

## Moving with the Women: Tracing Racialization, Migration, and Domestic Workers in the Archive

**C**itizenship became a hotly contested topic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the United States received waves of immigrants from Europe and as formerly enslaved Blacks migrated into previously White-dominated cities. What it meant to be an American was a question of considerable urgency at a time when racial conceptions and hierarchies were in the midst of upheaval in the United States. 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 challenged the hegemony of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), disrupting the established racial order. The period in which “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” (Omi and Winant 1994, 64–65) provides a particularly rich opportunity to examine dynamics of racialization.

By placing representations of African American and Irish domestic workers at the center of analysis, this article explores the process of marking racial differences among the population to determine which individuals deserved access to the material and ideological promises of American citizenship, a process orchestrated by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants to protect and preserve their privileges. It examines similar yet distinct racialized ideas of gender associated with Irish and African American domestic workers and their intricate relationship to representations of women employers. Comparing employers’ representations of domestic workers on both sides of the Atlantic, I analyze Irish and African American women’s labor and migration in a global context linked by a shared history of English colonialism. Excavating intersecting ideas buried in domestic service manuals, letters to editors, journal articles, and periodical images housed in archives in England, New York, and the US South, I investigate how England’s colonial history with Ireland and what later became the United States helped shape ideas about White American, Irish, and Black women.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although this article focuses on the process of racialization, it is not my intention to subsume other social categories such as class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. To the contrary, I

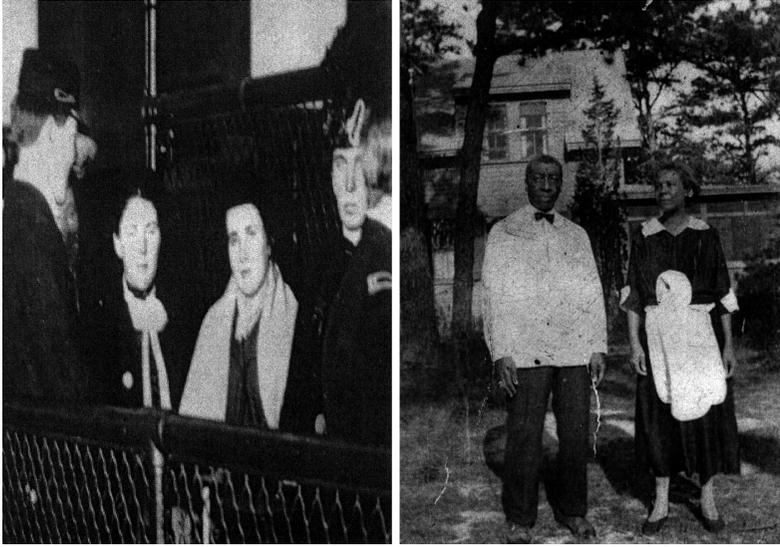
As Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) have noted, racial formation is a sociohistorical process in which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed, a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. But as Toni Morrison demonstrates so powerfully in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, racial formation also involves an imaginative process intimately tied to the African American presence in the United States: “Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of the collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American” (Morrison 1993, 38). In the elaborate racial formations devised in this formative period, as I will demonstrate, constructions of blackness also played a critical role in demarcating the domestic workplace as a site where the boundaries of race and citizenship were imagined and contested daily.

### Parallel migrations

At first glance, the lives of two Irish women awaiting a medical inspection after their arrival at Ellis Island (see fig. 1a) might seem worlds apart from the experiences of a married African American couple who worked as domestic servants in the home of a college president after migrating from South Carolina to the state of New York (see fig. 1b). Yet their stories represent the thousands of Irish and southern African Americans who migrated to New York seeking similar promises of the American Dream during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During their search for bet-

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investigate precisely how these social categories developed racial meanings. In conducting archival research I consulted with sources housed in the Fawcett Women’s Library, the British Library, and the British National Archive in England. Research sites in New York State included the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Cornell University’s Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives; New York University’s Bobst Library archive; the New York Public Library archive; Columbia University’s archive; and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, *New York Times*, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, and *Harper’s Bazaar* online archives. I gained access to articles published in the US South through the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta and the American Periodical Series online database, which contains a search engine that locates articles published in a variety of southern, western, and midwestern cities such as New Orleans, Savannah, San Francisco, and Chicago.



