Introduction

Ye Gon Lun was eighteen years old when he succumbed to tuberculosis on June 23, 1874. Three days later, he was interred in Sacramento's Old City Cemetery in a plot purchased for him by Nathaniel Greene Curtis, who, along with his wife, Nancy, had employed Ye as a domestic servant for nine years. Walking around the various plots, visitors encounter Ye's tomb as an anomaly, surrounded as it is by grave sites memorializing the city's white, Anglo founders. In Western cemeteries, Chinese immigrant graves are often located in segregated sections.

Curtis, a transplant from Memphis, arrived in California in 1850 during the Gold Rush. He quickly gave up prospecting to practice law. While simultaneously holding public offices as an elected judge and Democratic state assemblyman and senator, he was also well regarded as a criminal defense attorney. Curtis worked, on a number of occasions, as outside counsel for the Central Pacific Railroad. In 1887, he testified before the Pacific Railway Commission in response to allegations that he had set fire to financial ledgers revealing that the railroad's executives and board members had fraudulently overcapitalized construction costs for their own personal profit. Reflecting on his relationship to California's advancements toward the end of his life, he would claim membership in the “noble band of pioneers who had brought order out of chaos and had laid deep and broad and lasting the foundation of the social fabric which led to the present and happy condition of the people.”1 Defending railroad officials from charges of financial fraud was indeed consistent with how “civilization” unfurled in the American West. In material terms, the lawyer-pioneer belonged to an expanding class of salary earners with disposable income in cities like Sacramento and San Francisco—professionals such as politicians, accountants, and business owners who wished to employ servants, cooks, laundry workers, livery drivers, gardeners, and other service workers.
The *Sacramento Daily Union* reported that Curtis “came across” Ye in 1865 while he was in San Francisco for business. Ye was a nine-year-old immigrant boy who, as the Presbyterian minister Ira M. Condit commented, was “fresh from his heathen home in China.” How exactly Curtis encountered Ye, and what transpired between the two at that moment, was never disclosed, at least in public accounts. If Ye’s story conforms to that of other Chinese immigrants, his family may have relied on a lender to borrow money to finance his transpacific passage. His young age meant that he would have struggled to compete with older workers to get hired in more physically demanding jobs, and it is reasonable to infer that the intent was to have him specifically seek out work as a domestic laborer. Alternatively, Ye could have been the orphaned or abandoned child of a Chinese merchant family—a theory that has some credence if later rumors claiming that wealthy relatives wanted to exhume his body for return to China have any factual basis. There is no evidence that Ye was indentured to Curtis or forced into this relationship against his will—although “will” is a concept that this book complicates. The Thirteenth Amendment, which was ratified in December 1865, outlawed “involuntary servitude” along with slavery, although Ye’s age would have allowed for him to be fostered to a state-appointed guardian without his consent. “Being pleased with his appearance—for he was a bright, intelligent and handsome little boy, as white as any Caucasian [sic],” the *Daily Union* noted, without any additional detail, Curtis “took him into his service and gave him opportunities to learn.”

Under the supervision of Condit and a “native Chinese helper,” Sit Ah Mun, Ye was baptized a Presbyterian when he turned fourteen. A member of Sacramento’s Chinese Christian Association, Ye had aspired to train as a minister to his people, and as a dying wish, newspapers reported, he donated his savings to a fund that would allow other Chinese immigrants to pursue this purpose. In his eulogy, Curtis declared that his deceased servant was “an honor to Christian civilization, and an honor to the Church.” Condit’s bilingual lyrics to the Christian hymn “Happy Land” enabled Chinese immigrants attending Ye’s funeral to solemnize his passing in song, alongside white mourners. The inscription on Ye’s tomb captures and conveys the possibilities for cosmopolitan and globe-spanning fraternity and equality that Christian universalism
promised to the devout. It quotes Isaiah 45:22: “Look unto me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth; for I am God and there is none else.” Above it, two clasping hands are bordered by an impression of a ribbon with the term fidelis. While the loyalty referenced by the Latin word was likely meant to signify faith in Christ, given Ye’s relationship to the Curtises, it carried other valences as well. (A photograph of Ye’s grave site is included as Figure 1 in the color image insert.)

The childless Curtises, newspapers noted, considered Ye to be a son and not just a servant. Journalists covering the funeral suggested that the boundaries that divided families from their hired servants, capital from labor, and white Americans from Chinese immigrants could collapse under the weight of the type of mutual affection that the Curtises and Ye had developed for each other. The extravagant cost of Ye’s burial was cited as evidence to this point. The marble, granite, and brick tomb required the labor of three different stonecutting and masonry firms and cost Curtis twelve hundred dollars. It would have taken a Chinese servant in California earning typical wages of twenty-five dollars a month four years to make this sum. The elaborate expense also reflected the security features built into the tomb, which included a twenty-two-hundred-pound granite slab that required twelve men to roll into place. Curtis’s efforts to keep Ye buried and underground became a central fixation of the media, which relayed rumors that the enormous stone lid was installed to prevent Ye’s relatives from exhuming and returning his remains to China. The practice of having Chinese immigrants’ remains sent back to China was frequently cited as evidence that laborers chose to be sojourners in the United States and were uninterested in assimilating. In an 1869 speech he delivered in Boston, Frederick Douglass argued that Chinese immigrants’ desire to return posthumously to China would change with time and was not a sufficient reason for denying them the right to citizenship—which the 1870 Naturalization Act would do one year later. Douglass predicted: “He will not be long in finding out that a country which is good enough to live in, is good enough to die in; and that a soil that was good enough to hold his body while alive, will be good enough to hold his bones when he is dead.” In Ye’s case, his permanent incorporation into the earth that constituted American sovereign territory was ensured at great cost. It came, however, not as a citizen endowed with equal rights, but as a Christian servant guarded
by his master. The intimate labor that Ye performed produced his racial identity and the terms of his inclusion, even in death.\(^6\)

