

DOMINATION AND RESISTANCE: The Politics of Wage Household Labor in New South Atlanta

by
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Relations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance. Once established, domination does not persist of its own momentum. Inasmuch as it involves the use of power to extract work, production, services, taxes against the will of the dominated, it generates considerable friction and can be sustained only by continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment.

James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990)

Washerwomen in Atlanta organized a massive strike in the summer of 1881. Over the course of a two week period in July they summoned 3000 supporters through the neighborhood networks they had been building since emancipation. The strike articulated economic as well as political grievances: the women demanded higher fees for their services and fought to maintain the distinctive autonomy of their trade. When city officials threatened the "washing amazons" with the possibility of levying an exorbitant tax on each individual member of the Washing Society (the group

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responsible for the strike), the women issued a warning of their own: "We, the members of our society, are determined to stand our pledge . . . we mean business this week or no washing."¹

Southern household workers, who are often stereotyped as passive victims of racial, sexual, and class oppression, displayed a profound sense of political consciousness through the organization of this strike. Moreover, they initiated it at the dawn of the New South movement, an effort by ambitious businessmen to change the course and fortunes of regional economic development. In order to promote the goals of industrial capitalism and to attract northern capital below the Mason-Dixon Line, proponents of the New South heralded an image of all Southern workers as artless by nature and indifferent to class struggle. But these working-class women stridently scorned this agenda.

The protest in Atlanta was not unique in the post-slavery era. Washerwomen in Jackson, MS struck in 1866. And on the heels of the Great Strike of 1877, laundresses and other household workers in Galveston stopped work as well.² Both of these boycotts articulated goals for a living wage and autonomy, yet neither matched the proportions and the affront the Atlanta women posed to the emergent New South ideology. The Atlanta strike was unusual; domestic workers rarely organized strikes. But they did find a multitude of other ways to oppose oppression, usually in the form of surreptitious and quotidian resistance.³

Household workers often resorted to covert tactics of resistance because they were frequently the only options available within a system of severe constraints. The magnitude of seemingly unassuming gestures looms large if we realize that workers sometimes transformed them into collective dissent or used them as building blocks for the occasional large-scale outburst. Nonetheless, it is a testament to the potency of the forces dominating women workers in the South that defiance would assume this form and that these forces were powerful enough to cover up the expression of opposition. The importance of strikes such as that by the Atlanta washerwomen in part is that they have generated a precious few documents straight from the mouths of working-class women in the form of letters and petitions to municipal officials and reports from journalists who witnessed

¹*Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 3, 1881.

²See *Jackson Daily Clarion*, June 24, 1866, reprinted in Philip S. Foner and Ronald Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times To the Present*, (Philadelphia, 1978-84), II, 345; *Galveston Daily News*, 1, 2, 5, 7, and 16 Aug. 1877. For a full account of all the strikes, see Tera W. Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making: Afro-American Women in Atlanta and the New South, 1861 to 1920," unpublished Ph.D. diss. Yale Univ., 1990).

³This essay relies on the following works on resistance: James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Rebellion* (New Haven, 1985); *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990); Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988), 189-224; John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston, 1989).

mass meetings and rallies. In the main little direct testimony exists from household workers about their activities and the motivations that prompted them. But there is another way to scout out working-class women's discontent and dissent. Evidence from employers and their proxies in public authority positions unwittingly expose the resilience and creativity of African-American household workers' efforts to counter domination.

This article is an effort to understand resistance by looking at the character of domination and the attempts to counter it from Reconstruction to World War I. Domination is defined here as the process of exercising power over the dispossessed by whatever means necessary, but without overt conflict where possible. Conversely, resistance is defined as any act, individual or collective, symbolic or literal, intended by subordinates to deny claims, to refuse compliance with impositions made by superordinates, or to advance claims of their own.⁴ This essay outlines examples of African-American women domestics combatting injustice, and it analyzes the responses of employers and public officials. As household workers struggled to negate conditions of abject servitude, their employers worked even harder to repress and contain these workers. The subsequent contests reveal how structures of inequality were reproduced and challenged in daily interactions; their public airing suggest that wage household labor had broader social and political implications beyond its significance to private homes. Atlanta is a fitting place to begin exploring the larger ramifications of wage household labor. Young, white, upwardly mobile businessmen in the years after the Civil War began cultivating an image of the city as the vanguard of a "New South." As the ideas of these urban boosters were instituted, it became all too clear that "modernization" of the social, political, and economic order included racial segregation and political disfranchisement. From this perspective, Atlanta did not simply embody the contradictions of life under Jim Crow, the conscious leadership role it assumed in the region also made it instrumental in creating and perpetuating them.⁵

This self-proclaimed model of the New South held the distinction of employing one of the highest per capita numbers of domestic workers in the nation during the period of this study.⁶ Such a reputé was not coin-

⁴See O'Hanlon, 199-200; and Scott, 289-303.