**Figure 1** Left, Irish women who just arrived at Ellis Island, circa early 1900s. Courtesy of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Right, Charles W. James and Mattie L. James, a married couple who migrated from South Carolina during the early 1900s and worked in the home of a college president in upstate New York. Courtesy of their niece, Sharon E. Robinson.

ter educational and employment opportunities than those offered in Ireland and the US South, Irish women and Black women migrated, yet they found it difficult to access jobs outside of domestic service, and together they constituted the largest percentage of racial minority women in the industry. Irish women had established their dominance in paid domestic service by the mid-nineteenth century, but Black women challenged Irish women's monopoly in the industry as they began migrating to the North after emancipation during the late nineteenth century. In a sense, Black women were considered the new immigrants of the North, and employers preferred to hire them because they thought these southern newcomers would accept lower wages than the Irish. This transition in the northern labor sector fueled tension and physical confrontations between African Americans and the Irish as they competed for domestic service employment. As a consequence, many employers were discouraged from hiring members of both groups to work in a single home (*New York Globe* 1884; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 1900a; Yentis 1937, 48–54).

W. E. B. Du Bois's sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), details the replacement of Irish labor with African American women's labor in the North and how employers formed racialized ideas of gender to justify this change. An employer in Philadelphia who was interviewed by

Du Bois's research assistant Isabel Eaton 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" (Du Bois 1899, 487–88).

By 1840 approximately forty thousand Irish emigrants, most of them Roman Catholic, had settled in the United States, seeking employment opportunities after the economic devastation caused by the potato famine. Five years later, women made up nearly 50 percent of Irish immigrants in the United States, and the vast majority sought employment opportunities in domestic service (Lynch-Brennan 2009, xix). Irish women's emigration to the United States began to affect the employment of approximately thirty-one thousand free African Americans, who mostly worked as laborers, waiters, laundresses, and domestic servants.<sup>2</sup> Some employers preferred to hire Irish women, and northern African Americans found it increasingly difficult to find domestic service employment. Free Black women increasingly occupied live-out positions, sometimes at their own insistence, as mostly Irish women worked inside employers' homes (Dudden 1983, 63).

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. Between 1870 and 1910, an average of 6,700 southern Blacks migrated to the North annually in search of employment. As early as 1905, one-quarter of all adult Black women in the state of New York lived alone or in a lodging house, and 90 percent of Black women in the city were domestic workers. By 1920, 1.5 million African Americans had 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 City, Chicago, or Boston (Phillips 1999, 40).

Yet the percentage of Irish women in domestic service did not decline during this period. In fact, the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries were times of increased migration for both groups of women. Be-

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to accurately measure the number of Irish and Black women who worked as domestic servants in the state because many women did not report to census takers. Published statistics regarding the migration of both groups of women are probably lower than the actual percentages.

tween 1885 and 1920 nearly seven hundred thousand 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” workers; 54 percent were specifically classified as “servants and waitresses” (Steinberg 2001, 154). 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 (Lynch-Brennan 2009, 42). And as late as 1920, Irish-born women still constituted 43 percent of foreign-born female domestic servants in the United States (Lynch-Brennan 2009, xvii).

