



# Racialized and Gendered Constructions of the “Ideal Server”: Contesting Historical Occupational Discourses of Restaurant Service

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This essay takes a discourse-centered approach to understanding the historically contingent construction of restaurant service as a devalued occupational identity, showing how service is actively constructed as low wage and organized along hierarchies of gender, race, and class. These discursive constructions shape the relative visibility and legibility of workers as fully deserving of rights, compensation, and dignity. Building on prior research on the struggle over meanings of work, occupational identity, and gendered and racialized job segregation, the essay begins by tracing constructions of the “ideal server” predating the contemporary rise of restaurants from relations of servitude within and beyond the plantation economy, to the eventual entrenchment of tipping, and the gendered and feminized constructions of domestic service. It discusses racialized and gendered relations of servitude in the Pullman Company’s dining cars and the eventual white feminization of waitressing. Adopting a historical narrative built on secondary literatures, it demonstrates the centrality of race, gender, and class to early occupational formations of service. It highlights how employers have cultivated occupational hierarchies and divisions as well as efforts by restaurant workers to transform how their labor is valued and compensated.

**Keywords:** restaurant labor, wages, occupational discourse, food chain workers, devalued work, racial hierarchies, gender hierarchies, job segregation

## OPEN ACCESS

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### Specialty section:

This article was submitted to  
Social Movements, Institutions and  
Governance,  
a section of the journal  
Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems

**Received:** 18 June 2021

**Accepted:** 29 September 2021

**Published:** 26 October 2021

### Citation:

Dempsey SE (2021) Racialized and Gendered Constructions of the “Ideal Server”: Contesting Historical Occupational Discourses of Restaurant Service. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 5:727473. doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2021.727473

## INTRODUCTION

*This morning, the young barista woman told me that a customer came in with a mask, but not wearing it. When she asked the customer to put on her mask please, the woman said: Why? There’s no-one in here.*<sup>1</sup>

The above re-telling of a service interaction takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic at a time when choices about the health and safety of workers were largely being determined by employers and customers. This mediated account provides a glimpse into the uneven, multi-faceted relations characterizing U.S. restaurant work. That the server is a young woman tasked with enforcing mask compliance invokes the relational, identity-based nature of privileges and vulnerabilities exacerbated within the pandemic. The statement “there’s no-one in here” marks the server as invisible. By excluding her as a person fully deserving consideration and care, it summons the long reach of relations of servitude originating in the plantation economy. Combined with increasing evidence that the pandemic has only intensified ongoing problems of

<sup>1</sup>Posted to Twitter by @DominicPettman, July 16, 2020 (Pettman, 2020). I am less interested in whether this account actually happened and more interested in the historically contingent discourses that circulate around the value of service workers, including the exacerbated relations of inequality during pandemic times.

occupational hierarchy, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, wage theft, and wage inequality in the restaurant industry (One Fair Wage, 2020), there is a clear need for greater attention to how unequal work relations have been constructed and maintained over time.

To that end, this essay takes a discourse-centered approach to understanding the historically contingent construction of restaurant service as a devalued occupational identity, showing how service is actively constructed within capitalism as low wage and organized along hierarchies of gender, race, and class. These discursive constructions shape the relative visibility and legibility of workers as fully deserving of rights, compensation, and dignity. Building on prior research on the struggle over meanings of work, occupational identity, and gendered and racialized job segregation, the essay begins by tracing constructions of the “ideal server” predating the contemporary rise of restaurants. Adopting a historical narrative built on secondary literatures, I demonstrate the centrality of race, gender, and class to early occupational formations of restaurant service and highlight how employers have cultivated occupational hierarchies and divisions. Historical discourses of servitude originating within the plantation were constituted through racial and gender difference and notions of (un)free labor. The essay illustrates how the logics and practices developed within slavery shaped ideas about the ideal domestic server in the racialized and feminized spaces of the household and in the railroad dining cars of the Pullman Company. It highlights how occupational formations of service within the early period of U.S. restaurants have been meaningfully shaped through Jim Crow practices and discriminatory hiring at the intersections of race and gender, discussing the eventual white feminization of public-facing restaurant service. The final sections emphasize the importance of emergent coalitional efforts by restaurant workers aimed at transforming how their labor is valued and compensated.

## THE CONTESTED DISCURSIVE TERRAIN OF OCCUPATIONS

This essay is organized around key sites of struggle over how the work of serving is understood, valued, and compensated. I build on a tradition of critical scholarship aimed at unearthing the communicative processes involved with ascribing meanings, values, and judgements to occupations and their associated workers (Trethewey, 1999; Ashcraft, 2007, 2013). Taking a constitutive approach, I approach discourse as generative and powerful. Discourse not only brings objects and ideas into being but is used to delimit and govern how those objects and ideas are put into practice. A discursive approach challenges the idea that certain types of jobs or occupations have more or less inherent value than others. Rather, notions of value and worthiness are culturally contingent communicative accomplishments. Communication influences what types of jobs are considered un/desirable, and more or less “meaningful” (e.g., Clair et al., 2008; Kuhn et al., 2008; Way, 2020). The material dimensions of work like wages and working conditions are always mediated in and through discourse. My focus on discursive

struggle foregrounds the interplay between competing systems of meaning, illustrating that the devaluing of certain occupations takes constant work to produce, maintain, and justify.

