

Transatlantic Women at Work: Service in the Long 19th Century

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This special issue focuses on “Transatlantic Women at Work” in the 19th century, with attention paid specifically to the labor women performed that was deemed by family, community, government, and often the women themselves as service. Our introduction briefly describes the six articles and responses included in this issue and their origins in an online forum in 2021 and 2022; it also presents three featured poems, and one fictional work. The overview of contributions is followed by an attempt at theorizing an understanding and conception of the idea of *service* from a diachronic perspective. This exploration of varying notions and the accompanying politics of *service* is organized in sections as follows: “The Evolving Concept of Service in the Long 19th Century,” “Theorizing: What Is This Thing Called *Service*,” “The Tradition of *Service* as a White, Middle-Class Notion,” “Women’s Service and Reform,” “Municipal Housekeeping as Service to the Community,” and “Women of Color and ‘Service to Their Race.’” Our examination of 19th-century conduct books and reform texts by and for women illuminates how evolving notions of *service* as benevolence was primarily connected to a well-to-do class of white women and conceptualized against the background of servitude as hard (remunerated) labor associated with poor women and women of color. We show how since the beginning of the century Black activists fought against such racial essentialism. However, white *service* notions lastingly influenced both 19th-century (segregated) ideas of women’s social roles and 20th/21st-century women’s historiography that continued to center on white concepts of True Womanhood. We conclude by acknowledging that in our own 21st century, women (especially women of color) too often continue in

the vicious cycle of being relegated to lower paid and lower status service work, professions which remain as such precisely because they are held by women. As we point out, the recent Covid pandemic shed renewed light on this transatlantic reality.

Keywords: notions of *service*, True Womanhood, servitude, racial essentialism, 19th century

Transatlantic Women at Work: About this Special Issue

The recent dual crises of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the (also global) renewed struggle for racial justice have turned our attention to women worldwide whose critically important *service*¹ roles bring to mind and expand on their similar occupations across the world in the long 19th century. Women comprise the majority of the workforce that was deemed “essential” during the pandemic—from healthcare and social services to retail and other service sector jobs. Women have been disproportionately affected by the loss of employment, whether through involuntary lay-offs or voluntary resignations due to the need to provide “essential” care at home, most significantly as teachers of their virtually-schooled children. Across various service horizons today, we also observe that women, especially those of color, continue as in the past to confront institutionalized discrimination, subordination, and marginalization.

Both this troubling contemporary reality and its historical precedents make clear the inherent ambiguity of women’s *service*. On the one hand, as Hannah Branch and Melissa Wooten have shown, *service* occupations may offer fields of action that enable new paths of social mobility for women; on the other, as with today’s virtual mother-teachers, such *service* often perpetuates domestic stereotypes, race conflicts, and class affiliation, while also severely impacting career progression, lifetime earning potential, and causing ongoing emotional stress.

1. Note that throughout this Introduction and the individual chapters, we have italicized the word *service* to draw attention to it as the subject of this special issue.

Studies on women and service are limited; those that are published largely focus on three main research areas: 1) women and domestic service, 2) women and service in an entrepreneurial context, and 3) women and military service. Kristina Booker, in particular, conceptualizes women in service as either engaging in such work from a humanitarian “spiritualized sense of ‘duty,’” (4) or actually working for wages in a servant capacity.

Not as well examined, however, is the complexity of women’s service as an enabling or a disabling factor within a transatlantic context. Throughout the long 19th century, women in the transatlantic world were engaged in a range of service roles, including nursing, teaching, and reform causes. Many served in menial jobs with no glory or recognition, while some held leadership roles in various movements, such as antislavery, temperance, workers’ rights, woman’s rights, and community service movements. Several served openly with the support of family and society, while other women were forced to disguise themselves in order to serve their chosen cause.

For an online forum series, held in 2021 and 2022, the Intercontinental Cross-Currents Network solicited reflections on contributions by women in wide-ranging service roles in the transatlantic world during the long 19th century. We were interested in presentations that engaged with spheres of service such as women’s wartime service and aid to the resulting populations displaced by wars, representation(s) of service (literary and otherwise), intersectionality and service, and scholarship of service.

The response was quite impressive and led to a number of conversations during the summer and spring of 2021/2022 with contributors from Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Philippines, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and the United States.

