

Part One

Searching for Sisterhood

Chapter 1

Cleaning Race

Irish Immigrant and Southern Black Domestic Workers in the Northeast United States, 1865–1930

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In 1866 the scowling face of Mrs. McCaffraty stared out at readers of *Harper's Weekly* as cartoonist Thomas Nast's "Holy Horror of Mrs. McCaffraty" captured the unsettledness surrounding race and gender following the recent passage of the Civil Rights Act by Congress.¹ In the cartoon, Mrs. McCaffraty's round body and face are contorted with anger and her mob cap and bib apron mark her as employed in domestic service. Her basket overflows with the stuff of working-class women's domestic labor: fish (are we to imagine that it stinks?), vegetables, and bottles. The Black woman next to her epitomizes nineteenth-century ladyhood: slender face and body, lace-trimmed dress, and bonnet with hair neatly held by a snood. Her gentle hands grasp a parasol and purse. Her casual demeanor seems uncaring or unaware of Mrs. McCaffraty's high dudgeon. Although Black, she is the woman of careless leisure. She is Mrs. McCaffraty's "holy horror."²

What is striking about the image is that it illustrated a shift in the country's attention—and anxiety—from Irish immigrant and African American men to their sisters, daughters, nieces, and wives. Since Ireland's potato famine, native-born whites had attributed societal ills to degenerate Irish immigrant men and Black men.³ I argue that after Emancipation, African American and Irish immigrant women's household labors as domestic workers became a medium through which the country gauged and defined racial hierarchies and undesirables. By the late nineteenth century, Mrs. McCaffraty no longer had to worry about the perception that Black women were more worthy of American citizenship than their Irish counterparts. Although African American and Irish immigrant women were concentrated in the lowest-paid women's work by the late nineteenth century, the newcomers from Ireland would access the privileges of

American citizenship before Black women.

Irish women immigrated to the United States in their greatest numbers in the mid-nineteenth century and southern Black women migrated to the North in unprecedented numbers after World War I. While the height of Irish and Black women's movement to the urban North took place in different periods, similar circumstances fueled their migration, and their labor histories in domestic service overlapped. Both entered northeastern cities as racialized beings who had been relegated to tenant farming and household work in their hometowns. They also left the U.S. South and Ireland to escape poverty and violent social and political conflict. Of all the ethnic and racial groups of women who migrated to northern U.S. cities they were most likely to be concentrated in domestic service (except for Caribbean women).⁴

Overall Irish immigration declined in the late nineteenth century, yet a series of crop failures in the late 1870s and 1880s and violent conflicts between British soldiers and Irish nationalists who sought freedom from British rule fueled Irish women's immigration to the United States until the early 1930s, when they chose Great Britain as their primary destination.⁵ In 1900, the U.S. Immigration Commission reported that 71 percent of Irish immigrant women in the labor force were classified as "domestic and personal workers" and 54 percent were classified as "servants and waitresses." By 1912 and 1913, nearly 87 percent of the Irish women who had migrated to America worked in some form of private or public domestic service. And as late as 1920, Irish-born women still constituted 43 percent of white, female, foreign-born domestic servants in the United States.⁶

Streams of Irish and Black women from similar, but also very different contexts, flowed into the Northeast, a region fraught with its own political and socioeconomic unrest. Although native-born white northerners had boasted that the North was the pinnacle of American democracy and progress, they remained deeply ambivalent about Irish immigration, women's rights, and Black freedom following the Civil War. They encapsulated these sentiments in portrayals of the Irish and southern newcomers as the source of the "servant problem," or the shortage of reliable, clean, honest, and efficient household servants.⁷

While they cleaned dirt from floors, linens, and dishes, Irish immigrant and African American women also worked at redefining ideologies of race that deemed them “dirty” and thereby undeserving of the promises of American citizenship. As Phyllis Palmer noted, “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.”⁸ As can be seen in “The Great Scrub Race” (circa 1870), progress, whiteness, intelligence, and respectable womanhood were mutually constituting categories represented in the labor of women (see figure 1.1).⁹



{fig. 1.1 “Great Scrub Race”}

Only native-born, landowning white men were without markers of racial and gender inferiority. Unquestioned American citizens, they had the right to an education, to own property, to vote, to earn livable wages, and to live in safe and comfortable housing. Irish immigrant and African American domestic workers worked long hours in private homes to access the rights and resources of citizenship. As with work that rearranged household objects, Irish immigrant women reorganized the terms of white female respectability to include themselves. Black women's citizenship-claiming tasks, however, were more daunting. They not only had to clear away entrenched ideologies of womanhood; they also had to eliminate ideologies of race that excluded them from the *human*.