Occupational identity is a key site of discursive struggle around meanings of work. “Dirty work” describes occupations that are associated with negative stigma and constructed as physically, socially, or morally tainted (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Given that organizations are simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed (Allen, 2010; Parker, 2014), social identity categories like race, gender, and class play a decisive role in whether and how certain occupations gain prestige or stigma. Much of the occupational identity scholarship draws on interviews and observational research to explore how organizational members navigate stigma. A central aim involves understanding how workers are able to recast negative stigmas and reclaim or maintain positive occupational identities (Drew et al., 2007; Meisenbach, 2008; Lucas, 2011). In their comparative study of firefighters and correctional officers, Tracy and Scott (2006) illustrate how participants were more or less able to deploy discourses of sexuality and masculinity to deflect stigmas. Their findings highlight how broader discourses frame certain occupations or tasks as “morally questionable, servile, or low in status” (p. 33). Cruz (Cruz, 2015) has argued for the need for increased attention to the variances of national context, illustrating how participants leveraged both negative and positive meanings to frame the meaning of their work a shifting post-conflict context. Further, researchers highlight that one’s position relative to others within a broader social and cultural hierarchy of advantages and privileges structures who bears the brunt of stigmatized occupations. For example, historically marginalized groups experience disproportionately more negative impacts of occupational stigma when compared to their privileged counterparts, even when engaged in the same job tasks (Rivera, 2015; Malvini Redden and Scarduzio, 2018). Together, this research underscores that a broader context of privileges and advantages shapes devalued occupations. Racial and gender difference is a key organizer of occupational identity where notions of value and fit are constructed and maintained.

The need to attend to the variations of macro-level discourses and practices has given rise to critical studies of how the texture and meanings of occupations are discursively maintained over time. Approaching occupations as “rhetorical endeavors,” researchers pursue questions about the endurance of labor hierarchies across time and space, multiple scales of discourses, and within and across institutions and actors (Ashcraft, 2007). Intersecting discourses and practices of difference – such as nationality, gender, race, class, and sexuality—are understood as key constituting features (Acker, 2006; Ashcraft, 2007, 2013; Ray, 2019). Recently, Ray (2019) has argued for the need to replace the notion of organizations as race-neutral with a view that sees organizations as constituting and constituted by racial processes. As he underscores, racial inequality is not merely “in” organizations but “of” them, as racial processes are foundational to organizational formation and continuity” (p. 50). Bridging studies of occupational discourses with these insights, I contend that intersecting processes of gendering and racialization are similarly foundational to the formation and maintenance of restaurant service as devalued work.

While organizational researchers increasingly attend to the intersections of race, class, and gender as foundational, these approaches would benefit from greater attention to how employers have historically devalued and disadvantaged workers (Duffy, 2007). There is a particular need to shift attention to how employers have wielded racial and gender difference to their advantage. Employers are not neutral actors. Their hiring preferences and choices reflect and maintain a racialized and gendered social system of privileges and disadvantages (Branch, 2011, p. 25). An intersectional approach contends with how forms of oppressions work together as “reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 2). As Branch’s (2011) rich study of domestic service reveals, the “near-universal restriction of Black women to devalued work” reflects the influence of both racism and sexism (p. 8). By tracing shifting constructions of the ideal server across multiple sites, I respond to the need for greater attention to the historical processes of formation surrounding occupations and the significance of intersecting forms of racism and sexism to their very constitution. The essay proceeds with a brief overview of contemporary occupational hierarchies and wage inequalities of restaurant service before turning to a much-needed focus on the long aftereffects of slavery and its associated gendered and racialized meanings tied to the work of serving. I then turn to domestic service and the dining cars of the Pullman Company as key sites of contestation around how food service should be valued and compensated. The final section brings a focus to coalitional organizing by restaurant workers in the face of employers’ attempts to exert control over the terms of service work.

## RESTAURANT OCCUPATIONAL HIERARCHIES AND WAGE INEQUALITIES

The relative invisibility of today’s restaurant service worker invoked by the essay’s opening is a product of gendered and racialized patterns of work, employment, and consumption as they have developed over time. Widely recognized as an undesirable “bad job” within popular and academic discourses alike, restaurant work typically involves low pay, few employer-sponsored benefits, unpredictable schedules, dangerous working conditions, and limited ability for advancement (Jayaraman, 2013, 2016; Hunt, 2016). Employers largely rely on at-will and short-term hiring and scheduling practices that creates precarity for workers. Nationally, the average salary of restaurant workers averages <\$30,000 a year and is defined by high levels of wage inequality and occupational segregation (Wilson, 2021). The great majority of restaurant workers—largely women and racial minorities—are much more likely to be earning poverty wages, experiencing hunger and food insecurity, and at increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 in their workplaces.

Restaurants involve a clear gendered and racialized dividing line between higher paying server and bartender positions in full-service, formal restaurants and poverty-level positions as line cooks, bussers, and dishwashers in casual and quick service restaurants (for an overview see Jayaraman, 2013, 2016; Wilson,

2021). White men remain highly concentrated in the highest paying jobs and in managerial positions, whereas women are clustered in lower paying positions. Overall, Latinos and African Americans are much more likely to be working in lower paying back of the house positions or in limited-service fast food restaurants. When compared to white women, Black women tend to occupy lower paying positions.

Restaurants typically involve a mixture of hourly, salaried, and tipped workers within one organization. However, tipping remains the primary wage relation for employees involved in service-related activities in restaurants. Unmoved since 1991, the federal tipped minimum wage remains at \$2.13 an hour. It is a poverty wage, upholding wage theft. The relationship between tipping and relations of inequality, discrimination, and harassment within restaurants is well-documented. Restaurant worker narratives frame tipping as risky, exploitative, and in need of reform (Hunt, 2016). Even when tips are considered, tipped workers on average occupy the bottom quartile of all U.S. wage earners. Women comprise two out of every three tipped workers; of the food servers and bartenders who make up over half of the tipped workforce, 70% of them are women (Filion and Allegretto, 2011). Tipped workers experience a poverty rate nearly twice that of other workers (Filion and Allegretto, 2011), and 46% of tipped workers and their families draw public benefits, compared with 35.5% of non-tipped workers and their families. A host of research explores how discrimination results in lower tips for people of color when compared to their white counterparts (Lynn et al., 2008; Wang, 2013). Research also identifies links between tipping and high rates of sexual harassment. Overall, food service workers report the highest levels of sexual harassment of any other industry, with much harassment involving racism (Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, 2014). In addition, emerging research highlights the need to attend to the diverse experiences of LGBT+ populations, including transgender frontline workers, who may face abusive, discriminatory, and transphobic treatment by managers and customers alike (Hadjisolomou, 2021). Reports indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated conditions of harassment. A recent study of servers found that 43% of women participants reported receiving or witnessing unwanted sexual comments related to COVID-19 protocols, such as masks or physical distancing (One Fair Wage, 2020). For example, one participant described being told by a customer: “take off your mask so I can know how much to tip you.” As I discuss next, histories of servitude provide insight into how work associated with serving has been historically devalued, constituted by racial and gender difference, and primarily compensated through tips.

