“Vulgar Strangers in the Home”: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Modern Servitude

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Abstract
The article discusses feminist and author Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her interpretation of popular views on the domestic service of women. The article cites Gilman's book "Women and Economics" as well as several of her novels. The economic dependence of women on men is examined. The author explores the social anxieties of domestic servants brought on by waged and unwaged domestic labor. The article talks about domestic service reforms in the home economics movement in the U.S. The interpretation of domestic service by other material feminist reformers is also discussed.

The labor which the wife performs in the household is given as part of her functional duty, not as employment. The wife of the poor man, who works hard in a small house, doing all the work for the family, or the wife of the rich man, who wisely and gracefully manages a large house and administers its functions, each is entitled to fair pay for services rendered. To take this ground and hold it honestly, wives, as earners through domestic service, are entitled to the wages of cooks, housemaids, nursemaids, seamstresses, or housekeepers, and to no more. This would of course reduce the spending money of the wives of the rich, and put it out of the power of the poor
man to "support" a wife at all, unless, indeed, the poor man faced the situation fully, paid his wife her wages as house servant, and then she and he combined their funds in the support of their children. He would be keeping a servant: she would be helping keep the family. But nowhere on earth would there be "a rich woman" by these means. Even the highest class of private housekeeper, useful as her services are, does not accumulate a fortune. She does not buy diamonds and sables and keep a carriage. Things like these are not earned by house service (Gilman Women and Economics 7–9).

The epigraph from Women and Economics puts into stark relief the loaded rhetorical function of domestic service in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's first-wave feminist critique of patriarchal households. By deploying a clever range of analogies between the service industry and marriage, Gilman underscores the low value of domestic labor within the capitalist economy and de-romanticizes commonplace assumptions about women's economic dependency on men, which she terms the socioeconomic relation. However, extended metaphors of domestic service, which frequently arise in Gilman's writing, are also a crucial way in which class struggles among women get sutured to the narrative of progressive kinship. The metaphorical entanglement of waged and unwaged domestic labor registers a host of social anxieties surrounding domestic servants in the home. Because reformers in the Progressive era sought to democratize and modernize both social and labor relations in the domestic sphere, the archaic nature of employer/servant relations complicated the progressive agendas of first-wave feminism in profound ways. These social complications manifest rhetorically and literarily in Gilman's nonfiction and fiction focused on modern home-life and domestic service that are less critically discussed than Women and Economics, namely, The Home (1903), a reform tract that brazenly critiques the practical and cultural implications of American housewifery, as well as her first novel What Diantha Did (1909) and her short story "Turned" (1911). All of these texts expose the social imperatives of marital reform and domestic service reform to be intimately connected. Servants thus function as rhetorical lynchpins of a progressive paradigm of domesticity—and domestic sociality in particular—that was tailored specifically to white bourgeois femininity.

Domestic service reforms were an important subset of the home economics movement in the United States, which historian Dolores Hayden refers to as the "material feminist" movement. The different projects Progressive era reformers envisioned were meant to modernize the domestic sphere, creating alternative living and labor arrangements that challenged the ideology of the separate spheres.[1] Adapting experimental and scientific principles to the domestic sphere, material feminists called mistresses to regulate the haphazard labor relations of the service industry for ethical, sanitary, and social reasons.[2] At the forefront of such reforms, historian Lucy Maynard Salmon deployed the scientific method as a means of interrogating and solving the problem of maid/mistress relations, which she exposes in her influential study Domestic Service (1897) to be overly personal and in desperate need of standardization. Revealing how the industry remained seeped in the social practices of benevolent feudalism, Salmon underscores the need for mistresses to establish professional relationships with their maids. Gilman fictionalizes Salmon's ideas in her first novel about domestic service, What Diantha Did, but even before then, she was already applying those principles in her own domestic service reforms. In 1893, for example, she started a Household Economics society in Chicago with her good friend Helen Campbell, and together the women conducted training classes for servants (Hayden 186–187). As part of those reforms, Gilman attended to various technical details pertaining to domestic service, including servants' dress, hours, wages, and their troubling presence in American homes.

Gilman's writing on domestic service evokes an ideological complex of newfound social and sexual dangers attributed to domestic service by material feminist reformers. Underlying this ideological matrix is an intense rhetorical urgency to privatize domestic intimacy—to bracket the core intimacies of home-life from the progressive social institutions they aspired to cultivate. By "rhetorical urgency" I mean that Gilman, like other reformers, constructs arguments and narratives that reflect an exigency to cleanse the home of domestic service's social problematics, yet still justify the capitalist exploitation of a feminized and racialized group of
workers. In Gilman's writing, however, the direct social negotiations of service also create breakdowns in this rhetorical drive, spaces of ambivalence that challenge, if only momentarily, "dominant life narratives" naturalizing privatized intimacy and racist hegemony under capitalism.[3] These ambivalences manifest themselves most strongly in Gilman's literary archive. The problematic value of reproductive labor under capitalism is reflected in the social challenges modern domestic service posed for feminist conceptions of the progressive family.

