicated their “immigrant” status, or the notion that they could be easily exploited as newcomers to the North. Their experiences as domestic servants in the South was cause for suspicion among some employers. An 1893 article reports, “The colored people are very shrewd in some ways, and nobody ‘sizes up’ a family quicker than they, and they set according to the measure they have taken...”¹⁷⁷ As this author suggests, Black women were perceived as being too familiar with white Americans as formerly enslaved laborers thereby challenging the employer’s ability to establish social distance from the worker. Hence, some employers preferred to hire “white” immigrant women. An 1897 article reads: “It is always the girl from a great distance who would do the best. Do our housekeepers often wish for ‘one of those fine old negro servants from the South,’

¹⁷⁶ Haney Lopez 3

¹⁷⁷ “Kitchen versus Slop Shop,” The New York Times 5 Mar 1893.

and then, getting her, find that her art does not go beyond frying bacon and boiling hominy? And have you not often, Madam, wished for ‘one of those well trained English girls, always so prompt and respectful?’¹⁷⁸

During the latter half of the nineteenth century larger processes including the expansion of industrialization, the Reconstruction of the nation following the Civil War, increased immigration from Europe, and the North’s economic dominance over the South helped form a moment when the definition of what it meant to be “American” was in flux. According to Glenn, “Thus it is crucial to examine not only the ways in which prior race-gender hierarchies were incorporated into the capitalist labor system but also the ways in which capitalist industrialization helped create new structures and relations of race and gender.”¹⁷⁹ The intersections between the labor experiences of southern Black women and Irish women in New York City resulted from this process. Both groups of women encountered and negotiated ideas of race that were constantly being rearticulated and re-circulated.

Ideas which deemed Irish and southern Black women both the “worst” and “best” possible were positioned at the crux of regional tensions as the North and South worked through the bitter sentiments that continued well after the Civil War. In this context, domestic servants, particularly racial minority women, often

¹⁷⁸ “Servants Hard To Get: London’s Domestic Problem is Similar to That Which Puzzles American Households,” The New York Times 9 May 1897.

¹⁷⁹ Glenn 73

found themselves at the center of moral panics that swept through northern and southern cities. For instance, Black domestic workers were blamed by southern physicians for transmitting diseases to their employers. In fact, diseases such as tuberculosis were considered “the Negro servants’ disease.”¹⁸⁰

The tense relationship between white southerners and northerners after the Civil War, noted by Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*, shaped such complaints about southern migrant women. Blaming domestic workers for diseases that were spreading across the South provided a response to northerners who were convinced that the South was a “backwards” region. Northerners considered southerners an inferior breed of Anglo-Saxons and the epidemic of disease confirmed their “uncivilized” nature. Such disdain toward the South was partly rooted in northern opposition to the institution of slavery, which they argued stunted the South’s economic growth. Glenn explains northern Republican thoughts: “Not only was slave labor less productive and less efficient; reliance on slave labor promoted laziness, undermined democracy, and corrupted the morals of slave owners.”¹⁸¹ Southerners responded by arguing that the North’s control of the South after the Civil War disrupted environmental and social conditions that had once prevented “black” diseases through slave management.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Tera Hunter, *To ‘joy my freedom: Southern Black women’s lives and labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 195-196.

¹⁸¹ Glenn 67

¹⁸² Hunter 189

Considered an extension of “uncivilized” southern planters, some northerners also expressed disdain for Black migrant women. Some employers described southern women as licentious and incapable of taking proper hygiene measures when working in their “refined” northern homes. These ideas were partly rooted in the transition of northern racial demographics. Although some Blacks lived in the North prior to emancipation, the percentage was relatively low in comparison to white Americans and European immigrants. Hence, the influx of southern Black migrants encouraged northern employers to draw from ideas of race developed during colonialism while also creating new racial hierarchies to re-establish their racial and class privileges. Sociologist Judith Rollins notes, “Northern employers, on the other hand, operating in communities with unclear rules of race relations, typically having had less experience with blacks than their Southern counterparts, administering to an employee different not only in color but in culture and class, had to struggle to create rules to define domestics’ proper place in their homes and psyches. If the Northern employer was also new to the role, the struggle was one of creating both class and racial distance.”¹⁸³

Du Bois sought to dispel such myths in relation to Black women in his sociological study entitled *The Philadelphia Negro* by demonstrating that the North was not characterized by more favorable health conditions for Blacks. *The Philadelphia Negro* project was created by the acting Provost of the University of

¹⁸³ Rollins 221

Pennsylvania, who asked Sociology professor Samuel McCune Lindsay to oversee a comprehensive study about the emerging southern black population in the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia, which frightened many whites in the area. Du Bois quickly accepted the invitation of Professor Lindsay to assume the position of lead researcher for the project. Lindsay thought the deplorable results of the study would be more credible if it came from a black scholar.

In addition, conducting research about poor and working class Blacks was considered “dangerous,” and Lindsay was not interested in performing the study himself. However, Du Bois was eager to accept the position because he considered it an opportunity to dispel myths about race that were fueled by Social Darwinism. He was well aware of the assumptions that motivated the study, which was to reveal the inherent nature of “dangerous” and “dirty” southern Blacks who were threatening the lives of middle class and elite whites in Philadelphia. Thus, Du Bois was asked to investigate such questions as why Blacks engaged in criminal activities and refused to adopt a stronger work ethic.

After interviewing thousands of Philadelphia born and southern Black migrants, he concluded that Blacks were more susceptible to diseases because many of them lived in filthy tenement houses. In other words, he provided strong evidence that Blacks were not inherently prone to diseases and used his research to advocate for more institutional support to improve their living conditions. He shared horrific details of the tenement houses he visited:

Many share the use of one bath-room with one or more other families. The bath-tubs usually are not supplied with hot water and very often have no water-connection at all ...the bad sanitary results are shown in the death rates of the ward...over 20 percent and possibly 30 per cent of the Negro families of this ward lack some of the very elementary accommodations necessary to health and decency...Here too there comes another consideration, and that is the lack of public urinals and water-closets in this ward and, in fact, throughout Philadelphia. The result is that the closets of tenements are used by the public.¹⁸⁴

Du Bois also explains that Blacks had a hard time moving out of the tenements because they could not afford better housing. In fact, they had to sacrifice nutrition to afford the relatively high rent at the tenements. One can only imagine the tenement houses of New York City after Du Bois states, “These tenement abominations of Philadelphia are perhaps better than the vast tenement houses of New York, but they are bad enough, and need for reform in housing.”¹⁸⁵ Marie Tome, who migrated to the Bronx from Charleston, South Carolina in 1932, recalls the uncomfortable living conditions she encountered. Her father sent her to New York so that she could earn money by helping her grandmother perform household work. Similar to many Blacks who lived in the Bronx, Marie and her grandmother were relegated to living in “coldwater flats.” The two-family style flats had no hot water or steam. However, Marie concluded, “but it was better than living in the South.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois and Isabel Eaton, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899) 292-293.

¹⁸⁵ Du Bois and Eaton 294

¹⁸⁶ Marie Tome, The Bronx African American Historical Project, date unknown.

White northerners echoed Marie's observation decades earlier while continuing to assert their superiority over the South. Northerners tended to ignore the apparent forms of racial discrimination in the North that W.E.B. Du Bois documented in Black Reconstruction. Oswald Garrison Villard, a writer for *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, boasted that the North was more successful in negotiating the racial tension between blacks and whites. According to Villard, "The truth is that the races are coming together...Nothing was ever more mistaken than the Southerners' familiar boast to the Northerner: 'We know the negro. We have lived with him—you have not and cannot know him.'"¹⁸⁷ Villard argued that actually northerners were becoming more equipped to deal with racial tensions between whites and blacks as it facilitated an environment in which both races could work together for racial equality. He referenced the condemnation of lynchings in the North, the development of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and interracial committees and activities organized by Colored Women's Clubs, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the Young Men's Christian Association as examples of how the North was actively addressing racial problems.

¹⁸⁷ Oswald Garrison Villard, "The Crumbling Color Line," Harper's Monthly Magazine Jul 1929; 158.

Similar to Black women, there is some evidence that suggests Irish women were also targeted as the bearers of disease. Stories of an Irish immigrant woman nicknamed “Typhoid Mary” Mallon swept the headlines of a series of articles published in local newspapers. Mallon was chronicled as the first known typhoid bacilli carrier in America, accused of infecting fifty-one people, and causing the deaths of three of her employers. Allegedly, the families she worked for contracted typhoid fever shortly after she began working in their homes as a cook. Contrary to the beliefs of government officials and employers, the typhoid outbreak as well as other diseases was due to the poor health and sanitary regulations that were characteristic of late nineteenth century urban cities.

Working in the intimate confines of the home made especially domestic servants vulnerable to these attacks. In addition, the widespread perception that Ireland was a “dirty” and “uncivilized” country fueled stereotypes of Irish immigrant women as the main group of servants who were spreading illnesses to New York families. A *New York Times* article reports: “The physicians of the Health Department have never been able to discover that Mary herself ever had typhoid...In fact, she always insisted that she never gave typhoid to anybody, but that the water was at fault.” After her arrest for being a “menace to the community,” she was examined by a doctor who insisted that she cure the disease by undergoing an operation. Mary refused and was mandated by a judge to spend three years in isolation on North Brother Island. She responded by filing a lawsuit

against the City and its Health Department for \$50,000 because “she has been unable to follow her trade of cooking, and her chances of making a living had been greatly reduced.”¹⁸⁸ It was only during the 1970s when government officials began to acknowledge that typhoid fever was caused by the city’s lack of sanitation policies and practices.¹⁸⁹

Another Irish immigrant named Bridget Torney sued the city of New York for \$10,000 after she was forcibly taken by agents of the Board of Health to a small-pox hospital, when she had only a slight attack of measles.¹⁹⁰ Perhaps Torney was targeted along with other Irish women because discourses targeted them as “dirty” workers. Jokes about Irish women refusing to wash their hands before cooking were published in local periodicals a couple of decades earlier, thereby suggesting that Torney’s claims were not unfounded. In 1858, San Francisco’s Daily Evening Bulletin published the following dialogue: “Bridget, you must wash your hands before you mould the bread.” “Sure ma’am, I don’t think it’s best to be wasting time on that, at all. Tis but bare three weeks since the day I cum to ye, an’ didn’t I wash ‘em clane that very day; ‘an, indade, what have I done, since that time, that’s nasty with ‘em?”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ “Typhoid Mary asks for \$50,000 from the City,” The New York Times, 3 Dec 1911.

¹⁸⁹ “Typhoid Carrier tied to Epidemic: Poor Sanitation on Liner is also blamed for illness,” The New York Times, 26 Oct 1970.

¹⁹⁰ “Bridget has sued the city of New York,” Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco) 2 July 1877.

¹⁹¹ “Bridget, you must wash your hands before you mould the bread,” Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco) 11 June 1858.

Colonial Subjects as “Foreign” Threats to the post-Civil War North

An anonymous writer to the *Brooklyn Eagle* suggests that stereotypes of Black servants as “dirty” and “disloyal” were partly rooted in the disdain that northern whites had for southern whites. Such sentiments encouraged the person to recall, “thirty or forty years ago, there was a set of servants, mostly blacks, attached to Knickerbocker families in New York and New Jersey who were as near perfection as men and women can become. Those were the days of Dutch kitchens, Dutch dishes, Dutch neatness, and Dutch housewifery, now long past and never to return. With them faded away that old faithful race of servants, who honored and respected their employers, and were honored and respected by all.”¹⁹²

This 1869 comment suggests that southern Black women came to the North ill-prepared for domestic labor; the “old faithful race of servants” were those already in the North. This author also insinuates that African American domestic workers were instrumental in forcing white northerners to adjust to a new racial organization that encouraged waves of Black women to migrate to the North. She or he writes nostalgically of the days before the Civil War when African American women were considered less rebellious and more submissive. The covertly stated claims that southern women were not “respectful” and did not

¹⁹² Untitled, Brooklyn Eagle 29 Jan 1869.

“honor their employers” suggests that they might have been considered “foreign” threats to the maintenance of racial privileges in the North.

Amy D’ Arcy Wetmore echoes such sentiments in a letter to the New York Observer while praising northern African American women her family employed before the war and making disparaging comments about southern Black servants. She lamented that Ellen and Sally, or her “aunties,” were often drunk and were incapable of saving money. However, Wetmore concludes: “Dear old aunties! Who, after all, will give the adoration and blind worship that these relics of the past lavished upon us? No, the new generation may be more efficient, more honest, and, alas, very often more impudent, but the relationship between mistress and servants will never again be exactly what it was in the days “before the war, and those just following.”¹⁹³ Another northern employer’s nervousness about the diminishing colonial era led her to opine, “My best napkins are used to dust or wipe dishes with. My finest dishes are broken or disappear mysteriously...The old time, well tried servants of slavery days are disappearing, and soon will be entirely gone. The present generation of servants is almost worthless, and getting worse.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ “Old Colored Servants,” Brooklyn Eagle 11 Jul 1897: 9.

¹⁹⁴ Untitled, Brooklyn Eagle 8 April 1883: 1.

Complaints comparing the work ethics of southern and northern born domestic workers were not unique to New York City. Such comparisons were also popular in neighboring areas including Philadelphia. Du Bois and his research assistant Isabel Eaton reported:

The question whether one State or one section furnishes better domestics than another State or section is interesting, and has its bearing on the point under discussion. It is possible that the Philadelphia colored people represent a higher grade socially and intellectually, than the Negroes of the South...Such a comparison may cast light on the moot question whether Philadelphians are more likely to be well served by Philadelphia colored people or by Southerners.”¹⁹⁵

The passage reveals that southern Black women, because they were former enslaved and colonial subjects of the U.S. South, were sometimes considered intellectually incapable of performing household labor in the North. Such ideas echoed northern sentiments about white southerners who lacked the intelligence to manage properly their economy and racial relations. After interviewing employers who hired both northern and southern born Black women Du Bois and Eaton concluded that “Philadelphia-born colored people appear to render the more efficient service.”¹⁹⁶ The concluding results of the study reveal that some northern Blacks had similar sentiments toward southern migrants to those expressed by northern whites who were unwelcoming to the newcomers. However, Du Bois

¹⁹⁵ Du Bois and Eaton 482

¹⁹⁶ Du Bois and Eaton 483

resisted the racist assumptions underlying the disdain northern whites had for southern Blacks.

Perhaps, the daily drudgery of general household work, which was not far removed from the expectations of female servants during slavery, also encouraged employers to compare southern and northern household workers. Although women were paid weekly or monthly wages in the North, they earned “slave” wages for the amount of work they performed. Simultaneously, political and economic changes in Europe ensured the continued flow of thousands of Irish women to the North. The increasing gap between the wealthy in England and the poor in Ireland, the limited opportunities for decent paying jobs within domestic service in both Ireland and England, England’s continued assertion of colonial power over Ireland, and letters from family members filled with stories about what they considered to be better working conditions in the U.S. encouraged waves of Irish women to compete with southern Blacks for domestic service jobs in the North. Interestingly, Irish workers were also seen as threatening the organization of northern homes with their supposedly insufficient work ethic. Although satirical cartoons about “Bridget” existed prior to the Civil War, complaints and jokes about Irish women became increasingly popular afterwards. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for people to send letters to local newspapers in support of Irish women.

A letter sent to the *New York Sunday Times* reprinted in the *New Hampshire Statesman* reads, “It has been said that Bidy will not bear kindness, and that she has no gratitude. This is a mistake. She will not bear *over-indulgence*, and, in fact, it makes her insolent to the last degree; but *judicious* kindness is seldom thrown away upon her.”¹⁹⁷ Another employer writes, “Our folks” have got a Bidy of the verita best kind. She’s a queer duck, and as good natured as “a basket of chips.”¹⁹⁸ Even in the 1890s such attitudes could still be found occasionally. A Brooklyn employer writes:

Fifty years ago I resided on Washington Street, near Concord, at that time the most desirable location in Brooklyn. Nearly all of the servants then were Irish with rare exceptions could neither read nor write. Letters often brought to members of the family to decipher and it was not an easy task I can assure you. In those happy days now gone, servants were respectful and self respecting. The children in the family were addressed as master (Harry) or Miss (Mary), and servants were loyal to their employers, a cook remaining in my family for twenty odd years and a gardener nearly as long.¹⁹⁹

The Brooklynite’s letter suggests that employers thought not only southern Black women, but also Irish women became more difficult to work with after the war.

The author’s assessment of an earlier Brooklyn also echoes the sentiments of other employers during earlier and later time periods who longed for servants of a mythical past thereby suggesting that some employers were never satisfied with

¹⁹⁷ Untitled, *New Hampshire Statesman* 26 Dec 1857.

¹⁹⁸ Untitled, *Vermont Patriot & State Gazette* 8 Jan 1858.

¹⁹⁹ “Servant Girl Question: Additional Suggestions From Employer and Employed for Clearing Up Existing Complications,” *Brooklyn Eagle* 31 Mar 1897: 5.

the performance of the women they hired despite the political and economic context.

At times northern disdain toward white southerners was echoed in complaints about Irish as well as African American women. Robert Tomes, for instance, wrote to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1864 that Bridget's "country" background creates the following situation:

Housekeepers complain bitterly of Bridget's ignorance and awkwardness, and will tell you, with tears in their eyes, how she cut off the tender and eatable parts of the asparagus and served up the tough stalks; how she washed her feet in the soup-tureen; how, in her zeal for a shine, she rubbed off the coat of bronze from the tea-urn; how she scrubbed the family portraits with soap and water...²⁰⁰

A similar discourse about race, gender, and the southern agricultural economy positioned African American women outside of the boundaries of modernity and thus notions of American citizenship as they were commonly associated with a rural, agricultural region. Tomes continues:

Most of the negroes, however, even those who are called domestic servants, brought up as they have been in the slatterly households of the South and Southwest, would be as out of place in the better-ordered homes of the North as a bull in a china-shop. As for the old negro servants, once so common in our Northern kitchens and halls, they have become almost extinct through inherent weakness or the force of external pressure...²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Robert Tomes, "Your Humble Servant" *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 29 Jun/Nov 1864: 54.

²⁰¹ Tomes 54

Tome's commentary provides evidence that northerners, who considered the South a "backwards" agricultural region, complained that southern migrant women lacked the skills to care for the modern and "better-ordered homes of the North" by making a clear distinction between African American servants of the North and South. It is no coincidence that Tomes commented about Irish and southern Black domestic servants in the same article. Both groups were accused of not knowing how to maintain a modern northern home. Such complaints resonate with ideas developed by colonial elites to describe Irish workers in England. Perhaps, it was not difficult for Northerners to form complaints about, as Tomes put it, the "Irish female peasant" because the image coalesced with discourses already circulating about southern Black women and the Irish in both Ireland and the United States. Although northerners used southern Black women to express their superiority to the South, they also adopted ideas developed by southerners during the colonial era to describe both groups of women.

Thus, some northerners described Irish women using animalistic and masculine terms, a discourse developed during the colonial era to justify the labor and sexual exploitation of enslaved African American women and to explain the racial "superiority" of white Americans. Tomes states, "If Bridget has vices in common with the rest of the wicked world, she has her virtues too. With the muscle and strength of an Amazon she is equal to any physical effort, and can not only perform with ease the most laborious functions of her place, but has force to

spare for a tussle with an impudent butcher-boy or overbearing master...Her strong arm and voluble tongue keeps the most tyrannical housekeeper in such awe as to save her from all invasion of her prescriptive tights.”²⁰²

Tomes connects the masculine and animalistic behavior of Irish women to their homeland, thereby insinuating that Ireland and the U.S. South shared certain characteristics: “The ignorance of Bridget is, no doubt, tormenting to the careful housekeeper,” he notes; “but what else can we expect? Where has she had an opportunity to learn? Surely, not in her native Connaught. Born and bred in a mud hovel, in the companionship of boorish peasants like herself...she can know nothing of the simplest elements of civilized life.”²⁰³

A decade later, similar concerns were being voiced. An employer wrote to the *Inter Ocean*, “But then if Edison’s electric light is generally introduced into our houses, what is Bridget going to light the kitchen fire with?—*Burlington Hawkene*.”²⁰⁴ Irish servants were described by some employers as “ignorant about the names of utensils, even of the use of scrubbing brushes, since their floors at home [read: Ireland] were the hard earth.” They supposedly did not know how to light a fire in a stove and were unfamiliar with the concept of drinking glasses.²⁰⁵ Although the majority of Irish women migrated from rural areas where they did not use stoves, the invention was relatively new to American housewives

²⁰² Tomes 57

²⁰³ Tomes 54

²⁰⁴ Untitled, *Inter Ocean (Chicago)* 31 Oct 1878: 3.

²⁰⁵ Lynch-Brennan 334

as well. This no doubt increased concern among American housewives who might not know how to operate the latest household appliances themselves. But the new technology also raised the stakes for servants.