## CONSTRUCTING THE IDEAL SERVER

Service—providing help or care—and the associated labor of cooking and cleaning have come to define restaurant work. These tasks are part of a broader category that feminists refer to as reproductive labor (Federici, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017). The concept of reproductive labor derives from the recognition of women’s unpaid housework as central to economic

production. Reproductive labor involves the many activities involved with maintaining life itself, including caring for and reproducing future generations. It names activities like cooking, child rearing, and caring for one's health that have been typically ignored by traditional analyses of the economy (Barker et al., 2021). Theories of reproductive labor critique the gendered and racialized division of labor, emphasizing its centrality in maintaining women's inequality and continued marginalization. The devaluation of reproductive labor is both symbolic and material. It is devalued symbolically as less prestigious, less serious, and less "real." It has been simultaneously devalued in material ways through stolen freedom and wages within the plantation economy and later, in the form of poverty wages, temporary work arrangements, and less benefits like health care or paid time off.

The following sections demonstrate that the question of who has been constructed as the most fit for the work of serving reflects the relational nature of race and gender privileges and disadvantages (Duffy, 2007; Branch, 2011; Branch and Wooten, 2012). In the case of domestic labor, the exploitation of Black women in the domestic sphere of the plantation and the household provided advantages in the form of increased leisure time or a better position within the formal economy for white women (Glenn, 2009; Sharpless, 2010). Historical discourses and practices of servitude originating within the plantation economy found adoption within debates over domestic service as well as within the gendered and racialized occupational hierarchies of the Pullman Company dining cars to the eventual white feminization of public-facing restaurant service. Together, these key turning points demonstrate that constructions of the ideal server are simultaneously racialized, gendered, and classed.

## Relations of Servitude Beyond the Plantation

In the U.S., questions about who is considered the most fit for the reproductive labor of serving are impossible to answer without attending to the long reach of discourses and practices of servitude developed within slavery and the plantation economy (Branch, 2011; Branch and Wooten, 2012). The plantation economy was constituted by the stolen freedom and forced labor of African descended people. It was supported by supremacist and hierarchical ideologies that sought to categorize and divide certain groups as less than human according to shifting conceptions of race<sup>2</sup>. Slave owners materialized their ideologies of servitude through violence and routinized surveillance. These relations were also maintained through discourses that devalued the knowledge and skills of enslaved people, such as through "controlling images" perpetuating myths about Black womanhood (Collins, 1999). Relations of servitude created during slavery laid the foundation for exploitation beyond abolition.

<sup>2</sup>Here, I adopt an approach to gender and race as interlinked and historically contingent social constructions involving categorizations of people based on perceived differences. These categories are made to matter as they are used to dehumanize and justify violence, poor treatment, and discrimination.

Within relations of servitude, surveillance practices created forms of hyper visibility. Technologies of surveillance included the constant white gaze of the overseer, the relentless tracking by the slave catcher, and local ordinances like "lantern laws" requiring that enslaved people light their faces with lanterns when traveling after dark (Browne, 2016). The plantation kitchen itself functioned as a key site of violence and surveillance. Culinarian historian Twitty (2017) describes the kitchen during slavery as a "sinister place," a site of violence, rape, and sexual violations (p. 107). Architects designed plantation kitchens to allow white mistresses to keep constant watch over the cook (Deetz, 2017). "Southern hospitality" revolved around the use of food as a performance of wealth and status. White mistresses enlisted their enslaved domestic staff, and especially, their cooks, as a central part of this performance (Deetz, 2017). Whites' explicit showcasing of Black servitude changed as anti-slavery sentiment grew. Plantation owners turned to new kitchen technologies as a way to conceal their reliance on enslaved domestic labor when it suited them. For example, Thomas Jefferson installed a system of mechanical dumbwaiters in the White House masking his enslaved domestic staff from visiting domestic and foreign dignitaries who opposed slavery (Miller, 2017). Owners used these technologies to oscillate between the visibility or concealment of enslaved labor.

Long after the "official" end of slavery, racist songs, literature, memorabilia, and advertising maintained racialized constructions of the ideal server. Hartman (2007) characterizes the continued devaluation of Black life, skill, and labor as the "afterlife of slavery." Williams-Forson (2006) argues that the period between the 1880s and 1930 was defined by symbolic slavery involving overtly racist images and portrayals of the Old South. Popular discourses constructed an image of enslaved domestic servants as "cooking by instinct," or possessing an inherent ability to cook and serve (Veit, 2013). The idea that enslaved women were ideally suited for reproductive labor while also "cooking by instinct," and therefore unskilled, is well-illustrated by the feminized image of the Mammy. Originating in the 1880s, images of the Mammy figure functioned as a white response to the prospect of racial parity (Tipton-Martin, 2015). As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (2011) describes, supporters of the Confederacy deployed the Mammy image in their attempts to recast relations of servitude and perpetuate a myth that the antebellum South was characterized by mutual respect and loyalty between slave owners and those they enslaved.