This special issue grew out of these conversations and combines a variety of approaches to women and service within a transatlantic context. In order to create a dialog across national and scholarly boundaries, we solicited articles as well as responses to them that would evaluate and expand on significant themes. This process ensured that arguments were critically examined as well as new and sometimes contradictory perspectives added. We ended up with five papers and five corresponding responses, which are as follows:

In her essay, “‘Grief Became My Friend, My Work’: Mary Todd Lincoln’s Uneasy Union with Memory in LeAnne Howe’s *Savage Conversations* (2019),” Stefanie Schäfer assesses the role of the First Lady, “her affective labors,” and her expected domestic service in the United States. Specifically, she focuses on the problematic

reputation of President Abraham Lincoln's widow, Mary Todd Lincoln, by examining Choctaw author LeAnne Howe's recent historical drama *Savage Conversations*, in which an emotionally distraught Lincoln suffers from nightly torture administered by "Savage Indian," who visits her bedchamber, "slits her eyelids and sews them open." Schäfer argues that Lincoln's "pathological craving for attention" ultimately made her complicit in her husband's "settler colonial violence" as carried out in the 1862 Mankato Massacre in Mankato, Minnesota, where 38 Dakota men were executed for their participation in protesting the government's breaking of treaties. Those broken treaties led to impoverishment and starvation of native peoples living in this region.

In her response to Schäfer, Sirpa Salenius supports her assessment of the role of the First Lady while noting that some First Ladies have broken out of their spouse-only-status and fashioned active social, political, and cultural roles.

In "Contemplating Women's Imperial Service: Mabel Bent as Photographer, Travel Writer, and Collector," Esther Wetzel assesses the private writings and photographs of Mabel Bent, the wife of British archaeologist and anthropologist Theodore Bent. Wetzel argues that Mabel's collections documenting their travels and years of service in Africa and the Middle East show her to have been complicit in both Britain's and her husband's exploitation of African nations for "the British colonial project." Additionally, Wetzel examines Bent's diaries and other travel writing as examples of married women's work that "has yet to be brought into the discourse of gender and empire."

Verena Laschinger applauds Wetzel's "intersectional feminist approach" to Bent and adds further evidence to Wetzel's claim that Bent, like her husband, exerted epistemic violence through her participation in the British colonial project.

In "Serving in the Household and the Imagination: The Brontës, Alcott, and the Interconnected Roles of a Neglected 'Transatlantic' Female Figure," Paula Guimarães explores the real-life experiences of the Brontë sisters and Louisa May Alcott with household service, both in terms of their household servants and the writers' own acts of service. Guimarães argues that though the British and American ideas of domestic service might differ, all of these writers were directly affected by their expectations of what it meant to serve in a household.

Daniela Daniele takes up the transatlantic thread of Guimarães's examination of concepts of *service*, expanding on the racialized and class-based value systems inherent and expressed in Louisa May Alcott's and her mother's approach to immigrant women, Black servants, and their own subservient status as women writers, reformers, and care givers.

In “Katrina Trask: Gilded Age of Philanthropy,” Khristeena Lute explores the difference between philanthropy and service as pertaining to the late-19th and early-20th century New York-based philanthropist and writer Katrina Trask. Lute argues that Trask’s writing career is often overlooked in light of her extreme wealth and devoted notion of *service*. Lute connects Trask’s writing with her ideas of *service* and the European philosophies that influenced her.

Stéphanie Durrans takes up Lute’s discussion of Trask’s conception of *service* and philanthropy and further shows how in her 1916 novel, *The Invisible Balance Sheet*, Trask promotes “the role of the divine female to serve as a guide to those around her.”

In “Experience, Exchange, and Education: The Hull House Women, an International Network, and Chicago’s Immigrant Population,” Alice Bailey Cheylan explores the creation and purpose of Chicago’s Hull House. Cheylan provides an overview of volunteer work by women in the United States and addresses the European influence on Jane Addams’s idea for Hull House. She also explains the various pedagogical approaches used by the Hull House educators.

Joanne Paisana concurs with Cheylan’s argument that Hull House served both the stipulated beneficiaries and those who worked in the institution, giving the former educational opportunities and the latter political sway. Paisana further stresses the transatlantic nature of Hull House, highlighting some of its British equivalents and predecessors.

All in all, this volume brings together contributions that approach the issue of women and service in connection to reform, domestic service, philanthropy, travel, and science. It should be noted that the term of reference in all of these contributions is white middle-class womanhood. The intersection of gender, race, and the elusiveness of the term *service* feature only marginally in this special issue. One reason for the prominence of white middle-class women is the fact that 19th-century notions of benevolent service excluded women of color and situated them within the sphere of domestic service or (un-)paid servitude, including but not restricted to slavery.