The first stoves were installed in US. homes during the 1820s. While they relieved some work for servants, they had to be careful about operating them. Improper lighting of the stove could easily result in a full blown fire and servants did not have a thermostat or thermometer to measure the heat until the late nineteenth century. The precariousness that stoves generated encouraged employers to complain that servants could not operate them properly and thus could not perform the motherly duty of preparing meals for the family. Some employers claimed that servants were always tardy with preparing meals and the food was always burned.²⁰⁶ *Harper's Weekly* featured a satirical representation of a conversation between an Irish servant and her employer: "Bridget," said a mistress to her servant, "where's the gridiron?" "An shure, ma'am I'se just after giving it to my sister's own cousin, O'Flaherty; the thing's so full of holes it's no good at all."²⁰⁷

According to some employers, Irish and Black women also demonstrated incompetence when using refrigerators, a late nineteenth century invention. An advertising circular for the Whitson Refrigerator circa 1880 claimed that

²⁰⁶ Dudden 131

²⁰⁷ "Facetiae," *Harper's Bazaar*, 21 Mar 1868.

housewives would please “lazy” Irish and Black servants if they bought the item. The circular features an Irish maid who says, “Shure an I’ll lave the place if they take it out,” and a Black maid who claims, “After getting in day box eberything comes out right.” The circular contained other advertisements that often juxtaposed Irish and Black women employing similar speech patterns and displaying broad, coarse physical features.²⁰⁸

Certainly complaints about Irish women were also partly rooted in misconceptions of them as “country” women in an age of advancing capitalism. However, Bertha Devlin confirms that operating household technology might have been a real source of tension between employers and household workers. She remembers that it was hard for her to adjust to cooking on a stove given her experience in Ireland. She states, “Well, the way of living was sort of different, the cooking was different, the way of cooking and things like that. But we cooked on open fires, you know, stoves and whatnot are here [United States], hard to get used to those things.”²⁰⁹ But when servants found it difficult to adjust to new household technologies, it reinforced employers’ ideas about Irish women’s inferiority, ideas associated with the “backwards” agricultural economies of Ireland and the U.S. South.

²⁰⁸ Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 102.

²⁰⁹ Bertha Devlin, Ellis Island Oral History Project, 19 Sep 1985.

Not only were Irish women accused of not knowing how to operate household machines, but they were also considered incapable of preparing certain delicacies that were a part of the middle class American diet. The New Hampshire Statesman published the following dialogue: “A ‘Bridget,’ who, as usual entertains an exalted opinion of the good things of the old country, was asked by her mistress ‘if they had any pies where she formerly lived in Ireland?’ ‘Yes, an they sure do.’ ‘What kind of pies?’ ‘*Magpies*, mum.’”²¹⁰ The Raleigh, North Carolina News and Observer featured a satirical skit which reads, “ ‘Bridget,’ said the mistress to her servant, ‘put a little nutmeg in the custard this afternoon,’ and Bridget picked out the smallest nutmeg she could find and threw it in the custard, where it was found entire at the evening meal.”²¹¹ The following image accompanied a cartoon that appeared in an 1896 edition of *Harper’s Bazaar* and the caption read: Young Jones: “Did a man bring a game here for me today, Bridget? Cook: “There was a rooster left here and I thought he was for dinner. So I cut off his head and roasted him. Young Jones: “Great Scott, woman! That was my imported Black red game cock and it cost me forty dollars.”²¹²

²¹⁰ “A Bridget who as usual entertains an exalted opinion,” New Hampshire Statesman 31 Dec 1859.

²¹¹ Untitled, The News and Observer (Raleigh, NC) 6 Dec 1881.

²¹² “A Valuable Cook,” Harper’s Bazaar 11 Jul 1896.



Ideas of Irish women, in particular, as incapable of adapting to modern technology or cooking certain delicacies were reinforced by satirical skits in British periodicals, which circulated throughout the United States. A dialogue originally published in London Household Words and reprinted in The Idaho Avalanche reads:

A lady employed a very ignorant Irish servant, who would not rise in the morning at a sufficiently early hour. An alarm was therefore bought and presented to the servant with the words. “You know, Bridget, that I require the fire alight every morning by 7 o’clock; but I cannot get you to do it; so I have bought you this alarm.” Bridget examined it and said: “Thank you, mum: it’s very pretty. But fancy a think loike this bein able to loight a foire. Sure it’s a wonderful invention, mum.”²¹³—London Household Words.

²¹³ Untitled, The Idaho Avalanche (Silver City, ID) 20 Dec 1895.

Some readers of the Idaho Avalanche and other American papers no doubt looked to England to help make sense of what they considered “the domestic service problem” as well as changes in the racial structure of labor in the United States. Yet England, too, was going through political unrest in the late nineteenth century as it faced imperial rivalry from Germany and the United States, growing resistance in Ireland, and an inner city population that prompted fears that the cities were being invaded by an uncontrollable population that was considered “a race apart.”²¹⁴ Yet, at the same time, many American employers still considered England as a place that had effectively managed domestic servants. According to sisters Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, “In England, the class who go to service are a class, and service is a profession; the distance between them and their employers is so marked and defined, and all the customs and requirements of the position are so perfectly understood, that the master or mistress has no fear of being compromised by condescension, and no need of the external voice of air of authority...”²¹⁵

It is important to note that in addition to the colonial relationship between Ireland and England and the US South and North, the colonial status of domestic workers depended upon the privileged status of women employers. Therefore, women employers were not excused from the litany of complaints launched at the

²¹⁴ Hickman and Walters 3

²¹⁵ Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, The American Woman's Home (New York: J.B. Ford & Co., 1869) 321.

women whose labor they directed. An anonymous person wrote to Harper's Bazaar in a letter entitled "Your Servant, Ma'am": "If mistresses have not the knowledge, or will not take the trouble, to form that rawest of raw material, the Irish Bridget, into cook or waiter, they should submit without a murmur to being ill-fed and ill-served. How is it possible for a peasant who has been living her life upon potatoes, to which she has helped herself out of a common pot, to be able to place a knife and fork, or roast a chicken—as rare to a bird to her as a black swan, or any creature of fabulous existence?"²¹⁶ This writer suggests that the identity of employers was intricately tied to the women they employed. If servants were not considered properly trained, then that challenged the perceived superiority of the employer herself. Faced with such ideas about race, class, and female gentility, employers and domestic workers themselves varying strategies to negotiate the unstable discursive terrain.

Conclusion

Although Irish women began to transition out of domestic service by the 1930s, African Americans were not so fortunate. During this transition, Blacks continued to write about the parallels between the labor and migratory experiences between women of the African Diaspora and those of Irish women. A.M. Wendell Malliet, a writer for The Chicago Defender, responded to a meeting between Amy Ashwood Garvey, the first wife of political activist Marcus

²¹⁶ "Your Servant, Ma'am," Harper's Bazaar Magazine 7 Aug 1869: 498.

Garvey, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Garvey met with Roosevelt to discuss an immigration policy that would make domestic service jobs in the United States more accessible to Caribbean women. While observing the economic benefits of the policy for families in the Caribbean, Malliet pointed to its imperialist implications. In fact, Malliet uses British colonialism to link the labor histories of Irish and Caribbean women. He states:

...it is most disgusting and tragic to behold a national policy that looks to the exportation of its citizens or nationals as the mainstay of its economy. This has been the record of the British West Indies and of Ireland. Since immigration usually siphons off the most adventurous people, it can be easily understood how and why countries decline or stagnate. This blight or curse is the direct responsibility of the British Government and its damnable system of imperialist exploitation.²¹⁷

British colonialism and quasi-colonial relations within the United States long connected the lives of Irish and African American domestic workers in New York through histories of labor migration, racial oppression, and domestic service that had developed roots dating back to the seventeenth century. Formations of racialized ideas of class, gender, and sexuality that developed during the colonial period circulated between England, Ireland, the Caribbean, and the United States and informed complaints about Irish and African American servants well into the early twentieth century. Although Irish and African American women did not

²¹⁷ A.M. Wendell Malliet, "World Fronts: The Garvey-Roosevelt Plan," New York Amsterdam News 18 Mar 1944: A9.

always work in the same homes, ideas positioned them in close discursive contact with each other as employers and domestic workers themselves negotiated the boundaries of race for centuries.

Chapter Three

Too Close to Ignore, Too Close for Comfort:

African Americans, the Irish, and Employers

Respond to their Shared Experiences

Some African Americans made explicit and public connections between their experiences of discrimination and those of the Irish. Reverend Dr. Fulton, an African American pastor, delivered a speech to a white Baptist church audience in New York City, in which he urged African Americans to follow their Irish counterparts in resisting racial inequality. Fulton told the audience:

I speak because they [African Americans] don't speak... The Irish people never submit to the rule of England, and by their constant resistance to oppression awaken the sympathies of all nations. When I look about me and see so few colored people present, I confess that a feeling of sorrow oppresses me... I remember talking to Mr. Kinsells, whose paper is so great, an Irishman of Irishmen and a leader of Irishmen... he said: 'If the colored people expect their rights, they must stand up for them.'²¹⁸

Dr. Fulton's comparison of the political and socioeconomic status of the Irish and Blacks might have been informed by the intimate history between the two groups in New York that began a couple of decades earlier. During the early nineteenth century, a small percentage of free Blacks lived in the North and worked in the same occupations as incoming Irish laborers. Both groups of workers interacted socially and created families together while living as residents

²¹⁸ "The Negro in the North," Brooklyn Eagle 11 Oct 1880.

in the Five Points area, a section of lower Manhattan where many poor European immigrants and Blacks settled. The interaction between Blacks and the Irish, especially in poor neighborhoods, fueled local debates among white Americans about race, sexuality, class, and citizenship.

According to historian Leslie Harris, “Proslavery, anti-equality New York journalists and conservative religious reformers depicted interracial sex and socializing, or amalgamation, between working-class blacks and Irish as a major threat to New York’s racial and social order.”²¹⁹ At this point the Irish were not considered white, but occupied a racial status that was in between “white” and “black.” This ambiguous positioning is reflected in the multiple comparisons journalists made between the Irish, American born whites, and blacks. Harris continues, “. . .from the 1840s through the Civil War, middle class journalists and reformers linked amalgamation, first between blacks and native-born whites and then between blacks and Irish, to their allegations of the increasing poverty and crime in New York City.”²²⁰

After the Civil War, complaints about Irish women as difficult household workers became more prominent as employers sought formerly enslaved women to remedy the “domestic service problem.” Ironically, the migration of Black women positioned them as an immigrant-like group that competed with Irish

²¹⁹ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 247.

²²⁰ Harris 251

women who had long monopolized domestic service in the North, thereby prompting some fears among Irish women that they would become “black” upon arrival in the United States. Mary Jones, an Irish woman who came to the United States to work as a domestic laborer, vividly recalls her experiences at Ellis Island in the 1930s, particularly a conversation about race with an immigration official.

She told the official, “I am not anxious to be here because I don’t want to get black.”²²¹ The official replied, “They don’t feel bad. They feel they were born black...” Although Jones does not explicitly state that she was concerned about being lumped into a racial category with African Americans, it is implied in her confessed nervousness about being considered “black” and the official’s response that African Americans do not “feel bad that they were born black.” Jones was apparently aware of the social proximity of Irish immigrant and African American workers. Some clearly feared becoming (or being mistaken for) Black, which would place them in a racial category that did not reap the privileges of whiteness. Perhaps their awareness emerged from reading periodicals that circulated between the United States and Great Britain such as *Harper’s Bazaar*, which was filled with dialogues between fictional employers and Irish domestic workers.

The following exchange titled “Change of Help” appeared in 1893:

Employer 1: “Do you still have colored servants, Hicks?”

²²¹ Mary Jones, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 19 Sep 1985.

Employer 2: “Well, in a sense. We don’t have negroes any more, but we’ve got three of the greenest girls you ever saw in the house now.”²²²

This dialogue insinuates that African American domestic workers were almost interchangeable with Irish immigrants. However, the employer is careful to note the subtle distinction between the two groups of women when she replies, “we don’t have negroes anymore.” Hasia Diner in *Erin’s Daughters* argues that ideas of race sometimes caused tension between Irish and African American domestic workers in the North. Much of the Irish hostility against blacks in the North before and after the Civil War sprang from the fear that black women might challenge the Irish monopoly in domestic service.²²³

After emancipation, African American women were considered a threat to employment because both groups were relegated to domestic work. Irish and other European immigrant women became increasingly concerned that the migration of Black women would lower their wages. A reporter for the *New York Globe* comments, “Colored servants constitute a very large proportion of the domestic laboring population of the North...Underbidding is one of the chief causes of complaint, since competition in this field tends to reduce the wages paid as the supply increases. So it is with that class who do domestic and other service of the kind.”²²⁴ Domestic servants already in New York expressed their concerns

²²² “Change of Help,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1893.

²²³ Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the nineteenth century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) 92.

²²⁴ “Colored Servants,” *New York Globe* 29 Mar 1884.

to the Central Labor Union, which reported that it planned to “say something forcible about this proposition to supplant white with colored labor, and the formation of a servant girls’ union is not improbable.”²²⁵

While Black women faced resentment from European immigrant and white American women, they also encountered forms of labor exploitation that suggested they, too, needed a labor union. In addition, white workers attempted to re-affirm their whiteness by not only targeting the southern migrants, but also Irish women. A New York Butler, who identified himself as a white American, articulates these sentiments by referencing the stereotypical Irish figure “Maggie”.²²⁶

Maggie is such a thorough cleaner, you know. Maggie’s thoroughness is when she sweeps the parlor, and then, with a feather duster, flicks the dust from one place to settle in another, and yet this is cleaning. Let the lady make a visit (unexpected) to the servants’ bedrooms, then she will see some of Maggie’s thoroughness. She will see all the national traits that have clung to her since she left Ireland.

There she will find water pitchers half filled with dirt, water that is reeking, and which compels men servants to take their towels down stairs, where they can get running water to wash with. The tenement house cannot compare with some of the top floors of the Fifth Avenue for filth....

²²⁵ “Southern Servant Girls,” The Brooklyn Eagle 23 Apr 1900: 7.

²²⁶ “Letters of the Subject,” The New York Times 10 Feb 1895.

The butler continues by accusing employers of giving preferential treatment toward Irish women, which compromised the employment security of white workers. He states, “Nothing happens in a house unless Maggie figures in it. For instance, a gentleman says, ‘John, my cigars go very quick.’ John says, ‘Yes, Sir.’ If you were over on the west side where Maggie’s cousin Patrick lives, you could detect the same smell as you can in the smoking room of your own house, and yet Maggie gets the benefit of the doubt and John gets his discharge. Why is it that these ignorant people are given so much power over educated and competent servants and upheld by their mistresses?” Some employers echoed the sentiments of the butler by declaring outright that Irish women were not only subordinate to whites, but also inferior to other European immigrant women who were near white. She or he writes: “The over-plus of single Irish girls in American cities, as contrasted with the fact that nearly all the English and Scotch damsels get almost immediately mated, speaks volumes of their characteristics.”²²⁷

While whites were concerned about the influx of Black and Irish labor, the Irish suffered the greatest competition from the southern migrants. The close racial proximity of Irish and African American women encouraged both workers and employers to comment upon this discourse. The perspectives of Irish workers were printed regularly in the editorial section of *The Brooklyn Eagle*. One, who called herself “Irish Rambler,” drew an instructive parallel between the working

²²⁷ “Domestic Servants,” The New York Times 7 Jul 1872.

experiences of African American and Irish women to articulate her frustrations with the low wages of domestic service. She predicted that if employers continued to mistreat Irish servants, “Then we will have what Abe Lincoln never thought of—white slavery. It is very near that now.”²²⁸

According to David Yentis in his 1937 study of Brooklyn’s labor history, domestic service linked the fates of Black migrants and Irish immigrants. He states, “Lacking mechanical training (speaking of the Irish immigrants) and not being fitted by experience for trade, they largely entered domestic service, and the coachmen, the nurses, and the cooks of the Heights, for several generations were of Irish birth and parentage.”²²⁹ He also argues that Black migrants in the early twentieth century were in a similar socioeconomic position as Irish women decades earlier and thus challenged the Irish monopoly of domestic service in the North.

This shift in the labor market must have been a shock to some Irish immigrants considering that northern Blacks were marginal in domestic service prior to emancipation. Yentis states, “. . .the Negro was decidedly in bad taste as a household servant, among the leading families. If the Negro came into the household at all it was only as a temporary day worker, and even as far back as the 1870’s the enmity between white and Negro domestics was such that the

²²⁸ “‘Irish Rambler’ Suggests a Servant Girl Trust,” *The Brooklyn Eagle* 11 Mar 1897.

²²⁹ David Yentis, “The Negro in Old Brooklyn: An Experiment in Sociological Reconstruction of the Life of a Racial Minority in a Northern City,” Master’s Thesis. New York: Columbia University, 1937: 49.

white house servants would refuse to eat with any Negro help, and the Negro would have to be served separately. To preserve household harmony, the Negro was never used on Brooklyn Heights... incoming Irish and German immigration deprived them even of the street trades and unskilled occupations.”²³⁰

Thus, Blacks encountered violent acts of resentment from the Irish as they migrated to northern cities in growing numbers. Some of the tension between the groups resulted from Irish fears that Blacks might develop political influence that would change the social and economic landscape of northern cities. For instance, tension between Blacks and the Irish increased in Philadelphia as a large percentage of Blacks from Virginia began migrating to the City of Brotherly Love and voting for candidates that threatened to oust the incumbents, who were largely supported by the Irish. The police, who were generally sympathetic to the Irish, failed to protect African Americans, making black voters vulnerable to being violently attacked by their Irish neighbors. The spring elections of 1871 inspired so much violence that U. S. Marines were called to establish order. Violence escalated in the fall and one election day--October 10-- several Blacks were killed at the polls. However, Du Bois reports, “It must not be supposed that the colored people were passive when attacked, because the records show ‘an eye

²³⁰ Yentis 48-54

for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' in every instance. No pen is graphic enough to detail the horrors of that day.”²³¹

Developing distinctions between female laborers:

Intra-racial and cross-racial processes of racialization in the “home”

Protests against Black migrants did not prevent employers from wielding ideas of race as they wrote and spoke candidly about whether they considered Black or Irish women to be better domestic workers. The temporary decline of industrial activities deterred Irish women from seeking jobs in the factories and encouraged them to seek jobs in domestic service. The increase of available Irish women prompted some employers to boast about Irish workers. An employer asserts, “She [an Irish woman] is glad to learn; she instructs her money and interests to the mistress’ care; she enters into the affairs of the family, for the Irish peasant has the old Celtic clan-feeling of attachment to the person of the leader or lady;... Owing to the stoppage of manufacture, the supply of female help is just now greater than the demand; the domestics are in an humble fame of mind’ they are anxious to secure permanent places...”²³²

The Philadelphia Negro revealed that romanticized ideas of southern Black women as “better” domestic servants were partly rooted in the desire of employers to pay low wages to serving women. Some employers justified hiring southern migrants as they insisted that the women were “less impertinent,” “very

²³¹ Du Bois and Isabel Eaton 139-140

²³² “Servants,” New York Times. Editorial 20 Sep 1874.

anxious to please,” “more respectful,” “more agreeable and obliging and have nicer manners.”²³³ The wife of U.S. Senator John Sherman told a reporter in New York that she had employed “a typical old Virginia darkey for nearly twenty years, who she secured at the close of the war and who, according to the custom of all Southern households in ante-bellum days, was instructed almost from infancy in the essential rudiments of her art.” Therefore, Sherman recommended that the remedy for the domestic service problem must include “the organization of a training school in conjunction with the colored public-schools of the District” so that Black women could continue to be taught domestic work at an early age.²³⁴ In addition, some employers thought slavery encouraged Black women to develop familial bonds with their employers’ families. One employer remarked: “they [African Americans] are much more likely than white girls to become attached to the family—so they naturally stay longer in one place than others do.”²³⁵

Racist scientific discourse developed during the colonial era that deemed Blacks as naturally fit for servile positions informed this employer’s comment that Black women have an innate proclivity to develop an attachment to the employing family. Such perceptions were further buttressed by the assumption that Black women would be content receiving low wages considering that they

²³³ Du Bois and Eaton 481

²³⁴ Untitled, *Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco)* 28 Jul 1879.

²³⁵ Du Bois and Eaton 481

were not paid at all as enslaved laborers. Partly encouraging employers' desire to pay servants low wages were the larger employment practices of industrialization. In an effort to maximize profits and productivity, owners of factories increasingly hired unskilled workers and paid them low wages. Harris explains, "White workers feared blacks as symbolic of disquieting changes in the newly industrializing nation. Master mechanics began abandoning the apprentice and journeymen systems, hiring unskilled laborers to perform piecework...Unskilled men, but especially women and children, put together shoes, clothing, and other articles in large supervised workshops...Employers paid these workers stingily for their labor so that they could compete nationally and internationally and gain greater profits."²³⁶

Black women were integral to this process of replacing white "skilled" workers with "cheap" and "exploitable" labor. Hence, the ideas of Black women as ideal servants both shaped and became shaped by the employment practices of the industrial era. Most Black women were employed for the lowest-status and lowest paying position of general house worker. This made them particularly attractive, especially to employers who could barely afford to pay domestic workers livable wages. As an employment agency director observes, the lower

²³⁶ Harris 99

paying position of general house worker presented “a promise of better times for the women with small homes or who live quietly.”²³⁷

Some employers candidly compared southern African American and Irish servants. An employer recalls, “We had white servants for seven winters, and always employed the best Irish servants we could get; but they were so unsatisfactory that we gave them up and tried colored servants. Our experience of them is that they are infinitely cleaner than the white Irish, both in their work and personally; they are more self-respecting and better mannered—more agreeable in manners; indeed, I have found them capable of the very highest cultivation of manner.”²³⁸ Other employers insisted that Black women were more likely to perform nursing tasks than Irish women. One employer noted, “When my sister was ill, the Irish maid I had at the time refused to carry up the breakfast tray because she said, ‘it was not her business to do nursing,’ and she ‘wouldn’t do it for ten dollars.’” The employer remembers that she was then forced to take the trays herself until the “colored girl, who came soon after, volunteered to do the work.