⁵On Atlanta as a leading city in the New South see James Michael Russell, *Atlanta, 1847-1890: City Building in the Old South and the New* (Baton Rouge, 1988), *passim*; Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill, 1990), *passim*; Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (NY, 1978), *passim*; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 124.

⁶For a comparison of rates of employment of domestic workers in various cities, see David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service and Industrializing America* (NY, 1978), 61, 286.

cidental to the seeming contradiction between the goals of modernization and the advocacy of a retrogressive system such as segregation. One might expect that a modernizing economy would shirk old fashioned manual household labor in favor of up to date mechanized and commercial production. Yet manual household work furthered the goals of the advocates of the New South in restricting black workers' social and economic opportunities. African-American women who migrated to Atlanta following Emancipation were segregated into household labor. Virtually no other options were available to them, yet wage work was essential to the sustenance of their livelihoods from childhood to death. And in Atlanta, as in other Southern cities, the disproportionate sex ratio among blacks made wage work all the more imperative for women, especially for single, divorced, or widowed mothers saddled with the sole responsibility for taking care of their families. And the low wages paid to black men meant that even married women could rarely escape outside employment and worked in far greater numbers than their white counterparts.⁷

Yet despite this occupational confinement, black women managed to assert some preferences for the particular kind of domestic labor they performed. Single and younger women accepted positions as general maids or child-nurses more often, for example, while married women usually chose positions as laundresses. Washerwomen represented the largest single category of waged household workers in Atlanta, and by 1900 their total numbers exceeded all other domestics combined.⁸ Laundresses picked up loads of dirty clothes from their patrons on Monday; washed, dried, and ironed throughout the week; and returned the finished garments on Saturday. This labor process encumbered their already cramped living quarters with the accoutrements of the trade, but it exempted workers from employer supervision, yielded a day "off," allowed workers to care for their children and to perform other duties intermittently, incorporated family members into the work routine, and facilitated communal work among adult women.⁹

Regardless of the specific domestic job black women chose, the majority insisted on living in their own homes rather than with their employers. Elsewhere in the country, where immigrant European and native-born white

⁷On rates of married women in the work force, see Joseph A. Hill, *Women in Gainful Occupations 1870 to 1920* (Washington, DC, 1929), 334-336.

⁸U.S., Dept. of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census. *Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, DC, 1904), 486-489.

⁹On laundry work, see Sarah Hill, "Bea, the Washerwoman," Federal Writer's Project Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Jasper Battle, "Wash Day in Slavery," in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT, 1972-1978), II, pt. 1, 70; Katzman, 72, 82, 124; Daniel Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 92; Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, CT, 1983), 224-225; Patricia E. Malcolmsom, *English Laundresses: A Social History, 1850-1930* (Urbana, 1986), 11-43.

women were more numerous, live-in domestic work predominated; but for recently freed slaves, living with their own families was foremost to approximating independence.¹⁰ Above all, living on their own meant for the former slaves breaking the physical chains of bondage and reestablishing the kinship ties scattered and torn asunder by the caprice of fluctuating fortunes or the ill will of owners. It also meant preventing employers from exercising unmitigated control over their entire lives. Some employers accepted a live-out arrangement; perhaps, because it coincided with their own ambivalence about continuing the intimacy that prevailed between master and slaves. But many employers resented the loss of control that resulted.¹¹

Black women's priorities in the post-Civil War years demonstrated that economic motivations alone did not influence their decisions about wage labor. They sought instead to balance wage-earning activities with other needs and obligations. Consequently they moved in and out of the labor market as circumstances in their personal lives demanded and switched jobs frequently. Domestic workers quit in order to buy time off for a variety of reasons; among them participation in special functions, such as religious revivals, or taking care of family members who became ill. The workers also resorted to quitting to make clear their discontent over unfair practices when other efforts to obtain satisfactory redress failed. Quitting did not necessarily guarantee a better situation elsewhere (and often did not), but it reinforced workers' desire for self-determination and deprived employers of the ascendancy to which they were accustomed as slaveholders.