Although Irish and African American women rarely worked alongside each other in private homes, and while some employers preferred to hire one group instead of the other, Irish and Black women’s paths crossed in the racial imaginations of their employers and in national debates about American citizenship. While working in the domestic service industry, both groups became central to national debates about immigration, race, labor, and American identity. As Black, immigrant, and Anglo-American women came into greater contact in the domestic sphere, the supposed bedrock of American civilization became a site of contention as the groups negotiated modes of power and constructed definitions of who was White, non-White, Black, and American. Domestic service employers in the northeastern United States, for example, frequently commented that African American women and Irish women were biologically prone to deviant behavior that set them apart 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 work ethics, 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.<sup>3</sup>

Debates about Irish and southern Black domestic workers in the state of New York, a primary site of archival sources for this analysis, 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 women and Irish women as well as the problem posed by female employers who were incapable of caring for their homes without such help. Domestic service manuals, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Harper’s New Monthly*, and other periodicals carried these discus-

<sup>3</sup> See Tomes (1864), Du Bois (1899), Brown (1941), Rollins (1985, 52), and Lemert and Bhan (1998, 255).

sions overseas, featuring transnational conversations between employers in New York State and London who exchanged tips about how to deal with “belligerent” domestic workers who were “invading” their homes and providing “inadequate” service.<sup>4</sup> In discussing their plight, employers 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 early nineteenth centuries in relation to enslaved Blacks and Irish indentured servants in the US South. Although conceptualizations and discourses changed over time, core formulations still informed conversations about domestic labor and laborers into the early twentieth century (Urban 2009b).<sup>5</sup>

As racial minority women who were concentrated in a form of work that demanded arduous labor and extensive time, Irish and African American women rarely left behind diaries and personal letters describing their labor experiences. To extract information about their lives, then, requires ingenuity, tracing the racialization of domestic workers through sources authored by employers who seldom made explicit comments about race. Drawing insights from Morrison’s analysis of canonic literary texts written by White males during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I excavated information about changing conceptions of race from the “significant and underscored omissions” and “startling contradictions” regarding the “real or fabricated Africanist presence” embedded in texts authored by those who possessed racial, gender, and economic privileges (Morrison 1993, 6). Searching for ideas about race and gender that were both loudly voiced and hidden in the shadows of archival sources, I found that materials that initially seemed irrelevant could illuminate hidden yet important racializing processes in the lives of domestic laborers and employers. Indeed, the sources suggest that examining the racialization of women in domestic service means tracing two simultaneous processes of racialization that were mutually constitutive. Domestic work, as a specific kind and location of labor, is racialized, as are the workers and employers involved in these employment settings. Specific racial parallels drawn between Irish and African American domestic workers marked the social distance between them and their female employers. The following sections of this essay explore the ra-

<sup>4</sup> See Tomes (1864, 54), Beecher and Stowe (1869, 321), *Harper’s Bazaar* (1871), *Our Jenimas* (1880), and *New York Times* (1893).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew T. Urban’s article (2009b) provides additional reading regarding transnational conversations about “unruly” Irish servants that developed between employers in England and the United States. The article emanated from his dissertation (Urban 2009a), which is a comparative study of Irish female domestic servants and Chinese male domestic servants in the United States.

cial politics of archival sources, examining the gendered racialization of domestic work by extracting gendered ideologies of race from historical evidence left behind by privileged White employers.

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 US South whereas members of the other group worked as either indentured servants or paid domestic servants in England, Ireland, and the United States. In addition, domestic work did not remain a ghettoizing occupation for Irish women. As they became increasingly identified as White after the 1930s, Irish women gained access to higher-status and higher-paying jobs.<sup>6</sup> Northern employers' incessant and racially charged complaints about Irish and African American women, however, suggest that some transnational connections developed between the two groups of women, and it is these discursive intersections that I examine here.

### **Exploring the loud silences and omissions of the archive in England**

Prior to the 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 English colonial imaginary. 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 and Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively. The colonizers claimed that Ireland and Africa were backward societies, and it was their responsibility to civilize the Irish and Africans by converting them to Protestantism (Garner 2004, 73). English colonists brought these discourses to what later became the United States to describe enslaved Black women and Irish women who worked as indentured servants in the US South.