She told the employer: “Let *me* take up the breakfast tray Mrs. W--. You look ready to drop.” Ever since, “Mrs. W—never had a white girl in the house.”²³⁹

Another employer claims that Black women were “much cleaner than the Irish

²³⁷ “Good Servant Girls are Now Plentiful,” The New York Times 8 Sep 1909.

²³⁸ Du Bois and Eaton 487-488

²³⁹ Du Bois and Eaton 487

both in their work and their persons; they keep their kitchen and their own room cleaner.”²⁴⁰ Another employer complained, “We lost more food, etc., from the treating in the kitchen, which the Irish indulge in, than we have ever missed from pilfering of colored servants.”²⁴¹ Despite the kind words employers expressed about Black workers during these interviews, Du Bois concluded that, “These people [African Americans] were too good for domestic service and were ‘coming to regard the work as a relic of slavery, and as degrading, and only enter it from sheer necessity.’”²⁴²

While some employers preferred Black women, racial prejudices still positioned European immigrant and white American women as a constant threat to the employment security of African Americans. Indeed, in 1884, a Black journalist from the *New York Globe* claimed that Blacks, who had come to monopolize domestic service in the city, were now in a precarious position:

Time was when colored people largely monopolized such positions as coachmen, footmen, valets, chambermaids, chefs, and waiters; but they have been slowly superseded in these employments by foreign white help... They can only hold their own against the great odds by being constant in their employments, strictly honest, punctual and reliable, and studied in neatness of dress and manners. A case of one dishonest colored servant in this city recently, resulted in a whole sale discharge of the colored help in that flat and the substitution of white help... it behooves all of us, all and each, to do well what our hands find to do.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Du Bois and Eaton 484

²⁴¹ Du Bois and Eaton 486

²⁴² David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: H. Holt, 1993-2000) 196.

²⁴³ “Colored Servants,” *The New York Globe* 29 March 1884.

Another New York employer outlines the reasons why she preferred English servants in comparison to Irish and particularly northern Blacks thereby giving a glimpse into how different groups were racialized in relation to each other. The author observes, “Indeed, I may say that the English are the only satisfactory servants...They are capable; they have the rare faculty of doing just what they are told; they are quick, neat, and respectful...Colored girls are good, particularly as cooks, and as a rule they are more obedient than the Irish, at least those who come from the South are. The Northern darky has a strong predisposition to grow ‘fat and sassy’ in a good place.”²⁴⁴

Although some employers were suspicious of Black women, they still remained attractive employees as Irish women increasingly demanded higher wages. The insistence for better working conditions that was expressed by Irish women even encouraged white domestic workers themselves to complain about their Irish co-workers. In the process of contributing to these negative portrayals of Irish women, white American workers contributed to the racialization of the Irish as “non-white” by making distinctions between Irish women and white American, German, and Swedish women. A white American worker reports to *The New York Times*:

²⁴⁴ “Kitchen versus Slop Shop,” *The New York Times* 5 Mar 1893.

I am an American woman and was for nine years lady's maid. But I became so disgusted with the life that I now do dressmaking at home with my parents. My employers were very nice to me, but the other servants were unbearable. When I first went there to live I found an English cook, a German chambermaid, and a Swedish laundress. They were all so kind to me that I never felt so happy in my life. But, alas! The chambermaid and laundress married and the cook went to England for a vacation.

Three Irish girls took their places; three of the dirtiest and most grossly ignorant people I ever met. Before the cook had been there a week you could not tell it was the same kitchen; before so bright and clean, afterward so black and dirty...Cooking schools are no good to those dirty creatures, and it is impossible to teach them to be clean, as almost all other nations are already trained...I would suggest that the President annex Hawaii and then on the 17th of March charter enough steamers to send all the Irish servants in New York out there and leave them where they could fight among themselves, which they would do until they were exterminated. The servant question then might be settled.²⁴⁵

The tension between Irish women, those who hired them, and other groups of domestic workers reached such high levels that it could no longer be contained within the geographical boundaries of New York. News about the "domestic service problem" in the city reached the West, where residents weighed in on the situation. *The Milwaukee Sentinel* notes that "A New York woman finds that Bidy wants high wages and will do but little work. What does she do about it? She writes to a newspaper. That, in the opinion of many, is the panacea for all ills. It strikes us that if housewives would let Bidy know that she is not a necessity, matters would gradually mend."²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ "Ex-Lady," *The New York Times* 17 Feb 1895.

²⁴⁶ Untitled, *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1 Apr 1872.

This comment reveals the familiar disdain expressed toward Irish women out West, suggesting that negative representations of Irish women were widespread across the United States. In 1883, an article in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* claims, "The Californians groaned as heavily as any people under what they called the tyranny of Bridget...Bridget, whether in Canada or in California, simply takes care of herself, and tries to get all she can for her service...It is certainly not right that she should be paid for work she does not do, and it wrong for her to make herself disagreeable..."²⁴⁷

An article in the *Brooklyn Eagle* two years later suggests that Irish women were becoming more unmanageable as they sought living arrangements outside of their employers' homes. The journalist was careful to note that "living out," an arrangement that violated the ideal terms of domestic service, was a source of tension between Brooklyn employers and Irish nurses:

A considerable proportion of the Brooklyn nurses sleep at home, going to their employer's house early in the morning and returning in the evening. This is an arrangement arising from the limited house accommodation possessed by many families who require the assistance of a girl, and while it is a good plan in some respects it is bad in others. It gives the girl greater 'liberty of action,'...a girl sleeping at home is frequently placed too much in the position of a critic, if not a spy on the family whose service she is, a state of affairs from which neither mistress nor girl is likely to derive any advantage.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Untitled, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York) 3 Nov 1883.

²⁴⁸ "The Children's Nurse," *Brooklyn Eagle* 1 Aug 1885: 10.

Tensions escalated not only between Irish workers and employers, but also between Irish and Black domestics. Sometimes both groups were co-workers in hotels and other service institutions that hired large numbers of workers. Well aware of the racial implications of being employed in the service industry in a highly racially segmented country that associated laborers in this type of work with racial inferiority, Irish workers sometimes initiated violent confrontations with Black workers. Yet, the most violent incidents seem to have occurred among male rather than female workers.

Thomas McCormick, a gardener for the Bay Cliff Villa Resort in New York City, made headlines after he attempted to murder Black servants he worked with at the resort. It was reported that he often made racist comments about the servants while carrying out his daily tasks of pruning the trees and trimming the flower beds. The servants grew weary of the comments and demanded that McCormick stop. The servants' demands infuriated McCormick, and he charged at them with an ax. The *Brooklyn Eagle* reports, "It took two stalwart boarders to separate Tom and the colored cooks and waiters from each other... It is probably that the next gardener will be colored as no further experiments with the race problem is desired at the Bay Cliff Villa."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ "Miniature Race War at Bay Cliff Villa," *Brooklyn Eagle* 9 July 1900: 1.

McCormick's initiation of the fight by voicing racist comments about Black servants makes clear that he thought it was necessary to establish his "white" identity by distinguishing himself from his African American co-workers. In addition, the reporter's prediction that the employers of the Villa will probably hire a "colored" gardener to replace McCormick suggests that the situation was not unique. There was apparently enough resentment between Irish and African American workers to convince employers to avoid, when possible, "further experiences with the race problem." The journalist's report also highlights the instability of the racial status of Irish immigrants. McCormick was clearly positioned as a "white" worker in relation to the "colored" servants. Yet, his class status positioned him in a highly racialized form of labor that was closely associated with ideas of "blackness."

Such tensions, if expressed in less violent ways, also occurred among female domestics. An employer in Philadelphia told a Black woman looking for a position, "I should like so much to keep you permanently, but all my other servants are white."²⁵⁰ McCormick's actions at the Villa were part of a long history of the Irish devising strategies to separate themselves from Blacks. Charles Loring Brace recounted a story told to him about a small demonstration that Irish mothers organized in New York City in 1863 to demand that Mrs. Macy, the co-founder of the Cottage Place School, expel all "colored" students.

²⁵⁰ Du Bois and Eaton 339

The Irish women were outraged that their children had to go to school with Black children. As Brace recalled:

...a deputation of hard-looking, heavy-drinking Irish women, the mothers of some twenty or thirty of the children, waited on her [the wife of Mr. Macy] to demand the exclusion of some colored children... she assured them that, if every other scholar left, so long as that school remained it should never be closed to any child on account of color. They [the Irish mothers] withdrew their children, but soon after returned them.²⁵¹

What is most striking about Brace's story is that the Irish mothers clearly did not have many alternatives in this period. The Cottage Place School was designed specifically for poor Black and immigrant children who were reported to have the highest rates of illiteracy in the state. The Irish mothers had few options, especially considering that their children would not have been welcomed at schools dominated by white American Protestant children. At times, circulating discourses about the racial pathology of Irish and Black children during this period operated in a manner that confined both groups to the same institutions. Irish women's inability to distance themselves from Blacks because of their shared class and racialized social positions encouraged these mothers to return their children to the school. Yet, such incidents did not bode well for relations between Irish and African American domestic workers in the postwar period.

²⁵¹ Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and twenty years work among them* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck Publishers, 1872) 214.

Perhaps, some Irish women expressed racist and classist sentiments toward Blacks with ease because such ideas were also used by the Irish to describe segments of their own community. Mary Hawkesworth remembers the class tension between her mother and father's sides of the family. Sarah Keegen, her father's mother, migrated to New York from Drum Shambo, Ireland, which was a small and poor town. Florence Ahearn, who was Hawkesworth's grandmother on her mother's side, came from a more affluent family that owned property and made a living in the undertaking business. Hawkesworth recalls that there were clear class distinctions made between the two sides of the family: "My grandmother on my mother's side massively looked down on my father's mother...they [mother's side of the family] always talked about my father's family as dirty. There was constant criticism of my father's family."

When asked how Keegen's occupation as a domestic worker might have shaped such perceptions, Hawkesworth responded, "to parse out how much of it was that she had once been a domestic and how much of it was working as a farm laborer, I can't sort that out. But, there would be commentary from one grandmother that the other grandmother's hands were always dirty. There was always that constant notion that she was unclean." Ideas of class and ethnicity that shaped the tension between the two sides of a family might have been adopted from England as remarkably similar ideas were circulating there about working class English and Irish women. Hawkesworth's mother's side of the family also

might have been motivated to distance themselves from the father's side to elevate themselves in the United States where Irish immigrants often faced class, ethnic, and racial discrimination.²⁵²

A letter from an Irish male employer named J.S.G. suggests that there was ethnic and class tension even between Irish employers and Irish domestic workers. J.S.G. complained to the *Brooklyn Eagle* that Irish women were unprofessional by virtue of being from Ireland. He wrote, "The cheekiest, dirtiest and most unreliable domestics are Irish—and I am Irish myself, so I won't be sued for libel. They are quick workers, but by no means careful. Their haste to get though their labors often means work half done and considerable damage. They are not clean, either in their persons or their work."²⁵³ An Irish domestic worker named D.M.B. responded to J.S.G.'s letter almost a week later. She wrote:

I am very much surprised that 'J.S.G.' owned that he was Irish. He must have come from a very dirty part of Ireland when he thinks that all of the Irish are dirty. I would be ashamed to say I was Irish if I knew my race was dirty. Poor J.S.G. must have lots of trouble with his own nationality...

But I guess if he would have treated his servants right they would have stayed longer than a month with him...J.S.G.'s family is like a good many others, putting on airs and can't afford it. When they engage a girl for a first class cook and then the cooking times comes along what was the servant to cook but a half pound of liver for a family of six?²⁵⁴

²⁵² Mary Hawkesworth, Interview by author, 3 Dec 2008.

²⁵³ J.S.G., "Servant Girl Evil: Mul's Sentiments on This Grave Subject Indorsed," *Brooklyn Eagle* 6 Mar 1897: 3.

²⁵⁴ D.M.B., "Many Expressions of Opinion Received by Mail To-day—The Girl's Side Ably Championed," *Brooklyn Eagle* 10 Mar 1897:4.

D.M.B. channeled her discontent with J.S.G.'s letter through notions of cleanliness, which at the time were closely associated with ethnic, racial, and class status.²⁵⁵ While employers usually used the dirt epithet to establish racial and class distance from the women they employed, "D.M.B." uses the same idea to distance herself from "J.S.G." In addition, D.M.B. accuses J.S.G. of internalizing inferior notions of the Irish "race" by questioning his allegiance to Ireland. According to her, J.S.G. could not accuse Irish women of being inefficient workers because he probably did not treat them with respect. Furthermore, similar to other employers who complained about Irish women, he probably could not afford to pay decent wages for a household worker. Although Irish domestic workers labored in the confines of the private sphere, they still thought of themselves as wage laborers and held their employers to terms of respectability by demanding labor regulation standards of their employers.

D.M.B. articulates her terms of respectability: "Let the lady treat the girl right and she will be rewarded for it. I have lived and am living with a family that would not have any other help but Irish. Certainly the Irish will not do such slavish work as others may do, and they are right not to do a man's work... They do their own work and no more." According to the author, Irish women were arguably better workers than women of other races because they asserted their own labor standards and establishing these boundaries encouraged employers to

²⁵⁵ Please see chapter one for a discussion about how notions of "dirt" developed racial and class meanings within the realm of domestic service both in the United States and England.

respect Irish women. As D.M.B. continued, most employers will “not have any other help but the Irish.” “Irish Rambler,” another Irish servant, also responded to J.S.G.’s letter by asserting that the Irish were a respectable group of workers. She writes, “He judges a nation of bright, clean, willing, generous and God loving people (the Irish) by a few black sheep that he has met (and he doesn’t deserve any better).”²⁵⁶

Indeed, it is important to note that white American employers also developed a hierarchy among the preferred European immigrant groups. They considered English, German, Swedish, and Norwegian women as ideal domestic servants for higher paying positions such as governesses.²⁵⁷ English servants, for instance, were partly racialized in relation to the status of highly regarded English employers. A journalist comments, “The main reason why English girls are so superior in service is that the English mistresses are admirable managers of their domestic affairs. They are considerate, firm, kind, willing to teach, and always dignified, perfectly preserving the proper attitude toward the maid...”²⁵⁸

In fact, English workers were considered the most ideal out of all the European immigrant groups thereby signaling how the traditions of domestic work and racial classifications in the United States were significantly influenced by its English colonial history. While expressing the general preference for

²⁵⁶ “‘Irish Rambler’ Suggests a Servant Girl Trust,” The Brooklyn Eagle 11 Mar 1897.

²⁵⁷ Yentis 6

²⁵⁸ “Kitchen versus Slop Shop,” The New York Times 5 Mar 1893.

English servants, the director of an employment agency makes disparaging remarks about German and Swedish women:

The Germans are the next most numerous of female servants [in comparison with Irish servants], and they labor under difficulties in American families, especially at first. They do not understand our language...and they understand even less of our cooking. They have a preference for garlic and oil. It is almost impossible to correct them in their cooking...The one drawback in their behavior is excessive sociability. It makes them excellent child nurses but bad kitchen maids...

The Swedes, of late years, have been in the habit of making a brilliant dash on American kitchens. They have many qualities in common with their Teutonic serving sisters...They are hard to teach American cooking...²⁵⁹

A journalist for *The New York Times* echoes such sentiments: “The estimate put upon the Swedes as servants has greatly fallen of late. It was been said that they are clean, but beyond their personal appearance, in which they take a pride because they are mostly good-looking girls, they are not a whit cleaner than the Irish, and are quicker to take offense and more inclined to be insolent. In their morals, too, they are below the Irish.”²⁶⁰ At times, job competition helped shape the malleable process of racialization. Irish women were sometimes positioned as preferred workers in relation to other groups of European women who were generally racialized as “near white,” thereby suggesting that there were constant re-negotiations about which groups were “white” and “non-white.”

²⁵⁹ “Domestic Servants,” *The New York Times* 7 Jul 1872.

²⁶⁰ Kitchen versus Slop Shop,” *The New York Times* 5 Mar 1893.

According to Lynch-Brennan, comparisons between the Irish and Swedes encouraged some tension between the two groups. She explains, “Indications of possible rivalry between Swedish and Irish domestics, however, can be found in comments made by Swedes. They proclaimed that their domestics were ‘more reliable and hardworking than Irish women’ and were thus ‘more sought-after for domestic positions.’”²⁶¹ Irish women might have been more attractive employees for families with more modest incomes than those who could afford to hire the “near white” European women.

Still employers continued to target mostly Irish and Black women as difficult workers. An employer wrote to *The Brooklyn Eagle* that dismissed Irish servants as dirty and wasteful while also described the difficult experiences she had as an employer of German and Swedish women. She accused a Swedish woman of never reporting to work and claimed a German woman refused to do the washing, ironing, and cooking. While the author considered German and Swedish women to have specific shortcomings, she emphasized that she thought “colored” and Irish women were totally inept as servants. In the same letter where she denounced Irish help, she wrote as well, “I hired a colored girl. She came and did not do so badly. I wrote to a Connecticut city for her reference. The family had moved to Rhode Island, but answered that she was a thief and a liar. Of course she

²⁶¹ Lynch-Brennan 118

had to go.”²⁶² Her preconceived and racialized notions of the inadequacies of African American women took precedence over what she had observed. Eventhough this employer was clearly satisfied with how the employee worked in her home, she fired her because of a reference sent by another white employer.

As the Irish struggled to distance themselves from poorer countrymen and from Blacks, some African American women also saw it in their best interest to disassociate themselves from the Irish. An image entitled “Effect of the Fifteenth Amendment,” which was published in Harper’s Bazaar Magazine in 1871, features an African American mother warning her children that if they do not stop playing in the mud, they will “be took for Irish Chil’en.” Although the fifteenth amendment granted Blacks the right to vote, black voting had been curtailed by the late 1800s in the South. As legal theorist Haney López argues, laws were constantly negotiated and re-worked in the daily lives of the population. By the 1890s, organized movements under the spearhead of white Protestants and European immigrants were created to completely eliminate the Black vote by supporting amendments that established that instituted voting requirements aimed to disqualify blacks from civic participation.²⁶³ The cartoonist suggests that the Fifteenth Amendment, which declared that U.S. citizens could not be denied the right to vote based on race or previous conditions of servitude, was a stepping stone for Blacks that raised them above the Irish. Yet, the image also signals how

²⁶² The Brooklyn Eagle 12 March 1897.

²⁶³ Glenn 11

the Irish and Blacks were used as a “sounding board” for the constant re-negotiations of citizenship and disrupted racial hierarchies toward the end of the nineteenth century.²⁶⁴



Articles about southern Black women became more popular as they migrated in greater numbers to the North during the early twentieth century. As Black women came to dominate domestic service in the early twentieth century, racial concerns continued to be an issue for some Irish immigrants. Prevailing notions of blackness in Ireland no doubt contributed to these attitudes. Bridget McGaffighan, a domestic servant who migrated to New York City from Derry in 1923 remembers, “I never saw anybody black till I came to Ellis Island and there was an awful lot of black people. First black people I saw were on Ellis Island.

²⁶⁴ “Effect of the Fifteenth Amendment,” Harper’s Bazaar Magazine (New York) 4 Mar 1871.

And when we were children growing up, we were always taught, told, that the devil was black, the devil was black and, of course, I was big enough then to know the difference. But anyway, there were a lot of them there, a lot of black people.”²⁶⁵

Race may have also remained a concern for some Irish immigrants because they continued to experience difficulty gaining jobs outside of domestic service and positions within the occupation that offered higher wages. And some Irish were barred from higher paying jobs because they were accused of having characteristics that signaled racial and class inferiority, such as the inability to speak English correctly. This complaint was reflected in numerous cartoons of Irish servants in *Harper's Weekly* and other periodicals where the women spoke in broken English to their employers. Katheren MaGennis Lamberti, a woman who migrated to New York in 1921 at the age of twenty two, remembers language as a source of difficulty in finding jobs outside of domestic service. She states, “I wanted to get into the telephone company but they wouldn't take me because of my Irish accent. They told me to come back. They wanted me to come back when I spoke 'New York.' I said, 'What is New York?' New York is English like the rest of us.” The manager said, “We can't take you with that Irish accent.”

Lamberti worked as a domestic worker and then finally found a job at the Crescent Country Club as a waitress, which she considered a “god send.” She had

²⁶⁵ Bridget McGaffighan, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 19 Sep 1985.

secured the job at the Crescent Club with the assistance of the Knights of Columbus, the world's largest Catholic fraternal organization.²⁶⁶

Bertha McGeoghen also remembers language being a source of tension between herself and her employer while working as a domestic. She recalls that she had difficulty adjusting to how employers perceived her accent: "these people I worked with, you know, they were born in this country and you didn't talk the way they talked. Your English was so different...sometimes they'd correct you, a few things you would say. Instead of saying that, uh, must've been, or something, I'd always say vit-a-vie. That's the way they said it in Ireland. I was chastised for that many times."²⁶⁷ American employers' perception that Irish domestic workers did not speak "proper" English was shared by their counterparts in England, and indeed may have been reinforced by complaints from abroad.²⁶⁸

Although middle class and affluent Americans voiced concerns about a scarcity of servants during the 1920s, employers continued to offer a litany of racially charged complaints about Irish and African American domestic workers. Both groups were considered devoid of the mental capacity to perform household work adequately. Irish women were often the laughing stock among employers and New York society at large. As late as the 1920s, an immigration official had pity for Bertha McGeoghen and changed her name, which was originally Bridget,

²⁶⁶ Katherine MaGennis Lamberti, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 25 Feb 1994.

²⁶⁷ Bertha McGeoghen, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 19 Sep 1985.