It needs to be noted, though, that the original conversation series of the Intercontinental Cross-Currents Network that evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as described above, served as a starting point for this collection included talks on women of color in different positions of service, e.g., the enslaved domestic servant Tituba, one of the first women accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials; and Filipina women and nursing in the 19th century. Unfortunately, these talks were not submitted for publication.

In order to address this lack, we publicized an open call for fictional contributions and are pleased to include a short story, “Trees,” by Leanne Philipps. Her story shifts attention from white middle-class concerns to 19th-century Californio women who had to labor in the homes of white families, enabling the latter’s leisurely life-style. The story focusses on female comradery across class and racial boundaries and shows how poor Californio women served their families and the wider community in a variety of selfless and emancipatory ways, despite their enforced servitude.

Additionally, we include two poets in this special issue: Jessica Bundschuh and Ellen Rachlin. Rachlin’s poem, “David and Goliath,” depicts the unseen labor hidden in plain sight; in this poem, it is a blacksmith’s work hidden in the literal shadow of a great artist and his disciples. Echoing the dialogic argument-and-response format of the scholarly contributions, Bundschuh’s poem, “Early Working Girl,” is a response to Rachlin’s work. It takes the occasion of the two poets finding an iron nail during a walk through Regensburg in a different direction, this time to speculate about the hidden labor of the blacksmith’s wife. Bundschuh’s other poem, “Flirting Through Summer Jobs,” explores the “mountains and the valleys” of typical, summer jobs in food service and connects our issue’s topics with a more contemporary understanding of *service* (not to mention growing up in the 1980s). The global pandemic drew attention to those jobs that, coincidentally enough, we “see” when they are *not* being done—that of service workers and grocery store clerks, for example—but which we frequently do not notice when they are. All three poems explore the often invisible service that happens in everyday life.

The Evolving Concept of Service in the Long 19th Century

The exclusion of women of color from 19th-century notions of benevolent service resulted in a 20th- and 21st-century scholarly bias that has likewise conceptualized 19th-century women’s service to the nation, Republican Motherhood, and public housekeeping as primarily white middle-class phenomena. Such a misconception neglects the fact that notions of *service* evolved alongside concepts of (white) True Womanhood in the course of that century, a development that was closely tied to the rise of the middle class and the ensuing, albeit slow, emancipation of its womenfolk. Part of the prominent ideology of True Womanhood has from its inception depended on the exclusion of women of color. The rhetoric of this imaginary ideal—routinely promoted by conservative and progressive women alike—has covered up its exclusionary force and

at the same time contributed to marginalizing those to whom it did not apply: that is, Indigenous women, Black women, immigrant women, and poor/working class women. In the following, we shall try to track some of these developments but do not claim comprehensiveness; certainly, more research is needed on the subject. This special issue comprises one step towards challenging fixed notions about women and *service*, and we are hopeful that future research will help us understand how womanhood writ large has been negotiated and defined both within the United States and across the oceans.

Theorizing: What Is this Thing Called Service?

The guiding theme for this special issue, *service*, is a ubiquitous and elusive term that has inspired, enabled, circumscribed, limited, and divided women's work. Historically, it has been evoked in wide-ranging discourses concerning women's activities: from the much-labored idea of True Womanhood and domesticity, the push into "municipal housekeeping" and the ensuing reform movements and missionary work, to women's contribution to Civil War efforts on both sides, philanthropic activities, and the unofficial though professional work through which they contributed to their husbands' careers. While there is substantial scholarship on all of those fields of women's activities, as a cultural notion that informed these activities, *service* is severely undertheorized. In both primary and secondary sources, it appears inconspicuously and has been closely intertwined not only with what women do but who they are or are supposed to be.

The strong association between middle-class women and service as doing-good-to-others can be traced in the highly regulating conduct literature of the Civil War era. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the term *service* was predominantly used in two ways. First, it appears in religious contexts, as in "service to God." It would be through this religiously-spirited vehicle of loving-thy-neighbor that doing good unto others was extended to the emerging white middle-class notion of women's *service* as a form of civil religion. Second, *service* referred to the work of domestic servants.