The outcomes and the duration of their work could not have been more different. By the 1930s, Irish immigrant women had exited domestic service and could vote as white women. Today Irish immigrant women are engrained in the American imagination as respectable, God-fearing, hard-working matriarchs who raised their children to become responsible American citizens.¹⁰ Since slavery, ideologies of race relied on the premise that Black women were hypersexual, masculine, immoral, and *permanently* inferior. Hence, the work of eliminating ideologies that categorized Black women as antithetical to American citizenship persisted much longer than it did for Irish immigrant women. Black women also remained concentrated in domestic service until the latter half of the twentieth century.¹¹ And their project is ongoing. As Melissa Harris-Perry noted in *Sister Citizen*, "Black women are rarely recognized as archetypal citizens."¹²

The questions I explore in this chapter are the following: What do the lives and representations of Irish immigrant and southern Black women tell us about the racial projects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?¹³ What strategies did both groups of women use to redefine race as they cleaned homes and resisted labor exploitation? Because I am interested in analyzing how domestic workers shaped ideologies of race, I am exploring, as Nancy Hewitt put it, "women who sought to make sense and create order out of the upheavals of their time."¹⁴

Rearranging Boundaries of Whiteness and Respectability

Before Ireland won its independence in 1921, the British had long declared the Irish a racial “other” to justify England’s assertion of political, religious, and economic dominance over Ireland since the twelfth century. As J. J. Lee explained, racism occurred in Ireland “where there were no observable differences” between the Irish and British.¹⁵ Protestant Irish descendants of early British settlers, the Anglo-Irish established a tenant farming labor system in the 1800s that seemed to confirm the belief that the Irish were in fact inferior to the *white* British. Catholic Irish families were confined to living on small tenant farms owned by Anglo-Irish landlords who demanded exorbitant rents. Irish girls had few options but to quit school at an early age and learn domestic skills including cooking, knitting, and poultry and dairy work.¹⁶ Irish women and girls also worked alongside their fathers, brothers, and husbands harvesting potatoes, vegetables, and eggs and tending to livestock for both subsistence and to sell so that they could pay their Anglo-Irish landlords.

The minimal oversight of agricultural production and the overproduction of the potato crop to meet the excessive demands of Anglo-Irish landowners facilitated fungus growth, which in turn compromised the fertility of the soil. From 1845 to 1847 a strain of bacteria spread across farms, destroying potato crops that were a source of income and personal consumption for Irish families.¹⁷ Faced with insurmountable poverty, limited options for earning a living, and virtually no political power to change their economic circumstances under British rule, approximately three million people from Ireland crossed the Atlantic Ocean to seek domestic service jobs in the United States well into the early twentieth century. Over 50 percent of the immigrants were women.¹⁸

Irish women could not have come to the United States at a better time for domestic service employers. Industrialization expanded employment options for native-born white women who had been employed as the “help” in private homes since the early nineteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, native-born white women had exited private household work to become housewives or work in factories. With housework experience and limited formal education, Irish-born women displaced the smaller population of free Black women in domestic service and became the largest group of servants in the urban Northeast.¹⁹

Irish immigrant women arrived in the United States as racialized beings entering a racially stigmatized occupation. Although Irish women on both sides of the Atlantic were portrayed as dirty, lazy, and domineering in contrast to their pious white Anglo-Saxon Protestant mistresses, and were concentrated in domestic service in both countries, the circumstances by which Irish women were racialized by the British in Ireland were distinct from the conditions from which the Irish “Bridget” emerged in U.S. racial discourse. The battle between Protestants and Catholics for power in the name of religion and Britain’s refusal to release Ireland and its other colonies from its control set apart the Irish from the *white* British race. The racialization of the Irish in the United States, by contrast, had nothing to do with land but had everything to do with political power, jobs, American citizenship, and most importantly, slavery.