A North Carolinian by birth, Curtis would have been familiar with the commemorative narratives that white southerners deployed to extol the virtues of deceased “loyal” slaves and, in the postbellum period, free black workers they deemed compliant. The enactment of these rituals actively suppressed “market forces and economic exigency,” historian Micki McElya observes, as well as the violence and inequality that were the very foundations of the master and servant relationship.\(^7\) The framing of Ye’s death enlisted similarly evasive tropes, refashioned, however, to commend not only his loyalty but also his spiritual conversion by way of the labor marketplace. Nevertheless, no matter how much the coverage of Ye’s funeral emphasized the emotional and religious bonds between him and the Curtises, the other values produced through this relationship slipped out as well. The *New York Times*, for instance, informed readers that “the flowers which [Ye] had cultivated in his life are being transplanted to bloom over his grave.”\(^8\)

The political implications of Curtis’s decision to employ a Chinese servant had different resonances still. By 1874, white antagonism toward Chinese immigration was mounting in California, and as a politician and public figure, Curtis had to be cautious about his hiring practices. The *Sacramento Daily Union* reported—without referencing its source—that Ye himself favored restrictions on Chinese immigration for religious reasons. Before his death, the paper quoted him as saying: “it was a disgrace to Christian civilization to permit the Chinese to live here, as the class of Chinese who come here were of the lower classes.”\(^9\) In 1877, only three years after Ye’s passing, Curtis campaigned for a seat in the California Senate by asserting that he had “always been opposed to Chinese labor and in favor of white labor over Chinese competition.” He added that he had no objections to proposals that called for “arresting Chinese immigration and sending the Chinamen out of the country.” During the same campaign, Curtis tried to deflect attention away from his role in eliminating language from a bill that would have, if passed in its original form, prohibited California counties from issuing Southern Pacific Railroad construction bonds unless the company agreed to employ white labor exclusively.\(^10\) The inconsistencies between Curtis’s
anti-Chinese pledges and his personal and professional actions failed to
doom his campaign, and he emerged victorious in the election.

Curtis may have refused to see a contradiction in his love of Ye and
his support for Chinese exclusion. He may have indeed believed that, as
a Christian servant, Ye belonged to an entirely different class of Chinese
altogether. More pragmatically, California’s middle classes were reluc-
tant to surrender the services that they had become dependent upon.
It was one thing to rhetorically invoke “pioneer” days gone by when, as
one memoirist recalled, even the governor of California tended his own
garden.11 It was another matter to enact this type of self-sufficiency in
practice.

The hypocrisy of white employers who opposed Chinese immigra-
tion but continued to rely on Chinese servants did not go unnoticed. In
October 1877, for instance, a cartoon in the *Wasp* attacked Richard Josiah
Hinton, the editor of the *San Francisco Post*, who frequently penned col-
umns castigating businesses that employed Chinese immigrants. In the
cartoon, Hinton is shown eagerly awaiting the delivery of his meal from
his Chinese cook, while a Chinese servant dusts in the background.
(The cartoon, “A Hint-On the Chinese Question,” appears as Figure 2
in the insert to this book.)

To those who heeded the *Post*’s advice, the cartoon offered (in what
the editors no doubt thought was a clever pun) a “hint on” the complex
realities of the “Chinese Question.” In November 1882, six months after
the passage of the first Chinese Restriction Act, the *Christian Advocate*
derided the soon-to-be Democratic governor of California, George Ston-
eman, after it was discovered that he employed Chinese servants at his
family’s estate in the San Gabriel Valley. Eager to paint western politicians
as engaging in the state’s anti-Chinese furor for cynical, vote-hunting rea-
sons, the *Advocate* observed that Stoneman’s actions showed “the precise
degree of sympathy which dwells in the bosoms of these politicians for
the ‘poor, down-trodden white laborer, who is ruined by Chinese cheap
labor.’” Stoneman, meanwhile, defended his family’s employment prac-
tices by claiming that his wife managed the family’s household affairs
without his input.12 While Stoneman sought to reinforce a neat distinc-
tion between public and domestic affairs, it is clear that the politics of
employing Chinese labor had eroded these boundaries.
How Ye viewed the social and economic relationship that he entered into with the Curtis family is impossible to determine with any certainty. His most immediate actions must be understood in the context of his need to plot for his survival as a nine-year-old boy apparently living alone in San Francisco. Accepting an arrangement that made him a dependent of the Curtises would have been an obvious move in the absence of kin or other Chinese immigrants willing to protect him. Orphans of all backgrounds were fostered out and brokered as labor, in order to relieve whatever costs that governments and social welfare institutions might otherwise have to assume for their care. As Ye aged, he seems to have developed a genuine belief in the Presbyterian faith that the Curtises exposed him to, to the extent that he was willing to identify with white restrictionists’ goals for limiting “heathen” and unassimilable Chinese laborers. Then again, if he was indeed the son of more affluent Chinese immigrants, he may have been predisposed to such views anyway. Since he died when he was only eighteen, it is hard to forecast what the future might have held for him. It was not uncommon for Chinese servants to use white missionaries and Christianity, whether they were believers or not, to advance their own interests. Missionaries overwhelmingly belonged to the middle class and were valuable allies to Chinese servants who wished to open laundries, restaurants, or other businesses that allowed them to transition from household service to service work where they controlled the means of production. Whether he went on to pursue a career in the ministry or another vocation, it is doubtful that Ye would have remained a devoted servant for the remainder of his life. If the Curtises indeed saw him as a son, would they have wanted him to?

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When I visited Ye’s grave site in March 2014, it beckoned both as a monument to the historical subjects whose lives had already commanded my focus for years, and as a figurative portal through which to explore the larger issues and questions that Brokering Servitude addresses. At its broadest level, this book explores how different actors and institutions in the United States, between 1850 and 1924, brokered the placement of migrants in household positions, and what they hoped to accomplish economically, politically, and socially through these transactions.
Although this book is concerned with how race, gender, and nationality informed the day-to-day experiences of servants and how workers socialized off the job, worshipped, and participated in the cultural activities and practices of their communities, it is most interested in how these categories governed how workers were commodified and managed in respect to their purported capacity to serve. *Brokering Servitude* builds bridges between subjects that typically get studied in isolation. Household service defied conventional divisions between free and unfree labor, coercion and contract, protection and exploitation, and domesticity and work. *Brokering Servitude* delves into both sides of the often neglected commodity chains that households and migrant laborers participated in and were governed through. This book asserts that the study of the political economy of reproductive labor, usually confined to the static space of the home, cannot be properly understood without attention to labor migrations, and especially migrations of workers that were assisted, compelled, or contracted. Brokers tried to marshal opportunities that transatlantic, transpacific, and internal labor migrations posed. Their interventions responded to household employers who were eager to compare the merits of different labor sources, and to reinforce presumed differences by pitting workers against each other.