Deirdre Cooper Owens, in "Courageous Negro Servitors," a study of gynecological experiments conducted on enslaved Black women and poor Irish immigrant women during the antebellum period, argues "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" (Cooper Owens 2008, 18). These ideas continued to circulate after emancipation. Many female employers during the late nineteenth and

<sup>6</sup> See Logan (1877), *New York Times* (1923), Steinberg (2001, 154), and Lynch-Brennan (2006, 346).

early twentieth centuries came from Anglo-American families that readily embraced British notions about race, gender, and labor. Yet they did not simply impose these ideas on domestic workers but absorbed expectations for themselves as well. Thus, the English roots of racialization in American domestic service can be found in numerous archives in England.<sup>7</sup>

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 I inserted 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. After I consulted with local archivists, historians, and graduate students, it 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 afterward 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" and in the sources for such studies (Walter 2001, 2). The history of Irish- and African-descended household workers in England and its colonies is buried in archival sources not readily recognized by library search engines.

At first glance, the voluminous domestic service manuals about English servants seemed irrelevant to this study. Yet after taking a closer look at the adjectives used to describe the servants, I found that the texts revealed how domestic work, as a specific niche of labor, operated as a racializing mechanism. One such manual was authored by Anne Thackeray Ritchie, who wrote about the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants in "Upstairs and Downstairs." Jane Nassau Senior founded the association in the late 1800s to encourage poor young English girls to seek refuge in domestic service as a way of avoiding being lured into prostitution. Thackeray Ritchie states:

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 inex-

<sup>7</sup> Please see n. 1 for the specific names of the archives that were consulted in England.

perience, 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. . . . 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 little serving girls? . . . Little by little they learn better things and gain some experience in the ways of the civilized world. (Thackeray Ritchie 1882, 9, 14)

Although Thackeray Ritchie is describing the cognitive development of young girls, she also conveys that poor girls are perceived as having innate sexual temptations that would prevent them from providing adequate domestic labor. According to Thackeray Ritchie, the girls needed upper-class women, of more respectable character, to offer a “word of real friendship” to guide them to domestic service (Thackeray Ritchie 1882, 9).

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. 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” (Rollins 1985, 186). Employers rarely referred to servants using deferential terms such as “Mrs.” or “Ms.” Servants were instead often called upon by their first names, as if they were the children of the employers. Some employers did not even use the actual first names of servants to address them but would use generic terms such as “girl.”

What further reinforced this characteristic of domestic service was the Industrial Revolution in England. During this period, 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 (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994, 14). This idea of separate public and private spheres increasingly confined both White middle-class and poor women to the domestic sphere (Valenze 1995, 4). In both England and the United States hegemonic notions of true womanhood helped organize the relationship between female employer and female employees in the home. Middle-class women were regarded as 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 the middle-class housewife depended on the denigration of household tasks that were unbecoming a “true” lady (Valenze 1995, 158). 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” (Palmer 1989, 128).

Relations of class inequality that were created and reinforced by industrialization and the cult of true womanhood also developed racial meanings. Deborah Valenze notes in *The First Industrial Woman* that, “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” (Valenze 1995, 174). 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.

In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Anne McClintock uses Arthur Munby’s sketches to illustrate how England’s colonial relationship to Africa helped produce racialized perceptions of poor English women. Munby, a Victorian barrister and man of letters, became obsessed with working-class women. Over nearly sixty years he embarked on long walks, searching for, questioning, and sketching milkmaids, circus performers, domestic servants, and other working women. What is particularly interesting about his sketches is that he drew the women he encountered with dark, masculine, and animalistic physical features. McClintock suggests that the circulation of Saartjie Baartman, and other images of African women in England associated with “unbridled, lascivious sexuality” (113), informed Munby’s representations of poor English women. She argues, “Munby’s association of working-class women with Africans is thus far from idiosyncratic” (114). Thackeray Ritchie’s manual also helps explain why poor English women were believed to be among those segments of the population suitable to perform domestic service. Like the racial background of African-descended women, the poverty of English working-class women was taken as evidence that they lacked sexual restraint and would thus easily fall prey to prostitution.