²⁶⁸ Hickman and Walter 272

to Bertha. She remembers, “Well, years ago, people used to laugh about Irish girls that came out here [New York]. They called them Dittys; sometimes, just Ditty’s day off. You worked for things, working families and so forth. So anyway, they [immigration officials] changed it [her name] around to Bertha. My aunts and I went along with them. I didn’t want to be haggling with them.”²⁶⁹

Religious differences also remained a source of tension between many Protestant employers and their predominately Catholic employees. Catherine Foley, who immigrated to the US in 1913, remembers that she worked for a minister’s son whom she did not particularly like because, as she puts it, “He’d like everything to go his way. Like he’d ask you to go to an early mass so you’d be there for everything. And I went to mass anyway.”²⁷⁰ Clearly, some employers would try to make Irish women compromise their religious commitments, but women like Catherine refused. A cartoon that was originally published in the New York Sun in 1888 confirms the persistence of this long standing tension. The cartoon reads:

Lady (anxiously)—“I am so worried about poor Bridget.”

Husband—“What’s the matter with her, sick?”

²⁶⁹ Bertha McGeoghan, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 19 Sep 1985.

²⁷⁰ Catherine Foley, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 15 Oct 1996.

Lady—“N-no, but it’s Lent, you know, and she doesn’t care for oysters or clams, and complains that she is so tired of terrapin and crabs, and the shad we had yesterday she said was so full of bones that even her cousin wouldn’t touch it.”
 Husband—“Well, I presume she can get something for us to eat at least. I’m hungry.” Lady—“No, poor girl, she’s at church.”²⁷¹

The close racial association between Irish and African American women also continued to permeate the social relations of domestic service. A journalist for The Chicago Defender revealed the findings of a 1918 study conducted by the Negro Welfare League of domestic workers in New Jersey and New York. The *Defender* reported: “Jewish and Italian girls work alongside the Race women [read African American] without friction, while the Irish, English and American-born white girls are far less cordial in working with girls of the Race. The Race girls, in their new jobs, have not yet learned to be punctual, and according to Mr. Ashby, the northern born workers show much more endurance and stamina than the southern born Race women.”²⁷²

The Negro Welfare League study also reveals that differentiations were still being made between African American domestic workers from the North and the South. For instance, the idea that northern born Black workers were more diligent workers than southern Black women replaced notions that the southerners

²⁷¹ “Poor Bridget,” The Milwaukee Sentinel 4 Mar 1888.

²⁷² “Women Filling Many Jobs,” The Chicago Defender 31 Aug 1918.

were more subservient and better trained at household tasks. The conscious effort to distinguish between the two groups suggests that Blacks in the North absorbed the sentiments of white northerners toward the South. Some Black organizations such as the Urban League in New York City went so far as to create pamphlets to help southern Blacks adjust to the North. They instructed migrants how to dress and to refrain from “country” behavior including “yelling across the street to talk with neighbors.”²⁷³ Such comments suggest that early praise for those southern black women who had been trained under slavery disappeared by the 1910s. Moreover, although different groups of immigrant women worked in domestic service, African Americans and Irish remained at the bottom of the hierarchy. The positions of each group in the U.S. racial order caused tension, especially as Irish, English, and white American-born women struggled to maintain their racial privileges despite being concentrated in a racially stigmatized form of labor.

Given all the conflicts between and within ethnic and racial groups, it is important to note that not all Irish immigrants harbored racist sentiments toward African Americans. Lillian Cavanaugh, an Irish domestic worker who migrated to Ellis Island in 1912, remembered: “I never saw a black child till I come off the boat in New York, and I saw a bunch of them, you know, on the sidewalk, playing ball and skipping. I thought it was great.”²⁷⁴ Ellen Slane Conway migrated from

²⁷³ Nadia Brown, Interview by author, 2 Nov 2008.

²⁷⁴ Lillian Cavanaugh, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 28 Mar 1993.

northern Ireland in 1929 at the age of twenty two and worked as a domestic in New York, Philadelphia, and New Hampshire. When asked how she felt about interacting with people of different races in the United States, she replied, “I didn’t mind. I worked with you know, the colored people? They came in to do cleaning and I never seen nothing wrong with them. They were nice, very nice.”²⁷⁵ But, Irish women had the advantage in this period as increasing numbers found jobs in occupations outside household employment. African American women, however, remained vulnerable to the exploitative aspects of domestic service after Irish immigrant women and their daughters transitioned into the racial category of “white” and gained access to factory and white-collar jobs.

Tightening Racial and Gender Boundaries:

Increasing Ghettoization and Racialization of Domestic Service

Irish women entered higher wage and less stigmatized forms of employment as the overall Irish community gained political power as active members of powerful U.S. institutions. The active participation of the Irish in the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church, two institutions that had become major sites of organized support for curtailing the civil rights of Blacks, played a major role in the “whitening” of the Irish. Since the 1830s, the Democratic Party devised strategies to oppose abolition and ban Blacks from voting and participating in other forms of civic participation after emancipation. According

²⁷⁵ Ellen Slane Conway, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 3 Nov 1998.

to Roediger, “The Democratic party reinvented whiteness in a manner that ‘refurbished their party’s traditional links to the People and offered political democracy and an inclusive patriotism to white male Americans.’”²⁷⁶ The Catholic Church was particularly outspoken about its support for slavery and the removal of emancipated Blacks from the North. A prominent Catholic paper in New York City proclaimed that “emancipated slaves moving North should be ‘driven out, imprisoned or exterminated.’”²⁷⁷

As Irish immigrant participation increased in the Democratic Party, they gained significant leadership positions in the city political machines, which resulted in the election of Irish political representatives in nineteenth-century America. Tammany Hall, one of the most well-known, Irish-controlled political machines in the early 1880s, provided critical services for the Irish community such as safe and affordable housing, food, and coal. The political machines also created opportunities for Irish immigrants to access government jobs and city contracts for Irish-owned businesses. These political institutions aided in the transition of the Irish into the white race by granting them access to systemic privileges of whiteness.²⁷⁸ This transition had large implications for Irish female laborers. In the 1920s higher-paying positions both within and outside of domestic service were becoming available to them. Some Irish women even accepted lower

²⁷⁶ Roediger 140

²⁷⁷ Roediger 140

²⁷⁸ Scupin 111-112

pay to work as a stenographer or secretary. They preferred earning \$12 a week in these jobs compared to \$60 a month as a domestic worker because such positions only demanded an eight-hour day and they were higher-status jobs than those in domestic service.²⁷⁹

While Irish women were venturing into other forms of employment, African American women were increasingly tracked into domestic service occupations through educational institutions. Black schools such as Hampton University and Tuskegee University struggled to raise funds that supported liberal arts and teaching education. Primarily dependent on philanthropic support, Black institutions were no longer able to devote attention to these programs and shifted their emphasis to creating industrial and vocational training that served as gateways for the domestic service industry. The majority of Black women graduated from these institutions having acquired domestic training in laundry work, nursing, and cooking.²⁸⁰

Even as Irish women gained access to employment outside of domestic service, Blacks continued to draw parallels between their experiences and those of the Irish. A Black male writer for the *Wall Street Journal* in 1920 encouraged readers to imagine the achievements that could be gained by African Americans if they used resistance strategies similar to those devised by the Irish to challenge

²⁷⁹ "Hired Girl Now Almost Extinct," *New York Times* 14 Oct 1923.

²⁸⁰ Glenn 142

English colonial rule. The writer is careful to preface his suggestion by insisting that he wrote the article with

“no intention of comparing the supersensitive Irishman to the Negro, but to draw an instructive to the international parallel...” His description of the Irish as “super sensitive” implies that there was still some tension between them and Blacks.²⁸¹

In the same decade, Black writers also echoed the resentment once felt by white northerners toward southerners. However, these complaints now coalesced with race pride and organizing among workers to improve the labor and living conditions of Blacks. *The Chicago Defender* reports:

You simply cannot get a southerner to think realistically about any question which concerns the Negro. Drive him into a hole in an argument and he will seek refuge from the facts by telling you how much he loved the Negro mammy who nursed him when he was a child... Proud Nordics from the North of Europe worked as cooks and maids under conditions which a woman from Harlem would not tolerate even though she were starving... it is the Negro woman who has led the war to winning the new freedom for the servant. She has insisted when her job was done she would go back to her own home and return the next morning.²⁸²

At the same time, Black newspapers were vocal in condemning the continued exploitation of African American women, which often came in the form of sex trafficking. Mr. Moss, a New York License Commissioner, told reporters that unlicensed agencies made a practice of bringing young women to New York ostensibly as domestics. “In many cases,” he said, “the girls are

²⁸¹ “A Negro Parallel,” *The Chicago Defender* 6 Mar 1920: 20.

²⁸² “Writer Flay Attitudes of Southerners,” *The Chicago Defender* 3 Aug 1929: A1.

discharged for incompetence and then turned out on the streets and made dependent on public relief. The majority of girls brought here by these unlicensed agencies are Negro girls from the South and Polish and Bohemian girls from the mining towns...”²⁸³ The article reveals that African American women still maintained an immigrant-like status as they were transported with foreign women to northern cities to perform cheap labor. Yet, they still were met with racist sentiments when they reached the North. The Superintendent of the Women’s Division of the State Employment Bureau in New York City revealed the racial and ethnic division of labor within domestic service employment when she reported that employers were frustrated about the declining quantity of white American, French, German, and Swedish women available for higher paying permanent positions. Thus employers were forced to hire Black women, who they preferred to employ only as day workers.²⁸⁴

The 1920s was a period of relative advancement for Black women in domestic employment. They often had the option of being hired as full-time, part-time, day, or live-in workers. Since employers in this period were more financially secure, Black women could find jobs that paid livable wages. And the relative prosperity allowed other groups of women, like Irish and northern European immigrants, to move into other occupations. Yet just a decade later,

²⁸³ Untitled, *New York Times* 15 Jun 1939: 5.

²⁸⁴ Ethel M. Smith, “America’s Domestic Servant Shortage,” *Current History* May 1927: 215.

during the Great Depression, African American women once again had to compete with white women for domestic service jobs, which confined them to day work. Many had to rely on part-time work for income thereby subjecting them to housewives who a decade earlier could not compete with the relatively high wages paid household workers.

As the economic crisis deepened, more secure and better paid positions were once again occupied by white American and European women. Employment agencies, too, became increasingly discriminatory and closed their doors to Black women while other agencies sent them to the lowest paying jobs.²⁸⁵ Irish women such as Ellen Brady remember having access to “special” employment agencies after the Crash of 1929 that offered her higher paying jobs within domestic service. She recalls, “Someone told me about the special jobs! Oh, you get in with the people that had all the money to work for, and pay you better money, pay you better salary.”²⁸⁶

The majority of Black women did not have access to these agencies or the jobs they offered. According to the Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Urban Colored Population, in 1930 only 4.3 percent of 5,523,337 gainfully employed persons in New York State were Black. And the largest number of those were employed in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations and domestic and personal service. Moreover, by 1935 blacks comprised only 10.3 percent of

²⁸⁵ Gray 5

²⁸⁶ Ellen Brady, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 7 March 1977.

workers on relief even though they were the likeliest to be unemployed in the City.²⁸⁷

Meanwhile, the cost of living soared as rents doubled during the period. To make matters worse, policies such as the National Recovery Act and the Fair Standards Act of 1938, which were created to increase wages for workers and provide employment, excluded household and agricultural workers. Household workers were not eligible to receive workmen's compensation, provided by the Social Security Act, until 1951.²⁸⁸ Such inequalities helped sustain the trafficking of southern Black women into New York City. Mrs. Florence Kravis was one of many white women arrested for running an employment agency without a license and making false employment promises to southern migrants. Kathryn Kalish and Jennie P. McGee of the City License Department claimed that Mrs. Kravis brought "thousands" of girls, mostly from South Carolina, into Brooklyn.²⁸⁹

Comparisons between Black and Irish workers resurfaced as they once again competed for household employment during the Depression era. In 1932 Kelly Miller, a writer for the *Chicago Defender*, wrote an article comparing the South's treatment of Blacks to the North's treatment of the Irish. Miller argues that native born whites in both regions were encouraged to support prohibition because of concerns about alcohol use (and abuse) among Irish and Blacks. Miller

²⁸⁷ Gray 95

²⁸⁸ Gray 96-100

²⁸⁹ "Charge Woman Brought Maids Here Illegally," The New York Age 5 June 1937: 1.

writes, “Why did the South surrender its immemorial doctrine of state rights and yield to federal control of the intimate conduct of the people...The chief reason was due to the presence of the Negro...It was felt that intoxicating liquor made the Negro unsteady and unreliable as a domestic servant and productive worker...The prohibition doctrine originated in the North. One of its strong incentives was to keep intoxicating drink out of the reach of the Irish immigrant, who then recruited the lower stratum of society.”²⁹⁰

Perhaps, the author was attempting to reclaim sober Blacks as productive workers to counteract the especially difficult time they had finding stable employment. Domestic help wanted ads during the Depression reflected employers’ continued desire for hiring Scotch, Irish, German, Swedish, and Norwegian servants.²⁹¹ At the same time, some Irish still expressed racist sentiments toward Blacks. Josephine Lenney, a woman who migrated from Ballina, Ireland in 1935, confirms that some immigrants embraced ideas of racial inferiority. After arriving at Ellis Island Lenney rode the subway with a family member to Washington Heights. Along the way, she saw Black people and became frightened. She thought to herself, “Where did they come from? How are we going to get out of this place?”²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Kelly Miller, “Why the South is Dry,” Chicago Defender 4 Sep 1932: 14.

²⁹¹ Gray 57

²⁹² Josephine Lenney, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 21 Aug 1996.

Unlike Irish and white American women, many Black women had no other option but to stand on the street corners of Brooklyn and the Bronx for long hours to wait for housewives to hire them by the day. There were no equivalent “slave” markets for Irish women, suggesting that despite similarities in their experiences, Irish and African American domestic workers faced distinctly different opportunities in times of crisis. In addition, African American women were relegated to domestic work much longer than Irish women and for them, household employment retained connections to slavery.²⁹³ In 1937, social activist Ella Baker and journalist Marvel Cooke wrote an article for the *Amsterdam News* entitled “The Bronx Slave Market.”

They documented the experiences of hundreds of African American women who stood on the corner of 167 Street and Jerome Avenue or waited at the intersection of Simpson and Westchester Avenues in the Bronx for employers to pick them up for housework by the day. Baker and Cooke considered the scene at these corners as similar to auction blocks during slavery. Whites who came to the street corners inspected women’s bodies to determine the strongest worker for the lowest bidding price. The Market was also reminiscent of slave auctions because the women were vulnerable to sexual exploitation at the hands of white men.

Baker and Cooke reported: “If not the wives themselves, maybe their husbands,

²⁹³ The photograph was taken by Paten-Davis and it was featured in an article published in an article entitled “Rowina Douglas, Domestic, Makes \$1.05 at the Slave Market” that was published by a periodical entitled PM on 16 Jan 1941.

their sons, or their brothers, under the subterfuge of work, offer worldly-wise girls higher bids for their time.”²⁹⁴

The photograph below was taken of a 26 year old woman named Rowina Douglass who migrated from Baltimore, Maryland to New York City to earn money as a domestic worker. Faced with severely limited employment opportunities, Rowina was forced to stand for hours each day on the corner of 170th street and Townsend Avenue until a housewife came along to hire her for day work. Rowina and the other women often worked for slave wages as the women who hired them were unable (or unwilling) to pay minimum wages. According to Tom ‘O Conner, a white reporter for the local newspaper *PM*, “Many of them [the housewives] are poor themselves and couldn’t afford any domestic help if they had to pay decent wages or keep a regular employee. Many others just don’t like to plan their housework regularly and would rather walk to the corner and pick up a maid for a day when they feel like it just as they’d pick up a lamp chop or a head of cabbage at the store.”²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Marvel Cooke, “Modern Slaves: Domestic Jobs are Miserable in Hours, Pay: Union is Seeking to Relieve their Bad Situation,” *The New York Amsterdam News* 16 Oct 1937: 13.

²⁹⁵ Tom O’ Conner, “Negro Domestic Earn Pittance in ‘Slave Markets,’ *PM* 16 Jan 1941: 15.



(Photo Courtesy of Labor archives at Cornell University)

The photograph also highlights how bringing media attention to the Bronx Slave Markets could be exploitative. All of the women are facing the wall except Rowina because as the caption puts it, “When these women saw the cameraman, they turned their backs—all except Rowina Douglas, who knew her picture was going to be taken and didn’t care. Some are camera shy because they’re on relief.”²⁹⁶ Therefore, some reporters, especially those who were employed by Black-owned newspapers, did not feature pictures of women at the corners. Taub, a reporter for the New York newspaper *The Liberator*, notes the ties between the corners and slavery. He writes:

In contrast with the civil war days, these wage slaves perform the obliging function of auctioning themselves off to their employers. Another obliging feature of their plight is that they are neither fed nor sheltered not paid wages for the hundreds of hours which they stand and wait for employment! Propped up against, store-walls at street corners they stood.

²⁹⁶O’ Conner 15

The women will occasionally rest weary bodies on old discarded grocery boxes. In their hands they hold a brown paper bag. In that bag is their promise of comfort for the day—a dry piece of bread for lunch, also a few torn bits of work clothes. The average wage they earn is three dollars a week with hourly wages ranging from 20 cents to 30 cents an hour.²⁹⁷

And these women, too, were often vulnerable to sexual assault: “Our beautiful girl, propped against the wall of Woolworth’s five and ten, tells of one of her friends being lured to so-called ‘bachelor’s apartment’ where she barely escaped an attack.”²⁹⁸



(Photograph of a white man attempting to solicit Rowina Douglass in the doorway of the Woolworth store where she was waiting for day work. Photo Courtesy of Labor Archives at Cornell University)

²⁹⁷ Belle Taub, “Discovered! A Modern Slave Block,” The Liberator 15 Jun 1935: 5.

²⁹⁸Taub 5

A photographer caught a man propositioning Rowina Douglass in the doorway of a Woolworth's store. She refused his advances, but times were hard and some women resorted to having consensual sex with male employers to supplement the low wages. Sharon Robinson remembers her grandmother Hannah Moses, who she affectionately called "Hammie," having consensual sexual relationships with her male employers for which she was compensated.²⁹⁹ A woman who sought work from the slave markets by the name of "Miss P.G.A." confirms that "sexual favors" were part of the job. She wrote to the *Amsterdam News*, "White grandfathers, fathers and sons stand and beckon at you for an hour at a time. One asked me whether I work at night.

He said some of the girls refused to night work. I asked if his wife was at home and he said she was on a vacation and asked me to be a nice baby, etc. These Negro women have been refused relief. The employment agencies do not have any day or part-time work. If they buy a job they are many times cheated of their fee and they are forced to pay the same high rents."³⁰⁰ To make matters worse, some Black women found it difficult to request higher wages from their employers. One employer responded to a Black woman who asked for higher wages by saying, "Why I can get a white girl under those conditions!"³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Sharon Robinson, Interview by author, Atlanta, GA, 7 Jul 2009.

³⁰⁰ Miss P.G.A., "Jobs, Relief, Opportunity: To the Editor of the *Amsterdam News*," *Amsterdam News* 10 Aug 1935.

³⁰¹ Jean Collier Brown, "Concerns of Household Workers: Program with Household Workers in the Y.W.C.A.," *The Woman's Press* 1941: 48.

As Irish women began to transition into members of the white race, some were granted power over their Black counterparts. According to Alfred Duckett, a journalist for *The New York Age*, some Irish housewives in Brooklyn exploited Black women who worked in their homes. He reported, “Not in the deep heart of the South, nor in some barbaric or untamed country, but right in the heart of civilized Brooklyn, today there is a forty-nine-year old Negro woman being kept virtually a slave by an Irish housewife, forced to do heavy housework, make beds, shovel coal, and sweep floors...Elisa Denny, has been the victim of robbery and exploitation on the part of several families in the vicinity.” Apparently, Denny was also bankrupt because her Irish employers stole her savings. Duckett pleaded with the readers of the *New York Age* to “get together under a common cause and fight for this helpless Negro woman.”³⁰²

Blacks themselves organized responses to the struggles of women in domestic service as part of a growing labor movement in the community. Starting in the 1920s, Blacks organized by publishing articles in Black-owned periodicals about the abuse women encountered in domestic service. Marvel Cooke used her journalistic skills to bring media attention to the hiring corners and declare them a form of slavery. She interviewed some of the workers and reported:

³⁰² Alfred Duckett, “Virtual Slavery of Negro Women in Brooklyn Reported by Social Worker in Exclusive Interview,” *The New York Age* 19 Feb 1938: 1.

All of the girls had the same tale to tell. Up at seven in the morning to cook breakfast, wash dishes, and babies' clothing, wax floors, wash windows, market, prepare all meals, take babies for their daily airing, prepare dainty midnight lunches for card-playing employers, give up their days off for this or that emergency—that was an ordinary work day. They all agreed. They were leading the lives of slaves. But where could they turn? It did no good to look for other jobs. They had all tried that, only to find similar conditions.³⁰³

During the depression, women from the West Indies stood alongside African American women in the slave markets, reflecting a long colonial history for them as well. The number of women who migrated from the Caribbean to New York began increasing during the nineteen twenties. In earlier decades, it was mainly men who migrated from the Caribbean and then sent for their wives and children after finding employment. This changed as the economic depression hit the Caribbean in the mid to late 1920s. Like southern women, most Caribbean women could only find low-wage work in the islands as agricultural workers or domestic servants. After hearing from family members and newspapers about higher paid domestic service jobs in the U.S. North, more Caribbean women began migrating to New York. Many lived in the same neighborhoods as southern migrants and worked in the same service-sector jobs.