Consequently, quitting made it difficult for employers to find "good" servants and, especially, to keep them — the single most oft-repeated complaint from Reconstruction onward.¹² Quitting violated employers' expectations of the ideal worker: one who conformed to relentless hours of labor, made herself available at beck and call, and showed devoted loyalty throughout her entire life. In 1866, as the clamor among employers demanding relief quickly rose to a high pitch, the Atlanta City Council interceded on their behalf by passing a law to nullify free labor's most fundamental principle. To obstruct the liberties essential to authentic independence, to hinder the ease and frequency of workers changing jobs,

¹⁰On live-out arrangements see Katzman, 87-91.

¹¹See, for example, testimony of Albert C. Danner, U. S. Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Report Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital* (Washington, DC, 1885), 105 (hereafter cited *Labor and Capital*).

¹²See Myrta Lockett Avery, *Dixie After the War: An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South during the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond* (Boston, 1906; reprint ed., 1937), 192; entries for 17 June through 2 Dec., 1866, Samuel P. Richards Diary, Atlanta Historical Society; entries for May 1865, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Journal, Duke University Archives; Emma J. S. Prescott, "Reminiscences of the War," 49-55, Atlanta Historical Society.

the law required employers of domestics to obtain recommendations from the previous employer before hiring them.¹³

The 1866 law is instructive of the general crisis of free labor in the South following the Civil War. As African-Americans showed a marked determination to make their new status live up to their needs and expectations, planters and urban employers rejected the ideals of the free labor system that conflicted with the safekeeping of white supremacy. In 1865, during the brief reign of Presidential Reconstruction under Andrew Johnson, Democrats in state legislatures in the South instituted the Black Codes, laws designed, among other things, to diminish blacks' rights in labor contracts.¹⁴ The 1866 law was strongly reminiscent of this mechanism and its passage signalled the increasing role of the state in relationships formerly governed entirely by individual masters. Black women workers would still be vulnerable to arbitrary personal power although its exercise would be tempered by the 13th Amendment. Nonetheless employers would try to coerce workers with the aid of the state. The enactment of the law in 1866 provided concrete evidence that household workers' refusals to acquiesce to unrelenting physical exertion forced employers to procure outside intervention.

Employers' augmentation of their authority with municipal power, however, proved ineffective in part because of their ambivalent attitude towards the law. Frustrated employers were often willing to employ almost any black woman in their ever illusive search for individuals whose personal characteristics and occupational behavior coincided with the traits of "good" servants. Despite the employers' dissatisfaction with the way the system worked, and in defiance of the law passed for their own protection, they preferred to hire workers without the requisite nod from former bosses rather than face the unthinkable possibility of no servants at all.

Black women's active opposition to the law also helped to defeat it as they continued to quit work at will. Quitting was an effective strategy of resistance precisely because it could not be quelled outside a system of bound labor. Though some women workers may have openly confronted their employer before departing, quitting as a tactic thrived because it did not require such direct antagonism. Workers who had the advantage of living in their own homes could easily make up excuses for leaving, or leave without notice at all – permitting small and fleeting victories for individuals to accumulate into bigger results as domestics throughout At-

¹³Alexa Wynell Benson, "Race Relations in Atlanta, As Seen in a Critical Analysis of the City Council Proceedings and Other Related Works, 1865-1877" (unpublished MA essay, Atlanta Univ., 1966), 43-44.

¹⁴On the crisis of free labor see Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (NY, 1978), 97-125. On Black Codes see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Business, 1863-1877* (NY, 1988), 109-202.

lanta and the urban South repeated these actions over and over again. The instability created in the labor market strengthened the bargaining position of domestic workers since employers persisted in thinking of the pool as scarce, though, in absolute numbers, the supply of domestic workers available to the employing population in Atlanta was virtually endless. The incongruence between the perception of a dearth and the reality of an abundance suggests that black women's self-assertion had indeed created a shortage of workers with the attributes employers preferred.¹⁵

Quitting and other forms of everyday struggle continued for many decades long after Reconstruction. In 1912 an Atlanta mayoral candidate offered an extreme, if novel, solution to the menacing problem of restraining domestic workers' self-assertions. George Brown, a physician, supported a public health reform that encompassed the concerns of white employers. The candidate promised pure drinking water, free bathing facilities, improved sanitary provisions at railroad stations, and a (white) citizenry protected from exposure to contagious germs.¹⁶ The latter proposal had direct implications for black domestics whom employers and health officials accused of spreading tuberculosis through the food they cooked, the houses they cleaned, and the clothes they washed. Laundry workers were the most vociferously attacked objects of scorn. The freedom they enjoyed from direct white supervision permitted them to operate more as contractors than as typical wage workers, which made them vulnerable to scrutiny of their labor and personal lives.¹⁷