Like her more canonical text, *Women and Economics, The Home* pathologizes the sexuo-economic relation on the basis of its consumptive and performative excess, which, according to Gilman, stalled the evolutionary growth of American culture. In defining this general milieu of domestic excess, female servants in *The Home* become an important point of reference. Along with domestic service reformers who called for professionalizing the service industry, Gilman considers the highly personal nature of the maid/mistress relationship to be a central problematic of the modern home for pragmatic reasons; however, she also relies metaphorically on different cultural iterations of female servitude, invoking them as universal signifiers of women's subordination under patriarchy. Metaphors of domestic servitude unify Gilman's discourse of female oppression, often conflating divergent, and even opposing, structural and cultural connotations. In the prefatory poem "Two Callings," for example, cross-cultural scenarios of gender subordination become consolidated in a napping woman who wakes up to the sound of "Duty" personified:

I shrink – half rise – and then it murmurs 'Duty!'
Again the past rolls out – a scroll unfurled;
Allegiance and labor due my lord –
Allegiance in an idleness abhorred –
I am the squaw – the slave – the harem beauty –
I serve and serve, the handmaid of the world. (19–24)

The image of a napping woman who embodies the global and historical suffering of all women should give us pause. For one, she is distinctly a leisure-class woman, surrounded by the "comfort of leafy lair and lapping fur/Soft couches, cushions, curtains, and the stir/of easy pleasures that the body prizes" (16–18). Still in a state of half slumber, the woman is presented with a false sense of duty that reduces her to the "squaw," "the slave," and "the harem beauty," three female types who identify her with a racially marked past. Following Thorstein Veblen, who, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, equates the "conspicuous" functions of trophy wives' with the drudgery of servants in the patriarchal household, Gilman's poem conflates—as does her language in the epigraph—oppressive labor and forced leisure in domestic contexts. Gilman further articulates the horror of these gendered associations between the United States and cultures she (and presumably the white middle-class reader) already presume to be inferior, racially, culturally, and morally. Shifting in such peculiar ways, female servility is invoked across a range of contexts in order to shed particular light on elite women's oppression in a nation that prides itself on individual liberties and egalitarianism. As more obvious metonyms of female subordination, harems, squaws, slaves, and handmaids thus do the rhetorical labor of sensationalizing bourgeois and elite women's experience under patriarchy in America. By drawing parallels among these various women's domestic functions, Gilman evokes metaphorically how white, middle-class America and the specter of degraded, racialized, and backwards femininity converge dangerously at the cultural intersection of domestic labor.

The rhetorical work of the female figure in "Two Callings"—at once a leisure-class American white woman and collective womanhood figured as primitive and feudal—homogenizes women. This logic is reinforced by
Gilman's overall structure of address in *The Home* in which she addresses all women yet admits to the manual's particular relevance for middle-class women who employ servants, the most educated and influential, if not talented, tenth of the nation's women. This demographic of exceptional women becomes even more pronounced in the second stanza of "Two Callings," which depicts the trophy wife waking up to another voice of "Duty"; this voice counters the first voice, articulating a progressive mission for the mistress who is now individually called to reform the human race, not as a handmaid (like her less evolutionarily-advanced counterparts) but as the "World's Mother":

So when the great word "Mother!" rang once more
I saw at last its meaning and its place;
Not the blind passion of the brooding past;
But mother – the World's Mother – come at last.
To love as she had never loved before –
To feed and guard and teach the human race. (87–92)

Unlike her servile feminine counterparts throughout the world, the American middle-class woman is exceptional by virtue of her maternal role that aligns her with futurity. The above passage blatantly evinces what Dana Seitel refers to as Gilman's "eugenic feminism" (76). Gilman's narratives, Seitel argues, are based on evolutionary models declaring the genetic superiority of white bourgeois women who were problematically enlisted as professional mothers of the national race—a racist and gender essentialist argument rooted in Lester Ward's matrocentric theory of cultural evolution (76). Eugenic feminism, according to Seitel, is combined with a scientific brand of familialism in Gilman's fiction that "rearranges conventional familial ideology in its attempt to reconfigure the imagined feminine sphere (private and domestic) as a world of (reproductive) labor and responsible public life" (76).[4]

While literary critics have produced many critiques of Gilman's essentialist views of race, gender, and sexuality, little scholarship has been done on the relationship between modern ideologies of intimacy and the domestic service industry in the Progressive era.[5] I will show in my readings of Gilman's fiction that domestic service reform played a major rhetorical role in mobilizing the ideological projects of "eugenic feminism" and "scientific familialism" because it sought to normalize and idealize privatized home environments that were designed to improve the reproductive and productive future of the nation. The political unconscious of first-wave feminism and of the Progressive era, however, often exposes itself in literary representations of domestic service. Wage reproductive laborers pose challenges to the increasingly alienated arrangements of modern labor, as well as the privatization of home life.[6] The social relations and labor struggles of domestic service illuminate the material basis of progressive domestic ideals which needs more critical attention. Gilman's writing, I contend, evokes a synergy between the domestic wage economy and "heterogendered" social ideologies introduced by first-wave feminists. The eugenic dimension of material feminist reforms, which in many ways sought to productively foreground women's reproductive labor, attests to the contradictory nature of capitalist hegemony.[7] By deploying Rosemary Hennessy's notion of social differences as "heterogendered" (as opposed to the Butlerian concept of heteronormative), I ground my analysis of Gilman's literature in labor struggles under patriarchal and imperialist capitalism and highlight the negative implications of progressive reforms for a feminized and racialized underclass.