The racial shift in domestic service to an Irish-dominated occupation did not diminish the negative stigma associated with it. Despite Irish immigrant women’s displacement of free Black women, the newcomers from Ireland entered a labor niche that had been defined as servile, Black, and non-feminine work since slavery. The very term “servant” held significant racial meanings in a country that had long celebrated the republican ideologies of independence and free labor as a certifiable virtue of whiteness and Americanness. According to Leslie Harris, “Whites believed that blacks who had been enslaved and who in freedom held jobs as servants were the most degraded workers and the farthest removed from the ideal republican citizen.”²⁰ As such, *servant* was a term that white domestic workers in northern cities in the early 1800s avoided, preferring to be called “the help” to distinguish themselves from enslaved Black women.

Domestic service was defined as a form of dependent labor that was only suitable for enslaved Black women in the homes of white slaveholders. Irish immigrant women’s living arrangements—they obtained food and lodging as well as wages by residing in their employer’s home—were different from what enslaved Black women household workers were coerced into doing in the South. Native-born white Protestant employers, however, were suspicious of poor, immigrant, female outsiders who were devoted to a “suspicious” religion and hailed from a country that resisted Anglo-Saxon rule well into the late nineteenth century.²¹ Despite their dissatisfaction with Irish servants, employers depended heavily on their labors, which fueled complaints for several decades.²² Employers accused Irish newcomers of being bossy, impatient, dirty, defiant, incapable of doing household tasks properly and thereby the source of instability in

the American home. These incessant complaints were captured in the dark, masculine, and animalistic Irish “Bridget” caricature in print media.

As women who were on the edges of whiteness, Irish immigrant women did not have to completely redefine race. Irish servants inserted themselves into the sphere of white female respectability by linking their concerns to the larger Progressive Era movement to end the labor exploitation of wage-earning white women. Irish immigrant women asserted themselves as simultaneously professional workers and *white* “ladies” who deserved the same treatment as native-born white housewives and white male and female factory workers. Irish serving women created women’s branches in the male-dominated Knights of Labor and joined white women’s labor organizations to advocate for their own legal protection. They set the clock on the time they would do domestic work in other people’s homes and refused to do tasks that were beneath wage-earning white *ladies*. The daughters of Erin also demanded respect and fair working conditions on the job by expressing their candid opinions about white women employers in local newspapers.

An Irish servant who signed her letter “Brave Irish Girl” responded to a letter written by “C.O.P.,” a domestic service employer who complained to readers about an Irish servant in her home. According to the employer, the servant stole food from her kitchen and used household toiletries excessively. “Brave Irish Girl” wrote in response to C.O.P.’s letter: “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 took 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 pays \$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.”²³

An Irish servant who signed her letter “Irish Rambler” associated herself with ideas of whiteness and Americanness by drawing an instructive parallel between slavery and the working conditions of Irish immigrant women in domestic service. “Irish Rambler” predicted that if employers continued issuing low wages to Irish servants, “then we will have what Abe Lincoln never thought of—white slavery. It is very near that now.”²⁴ As the letter made clear, “Irish Rambler” based her demand for better working conditions for her fellow Irish women on the fact that they were white and thus deserved the same level of respect as white American workers.

Domestic workers collaborated with labor organizers to demand protection in the workplace on the basis that they were white workers. Although Irish American and Irish-born leaders in these organizations rarely spoke about the particular concerns of domestic workers, deciding to focus primarily on the concerns of immigrant women in factories and mills, one of the most outspoken labor leaders, Leonora O'Reilly, did advocate that all wage-earning Irish immigrant women be respected as white workers who deserved better working conditions and higher wages.²⁵ While delivering a speech about factory workers, O'Reilly argued that labor legislation was also needed to "break up caste and put domestic service on another foundation."²⁶

