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'First Get your Hare': Urban Women and the Work of Food Procurement in the Twentieth Century

This paper is an historical exploration of the complicated politics that surrounded urban women's food buying in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. It recasts consumption as labor that is intimately tied to family life. Food shopping, I argue, situates the private labors of unpaid domestic work in the workings and politics of the market.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women negotiated the busy stalls of public markets, bargained with neighborhood peddlers, and sought personalized attention at small grocery stores. This was difficult work and it was recognized as such. Everything from local newspapers to advice columns to records of city governments remarked that women's procurement of food required careful negotiations with sellers and attention to community standards. Women's own words reinforce the hard work of food shopping, revealing that both working- and middle-class women undertook enormous burdens in terms of time and energy to make market offerings meet family budgets and their own standards. Food stood at the center of families' economic lives, and women's labors.

The tremendous increase in the size and presence of large chains of grocery stores in the late 1910s and early 1920s reinforced Americans' sense that consumption was work. The spread of chains across the retail landscape occurred in the context of WWI-era inflation and urban race riots. In the charged spaces of grocery stores, it was clearer than ever that food shopping was a moment when the meanings of women's class, race, and ethnicity were a factor in economic transactions, when women's loyalties to communities, to families, and to individual merchants could be shored up or risked, and when the power relations of market economies were made palpable. Mass retailers, in this historical moment, proved unable and unwilling to impose fully their policies on customers. Women's individual economic and political priorities shaped interactions with clerks. Moreover, women's concern with power and economic dependence were crucial to the appeal of stores that promised them individual autonomy and equal treatment. To position food shopping as labor is also to disrupt the notion that consumption is inherently depoliticizing

The paper concludes by observing that the current institutional workings of food distribution can make it difficult to see the politics and labor that surround food shopping, and women's domestic labor generally. Over time both stores and the state came to depend on women's willingness and ability to work within the confines of store offerings. Even current-day progressive discourses around food politics often encourage solutions that would dramatically increase the amount of work women would have undertake to procure food for their families. Recapturing the politics of food shopping, and speculating on the reasons that they became defused and obscured over time, I encourage scholars to see women's work as food shopping as crucial to the workings, and disruptions, of modern capitalism.