To carve out the notion of *service* that this journal issue brings into focus, we can draw on Eliza Lynn Linton's 1868 essay "The Girl of the Period," which was well received on both sides of the Atlantic. Bemoaning middle-class, progressive women's ostensible pleasure in leisure and professional careers, for which she did not deem women intellectually suited, Linton lamented the neglect of their assumed "natural duties": "But how seldom do we find a house where the lady does look after the food of the family; where clean hands and educated brains are

put to active service for the good of others!" (42) The essay first appeared in the *Saturday Review*, London, 14 March 1868. Its wide reception in the United States is evidenced by Fanny Fern's poignant response, first published in the *New York Ledger*, most likely in 1869, titled "Woman's Millenium" and later that year republished by British and American periodicals under the title "The Other Girl of the Period" (Huston et al.). Directly referencing Linton's essay, Fern writes:

I am inclined to believe that there are a great many kinds of women, both in England and America. This idea seems to be lost sight of by the writers of both nations, who have lately undertaken to describe the feminine element under such titles as "The Girl of Period," or "The Woman of the Time;" presenting to our view monstrosities ... New York, for instance, is not wholly given over to the feminine devil. Angels walk our streets, discernible to eyes that wish to see. Noble, thoughtful, earnest women; sick of shams and pretence; striving each, so far as in her lies, to abate both, and to diminish the amount of physical and moral suffering. (qt. in Huston et al.)

Some scholars have asserted that Linton's stance on women's place in society might have been insincere and self-serving (see for example Broomfield); nevertheless, Linton's essay is telling in the way it praises service and breaks it down to its quintessential component: applying one's resources for the benefit of others.

Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), almost exclusively used the term *service* to refer to church services. Wollstonecraft, who was the most influential 18th-century proponent of women's rights and who was adored on the continent and across the Atlantic, mostly speaks of *duty* when talking about women's role and performance in society. There is no mention of women and service, but she uses the term independently as "in the service of" and "of service to," two notions of the word that would feature strongly in connection to women and their assigned spheres of activity as the 19th century progressed.

In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), US intellectual, educator, author, and activist Margaret Fuller also divorces service from ideas of the proper activities for women. For her, it mostly denotes hard work, that is, servitude, as regards immigrant and enslaved women. In addition, Fuller uses the term to address the motivation for activities such as "service of love" (145) and "service of the saint" (47).

Catharine Beecher, sister to the well-known abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe and an educator and a reformer in her own right, is known for her highly influential manual *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (first published 1841), in which she makes the case to treat women's domestic work as a science, anticipat-

ing the development of modern home economics (Strazdes 452). In the *Treatise*, which Beecher historian Kathryn Kish Sklar has characterized as “a nation-building, class-building, family-building, and woman-building manual” (1251), the most common use of the term is in reference to domestic, or hired, service, with Beecher providing ample advice on how to secure and manage servants. What *service* is not yet used to denote here are the regular activities women perform at home—Beecher lists mending garments, performing kitchen work, or nursing infants and the sick, all of which she calls simply “work” (164).

The underlying idea of *service* as duty to others appears in *A Treatise* in terms such as “[g]ood-manners” and “benevolence,” which Beecher demands of men and women alike (136). Remarkably, despite her *Treatise* being targeted at “young ladies,” and her heavily drawing on the discourse of Republican Motherhood, invoking the moral responsibility of women of all classes towards their husbands, children, and charges, Beecher does not establish benevolent service as a specifically female virtue. She encourages parents (mothers *and* fathers) to help their children, regardless of gender, in

the formation of habits of *submission, self-denial, and benevolence* ... to form such a character ... that they can hereafter find their chief happiness in giving up their will to God, and in living to do good to others, instead of living merely to please themselves. (224, emphasis in original)

What is apparent in Beecher’s rhetoric is the idea of what could be termed “service to God” as it applies in daily life, but the form this notion takes as giving preference to other people’s wishes applies to men and women alike.

Just 20 years later, Florence Hartley explicitly ties the practice of self-sacrifice to women’s value in her influential *Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness*, which went through at least four editions throughout the 1870s. Still not engaging with the term *service*, she uses “graceful manners” and “virtue” to paint the image of the ideal woman as “generous, disinterested, self-sacrificing, and amiable,” urging women to “let everyone ... see that you care for them” (Hartley 143–44).