The Catholic Church also charted avenues for Irish immigrant women to achieve white femininity by providing hospital employment to the Irish newcomers, which offered an escape from the racial stigma of domestic service even for Irish women who were not trained nurses. At the insistence of their relatives, some Irish immigrant women sought jobs cleaning floors and linen in hospitals instead of cleaning private homes. Frances Hoffman migrated from Londonderry, Northern Ireland, in 1923 to live with her uncle in New York City. Shortly after arriving in Manhattan, Hoffman told her uncle that she planned to apply for domestic service positions at the employment agency down the street from where he lived. He warned Hoffman, "No, do not go there. That is for colored people. You can work in a hospital." Hoffman followed her uncle's advice and searched for employment at the Brooklyn State Hospital. Three days later, she was hired as a nursing assistant.²⁷ Her duties were similar to domestic work, but without the racial stigma associated with domestic service. Irish immigrant women who worked as formally trained nurses achieved a degree of racial and social-class mobility. Nursing was a racially segregated occupation considered skilled labor for only white women. As Jane Edna Hunter, founder of the Phyllis Wheatley Association and a nurse trained at the Hampton Institute, was told by a white doctor when she arrived in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1905: "white doctors did not employ nigger nurses."²⁸

Many women who had been in domestic service insisted on leaving their jobs to become housewives. These Irish immigrant women adopted the customs of their native-born white women employers, using similar furniture and linens to adorn their homes.²⁹ Despite Irish immigrant women's advancements, however, they remained concentrated in service jobs, encountered ethnic discrimination in the workplace, returned to domestic service during periods of financial hardship, and remained a generational step behind Jewish women and native-born

white women in occupations well into the 1930s.

In contrast to that of Irish immigrant women, the racial identity of Black women was never open to debate. They were undeniably Black, which for native-born whites meant that they were in a permanent state of inferiority to all other races and ethnicities. Attaining freedom required Black women to, as Leslie Brown put it, “redefine black womanhood” and “shed the burdens of labor and reproduction that black women had carried in the past.”³⁰ An additional task, particularly for southern Black women in the North, was to redefine what it meant to be southern, Black, migrant, wage-earning women in the North. As women who were the descendants of enslaved laborers and who entered a region that was culturally distinct from the South, journalists quickly categorized them as outsiders who were akin to immigrants.³¹ Reporters also suggested that southern Black women become Americanized before working in northern white homes.³²

Cleaning Race: Domestic Labor and the Legacy of Slavery

After Emancipation, African American women were relegated to the lowest-paid labors of sharecropping and domestic service in the South, with no legal protection. The federal government failed to establish a land redistribution program after the Civil War to allocate property to formerly enslaved Blacks. Whites remained in control of the land and refused to sell their property. Bitter over the economic and political outcomes of the Civil War, they also sought to regain control over Black labor by establishing a sharecropping system. With very little capital, Blacks had few options but to work as tenant farmers for survival, sometimes on the same property where they had been enslaved. While Black women’s daily routines consisted of domestic chores, including cooking breakfast for children and male sharecroppers in the household, they also worked alongside men planting, chopping, and harvesting cotton, and digging up potatoes and picking peas on small plots of land. White landowners held Black families in perpetual debt by charging exorbitant prices for tools, seeds, and fertilizer needed to grow crops and they imposed strict rules that required families to pay rent in the form of a fixed amount of cash rather than a portion of the harvest.³³

Some Black women left the farms to seek higher wages in domestic service in southern towns and cities. Although some domestic workers found “good” employers, the occupation itself remained low-wage work.³⁴ Not all white employers accepted Emancipation and many refused to recognize domestic workers as wage-earning women. They continued the exploitative labor practices prevalent during slavery. Some employers refused outright to pay domestic workers livable wages, claiming that Black women had gotten lazy since the Civil War. Others paid domestic workers with leftover food or second-hand clothing instead of money. Black women were also accused of becoming dirtier now that they were no longer under the watchful eye of slaveholders. When tuberculosis hit southern towns in the late 1800s, Black women were accused of exposing their employers to the disease such that it became known as “the servants’ disease.”³⁵

In addition to being subjected to a repackaged slave labor system, Blacks had no legal recourse for protection against labor exploitation. They were forced to adhere to the Black Codes, a series of laws passed by southern states in the 1860s that confined them to low-wage work through vagrancy laws. As during slavery, lynchings and sexual and physical abuse remained a constant threat to Black women whether or not they spoke out against their working conditions. The Atlanta city government allowed the Ku Klux Klan to threaten domestic workers who “gave too much lip” or talked back to their employers.³⁶ The 1896 Supreme Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision further entrenched white supremacy by legalizing racial segregation. Except for the very few southern towns that Blacks established and controlled, Blacks were barred from political and civil service positions, and most institutions, public spaces, and residential neighborhoods remained segregated.³⁷