From film to commercial advertising and restaurant concepts, U.S. material cultures invoked racialized images of servitude like the Mammy originating within slavery (Williams-Forson, 2006; Kwate, 2019; Walters, 2021). Perhaps the most consistent commercialized portrayal of the Mammy image is found in the figure of Aunt Jemima. For 120 years, food companies have employed the figure of Aunt Jemima to sell pancake mixes and syrup. For some scholars, the popularity of Mammy portrayals like Aunt Jemima indicates white fears of the potential superiority of African Americans within the space of the kitchen (Egerton, 2015). Others have argued that the commodification of Aunt Jemima draws upon white women's racial nostalgia for a plantation economy defined by Black servitude (Manring,

1998). Activists, scholars, and consumers have long criticized the Aunt Jemima brand for its racist imagery, calling for boycotts and its removal. In June 2020 as widespread uprisings against police brutality targeting Black people were reignited after the killing of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by police, the Pepsi-owned Quaker Oats brand announced that they would stop using the Aunt Jemima name and image<sup>3</sup>. Restaurants have also drawn on white nostalgia for the plantation economy by invoking Mammy portrayals in their marketing and concepts. Three such restaurants, Richard's Restaurant and Slave Market in Berwyn, IL, The Coon Chicken Inn in Salt Lake City, UT, and Mammy's Cupboard in Natchez, MS exist today (Kwate, 2019).

## The Entrenchment of Tipping

The adoption of tipping and its later entrenchment within restaurants is similarly bound up in shifting constructions of the ideal server. These constructions became increasingly racialized as tipping became linked with notions of unfree labor. The earliest U.S. restaurants were elite spaces that imported a French model of professional dining service originating in master-servant relationships. These largely formal restaurants were located in hotels and employed professionally trained European male immigrants until World War I (Haley, 2011). Early constructions of the ideal European male restaurant server involved politeness, obedience, and submission. These traits were masculinized, recognized as being gained through professionalized training, and thus associated with greater skill (Rawson and Shore, 2019). However, racist ideologies naturalizing Black servitude at the expense of constructions of white free labor clashed when whites labored in these same service jobs after abolition. For employers, tipping was a way to avoid paying formerly enslaved workers a direct wage (see Jayaraman, 2013, 2016; Barber, 2019; Alexander, 2021; Wilson, 2021). White Americans adapted tipping to fit within existing racist ideologies naturalizing Black servitude. Segrave (2009) quotes a southern white journalist declaring his prejudices after encountering a white man working for tips in 1902:

I had never known any but negro servants. Negroes take tips, of course; one expects that of them—it is a token of their inferiority. But to give money to a white man was embarrassing to me. I felt defiled by his debasement and servility. Indeed, I do not now comprehend how any native-born American would consent to take a tip. Tips go with servility, and no man who is a voter in this country by birthright is in the least justified in being in service (Quoted in Segrave, 2009, p. 11).

The quote indicates that tipping functioned to sustain relations of dominance and servitude premised on racist logics. To tip was to note and mobilize the unfreedom of a racialized other. For employers, tipping had the benefit of replacing a mandatory wage with a discretionary gift.

<sup>3</sup>The announcement came one day after the artist Kirby Laury's viral TikTok video "How to make a non-racist breakfast" where she analyzes the racist origins and harmful impacts of the Aunt Jemima image. She is part of a tradition of artists including Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis and Faith Ringgold who have appropriated and deconstructed Aunt Jemima imagery.

At the turn of the century, an emerging anti-tipping movement reinforced a binary between white free labor and Black unfree labor. Anti-tipping groups tied tipping to the legacy of aristocracy, maintaining it endangered American republican egalitarianism (Haley, 2011). The anti-tipping movement did not challenge Black servitude, instead affirming the economic privileges of white male citizens. Anti-tipping became an argument for the common (white) man, reflecting how the wage system hinges upon the unequal freedom of some at the expense of others (Glenn, 2009). As a political expression, anti-tipping sentiments attempted to ensure that white males would never be at risk of servitude. Some Progressive era reformers opposed tipping based on their belief that it encouraged women's immorality, making them dependent on men's patronage. Labor activists associated with the IWW held that tipping encouraged workers to "become servile, slavish, mealy-mouthed and beggarly; and to succumb to 'the easier way' of loose morals" (Quoted in Cobble, 1992, p. 42). By 1918, seven states had passed anti-tipping legislation. This legislation never gained wide adoption. These initial attempts ultimately fizzled and tipping came to be fully adopted by employers in the restaurant industry by the 1940s (Cobble, 1992; Segrave, 2009). Despite these early forms of contestation, tipping came to be the dominant form of compensation for the occupation of restaurant service. As a result, tipped service workers became increasingly subject to the racist and sexist expectations of those who paid their wages through tips.

## Feminized Racialized Domestic Service and the Servant Problem

Histories of domestic service post-Emancipation were also characterized by discursive contestations around who was most fit for service, including how service labor should be valued and compensated. Discourses of race and gender played a foundational role in constructing the ideal server within the space of the household. The labor of cooking and domestic housework is physically demanding and time-intensive work. And before modern forms of housing and water and electricity infrastructure, this was particularly difficult and time-intensive work (Schwartz, 2019). For those with social and economic power, hiring a live-in domestic servant to perform domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning provided one way to address the problem of housework. But who actually carried out this domestic service was shaped by employers' discriminatory hiring practices that narrowed the available economic opportunities for non-native born women and the formerly enslaved. For formerly enslaved women in the South, their options were limited to working as live-in domestic servants, hiring out their services for domestic tasks like cooking, laundry, and cleaning, or working as sharecroppers alongside men (see Walters, 2021). These limited options reflected Jim Crow laws and discriminatory hiring practices and further entrenched gendered and racialized stereotypes about Black women as "naturally" inclined toward domestic tasks.

Post-Emancipation, many freedwomen sought out what limited opportunities they had to leave their former enslavers. For the vast majority, this meant leaving rural areas and entering into the paid workforce as live-in domestic servants or domestic

workers in cities. As Sharpless (2010) details, for many Black women, domestic work functioned as the middle ground between slavery and greater access to economic opportunities that would come later. By 1870, more than half of all women workers were employed as domestic servants (Dudden, 1983). By the 1880s, almost a quarter of white families living in cities employed at least one domestic servant (Veit, 2013). Foreign-born women without citizenship and the formerly enslaved faced limited job opportunities and were much more likely to be working as domestic workers (Duffy, 2007; Branch, 2011; Branch and Wooten, 2012). As part of the Great Migration, large numbers of African Americans moved to Northern cities in the hopes of greater economic mobility. Compared to African American men who were able to move into factory jobs, hotel bellhops, or train porters, African American women's occupational opportunities remained largely limited to domestic service (Walters, 2021).