Brokers

Matching supply to demand has always required intermediaries. In household service, brokers were responsible for identifying and making available supplies of domestic labor within their spheres of influence. They were also motivated to identify possibilities for transactions—through the promotion of migration—that did not yet exist. The “production of difference,” historians Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger contend, has long been the key innovative force in American labor management, and, at the same time, a “contradiction,” since “managers pretend to possess a knowledge of race and of human behavior that they could never have had.” Race is an imagined social and cultural construct. It is not a mechanical feature that can be found in workers and engineered for efficiency and maximum output. Brokers interpreted how race and gender were valued by employers, and constructed labor markets that produced racial difference anew. The robust and transatlantic
free market economy that emerged around the sale and purchase of domestic labor in the 1850s ushered in the end of customary and fixed wages for servants performing general housework. Women could increasingly find work in manufacturing sectors of the economy, namely in the needle trades and in textile mills, and could move more easily between labor markets. Households with more disposable income and a willingness to pay more for servants with certain ethnic characteristics, or with skill and experience, also contributed to a competitive market.14 From 1850 to 1870, the number of servants employed in the United States, not counting enslaved workers, nearly tripled from 350,000 to one million, outpacing the overall growth in population from roughly 23 to 40 million.15 The emergence of an active and virtually unregulated market for domestic wage laborers in the mid-nineteenth century encouraged an environment where brokers and workers saw ethnicity, race, and religion as elements of character and identity that could be advertised. Whether a servant was black, white, Chinese, Catholic, Protestant, Irish, English, or German was a characteristic that employers factored into how they evaluated the potential benefits of a transaction and a trait brokers and laborers marketed. Writing in 1857, one woman diarist described her excitement upon learning that a German Protestant “girl” living on Carmine Street in Manhattan had posted notice, in English, that she was available for domestic work. Despite calling on her immediately, however, twenty-seven other women made it there before her, and the woman was already contracted to the highest bidder.16

When it came to placing individuals in household labor situations, the list of who functioned as brokers was capacious. Anglo-Irish gentry, Union army officers, abolitionists, commercial employment agents, steamship ticket agents, Protestant missionaries in China and the American West, ethnic community leaders, and immigration officials—to offer an incomplete inventory—all took part in brokering domestic servants. A broker could be someone like Curtis, who produced a servant from a Chinese boy he “discovered” on the streets of San Francisco, or the federal government itself. Nonprofit brokers were linked by the fact that they all strived and hustled to establish their worth and authority as intermediaries, and to prove the superior value of the exchanges they vowed to arrange. They championed their ability to identify potential migrants who could be reliably consumed due to the exigent or
precarious circumstances under which they entered the labor market. Brokers promised to satisfy household employers’ want for servants who were dependents, and whose lack of alternative options meant that they could be disciplined above and beyond what could be exacted through wage controls alone.

By the mid-nineteenth century, as political scientist Aristide Zolberg contends, “the massive procurement of foreign labor from a diversity of sources came to be firmly acknowledged as an essential feature of the country’s maturing industrial capitalism, and hence an ‘affair of the state.’”17 During the Civil War and Reconstruction, how to deploy emancipated black labor generated similar calculations. The state was concerned not only with ensuring adequate supplies of labor, but also with keeping migrant laborers off of public assistance. For various government officials and private actors, the goal of keeping migrants off relief was often inseparable from the goal of provisioning servants to household employers.

Brokers of migrant servants not associated with the state—and, in the case of the Freedmen’s Bureau, representatives of the state itself—had to contend with accusations that they were contributing to malevolent forms of trafficking, intentionally or otherwise. Trafficking, unlike assisted migration, carried sinister connotations and was presented as the unequivocal enemy of both free labor and free migration. In the 1850s, commentators focused on how trafficking preyed on new forms of transatlantic free migration and posed special dangers to single, unaccompanied white women vulnerable to recruitment as sex workers—a racial concern that would persist well into the twentieth century. From the 1860s onward, concerns about trafficking grew to encompass Chinese immigrants labeled “coolies,” whom anti-immigrant activists accused of being unfree by virtue of being bound by debt and racial subservience to the commands of transnational bosses who dictated the contract of their labor. Denunciations of padrones who trafficked in Eastern and Southern European labor would elicit similar critiques.18

It was assumed that in the absence of explicitly coercive methods for moving labor, and where profit was not the apparent motive, brokers’ restrictions on migrant workers’ liberties maintained natural dependencies that were rooted in laborers’ gender (in the case of white women) or in their race (in the case of black women and men and Chinese men).
Yet as historian Gunther Peck argues, “For the trafficked migrant, coercion begins not with one’s legal status as a slave, but by the varied ways a migrant’s transnational movement and political status en route become commodified and controlled by middlemen.”¹⁹ This holds true in regard to the brokerage of migrant laborers into domestic service, and is complicated further by the fact that the middle-class homes were not seen as market actors let alone potential destinations for bonded, deceived, or trafficked laborers, even though their consumer demand dictated that certain workers would be pressured or in some instances compelled legally to accept household employment. Middle-class households were often granted immunity—except from workers themselves—in respect to accusations that they might be sites of exploitation.

Contracts

As legal scholars and historians have argued, a defining feature of the late nineteenth-century United States was the ground-shifting changes that took place in respect to how social relations within households were governed. Whereas slavery, master and servant relations, and family law were previously governed in accordance with the “natural” dependencies that they purportedly captured, and the belief that only white propertied men were fit for independent citizenship, this system clashed with and gradually yielded to the liberal belief that certain rights and protections were universal, regardless of an individual’s race or gender.²⁰

The liberty to contract has never implied a political commitment to social or economic equality.²¹ Liberty of contract entitled individuals the right to freely determine the agreements they entered into without coercion, and protected them from the alienation of their personal property by granting them the autonomy to dispose of their labor power as they saw fit.²² The freedom to contract or withhold labor power from an employer was a liberty that clearly mattered to formerly enslaved persons, but was of considerable importance to household servants and married women who were kept and governed as dependents as well.

