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An Intimate World: Race, Migration, and Chinese and Irish Domestic Servants in the late-Nineteenth Century United States

This paper – a condensed chapter from my dissertation – explores the historic relationship between race, migration, and labor by looking at Chinese and Irish immigrants employed as domestic servants in the late-nineteenth century United States. From 1850 to 1920, white, middle-class Americans relied on the labor of household servants in order to perform the domestic tasks that were considered essential to the public appearance of the Victorian home. In New York and California, Irish women and Chinese men provided the majority of these servants respectively, doing work that native-born Americans felt was too degraded. Social commentators filled periodical and newspaper columns with articles outlining the unavoidable risks that employers took when Chinese and Irish “aliens” entered the intimate space of their homes. The attention devoted to domestic service in the late-nineteenth century reflects Americans’ overarching concern with how the amalgamation of different races would affect the nation’s destiny in regards to its physical expansion, labor relations, and sexual and moral character.

This paper argues that while Irish servants were initially racialized as the dangerous “other” entering the American home, by the end of the nineteenth century they were able to effectively claim cultural whiteness and consequently, social acceptance, albeit as members of the working class. Although Chinese servants were racialized in a manner that also highlighted the perceived differences between them and their employers, because of their skin color and the larger implications attached to Chinese immigration, they were not able to escape their stigmatization. After the passage of the federal Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Chinese immigrants working as servants became classified as a permanently foreign class of labor.

In the historic literature that has explored immigration to the United States in the nineteenth century, scholars have usually studied Irish and Chinese immigrants separately, despite the fact that contemporaries saw them as fierce antagonists competing for the same jobs and as racially akin in terms of the type of labor they were ostensibly suited to do. The realm of intimate labor was a crucial site where white, native-born Americans employed racial language and concepts to measure and compare what they felt to be the relative merits of these two immigrant groups. Cartoons, newspaper and periodical articles, political debates, and novels, all juxtaposed Irish and Chinese servants and discussed each group in the context of their gendered and racial qualities. Middle-class authors believed that male, Chinese servants came from an emasculated and docile race, making them the ideal replacements for the unwomanly and overly aggressive Irish female servant. The idea that the innately servile male Chinese servant, “John Chinaman,” could rescue American households from the oppressive reign of the female Irish servant, “Biddy,” was a topic that surfaced in connection to a variety of developments in this era. For example, an article in *Scribner’s Monthly* in 1868 speculated that the opening of the transcontinental railroad would bring Chinese immigrants in mass numbers from California to the East Coast, a positive outcome according to the author, since “to thousands of people in this

country, Irish labor makes housekeeping a prolonged misery...if the Chinese shall come to compete with it here, we will hold out hands of cordial welcome to them.”

Finally, this paper poses questions that are important to understanding and making sense of human migration in the present. By demonstrating that historically, domestic service was a profession that Americans scrutinized in order to understand the ramifications of immigration, my work will hopefully shed light on why service work and issues surrounding immigration are often inseparable today.