At the turn of the century, the difficulty of finding good household help for those able to afford it became an internationally reported topic. Employers complained about the poor performance of their live-in domestic servants in the pages of newspapers and popular etiquette manuals and guides. The "servant problem" reflected an emerging tension within industrial capitalism related to the broader problem of reproductive labor and housework (Schwartz, 2019). The growth of the formal capitalist market solidified a hierarchy between what was constructed as "men's work" in the realm of formal market exchange, and "women's work" seen as occurring within the domestic realm of the household. Waged work done in the formal economy sat at the top of the hierarchy, with unpaid and reproductive labor assigned less value and status. Elites constructed a perceived lack of servants due to their inability to retain workers in these positions (Levenstein, 2003; Veit, 2013). The servant problem indicated employers' refusal to pay higher wages and improve working conditions for domestic servants, the vast majority of whom were recently emancipated or new immigrants. The solidification of gendered and racialized occupational hierarchies was foundational to the devaluation of domestic service.

The servant problem underscores the centrality of processes of racialization and feminization to the occupational formation of domestic service. Because whites associated domestic service so strongly with unfree labor and servitude, they were reluctant to take and stay in these positions (Glenn, 2009). For white women, domestic service was seen as a temporary work arrangement until marriage. Middle class norms of white domesticity also reflected Victorian devaluations of physical labor. These norms dictated white middle-class women should not be seen doing the actual labor of housework. This labor was meant to be done with the utmost discretion, ideally by servants or enslaved people (Veit, 2013). According to white middle-class norms of gendered domesticity, "good" white women maintained the household, and were happy to do it. "Bad" women complained or shirked their duties (Turner, 2014). The ability to choose whether to opt in or out of domestic labor was also a function of race and class privilege—then as now. Racism and gender discrimination limited opportunities for formerly enslaved women and recent immigrants to enter other occupations. As soon as these groups

were able to pursue other job opportunities, they did (Sharpless, 2010). Further, the servant problem reflected transformations in the organization of domestic service itself. In the early 1900s, live-in domestic servants were increasingly being replaced by "cleaning women" who hired out their services and lived apart from their employers (Levenstein, 2003). For the employer class, the disappearance of the live-in servant represented a loss of direct control and surveillance over service work.

The servant problem also illustrates how the devaluation of service was deeply connected to the related hierarchy of citizenship and belonging taking shape within a broader project of nation making. This hierarchy excluded formerly enslaved people and new immigrants—and the work they performed—from full participation as citizens (Glenn, 2009). The assignment of domestic reproductive labor to Black women was tied to their exclusion from the rights and privileges of full cultural citizenship. As Branch (2011) details, white southerners had the material resources to take advantage of the low wages that domestic work garnered, freeing themselves from this labor. The ability to hire domestic workers also served as a way to improve their class status. White women in particular benefited from being freed from reproductive forms of labor at the expense of women of color (Branch, 2011). Through this displacement, white middle-class women were able to pursue greater opportunities for paid employment. Freed from their domestic duties, middle class white women could turn their attention to more "meaningful work" that improved their social standing like charitable actions (Branch and Wooten, 2012). Further, women's unpaid labor within the domestic sphere "made up the deficit of living," allowing employers to artificially suppress male wages (Turner, 2014, p. 124). The relational nature of freedom and oppression is key to understanding the devaluation of domestic service labor.

The relative stability of gendered and racialized constructions of domestic service as a devalued occupation are well illustrated even in reform efforts. In the early 1900s, the home economics movement set out to transform the meanings of domestic service from its broader associations with Black servitude and unfree labor. Over the course of several decades, social scientists associated with the emerging field of home economics, social reformers, trade unionists, and the women's suffrage movement made many attempts to upgrade and professionalize domestic service by instituting standard work hours, increased training, and better working standards. Founded in 1928, the National Council on Household Employment (NCHE) cited addressing the servant problem as part of their charge. The NCHE advocated for higher wages and shorter working hours. However, such attempts to distinguish housework from servitude had ironic results. The movement's attempts to convert housework into a respected symbol of white middle-class domesticity rather than a racialized symbol of slavery and bondage inadvertently shored up its status as unpaid feminized labor (Veit, 2013). Efforts to professionalize domestic service were also no match for the economic instability and high rates of unemployment defining the Great Depression. As the 1932 *New York Times* headline read, the Depression "solved" the servant problem for the employer class by depressing wages even further. The article

summarizes this situation thusly: “domestic service wages have fallen much faster than the salaries of the “white-collar” classes employing them” (“Depression Ends Servant Problem, 1932”). While the subsequent devaluation of service may have created new opportunities to opt out for middle class white women, it continued to be devalued as Black women’s work (Branch, 2011).

## Racialized and Gendered Relations of Servitude in the Pullman Company’s Dining Cars

The experiences of Black men working as porters in the dining cars of the Pullman Company provide parallel insight into the formative role of race and gender in constructions of the ideal server. Railroad dining cars hold an important role in the early history of the restaurant industry. In 1867, 4 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, George Pullman launched the railroad sleeping car as a luxury “hotel on wheels” centered around personalized service and fine dining. Train cars were equipped with porter call buttons, personalized temperature controls, fans, lockers, and other amenities (Perata, 1996). The dining cars functioned as traveling restaurants with formal service. But unlike elite hotel restaurants who primarily hired professionalized European men, The Pullman Company used their hiring practices to create a racialized and gendered occupational hierarchy, employing freedmen as porters and freedwomen as maids (Perata, 1996; Derickson, 2008). Porters worked as busboys, sleeping car porters, cafe/food service attendants, and private car porters. The company exclusively hired white men in supervisory roles of conductors and engineers, paying them higher wages.