Brokers’ and employers’ efforts to coerce workers into servitude they would otherwise avoid adjusted to new technologies that governed how labor was free to circulate. This is most evident in the ways in which the contractual arrangements that migrants entered into when promised
transportation assistance, relief, or wages became devices for guaranteeing third-party employers a captive supply of servants. The debates of the nineteenth century, focused as they were on the problem of slavery, inaccurately enshrined free versus unfree labor in a misleading, ideological oppositional binary. The shifting and uneven topographies that the categories of “free” and “unfree” demarcate in respect to workers’ liberties give these concepts their cultural and political potency.23

Employers and so-called charitable brokers conspired to strip household labor transactions of their competitive dimensions. As sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein argues, one of the defining and ironic features of market capitalism, given proponents’ vocal commitment to “free enterprise,” has been its pursuit of monopoly positions and “profit-maximization via the principal agency that can make it endurably possible, the state.”24 Northerners committed to the sanctity of free labor routinely looked to private and public welfare institutions responsible for providing relief to the indigent, as well as to orphans and prisoners, to obtain a captive labor force compelled to work in servitude. Employers tried to overcome this contradictory approach to consent by arguing that criminals, paupers, and vagrants forfeited liberal rights on the basis of having broken the law, or because they had become dependent on the state.25

Even when domestic workers failed to give cause for the abdication of their contract freedom, the availability of labor for use in household employment was predicated on the alienation of migrants from preexisting modes of social organization that were no longer viable, even if the pursuit of wages in service was ultimately rendered in liberal terms as a decision that was voluntary. This was the case both for Irish women forced to leave an Ireland spoiled by famine and British colonial land policies, and for black freed persons fleeing the horrors of war and slavery.26 Employers also tried to undermine freedom of contract as it applied to the negotiation of wages. In their coauthored 1869 publication, The American Woman’s Home, Catharine Beecher and her younger sister Harriet Beecher Stowe asked readers to consider, self-reflectively, whether it was just to impose a “rule of rectitude” against servants who, coming from impoverished backgrounds, were perceived to be demanding “exorbitant wages.” Punishing servants who sought to maximize profits from the sale of the property in their labor made employers
complicit in violating “the universal law of labor and of trade that an article is to be valued according to its scarcity and the demand.” In her 1873 memoir *Palmetto Leaves*, which she wrote while living on a former plantation in Florida, Stowe made the resignation of a talented black cook who left for a hotel job in nearby Jacksonville that paid forty dollars a month into a lesson on respect for the free market. That free people could “command their own price” was affirmative proof that what the North had fought for was working not just in principle, but in practice.  

But these views made the sisters outliers.

Labor historians have suggested that by the twentieth century, the use of criminal and penal punishments rather than civil actions in the enforcement of labor contracts persisted as lawful devices for worker compulsion in only a few, select occupations. Merchant seamen, enlistees in the armed forces, and sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the American South are typically cited as workers who continued to be subjected to various forms of incarceration and detainment as penalties for leaving employment or lease contracts prior to their expiration. Service work exists as a neglected site of labor history because the workers who performed these jobs do not conform to the model of the liberal and national subject—the white, industrial worker—who was understood to be implicitly deserving of protections and liberties in the face of capitalist exploitation.

As the latter chapters of this book conclude, facilitating the movement of migrant labor into domestic work became a priority enshrined in federal policies and their enforcement. One of the key ways that the federal government became a broker of servitude was by demanding that certain labor contracts be enforced as the status or condition by which a migrant was eligible to enter or remain in the United States. It did so by exempting Chinese servants from racial restrictions that would have excluded their entry into the United States as laborers and by carving out exceptions to prohibitions that would have barred European women as economic liabilities—as long as these subjects contracted to work as servants and remained in these positions. Whereas at the end of the Civil War contracts were heralded as essential to the guarantee of workers’ freedom to consent to labor, by the second decade of the twentieth century—even if the decision to enter into contracts remained in theory voluntary—they had become devices for constraining immigrant
laborers’ liberty to move between jobs and employers. At the very moment when Progressive Era reformers were beginning to highlight domestic service as an occupation where labor remained governed by “feudal” rules, contemporaneous immigration legislation was creating new classes of laborers who were dependent on maintaining employment relations as servants in order to be allowed to enter or stay in the United States.29

The Value of Domestic Labor

Household labor has often been neglected as a feature of capitalism. Domesticity’s value to individuals and families, and how this gets calculated, defies a strictly monetary approach. Domesticity results from the production or consumption of tangible goods and services, but it is also a feeling and set of affective social relationships, and cannot be commodified or priced for purchase as a discrete “thing” to be obtained. This does not mean that domesticity exists outside of capitalism. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith famously asserted that the employment of servants could not be considered productive because their labor did not add real value to an economy. Some seventy years later, Karl Marx seconded this conclusion. Marx grouped together everyone from “whore to pope” as service providers who did not contribute to the production of capital.30 Both classical and Marxist economic theories have been insufficient in grasping the significance of unpaid domestic and reproductive labor as well. Since the late 1960s, feminist historians and scholars have combated the view that unpaid labor performed for families and households could be dismissed, along with the work of paid servants, as unproductive in capitalist terms.31 The performance of reproductive labor generated the very conditions under which men of all classes—and women burdened with second shifts as paid workers—were physically able to work for wages or other compensation.

Historians have failed to account for how capital gets generated through transactions that establish the social relations of production, and link supply to demand. As commercial intermediaries that profited from job placement, intelligence offices generated significant anxiety. Private intelligence offices or employment agencies as they were later called profited as middlemen (and often *middlewomen*) through fees
and commissions. Through transatlantic, transpacific, and transregional networks, they not only managed migrants’ placement in household service, but also provided loans and other forms of financing that enabled migrants’ passage. As arbiters of borders, they instructed immigrants on how to maintain their eligibility to enter the United States and on how to avoid immigration officials who might declare their actions, and the assistance they had received, illegal. Intelligence offices were demonized by middle-class commentators and accused of making a mockery out of the principle of freedom of contract by seducing workers with the promises of riches and by convincing them that they had no responsibility to potential employers beyond the satisfaction of their own self-interest.32 As an author complained in an 1868 Godey’s Lady’s Book article, lamenting the powers of contract that Irish servants had, the intelligence office “represents, in Biddy-dom, all the power of the State, and is moreover the Temple of Liberty.” “The custom of other places is here reversed,” she added, “and the servant is the mistress. She sits enthroned, waiting to receive the homage of dependent and tributary housekeepers.”33 Other middle-class commentators homed in on intelligence offices’ predatory actions, which included trafficking women in sex work, holding their possessions as ransom, and eliciting exorbitant fees from the job applicants whom they were placing. While these practices no doubt occurred, employers seized upon their existence to try to eliminate commercial intermediaries altogether. This allowed them to evade a more nuanced analysis of how these brokers were imperative to labor migrations in the absence of other financing mechanisms.