It seems to be only after the Civil War that *service* makes its appearance in conduct literature and related discourses of women’s roles. Its appearance then builds on antebellum notions of women’s virtue being tied to self-sacrifice, care-giving, and their moral aptness at lifting up others. Possibly taken up from the rhetoric of “serving the nation” during the war, the term *service* now encompasses the “benevolent” activities that 20th-century historiography has conceptualized as white middle-class women’s concerted push into the public sphere (see, for example, Kerber’s “The Republican Mother” and Werbner’s “Political Motherhood”). The conceptual shift occurred at a moment when millions of enslaved women had

recently been freed. Before Emancipation, enslaved women's labor was not at all acknowledged as service to white enslavers. White women's antebellum and Civil War diaries, for example, clearly present that the work of enslaved women is often either ignored, or divorced from its agents via passive constructions such as "the house was cleaned," or, even conceptualized as white woman's work. The end of slavery triggered a reconfiguration of (Southern) white femininity that relied on new markers of difference, as McPherson puts it (21), to set off white from Black womanhood. Part of this reconfiguration was to style Black women as sexually promiscuous, easily corruptible inferior beings and therefore in dire need of moral guidance. Essentialist racial categorizations promoted by most Southerners and eagerly adopted by many Northerners and supported by 19th-century pseudoscience such as phrenology denied Black women any claim to True Womanhood, a concept based on women's natural moral and religious compass (Nitz 12–19). Racial boundaries were firmly in place in the 19th century, in Europe and the United States alike, but the momentous shift from a slave-society to a free one in mid-century set off a more rigorous reconceptualization of notions of femininity (and masculinity as well) in the United States than elsewhere.

While the Civil War deepened the conceptual connection between ideas of sacrifice and serving the nation, especially for white Southern women, the American Revolution had already seen gendered services with men serving in the military and women mostly engaging in domestic service for soldiers, for example, as camp followers. However, women were also involved in the boycott of British goods, in raising funds and in taking on managerial roles in their families and communities when the men were gone. Service to one's country during wartime became a defining moment for the citizenship of the newly reformed republic. As DuBois and Dumenil highlight in their seminal book on American history, *Through Women's Eyes*, "sacrifices become emblems of civic virtue and worthiness" (107), and they convincingly conclude that, hence, "the link between women's patriotism and the domestic sphere was to be one of the principal ideological legacies of the Revolution" (112). Revolutionary ideology, industrial revolution, westward expansion, the Great Awakening and the much-cherished egalitarianism of the republic sowed the seeds for a greater participation of women in the civic project and public life. However, this expectation applied only to white, well-to-do women, but certainly not because they had worked the hardest in service to the nation; on the contrary, most care work and hard labor

during war and peace times was handled by women of the laboring classes and by enslaved women. Because white upper- and middle-class women were (officially) related to the male elite of the country, they therefore had some sway and could push for more recognition.

Increasingly, the notion of *service* conflated women's activities with their ostensibly natural morality and altruism. Unlike "benevolence," "manners," or "virtue," using *service* to denote the way women navigate private and public life—if one wants to make that distinction—imbues it with gravitas. It focusses what they do through the lens of some greater good that might or might not be specified. What exactly that greater good consists of is open for interpretation. Husband, family, God, nation, society, civilization—they have all been distinguished as recipients of women's service, to put women into their "proper" place, or to justify them in breaking out of it.

Returning to Eliza Lynn Linton and her essay on the "Girl of the Period," we find the notion of *service* invoked to relegate women to the home. Linton calls into question the morality of married women who occupy themselves with activities beyond the domestic: "professions are undertaken and careers invaded which were formerly held sacred to men; while things are left undone which, for all the generations that the world has lasted, have been naturally and instinctively assigned to women to do" (37). Echoing Social Darwinist discourses on woman's natural duties, Linton chastises married women who seek professional careers and neglect their home lives. Although she concedes that single women might economically have no choice but to work outside the home and that some extraordinarily brilliant women may be suited for professional careers—meaning anything remunerated outside the house (38)—the notion of *service*, in Linton's polemic, is engaged to circumscribe and limit women's legitimate sphere of action.

Conversely, in *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* (1882), an incredibly popular etiquette manual that went through at least 21 editions in the 1880s, the highly contentious chapter on "The Higher Culture of Women" engages the notion of *service* to justify its call upon women to pursue professional careers and gain economic independence. Claiming that "no woman possessed of a genuine womanly character" (180) could depend on the charity of her husband's income, the authors² argue that

2. It is not specified who exactly out of the many authors contributed this chapter, but inferring from the use of the first-person plural, our most probable guess would be "Mrs. W. R. Houghton," as she is listed in the frontmatter.

characters must have some way to embody themselves in an outward form to be of service to the world. The best way is in devotion to some useful calling or profession by which our powers may be called upon for their best efforts in a direction that shall promise a full reward for ourselves and a good surplus to our fellow men. (Houghton et al. 181)

Here, women are called upon to leave their domestic world for their own salvation and the greater good. What exactly women are supposed to devote themselves to is left intriguingly open. It is exactly this openness to an unspecified variety of *good* causes that constitutes the currency of the term *service*. While conservative appeals such as Linton's could mobilize *service's* connotation of women's natural duties to home and family, progressive causes could exploit its connection to broader notions of selflessness. In its somewhat emancipatory use, *service*, as compared to "activism" or "work," could obscure women's self-interest and help avoid social sanctioning as middle-class women pushed into the public sphere as reformers, teachers, missionaries, etc.