*The Home*’s preoccupation with domestic service thus reveals that the threatening proximity of lower-class domestics to their male and female employers is more than metaphorical for modern reformers. Servants and trophy wives alike, according to Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, were "conspicuous" signifiers of new
household wealth in America (82), and Gilman responds directly to Veblen by mandating progressive ideals of womanhood and domestic service. When Gilman equates the leisure class woman with the "handmaid" in "Two Callings," then, the poem takes on a new, more literal, significance if we consider that she addresses women who depended on the domestic service industry in the North, an industry that had by the turn of the century become increasingly dominated by immigrant and black women.[8] Although Gilman rightly condemns the feudal manner in which housewives treat their maids—wanting them to be affectionate, celibate, and at their beck and call—her ethical as well as practical imperatives to reform labor are often grounded in anxieties over interracial and interclass mixing.

Repeatedly casting housemaids as ignorant, stupid, silly, and gossipy in The Home, Gilman asserts the absurdity of their presence in middle-class and elite homes: "Strangers by birth, by class, by race, by education—as utterly alien as it is possible to conceive—these we introduce into our homes—in our very bed chambers; in knowledge of all the daily habits of our lives—and then we talk of privacy!" (The Home 42). With disgust Gilman reviles maid/mistress intimacy, remarking, "in simple communities the women of the household, but little above the grade of a servant in mind, freely gossip with their maids. In those more sophisticated we see less of this free current of exchange, but it is there none the less, between maid and mistress, illimitable" (43). She goes on to ask the reader: "Does this not prove that our ideas of privacy are somewhat crude so long as the home is thus vulgarly invaded by low-class strangers?" (The Home 43). The paradox of The Home's feminist discourse here is strikingly evident: although Gilman ostensibly refers to all women as the "handmaids of the world" in order to establish a collective notion of women's oppression in the domestic sphere, she must also reinscribe racial and class boundaries to counter any intimacy — or even identification — between mistress and maids. Reinventing the maid/mistress relationship was, then, crucial for American feminism as defined by bourgeois women who wanted to carve out a space for female professionalism.

The social imperatives underlying Gilman's evolutionary thinking reflect the influence of Helen Campbell, Gilman's maternal role model and mentor in domestic service reform. Writing Prisoners of Poverty in 1887, Helen Campbell informed modern housewives who could afford servants of the dark secrets physicians had revealed about domestics living in American homes: prostitution, venereal diseases, and unwanted pregnancies. As historian Sarah Deutsch points out, mid-nineteenth century reformers of service had known about the social ills disproportionately affecting domestics living in private homes; however, in accordance with their genteel mission to reduce the demand for servants, they chose to repress this troubling information about their live-in domestics, constructing their homes as safe havens for poor women looking for work and shelter (59–60). The atomized nature of bourgeois households—similar to plantations in the antebellum south—facilitated sexual exploitation of female workers more than any other work environment. Domestics often entered homes as early as twelve or thirteen years old, and historians have gathered evidence from domestics' testimonies that shameful feelings as a result of early abuse or seductions led many to prostitution (Sutherland 70–1). To her credit, Helen Campbell was the first progressive reformer to address sexual relations between male residents and domestics in the bourgeois home; still, like those before her, she continues to blame these relations, at least in part, on immigrant domestics, whose alleged licentiousness was both inherited and conditioned by the tenement environment, where urban domestics were typically raised. She writes: "The tenement house stands today not only as the breeder of disease and physical degeneration for every inmate, but as equally potent in social demoralization for the class who ignores its existence" (236).

Domestics are thus at the center of Cambell's and Gilman's rhetorical agenda that increasingly bracketed the intimate core of kinship from public reconfigurations of domestic labor. These social discourses reveal first-wave feminists' impulse to endorse progressive marriages as the pinnacle of democratic living, even if they suggested an array of alternative living arrangements. Thus, despite being subject to collective reforms, the modern social body's haphazard pattern of intimate sociality—its idiosyncratic domestic patterns—had to be managed in a way
that privileged the privatized home over more public and extensive forms of affiliation that structured the lives of poor migrants. Vitiating husbands' and sons' complicity in domestics' sexual exploitation more than Campbell, Gilman disdains to such relations because of the power differential between masters and maids, but also because they stunt culture's evolutionary growth along the lines of kinship. In The Home, she refers to Veblen who argues that domestic service is rooted in the early "predatory" practice of polygamous kinship, "the household with the male head and the group of serving women in which wives and enslaved serving women were synonymous." Gilman therefore argues that "the housemaid is the modern derivative of the slave-wife. She may no longer be the sub-wife of the master—but neither may she be another man's wife" (The Home 106). Even though Gilman does not directly refer to the sexual dangers of housemaids in the home here, she clearly articulates their threat to the monogamian ideal—an ideal that, however universal in appeal, is particularly necessary for the white bourgeois families whom she considers the nation's racial elite.