Domesticity was also commercial, despite its long-standing associations with privacy and opposition to the values of the marketplace, in that it required employers—and middle-class women more specifically—to engage in the procurement, purchase, and training and management of labor.34 Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, most Americans were only tentatively connected to an economy where wages predominated as the means by which to acquire goods and services. As historian Jeanne Boydston documents, in the antebellum period men and women participated in domestic production as relative equals, even if gendered divisions of labor existed in respect to the creation of goods for use and exchange. The divisions of household labor that accompanied what historians describe as the midcentury “market revolution”
would segregate spiritual, mental, and reproductive work from domestic labor that wages rendered menial. The pursuit of comfort, contentment, and time to devote to intellectual, charitable, and religious matters became the surplus value that men and especially women might enjoy if their homes were well run.35

When commentators insisted that the typical Irish servant was “a more disquieting and unendurable ruler” than even the most “tyrannical” of workingmen’s unions, as an article in Putnam’s did in 1869, they also grappled with the extent to which domesticity might be perfected through the implementation of more conscientious and selective approaches to how supply chains could be assembled.36 Too much was at stake for middle-class women to idly sit by and let supply and demand take its uncertain course. This explicitly commercial role aligned with middle-class Protestant women’s self-appointed cultural responsibility to promulgate American domesticity to the indigenous people, immigrants, and colonial subjects who came under their jurisdiction.37 A letter writer explained to the editor of the New York Observer, for instance, that her husband had encouraged her to act as the “Secretary of the Interior” over her domestic servants—a title that in 1865, when the letter was written, gestured toward the administration of “foreign” Indian populations within the domestic space of the nation—and that she was to convene the “cabinet” only when “great emergencies arose.”38

Competing Discourses of Empire

Consumer demand for services drove migration. The demand for domestic labor and other household services determined both regions’ and the nation’s demographic composition.39 Servants, despite the needs they fulfilled, were considered by many to be impossible subjects for republican freedom. In the antebellum period in which this book begins, southern slavery provided the antithesis to white independence in racial terms, and contributed to the stigmatization of any work that entailed an individual to surrender sovereignty over hours, pace of production, and free movement. The cultural and social construction of what it meant to be a white American made rejecting the deference that personal and household service was supposed to require a gesture of almost mythical importance, and an act that was commonly cited in
exceptionalist narratives about what set the United States apart—at least to white immigrants.40

As a matter of demography, the need for servants was framed in the context of how the human capital being imported to satisfy household labor needs might be redeployed—or not—in the social and cultural work of nation building. As E. L. Godkin, the founder and editor of the Nation argued in an 1869 editorial, Americans could not “go back to the early, happy time, when the mill girls wrote poetry and read French and the farmer’s hired man could deliver a Fourth of July oration on a pinch.”41 Having abandoned republicanism for market liberalism, Godkin suggested, Americans could no longer limit what types of experimentations with the hire of wage labor might take place. This was especially true since white immigrant women and the Irish in particular resisted submitting to a social hierarchy within the household workplace. For this reason Godkin supported continued Chinese immigration. As free laborers classified as sojourners, whose unassimilable status allegedly limited them to menial labors, Chinese immigrants exemplified both new advantages to be gained from access to Asian labor markets, and the risks that purportedly came with remaking the United States as a nation that incorporated laborers whose inclusion was never intended to result in their possessing the full rights of liberal self-rule.

White servants’ desire to control who got to participate in labor markets for domestic service and their attempts to exclude black and Chinese workers from job competition were emblematic of how they viewed white settlerism. In this book I use white settlerism, a complicated and multifaceted idea, as a concept that elucidates how white immigrant workers and their allies insisted that they had value as racial subjects that transcended how their worth was defined by labor markets. The goal here, as theorist Patrick Wolfe urges, is to grasp how white settler colonialism represented a “structure not an event.”42 Irish women’s imagined transition, for instance, from wage-earning domestics to unpaid mothers and wives informed the larger philosophy that brokers of their labor professed to, genuinely or otherwise, when it came to intervening in how they moved along the various supply chains that fed household labor. It is possible to see racially inclusive settlerism reflected in the frontier embrace of Irish Catholic immigrant women sent in the 1850s to places like Illinois and Wisconsin, where emigration boosters
advertised that wage-earning migrants would be treated as if they were daughters. At the same time, this did not preclude Irish servants from being embraced by white republicans and laboring classes as producers in their own right, whose breadwinner status, defined by the remittances they sent to families back in Ireland, made them independent contributors.

White settlerism also manifested in seemingly less obvious places, like Ellis Island. There immigration officials treated unaccompanied women arriving from Europe as future members of the nation's reproductive population who deserved protections and required control, but who were not to be treated as disposable labor or undesirable subjects. As the political scientist Aziz Rana argues, settlerism was one “face” of American freedom, distinguished by its democratic aspirations and desire to empower certain subjects, yet accessible only to groups and individuals of a certain skin color. Horatio Seymour, the former governor of New York and the Democratic nominee for the presidency in 1868, captured this mind-set when he expressed the opinion that while “the Chinese have useful qualities” such as being “good servants, ready to do the work of men or women,” these were not “traits which will build on this Continent a great and high-toned power.”44 In these contexts, when Irish servants usurped middle-class rituals as their own, by dressing and acting as if they were the rightful mistresses of the homes in which they worked, their actions represented both a power struggle between capital and labor and a conflict over who was eligible to lay claim to gendered citizenship. More generally, producing domesticity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was dangerous and back-breaking labor in addition to being degraded in status. To make those who were defined in racial and class terms as favored representatives of the population live (and live splendidly if they could afford to) meant that the providers of menial services—those hewers of wood and drawers of water—could not be barred or exiled as unwanted subjects from the social life of the nation altogether.45