Racialized representations of English workers also converged with religious discourses circulating in Western Europe. Poor English women per-

formed dirty and arduous labor during a period when Christian doctrines associated bodily cleanliness with morality. These arguments about the inherently immoral practices of English servants were reinforced through the daily physical requirements of caring for the bodies of their employers. Servants came into contact with unsanitized substances daily as they scrubbed floors, cooked meals, washed dishes and clothes, and emptied chamber pots. Women who came into contact with dirty substances were perceived as biologically prone to immorality through excessive sexual desires.

According to Walter, “evidence of the manual work of servants was removed in an excessive display of cleanliness through the Victorian dirt fetish. Much of the punishing regime of female domestic work involved symbolic removal of dirt, particularly at the boundaries of the domestic sphere. . . . In the process, servants came to be associated with the dirt and disorder they were employed to remove. . . . Servants stood on the dangerous threshold of . . . moral contagion and racial degeneration” (Walter 2001, 104). Thus, it was no coincidence that Thackeray Ritchie linked servants’ “ignorance” to the daily demands of household work, which required them to come into contact “with dust, with dirt, with disorder” (1882, 253).

While Thackeray Ritchie and other middle-class English housewives 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 United States and England, employing effective servants was deemed critical to embodying this newly acquired status (Dill 1994, 14). 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 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 domestic servants in the United States] 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” (Logan 1877).



Figure 2 Cover of *Our Jemimas*. London: Houlston & Sons, 1880.

Contrary to the beliefs of American employers, English women had not discovered solutions for managing difficult Irish servants. After I returned to the archive and inserted more generic, stereotypical terms in the search engines such as “Bridget,” “St. Patrick,” and “Celtics,” manuals appeared that featured the complaints of employers who used 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”* (1880; see fig. 2), a manual originally published in London and written for both English and American readers, reveals that racialized descriptions of domestic workers circulated across the Atlantic. 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 in the imaginary of English employers.

The anonymous male author of this manual drew from ideas on 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 slavery in the White imagination, envisioning the ideal African American household servant as 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” (Wallace-Sanders 2008, 4). Perhaps such racial understandings were not unfamiliar to British readers. After all, the image of Aunt Jemima was born as a nostalgic representation of the antebellum South for White American audiences. Thus, it is not coincidental that the author would draw comparisons between Irish and African American women, since both representations have ties to English colonial history.

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 deploys a range of signifiers, including dirt, language, and nationality, as evidence signaling 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, 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” (*Our Jemimas* 1880, 60). After firing Bridget, the author vowed never to employ 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. England’s weakening control of its colonies may have heightened agitation against Catholic immigrants at a time when increasing 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 remain loyal to Rome and

to nonscriptural theology, which posed “a threat to British liberties” (Garner 2004, 115). Suspicions of Irish women’s wavering loyalty to the British nation-state also prompted fears that they would not be loyal to their employers.

Complaints about Irish women were also written during the Industrial Age, when women’s domestic labor was increasingly perceived as subordinate and unskilled. Industrial and commercial activity performed by male laborers outside of the home was designated as productive and skilled work. According to Valenze, “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” (Valenze 1995, 156–57).

Growing resistance among the Irish to British colonial rule in Ireland and fears among the English that Irish immigrants would take their jobs also coalesced to form a hostile environment toward Irish servants. The influx of colonial subjects into English cities during the nineteenth century prompted fears and animosity that encouraged employers to complain incessantly about Irish servants while drawing from racialized representations developed during the early years of England’s colonial conquest of Ireland.<sup>8</sup> English employers took cues from racialized ideologies of class, gender, and sexuality developed overseas to describe enslaved Black laborers and employed similar ideas to describe their frustrations with the English colonial subjects who worked in their homes. Similar to enslaved Blacks, Irish women were regarded as an uncivilized race of people and therefore considered incapable of caring for modern industrialized homes in England. Mutually reinforced ideas about the unimportance of women’s work, suspicions about Catholicism, and the colonial status of Irish servants 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 that made her incapable of cleaning his home properly. This 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” (*Our Jemimas* 1880, 60–61). The author’s description

<sup>8</sup> See Mayhew and Mayhew (1847), Palmer (1989, 128), Walter (2001, 110), and Garner (2004, 73).

echoes the sentiments of US employers who claimed that Irish women were particularly rude and dirty, that they were horrible cooks and servers, and that they failed to adhere to their social rank.