Brown and like-minded individuals heightened the fear that domestic workers were the primary emissaries of physical contagions and impressed upon white minds that black women were also the harbingers of social disease as well. The attribution of pestilence to domestics unveils deeper frictions that lay bare a central paradox about Jim Crow, which by then was firmly in place. The social and political geography of Atlanta bolstered the exploitation and containment of black bodies and their spatial separation from upper-class whites. African-Americans were segregated in the worst areas of the city and had the least access to the municipal resources essential to good health; services such as street pavings, proper waste disposal, and potable water were provided to Atlantans on the basis of both racial and class privileges. By the late 19th century upper-class

¹⁵David Katzman speculates on the basis of the ratio of workers to employers that there were enough laundresses in Atlanta for every white household and even some black. See Katzman, 91-92 and table 2-6.

¹⁶On George Brown's campaign see *Atlanta Constitution*, 8, 15, 28, and 29 Sept. 1912.

¹⁷For example see H. McHatton, "Our House and Our Servant," *Atlanta Journal-Record of Medicine*, 5 (July 1903), 212-219; *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 19, 1909; William Northen, "Tuberculosis among Negroes," *Journal of the Southern Medical Association*, 6 (Oct. 1909), 415; H. L. Sutherland, "Health Conditions of the Negro in the South: With Special Reference to Tuberculosis," *Journal of the Southern Medical Association*, 6 (Oct. 1909), 399-407; *Daily Times*, n.p., Sept. 7, 1912, in Tuskegee Institute News Clip file (hereinafter TINF).

whites in large numbers had moved out to ostentatious suburbs and had begun to escape regular interaction with the unattractive sites that the inequitable distribution of city resources typically bred.¹⁸ Yet these white suburbanities continued to hire black household workers from such malodorous neighborhoods. White anxieties about the contaminating touch of black women reflected the ambivalence of a tension between revulsion and attraction to the worker who performed the most intimate labor, taking care, for example, of children.

Brown proposed to wipe out the public health problem and to diminish the ubiquitous "servant problem" in one sweeping measure. He proposed the creation of a city-run servant bureau invested with broad discretionary judiciary powers that would require domestics to submit to rigorous physical examination and to offer detailed personal and employment histories before obtaining prerequisite licenses for work. Brown sought to reinstitute "absolute control" of servants and to relieve white fears by criminalizing presumed carriers of disease; he promised to punish domestics who impeded efforts to keep the scourge away from the door steps of their white bosses.

And the mayoral hopeful went further: he called for disciplinary measures to be used against workers who exercised the conventional liberties of wage work. Quitting for reasons employers did not consider "just" or displaying other forms of recalcitrance would constitute sufficient grounds for arrest, fines, incarceration, or labor on the chain gang.¹⁹ As a candidate outside the inner circle of New South politicians, Brown hardly had a chance to win the election, but his campaign is noteworthy for its dissemination of pejorative images of domestics that further legitimized their subordination as a source of cheap labor.

The Brown campaign is also suggestive about the changing constitution of domination in response to household workers' agency. The prominence of the disease issue, even beyond the mayoral campaign, showed signs of a shift in the "servant problem" discourse from an emphasis on so-called inherent deficiencies of black women, such as laziness and the lack of a proper work ethic, to a more powerful critique of domestic workers as the bearers of deadly organisms.²⁰ Worker mobility and other acts of defiance undoubtedly took their toll on employers' patience, but the prospects of contracting tuberculosis or other communicable diseases

¹⁸On the social and political implications of Atlanta's geography see James M. Russell, "Politics, Municipal Services, and the Working Class in Atlanta, 1865 to 1890," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 66 (1982), 467-491; Jerry Thornberry, "The Development of Black Atlanta, 1865-1885" (unpublished PhD diss., Univ. of Maryland, 1977); Dana F. White, "The Black Sides of Atlanta: A Geography of Expansion and Containment, 1870-1970," *Atlanta Historical Journal*, 26 (Summer/Fall 1982-1983), 199-225.

¹⁹*Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 15, 1912.