Organization and Methodology

Throughout this book, I use the terms “domestic” and “servant” as interchangeable shorthand to describe hired laborers who performed work
in and around private households. I also use these terms to describe employees who catered to the domestic needs of individuals and families in transit. My focus, with some exceptions, is on domestics who can be classified as general servants. Unlike domestic laborers assigned to specialized roles in more affluent households, such as chambermaids, butlers, and governesses, servants without these distinctions in title were expected to complete any and all work that they were assigned. Cooks and, to a lesser degree, live-in nurses do warrant attention here. Preparing meals often fell to general servants in households where only one hired worker was employed. But talented cooks with experience were highly coveted, and for many servants cooking was the primary route to higher wages, opportunities outside of private households, and situations that carried more prestige.46

Where necessary, I make specific reference to unpaid domestic labor to describe work that was conducted by female members of a household in the service of their own families. Because wives and daughters could be called on to perform the entirety of a household's labor when resources were lacking, this gendered division of labor kept wages for domestic work in check, and made debates about whether or not certain household services were a luxury commonplace. In addition, this book mainly examines servants working in private homes and not in boarding houses, hotels, or other commercial accommodations.47 Where I depart from this focus it is to illustrate how commentators and policymakers perceived the service economy as an area for governance that extended beyond private homes.

This book addresses “live-in” servants who occupied the same dwellings as their employers. This reflects on the period it addresses, since “living out” would not really take hold until 1900 onward. Because live-in servants resided under the same roof as their employers, matters such as rooming arrangements and the right to visitors had to be negotiated contractually or, more likely, informally. Unlike factory jobs, where a shift—no matter how long—ended, servants and their employers constantly struggled to dictate when work began and finished. In November 1906, the social scientist Frances Kellor published in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* a work schedule that a housewife had sent to her, which she announced was the second-place winner in a contest that she had sponsored to publicize the best management of servants’ schedules. Despite
being in a situation that Kellor deemed “favorable,” the runner-up’s servant was on call each day until eight in the evening and spent eighty-eight hours each week in service, with seventy-one and a half hours spent in active labor. Wages for servants were paid weekly or monthly, not by the hour. Many employers dictated that their servants wear a uniform. They controlled the cleaning and cooking techniques they were permitted to use, and the affectations and mannerisms they were allowed to display. In some cases, employers’ rules extended into other facets of their servants’ lives, over where they could worship, for instance, or whom they were permitted to socialize with when outside the home. Sexual and physical abuse, although documented infrequently, were far more prevalent in domestic service than in other workplaces.

In this book, I rely on novels, short stories, and other works of fiction in order to examine how American household employers—who were both the creators and audiences for these texts—interpreted the actions of their servants. Through fiction, authors narrated servants’ choices, decisions, and habits in order to provide “evidence” that backed assessments about how different domestics should be brokered and employed as suppliers of labor. Where possible, I provide alternative explanations as to what servants would have done in practice, based on information gleaned from nonfiction sources. I also explore how representations of servants’ actions did specific forms of damage when they refused to acknowledge workers’ actual agency.

Why focus on black, Chinese, and Irish servants? Unlike German and Swedish immigrants, whose prominence in domestic work was more regional, Irish servants were employed nationally excepting only the rural South. Anglo-American employers considered Irish servants, whom they captured in the stereotype of “Biddy,” to be the primary obstacles to domestic peace and comfort. Irish servants were embraced by both the law and popular opinion as white subjects, but this racial construction did not spare them from attacks that were geared at fixing their place in both household and national hierarchies. Anglo-American household employers viewed Irish servants as members of an undifferentiated mass of poor immigrant labor flooding the United States. When Irish servants began to assert greater power over the domestic labor market, employers in cities like New York responded by presenting “Biddy” as the female prototype of the Irish rebel. In the
same ways British imperialists argued that Irish subjects were not fit for self-governance and home rule, Anglo-American employers claimed that Irish servants were equally dangerous when it came to advancing their militant claims to sovereignty over American kitchens, parlors, and bedrooms. In California, Irish servants were championed by the anti-Chinese movements that mobilized in the 1870s, as human capital that would drive Chinese immigrants out of domestic and laundry work. At the same time household employers of Chinese servants reviled Irish servants and accused them of using mob violence and populist calls for restriction to drive competitors out and further consolidate their monopoly over the occupation. The prominence of Irish servants in the national domestic labor market allowed for these myriad interpretations of their racial, social, and political subjectivity.

The historiography on black women’s domestic labor in the post–Civil War South and North is rich in detail and has done much to map out these workers’ agency in the face of near constant structural discrimination and violence. In this book, I add to this literature by examining how black women, men, and children were governed as displaced persons. I focus on the ways in which Reconstruction-era brokers understood the value that subjects classified as refugees presented to household employers, and how they viewed long-distance transactions of labor as an alternative to government relief. Depending on the context, the Freedmen’s Bureau viewed the value of free black labor as either tainted or enriched by the experience of slavery. Progressive Era sociologists and the white middle-class public debated whether black migrants from the Jim Crow South were beyond the pale when it came to reforms that would bring them in line with how white women desired to see domestic labor transformed as an occupation, or whether this made them all the more exploitable for this very reason. In both instances, brokers’ interventions and designs to capture migrant black laborers as a new commodity to be marketed to northern homes provided the backdrop for these evaluations.

This book dwells on the political economy of Chinese domestic labor more than it does on the other groups that are also its focus. As historian Mae Ngai asserts: “we know a lot more about what whites thought about Chinese labor than about Chinese labor itself.” The study of Chinese immigration to the United States has consistently been plagued by what
she describes as “orientalist historiography.” “Orientalist historiography,” Ngai argues, speaks to how many scholars continue to assume, despite evidence to the contrary, that Chinese workers were “indentured, bound by debt peonage, or otherwise enslaved by ‘custom.’” Even though more recent scholarship has moved away from conclusions that conflate “coolieism” with all Chinese labor, misperceptions about Chinese immigrants’ status and agency persist. Allusions to the allegedly sinister and secretive powers that Chinese labor bosses wielded to compel workers beyond the more universal pressures that were placed on individuals and families to satisfy debt obligations have prevailed in the historiography as well. I flip these scripts by showing that the actor most responsible for keeping Chinese servants in a state of bondage or employment-based dependency was the U.S. government itself, through the federal policies it enacted.