Much like The Home, Gilman's first novel, What Diantha Did (1909) marries the progressive drive to reform domestic service with a call for empowered female individualism. The narrative structure reflects the heightened social anxieties surrounding the modern service industry by seeking to integrate, harmoniously, privatized and public political agendas. While this novel deals centrally with domestic service reform, it frames these industrial reforms with the privatized conflicts of the entrepreneurial heroine Diantha, who eventually leaves her home to reform domestic service in Orchardina, a small California town. Diantha—the young, white, New Woman protagonist—is stifled by her parents' refusal to allow her to engage in waged work apart from teaching, a respectable profession for middle-class women, but one that provided her with only a supplementary wage. She feels a particular urgency to work because her fiancé Ross is incapable of marrying her since he must support his mother and sisters, whom Diantha regards as parasitic, by running his recently deceased father's grocery business. It is evident that Ross's rigid position on gender roles works structurally against him—he is bound to work in the store because his sister and mother are bound to the home. The couple thus reveals how traditionally masculine and feminine roles need to be transgressed in order to secure both men and women's personal fulfillment in life and work.

Making explicit the eugenic subtext of the novel is Ross's aspiration to be a scientist and gather research on guinea pigs to study inheritance and racial evolution. Ross's role as sole breadwinner of his family, however, binds him to work he finds monotonous. Although Ross and Diantha are in love, their relationship is plagued by their unequal relationship to work and Ross's persistent belief in benevolent notions of true womanhood. As a fellow scientific thinker and hard worker, however, Ross is Diantha's male counterpart, and their relationship, although jeopardized by a regressive gender hierarchy, embodies the potential of American progressivism. The nation's future thus depends upon their union to be reformed. Although Diantha and Ross are offspring of prestigious American ancestry, their current families are weighed down by decayed traditions that the couple rejects, as they are more identified with the innovation and potentiality of the American West. Diantha opposes, for example, her father's "repeated failures in the old New England home [that] had resulted in his ruthlessly selling all the property there" (19). Despite Ross's initial opposition to innovation, he physically embodies the potential of a new, progressive elite, as evident in this early passage: "He had the finely molded features we see in the portraits of handsome ancestors, seeming to call for curling hair a little longish, and a rich profusion of ruffled shirt. But his hair was sternly short, his shirt severely plain, his proudly carried head spoke of effort rather than ease in its attitude" (5).

Through this characterization, the narrative implies that the nation's progress relies upon emergent attributes of a reformed, white aristocracy who are called to adopt modern and efficient modes of procuring wealth and prosperity. National progress thus depends upon the union of these pedagogical counterparts, who, significantly, cannot be properly unified until domestic service is reformed. As Judith Allen points out, What Diantha Did reveals an imperative to reform the marriage contract to give women more financial independence.
in response to anxieties over racial impurity as a result of venereal diseases (119).[9] Because of the explicit juxtaposition of domestic service and prostitution evident in Campbell and Gilman's ideas, this romantic subplot invoking a racial investment in Diantha and Ross's marriage importantly carries over to the domestic service narrative.

Despite the staunch resistance of her parents and Ross, Diantha, a quintessential New Woman, flees home and takes up a job as a live-in domestic servant in Orchardina, California. In framing the novel with the conflicts of Diantha's personal rebellion—her resistance to middle-class domesticity—Gilman, as in The Home, assumes an audience of middle-class or elite women who are suppressed by their domestic function under patriarchal kinship. Indeed, Mrs. Porne and Mrs. Weatherstone, the two minor characters who are most moved by Diantha's reforms, reflect the two feminized excesses of traditional kinship that she invokes in The Home—Mrs. Porne, the overworked housewife, mother, and architect who does not have time to engage in work, and Mrs. Weatherstone, the extraneous leisure-class widow whose conspicuous leisure makes her feel depressed and useless. Diantha's domestic service reforms become the gateway to these women's freedom. Mrs. Porne, who hates cooking and cleaning, is liberated from these arduous domestic tasks so she can work as an architect, and Mrs. Weatherstone invests her wealth into Diantha's business, becomes even wealthier, and develops a purpose in life. Modeling good service first as a domestic in Isabel Porne's home, Diantha persuades her mistress to think of service as a skilled profession, to raise her wages, to restrict her working hours, and to call her Miss Bell, instead of "girl" or "Diantha."