The Tradition of Service as a White, Middle-Class Notion

Middle-class women's espousal of service as a field of appropriate activity came at the cost of working-class women. It was the employment of domestic servants that afforded middle- and upper-class 19th-century women, in the UK, Europe, and the US, the time to commit themselves to the causes of their choice. This allowed them to dedicate themselves full-time to what historian Lori Ginzberg has termed the "work of benevolence." She shows how under the auspices of benevolent service to those in need, middle-class white women gained substantial authority over the poor, immigrants, and racialized others (60). Abigail May Alcott's Missionary and Relief room for immigrant women, as outlined in Daniela Daniele's article in this volume, is a prominent example of how these women understood their charitable work as quite distinct from and above that of domestic servants.

Conceptualizing service as inherently benevolent and thereby setting it off from paid services gave white middle-class women the moral high-ground and has lastingly affected society's understanding of service up to today. Being "in somebody's service," clearly, became an altogether different and morally devalued matter as compared to "being of service to" somebody or something.

Furthermore, the distinction of service and “domestic service” entailed the racialization of the latter. Studies such as Margaret Lynch-Brennan’s *The Irish Bridget* and Melissa Wooten and Enobong Branch’s “Defining Appropriate Labor” demonstrate how Black and Irish women were constructed as the most typical domestic servants. Consequently, but less obviously, the notion of benevolent service became white-coded.

White women’s emancipation possibilities and reform efforts in the 19th century were intricately tied to changing notions of *service*. The well-established idea of serving in and through God’s grace was expanded or translated to serving the moral and religious integrity of the nation. This becomes especially apparent in emerging calls on women to exert their assumed natural sensibilities for moral guidance in antebellum reform efforts.

Woman’s Service and Reform

During the Antebellum Period in the United States, White women’s service (not yet called by that name) expanded to include political reform, particularly in the antislavery and woman’s rights movements. In northern cities, thousands of women responded to Boston abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison’s insistence in the early 1830s that women had a duty to join his radical antislavery movement. Women’s “influence” was “potent,” according to Garrison (1:208), and he urged them to take leadership roles in his radical abolitionist movement.

Despite the criticism against their speaking in public, especially on politically sensitive subjects such as slavery, Black and white women such as Maria Stewart, Abby Kelly Foster, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Sojourner Truth, and Lucy Stone responded to Garrison, delivering lectures in public forums throughout the 1830s and 1840s against the horrendous practices of slavery. From their vantage point of growing up on a large agricultural estate in South Carolina, worked by enslaved people, the Grimkés readily agreed with abolitionist Eliza Follen that women were “the greatest sufferers from slavery” (Follen 153).

Other abolitionists also argued that “women must agitate the conscience of the community. You must see that it is done. You are more responsible—for you have more moral influence” (Rogers 18). With this statement, Rogers voices the cultural norm of the Antebellum Period—that women were held to be the moral guardians of society.

Reform-minded women at this time also formed hundreds of local antislavery societies; these organizations raised money to support Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society and to subsidize his *Liberator* newspaper. They also sponsored antislavery speakers and rallies, organized fundraising bazaars, and circulated petitions, which they sent to their state legislators as well as to the United States Congress.

This reform work on behalf of enslaved Americans soon led some of the most active abolitionist women to begin advocating for their own rights, particularly the rights to suffrage and access to higher education. The first woman's rights convention in the United States took place in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, who had met at a World Anti-Slavery Convention in London several years earlier. The result of this gathering was published as *The Declaration of Sentiments*, which added two significant words to the opening line of *The Declaration of Independence*: "All men and women are created equal."

Women's reform-mindedness throughout the 19th century also encompassed the temperance movement, labor and prison reform, dress reform, and advocacy for mothers to have custodial rights to their children. The specific duties women handled in taking on these important roles were extensive; from organizing national conventions to writing and delivering speeches to editing and publishing newspapers, women turned their former charity efforts into fulltime service that addressed a number of causes.