Through its advertising and within its everyday workplace practices, the Pullman Company cultivated racialized and gendered service relations (Perata, 1996; Rawson and Shore, 2019). The company explicitly drew upon folkloric images of the docile, non-threatening Black male servant and stoked nostalgia for the exploitative service relations characterizing plantation hospitality. Male porters were feminized and infantilized. Advertisements featuring images of smiling Black porters each named “George” appealed to white customers’ appetites for being served in a manner once reserved for privileged gentry in the antebellum South (Perata, 1996). Benjamin McLaurin, a former porter, described needing to perform the role of the stereotyped “natural” servant prescribed by their employer and the public (see Bates, 2001). The servant script involved maintaining invisibility and interchangeability. Former porters related that white women dressed in front of them “as if they were invisible” (Bates, 2001, p. 22). White conductors referred to the Black porters as “their boys,” and over decades maintained the practice of referring to individual porters by “George” after the company’s founder. To their white employers and customers, an ideal server was feminized as non-threatening, seen as interchangeable, and rendered invisible in comparison to those they were expected to serve. These expectations drew upon, and continued to maintain, the logics and discourses of the plantation.

By the 1920s, the Pullman Company became the single largest employer of African American men. The Company employed more than ten thousand male porters but just 200 female maids (Derickson, 2008). The low base wage increased pressure for employees to perform subservience in exchange for customer tips. In the 1904 book *Freemen Yet Slaves*, porters describe the tipping system as humiliating and their working conditions as resembling the power relations characterizing slavery. A tipped wage system solidified these relations. As one Pullman porter put it, “this tipping question is the nub of the whole situation.” But in keeping with a history of corporate paternalism, the company’s leaders framed their hiring and employment of African Americans as praiseworthy.

Black Pullman porters became widely recognized public figures, and for some, symbols of the possibilities of middle-class achievement (Derickson, 2008). But for advocates of Black freedom like sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, the status of the Pullman porters indicated the persistence of social relations originating in slavery that relegated African Americans to the most devalued and menial forms of work. Du Bois (1920) critiqued what he saw as the further entrenchment of the belief that Black people belonged to the servant class, arguing that the white labor union movement actively supported such assertions as they sought to avoid any comparisons between white laborers and servants.

Over several decades, sleeping car porters and maids employed by the Pullman Company contested processes of gendered racialization and asserted their status as full citizens. Through the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), they fought to reassert their masculinity and transform their working conditions (Perata, 1996; Bates, 2001). Through the newspaper *The Messenger*, BSCP publicized their low pay, discriminatory treatment, extended work hours and sleep deprivation. Their efforts created greater public scrutiny; a 1915 hearing by the Commission on Industrial Relations focused on the Pullman Company’s employment practices. The Chairman of the Board of Directors, Robert Tod Lincoln (Abraham Lincoln’s son) acknowledged that although porters were underpaid and reliant on tips, the Company would not increase wages. Such responses reflected the Pullman Company’s ongoing rhetoric of corporate beneficence that held that porters should be thankful that they were employed at all.

The BSCP continued forwarding demands including a living wage, the end of tipping, and relief from extreme forms of sleep deprivation (Derickson, 2008). They fought for a reduction of hours in the form of a 240-h work month, and four to 6 h of rest each night. They connected demands for higher pay to larger issues of dignity and “manhood” and manly rights, asserting a claim to status as first-class Americans. Over several decades, they facilitated organizing, developed protest networks, and helped circulate ideas through the Black press. In 1935, the BSCP secured a charter from the American Federation of Labor, which had previously refused to recognize their efforts. They became the first union of Black workers to have done so. In 1937, the BSCP won a contract with the Pullman Company raising their wages, guaranteeing a 240-h month and overtime pay (Bates, 2001). The BSCP were ultimately unsuccessful in organizing for significant

hour reductions, a living wage and the end of the tipping system. However, as Bates (2001) argues, the BSCP developed leadership, networking, and relationship-building that proved important for the burgeoning civil rights movement.

Yet the broader adoption of tipping for food service ultimately mitigated against the achievement of a more stable higher wage for workers as a whole. As this early history illustrates, racialized and gendered discrimination played a foundational role in constituting these power dynamics. Naturalized as an ideal form of compensation for the devalued work involved with serving, tipping continues to reproduce gender and racial wage hierarchies. Minoritized workers in particular may be discriminated against on multiple fronts: from white employers who either avoid paying a base wage or pay them less than their salaried white counterparts occupying higher occupational rungs, and by customers, who exert racialized and gendered relations. Finally, because tips are determined in proportion to sales, those earning the lowest hourly wages also receive the least tips, bifurcating compensation across racial and gender lines.

## The White Feminization of Restaurant Service

Restaurant service shifted from its early iteration as an occupation for European-trained waiters in elite hotels, to one dependent upon a feminized construction of servile Black men post-Emancipation. The occupation of restaurant service would go on to be increasingly feminized and filled by white women throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Change resulted in part from the 1924 Immigration Act that restricted the major source of traditional European restaurant labor (Cobble, 1992). By the late 1920s, white men occupied nearly half of waiting jobs, remaining clustered in higher paying restaurants and hotels. White women were more likely to be employed in lower priced cafes, diners, and lunchrooms while Black women were primarily employed in the private spaces of the household. Prohibition (1920–1933) also played a role in transforming hiring practices in restaurants. Prohibition hastened the shift from expensive and elite dining to the expansion of lower priced establishments (Levenstein, 2003). Cobble (1992) argues that the feminization of waitressing involved the direct substitution of white women for Black and white men, while women of color competed with white women for lower paying and less desirable jobs. By 1940, 68% of waiting staff were primarily white women (Rawson and Shore, 2019). Despite the increasing feminization of restaurant service, the absolute number of Black waitresses declined during this period (Cobble, 1992). Through Jim Crow laws and discriminatory hiring practices, Black women were largely excluded from restaurant service.