Associating the Irish with dirt in the home was integral to this process of positioning them as racially subordinate to the English. Dirt has a long-standing association with displacement, which aptly describes the condition of Irish household workers confined by their gendered class and racial status to labor in foreign homes (Walter 2001, 88). Similar discourses informed English perceptions of African and Irish women as inefficient laborers in the domestic sphere. According to Walter, “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” (Walter 2001, 110).

Hegemonic ideas of Irish women as dirty were also intricately tied to the psychology of domestic service relations between female employers and workers, which depended upon biologically based claims of superiority and inferiority. Rollins articulates this philosophy as “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” (Rollins 1985, 198). 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 saw as the declining quantity and quality of domestic workers in the United States.

### **Tracing gendered racialization 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” (Katzman 1978, 223). The complaints, of course, were rooted in a preference for White American-born female servants, who were (it always seemed) less available than before since they 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 (Katzman 1978, 225).

Meanwhile, Black and Irish women, due to racial inequalities in the labor sector and a lack of educational opportunities, found it difficult to find employment outside domestic service. Rather than being seen as offering northern housewives a solution to the declining numbers 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, often featured as front page news stories in local papers including the *New York Times*, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, *Amsterdam News*, and the *New York Age*, as well as in national periodicals such as the *Chicago Defender* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.<sup>9</sup>

Media sources warned employers to make cautious decisions about hiring the southern and Irish newcomers. Some northerners expressed disdain for Black migrant women, regarding them as an extension of uncivilized southern planters and accusing them of spreading diseases to their employers. Indeed, some northern employers described southern Black women as licentious and incapable of taking proper hygiene measures when working in “refined” northern homes. These ideas were partly rooted in changing northern racial demographics. Although some African Americans lived in the North prior to emancipation, the percentage was relatively low in comparison to White Americans. The influx of southern Black migrants encouraged the circulation of racialized ideas tied to class, gender, and sexuality. As Hazel Carby has noted, “The migration of black people to cities outside of the Secessionist states of the South in the first half of the twentieth century transformed America socially, politically, and culturally. The movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous” (Carby 1992, 738–39).

Some evidence suggests that Irish immigrant women, like Black women, were also targeted as the bearers of disease. Stories of Irish immigrant “Typhoid Mary” Mallon swept the headlines of local newspapers. Mallon, chronicled as the first known typhoid-bacilli carrier in America, was 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 at the time, however, the ty-

<sup>9</sup> See Tomes (1864), *New York Times* (1872), *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (1900b), *Chicago Defender* (1918), Miss P. G. A. (1935), and *New York Age* (1937).

phoid outbreak was caused by poor health and sanitary conditions that were characteristic of late nineteenth-century urban cities (*New York Times* 1911; Altman 1970).

Traditional practices of domestic service; intense job competition among Whites, Blacks, and European immigrants; widely held suspicions that emancipated African Americans would plan revolts against White Americans; fears that Irish Catholic immigrants would betray the US nation-state by enacting 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 to be" (Ignatiev 1996, 41). In the eyes of "WASP America," the two groups were comparable if not interchangeable and were regarded as unfit for US citizenship (Garner 2004, 98).

Although they belonged to distinct ethnic groups, Irish and African American women were often described by their employers in remarkably similar ways. As an employer of domestic help wrote to the *Augusta Chronicle* in 1883: "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" (*Augusta Chronicle* 1883, 1).

Fourteen years later, another employer revealed much the same concerns about an Irish employee: "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?" (M. E. P. 1897, 3). The 1897 letter, written by the employer of an Irish domestic worker, echoes the complaints in the 1883 letter, which was written by the employer of an African American domestic in the South. Both 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 were developed in the eighteenth-century US South and followed African American women when they migrated to northern cities in search of employment during the late nineteenth century. The editor of the *Brooklyn Daily 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. The status of racial minority women and laborers in domestic service mutually shaped racial stereotypes.