The political history of what motivated white laborers and politicians to press for the passage of a Chinese Restriction Act in 1882 has often come at the neglect, historian Erika Lee argues, of “the six decades of the exclusion era itself.” This has obscured the sharp conflicts that persisted over how to utilize as servants the Chinese migrants who remained in the United States or continued to arrive as temporarily admitted labor. The extent to which the Bureau of Immigration should have the discretionary authority to determine eligibility for entry, as opposed to vesting this power in federal courts governed by due process standards, was at the center of debates concerning Congress’s plenary power over immigration in the late nineteenth century. The landmark Supreme Court cases of *Ekiu v. United States* (1892) and *Fong Yue Ting v. United States* (1893) vastly strengthened administrative officers’ sovereign power to determine whether immigrants had the right to be in the country, except in cases where errors in procedure could be clearly demonstrated. These decisions removed for all but a select few the grounds for habeas corpus appeal of their debarment or deportation, unless a blatant miscarriage of justice or “manifest wrong” could be proven. With the 1906 Supreme Court ruling in *Ju Toy*, immigration officials’ power to determine the validity of a potential entrant’s claim to birthright citizenship was upheld, and individual inspectors’ and supervisors’ decisions “in effect became public policy,” as Lee notes. When the
bureau took measures to implement procedural uniformity and fairness in how it handled immigrant cases, it did so to preempt external critics who wanted to check the agency’s power.\(^{57}\) Governing the admission of servants created unique modes of governance in which productive forms of inclusion designed to favorably recognize the labor needs and interests of household employers had to be weighed against the threat that those same workers would become public charges, or, in the case of Chinese servants granted temporary admission under contract to a white employer, whether they would escape from the bonds of servitude and become unauthorized immigrants. These powers made the Bureau of Immigration a powerful broker of labor.

The geographic orientation of this book corresponds to the fluid labor market dynamics it analyzes. The brokers in this study specifically tried to defy spatial limitations on the supply of domestic laborers. Moments when brokers, whether in the form of private philanthropists or government agencies like the Freedmen’s Bureau, took measures to collapse barriers to the placement of servants by offsetting the cost of their transportation receive special attention here. The ability to engineer movement represented a form of expertise that was both venerated and despised, and the production of knowledge on these practices developed in conjunction with the introduction of steamships, better railroad connections, and new methods for financing migration that were also heralded as ushering in a “modern” era of migration and immigration.\(^{58}\) The major ports of Atlantic and Pacific entry, New York and San Francisco, and the hub for black refugees during and after the Civil War, Washington, D.C., receive particular focus here as nodes of distribution that supplied markets.

Finally, this book is transnational in multiple ways, and heeds the charge that historians of migration need to be attentive to how mobility gets governed at the point of departure as well as at the point of reception. Throughout this book, I shed light on the ways in which the brokerage of service relations, like migrants themselves, straddled the territorial boundaries that defined the nation-state. Individuals like the white Methodist missionary to China Esther Baldwin, for instance, made the availability of domestic laborers for hire by American household consumers a matter of foreign relations. This book also
takes on how domesticity itself became transnational and no longer a spatially fixed social relation of production. Servants had to be mobile actors befitting U.S. overseas expansion and imperial aspirations.

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Beginning with immigration that took place in the decade following the Irish Famine, this book's initial focus is on how relief efforts marked as humanitarian steered and compelled recipients of assistance into domestic service. Servitude was viewed as an ideal means by which to salvage the laboring capacity of women whose sudden autonomy became potentially burdensome to the American and British states. Chapter 1 follows the enterprising activities of Vere Foster, a member of the Anglo-Irish gentry who funded the emigration of approximately 1,250 Irish women from post-famine Ireland during the 1850s. Foster’s efforts serve as a case study that illuminates the ideologies of white settlerism and Anglophone imperial unity, and shows how they worked together in concert. Foster was convinced that the best way to govern rural Ireland’s surplus population and inadequate lands was to finance and coordinate the integration of young migrant women into wage labor positions as servants in the United States, in areas of the country where the supply of white female workers was inadequate. In order to assuage concerns about the moral and sexual dangers that free markets and migration posed to young Irish women, Foster endeavored to establish transatlantic networks of migration rooted in what he presented as racial and familial values of protection and mutuality. Chapter 2 turns its attention to the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction, when formerly enslaved persons, classified as “contrabands” and refugees, were placed as domestic workers in northern households. The involvement of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen’s Bureau) in the placement of refugees as servants prefigured the federal government’s expanded role as a broker of immigrant labor in the decades that followed, yet proved controversial. Designed to reduce government expenditures on the relief of refugees in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, the Freedmen’s Bureau’s financing of black servants’ migration was viewed with skepticism by detractors who claimed that it revived—under the thin veneer of “free” labor—a version of the slave
trade. Due to insufficient federal funding, the reluctance of black refugees to relocate to uncertain job situations in the North, and constant questions about its efficacy, the Freedmen’s Bureau—after contracting thousands of women and children to service positions—was ultimately forced to disband this initiative.

By the late 1860s, middle-class employers in eastern cities had shifted their attention to the labor supply of Chinese immigrants in California, and the possible importation of male servants who were portrayed as invaluable assets to western homes. In this period, Democrats seized upon abolitionism and free labor ideology, which were previously associated with Republicans, to critique Chinese laborers as “coolies” and push for restriction.59 Chapter 3 argues that employers produced a version of Chinese servants’ difference that referenced how they were naturally submissive and mechanically efficient—and therefore ideal as domestics. Employers overlooked the more complicated structural dynamics that relegated Chinese immigrants to service work through racial discrimination and legal marginalization as migrants barred from naturalizing. In these contexts, this chapter also explores the doubts that surrounded Chinese restriction as a policy and how proponents of allowing Chinese immigrants to do work labeled menial and unworthy of citizenship linked the continued employment of Chinese servants to the Pacific Coast’s imperial advantages as the gateway to Asian labor supplies.