Journalist Tom O'Conner met a West Indian woman who had migrated to New York with her husband in 1903 while gathering information for his article about the slave markets. The worker's husband made enough money to support

³⁰³ Cooke 13

the family with his income alone until he died in 1920. She then tried to find work as a cook, but claimed, “I couldn’t get no work like that—they cooks different here.”³⁰⁴ By the 1930s, she was standing on the corner with other Black women. Even southern migrant women who did not have to endure the “Bronx Slave Market” worked under what they considered inhumane conditions. Some were required to clean floors without using household appliances thereby increasing the workload and energy needed to perform their jobs. These requirements resembled the expectations of slaveholders. Many women whose mothers were employed as domestic workers or who worked similar jobs themselves remember mostly working for Jewish families. The varying stories reflect the sometimes complicated relationships Black women had with Jewish employers, another group with a long history of discriminatory experiences in the United States.

Vanessa Spear remembers that her mother, who migrated from Charleston, South Carolina between 1939 and 1940, would say to her: “I have to scrub these Jews floors.” Her mother worked for an orthodox Jewish family who would not allow her to use a mop to clean the floors. Instead they insisted that she clean them on her hands and knees. Despite this requirement Smith recalls that her mother had mostly good experiences with her employers. However, she was uncomfortable with their proprietary attitude. Smith recalls, “. . .that’s one thing they [employers] would say. This is my girl. She cleans. But, they would never

³⁰⁴ O’ Conner 14

say this is Mary. They would always refer to the person as girl. That's my girl. This is my girl. That type of deal. They always did that. That I do remember."³⁰⁵

Mildred Mitchell remembers, "You had to work like a slave. You couldn't use a mop." She didn't believe the requirements stemmed from religious beliefs, but rather she insisted that Jewish families preferred "African American women to get on their knees and scrub the floors." Yet it is important to note that Black women did not always conform to the "requirements" of their employers. Mitchell remembers that her employers told her that serving dishes for dairy and meat products must be cleaned separately. But Mitchell ignored their request and washed the dishes together. She recalls, "They didn't know the difference anyway." Mitchell also noted that she felt like a slave because the job did not have any social security benefits. She knew there was a law that was supposed to require employers to put aside money for domestic workers' social security. However, she claims workers would get fired if they requested the money.³⁰⁶

Vincent Harding remembers that his mother was most fond of a Jewish woman she worked for named Mrs. Slavin who lived north of Central Park on Ninety-Ninth Street. His mother, who worked her entire life as a domestic servant, migrated to New York shortly after World War I from a small African based town in Barbados named Brereton's Village. Harding recalls, "It just

³⁰⁵ Vanessa Spear, Interview by author, 18 Nov 2008.

³⁰⁶ Mildred Mitchell, Interview by author, 25 Sep 2008.

seemed like she [Slavin] was a kind person, a friendly person... And I don't ever recall ever my mother complaining about any kind of racist problems with Mrs. Slavin. I get the feeling that she thought well of her... ." Harding's mother also thought favorably of an Italian family she worked for, so much so that she named her son after their son.³⁰⁷

The demands of domestic work and the lack of job benefits encouraged many domestic employees to seek better for their children. Mildred Mitchell declared: "My children are not going to scrub anyone's floors." Other women also enforced the importance of education to their children so they would not have to enter the service industry. As Harding notes of his mother: "I'm not sure how she did it. But, what I remember is that whenever for one reason or another she needed to be at school on my behalf she found a way to be there. I'm not sure how that was worked out. But, I never had a sense that she couldn't take the time to be present either because of programs that were going on or conversations with the teacher. Her work was never a hindrance to her being a very responsible parent regarding school."

Responses of middle-class African American women to "race and labor problem"

By the early twentieth century middle-class Black women began to engage in organized efforts to combat racial inequalities in domestic service. They

³⁰⁷ Vincent Harding, Interview by author, 14 Nov 2008.

created Homes that provided critical services for Black migrant women in New York. In 1897, Victoria Earle Matthews helped start the White Rose Mission Home. Matthews was a biracial woman who was born to an enslaved woman in Fort Valley, Georgia and migrated to New York to escape her abusive master, who was believed to be Matthews' father. Although well educated and considered middle class, Matthews had to work as a domestic laborer because other jobs were closed to Black women in New York. Considering her own experiences in the labor market, Matthews was determined to help southern African American and Caribbean women who followed in her footsteps. She was well aware of the corrupt employment agencies and lures to prostitution. Matthews wanted to guide migrant women to stable and safe employment in domestic service. On February 11, 1897 Matthews and members of the White Rose Association bought a building in what was described as "a crowded colored settlement on East 97th Street" to provide this safe haven.

The White Rose Mission operated until 1981 and was a charter member of the Empire State Federation of Women's Clubs and was affiliated with the Northeastern Federation of Women's Clubs and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Records from the White Rose Home reveal that Matthews provided many vital services for southern migrants that they could not receive from the State. Matthew's concern about the deplorable living conditions of tenements inspired her to create a settlement home to provide female migrants

with food, lodging, social activities and employment referrals. The Home sent volunteers to meet migrants at docks and train stations to protect them from unlicensed employment agents. They also offered classes in financial management, cooking, gardening, and sewing and provided inexpensive lodging and an atmosphere full of social activities for migrants who had few friends and family members in the North.

Interestingly, the social activities served as a source of tension between Matthews and other middle class Black women, who refused to support her project financially. A pamphlet from the Home reads, “The well-to-do of the race are almost without exception members of Evangelical churches, and hold rather narrow views on the subject of card-playing, dancing, and like amusements. Many of them refuse their support to the White Rose Settlement because of the whist clubs, which are regarded by Mrs. Matthews as one of the most successful ventures ever tried here...Most of the support, however, comes from benevolent white men and women”³⁰⁸

Still, according to Deborah Gray White, “Helping rural black women establish themselves in urban areas had special significance for black women’s clubs because so many members had made the lonely and dangerous migration themselves...With no social agency to provide or refer services to black women,

³⁰⁸ “White Rose Mission Settlement: Girls from Southern Ports Protected, Social Life for Servants, Mothers’ Sewing Clubs Help Support Work, Race History Classes, and a Unique Library,” New York Evening Post, 6 Apr 1910.

they resolved that they alone had to initiate the change.”³⁰⁹ Hence, the organizing efforts of Black clubwomen such as Matthews remained vital well into the twentieth century as southern Black women continued to negotiate the attitudes that deemed them incapable of performing domestic work adequately, yet ensured their continued employment in the field.



(Victoria Earle Matthews. Photo courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Print Division)

The White Rose Home resembled organizations in England that were also created by middle class women to recruit young, poor English women to domestic service. In fact, some of the language used in the White Rose Home pamphlets resembled the language used by the Metropolitan Association for Befriending

³⁰⁹ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) 30-31

Young Servants in London.³¹⁰ The organizers of the White Rose Home often solicited financial support from White donors by advertising their mission and the services provided for working women.

One pamphlet read:

...as our work aims to help the ‘stranger girl,’ in our midst, aims to provide a home for her, to secure her employment and keep her away from the snares and the pitfalls of city life, we feel that our work is not only helpful to the ‘stranger girl’ in need who comes into our city, but is an asset to the city itself. And we are confident that those who help us to develop our work, can have the satisfaction of helping a deserving cause.³¹¹

Matthews’ socioeconomic status helps explain why the language she echoes the descriptions of servants articulated by elite women in England.³¹² Elitest language with missionary undertones was often employed to describe the home to potential donors. The White Rose Association deemed it their responsibility to “help the stranger girl and keep her away from the snare of city life.” The leaders of the Association targeted migrant women who were seen as having the potential to pollute the city by engaging in prostitution. They claim domestic employment can save them from such activities. The language of the memo was also intended to appeal to white northern donors. The Home’s description of migrant women echoed the concerns of whites in northern cities

³¹⁰ Please see chapter 1 for more information about the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants.

³¹¹ “Our Appeal” White Rose Industrial Association circa 1920.

³¹² Please see chapters one and four for more information about the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants

who thought African American women were socially dangerous because they had poor hygiene, lived in overcrowded dirty neighborhoods, and could easily fall prey to prostitution.

With this in mind, Matthews and her co-workers assured supporters that the Home was “not only helpful to the ‘stranger girl’ in need who comes into our city, but is an asset to the city itself.” They also attempted to distance African American women from ideas of blackness by emphasizing to White middle class patrons that the Home provided its tenants with lessons about how to clean homes thoroughly. As donors were ensured in another fundraising pamphlet, “The rooms are as neat and cheery as possible, and girls remaining at the home are often led into better habits of living than they have hitherto been accustomed to.”³¹³ The organizers mentioned these aspects of the Home to convince potential white patrons that residents—all black migrant women—did not pose a threat to the city or to their families.

The similarity in language used by the White Rose Industrial Association and authors of domestic service manuals in England suggests that ideas about femininity circulated between England and the United States, coalescing with the racial context of the post emancipation era, and shaping how African American women were perceived in New York. Anglo-American ideals of femininity were complicated, however, because African American women in the White Rose

³¹³ “White Rose Mission Settlement,” New York Evening Post 6 Apr 1910.

Association operated in a different social context than middle class women in England. Although the organizers were educated middle class women, they found it difficult to find jobs outside of domestic service themselves. Thus they did not simply position themselves as superior to domestic workers, but saw the social and racial status of domestic service as intimately connected to their own. As Hazel Carby notes, “the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations...”³¹⁴

Thus, even though obvious forms of elitism were reproduced in White Rose Association pamphlets, the Home provided much needed services such as housing and protection from corrupt labor agencies that were not provided to migrant women by the State. Middle class women who managed the Home emphasized Anglo-American ideals of femininity in their memos to gain financial support for domestic service training courses that increased the chances of southern migrant women getting higher paying positions. Their use of such language then was shaped by both social ideals and practical needs.

³¹⁴ Hazel Carby, “Policing the black woman’s body in an urban context” *Critical Inquiry* 1992: 741.



(“White Rose Mission Home” Photo Courtesy of Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Archive Division)

The Home also developed childrearing courses for mothers, African American literature courses for domestic workers, and jobs for women in the community as teachers. Aware of the limits domestic service placed on women eager to pursue formal education, Matthews created a library for workers that included a vast collection of books authored by Black notables including Booker T. Washington, Charles Chesnutt, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. The library housed rare books including a collection of poems written by Phyllis Wheatley and the *Anglo-African Magazine*, which was published in New York in 1859. Matthews incorporated these texts in a course she taught to a group of domestic servants

every year entitled “Race History.”³¹⁵ The Home also provided health courses for workers. Perhaps, Matthews thought it was necessary for Black women to have information about how to live healthy lives because domestic work could be a dangerous occupation.

Black female intellectuals in the South were doing similar work to Matthews. Educator and social reformer Anna Julia Cooper published articles in various national periodicals to help improve the lives of Black women. She was born Annie Julia Haywood in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina to an enslaved woman, Hannah Stanley Haywood, and her white master, George Washington Haywood. Among few Blacks with a graduate degree, Cooper attained a B.A. and later an M.A. at Oberlin College in 1887. She was among the first scholars to articulate Black feminist thought and was instrumental in advancing both the women’s suffrage movement and the movement to end racial oppression. She published articles challenging institutionalized forms of racism and sexism by helping to create the Colored Women’s YWCA in 1905 and becoming principal of the renowned Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. She was also especially critical of Black men who opposed gender equality and she was critical of white

³¹⁵ “White Rose Mission Settlement: Girls from Southern Ports Protected, Social Life for Servants, Mothers’ Sewing Clubs Help Support Work, Race History Classes, and a Unique Library,” New York Evening Post, 6 Apr 1910.

women who barred Black working class women from joining the women's movement.³¹⁶

In addition, Cooper argued that domestic work should be taken seriously as a respectable form of labor that was equally important to men's labor outside of the home. She wrote in 1899 to the Hampton University publication Southern Workman, "The colored woman must bring to her labor all the capacities, native or acquired, which are of value in the industrial equation. She must really be worth her wage and claim it...every wage-earner, man or woman, owes it to the dignity of the labor he contributes, as well as to his own self-respect, to require the rights due to the quality of service he renders, and to the element of value he contributes to the world's wealth."³¹⁷

Similar to Victoria Matthews, Cooper also thought of developing strong work ethics as a way for Black women to attain labor rights. Yet, Cooper is careful not to place the sole responsibility on Black women. She inserts Black women's labor in a global context by asserting that their labor is important not only to the immediate place of employment, but it is also necessary for maintaining a strong world economy. According to Cooper, this gave grounds for Black women to demand access to rights afforded to male and white laborers whether they were working in a factory or a private residence.

³¹⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *A Voice From the South by Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³¹⁷ Anna Julia Cooper, "Colored wage-earners," The Southern Workman, 1899: 296- 297.

National women's organizations also took an interest in helping to better the working conditions of Black women. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) created the Commission on Household Employment in 1915 after its national board received letters from both employees and employers complaining about paid household service. The Women's Bureau of Home Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Industrial Department of the YWCA along with the Commission on Household Employment organized a conference in the fall of 1928 to address the concerns of employees and employers on a national scale.

The YWCA responded to the litany of concerns expressed at the conference by creating the National Committee on Employer-Employee Relationships in the Home to address the concerns of women in domestic service. By 1929 this committee evolved into the National Council on Household Employment.³¹⁸ The Council organized conferences in various cities across the United States in an effort to bring employees and employers together to talk openly about their frustrations. They also pushed Congress to require employers to provide household employees with workmen's compensation and social security benefits as they argued that the rate of accidents in the home was higher than that in industrial settings. At the same time, the Y provided safety courses for

³¹⁸ Brown 8-10

employees to instruct them on how to protect themselves from injury while working and from contracting illnesses from their employers.

The YWCA also worked with the women's trade union league to organize support for bills introduced to the New York State legislature by the State Federation of Labor. Some of the bills included the Wicks-Wagner 60 hour Bill for Domestic Workers, which stated that no person shall be employed as a domestic worker for more than 60 hours a week; the Howard Wagner Amendment, which attempted to include domestic workers in the Minimum Wage Law; and the Wicks-Breitbart Bill, which would have provided workmen's compensation for domestic workers in households where two or more were employed.³¹⁹ The YWCA hoped to include domestic workers in these bills by arguing that domestic service was a form of industrial labor. Although domestic workers labored in the privacy of homes, according to the Y, they should still be protected by laws that demanded employers pay employees decent wages and provide compensation for injuries on the job.

A range of racial and ethnic groups joined the Household Employment Council, participated in the conferences, and helped garner support for the various labor laws. However, the Council made a concerted effort to address the racial concerns of Black women by conducting interviews with them, publishing census data about the positions of Black women in domestic service, and attempting to

³¹⁹ Lillian McGrew, "Household Employment in New York State," National Board Y.W.C.A. Records, 1939.

incorporate Black women in labor unions. The Council produced bulletins that explained to white employers why Black women who “lived-in” complained about their circumstances, which included not having access to bathing facilities and being prohibited from eating foods in the home that would have provided them with a nutritional diet.³²⁰ Such inadequacies led to illnesses among live-in employees including anemia and malnutrition. Some women also developed foot injuries as they were required to spend long hours working while standing.

Considering that the majority of Black women “lived-out,” the Y encouraged employers to address their issues as well. According to Jean Collier Brown, “living out means a considerably smaller wage and the negro girl usually has the responsibility of dependents. Much education needs to be done with employers to gain acceptance of a realistic wage differential between the ‘live in’ and ‘live out’ jobs.”³²¹ During the Depression the YWCA allocated funds from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create boarding houses for Black women in Harlem. The Association built the Harriet Beecher Stowe House, a training facility funded by the WPA that provided education about housekeeping, hygiene, exercise, and social etiquette for Black domestic workers.³²²

³²⁰ Brown 32

³²¹ Brown 48

³²² Dorothy P. Wells, “Report on visit to WPA Household Employment Centers,” 21 Jul 1936.

In addition, the “Y” helped circulate literature about domestic worker union meetings that were clearly targeting Black women. The image below was featured on a flyer urging workers to attend an organizing meeting in Washington, D.C. that was sponsored by organizations including The Domestic Workers’ Union, the National Negro Congress, and the Washington Committee of The National Women’s Trade Union League. The flyer pictured a woman named Mary Jackson and the back featured a synopsis of how her working experiences improved since she joined the Union.



In 1919, the West 137th street branch of the Y was established in Harlem to address the specific needs of Black women there. Its mission was to increase the employment stability of Black women by helping them “adjust problems of

personal appearance, dress, manners, health, social obligations, etc.” The membership of Harlem’s YWCA was mostly comprised of Black women who had migrated from the Southeast to seek employment as domestic workers. According to a study by the Harlem office, Black women were placed at a severe disadvantage in comparison with other racial groups.

When representatives from the employment department asked employers why they would not hire Black women, they responded with the following excuses: 1) all my friends have white maids; 2) I can get a German or Swedish girl for less money and they are more easily trained; 3) white girls don’t mind sleeping in, colored girls do; 4) the house I live in now does not permit colored help of any kind; 5) the elevator boys are colored and flirt with colored maids; 6) the other maid is white and I cannot mix them; 7) colored maids stay away on the slightest pretext are not reliable, clean, or honest; 8) my children are afraid of colored people.”³²³ Skin tone and age also proved to be a source of difficulty in finding employment for Black women. The same study reports that the majority of employers who called the YWCA office specifically requested “light-colored” and young women. Employers also openly advertised for “light-colored” women in local newspapers, including the *New York Times* and papers published in Brooklyn.³²⁴

³²³ Rosita E. Simmons, “A Brief Study of the Private, Non-Commercial Employment Agencies Operating in Harlem” Master’s Thesis. Columbia University, 1930: 14.

³²⁴ Simmons 17

Despite their many responsibilities, African American women pursued leadership positions within the YWCA to advocate for the labor rights of Black domestic workers. Dorothy Height, who joined the Y after working for the New York City Department of Welfare, was instrumental in bringing attention to the slave markets. After leaving the Department of Welfare, she became a case worker for the YWCA and assistant director of the Emma Ransom House. In 1938 Height provided critical testimony about the slave markets at New York City Council hearings in an effort to regulate the situation.³²⁵ Of course, the YWCA's role in helping Black migrant women in the North find employment was complicated by forms of racism practiced within the Association. Although thousands of women used the Association's services, the "Y" still did not reach the majority of Black women in New York. Most Black women secured employment by word of mouth. Therefore, many of those seeking jobs were still vulnerable to labor exploitation. Black leaders in the YWCA often complained to national officers that the Association did not adequately address Black women's labor issues and did not do enough to attract more Black members.

During World War I, the "Y" produced literature that emphasized the importance of granting Blacks political and economic rights. However, after the war the Association focused more on international labor issues and largely

³²⁵ Weisenfeld 181

abandoned the labor concerns of Black women. According to Weisenfeld, “While the YWCA used the moment of the war to include black women as Americans, the interwar period saw a retreat from this stance and, in many ways, an attempt to deny the presence of African American women in the organization...white leaders in the national YWCA retreated rather quickly from the wartime emphasis on the Americanness of African American women.”³²⁶

For many Black women, it was not until after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that their dreams for their children started to come true. By then, decades of activism including the efforts of Mary McCloud Bethune, Dorothy Height, and Ella Baker, helped provide more educational and employment opportunities for Black women outside of domestic service. However, activists such as Dorothy Lee Bolden did not consider this work done. She continued to fight for benefits and higher wages for poor and working class Black women who were relegated to domestic work from the 1960s until the late 1980s. It is important to note that there is little documentation of Irish women demanding rights within domestic service in this period because their daughters gained access to factory jobs and pink-collar professions while their male descendents gained access to positions within police and fire departments far earlier than Blacks.

³²⁶ Weisenfeld 153

Conclusion

The migration of Irish and southern African American women to the North was of great national concern. Black clubwomen, journalists, clergymen, employers, and scholars based in New York City and as far west as California were encouraged to weigh in on what had developed into a national discussion about Irish and African American women who worked in the homes of thousands of white American families. Both groups of women were placed in the center of growing preoccupation with how racial and class boundaries were going to be restructured after a period of unrest due to the Civil War and enormous economic growth in the North. The socioeconomic position of African Americans was captured by Anna Julia Cooper in 1899. She wrote, “As colored wage-earners, we are today under a double-disadvantage destined sorely to try our fitness to survive if it does not overwhelm us in the very start. In the midst of civilization the most brilliant on earth, in the very day of its ostentation and self-satisfaction, we are ‘let go’ to start from zero—nay, from a chasm infinitely below zero to build up our fortunes.”³²⁷

African American women’s migration to the North challenged racial and class hierarchies that existed prior to the Civil War as they sought to claim the fortunes that Cooper described. African American women asserted their right to access opportunities that resulted from the stimulated northern economy after

³²⁷ Anna Julia Cooper, “Colored wage-earners,” *The Southern Workman*, 1899: 297.

being denied access to the privileges of citizenship during slavery. Although some northern whites boasted about having progressive attitudes towards race relations in the United States, they used gendered and classed ideas of race to justify why Black women were not deserving of the North's economic promises. Some northern born African Americans developed similar perspectives about southern migrants to those of white northerners. They resisted acts of racism exhibited in the North, yet harbored conflicted views about Black southerners.