“Bridget’s Suggestion,” published in the August 10, 1889, edition of *Harper’s Bazaar*, highlights simultaneous processes—domestic labor operating as a racializing mechanism in conjunction with comparisons between the racial status of Irish and African American servants:

*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 ma’am, 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?

*Bridget:* No, mum; but ol was thnkin yet might ax th’ colored cook. [No, ma’am; but I was thinking you might ask the colored cook.]  
(*Harper’s Bazaar* 1889, 588)

Periodicals often featured dialogues between fictional employers and domestic workers that were read by both British and American audiences. These dialogues provide a lens through which we can consider possible attitudes toward race that circulated between England and the United States. 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. In addition, the employer’s decision to ask Bridget to fill the inkstand discloses that the employer regards this as a dirty job, suitable for an Irish domestic servant. Bridget then insinuates herself into ideas of race as blackness when she asserts that refilling the inkstand is more appropriate for an African American servant. The dialogue suggests that Bridget is aware of the racial implications of coming into contact with “dirty” or “black” substances, which is integral to performing household work.

While this exercise of racial formation involved negative portrayals of Irish and Black women, White women were also subject to this gendered racialization process. Requesting that Bridget refill the inkstand marks the employer as the lady of the house and thereby distinguishable from the servants, whose labor positions them outside of the boundaries of whiteness and female respectability. In her study of domestic workers in Yemen, Marina de Regt suggests that notions of cleanliness are used to establish

racial and class differences between employers and workers. “‘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 domestics 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 classes” (de Regt 2009, 578). Apparently, employers in the United States also deployed discourses of cleanliness to mark the sometimes indistinct social differences between themselves and the women they employed.

In *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class*, Bonnie Thornton Dill explains the close social proximity between employers and workers: “The domestic worker is, in some ways, an extension of the housewife. The housewife delegates some or all of her household and family maintenance tasks to the worker in exchange for wages” (Dill 1994, 5). This transfer of domestic responsibilities from employers to domestic workers could contribute to the evaluation of servants according to ideologies intended to describe employers’ own performance. Some housewives complained that servants did not maintain the household properly. Yet, if Irish and African American women were bad workers because they were “careless,” “dirty,” and “wasteful,” then it was impossible for their employers to be good wives and mothers—that is, to adhere to dominant norms for White, middle-class femininity.

In fact, some servants adopted notions of domesticity to evaluate their employers. One Irish woman wrote to the *New York Times*: “The mingled inefficiency 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” (*New York Times* 1871). Women employers responded by echoing ideas from England, especially regarding the ability of Irish women to adapt to the introduction of modern appliances ushered by the industrialization era.

Perceived as the descendants 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” (Garner 2004, 94). The presumption that Irish women would fail to adjust to the introduction of modern appliances contributed to a prediction that newly invented household products would eventually push them out of domestic service in the United States (*North American* 1894, 5). Expectations that Irish domestic workers would disappear seemed to be reinforced by the increasing



Figure 3 The “Gold Dust Twins” on a Gold Dust Washing Powder box advertisement.

number of African American women in domestic service in northeastern cities.

Indeed, the front cover of the “Gold Dust Washing Powder” box (see fig. 3)—produced by the same company that took out newspaper advertisements forecasting “Empty Is the Kitchen—Bridget’s Gone”—featured stereotypical depictions of two Black children who were referred to as the “Gold Dust Twins” and appeared eager to do household work. The advertising slogan encouraged White women to “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 box also featured descriptions of household chores that the Gold Dust Twins could perform efficiently.

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 powder, whose name references its bright yellow color at the time of its invention, was an instant success in England and the United States. 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 and to associate it with Black domestic labor. The playful twins communicated to housewife consumers that housework could be easy and fun.