Municipal Housekeeping as Service to the Community

In the latter part of the 19th century, white-coded benevolent service enabled women, as Du Bois and Dumenil put it, to draw on the image of "public housekeeping to describe women's activism" (415). In what has become known as municipal housekeeping, US society expanded the spatial boundaries of the True Woman and her home onto the cityscape and created what Morris-Crowther has termed a "'city as a home' vision" (31). Women advocated the idea of civic housewifery by connecting their domestic responsibilities with issues that pertained to society as a whole, such as cleaning dirty and polluted streets, and addressing public health concerns, often dangerous working conditions, political corruption, etc. The rhetoric of municipal housekeeping opened opportunities for women to enter public office, as they argued, in order to purify the male-dominated and corrupted environment of the public and political spheres (see also Lewis).

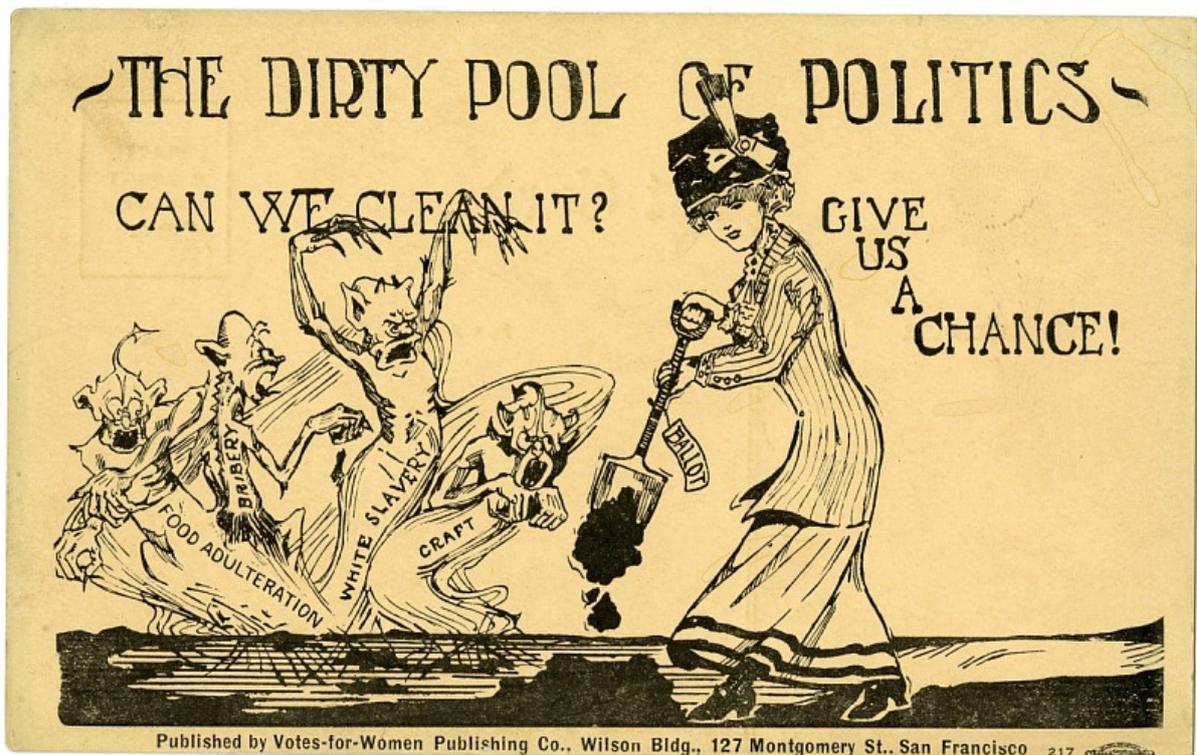


Figure 1: “The Dirty Pool of Politics,” *The Suffrage Postcard Project*, accessed August 16, 2023, <https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/items/show/286>.

Camilla Stivers shows how women like Jane Addams, founder of the Hull House, whose *service* to the city of Chicago and, by extension to the American nation, has been scrutinized in Alice Cheylan’s contribution to this special issue, have been characterized as taking serious social problems into their own hands. Addams and other women reformers like her were actively engaged in municipal housekeeping efforts to literally and morally keep their cities clean (18). In “Women and Public Housekeeping” (1913), Jane Addams eloquently connects her stance against the disenfranchisement of women with a sense of female moral superiority and aptitude for public service:

The very multifariousness and complexity of a city government demand the help of minds accustomed to detail and variety of work, to a sense of obligation for the health and welfare of young children, and to responsibility for the cleanliness and comfort of other people. Because all these things have traditionally been in the hands of women, if they take no part in them now they are not only missing the education which the natural participation in civic life would bring them, but they are losing what they have always had.