Southern Black women began migrating to northern cities before the Great Migration in the 1910s to escape racial and gender violence and exploitative tenant farming and domestic service. They migrated from rural farms to small towns and then to cities, constantly in search of better wages and living conditions for themselves and their families.³⁸ Between 1870 and 1910, an average of 6,700 Black southerners migrated north annually to search for better working and living conditions. Over 90 percent of the early migrants worked in domestic service.³⁹ When Black women left the South during the late nineteenth century, they ventured primarily into cities along the east coast, including Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City.

The women who took part in this early migration were young, single, separated, or widowed, and they often made the journey alone.⁴⁰ Some women traveled north to work in private homes only during the summers while others settled there working in domestic service permanently. They maintained strong ties with their family members in the rural South by sending money and letters about life and work in the urban centers.⁴¹ Family communication with their loved ones helped fuel the Great Migration of southern Blacks to northern cities from roughly the 1910s until the 1970s.⁴² As settlement worker and researcher Isabel Eaton discovered in her study of domestic workers in Philadelphia, some employers preferred hiring the southern newcomers over Irish servants. Seventh Ward housewives assumed that southern Black women were “more anxious to please” than Irish servants because slavery instilled in them the importance of having an “agreeable and obliging” demeanor toward whites.⁴³

Black women worked at cleaning race by asserting themselves as wage workers through individual acts of resistance, through music, and through collective organizing. Confronted with having to prove themselves *human*, Black women worked across social classes and employed multiple strategies to disrupt dominant racial ideologies that “explained” unequal wages. Black domestic workers toiled to rid domestic service of its ties to slavery by asserting themselves as wage workers deserving of livable wages and safe working conditions. And Black middle-class women, some of them daughters of domestic workers, researched and wrote their mothers, sisters, and aunts working in private homes into the American story of respectable hard, wage-earning work.

Few working Black women left behind letters and testimonials describing their experiences as domestic workers. The voices of Black women in domestic service did not become pronounced and formally organized until they created the Domestic Workers’ Union in New York City in 1935. We know, however, from interviews, newspaper articles, song lyrics, and personal stories passed down from generation to generation in Black families that Black women engaged in acts of resistance. Black women developed formal organizing strategies primarily in the South where they far outnumbered immigrants. Washerwomen in Atlanta, Georgia, organized labor strikes against white employers who refused to pay them livable wages and against Chinese immigrants who set up commercial laundries. Washerwomen strikes also occurred in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1866 and Galveston, Texas, in 1877.⁴⁴ Some Black women employed resistance methods in the North as they did in the South. They refused to do dangerous

tasks and left their jobs when their employers demanded too much of them.⁴⁵ Black women also created a blacklist of names to share with family and friends warning them to stay away from employers who refused to pay Black women livable wages, or any at all. And most importantly, the southerners transformed domestic service into a live-out occupation. Although some newcomers lived in their employers' homes, most Black women insisted that they have their own homes so that they could put an end to their workday.⁴⁶

Southern Black middle-class women, some of whom were the daughters of domestic workers or worked in domestic service themselves, entered the national discussions about race, migration, and domestic labor. They delivered speeches, wrote articles, and researched the experiences of Black women in domestic service. Victoria Earle Matthews, a Georgia native born to a white slaveholding father and an enslaved mother, worked as a domestic servant in New York City before becoming a clubwoman and co-founder of the White Rose Industrial Home for Working Class Negro Girls. She established the home to assist other southern migrant Black women with finding safe lodging and domestic service employment. While directing the home she traveled across the United States to drum up support for southern migrant women by dispelling myths that they were immoral women who posed a danger to northern cities. Matthews argued in a famous speech at Hampton University in 1898 that disreputable domestic service employers and the owners of brothels preyed upon innocent and respectable southern migrants. And she asserted Black women's claim to American citizenship by insisting that their exploitation was a national problem. She concluded her speech by demanding that the country do something to help the "long-suffering cruelly-wronged, sadly unprotected daughters of the entire South."⁴⁷