Raising and saving enough money to start a domestic service business, Diantha goes on to reform domestic service initially by meeting with servant girls and listening to their woes and needs. She goes on to challenge the staunchly Victorian contingent that had hitherto prevailed at the Orchardina Home and Culture Club meetings, articulating the material, social, and sexual exploitations that in her view necessitated live-out service. Persuading progressive-minded club woman to believe in her vision, Diantha forms The New Women's Club of Orchardina, making domestic service reform a priority. With a block of servant girls front and center at a club meeting focused on the topic of domestic service, Diantha's new club carves out a space for the marginalized woman worker in a social arena long reserved for the privileged. In addition to critiquing the inefficiencies of domestic service, Diantha underscores to the genteel club women how domestic service is the residue of archaic kinship structures, echoing Gilman's discussion of kinship in The Home: "the position of the housemaid is a survival of the ancient status of woman slavery, the family with the male head and the group of servile women" (74). She goes on to declare that ""the keynote of all our difficulty is that we demand celibacy of our domestic servants"" (74).

Ostensibly, Diantha considers the servant girl's celibacy a matter of great importance because it signals her exploitation, depriving her of the physical and spiritual comforts of home life. The highlighted social benefits of reform for housekeepers, however, far outweigh the material benefits for domestics. Some chapters are framed with poems that, similar to the one previously discussed in The Home, invoke bourgeois and elite notions of the home and femininity in order to subvert them. When Gilman does refer to servants, she creates an "us" and "them" binary, as in the following poem: "Armies of young maidens cross our oceans;/Leave their mother's love, their father's care;/Maidens, young and helpless, widely wander;/Burdens new to bear" (90). Whereas the novel constructs domestic workers as a victimized collective, it individuates bourgeois and elite women by providing a nuanced view of their privatized domestic conflicts. Marriages between professional men and women are described in particular detail in Gilman's work. Housework, for example, takes a toll on Mr. and Mrs. Porne's marriage, as Mrs. Porne is distressed by the impossible task of juggling housework, mothering, and her architectural plans. The Porne family's situation, however, was essentially a fantastical demographic in this period, because, as Hayden points out, professional women were the least likely group of women to be married at the turn of the century (203). At the end of the novel, the elite Mrs. Weatherstone describes how Diantha's
business has had immediate "psychic effects" for numerous married couples in the community, some whose married lives were literally saved on account of organized housework (149–50). Through these success stories, the novel tempts a burgeoning class of women who had historically evaded marriage with an ideal of progressive companionate love, an ideal which is bound up with civic and racial imperatives. Eugenic marriages are thereby reconfigured as essential for New Women, distinct from an older generation of financially independent women who would have been more likely to enter into Boston marriages or live alone.

The discrepancy between Diantha's attention to domestics' personal lives and those of mistresses is clear in an episode featuring Juliana, an African-American woman who is anything but a Mammy, described as "not the jovial and sloppy personage usually figured in this character, but a tall, angular, and somewhat cynical woman, a misanthrope in fact, with a small son" (106). Directed mainly at men (especially her multiple ex-husbands), Juliana's bitterness and string of broken marriages make her the antithesis of her mistresses, who remain open and susceptible to Diantha's progressive ideas about work and relationships. In attributing her broken marriages to a misanthropic disposition as opposed to a material situation, Gilman's narrator reduces Juliana's intimate life to a funny anecdote; the narrative apparatus merely notes Diantha's incapacity for understanding such a bizarre life story: "Marital difficulties in bulk were beyond Diantha's comprehension" (107). Nonetheless, Juliana disturbs the cheerfully rational discourse of progressive marriage that is implicitly reserved for bourgeois and elite white women. When asked her last name, Juliana responds, "'I suppose as a matter o' fac' its de name of de last nigger I married.... Dere was several of them, all havin different names, and to tell you de truf Mis' Bell, I got clean mixed amongst 'em. But Juliana's my name—world without end amen'" (107). While this characterization suggests Gilman's eugenic ideas about African Americans' inferior domestic relations, Juliana's vehement singularity provides another model—albeit class-inflected—of female individualism outside the eugenic marriage plot that domestics inherently threatened.

Although Diantha's intelligence, efficiency, and professionalism persuade mistresses to get beyond their own elitist stereotypes about domestics and forge friendships with her, it is Diantha's middle-class background and whiteness that allow her to be a safe liaison between housewives and the "vulgar strangers" invading their middle-class homes. Because Diantha's friendships with employers are highlighted over her interactions with domestics, the novel paradoxically naturalizes the social barriers between mistresses and maids. The model of sociality endorsed for entrepreneurial New Women dressed as domestics, then, is much different than the one proposed for actual mistresses and maids. Mirroring the scientific logic of modern service reforms, Diantha's schedule for her domestic employees allots time for various activities, including leisure, which so many domestic workers sorely lacked. Yet a double-standard comes most strongly across in the novel's description of the Union House, the name of Diantha's professional domestic service and boardinghouse. Diantha enlists her own mother to sternly oversee the young female domestics living at the Union House. Unlike the middle-class wives who are granted privacy and flexibility by domestic service, domestic workers are kept under constant surveillance, with an hour to dance with "special friends and 'cousins'" before curfew (113).[10] This social dimension of the text reflects the hierarchies of race and class underlying the structure of Diantha's reforms.

