

Lara Vapnek

St. John's University

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Desires for Distance: White Working-Class Women's Rejection of Domestic Service in the late 19th-century United States

Responding to the question of why she had left domestic service, one woman explained, "You can do things at home for them as belongs to you that somehow it seems different do for strangers."* This paper will consider how the analytical category of intimate labor might help us understand the reconstruction of the domestic labor market in industrializing cities in the late 19th-century United States. Drawing on social scientific investigations, organizational records, and newspaper reports from Boston, New York, and Chicago, I will argue that working-class women sought to limit the intimacy of their employment relations by rejecting service in favor of new jobs opening up in factories and retail stores. By and large these non-domestic jobs were available exclusively to white women. Many who left jobs in service compared it to slavery. This critique used the language of wage slavery to draw attention to the physical vulnerability of servants, who were required to live with the families that employed them. However, it affirmed racial divisions within the labor market by insisting that white women deserved better treatment than African American slaves. Daughters of Irish immigrants differentiated themselves from their mothers and staked their identities as "Americans" on not working as servants. Some labor activists cast the growing demand for servants in elite Victorian households as evidence of the development of a parasitic managerial class. Thus, white working-class women's refusal to labor for wages in someone else's household affirmed their racial, ethnic, and class identities. Even when middle-class reformers proposed a shift to day labor, native-born white working-class women refused to return to the domestic jobs they had left. While bourgeois commentators on the "servant problem" bemoaned the loss of older, more personal relations between a housewife and her help, working-class women acted to affirm their preference for an arm's length transaction with their employers, and to perform domestic work exclusively for their own families.

* Helen Campbell, *Prisoners of Poverty: Women Wage Workers, Their Trades and Their Lives* (Boston: Roberts, 1887, reprint, 1970), 226.