Clubwomen also established distinctions between southern Black women and immigrants to make the case that Black women were in fact American citizens whether or not the country chose to recognize them as such. They also argued that domestic workers in particular deserved adequate compensation and legal protection in the workplace before immigrants were granted such privileges. Women's suffragist and southern migrant Anna Julia Cooper was among the most outspoken nineteenth-century clubwomen on the subject of race, immigration, and domestic service. Cooper witnessed firsthand the exploitation of Black women in white homes as a young enslaved girl in Raleigh, North Carolina. Cooper credited her critical analysis of racial, class, and gender inequalities in the labor sector to conversations that she overheard between

elderly women on the plantation who spoke about their work experiences in slaveholders' homes. Cooper was also aware of her mother's experiences as a domestic servant during slavery and after Emancipation.⁴⁸ She advocated for legal protections for Black household workers by expressing her disdain for northern whites who were more sympathetic to the labor exploitation of European immigrants. In her classic text, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South*, Cooper declared:

How many have ever given a thought to the pinched and down-trodden colored women bending over wash-tubs and ironing-boards . . . Will you call it narrowness and selfishness, then, that I find it impossible to catch the fire of sympathy and enthusiasm for most of these [European] labor movements at the North? . . . I feel like saying, I can show you workingmen's wrong and workingmen's toil which, could it speak, would send up a wail that might be heard from the Potomac to the Rio Grande; and should it unite and act, would shake this country from Carolina to California.⁴⁹

Cooper stressed the importance of Black women's household labors seven years later in her *Southern Workman* article entitled "Colored Women as Wage Earners." In the article, Cooper redefined ideologies of domesticity by blurring the line between the public and private spheres and disrupting the Victorian belief that working women defied the norms of femininity. According to Cooper, Black women did not receive wages for the productive work that they did in their own homes and they were severely underpaid for important work that they did for employers. She explained, "The fact remains that a large percentage of the productive labor of the world is done by women . . . ; of 1,137 colored families 650, or 57.17 percent, are supported wholly or in part by female heads. So that in comparison with white, female heads of families and others contributing to family support, there is, by a house to house enumeration, quite a large excess on the part of colored women."⁵⁰ Cooper concluded from her research that Black women's labors were grossly undervalued, although their labor required "the capacities in man, intellectual as well as physical and moral . . . which have economic significance."⁵¹ Consequently, Cooper argued, Black women were simultaneously respectable and intelligent wage earners.

Music was another medium through which Black women articulated their perspectives about their working experiences.⁵² In the 1920s, patrons of blues clubs and juke joints could hear Bessie Smith sing of "bustin' suds" all day long and doing more work "than forty-'leven Gold Dust Twins."⁵³ When Works Progress Administration researcher Vivian Morris interviewed Rose Reed, a domestic worker in the Bronx during the Depression, Reed explained that spiritual music gave her the strength to bear the backbreaking work of domestic service and to lead her to

better working conditions. She recalled that after singing “I Got to Get Rid of This Heavy Load” and “Go Down Moses” while scrubbing floors, she learned later the same day about the Domestic Workers’ Union. After joining the union, Reed’s wages increased and her working conditions improved.⁵⁴

Despite the simultaneous efforts of both Irish immigrant and Black women to assert their own definitions of race and domestic work, redefining race was much more difficult for Black women. After the Immigration Act of 1921, racial categories were more rigidly defined and Irish immigrant women ascended to higher strata of whiteness than previously. In the 1920s, employment opportunities outside of domestic service opened up for Irish immigrant women and by the 1930s most had exited domestic service altogether. In cities like New York where the Irish outnumbered other immigrant populations, Irish immigrant women could vote for Irish American politicians who reserved city contracting and construction jobs for their husbands, uncles, nephews, and sons. Irish American men held political office, owned salons and contracting companies, and dominated the police force, which was instrumental in establishing racial divisions on the ground. As James R. Barrett argued, newcomers to New York City “could be excused for thinking that ‘Irish’ equaled ‘American.’”⁵⁵

Black women’s racial project continued beyond the Progressive Era. By the 1930s, Black women dominated domestic service in the North and South and they continued engaging in multiple forms of resistance by working with women’s organizations, Black labor organizations, and educators to end labor exploitation in domestic service.⁵⁶ Formal organizing to address the particular concerns of domestic workers emerged during the 1930s. In 1934, Dora Lee Jones worked with a small group of Finnish women to create the Domestic Workers Union of Harlem, which was initially affiliated with the Building Service Union, Local 149. The National Negro Congress sponsored the Domestic Workers Association in New York City, which worked with Black labor activists including A. Phillip Randolph to fight for legislation to standardize domestic service.