Although there were few African-descended servants in England, advertising Black serving children on the boxes fit comfortably with the colonial imagining of slavery among British consumers. Considering the long history of Black servitude in the United States, it is of little surprise that the image of the twins was also a success in the American market. According to journalist Lynn G. 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” (Wright 1910, 37). Indeed, the Gold Dust Twins also were memorialized in African American popular culture. In the lyrics to her 1928 song, “Washwoman’s Blues,” blues singer Bessie Smith contrasts the actual lived experiences of Black women with the message on the washing powder boxes: “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” (in Russell 1982, 132).

Although the Gold Dust Twins were featured on the boxes, the washing powder symbolized the arduous everyday demands of Black women’s household labor. In the context of that symbolism, the “Bridget’s Gone” advertisement prophesies a transition in paid domestic service in the United States, from a predominately Irish to a predominantly Black form of female labor. In addition to positioning Black and Irish women in relation to domestic labor, Gold Dust simultaneously defined the new role of housewives as consumers who were primarily responsible for buying domestic products in an advancing industrial age.

Both Irish and Black women were subject to complaints about their work, in part because they were laboring during an age that made women’s labor less visible. Ideologies linked to the developing capitalist economy drew boundaries between the workplace and the place of residence. Social reproduction cloistered in the home became women’s work as the production of goods outside of the home was attributed to men. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn has noted, “In an evolving economic system in which value

and independence were measured by earning, unpaid productive and re-productive labor did not count as real work” (Glenn 2002, 71).

The invention of household technologies also suggested that Irish and Black domestic workers were not necessary for maintaining the home, a view that organizations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) sought to debunk. 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 thoughtful it is obvious that household employment demands intelligence, initiative, stamina, character and a high type of manual skill” (Brown 1941, 29). The deskilling of reproductive labor reinforced racist ideas about Black women, confining them to low-wage work much longer than Irish women. Thus, the efforts of the YWCA were directed largely toward helping Black women, who remained concentrated in domestic service, as Irish immigrant women and their daughters moved into higher-paying forms of nondomestic labor beginning in the 1930s.

### **Conclusion**

Archives are neither race-neutral nor class-inclusive domains. Some archives include diaries and letters written by domestic workers, which chart the contours of their lives and struggles. Yet these are far outnumbered by sources written by employers, journalists, and clergymen, who offer markedly skewed accounts of domestic workers. The biases incorporated in sources written by those with racial, class, and gender privileges, however, provide unique insights about a form of stigmatized labor and those who perform it.

Hegemonic ideas about English, Irish, and Black women articulated by employers provide a lens that magnifies processes of gendered and racial formation during a moment of transition on both sides of the Atlantic. Representations of English servants as dirty and hypersexual women with dark complexions suggest an analytic framework with which to trace domestic work as a racializing mechanism. Domestic service manuals and periodical images highlight multiple and mutually constitutive processes of racialization in the lives of Irish and Black women laborers intimately tied to the deskilling of women’s labor during the industrialization era. The

emerging cult of domesticity in the second half of the nineteenth century illuminates growing concerns about cleanliness and dirt, concerns with long ties to slavery, racial hierarchy within the larger society, England's colonial relationship to Ireland, and England's colonial history in the United States. Employers' complaints about domestic workers reveal expectations concerning practices of subservience endemic to centuries of tradition in domestic service. Employers in both England and New York drew racial parallels between Irish and African American women that reflect shared colonial and labor histories. Thus, the racial status of Irish and Black women was shaped by transatlantic forces that far exceeded any construction of the private sphere, even as that status was consolidated by the domestic labor they performed within private domains.

As this study of women's labor migration makes clear, ideas travel just as people do. Examining the transnational circulation of racial ideas through archival materials housed in England and New York provides one way to explore African American women's labor and migration history in a global context. As the sources indicate, Black women's experiences of racialization were not bound by the geographical limits of the United States. "Moving with the women," then, along global circuits that cross the Atlantic constitutes a promising strategy for rewriting the history of domestic labor in order to capture processes of racialization endemic to that mode of employment.

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