Although the novel encourages mistresses to respect their maids as workers and fellow advocates for change and thereby resists an earlier model of sentimental maternalism, Gilman does not eliminate maternalism entirely but instead infuses it with scientific, as well as eugenic, overtones.[11] The domestics at the Union House tend to be referred to as child-like or as a one-dimensional collective, and when referred to individually, as ethnic or racial caricatures, as Charlotte Rich has pointed out: there is Juliana, the misanthropic man-hater; Wang Fu, a submissive and efficient Chinese manservant; the laundress Mrs. Thorald described, interchangeably, as Danish and Swedish. The mother–child dynamic is most unsettlingly evident when the sexual vulnerability of domestics is addressed. Reflecting the sexual dangers of live-in service, the master of an elite family seduces Ilda, a coquettish, Norwegian domestic; she escapes rape only because Diantha and her socially
conscious mistress Viva save her, proclaiming that llda is "only a child, a helpless child, a foreigner, away from home, untaught, and unprotected" (103). Granted, Diantha demystifies the notion that domestics asked to be raped and abused, yet she also assumes their innate ignorance of danger when, in actuality, domestics' testimonies reveal that they were painfully aware of their dangerous position in middle-class homes (Campbell 225–231).

Reflecting Gilman's rhetoric in *The Home*, the novel ultimately demarcates a primal field of intimacy between husbands and wives from public reforms of reproductive labor. Heterosexual egalitarian partnerships are promoted as the most advanced state of the species, a state that is, not coincidentally, attained in her novels only by white bourgeois couples with prestigious genealogies. Ross, like Diantha, is finally actively committed to the project of social evolution because Diantha's additional income allows them to buy a ranch miles from town on which Ross could do his work on guinea pigs. Enlisted as the progressive pedagogues of social evolution, middle-class lovebirds are responsible for disseminating knowledge and practices to inferior groups of people who, like the scientist's guinea pigs, will eventually acquire the superior traits of the race overall, but only after a few generations and with proper training. While Diantha succeeds very quickly in transforming the domestic lives of Orchardina citizens, her own domestic conflict is, significantly, not resolved until the very end of the novel. Ross allows Diantha to work after they marry, but he does not like the idea of it until he realizes that her ideas on domestic service reform have brought her international recognition and success. In effect, the narrative seems to separate a privatized zone of romantic bliss from the material feminist narrative that uncovers women's problematic structural position in the capitalist economy. Although the material feminist narrative intelligently affirms the continuity between private and public spheres of life, the romantic subplot suggests that true harmony between the domestic and public spheres is ultimately gauged by the contentment of dual-income, middle-class families.

*What Diantha Did* ostensibly appeals to all women by offering a modern agenda for reducing the universal burden of female domesticity, but then writes women marked by class and race out of the romantic narrative that frames the novel. The narrative of intimacy works to sustain dominant ideologies of class and race by disarticulating the wage workers' material struggles from the romantic subplot of Diantha's quest for free love and equality in marriage. The class and racial double-standards under capitalism, however, cannot be adequately repressed by the narrative. The happy and efficient "Chinamen" (159) the couple employ to grow vegetables on their ranch reveal that low-wage immigrant workers procure their employers' edenic paradise of free love. Because the ranch is far too removed for live-out domestic service, Diantha employs Wang Fu, a "first-class Oriental gentleman" (159), to do live-in domestic work. This plot element is peculiar, given that the entire novel works to move out domestic service in order to secure the privacy of the home. Gilman reveals self-awareness about its peculiarity, mentioning that Diantha is met with "malicious criticism" from people claiming that she "'did not live up to her principles'" (159). Orientalist assumptions underlying Gilman's representations, however, serve to dismiss such criticism and thereby justify the capitalist class relations supporting her domestic paradise. Cheerful, hard-working, mindful of their own business, and male, the Asian workers ostensibly quell the social problems of service work as a feminized industry. Relieved from a gendered division of labor in marriage, the progressive domestic sphere is nonetheless reliant upon an imperialist wage relation that remains gendered, though in a less traditional way. Because Diantha leaves home to oversee her agency and her husband works at his study at home, Wang Fu seems a safe surrogate for Diantha; however, the novel strangely naturalizes feminine domesticity in describing how difficult it is for Diantha to leave her husband at home: "With marriage, love, and happiness came an overwhelming instinct of service—personal service. She wanted to wait on him, loved to do it; regarded Wang Fu with positive jealousy when he brought in the coffee and Ross praised it. She had a sense of treason, neglected duty, as she left the flower-crowned cottage day-by-day" (160). It is thus significant that the novel ends with a depiction of live-in domestic service after demonstrating at length the benefits of a professional, live-out housekeeping agency. This domestic arrangement suggests that the
progressive couple relies on these workers for more than labor: the live-in domestic servant paradoxically affirms their couple's status as a progressive unit of modern intimacy. While *The Home* urges mistresses to establish professional ethics in reforming the maid/mistress relation, it also suggests that casting servants as "vulgar strangers"—or affectively vacant surrogates—is crucial for modernizing the privileged domain of bourgeois domesticity.