In her argument for the inclusion of women in the governance of the city, Addams builds on the by then well-established notion of domestic labor as a *service* to the nation and establishes women's efforts as a traditional role, as the privilege or even prerogative of women. By withholding women's access to the tasks of municipal housekeeping, Addams's argument suggests men deny women their personhood and violate the natural order of things. However, her fear of women missing out on civic life also signifies that municipal housekeeping might mean more to women than merely being of service to their communities and cities; this identity generates possibilities for women of upper- and middle-class status to experience self-efficacy and to perform citizenship.

Women of Color and "Service to their Race"

Middle- and upper-class White women partook in multifarious reform movements and widened their scope of activities within the municipal and political arena. As DuBois and Dumenil point out, women of color were largely excluded from these reform organizations but managed to create their own networks for self-help and social support.

Women of color were mostly excluded from notions of True Womanhood, and there were fixed color-barriers in reform organizations. As a consequence, the changing notions of *service* discussed above did not affect the way the work of women of color was perceived. By the 1880s and 1890s, the majority of Black working women were employed as domestic servants, even though the US government increasingly included Black women as clerks in government agencies (Stivers 18). As Branch and Wooten poignantly show, at the turn of the century, employing Black women as domestic servants "served as a status enhancer for employers" ("Suited for Service" 183).

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, a number of women of color found ways in which they challenged and pushed the boundaries of the white-coded sphere of "being of service to." They also understood the dangers of being relegated to a life of servitude that would suppress attempts at civil equity or emancipation. Maria M. Miller Stewart, one of the first African American public speakers, in a "Lecture Delivered at Franklin Hall" in 1832, calls this state of servitude, which she translates to being "a servant of servants" (51), a horror. She makes clear that she would prefer death over such a state of drudgery and ignorance: "And such is the horrible idea that I entertain respecting a life of servitude, that if I conceived of there being no possibility of my rising above the condition of a servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger" (53). She bemoans that even

when Black girls adhere to white moral and religious standards, they are subject to their employers' prejudice and reduced to a state of perpetual servitude that entails not only hard work but perpetuates inequality and suppresses moral and social uplift. It is worth quoting Stewart here at length to illustrate the obvious ideological flaws, inherent racism, and socio-economic consequences of the evolving concept of True Womanhood to those excluded from its sphere of reference:

Few White persons of either sex, who are calculated for any thing [sic] else, are willing to spend their lives and bury their talents in performing mean, servile labor. And such is the horrible idea that I entertain respecting a life of servitude, that if I conceived of there being no possibility of my rising above the condition of a servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger. O, horrible idea, indeed! to possess noble souls aspiring after high and honorable acquirements, yet confined by the chains of ignorance and poverty to lives of continual drudgery and toil. Neither do I know of any who have enriched themselves by spending their lives as house domestics, washing windows, shaking carpets, brushing boots, or tending upon gentlemen's tables. I can but die for expressing my sentiments; and I am as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence; for I am a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast. (52-53)

In this passage, Stewart appeals to a common sense of nationhood and for the extension of egalitarian sentiments to African Americans. Though her activism was short lived, her speeches are an example of early Black resistance to the way women's *service* was racially conceptualized.

Later in the century, women of color used a variety of means to challenge racially fixed notions of *service*. They engaged in anti-racist and anti-discriminatory discourses and emerged as "servants to their race." In her *Crusade for Justice*, Ida B. Wells writes that

because I saw the chance to be more of service to the cause ... I accepted their advice ... and continued my fight against lynching and lynchers ... They had made me an exile and threatened my life for hinting at the truth. I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth. (54).

What is apparent in Wells's rhetoric is her devotion to the greater good of her race, an undertaking that ultimately targets injustices that are distinctly racially-motivated. Similarly, Indigenous women like Zitkala-Ša, also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, created distinct discourses around being engaged in services benefitting her race. Like Wells's *service* described above, Bonnin's *service* was

geared at the elevation of a diverse marginalized social group on different societal levels, ranging from individual citizenship to political self-determination as sovereign nations, not solely directed at women but to Indigenous men as well (Johnson and Wilson 34).

The legacy of the notion of *service* as altruistic benevolence is still palpable today. In the 21st century, *service* remains a catch-all term for voluntary work, distinct from wage labor in the so-called service sector, and to some degree also from social service work. Similarly, the need for ongoing feminist struggle for the recognition of care work as “real” work can be seen as a remnant of the 19th-century conflation of white, middle-class femininity and selfless giving.

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