The broader shift toward the white feminization of restaurant service involved changing constructions of the ideal server. New expectations around what service should entail changed. First, the relational aspects of service became increasingly important. For women especially, this meant increasing pressure from employers and customers alike to engage in emotional labor like listening, conversation, and flirting (Cobble, 1992; Rawson and Shore, 2019). The increased demands on waitresses portended

the later shift to a largely service-oriented economy and the routinization of customer service. These new forms of control over workers centered on the self and involving the expression or concealment of emotions (Hochschild, 1983). In addition, workers were increasingly subject to multi-dimensional forms of control from managers and customers alike (Leidner, 1993). Second, the feminization of service also involved changing cultural expectations around gender, dress, and appearance. Constructions of service originating within relations of servitude held that the ideal server faded into the background. However, the white feminization of restaurant service was accompanied by employer demands for increased display (Rawson and Shore, 2019). Restaurant owners began developing their restaurant concepts to include the sexual attractiveness and friendliness of their waitresses (Cobble, 1992). Employers changed waitress uniforms from the apron and bonnets that had long associated them with domestic servants to involve increasingly feminized and sexualized styles of dress.

As Cobble argues (1992) waitresses were able to draw on an explicitly feminized occupational identity to forward their interests collectively. Reflecting the broader revival of the labor movement in the 1930s, waitress unions regained momentum in a number of key cities. In San Francisco, they organized across eating establishments, ultimately achieving near total organization of their trade by 1941 (Cobble, 1992). In comparison, Detroit waitresses took advantage of a broader coalition of active labor groups in the state, joining forces with male culinary workers. They also engaged in forms of solidarity and cross-sector alliances with groups like the United Auto Workers and the Teamsters. By the 1940s, Detroit culinary workers were successful in securing collective bargaining agreements with the majority of formal first-class restaurants, Woolworth stores, the Stouffer chain, and several cafeterias and lunch counters. In contrast, waitress unions in New York City and Washington D.C. suffered from a concerted lack of support from male culinary workers and the broader local labor movement. Employers took advantage of less coordinated groups of workers, drawing on divisive tactics such as replacing unionized white men with non-unionized white waitresses to further erode support for coalitional organizing. In addition, rigid occupational gender and racial segregation meant that the white male waiters who tended to work in more expensive, formal sit-down restaurants saw little advantage in joining with waitresses who labored in lower priced establishments such as diners or cafes.

By the 1950s, the occupation of serving had shifted to a primarily white, feminized occupation, with Black women limited by segregation and racial discrimination to domestic service and lower paying service jobs. Four out of five servers were women, with waitressing comprising the sixth largest occupation for women (Cobble, 1992). However, employers continued to enact wage disparities along gendered and racialized lines. When both men and women were employed, women were assigned lower paying breakfast and lunch shifts rather than dinner or bartending. In addition, occupational segregation meant that white men remained clustered in the highest paying formal restaurants with women working in lower cafeterias and



lunch counters. As seen in these examples, the feminization of service as an occupation for primarily white women continued to be accompanied by relational forms of privilege and oppression.

## BRIDGING EARLY AND CONTEMPORARY COALITIONAL ORGANIZING

While the shifting constructions of the ideal server have been largely constituted through intersecting forms of privilege and oppression, they have also been accompanied by important moments of coalitional organizing. The Great Chicago Waiter's Strike of 1890 is an important early example of a multi-racial alliance of hotel and restaurant waiters. At the time, male waiters worked thirteen-to-fourteen-hour days and did not have guaranteed days off. Especially in the higher priced restaurants and hotels, there remained a strict hierarchy involving head waiters who supervised captains, waiters, and water boys (Garb, 2014). White waiters had previously been unsuccessful in attempting a strike in part because employers hired Black workers to replace them. The Culinary Alliance took the form of loosely coordinated member unions organized around ethnic identities, including German, Irish, Scandinavian, and African American waiters. They organized across racial and ethnic lines and the hotels and restaurants across Chicago, eventually coordinating strikes and walkouts. The Alliance was ultimately successful in pressuring restaurant owners to sign improved labor agreements (Garb, 2014).

This loose solidarity proved too fragile for employers' continued efforts to employ perceived racial differences as a wedge. Garb (2014) argues that white restaurant owners and white news coverage judged Black waiters' participation in labor activism as violating white stereotypes of Black men's servility and suitability as servants. In the aftermath of a 1903 city-wide strike, restaurant owners began hiring white women to replace Black waiters on the basis of their perceived relative docility. During the summer of 1903, employers' use of separate pay scales for Black and white waiters exacerbated competition between groups of workers. Speaking to a reporter for the Daily News, one restaurant owner provides an exemplary justification:

I believe now and have always believed that the white man is a better worker than the colored man and is entitled to more money ... the colored men employed in the lunch rooms are an inferior class of waiters (in Garb, 2014, p. 1,093).

White union leaders in the Alliance abandoned their previous coalitional strategy, refusing to organize against discriminatory pay rates. Restaurant owners targeted Black waiters for retaliation, firing their Black employees. They actively recruited white women, for example advertising in other cities for "white girls who are willing to come to Chicago" (Garb, 2014). While the Alliance had briefly created a biracial coalition that successfully coordinated a concession from restaurant owners, it ultimately was unable to transform the racial and gender hierarchies that would continue to shape service work in restaurants more broadly.

The 1890 Great Chicago Waiter's Strike and its aftermath portended an eventual broader shift from a primarily male labor force in the restaurant industry to one that included white women, discussed earlier. For some white audiences, Black waiters' prior political mobilization violated stereotypes of servile Black men (Garb, 2014). In their search for cheaper and more docile labor, Chicago restaurant owners created The Waitresses Alliance in 1910 to help staff their workplaces. Again, when compared to the perceived increased militancy of Black men, employers assumed that women would be easier to control (Cobble, 1992). In addition, restaurant owners recognized that they could also pay lower wages to women who had fewer employment options compared to men.

Over several decades, predominantly white women servers self-identified as waitresses and engaged in collective organizing around a feminized occupational identity. They created waitress organizations affiliated with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) as early as 1900. By the World War One era, more than seventeen waitress locals existed (Cobble, 1992). Early waitress locals in Chicago and Seattle gained concessions from their employers, including higher wages and a shift from a seven to a 6-day work week. They fought to secure these gains through picketing and strikes. Importantly, restaurant owners began forming their own alliances like the Restaurant Keepers Association in Chicago and associated employer-led waitress associations. Cobble (1992) discusses a range of tactics employers drew on to re-establish their control: bringing in Black female strike-breakers, hiring picketers to harass union marchers and advertise restaurant owners' perspectives, employing labor spies and gunmen to intimidate strikers, and securing court injunctions against unions (see especially p. 67). Their efforts were ultimately successful in tilting power back to restaurant owners who returned to longer workdays and seven-day work weeks.