African American women were not migrating in isolation from other groups of women. They encountered ideas of race that were also being re-negotiated in relation to the waves of European immigrant women entering domestic service. Facing job competition, white American, German, Swedish, and Irish domestic servants wrote letters to local newspapers disparaging each other as the worst workers in the occupation. Ironically, these groups of women were also competing for jobs among U.S.-born "immigrants." Given racist sentiments articulated about newly emancipated Blacks, some employers still boasted that Black women were the most ideal servants. These employers thought of African American women's precarious position as those who were legally outside of the boundaries of citizenship as the perfect segment of the population to provide cheap domestic labor. Such ideas posed a threat to the economic stability of Irish domestic workers and they responded by using ideas of race to distance

themselves from African Americans, other groups of European immigrant women, and members of their own Irish community.

Female employers were not exempt from this racial formation process. Their racial and class status was intricately tied to the women who worked in their homes. Although female employers had access to racial and class privileges, both employer and employee were expected to perform the daily arduous demands of reproductive labor. Gendered discourses, which prescribed highly idealized “mothering” and “wifely” duties for women to perform in the domestic sphere, became increasingly entrenched in the lives of Americans and immigrants during the Industrial Revolution era of the late nineteenth century. The pervasiveness of racialized ideologies that were endemic to discourses of “mothering” as well as the close physical contact that domestic work required placed both female employers and workers in a precarious and nearly impossible position of attaining the ideals of “mothering.” Therefore, employers and workers continued to have contentious public and private conversations about which party was the cause of the highly debated domestic service problem.

Chapter Four

Who wants to be an “English mother”? Lessons from Irish and African American Domestic Workers

Letters submitted to local newspapers by employers and workers suggest that the ideology of “mothering” was another important factor that contributed to the tensions between them. Certain ideas about mothering re-surfaced during the era of industrialization and were shaped by the cult of domesticity and developing ideologies of race. Discourses of “mothering” crossed racial and ethnic lines, including the expectations that women should act as the primary caretakers of the household because their maternal instincts enable them to raise children better than men. Mothers were also to serve as self-less role models for their children by upholding the Christian moral of sexual chastity and cleanliness; keeping the house clean and safe and cook nutritious meals for their children; and providing a haven of relaxation for husbands who worked outside of home.³²⁸

Although these responsibilities were expected of women employers, who were generally the biological caregivers, the specific tasks and the expectations associated with them were often delegated instead to domestic servants. As Dill argues, “the domestic worker is, in some ways, an extension of the housewife. The housewife delegates some or all of her household and family maintenance

³²⁸ I refer to mothering as an idea because women are not born with the desire to care for the home. Such responsibilities are society’s expectations of what is proper for a woman to do in the home.

tasks to the worker in exchange for wages.”³²⁹ This situation resulted in the transference of “mothering” responsibilities from employers to domestic workers and the evaluation of those servants according to ideologies intended to describe the employers’ own performance. Thus, some housewives complained that their servants did not try to become a member of the family by caring for the household properly. If Irish and African American women were “bad” mothers because they were “careless” “dirty” and “wasteful,” then it was impossible for their employers to be “good mothers,” that is to adhere to dominant conceptions of mothering.

A comparative analysis of Irish and African American domestic workers using the framework of “mothering” reveals that it was impossible for these women to live up to dominant ideologies of “mothering” in late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban America. Intersecting and racialized ideas of class, gender, and sexuality made it difficult for domestic workers to meet their employers’ expectations, positioning them at the crux of contradictory ideas about “good” and “bad” mothers. According to Glenn, “The idea that the labor market is simultaneously segmented by race and gender, with different jobs being assigned to white men, white women, men of color, and women of color is familiar. The idea that domestic labor, including mothering or caring work, is

³²⁹ Dill 5

‘women’s work’ is also familiar. What may be less familiar is the idea that mothering is not just gendered, but also racialized.”³³⁰

I argue that examining domestic workers through the lens of discourses about “mothering” highlights new understandings about racialization and labor exploitation that continue to shape the experiences of women in domestic work today, particularly racial minority women. The expectation that servants adhere to the dominant ideology of “mothering” is one of the reasons why, for over two hundred years, employers have constantly failed in their search for the “best” domestic worker. Moreover, the tensions thus produced have created abusive working relationships for generations. Glenn explains, “Because mothering is often romanticized as a labor of love, issues of power are often deemed irrelevant or made invisible...mothering takes place in social contexts include unequal power relations between men and women, between dominant and subordinate racial groups, between colonized and colonizers. Thus, mothering cannot escape being an arena of political struggle.”³³¹

While feminist scholars have generally studied domestic work to examine the privileges of white middle class women, such studies can also reveal the limits of those privileges. The ideology of “mothering” created expectations on female employers as well as servants, including twenty-four hour devotion to the

³³⁰ Glenn 7

³³¹ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Forcey, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York: Routledge) 17.

household. It is the difficulty that both biological and hired “mothers” faced in fulfilling these expectations that helped generate anger, frustration, and resentment. This in turn contributed to volatile working conditions and relationships within households.³³² In addition, Dill explains, “The fact that the women had such an important and pivotal role in the development of the employer’s children and at the same time held a job in which they could be replaced gave the entire relationship of parent, child, and housekeeper a particularly intense quality.”³³³

Of course, ideologies that deemed African American and Irish women as alternately “good” and “bad” mothers were not simply formed within the neat geographical borders of New York. Ideas of mothering circulated throughout the Atlantic world. As Judith Rollins explains, the roots of American domestic service during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lie partly in England.³³⁴ Many female employers came from Anglo-American families who readily embraced British notions about race, mothering, and labor. Yet they did not simply impose these ideas on domestic workers, but absorbed expectations for themselves as well. The focus of this chapter involves tracing how contradictory and racialized discourses of “mothering” shaped tense relationships between domestic workers and their female employers.

³³² Glenn, Chang, Forcey 10

³³³ Dill 133

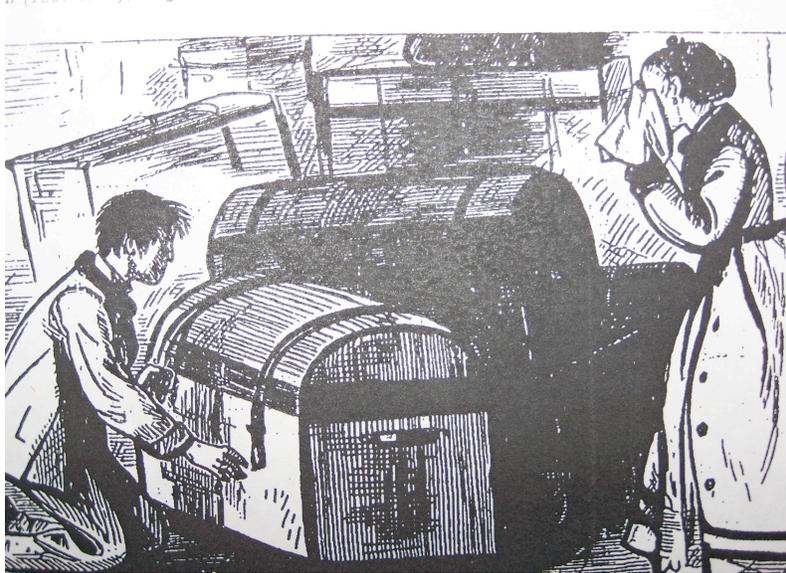
³³⁴ Rollins 24

Working Towards Both the Possibility and Impossibility of “Mothering”

Complaints that Irish women could not operate modern household technology informed employers’ concerns that they could not fulfill the “motherly” duty of caring for children. Lynch-Brennan notes that, “Bridget was very familiar to readers of popular American literature where, from the mid-nineteenth century on, in cartoons as well as text, her faults and foibles, in particular her ignorance of American housekeeping methods, were decried and derided.”³³⁵ Such ideas shaped employers’ conceptions of Irish women as “bad” mothers. The image below of a woman looking frantically through a pile of luggage at a dock appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar* and is entitled “That Servant Again.” The caption reads: “Oh, Tom, what do you think? That horrid Bridget has just told me that as she could not find the Cradle, she put the Baby to sleep in one of the Trunks, and I’m afraid it’s in the lot that went on in the First Load, and that little Tootsy has been checked through to Saratoga.” The illustration presents the Irish domestic worker as incapable of caring for a small child because she lacked the intellectual capability of distinguishing between a trunk and a cradle. Since the cradle was a new invention at the time, the image also suggests that Irish women were once again incapable of adopting modern domestic technologies.³³⁶

³³⁵ Lynch-Brennan 489

³³⁶ “That Servant Again,” *Harper’s Bazaar*. August 15, 1874, pg. 536



Complaints that Irish women could not operate modern appliances converged with anti-Catholic sentiments articulated by mostly Protestant employers. One employer wrote to the *Brooklyn Eagle* that an Irish woman she employed, “...would cook breakfast Sunday morning, with one eye on the clock, and let everything spoil, while she got ready for mass. She left at 8:30 and showed up at 11 a.m. I couldn’t go to church. Someone had to do up the work and start dinner.”³³⁷ Employers’ perceptions of Irish women as “lazy” Catholic worshippers informed ideas that Irish women were also “dirty.” Such perceptions, which positioned Irish women as incapable of caring for themselves, much less their employers’ children, are reflected in the image below. The caption

³³⁷ The Brooklyn Eagle 12 March 1897.

reads, “Mother: ‘Gracious, Bridget, haven’t you got the baby washed yet?’

Bridget: ‘Yes, mum.’ Mother: ‘Then, what in the world are you doing? Bridget:

“Oim a wiping; of him, mum.”³³⁸



The belief that Irish women were incapable of “mothering” was also partly rooted in the perception that female employers were the “mothers” of the newcomers from Ireland, which in turn positioned domestic workers in a child-like relationship to their employers. According to an editorial in *The New York Times*: “Many of our ladies, also, do not understand the proper mode of managing a European peasant, who, in nine cases out of ten, is the ‘help.’ The Irish peasantry make capital servants, but they are to be treated, not as equals not again as slaves or animals, but rather as children. An Irish peasant girl easily takes a

³³⁸ Harper’s Bazaar 17 Jul 1886.

position as a child under a cultivated American mistress.”³³⁹ This subordinate positioning of Irish women made it difficult for them to occupy the supervisory role that the ideology of mothering requires.

Interestingly, complaints about Irish domestic workers in New York echoed those of employers in England. Housewives in both places created organizations to address what they considered to be the domestic service problem. In 1825 a group formed the Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants in New-York, which was modeled after a similarly named society in London. The Society hoped to increase the quantity and quality of servants by offering financial premiums and Bibles to women who worked for the same employer for more than a year. The Society did not charge servants fees for registration or placement.

Yet, such associations did not preclude housewives in London and New York from complaining about the declining quality of servants.³⁴⁰ The vast majority of Irish servants in both the U.S. and England were concentrated in the lowest categories of general servant and maid of all work, rather than in positions that brought them into closer physical contact with the children and their female employers such as lady’s maid or parlourmaid.³⁴¹ Irish women were considered to have strong immoral proclivities that could influence these most “fragile”

³³⁹ “Servants,” The New York Times 20 Sep 1874.

³⁴⁰ Katzman 225

³⁴¹ Walter 145

members of the family if precautions were not taken to establish social and physical distance between the parties.

Author of Our Jemimas articulates this fear when he blames Bridget Hanlan for spreading “a great deal of minor wickedness” throughout his home and causing Susan, an English woman he had also hired, to soon “operate towards a manifest destruction of Bridget’s morals.” The author continues to explain why some Irish women were also prohibited from coming into close contact with the children of employers. He asserts that under Bridget’s care, “the children were neglected, taught to lie audaciously to conceal faults, were spoilt in every conceivable way, and became possessed of the added disadvantage—a very lesser one, I freely admit—of speaking with the rich rough brogue which distinguished Miss Hanlan’s utterances.”³⁴²

Ideas of Irish women as “bad” mothers that were circulating in the United States were further reinforced by the financial status of most New York employers. Unlike their British counterparts, most employers in New York City could afford to hire only one or two servants. A cadre of servants were generally hired in England and employed in American homes outside of the city limits of New York City. Thus, employers within the city limits had few options but to allow the Irish women they employed to come into close contact with their children. Ironically, however, the inferior racial, class, and immigrant status of

³⁴² *Our Jemimas* 60-61

Irish women also made them ideal “mothers” for American homes. Some employers claimed that Irish women were content with low wages and living in the homes where they worked, thereby allowing employers to command their labor twenty four hours a day. The increasing availability of “cheap” Irish labor and the reluctance of some employers to hire Black women informed some perceptions that the most qualified “mothers” hailed from Ireland.

Some U.S. employers thought Irish women were such good workers that they argued for higher wages on their behalf. In 1888, an employer wrote a letter to the *Brooklyn Eagle* asking others to raise Irish women’s wages. She claims, “Harriet Beecher Stowe, in ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ immortalized the negro ‘Mammy,’ who watched over little Eva from babyhood to womanhood, but the faithful Bridget, whose tender care has endeared her [to] households, needs not the eulogy of a novelist to establish her unclaimed right to be remembered for her motherly devotion to the children of her mistress.”³⁴³

It was not difficult to conceive Irish women as better “mothers,” especially in comparison to southern Black women. By the time Irish women arrived in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the southerners had been positioned at the crux of representations that deemed them as both “bad” and “good” mothers since the early nineteenth century. According to Deborah Gray White, “One of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was of a person

³⁴³ “The Servant Girl Question,” *Brooklyn Eagle* 18 Mar 1888.

governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character...She did not lead men and children to God...She saw no advantage in prudery, indeed domesticity paled in importance before matters of the flesh.”³⁴⁴

Such ideas derived from the first encounters between European colonists and Africans. The Englishmen “mistook semi-nudity” and practices of polygamy for “lewdness” and “uncontrollable lust.” These racist scientific claims served the colonial interests of slaveholders who wanted Black women to provide future laborers through constant reproduction. According to Angela Davis, “Ideological exaltation of motherhood—as popular as it was during the nineteenth century—did not extend to slaves. In fact, in the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force.”³⁴⁵

Facing increasing criticism from northerners about slavery, southerners created a more positive image of Black women to defend their institution. Southerners argued that “Mammy” was a clear example of how slavery benefitted both blacks and whites. “Mammy” was a loyal servant, hard worker, helped the wives of slaveholders maintain moral and ethnical standards in the home, and devoted twenty-four hour attention to the needs of the children. White explains, “She [Mammy] was a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of the family...She served also as friend and advisor.

³⁴⁴ White 29

³⁴⁵ Davis 7

She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother.”³⁴⁶ Representations of the Mammy and Jezebel continued to shape northern perceptions of Black women after slavery and informed employers’ beliefs that the southern women could be “good” or “bad” mothers.

Yet, when African American women began migrating to the North in record numbers during the late nineteenth century characterizations of Irish and Black women fluctuated. Charles Loring Brace, a missionary and founder of the Children’s Aid Society, spoke candidly about what he considered to be the shortcomings of Irish women as mothers for their own children. He argued that Irish children committed more crimes in the city of New York than children of other ethnicities because most Irish women were single parents. According to Brace, Irish men exercised forms of what he called “Free Love doctrines,” or having sexual relationships with women outside of marriage, which often resulted in Irish men leaving their families.

Irish women, Brace continues, “begin the heavy struggle of maintaining her little family herself. The boys get beyond her control...they become wild and vagrant, and soon end with being street-rovers, or petty thieves, or young criminals. The girls are trained in begging or peddling, and, meeting with bold company, they gradually learn the manners and morals of the streets, and after a while abandon the wretched home, and break what was left of the poor mother’s

³⁴⁶ White 49

hope and courage, by beginning a life of shame. This sad history is lived out every day in New York.”³⁴⁷ Hegemonic beliefs that Irish men were drunks and sexually promiscuous, defied the structure of the nuclear family, which also contributed to images of Irish women as single parents who were unable to manage their children. Such ideas certainly helped to shape employers’ perceptions that Irish women were “unfit” mothers for their own children.

The arduous labor that household service required made it difficult for Irish women to be ideal “mothers.” It would have been reasonable to assume that servants could not perform daily household tasks without errors considering the fatigue that might have resulted from performing such labor. “Mothering” was hard, back-breaking work. Servants who lived in their employers’ homes were often assigned to the most uncomfortable living quarters. If more than one servant was employed in a house, it was not uncommon for them to sleep in the same bed in the attic. The attic usually had no windows for light or ventilation and it was mostly cold during the winters and hot during the summers. Some women worked in tall houses and would have to walk up and down four flights of stairs several times a day to reach the kitchen and serve the family. They would be required to carry trays, clothes, and other household items that sometimes weighed over twenty pounds up and down the stairs. Preparing meals could be an ordeal in itself.

³⁴⁷ Brace 42

Many courses were made from scratch, and servants sometimes had to prepare essentials ingredients such as butter and bread.³⁴⁸ The most arduous labor was performed by women who worked alone as maid-of-all work. The occupation could also be very lonely. Some servants came to the United States as young women without friends and family to meet them in a new country. They often had to work for families they met for the first time upon arrival. Even servants who had relatives in the city had to adhere to visitation restrictions set by their employers, and it was unlikely that they could entertain their own guests. Southern Black women found themselves in a similar predicament when they reached the North after emancipation.

Caring for children, in particular, added more arduous labor expectations to the general requirements of general housework, which deterred some women from working for employers with children. A late nineteenth century article in *The New York Times* explains the duties of childcare:

Pretty thorough observation will convince one that no servant thinks a family with a baby is small. A baby in a house may be a well spring of pleasure and all that sort of thing. But it is a terror to 'help.' Their principal objection to it is he additional washing it imposes. American mothers may be slatternly, but they will have their babies' gowns and dresses and 'skirts' washed and ironed to exquisite nicety. It is a plain, somewhat deplorable fact that the birth of a baby directly diminishes a housekeeper's chances to get good servants...Hence it is that childless couples are about the only ones with whom servants for general housework hire.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁸ Mary Knapp and Eva Ulz, Curators of the "Irish Servants' Living Quarters" Museum, Conversation with author, 6 June 2009.

³⁴⁹ "Domestic Servants," *The New York Times* 7 Jul 1872.

The demand for African American women in the North insinuates that although some employers praised Irish women as “good” mothers, they were still widely perceived as inadequate. A newspaper report posted by the *Brooklyn Eagle* reads: “The great demand for reliable servant girls in this section of the country has led to another scheme for the relief of housekeepers. It is now proposed to bring a large number of colored girls from the Southern States to the North.” Apparently, some employers were not content with Irish immigrant women who dominated domestic work in New York and were looking toward employing African American women.

Despite the expectations of anxious employers, ideas of blackness that developed under English colonialism followed African American women to New York. Some employers in the North wanted to hire southern Black women because images of “mammy” shaped their perception of them as loyal “mothers.” A New York employer asserts, “In the not universal quality of kindness to children, they are simply excellent by the laws of their gentle, cheerful, grateful natures. These colored people, for the present at least take pride in considering the household their family.”³⁵⁰

³⁵⁰ Domestic Servants,” The New York Times, 7 Jul 1872.

Yet even when African American women were in high demand among employers, they were still often criticized as “bad” mothers. Ideas of race and sexuality that deemed African American women hypersexual during slavery remained vibrant and informed how African American women were perceived as mothers in the North. Domestic service training schools were created in northern cities by both white employers and middle class African American reformers to train black women for domestic service jobs. Similar to middle class women in England who created domestic service training schools for poor English girls, middle class African American and White women thought the schools would help rescue black female migrants from their innate sexual temptations and educate them in skills and technologies necessary to respectable (if low paying) employment. Similar to Irish peasant women, rural African American women were considered incapable of maintaining a modernized household. Therefore, organizations in New York such as the Young Women’s Christian Association created domestic service training courses in Harlem for African American women.

While these schools demonstrate efforts to train African American women on how to become “good” mothers, the assumption that they needed to be trained suggests that they were inherently “bad” mothers. After all, knowing how to manage the household is supposedly an innate female characteristic. Yet, even African American women with training did not prevent employers from painting

them as “bad” mothers. An employer wrote to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, “I am going to part with my colored maid, and will bear in mind for the future that my system of training is not infallible, if it did take me thirty years to make the discovery.”³⁵¹

In addition, northern employers’ complaints about Black women stemmed from their dissatisfaction with how Black women transformed domestic service from a live-in to a live-out occupation. Many immigrant groups who dominated domestic service prior to the northern migration of Black women preferred to live with their employers. Live-in domestic work provided lodging, food, and an opportunity to save money to send back to their family members back in Europe. Considering the history of slavery in the United States, which required enslaved Black women to work as domestic servants in the households of slaveholders, southern Black women insisted on having a separate home from their employers.

Black women did not want to be at the beck and call of their employers twenty-four hours a day and preferred to develop a life outside of work. According to Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, southern Black women in Washington D.C. made the same demands. She states, “These women brought to Washington D.C., parcels of the South, both literal and figurative, in their ‘freedom bags’—the small suitcases they brought from the rural South. In time, however, their urban experiences caused them to modify many of their southern ideas and values. And they developed the determination to transform a master-servant relationship into

³⁵¹ “Training of Servant Girls,” *Brooklyn Eagle* 18 Mar 1900.

an employer-employee relationship,³⁵² in an effort to establish their status as wage laborers and not slaves.

The insistence of Black women to “live-out” confirmed for some employers that they were bad “mothers”. The ideology of mothering required women to devote themselves eternally to the maintenance of the home. Black women could not exercise this commitment if they had their own lives outside of the “home.” In addition, Black women’s concerted effort to transform the “master-servant relationship” of slavery disrupted ideas of Black women in the North as the southern mammy who sacrificed her personal life to perform the reproductive labor of white families. Black women devised other strategies to create an employer-employee relationship by negotiating with their employers for increased wages, lessened workloads, and vacation and sick time. Such demands challenged ideologies of mothering which deemed caring for the home as a responsibility that should be performed irrespective of compensation. Black women’s demand for adequate compensation for their labor introduced the reality that “mothering” was a job similar to the work performed by males in the public sphere. It also challenged the women’s intimacy with the children by suggesting that there was an end to the daily demands of mothering.