²⁰For other discussions associating domestic workers with disease and proposals to regulate them, see *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 11, Mar. 11, 12, 25, 1910, Oct. 2, 1912; and *Atlanta Independent*, Feb. 19, 1910.

provided new and greater rationalizations for establishing comprehensive mechanisms of control over black females. The ostensible concern with public health, however, falters as an adequate explanation for these exacerbated prejudices, if we consider that proposals like Brown's were based on the faulty assumption that disease traveled solely on one-way tickets from blacks to whites. The servant bureau of Brown's imagination would not have alleviated the propagation of germs, but it would have stripped household workers of important rights. Carried to their logical conclusion, the punitive measures could have conveniently led to a convict labor system for domestic workers, forcing them to work at the behest of employers without compensation and under the threat of physical brutality.

Several of the issues raised in George Brown's run for mayor reverberated in another infamous campaign. Joseph M. Brown, son of the former Confederate governor and unrelated to George, ran for the U.S. Senate against the incumbent Hoke Smith in 1914. The two Brown men shared the view that domestic workers' defiance posed an ample threat to social stability in the New South that justified state intervention. Both men berated the large numbers of household workers who participated in benevolent and mutual aid associations, also known as secret societies, and both believed that it was imperative to dismantle the workers' capacity to bolster clandestine resistance through such institutions.²¹

From Reconstruction onward, black women led and joined secret societies to pool their meager resources to aid the sick, orphaned, widowed, or unemployed, and to create opportunities for personal enrichment as well as broader race advancement. The number of such organizations with explicit labor-related goals were few, but groups that brought working-class women together for other expressed purposes were known to transform themselves on the spur of the moment and operate as quasi-trade unions when necessary.²²

George Brown had entreated white men to put him in the mayor's seat so that he could direct the cleansing mission of his servant bureau toward eradicating these organizations that debilitated "helpless" white housewives.²³ "Little Joe" Brown followed suit in his bid for the Senate two years later by rebuking African-American domestics for devising "blacklists" in secret societies that deprived errant employers. This tactic was especially unnerving to him (and others) because it shrouded a collective act by relying on individuals to quietly refuse to work, leaving behind per-

²¹*Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 15, 1912; 1914 campaign literature, Joseph M. Brown Papers, Atlanta Historical Society.

²²For example see *Atlanta Constitution*, Mar. 31, 1910; Ruth Reed, *Negro Women of Gainesville, Georgia* (Athens, GA, 1921), 46. Canadian working-class women's mutual aid organizations operated similarly: see Varpu Lindström-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto, 1988), 56-60.

²³*Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 15, 1912.

plexed housewives with the sudden misfortune of not being able to find willing workers. Joe Brown preyed on white Southern fears to dramatize the urgent need to eliminate these quasi-union activities and he tried to race-bait his opponent Hoke Smith, no stranger to this ploy himself. Brown accused the black mutual aid groups of conspiring with white labor unions in an interracial syndicate, a charge which white labor leaders quickly rebutted.²⁴ Brown forewarned the voters against choosing Smith and of the consequences of failing to elect him and neglecting to outlaw the institutional basis of African-American women's dissent: "Every white lady in whose home negro servants are hired then becomes subservient to these negroes," he stated.²⁵ Brown lost the Senate race, yet his devotion to assailing household workers' resistance had unintended consequences, it acknowledged its effect.

Schemes designed to thwart household workers' agency reached a peak as the Great Migration intensified during World War I. In May 1918, Enoch Crowder, the Selective Service Director, issued a "work or fight" order aimed at drafting unemployed men into the armed forces. The order stressed the nation's need for labor's cooperation in contributing to the war effort through steady gainful work or military service. Trade unions immediately protested the potential abuses that could result from such a directive, having heard of abuses perpetrated against striking British workers under a similar law. Newton D. Baker, the Secretary of War, made assurances to the contrary, but striking machinists in Bridgeport, CT, were threatened with Crowder's order.²⁶ Southern legislatures and city councils deliberately designed their own "work or fight" laws to break the will of black workers in order to maintain white supremacy in a time of rapid change and uncertainty. Similar to the logic used by white Progressives in anti-vagrancy campaigns during the same period, "work or fight" laws were rationalized as a solution to alleged crime and moral depravity that resulted when blacks filled all or part of their day with pursuits other than gainful work. Atlanta had one of the highest per capita arrest records in the country in the early 20th century, largely because of vagrancy and other misdemeanor convictions; the individuals apprehended were often gain-

²⁴1914 campaign literature, Joseph M. Brown Papers, Atlanta Historical Society. Also see *Atlanta Constitution*, Mar. 31, 1910. The white trade unionists vehemently denied the charges by reminding their supporters that "the 'nigger' question is generally the last and most desperate resort of demagogues to win votes." While they admitted the importance of black workers organizing in separate unions to prevent undercutting white workers, they opposed integration and social equality. "'Little Joe' knows that there is not a single white labor unionist in Georgia, or the South, who would stand for that sort of thing," they insisted. *Journal of Labor*, July 24, 1914.