Collective efforts by service workers like the Pullman Porters and waitresses to increase their power relative to employers and customers have often been thwarted through tactics of division aimed at pitting groups of workers against one another on the basis of perceived differences related to gender, race, and ethnicity. And, as Du Bois (1920) described, the history of white labor unionism involves the willingness of white workers to make use of racial animus and social divisions to elevate their own status. Restaurant employers have often taken advantage of these divisions, for example, by replacing striking workers with workers from a different ethnic identity, gender, or immigration status. In addition, the power of employer coordination is well-illustrated by restaurant owners' own coordinated action on the behalf of their collective interests as owners through associations like the Chicago Restaurant Keepers Alliance (Garb, 2014). The lobbying efforts of the National Restaurant Association (NRA), founded in 1919, would prove to be instrumental in maintaining an outsized ability to set the terms of restaurant work in the decades to come. In later decades, the NRA would go on to successfully lobby to prevent wage increases at both the federal and state levels (Leidner, 2002). Under the leadership of Herman Cain in 1996, they were successful in striking a deal with the Clinton administration that involved abandoning their

opposition to a proposed minimum wage increase in exchange for a freeze on the tipped minimum wage (Philpott, 2020). The success is indicative of how employers would go on to benefit from the nexus of neoliberal policies, logics, and practices beginning in the mid-1970s.

## CONCLUSION

My analysis of shifting occupational formations of service within the early period of U.S. restaurants contends that the question of who performs the labor of serving is a significant one. Histories of service reveal the foundational role of racism and sexism to the formation and maintenance of occupations (Ashcraft, 2007, 2013; Ashcraft et al., 2012; Ray, 2019). Building on insights from historians of devalued work (Glenn, 2009; Branch, 2011; Branch and Wooten, 2012), the analysis illustrates the relational nature of privileges and oppressions across key sites of negotiation over the meanings of service. The constructions of the ideal server I've highlighted demonstrate how multi-faceted, uneven relations are maintained.

The notion that particular groups of workers are more or less fit for service based on their racial, ethnic, or gender identities has had a lasting impact, and continues to inform current debates around wages in the restaurant industry. This is particularly the case for tipping. That tipping came to be tied to the occupation of service demonstrates the foundational role that racism and sexism has played. Employers have long argued that their low wages were justified because wait staff received tips from customers (Cobble, 1992). The tip swaps a mandatory higher wage for a discretionary and voluntary gift. Tipping reinforces a subservient power dynamic, allowing customers to exert immediate and direct control over those serving them (see Hunt, 2016). The recurring themes of surveillance, control, and in/visibility that my analysis surfaces continue to find purchase within the tipping relation.

The entanglement of tipping with the occupation of serving also maintains a legacy of employer attempts to stoke divisions among those involved in the work of serving. By tethering one's income to individual performance as judged based on the whims of their customers, the tipping system works against coalitional organizing among workers within restaurants and across the food service industry more broadly. This is well-illustrated by the uneven support for contemporary campaigns aimed at ending the tipped minimum wage by some restaurant employees who argue that ending tips would decrease their take home pay. One group, The Restaurant Workers of America, have placed several newspaper editorials arguing against the removal of the tipped minimum wage. In one editorial, a co-founder of the group argues:

So why not pay all employees one minimum wage rate and be done with it? Because most servers and bartenders earn well over the minimum wage. Many of us see ourselves as professional, commission-based salespeople. A minimum wage without a tip credit would effectively turn career servers—the most experienced of whom can earn up to \$24 an hour or more—into entry-level employees (Chaisson, 2019, Jan. 14).

Such arguments reflect the surfacing of justifications aimed at maintaining occupational hierarchies among restaurant workers. While the majority of tipped service workers may be making poverty-level wages, there are a subset of higher paid restaurant workers like bartenders and servers in formal, elite restaurants who want to maintain tipping. Today, restaurant workers are largely segregated by race and gender, with white males disproportionately in higher paid, public-facing positions like bartender and servers in formal restaurants (Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, 2015; Wilson, 2021). People of color who make up the majority of the industry overall are clustered in relatively lower paying, back of the house positions in lower-cost restaurants. For women of color who face the largest wage disparities, contemporary divides are another iteration of the intersecting forms of gender and racial discrimination that previously limited them to the private spaces of domestic service.

Service is not an inherently “bad” job. Its devaluation requires constant maintenance. Characterized by evolving racial and gendered hierarchies, service has long functioned in the U.S. to further unequal freedoms (Glenn, 2009; Branch, 2011; Branch and Wooten, 2012). In the here and now, amidst the evolving crises of COVID-19 and an uprising against anti-Black racism and state violence, the meanings and valuations of service have again become increasingly contested. As soon as April 2020, 5.5 million people who had been employed within restaurants and bars had already lost their jobs (Franck, 2020). Within the broader economy, Black women have disproportionately lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Holder et al., 2021). As in the opening quote, the pandemic amplifies already existing unequal relations characterizing service. The devaluation of the gendered and racialized service worker is perhaps uniquely exacerbated in the U.S. because of decades of neoliberal policies and practices that have left wage workers without a broader social safety net. While the restaurant industry as it existed before COVID-19 may not return intact, there is a clear need for increased critical attention and coalitional organizing aimed at transforming the multi-faceted, uneven relations that have largely characterized service to date.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

## FUNDING

This research was supported by the Thorp Faculty Engaged Scholar program through the Carolina Center for Public Service at UNC-Chapel Hill.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Mike Dimpfl, China Medel, Kumi Silva, Natalie Nelson Marsh, and Renee Heath for their comments on earlier drafts.

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