Black women also enlisted for domestic service training programs developed by the Young Women's Christian Association and collaborated with the Women's Trade Union League to upgrade the profession.⁵⁷ While domestic workers joined labor organizations, clubwomen like Cooper remained committed to speaking out against the labor exploitation of Black women in domestic service. In a 1930s speech entitled "On Education," Cooper declared that domestic workers were the "cream" of "natural endowment" and represented the "thrift, the mechanical industry, the business intelligence, the professional skill, the well-ordered homes, and the carefully nurtured families that are to be found in every town and hamlet where the colored man is known."⁵⁸ Despite these wide-ranging efforts to change the racial terms of domestic service, it was not until after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that Black women could make the large-scale transition into other occupations.

Conclusion

Bringing together the labor and migration histories of southern Black migrant and Irish immigrant women in domestic service challenges assumption that they did only manual labor. They engaged in both physical and ideological work to redefine blackness and whiteness for wage-earning women. Their histories also complicate understandings of race that rely on the labors and migrations of men. Shifting to a comparative focus on women's domestic labors and migrations opens a new avenue for tracing the messy process of constructing the meanings of whiteness, blackness, and American citizenship after Emancipation. An integrated history of Irish immigrant and southern Black migrant domestic workers challenges the idea that all Irish immigrant struggles with race ended in 1863 when Irish men became members of the white working class. As Catholic immigrant women from a despised country and concentrated in a "Black" occupation, Irish immigrant women worked harder and longer than their male counterparts to ascend to higher strata of whiteness.

A comparative history also challenges perceptions that race sparked either alliances or tensions among immigrant and Black workers. There are no recorded stories of violent conflicts between Irish immigrant and Black women in domestic service. The women's stories, however, reveal the complexity and power of race whereby an imaginary construct could be molded by political interests and anxieties to render distinct groups of women nearly synonymous, although the women's actual paths did not always cross in the homes where they worked. The women, as

journal editors, cartoonists, and employers imagined them, illustrated national debates about race, gender, and citizenship. However, these women also created discourses and representations of themselves while engaging in labor actions that molded definitions of race and gender at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thinking about cleaning race through women's migrations and labors expands the theoretical and conceptual terrain on which we can understand the historical and contemporary dilemmas of race.

Notes

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- ¹ After President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Democrats and Republicans in Congress engaged in contentious debates over whether Blacks were American citizens. Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives introduced the Civil Rights Act to Congress. Abraham Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, refused to see Black people as human and tried to restore white supremacy by vetoing the act. The Radical Republican-controlled House of Representatives overrode the veto and the act became law in 1866. See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 45–49.
- ² The bracketed caption read: "Mr. McCaffraty Voted against Negro Suffrage," see "Holy Horror of Mrs. McCaffraty in a Washington City Street Passenger Car," *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 24, 1866, <http://www.harperweek.com/09cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=February&Date=24>, accessed July 28, 2014. The website comments: "The bracketed remark lets viewers know that she represents the type of disreputable person who opposed black manhood suffrage."
- ³ Upon arrival, Irish immigrants and free Blacks lived in the same neighborhoods and worked in the same low-wage jobs. Irish immigrant and free Black men worked alongside each other before the Civil War as longshoremen, artisans, apprentices, and dock workers in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 144–149. Cartoon images of Irish immigrant and Black men reinforced their racially inferior, non-American, and non-masculine status in a country in which the model American citizen was defined as a rational, entrepreneurial, land-owning WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) breadwinning man. See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41.
- ⁴ Jewish and Italian women avoided domestic work because they were already married before immigrating to the United States or married soon afterward. They labored either as housewives or workers in factories and stores. See Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White: How Race Is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11; Hasia Diner, "A Century of Migration, 1820–1924," in *From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: George Braziller Press, 2004), 75–76.
- ⁵ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service in America, 1840–1930* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), xvii.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 223–224.