²⁵1914 campaign literature, Joseph M. Brown Papers, Atlanta Historical Society; Dewey Grantham, *Hoke Smith and the Politics of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1958), 270-273.

²⁶David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (NY, 1980), 269; David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge, 1979), 127-134.

fully employed and always disproportionately black.²⁷ The relative scarcity of labor produced by the war prompted Southern lawmakers to manipulate Crowder's order and use it to clamp down on African-Americans at the very moment when the war opened new opportunities for employment and increased their bargaining positions in existing jobs.

White Southerners abandoned the original intention of the Federal measure to fill the army with able-bodied men by making the conscription of *women* central to its provisions.²⁸ As opportunities for black women expanded in the sewing trades, commercial laundries, and less rapidly, small manufacturing plants, the number available for household work declined, giving an edge to those who remained in negotiating for better terms.²⁹ Employers of domestics resented this new mobility and sought to contain it by using "work or fight" laws to punish black women who vacated traditional jobs.

Individuals arrested under the laws' provisions included black housewives, defined as "idle" and unproductive, and other self-employed black women such as hairdressers. A group of self-described "friends" of the Negro race in Macon, GA, iterated some of the assumptions behind such enforcement. Black women should not withdraw from wage work in general and household labor in particular, no matter what the circumstances; the Macon group argued that patriotic duty required that black women not "sit at home and hold their hands, refusing to do the labor for which they are specially trained and otherwise adapted." Black women's domestic work was essential to the war effort, insisted the Macon group, because it exempted white women "from the routine of housework in order that they may do the work which negro women cannot do."³⁰ In Atlanta, two 17-year-old girls experienced the encroachment of this notion of patriotism first-hand. "You can not make us work," Nellie Atkins and Ruth Warf protested upon arrest and proceeded to break windows to vent their anger at the injustice, which doubled the sentence to 60 days each in the prison

²⁷Charles Crowe, "Racial Violence and Social Reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906," *Journal of Negro History*, 52 (1968), 247; John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* (Urbana, IL, 1977), 87-88.

²⁸Walter F. White, "'Work or Fight' in the South," *The New Republic*, 18 (Mar. 1, 1919), 144-146.

²⁹See U. S. Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of the Census, *Report of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, DC, 1897), pt. II, 634-635; U. S. Dept. of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, DC, 1904), 486-489; *idem*, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, vol. IV, "Population Occupational Statistics" (Washington, DC, 1914), 536-537; *idem*, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, vol. IV, "Population, Occupations" (Washington, DC, 1923), 1053-1055.

³⁰Macon News, Oct. 18, 1918, in TINF. The federal government also made similar appeals to black women through war propaganda. See, for example, the Portsmouth, Virginia, *Star*, Oct. 21, 1918, in TINF.

laundry.³¹ Warf and Atkins were relatively fortunate, however; other women were tarred and feathered and violently attacked by vigilantes.³²

African-Americans in Atlanta took the lead in organizing what eventually became a regional assault against racist and sexist implementation of "work or fight" laws. They enlisted the national office of the NAACP, which in turn launched an investigation and supported local chapters in the South in order to stop the passage of the abusive laws. The NAACP discovered that employers not only used the laws to conscript non-domestics; the employers also used the laws against employed household workers who demanded higher wages to meet the rising costs of living, organized protests, quit work because of unfair treatment, or took time out for other activities.³³ Over a half-century after the Jackson washerwomen's strike, for example, all the household workers in that city organized and established a six-day work week, with Sundays off. But employers launched a counter-offensive, forcing the workers to return to an unforgiving seven day schedule or face prosecution.³⁴

Blacks in Atlanta successfully lobbied Governor Hugh Dorsey to veto discriminatory "work or fight" legislation passed by the Georgia House and Senate. Fearing the intensification of the Great Migration and the loss of black laborers, Dorsey responded to their demands. The Atlanta branch of the NAACP similarly appealed to the city council and managed to preempt legislation at the local level, and eliminated de jure discrimination through a war time measure. Police and vigilantes, however, found other methods of abusing black women with impunity.³⁵

The blatantly unjust harassment of household workers during World War I revealed another variation on a familiar theme—the New South's unabashed disdain for the privileges of free labor. Yet the physical brutality and legal coercion rationalized by state "work or fight" laws also signalled the breakdown of the authority of the elite in controlling a work force whose hallmark was supposedly servility. Like similar proposals to

³¹Quoted in *Baltimore Daily Herald*, Sept. 10, 1918, Group 1, Series C, Administrative Files, Box 417, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress (hereinafter NAACP, LC).