It is surprising then that just two years later in a short story, "Turned," Gilman also depicts a domestic service relationship that departs strikingly from pragmatic reform discourse, but with quite different social implications. By re-personalizing domestic service in this story, Gilman allows for more open-ended social possibilities that are short-circuited or repressed in her earlier novel. In the story, Marion Marroner, a mistress, discovers that her domestic Gerta Petersen is pregnant with her husband's baby. Although this sensational conflict clearly reflects the social and sexual anxieties surrounding the domestic's presence in the home, the story does not present live-out service as a solution to this problem. After discovering the affair, Marion Marroner initially wants to throw Gerta out of her home, but she decides to flee her husband's house with her domestic, and the two ultimately raise the child together. Instead of depicting a utopian ending centered around heterosexual egalitarianism and the absence of live-in domestics, Gilman offers an alternative domestic environment based upon cross-class and cross-ethnic alliances between women who renounce their oppressive romantic attachments for a pleasant, shared maternity. This non-traditional domestic scenario parallels the one in Fannie Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*; in both narratives, there is a tension between modern maids and mistresses' female-centered alliance and ideologies of power sustained by a narrative agency focalizing bourgeois women's psychic life and material interests. Although "Turned" inverts the mother/daughter scenario in *Imitation of Life* in which Delilah, the black maid, assumes the maternal role, Gilman's story also depicts mother/child relationality as a possible haven from a domestic sphere defined by male sexual prerogatives.

As much as "Turned" opens up possibilities for alternative domestic scenarios, eugenic motherhood re-naturalizes social hierarchies between the women. The mistress saves the domestic from ruin, who, on her own, it is suggested, could not support herself or her child. Although sympathetic to Gerta's victimhood within the home, the narrative constructs her as ignorant, docile, and child-like—a frustrating yet potentially fruitful project for the motherless, highly educated and professional mistress:

She [Marion] had tried to teach Gerta, and had grown to love the patient, sweet-natured child in spite of her dullness. At work with her hands, she was clever, if not quick, and could keep small accounts from week to week. But to a woman who held a PhD, who had been on the faculty of a college, it was like baby-tending. Perhaps having no babies of her own made her love the big child even more, though years between them were but fifteen. (260)

Although Marion and Gerta's relationship clearly surpasses the professionalism that Gilman endorsed in *The Home*, this affective scenario between a mistress and maid is not totally renounced. On one hand, the scenario cautions the reader not to get too intimate with her maids; on the other, it also spiritualizes the potential of cross-class alliances between women that are ultimately more authentic than marital intimacy because they mimic a mother/daughter bond. Gerta's affective position as surrogate child to Marion renders the husband's transgression more sensational, even incestuous. Emphasizing this incestuous relation is Gerta's sexualized exterior, which does not match her underdeveloped interior: "She [Gerta] was precisely that: a tall, rosy-cheeked baby; rich womanhood without, hopeless infancy within. Her braided wealth of dead-gold hair, her grave blue eyes, her mighty shoulders, and long, firmly moulded limbs seemed those of an earthly primal spirit; but she was only an ignorant child, with a child's weakness" (259). In this passage, Gilman endorses a communal ethic for middle-class mistresses, as Mrs. Marroner's charismatic appeal ostensibly lies in her devotion to a servant who becomes pregnant with her husband's child. The maid's docility highlights her victimhood and the
husband's crime, which Marion comes to understand in these de-personalized terms: "'This is a sin of man against woman,' she said 'The offense is against womanhood. Against motherhood. Against—the child'" (264).

In this story the subtext of eugenic motherhood has a twist, because Marion is not a biological mother, but only a surrogate to Gerta. Progress, thus, lies in the future of Gerta and her baby, who are not members of America's racial elite. It is significant, however, that in both What Diantha Did and "Turned," the sexually exploited domestics are Scandinavian, blonde and blue-eyed. Because they are Northern European, these women are only liminally non-white from the perspective of American nativist ideologies. Under the pedagogical instruction of her maternalized benefactor, Gerta's child will inherit progressive racial traits; this is suggested at the end of the story, when Mr. Marroner finally tracks the women down, finding them blissfully happy, enamored with one another and the child.

By invoking and, in the case of literature, narrativizing "feminist" or egalitarian ideals of domestic intimacy, reformers in the industrial era naturalized the domestic wage relation within the capitalist economy. Racial and class hegemony thus converge, paradoxically, with first-wave feminist social imperatives to enact democratic citizenship within the home.[12] However, the problematic value of reproductive labor under capitalism is reflected in the social challenges modern domestic service posed for feminist conceptions of the progressive family. Progressive conceptions of domesticity work, ultimately, to repress the social relations of domestic service, as well as the far too often exploitative domestic wage relation in family and labor histories in the United States. Although bourgeois home-life often depended on low-wage domestic labor at the turn of the twentieth century, these workers, living meagerly in the basements and attics of middle-class and elite homes, came to be extraneous to the ideals of modern family living; they presented a very obvious challenge to the ideological synergy between capitalism and deployments of kinship naturalizing reproductive family life as a hermetically sealed space of personal and emotional fulfillment.[14] Bourgeois ideologies of privatized familial life are thus troubled by the proximate otherness of laboring domestics who were, at once, threateningly intimate and necessarily invisible within the modern home.