⁸ Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 140.

⁹ The woman in yellow is telling the clearly Irish and African American women there is no use competing with the white woman because she has a Eureka mop. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, circa 1870.

¹⁰ Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 74.

¹¹ Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 7.

¹² Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 20.

¹³ Like sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, I define race as “an unstable complex of social meanings constantly being transformed [and reasserted—my addition] by political struggle.” According to Omi and Winant, racial projects do the ideological work of defining race. A racial project “is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.” See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55–56. Like historical sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn I argue that racial formation is also a gendered process. See Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.

¹⁴ Nancy Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s–1920s* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 15. Similar to Nancy Hewitt’s analysis of how African American and Afro-Cuban women redefined race through their activism in cigar factories in Tampa, Florida, I examine how Black and Irish immigrant women’s activism, household labors, and migrations defined race in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹⁵ J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

¹⁶ Diner, “A Century of Migration, 1820–1924,” 13.

¹⁷ Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), 345–346.

¹⁸ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, xix.

¹⁹ Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 183.

²⁰ Ibid., 98.

²¹ Faye Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 65–66.

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- ²² Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1983), 88.
- ²³ "Hopes 'C.O.P.'s' Girl Did Not Eat the Soap," *Brooklyn Eagle*, Mar. 12, 1897.
- ²⁴ "'Irish Rambler' Suggests a Servant Girl Trust," *Brooklyn Eagle*, Mar. 11, 1897.
- ²⁵ Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 46–47; 130.
- ²⁶ Leonora O'Reilly, "A Few Thoughts Suggested on Reading," June 18, 1907, Women's Trade Union League Papers on microfilm, Texas Woman's University Library.
- ²⁷ Frances Duffy Hoffman, Ellis Island's Bob Hope Memorial Library Archive, interview by Janet Levine, February 20, 1997, interview EI-853, transcript.
- ²⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 30.
- ²⁹ Maureen Murphy, "Birdie, We Hardly Knew Ye: The Irish Domestic," in *The Irish in America*, ed. Michael Coffey and Terry Golway (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 145.
- ³⁰ Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2–3.
- ³¹ *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, July 28, 1879.
- ³² "Work to Domestic Service," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1907.
- ³³ Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington D.C., 1910–1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 9–13.
- ³⁴ Leslie Brown and Annie Valk, *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 81–82.
- ³⁵ Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 187–190.
- ³⁶ Testimony of Alfred Richardson, *United States Congress Report: Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Conditions of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, Volume 1: Georgia* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 1871) 12, 18.
- ³⁷ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 94–97.
- ³⁸ Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 90.
- ³⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 155–156.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁴¹ Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 54.
- ⁴² Joe William Trotter, ed., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 17.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 74–97.

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- ⁴⁵ 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, 1993), 92–93.
- ⁴⁶ Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 5.
- ⁴⁷ Victoria Earle Matthews, “Some of the Dangers Encountered by Southern Girls in Northern Cities,” *Hampton Negro Conference Proceedings*, no. II (July 1898): 62.
- ⁴⁸ Vivian May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.
- ⁴⁹ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 254–255.
- ⁵⁰ Anna Julia Cooper, “Colored Women as Wage Earners,” *Southern Workman* 28 (August 1899): 295.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 296.
- ⁵² For a history of Black worker folks songs, see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ⁵³ For the lyrics to Bessie Smith’s “Washwoman’s Blues,” see A. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 98–99.
- ⁵⁴ For Lawrence Levine’s analysis of the interview, see *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 161. To read the full-length interview and Morris’s analysis of Reed’s story, see Works Progress Administration Domestic Workers’ Union, interview by Vivian Morris, February 2, 1939, 2.
- ⁵⁵ James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multi-Ethnic City* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 2.
- ⁵⁶ Esther V. Cooper, “The Negro Woman Domestic in Relation to Trade Unionism” (Master’s thesis, Fisk University, 1940), 2.
- ⁵⁷ Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, “Domestic Workers Organize!” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 11 (2008): 417–418; Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *The Black Worker during the Era of the American Federation of Labor and the Railroad Brotherhoods* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 256.
- ⁵⁸ Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, eds., *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 254.