³²For instances of violence against women, see Walter F. White, "Report of Conditions Found in Investigation of 'Work or Fight' Laws in Southern States," Group 1, Series C, Administrative Files, Box 417, NAACP, LC.

³³Walter F. White, "Report of Conditions Found in Investigation of 'Work or Fight' Laws in Southern States," NAACP, LC; *Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1918, and *New York Age*, Nov. 19, 1918, in TINF.

³⁴*New York Age*, Nov. 19, 1918, in TINF.

³⁵One outcome of the NAACP's involvement in this campaigning was that it increased the interests of black Southerners in joining the organization. Thus, "work or fight" laws became a critical galvanizing issue for the growth of local NAACP chapters in the South. See for example, *Atlanta Constitution*, July 10–Aug. 25, 1918; Rev. P. J. Bryant, Remarks to the 10th Annual Conference of the NAAP, June 24, 1919, Group 1, Series B, Annual Conference Files, Box 2, NAACP, LC.

regulate domestic workers in previous years, "work or fight" laws uncovered an effort by employers to eliminate black women's ongoing resistance. The abusive legislation also uncloaked the impact of the Great Migration. As African-Americans left the South en masse to pursue freedom in Northern industrial towns, white Southern employers struggled to maintain power over those who stayed.

"Work or fight" laws and the other efforts to control domestic workers are interesting in part because they evidence struggle and contestation that till now had been obscured. While in many of the instances noted above, the household workers' collective consciousness may have been out of sight, it was not out of mind. The washerwomen's strike in the summer of 1881 reveals how working-class women's resistance could and did take a different form, as they openly proclaimed the usually "hidden transcript" of opposition in a profound way.³⁶ The strike displayed an astute political consciousness among black working-class women who made so-called private labor a public issue and insisted on autonomy and a living wage.³⁷

The communal character and self-organization of laundry work proved critical to this mobilization as it facilitated the creation of a relatively autonomous space that had already nurtured the foundation of working-class women's solidarity. The Atlanta laundresses built on this tightly knit system, extended it through an intensive door to door recruitment of adherents to their cause, and sustained it through mass or decentralized ward meetings held nightly. Their capacity to arise to this occasion demonstrates why washerwomen were the most outspoken leaders in domestic workers' strikes documented in the South. It is no accident that, as incidents in later years would indicate, employers often combined forces to repress this particular group.

White city leaders put their full weight behind employers' attempts to annihilate a strike. At least one landlord threatened to raise the rent of his washerwoman if she raised the fees for her work. A businessman scoffed "at the colored people's stupidity in not seeing that they were working their own ruin" and warned that if they persisted they would be faced with a harsh winter without white charity.³⁸ The police arrested several street

³⁶On "hidden transcripts" see Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, *passim*.

³⁷See Rabinowitz, 74-76; Katzman, 196-197; William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (1982), 37; Dudden, 232; Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (NY, 1984), 357-358; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women Work and the Family from Slavery to Freedom* (NY, 1985), 148-149; Donna Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Domestic Workers, 1870-1940* (NY, 1988), 200. My own interpretation is closest to the only other study that considers most of the available evidence: Thornberry, 215-220. Rabinowitz's account has prevailed as the definitive one, often cited uncritically by other historians. But in the haste to force the event to conform to a thesis that emphasizes white attitudes and black inefficacy in the face of white power, he ignores significant evidence and overstates the known reprisals made against the women.

³⁸*Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 3, 1881.

organizers for "disorderly conduct," charging them with disruptive and violent behavior as they canvassed their neighborhoods. Leading capitalists raised funds for a state-of-the-art steam laundry and offered to employ "smart Yankee girls" to buttress the counter-offensive and requested a tax exemption from the city council to subsidize the costs. Meanwhile, municipal authorities proposed a scheme to regulate the trade and destroy the workers' independence: councilmen suggested that each member of any washerwomen's organization pay an exorbitant business tax of \$25.00.³⁹ In the end, however, the City Council rejected the license fee; the councilmen may have been daunted by the continued determination of women who refused to buckle under to threats and who vowed to reappropriate the license fee and city regulation to gain the benefits of private enterprise. As the women themselves stated in an open letter to the mayor, "We have agreed, and are willing to pay \$25 or \$50 for licenses as a protection so we can control the washing for the city."⁴⁰