Works Cited

Footnotes

1 Hayden's book The Grand Domestic Revolution is a highly informative discussion of material feminist reforms, or the architectural, social, domestic, and political projects advanced by women in the Progressive Era. For Hayden, material feminists challenged the organization of reproductive labor under industrial capitalism in ways that sometimes had continuity with, but were also distinct from, both communitarian socialism and industrial capitalism in its pragmatic interest in women's material needs; material feminists imagined public alternatives to the sexual division of labor in the family such as kitchenless homes, cooperatives, public kitchens and dining, and day care (3–6).

2 See Barbara Ryan's and Faye Dudden's comprehensive historical accounts of domestic service in the nineteenth century. In her more recent study, Ryan especially focuses on the textual history of domestic service in nineteenth-century literature and periodicals. She traces a loose logic of progression in the modernizing rhetoric of domestic service (occurring over the course of nine decades) that moves from an endorsement of sentiment to one of rationality in relating to non-kin help. While she is interested primarily in the nineteenth century, she ends her study with an Afterward that discusses in particular reformer Lucy Maynard Salmon's aim to de-personalize and professionalize the domestic service industry.

3 Lauren Berlant defines "dominant life narratives" as narratives grounded in the heteronormative logic of maturation, as well as a spiritualized notion of privacy and the private sphere as partitioned off from the exploitative public sphere (Intimacy 6).

4- Seitler challenges celebratory readings of Gilman's maternalism. In relation to the maternal discourse of What Diantha Did, for example, Jill Bergman refers positively to the novel's progressive "maternal realism" (94), and Sharon Rambo similarly praises Gilman for "de-romanticizing motherhood and marriage, as well as de-constructing masculinist conflicts among work, marriage, and motherhood" (153–55).

5 The limited attention to domestic service in Gilman criticism is suggested by the comparatively few critical readings of What Diantha Did, her first novel about reforming domestic service. While Haydon extensively describes Gilman's role in domestic service reforms and Beth Sutton-Ramspeck draws interesting parallels between Gilman's literary and domestic endeavors, neither critic provides a deep ideological critique of the relationship between domestic service and progressive discourses of domesticity in first wave feminist literature.

6 Because domestic service occurs in the private sphere, it challenges the social relations of production as understood by Marx. For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see Janet Momsen's introduction to Gender, Migration, and Domestic Service, Judith Rollins's Between Women, and Mary Romero's Maid in the U.S.A.
In Profit and Pleasure, Hennessy summarizes her critique of the New Woman, who reflects a major social contradiction under capitalism; the reality that capital has freed some women from a traditional division of labor yet maintains the economic basis of material inequity (23–31).

8 See the two historical studies David Katzman's Seven Days a Week or Daniel Sutherland's Americans and Their Servants for in depth explorations of this demographic shift in the service industry.

9 Allen explores the significance of What Diantha Did being set in the American West, where Gilman and other reformers exposed the prostitution industry as having the most degrading effects on American marriages and the racial "stock" (119). Although Allen does not discuss domestic service in her essay, she historicizes the evolutionary logic underlying Gilman's depiction of the reformed marriage contract in What Diantha Did (186–7).

10 Charlotte Rich discusses in a recent introduction to What Diantha Did how the novel reflects the "symbolic maternalism" endorsed by reformers, which Kathy Peiss documents in her study Cheap Amusements (15–16).

11 In "The Sins of the Mother," Monika Elbert explores this continuity of the maternal between nineteenth- and twentieth-century domestic reforms by attending to the various parallels between Gilman and her great aunt Catherine Beecher. Although Beecher’s rhetoric on the domestic sphere was decidedly more sentimental than Gilman's, Elbert asserts that both Beecher and Gilman's "view of mothering was defined more by the practical aspects of vibrant health than by a sentimental picture of or narcissistic maternal love" (104).

12 In "The Intellectualism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Evolutionary Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity, and Class," Lisa Ganobcsick-Williams argues that feminist critics have problematically conflated Gilman's evolutionary views on class and race. Although she emphasizes the extremity of Gilman's racism, she alleges that Gilman had a much more fluid conception of class that challenged laissez-faire economic policy (30–2). I, however, agree with Dolores Hayden that despite the strand of socialism in Gilman's writing, her ideas mainly catered to, and privileged, a burgeoning class of professional women (Hayden 203). In her writing, the paternalistic convergence of race/ethnic particularity and class positioning reiterates this particular intersection of oppressions in the Progressive era.

13 As Julie Torrant has discussed, this conception of the family represses class contradictions under capitalism, as well as its economic functions of reproducing labor and transmitting property. (http://www.redcritique.org/JanFeb02/FamilyCapitalandtheLeftNow.htm)