By 1882, federal immigration officials had assumed sole responsibility for determining who qualified as eligible to enter the United States. By the 1890s, they also wielded the power to deport immigrants—what legal historian Daniel Kanstroom has called “post-entry social control”—who violated the terms of their admission.60 Building on Kanstroom’s framework, chapter 4 grapples with the ways that government-appointed immigration officers and employment agents, first at Castle Garden and then at Ellis Island and the immigration station in Philadelphia, used the threat of barred entry and informal prohibitions on the release of unaccompanied female immigrants to compel these white women into taking jobs in domestic labor. Committed to the idea that young, white European women, when subjected to the right types of controls, remained a vital and privileged source of immigrants, officials devised
and implemented practices and regulations that allowed for their foreign contract and for them to circumvent restrictions that would have otherwise prohibited their entry on the grounds that they were likely to become public charges.

Chapter 5 continues this thread, although it contends that in the context of Chinese servants exempted from the exclusion laws and granted temporary admission as laborers, officials implemented post-entry controls aimed at containment rather than protection. Following the passage of the 1882 Chinese Restriction Act, immigration officials brokered special arrangements that allowed white employers to continue to enter the country with Chinese servants in their employ, so long as they took out surety bonds that indemnified the government against the possibility that their Chinese servants might leave their service and remain in the United States on an unauthorized basis. How to gain access to foreign labor without having to dispense with the entitlements that would accompany more substantive or permanent incorporation has always made domestic work, along with agricultural labor, a salient area of concern for policymakers. The Chinese who entered as temporary laborers were governed as a legally captive supply of labor for select classes of imperialists working overseas—businessmen, military officials, and missionaries—and came to symbolize the compromise between the privileged, free mobility that imperial elites required, and, in a national setting, the need to shore up the sovereign boundaries of the nation against the permanent settlement of Asian laborers. In this respect, the temporary admission of Chinese servants and the bonded conditions that defined their stay offer examples of what I argue was an incipient guestworker program. Chinese immigrant servants who lived in the United States legally—as well as birthright American citizens of Chinese descent—were also subject to various requirements by immigration officials that reinforced these workers’ dependency on white employers. During exclusion, the testimony of white employers became a crucial factor in determining whether Chinese servants would be credentialed as authorized residents, even in cases where they claimed to be birthright American citizens. This was essential to avoiding deportation but also to being allowed to depart and reenter the United States.
Stymied by the refusal of “new” immigrant women from Eastern and Southern Europe to pursue work as domestic laborers at the turn of the century, middle-class employers reevaluated the fundamental utility of hired labor to the production of domesticity. Chapter 6 brings the book’s different narrative arcs together by engaging public and expert debates about whether domestic service could best be reformed and made modern through changes to labor relations in the home or whether Chinese and black workers’ alleged predisposition to servitude meant that looking for racialized sources of labor continued to be the best solution for “fixing” the occupation. Examining the start of the Great Migration, the 1917 Immigration Act, and the eventual passage of numerical restrictions on European immigration that the 1924 Immigration Act instituted, this chapter argues that the various exceptions built into immigration laws, which had exempted domestic servants from restrictions since the passage of the 1885 Foran Act, finally gave way to the conclusion that white women could no longer be counted on to do this work.

A basic but often overlooked question persists in the United States and other wealthy nations where service workers are drawn from the ranks of immigrants: under what terms and conditions are certain workers allowed to migrate in order to serve others? To not grapple with this question is to naturalize policies that, after 1924, have supplied middle-class households with labor in situations where servants, especially live-in ones, would not otherwise be procurable. The epilogue to this book touches on how U.S. internment of Japanese Americans and their supervised parole during World War II provided displaced persons for hire as servants. It also briefly explores the 1948 Displaced Persons Act, whose sponsorship requirements meant that European refugees could agree to work as live-in servants in exchange for asylum. More attention is devoted to the labor exceptions built into the 1965 Immigration Act, which provided Jamaican and other Caribbean women with a short-lived opportunity to enter the United States after taking advantage of immigration quota rankings that privileged domestic servants. Policies that continue to authorize migrant servants’ temporary admission into the United States, contingent on their performance of domestic service to the employers they entered with, also garner focus here. Finally, the epilogue concludes by discussing how household consumers have exploited domestic and care workers
classified as undocumented—and how the absence of state action has enabled this social relation of production.

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The idea that the servitude of free laborers and free migrants had to be brokered challenges, on an epistemological level, how we view a past where liberty of contract allegedly triumphed against enslavement, indenture, and other forms of coercion that kept workers in a state of bondage. Accordingly, it is all the more important to delve into how intermediaries sought to justify interventions into labor markets and migratory processes, and to untangle why they presupposed the need to impose various controls. It is also essential, however, to keep in mind how servants’ actions and employers’ and brokers’ perceptions of workers’ agency influenced and obligated regulatory responses. As historian Walter Johnson has argued, historic agency is best understood in the nuanced circumstances in which it operated, and not through ahistorical maxims idealizing certain performances of liberal freedom. Independence and self-determination were not just ideological constructs of liberalism, but signifying concepts that whites used to maintain the exclusivity of their fitness for sovereign self-governance.

Examples of this dialectic between resistance and control are myriad. When a white St. Alban’s employer wrote to the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1870 to complain that the two “black boys” whose rail fare he had paid absconded en route, we can assume that they were motivated to break their contracts by the lure of a better option that presented itself during their journey north. The Freedmen’s Bureau, eager to maintain its reputation as a broker, sent two black refugee women instead. When a correspondent for the New York Times reported from San Francisco in 1878 that Chinese servants demanded higher wages than their white counterparts, and that local employers were willing to pay the extra money, we can decipher that Chinese laborers were not the “coolies” that opponents made them out to be. Rather, they were savvy market actors who knew how to leverage the very racial difference that employers produced and validated. In 1902, when Marie von Rhein, a twenty-year-old German immigrant, broke an oral agreement that she had entered into with a prospective domestic employer while in transit from Bremen to New York, we can conclude that she had good reason to change her
mind upon landing. William Williams, the commissioner of Ellis Island, tracked her down nonetheless, after accusing a missionary and broker from the Lutheran Emigrant Home of conspiring to steal her labor. Had she been permitted to freely enter the United States unaccompanied, as male immigrants were, the matter of whom she needed to be contracted to would have been evaded altogether.\textsuperscript{65}

If freedom is to be populated with real meaning, the purposeful abdications of its underlying economic and political principles must be diligently exposed.