Not only did the washerwomen's spirit of rebellion frustrate the actions of their opponents, it set an example for other black workers. Waiters at the National Hotel followed on the women's coat tails and won demands for better wages and working conditions previously rejected by management. Cooks, maids, and child nurses also were inspired to begin organizing for better wages. Even the *Atlanta Constitution*, ardent ally of the employers, begrudgingly admitted that the "amazons" had shown remarkable organization.⁴¹

The most telling piece of evidence about the strike's impact appeared several weeks after the event had apparently subsided, when an unidentified source divulged to the newspaper that the washerwomen were threatening to call a second potentially more perilous general strike of all domestics during the upcoming International Cotton Exposition. While there were no further reports to suggest that this rumor ever came to fruition, the mere threat of a second strike at such a critical moment is quite telling. The laundry workers were clearly conscious of the significance of this event which had been touted as the debut of the New South movement and as a showcase for Atlanta, an upstart metropolis eager to be emulated. A strike held at that particular time not only would have spoiled the image of docile labor that New Southerners were carefully projecting to attract northern capital, it would have wreaked havoc on a city already anxious about its capacity to host the thousands of visitors who would require the services of cooks, maids, child-nurses, and laundresses. The newspaper

³⁹*Atlanta Constitution*, July 24, 1881.

⁴⁰*Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 3, 1881. The women may have been counting on resources from individual savings and mutual aid organizations to help defray the costs of the fees. Nonetheless, the cost still would have been exorbitant.

⁴¹*Atlanta Constitution*, July 21, 1881.

forewarned white housewives: "prepare for the attack before it is made," and they did.⁴²

The actual outcome of the washerwomen's strike is inconclusive, though it is curious that reports on the protest petered out in the medium that had openly flaunted its partisanship against it. Whether or not some or all the washerwomen were able to gain higher wages we may never know; however, they continued to maintain a modicum of independence in their labor not enjoyed by other domestics. The strike speaks volumes symbolically about African-American working-class women's consciousness of their racial, class, and gender position. Domestic work was synonymous with black women in freedom as it was in slavery, and the active efforts by whites to exploit labor clearly circumscribed black lives. Yet black women fought for dignity, to be treated with respect, and for a fair chance to earn the necessary resources for making a decent living. The women identified autonomy as vital to freedom and to making decisions about wage work most commensurate with their non-wage responsibilities as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives.

The employers could not fathom the motivations that inspired domestic workers to act in these ways. But employers knew they could not afford to take a pacified work force for granted. They used coercion, repression, and violence and sought support from the state to extract compliance to their wishes, which helped to determine the form that resistance would take. Domination and resistance were always defined in dynamic relationship to one another, thus it is not surprising that strikes were atypical events. Domestic workers developed other ways to articulate their grievances and assert their own demands, however, and in return their actions influenced the character of domination itself. The illusive quality of the black women's surreptitious actions made them difficult to control by individual employers and kept them vigilant. Domination was not a project that could be erected in full form and left to operate on its own momentum; it required ongoing efforts of surveillance and reconstitution in order to guarantee its effect.⁴³ At times this meant that domestic workers won small gains and moments of relief, as when they quit work. At other times their resistance led to greater repression, as during the period of World War I with the implementation of "work or fight" laws.

The contested character of wage household labor between Reconstruction and World War I also highlights another important point. Far from functioning as "separate spheres" the so-called public sphere of politics and business and the private sphere of family and home infiltrated one another in complex ways. It should be noted, however, that employers sometimes displayed an ambivalence about the relationship between their

⁴²*Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 6, 1881.

⁴³See epigram above. Scott, 45.

prerogatives as managers of labor and the intervention of public authorities, literally, on their home turfs. Municipalities and legislatures often stopped short of imposing legislation; recall, for example, that the Atlanta City Council failed to impose the business tax on individual laundry workers during the 1881 strike. African-American women's opposition may have thwarted employers' efforts to subdue them, but other factors may have also hindered employers from realizing the optimal balance between compulsion and free labor. In an economy moving toward modernization, even in the constrained version of Southern capitalism, the issue of state power versus individual employer authority was never consistently resolved. Waged household labor played an important role in the economic, social, and political life of the New South. The women who performed the labor, the women and men who employed them were consummate political actors all. Further theoretical speculation and empirical research of the issues raised in this essay will advance our understanding of the development of New South capitalism beyond what we already know about social relations in agriculture and industry.

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