³⁵² Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living in, Living out: African American domestics in Washington D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994) 5.

The increasing demand for better working conditions is reflected in “Situations Wanted” ads placed by Black women in the *New York Times*. Some of ads read: “Experienced colored girl, wishes light housework, mornings, afternoons;” “Young Girl, colored, light housework;” and “Couple, colored, Southern, butler and cook, first class, want position with private family; 15 years experience.”³⁵³ To the dismay of some employers, establishing parameters required that employers respect Black women as professional workers, which inevitably defied some deep rooted beliefs about the lower-status of Black women.

It was also difficult for Black women to adhere to the ideals of “mothering” in caring for their own children since the demanding requirements of domestic service often meant that the laborers were absent from their own homes for long periods of time. Yet, children of the southern migrants remember how their mothers still made sure they were well taken care of. Vanessa Spear recalls that her mother provided a stable home life. In addition to working as a housekeeper Spear’s mother also accepted a job at a local shoe factory to provide resources for the home. Spear recalls, “The whole thing [domestic work] was financial. And then she had a kid to send to school. Even though I went to public school, she still had to feed me, clothe me, and send me to the dentist. We didn’t have health insurance like we have today.” Spear always had food, shelter, and a support network of friends and family in Harlem. She remembers having the

³⁵³ “Classified Ad 14” *The New York Times* 13 Jan 1924; 9 May 1924.

necessities while growing up and receiving parental instruction that prevented her from getting into trouble with the law.

Spears evokes memories of her daily routine: “I had my house key on a string around my neck. I came home from school. I changed my clothes did what I had to do for chores. I did my homework and then I could go out but I couldn’t have company. If someone saw me out in the streets when I wasn’t supposed to be out in the streets a neighbor in the building would grab you and say, ‘Your mother’s at work. I know she told you that you can’t have no company in this house.’ So, you didn’t do it.” Through this personal account, Spears describes a concept Evelyn Nakano Glenn refers to as “shared mothering.” According to the historical sociologist, “Shared mothering has been a characteristic of African American communities since slavery...caring for kin is shared among male and female adults, elders, and children.”³⁵⁴ Black women performed “shared mothering” by creating support networks through churches, family members, and friendships with neighbors to help provide care for their own children.

Black women also developed esteemed roles in their communities for “mothering” children that were not their own. Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Black women received respect and recognition within their local communities for innovative and practical approaches not only to mothering their own ‘blood’ children, but also to being other mothers to the children in their extended family

³⁵⁴ Glenn, Forcey, Chang 6

networks, and those in the community overall...³⁵⁵ Dr. Vincent Harding recalls that his mother, who migrated from Barbados to New York during World War I, often worked long hours as a household worker and was rarely at home when he arrived from school. “I think that for a period of time in my elementary school days I was what they call a door key child. I think that her schedule was such that she was always there when I left the house for school. But, often I remember she was not there when I came back and I had to let myself in.” This arrangement often contributed to hegemonic beliefs that Black women were incapable of mothering. Dill asserts, “Children with keys around their necks and the mothers who left home to earn wages in factories and private households were thought to be a major contributing factor to juvenile delinquency.”³⁵⁶

Contrary to these assumptions, many Black children learned respected values in their communities through the support networks their mothers created. Despite her long hours away from home, Dr. Vincent Harding attests that his mother always made sure that the family had a support network. His earliest memories were of living in a building on East 130th Street. His mother became a member of a small congregation that met on the main floor of the building. He attended some of the services and developed friendships with children in the neighborhood. He has fond memories of playing games in the street with his

³⁵⁵ Collins 56

³⁵⁶ Dill 122

friends. As he put it, “That was a very important part of community for me.” One day while Harding was in school, someone broke into the apartment. His mother became frightened and concerned about his safety so thereby decided to move to the Bronx. After moving from the building on East 130th Street to Dawson Street, his mother became a member of Victory Tabernacle Church, which became a permanent community and support network for them. He and his mother felt “at home” in the church. They shared cultural experiences with the congregation members who were mostly southern Black migrants and migrants from the Caribbean, and his mother volunteered to be an usher and deaconess. Dr. Harding also adjusted well to the new neighborhood. As he remembers, “I was almost always out in the streets playing stick ball and playing marbles.” His mother also managed to support him through his educational endeavors. She was always present for his school programs and took on extra laundry work to help him pay for college. Spear’s mother also stressed the importance of education. She recalls, “She used to tell me when I was young: ‘I don’t want to have to get up off these Jews’ floors to come to your school for any foolishness.’ That’s exactly what my mother used to say (laughing).”

Some descendants of domestic workers expressed resistance to the “mothering” demands of domestic service. Sharon Robinson was raised in Harlem where her maternal grandmother “Hammie” worked as a domestic servant. However, she remembers travelling to South Carolina annually as a young child

and adolescent to visit her paternal “Grandma Lilly.” Lilly worked as a laundress cleaning and ironing the clothes of white families in her neighborhood. Robinson resented that her grandmother would work hard to clean the families’ laundry and was still never allowed to return the laundry at the employers’ front door. One day “Grandma Lilly” asked Robinson to clean and iron a family’s laundry and drop it off to them. That day marked the last time her grandmother would ever ask her to help with the laundry again. Robinson recalls:

You would pick up the laundry basket from the back door take it home wash and clean it, and then take it back. I remember an instance there where grandmother had me washing and ironing clothes...I recall grandmother telling me to take the basket of clothing to the woman down the road I rang the front doorbell did not ring the back. The woman looked at me in horror and told me to go in the back. She called my grandmother to tell her that I was rude and disrespectful. My grandmother said because I was from the North I was very sassy. But I just couldn’t [ring the back door bell]. It was a hard pill to swallow.³⁵⁷

While serving women such as Sharon Robinson’s grandmother experienced blatant forms of discrimination, housewives found themselves in a complex predicament as well. No doubt the anxiety over what female employers perceived as the domestic servant problem was rooted in the social pressure they felt to adhere to ideals of “mothering” that demanded more than they or their servants could provide.

³⁵⁷ Sharon Robinson, Interview by author, 7 Jul 2009

Female Employers

An article written by Christine Herrick, a writer for *Harper's Bazaar*, suggests that the idea of housewives as “bad” mothers was part of public discussions regarding the domestic service problem. Herrick blamed housewives for mismanagement of the home, especially in relation to children by implying that female slaveholders were better mothers than northern housewives. She states, “In the ante-bellum days the well-brought-up children of conscientious slave-owners were forbidden to speak rudely to the negro servants. That principle has apparently fallen into disuse.” According to Herrick, housewives were unjustifiably blaming domestic servants for mismanagement of the home and children. Raising the children was supposed to be the primary responsibility of the biological mothers and it was not the servants’ fault if the children were not being raised in a proper manner. Herrick concludes with the following suggestion to housewives, “...if a few severe penalties met a child’s rudeness or impertinence to a servant, the lives of the white slaves of the nurseries would be robbed of one of their most unpleasant features.”³⁵⁸

Many middle class women in particular were in a precarious position as they inhabited a social rank that was closer to their employees than wealthy employers. Such close proximity served as a source of tension between servants and employers. According to Katzman, “The servant problem was a middle-class

³⁵⁸ Christine Terhune Herrick, “Children and Servants,” *Harper's Bazaar* Jun 1904

one, since the upper class could always command the hire of whatever servants they needed.”³⁵⁹ In addition, rapid urbanization and industrialization that began in the Post- Civil War years expanded the middle class, but periodic recessions made their status uncertain. While Irish and Black women were hired as servants in the North prior to industrialization, many families hired white American women as servants on small farms. As industrialization progressed, the middle class expanded thereby increasing the number of female employers who might have served as farm servants in the earlier nineteenth century.

The relatively small separation between middle class female employers and the women who worked in their homes might have encouraged employers to distance themselves from domestic workers by complaining about their services. In addition, middle class women exercised their maternal responsibilities by managing domestic servants, yet they were considered “bad” mothers if their servants failed to fulfill the dominant ideals. An anonymous employer bragged to the *Brooklyn Eagle* and its readers about how she effectively manages both Irish and “colored” women. She wrote, “I always have every detail of my housekeeping in my mind, anticipating and preparing for each day’s work as it comes...I try never to forget that first of all, I am a home keeper and a housekeeper, and the pivot around which all the domestic machinery revolves.”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Katzman 223

³⁶⁰ “Servant Girl Question” *Brooklyn Eagle* 16 Mar 1897

The author claims that women employers are often responsible for managing the alleged shortcomings of these servants. Her use of the term “domestic machinery” points to industrialization as one source of tension between employers and domestic workers. As Lynch-Brennan argues, “American housewives were learning about home appliances at the same time as domestic workers, which made some employers insecure in managing servants. In addition, employers were concerned about the declining quantity of women in domestic service since the presence of domestic workers defined a properly organized household.

At the same time, housewives wrote to newspapers criticizing domestic workers to explain what they considered to be their own failure as “mothers” or household managers. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the middle class was striving to make clearer distinctions between itself and the poor as a way to stabilize and confirm their identities in a newly industrialized country. The absence of a domestic worker in the household threatened a wife’s respectability and middle class status because she was faced with the possibility of having to perform arduous manual labor herself. Moreover, some servants began using notions of domesticity to evaluate their employers. One Irish woman wrote to the *Brooklyn Eagle*, “The mingled inefficient and extortion on the part of the servants, of which all housekeepers in this country, and particularly in this city, are constantly complaining, is the neglect, and the extravagance of

housekeepers themselves. Bad masters and bad mistresses are sure to make bad servants, although good servants never made good masters or mistresses.”³⁶¹

This servant suggests that workers themselves held their employers to certain ideals of “mothering.” She implies that female employers were more responsible for the household than domestic workers, stating, “Bad masters and bad mistresses are sure to make bad servants, although good servants never made good masters or mistresses.” She thus captures a contradiction embedded in the ideology of mothering: as “ladies,” middle class women were not supposed to perform the arduous manual labor of housework, yet they were still responsible for the organization of the household. This contradiction created ongoing tension between domestic workers and their employers.

Clearly ideals of “mothering” and “lady hood” relieved employers of domestic drudgery yet still tied them to the home and created expectations among domestic workers that their employers actually work. Thus, servants complained when employers failed to contribute their labor to the household. An African American woman named Marla Brinson worked as a domestic worker for over forty years highlights this particular tension. She remembers, “My cousin [Mary] was working for these people, the Adams. The Adams were rich people...and they acted like Mary was some kind of slave or something...washing and ironing and getting children’s stuff ready for school... And she talked to Mary like she

³⁶¹ “Servant Girl Question” Brooklyn Eagle 16 Mar 1897

was a child...then she had the nerve to tell Mary how to raise her two girls.”³⁶²

Ms. Brinson criticized this employer because Mary did not only have her own children, but she was also a “mother” to the children of her employer. That Mary’s employer had the audacity to tell Mary how to raise her own two girls was appalling to Ms. Brinson since she did not have her own. Her story suggests that in some cases it was a problem when employers attempted to “mother” their employees while placing their own children under that same servant’s care.

Interviews with Irish immigrant women who came through Ellis Island highlight class status as a factor that shaped workers’ perceptions of their employers as “good” or “bad” mothers. Ellen Brady worked for a wealthy woman who employed over fifty domestic workers on an estate in upstate New York. Ms. Brady’s employer along with other employers in the neighborhood organized a Servants’ Ball for the workers in the winter. Brady remembers, “They supplied cars for you. They threw a party for the help once a year...Oh, it was beautiful. The help from different---families, different estates...Oh, you’d dance, and eat, and you’d sing. It’s just like a party for young or old people.”³⁶³ Throughout the interview Ms. Brady constantly complemented her employer for treating the workers well and highlighted the Servants’ Ball as an example of how well they were treated.

³⁶² Marla Brinson, Interview by author, 3 Apr 2002

³⁶³ Ellen Brady, Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview, 19 Sep 1985

Ms Brady explicitly highlighted social class as a factor that shaped her impression of wealthy employers. She recalls, “You’d be surprised. Well, in the first place, they never look down on you like you’re beneath them. They treat you like a human being, let’s put it that way. I know a girl who worked for a family here, and that was the nicest—they were on Lexington Avenue—nicest people in the world... Those people, I mean, you’d never know that they have money. You know what I mean?” Sarah Brown, an African American woman also had relatively fond memories of working for a wealthy family because they trained her to become a book keeper for her male employer. She described her bookkeeping responsibilities with pride indicating that she liked not always being responsible for cleaning and cooking and enjoyed the responsibility of having “professional” duties.

Letters submitted by workers to the *Brooklyn Eagle* suggest that less affluent employers were more likely to be criticized by employees and the general public alike. Lower middle class employers were particularly targeted as “bad” mothers. An anonymous reporter for the *Brooklyn Eagle* argues:

I have often thought it a strange peculiarity on the part of thrifty American housewives that they prefer to keep a girl and do the family washing at home rather than put the washing out and do without [the] girl. Without the washing and without a servant the work is comparatively easy, and in living this way, if the wife so pleases, she can make her home a paradise and keep down expenses greatly...³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ “Of Interest to Women” *Brooklyn Eagle* 1889.

Housewives who employed workers they could not afford, the reporter suggests, were “bad” mothers who wasted family resources. Moreover, employing domestic workers prevented a wife from performing the motherly duty of “making her home a paradise.” An Irish servant echoed the sentiments of the reporter in a letter she sent to the *Brooklyn Eagle* by responding to a letter written by an employed named “C.O.P.” The servant wrote:

I pity the poor, innocent Irish girls who meet with such as ‘C.O.P.’ I don’t consider her a lady. I guess ‘C.O.P.’s’ girl must have been starved when she too the bread. I hope she did not eat the soap. ‘C.O.P.’ is more of a servant herself than the lady help that worked for her. I guess ‘C.O.P.’ is one of those ladies who pay \$5 a month and expect everything done first class...I have lived with a lady who always stole my shoe blacking to polish her shoes with. She would not give me a cake of soap in my room. She said she could not afford it.—A Brave Irish Girl³⁶⁵

“Brave Irish Girl’s” letter explains that some housewives simply could not afford to provide adequate wages yet still insisted on employing domestic workers. Irish women expected basic wages and lodging accommodations that some employers could not provide. The letter also highlights that there was sometimes a thin line separating the class status of employers and employees when she highlights the example of her employer taking her shoe polish. Similar situations must have encouraged servants to not think so highly of their employers. As “Brave Irish Girl” put it in the same letter, “she [the employer] was more suitable for the kitchen than I was. I don’t consider any housekeeper a lady

³⁶⁵ “Hopes ‘C.O.P.’s’ Girl Did Not Eat the Soap,” *The Brooklyn Eagle* 12 March 1897.

that is all the time in the kitchen counting the eggs and the fruit.” The letter hit at the heart of “C.O.P.’s” role as a housewife thereby causing her to respond angrily to the “Brave Irish Girl’s” letter. C.O.P. responded, “I think that the girl that wrote to ‘C.O.P.’ as she did in last night’s Eagle should beg her pardon, as she has made a very grave mistake.”³⁶⁶

An article published by *Harper’s Bazaar* suggests that the “Brave Irish Girl’s” claim that “C.O.P.” must not have had an adequate supply of food directly challenged the status of “C.O.P” as a “good” mother or household manager. The writer argues, “The excellent manager has preserves and pickles in her cupboard, and cold meat in her pantry... We all know houses in which, when meal is over, the cupboard, like Mother Hubbard’s, is bare of even a bone. Nothing can be had until the next meal comes around. The management of the commissariat is poor... Maids come and go. They resent reproof, and never identify themselves with the family. It is all because of bad management.”³⁶⁷

Food supply continued to be a measure of a properly managed household well into the 1920s. Canned food was an invention that accompanied the advancement of industrialization. A housewife was considered of “sufficient means” when she purchased canned fruits, vegetables, and ready made meals including spaghetti in meat sauce. The developing class standards also required

³⁶⁶ “C.O.P. Justifies Her Position,” *The Brooklyn Eagle* 11 Mar 1897.

³⁶⁷ “Good Management,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 23 Jun 1900.

housewives to purchase boxed foods including cold breakfast cereals, pancake mixes, and packaged desserts were also emerging on the market. It was generally perceived by the public that purchasing these more efficient forms of food preservation marked a modern and well-managed household.³⁶⁸

Clark-Lewis concludes from her study of Black domestic workers in Washington D.C. that domestic workers used class status to evaluate whether or not they had “good” employers. According to her, “‘Good’ was determined by the employer’s social status as well as by the quality of the work...migrants to Washington were taught that high-status or prestigious employers were better employers.”³⁶⁹ Household workers believed that wealthy employers were kinder and could ensure future employment for the relatives of their employees. Elite employers could also afford to pay workers promptly and could offer paid sick time and vacations. Lastly, workers believed higher-status employers had prior experience employing household workers thereby making them less likely to belittle the employees.

Complaints about middle class housewives among the general public were prevalent and journalists began to publish articles urging housewives to perform their own housework. Christine Herrick, a writer for *Harper’s Bazaar*, wrote, “The woman who does her own work has this great boon—she is not dependent

³⁶⁸ Ruth Schwartz Conan, *The ‘Industrial Revolution’ in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 8.

³⁶⁹ Clark-Lewis 100

upon the moods and tenses of servants...She is a good housekeeper and thrifty, for she has to consider the dollars-and-cents question very carefully. But she feels that she is of more importance than rules and regulations laid down for the use of those who have servants at their command, and she rules her own home in accordance with her theories.”³⁷⁰ National and local New York organizations built domestic service training schools for housewives in the early decades of the twentieth century to train housewives how to perform housework.

The widespread erection of training schools for housewives suggest that what was perceived to be the declining quality and quantity of domestic workers was tied to the perceptions that housewives failed to fulfill their roles as mothers, or managers of household work. The photograph below is an image of the Dorcas Boardman School established in New York City in 1935. The purpose of the school was to instruct housewives how to perform household duties such as kitchen and pantry organizing, garnishing and carving foods, how to make a bed, and how to iron clothes. According to the school, “...Scientific Housekeeping realized that while it was sending perfectly trained servants into the world, there was an astonishing lack of training among employers, a fact that undoubtedly contributed to making servant troubles as frequent a topic of conversation as health, wealth, or offspring.”³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Christine Herrick, “Home Dinners Without a Servant,” Harper’s Bazaar Dec 1906.

³⁷¹ “School for brides” Kensight 15 Jun 1939: 17.



The photograph of the students at the Boardman School illustrates the occasional ambiguous distinction between the roles of domestic workers and women employers. The housewives were required to wear a service uniform at the school that was similar to the clothing some domestic workers were expected to wear in the homes in which they worked. Housewives were also taught how to perform daily maintenance tasks in the home such as ironing, cooking, and cleaning. The caption for the photograph reads: "...the mistress of the house should know as much about household work as her servants." The photograph below shows students enrolled in a course entitled "Elimination of the Domestic

Service Problem,” which instructed housewives on how to “Interview and Engage a Maid,” “Direct and Correct a Maid,” “Develop Character and Efficiency in a Maid,” and “Develop Household Morale.”³⁷²



Housewives were also the center of complaints regarding the domestic service problem in England. Violet M. Firth in *The Psychology of the Servant Problem: A Study in Social Relationships* asserts, “The chief cause of the inefficiency of domestic servants is, in my opinion, the badness of the training

³⁷² “School for brides,” *Kensight* 23.

they receive. And who is responsible for this defect but the mistress themselves? The great majority of domestic servants learn their work from their mistresses...but in how many cases is any serious attempt made to train a girl? How many mistresses nowadays are capable of giving proper training? Has not the standard of housewife's accomplishments fallen off just as much as the servants'?"³⁷³ Similar complaints of housewives circulating in both the United States and England suggest that there might have been a movement of such ideas between the two countries. The complaints also point to ways in which the particular expectations of domestic labor on behalf of both employers and employees coalesces with ideas of femininity and lends itself to feelings of frustration as both sides were pressured to be the ideal mother.³⁷⁴

The blurred line between servants and employers was also reflected in organizations that created professional domestic service programs. In 1930 the Jewish Social Service Association partnered with the Children's Aid Society to create "The Travelling Mothers," a welfare service for the state of New York. Experienced domestic workers were sent to care for children in homes where the biological mother was severely ill or deceased. The decision of the social service association to refer to household workers as "mothers" points to the

³⁷³ Violet M. Firth, *The Psychology of the Servant Problem: A Study in Social Relationships* (London: C.W. Daniel Company, 1925) 3.

³⁷⁴ Both photographs are courtesy of the labor archives at Cornell University.

interchangeability of their roles with the biological mothers. Ann Goodrich, a writer for the *New York Times*, describes the workers and the job:

Their job involves more than attending to just the physical well-being of the apartment, in the sense of house-cleaning; more than keeping the children clean and fed, and stressing nutritional values; more than practical nursing care; it means the synthesis of all the qualities and values that go into the meaning of 'Home.' They are middle-aged women who have had husbands and children of their own, and who have tact resourcefulness and knowledge that cannot be learned in books."³⁷⁵

Emphasis on the worker's instinctive and experienced skills as mothers highlights that the idea of "mothering" was still in play in the late 1930s. With the advance of industrialization and urbanization, employers no longer had to rely on references to hire household workers. "Mothering" became a commodity that could be transported to various homes through professional services offered by the State. Services such as "The Travelling Mothers" and domestic training schools for housewives suggest that household workers and housewives were sometimes interchangeable.

The physical space of many New York homes might have also contributed to the tension between workers and employers. Employers might have considered it especially necessary to distinguish themselves from workers as many of them worked in close quarters with servants. Dudden argues:

³⁷⁵ Ann Goodrich, "Travelling Mothers Keep Distressed Homes Intact," *The New York Times* 16 Apr 1939.

By mid [nineteenth] century changing domestic architecture reflected the sense that domestics should inhabit areas of the home where all the work was to be performed, while the family lived in other areas designed for display, comfort, intimacy, even study, not for housework...fashionable brownstones provides a good example of housing designed for domestics, with its kitchen in the basement, an uninhabited company parlor on the first floor, family living and dining rooms on the second floor, and bedrooms above.³⁷⁶

The expansive space of some homes allowed this type of architectural division to maintain race and class boundaries between employers and the employed. However, many employers in New York were middle-class and lived in smaller homes that could not be divided in the manner that Dudden described. The relatively small space of New York City houses and apartments might have provided additional incentive for middle-class employers to distance themselves socially from domestic workers through racially charged complaints about Black and Irish women. The close proximity might have also encouraged employers to consider it necessary to employ women who could bolster their social rank as members of the middle class by hiring women from particular racial and ethnic groups for certain jobs. "Situations Wanted" ads in the *New York Times* expose the racial preferences of employers as they mostly advertised for white American, German, English, Swedish, and French women to fill the higher status and higher paying positions of governesses, nurse maids, traveling companions, dressmakers, beauticians, and language tutors for children. Many of these positions required

³⁷⁶ Dudden 119

close contact with children, which was important to especially female employers.³⁷⁷

An anonymous writer for *Harper's Bazaar* explains the decision-making process of some female employers regarding who they chose to interact most closely with their children. The writer asserts, "A closer sympathy of the employer with the employed is particularly important as regards the servant in relation to children. The education of the latter is greatly dependent upon the character of the domestic with whom the child must be necessarily in constant and close communion. By improving her servant the mother will find that she is indirectly but surely elevating her offspring."³⁷⁸

Although some employers hired Irish and Black women to serve as nurse-maids for the children, few advertisements placed by the workers themselves advertised for nurse-maid or governess positions. Ads from Irish women usually read: "Maid or chambermaid, Irish girl lately landed wishes position in city;"³⁷⁹ "Cook and chambermaid-waitress, two young Irish girls; together or separate; city or country."³⁸⁰ Cognizant of the discrimination exhibited toward Black women, southern newcomers often made a point of emphasizing to potential employers that they were "neat and clean Southern girls" who were "reliable" and

³⁷⁷ There was some variability in the positions requested by employers and domestic workers. However, these represent the overall trends.

³⁷⁸ "Humanity of Servants," *Harper's Bazaar* 21 Nov 1868.

³⁷⁹ "Classified Ad 3," *New York Times* 31 Oct 1923.

³⁸⁰ *New York Times* 20 Jul 1924.

“honest.”³⁸¹ Some Black women also decided to emphasize the shade of their skin tone in their ads. Some of the ads read: “Cook, assistant, house worker, waitress competent: light-colored;” “Cook, absolutely first-class; light colored American woman.”³⁸²

The voluminous ads placed by employers and domestic workers point to the ethnic and racial distinctions employers made between household workers and suggest that employing “white” as well as lower-status “colored” and Irish women was a strategy used by employers to elevate their own class status, which also shaped notions of whether or not they were “good” mothers. However, whether they employed “refined” German and Swedish women or Black and Irish women the public held and continues to hold female employers to the ideals of “mothering.”

Conclusion

The discrepancies between the prescription and practice of “good” mothering points to the impossibility of achieving the ideal among both employers and domestic workers. Racialized ideas of social class, gender, and sexuality defined the socially prescribed responsibilities of “mothering” coupled with the daily drudgery of household work made it impossible for domestic workers or employers to meet them. Examining such ideas requires tracing

³⁸¹ “Classified Ad 2,” New York Times 1 Sep 1908; 23 Dec 1910; 31 Oct 1923.

³⁸² New York Times 20 Jul 1924.

domestic labor, domestic workers, and women employers along a messy route that reaches from England to Ireland, Africa and the United States. Ideas of “good” and “bad” mothering circulated throughout the Anglo-American world. They were shaped by the industrial revolution, the legacies of British colonialism in the United States and Ireland, the labor migration of Irish and African American women to northern U.S. cities, and the racially segmented labor force in the United States.

Although Irish women transitioned into the white racial category beginning in the 1930s, the ideas that shaped their lives and those of African American women did not change dramatically. Indeed, there was a constant battle among employers about which group met mothering ideals most closely. Some employers favored Irish immigrants or African Americans; and still others claimed that both groups were “bad” mothers. Still, almost all white middle-class women hired women from one group or the other.

The experiences of Irish and African American domestic workers occurred more than a century ago, but domestic workers and their employers are still expected to adhere to ideologies of “mothering” today. Although many more women work outside the home now, they are still expected to maintain the household by successfully negotiating the demands of the public and private spheres. Middle class women claim they need domestic workers because their jobs demand important time away from their children. They would like their

children to receive individualized attention, which they will not get in overcrowded nurseries and day care centers. Moreover, surveillance of domestic workers remains the responsibility of women employers, leading to new technologies, like nanny cams, that allow employers to record the behavior of domestic workers.³⁸³ A New York prosecutor who is also a mother of two has created a new surveillance system. Mothers buy license plates for their children's strollers so that people can record the plate number when domestic workers take children to a public venue and behave in some inappropriate way. The observers can make an anonymous report to the website <http://www.howsmynanny.com>. Employers, in turn, can create an account on the website and view the reports daily.

Effectively addressing the exploitative experiences of domestic workers requires a transformation of the ideologies of “mothering” that have bound both employers and poor minority women to domestic service. Otherwise obvious forms of abuse such as low wages will remain a feature of domestic service because employers pay domestic workers according to how well they think they “mother.” It is difficult to challenge social constructions of “mothering,” especially since they are often internalized by both employers and domestic workers. In addition, perceptions of “mothering” intersect with ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality that have deep and sustained historical roots.

³⁸³ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 40.

While it is indisputable that racial minority women historically and presently perform the reproductive labor of privileged groups of women, interrogating the ideals of mothering can lead scholars to ask questions about the complexity of domestic workers' experiences that disrupt the binary framework of "evil" middle class women who oppress poor "vulnerable" workers. Being a "good" mother is a goal that is difficult for any woman to achieve, and barriers of race, class, and immigrant status add challenges for those who take care of their employers' children as well as their own.

Conclusion

The late nineteenth to early twentieth century was an incredibly rich and formative period in United States history. A diverse group of racial and ethnic populations were migrating to U.S. cities to claim the promises of the American Dream. Irish immigrant and southern African American women played a prominent role during this period of transition in America's labor history when both laborers and employers were negotiating racial, class, and gender boundaries that had been disrupted due to the socioeconomic and political events that accompanied emancipation. A considerable number of employers formed and reproduced gendered ideas of race formed during the colonial era in both Great Britain and the U.S. to draw racial parallels between particularly Irish and southern Black women.

Despite its racist, classist, and sexist origins, such ideas centralized the labor of Irish and southern Black women in national conversations about migration, the labor sector, and the racial status of various segments of the population. In other words, reconstructed racial boundaries between "whites," "non-whites," and "blacks" in the labor sector and society at large were re-negotiated using Irish and African American women's bodies. Both groups were considered apt targets for such racial negotiations as racial minority women who were concentrated in a racially stigmatized form of labor and had a shared English and American colonial history.

The greatest economic opportunities were mostly accessible to those who were considered members of the white race. Being included in this category by native-born white Americans depended not only upon skin color, but also behavioral characteristics that were largely opposed to those they associated with the black race. Newly emancipated Blacks from the South, northern born Blacks, and immigrants as well as native-born white Americans deployed gendered and classed ideas of race to describe themselves and other groups. In doing so, they sought to position themselves as the beneficiaries of the North's robust economic development.

Yet, due to deeply entrenched views among white Americans that African Americans were unworthy of educational, occupational, and political opportunities, most of those who wanted to claim a stake in the "American Dream" tried to distance themselves from certain ideas of race. At the same time, the racial conceptions and hierarchies were in the midst of upheaval. The abolition of slavery, the increased mobility of a newly emancipated Black population, the deterioration of the southern economy and the modernization of the northern economy, and waves of immigration to the U.S. from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean disrupted preconceived notions of what it meant to be white or black in America.

Moral, political, and labor concerns among people already settled in the North intensified in response to the waves of southern migrants and European immigrants that arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While many groups met in the bustling economic and cultural center of New York City, two groups of women drew particular attention with concerns about their behavior articulated through domestic service manuals, personal diaries, interviews, periodical images, letters to newspaper editors, and journal articles. Black and Irish women served as the primary target of complaints by employers, landlords, government officials and newspaper editors. These women were described as embodying or initiating a range of problems, from disease, crime and prostitution to the deterioration of white American homes. The last threat was heightened by the fact that African American and Irish women formed the vast majority of those working as domestic servants in the city and the nation at large.

Debates about the “domestic service problem” in New York did not occur in isolation. Journalists and employers from the far West including California and Colorado, southern states like Georgia and Virginia, and the Midwest such as Illinois and Missouri offered their opinions about what should be done to address the “problem” of Black and Irish women and female employers who were incapable of caring for their homes without such help. Irish and Black women developed their own perspectives on the images and stereotypes formed about them and they expressed their views about the women and men who employed

them in a variety of ways. The descriptions of Irish and Black women voiced by employers, journalists, and workers themselves can only be adequately examined by tracing a convoluted series of ideas. What is clear, however, is that gendered and classed ideas of race were both entrenched in the American imagination and constantly re-negotiated in close quarters.

The “home” was considered a stabilizing force in this period of socioeconomic and political transformation. Domestic workers and female employers were highlighted as they had significant influence over future generations as caretakers of children and over the male workforce as they needed a nurturing home environment to ensure that they were equipped to maximize their labor potential outside the home. Discussions about the home and household workers did not take place only outside the domestic sphere. Tense exchanges between domestic workers and female employers reveal the lineaments of private dynamics and make clear that ideas about home and work, whiteness, non-whiteness and blackness were always relational. The evaluation of Irish and Black women’s labor in the home was dependent upon the status of their female employers and vice versa. Female employers were not simply characterized as “ladies” who knew best about how to maintain the home. They were also ridiculed by workers, male employers, and journalists for failing to maintain proper domestic order and engaging in non-productive activities such as riding bicycles and gossiping with neighbors.

Social observers argued that participating in these leisure activities distracted housewives from properly instructing domestic workers about how to perform their daily chores. Thus, gendered discourses that positioned female employers as ladies who were above the drudgery of housework put them in a contradictory position. They were defined as ladies who needed domestic servants to perform household labor, yet they were still expected to take on the responsibilities for the home, which required arduous “unlady-like” labor. The development of social programs for housewives to instruct them on how to care for the home indicates that domestic workers were not considered the sole cause of the “domestic service problem.” Housewives, too, were implicated in national concerns that middle class homes were entering a period of moral and physical decline. Across time, female employers complained that Irish and Black women’s lack of intelligence and domestic training meant that they were unable to assume their proper roles as “ladies” of the household. According to these frustrated housewives, Irish and Black women’s racial status made them inherently incapable of providing adequate service.

It is important to note, however, that these complaints did not remain stagnant. They fluctuated over time as economic and political developments occurred within and outside the home. For instance, Irish women were considered the perfect domestic servants during the mid-nineteenth century as a large number began migrating to the United States after the potato famine, which left them and

their families with few employment opportunities. During the Civil War era, arguments developed by pro-slavery advocates to justify why Blacks should remain in slavery, informed complaints about Irish women. Some northern employers complained that Irish immigrants (like their African American counterparts) broke household items, scorched food, and participated in immoral sexual acts. Similar to enslaved Black women, Irish women were also accused of being “country,” “uncivilized,” and therefore incapable of adapting to a modern household and nation.

This group of Irish women largely displaced northern born Black women who had been employed in domestic service prior to the potato famine. The monopoly of Irish women in household labor domestic was challenged in the 1870s and 1880s by newly emancipated southern Black women. Southern Black women’s migration posed some problems for Irish workers as employers continued to complain about their skills and habits, especially when former slaves presented the possibility of providing cheap labor for northern American families. Some employers preferred to hire southern Black women, seeing them as the “new immigrants.” These employers often drew on (or invented) reminiscent images of slavery to explain why they preferred to hire emancipated “mammies.” Other employers drew upon modes of scientific racism to claim Irish women and Black women shared masculine characteristics that made them perfect to perform the arduous and dirty labor of the home.

This period of identity formation posed some challenges for middle class Blacks as well. Journalists for the *Chicago Defender* advocated for labor rights on behalf of Black workers but remained ambivalent about southern migrants who posed a threat to the economic stability of northern Blacks. Scholars such as W.E.B Du Bois detested the racist sentiments of northern Whites who opposed the northern migration of Blacks, yet he also expressed some antiquated views of former slaves and their descendants. His ambivalence about “country” southerners led him to conclude in his sociological study of Philadelphia domestic servants that northern born Blacks were more efficient workers than southern migrants. It is important to note, however, that his ideas became more nuanced over time, and he became less dismissive of southern Blacks and whites.

In addition, his notions about southern Blacks were complicated by his disdain for southern whites who had clearly mismanaged the southern economy by refusing to diversify its production and abusing its enslaved workforce. Du Bois was not alone in articulating such sentiments. The complaints of some northern employers about Black domestic workers were also shaped by their contempt for southern whites. They were skeptical about southern newcomers who had labored under a class of whites whose intellectual and cultural “inferiority” led to the demise of the southern economy. According to black and white critics, then, southern Black women had labored under an inefficient white

southern regime and thus had a long way to go to adapt to the modernized labor sector of the North.

Although Du Bois rarely gave credit to Anna Julia Cooper, he took some of his cues regarding women's labor from her work. Cooper along with Victoria Earle Matthews and other southern born, middle-class Black women who migrated to the North argued for the rights of working class Black women. For instance, Cooper argued that domestic labor should be considered the inherent responsibility of women, but a form of labor that is worthy of compensation. She also contended that Black women's labor in the home was central to helping maintain the world's economy. Therefore, if Black women performed their jobs adequately, there is no excuse for employers not compensating appropriately.

While it is clear that middle class Black women exhibited a sense of superiority over female southern migrants, they provided services and information for domestic workers that would not have been made available otherwise. A motivating force behind Matthews' decision to create the White Rose Industrial Home was her own difficulty entering the labor market in the North. Although she had received formal and advanced education, employment opportunities outside of domestic service were difficult to access. Matthews was clearly aware of how her own status was connected to those of the southern and Caribbean women who entered the doors and classrooms of the Home. Matthews' White Rose Industrial Association not only trained women for domestic service, but also provided

educational opportunities for the women. Matthews taught an African American history course and cultivated an extensive library filled with Black-owned periodicals. In other words, Matthews envisioned women becoming more learned workers and gaining access to some forms of employment outside of domestic service.

Since African American women, especially southern migrants, had few occupational options, they were often forced to swallow their anger and frustration. Yet the lack of public resistance displayed by domestic workers does not mean that Black women were submissive to their employers. They devised various ways to resist the racist demands of their employers. They were among the first groups of women to insist on living outside of their employers' homes, and some told their employers what type of labor they were willing and not willing to perform. Domestic workers also created informal networks through which they shared information with each other about good and bad employers. They used their circle of friends and family as a safe space to talk about their frustrations with employers and to help provide the reproductive labor needed to care for their own homes. My personal interviews with the descendents of domestic workers reveal that adult female neighbors and relatives were instrumental in helping to raise them by providing instruction and safety while their mothers were working. Clearly Black women negotiated the restraints that

gendered and class ideas about race placed on the labor and social aspects of their lives.

Irish as well as Black women resisted the oppressive aspects of domestic labor, but the Irish voiced their frustrations more publicly. Indeed, the lack of sources written by Black domestic workers before the mid-twentieth century and the abundance written by Irish women points to a difference in racialization between the two groups of women. Apparently, Irish women were concerned about publicly voicing their discontent with the women who employed them. Their letters, published in popular periodicals, often accused female employers of not knowing how to instruct workers properly and of not being able to afford household help. Irish women routinely characterized their female employers as women who were more concerned with non-productive activities such as riding bicycles, reading novels, and gossiping with friends than cleaning their home. Of course, traditional discourses of gender partly shaped Irish women's expectations that their employers should help with the household labor.

Written exchanges between Irish women and housewives reveal the sometimes blurred line between the class status of middle-class employers and the women they employed. Ideas of class hierarchy were endemic to the structure of domestic service, which requires the worker to class hierarchy structured the employer-employee relation as domestic workers were forced to be subservient in socioeconomic status and behavior to their women who hired them. This

arrangement was sometimes difficult to maintain by employers. An increasing percentage of white Americans were entering the middle-class during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and were learning how to adhere to the socially prescribed role of their newly acquired status. Employing a domestic worker was a marker of this class status. As Irish workers highlight in their letters, however, the desire among some Americans to lead a middle-class life style meant that some employers who could not afford to pay adequate wages hired a servant anyway. This often caused friction between employers and workers who expected to be compensated appropriately for their labors.

There are a few sources that indicate that some Black women also expressed frustrations with employers in a public forum. The national and New York City Y.W.C.A. records highlight the participation of a small number of Black women in the organization who spoke openly about their experiences in domestic service. As women who were more intimately connected to ideas of “blackness” than their Irish counterparts, Black women would likely suffer more immediately if they engaged in public acts of resistance. Thus middle class Black women such as Anna Julia Cooper and Victoria Earle Matthews spoke and wrote most openly about the labor rights of Black working class women. While speaking on their behalf presented some problems, the voices of “respectable” middle class Black women were more likely to be heard by white Americans than those of the Black working poor.

Considering that Irish and Black women labored in a world undergoing significant transformations and within a specific niche that was characterized by a specific class, racial, and gender organization, interesting theoretical questions arise about the history of domestic service and the racial minority women who dominated the occupation. It is difficult to pinpoint how much of the racializing process of Irish and Black women was due to the nature of the work itself, which required women to come into contact with “impure” substances including dirt and the bodily fluids of their employers. Domestic work also required employees to be subservient and ideas of class, gender, and race were useful in maintaining such an arrangement. Furthermore, England’s colonial history, which positioned Irish and Black women as menial laborers, infiltrated American politics, economic structures, cultural ideals, and homes. Across three centuries of colonial relations, gendered and classed ideas of race developed to help explain why these groups of women were the perfect populations to work as enslaved laborers and indentured servants.

A comprehensive study of how ideas of race developed over time and shaped the lives of domestic workers must include an examination of the colonial relationship between England, Ireland, the Caribbean, and the United States. Ideas of race formed not only in relation to slavery and indentured servitude in the U.S., but also in the Caribbean. Therefore, future directions for this project will include a study of Afro-Caribbean women who migrated to New York during the late

nineteenth to early twentieth century in search of domestic service jobs. Most labor history studies focus mostly on the period in which the largest number of people from the Caribbean migrated to the United States, which was after World War II. Other studies focus on the lives of contemporary Caribbean women who work as domestic servants in New York, Canada, and California. Most literature about Caribbean domestic workers focuses on contemporary women who work as domestic servants in Canada and in New York. Such studies mostly compare the experiences of contemporary Caribbean women to women who have migrated from the Philippines and Latin America.³⁸⁴ This work is important considering that contemporary domestic workers are still not protected under labor laws. However, more research about the predecessors of contemporary Caribbean domestic workers is needed.

It is important to note that there are some pioneering works that have begun to examine the lives of Caribbean women during the early migration periods. Irma Watkins-Owens' groundbreaking study of early Caribbean women's migration to New York documents the political and socioeconomic relationships between African Americans and Caribbean migrants in Harlem. She

³⁸⁴ Pierette Hondangeu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Women Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Daiva Stasiulus and Abigail Bakan, "Negotiating Citizenship: The case of foreign domestic workers in Canada," *Feminist Review* 57 (September 1997): 1, 112-139; Nancy Foner, "Benefits and burdens: Immigrant women and work in New York City," *Gender Issues* 16 (September 1998): 2; Bernadette Stiell and Kim England, "Jamaican domestics, Filipina housekeepers and English nannies: Representations of Toronto's foreign domestic workers," in J. Momsen, ed. *Gender, Migration, and Domestic Service* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

pays close attention to how gender shaped the varying experiences of Caribbean migrants by examining the experiences of Caribbean women who entered domestic service. I see the future direction of my project continuing the work of Watkins-Owens' work by bringing together the labor and migration history of African American, Irish, and Afro-Caribbean domestic workers to illuminate more comprehensive and new understandings about gendered and classed ideas of race as well as Caribbean women's migration to the United States.

I predict that all three groups of women's shared history with domestic service in the United States, negotiating ideas of race, and migrating from countries with a history of English colonialism helps forge a connection between them. There is such scant information in the archives about Caribbean women as domestic servants during this earlier period. However, this does not mean that attempts to recover their history should be abandoned. Their history will mostly have to be pieced together from oral histories, family letters, Black women's organization records, and colonial records. Bringing these archival sources is required to extend our knowledge about the multiple manifestations of English colonialism that formed transnational and cross-cultural connections among women laborers who formed the backbone of America's paid domestic service industry.

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