

Tender Traffic: Intimate Labor Movements, 1790-1860
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In 2017, [*The New York Times Magazine*](#) described “the face of the new working class” as a woman of color employed in the service economy. Two years later, analysts marveled at the longest period of economic growth and one of the lowest unemployment rates in US history, citing a seemingly endless expansion of service jobs even as manufacturing continued to shrink. *Tender Traffic* will show that the gendered and racialized service sector is not new, nor is its economic significance a recent development. Rather, intimate labor and the movements of workers who performed it have always been critical to the history of capitalism. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic commerce required the care and feeding of male laborers who lived away from natal and marital households for long stretches of time. The political economists of the early US republic helped build institutions to extract gendered labor for nationalist economic projects. Asylum matrons and service workers assigned monetary value to domestic labor at the very moment when it is said to have been discursively separated from the masculine world of wage work. Housewives paid brokers to send them servants—and eventually became brokers of gendered labor themselves. Infrastructure projects, banks, and real estate transactions from the “American System” to nineteenth-century empires were financed by the profits generated as this service sector gradually took shape.

I use the phrase *intimate labor* to describe a range services sold in the early United States and beyond, including the care of households, bodies, and emotions. Feminist scholars apply this concept to work that has historically been “assumed to be the unpaid responsibility of women,”

including cleaning and other forms of “body work,” as well as sexual and emotional service. Because intimate labor is typically imagined as being “non-market activity,” it tends to pay poorly and to be relegated to “lower classes or racial outsiders” (Brown, 2006; Boris and Parrenas, 2010). Intimate labor in the Atlantic port cities of the early United States might also be defined as a continuum, anchored by paid housework on one end and sex work on the other. Workers—many of whom then, as now, were women of color and recent immigrants—moved back and forth along many gradients of waged and unwaged service between these poles. They seized the best opportunities available within the emerging service economy, often while under extreme financial duress. *Tender Traffic* traces the economic impact of these physical movements (from place to place and from job to job), which became a key site of contestation between intimate laborers, employers, philanthropists, political economists, courts, reformers, and corporations.

Workers of various classes and races constituted, contested, and shaped the service economy from its very beginnings. Northern American markets for waged domestic wage labor grew increasingly robust after the American Revolution, during a period of gradual abolition statutes, mass immigration, and national expansion. The deliberately slow process of ending northern slavery meant that white women of the employer class enjoyed the advantage of choosing among laborers of various legal statuses, just as they did in states where slavery and wage labor coexisted through the Civil War (Rockman, 2009). Depending on their location, northern household employers could purchase, indenture, or hire workers as late as the 1840s. Employers benefitted from the hybrid labor market and worried about how they would manage domestic laborers when they would no longer be able to pay for the ability to compel some workers to remain in their households. They complained of a “servant problem”—a chronic

shortage of workers committed to long-term household service—earliest in Massachusetts, which implemented the first emancipation law, and loudest in New York, which had the largest enslaved population in the North. During roughly the same period, employer-class women gradually lost the older prerogative to benefit from the unpaid help of white neighbor girls. Eighteenth-century “helps” had exchanged their labor for training in “the art and mystery of housewifery” until they became mistresses of their own households (Ulrich, 1990). But between 1815 and 1850, growing numbers of white girls migrated away from their towns of origin to work as factory operatives and school teachers—forms of employment that excluded free black women and recent immigrants for most of the period (Dublin, 1979). Large numbers of women and children also performed paid outwork within their homes, but they provoked more pity than fear. It was not simply women’s wage-earning potential but the *mobility* of workers whose gender and race had once seemed to hold them in place that bothered middling and elite people. Intimate laborers moved into and out of workplaces in order to assert control over their own lives and families, employers railed against a “transient” workforce, brokers profited from these tensions, and authorities devised institutional and legislative schemes to manage labor flows. Those conflicts gave rise to a reform movement against sexual *trafficking*, a term that seemed to justify female moral reformers and city officials in “placing” some women in service positions. Reformers framed these movements in terms of maternal feelings of tenderness toward “girls,” who appeared to need rescue from prostitution. Yet intimate laborers were not all girls, and anti-trafficking initiatives consistently included coercive transportation into domestic service.

The phrase *tender traffic* refers to the discourse of rescue crafted by reformers who coined the concept of sexual trafficking as a target of humanitarian intervention even as they traded in feminized labor and displaced workers to supply new markets. Treating sex work as

equivalent to enslavement, reformers founded asylums that sheltered poor and formerly enslaved women and their daughters before assigning them to service positions. They also recruited corporate and state sponsors for mass transportation programs that would bring household workers to remote and cash-poor areas where their services were in demand. The maternalist crusade to reclaim “girls” from prostitution authorized new forms of labor coercion, commodification, and displacement—often beyond the borders of the United States and in conjunction with imperial economic programs. In other words, the first campaign against sexual trafficking engendered in an ongoing pattern of labor trafficking. It also laid the historical foundation for “the settler colonial present” (Veracini, 2015; Kaye, 2017)

This book also documents the ways in which intimate laborers participated in—and shaped—the early labor movement. Though often presumed to have been too isolated by their workplace environments to organize, intimate laborers strove collectively to determine the value of their own labor as early as the 1810s. They challenged the hierarchical opposition of “skilled” and “unskilled” labor, a position that gained temporary recognition in the Workingmen’s press of the 1830s. Their efforts have been subsequently forgotten, buried under the memories of movements led by middle-class reformers and male labor unionists. *Tender Traffic* will show how efforts to control intimate labor shaped the growth of an American service economy. It will also recover specific ways in which workers’ movements defined that economy.

Chapter One: Magdalens and Matrons.

Mary Depue arrived at the Philadelphia Magdalen Asylum in May of 1813 and underwent the institution’s vetting process. Prominent philanthropists had established the asylum for “penitent prostitutes” on condition that the women it housed appeared truly willing to stop selling sex and take up “reputable livelihoods” (Address, 1814). A male officer of the Magdalen

Society interviewed each applicant to learn why she had sold sex. Had it been a whim motivated by lust, greed, laziness, or vanity? Or had it been a survival strategy, a response to unemployment in the absence of a male provider? Mary told the interviewer that she had been “led astray” the prior summer when she was eighteen years old. Abandoned by her seducer in New York City, she had no alternative but survival prostitution. Having made her way to Philadelphia last September, she expressed gratitude for an opportunity to finally leave sex work behind. The story persuaded the asylum officer to admit her as an “object of charity,” but Mary soon found herself treated as a worker. She spun a daily quota of flax and tow yarn, then joined the other “Magdalens” in performing the necessary housework to maintain the asylum and its residents. A salaried matron supervised this labor as part of their training for “honest industry” after they left the asylum. Magdalens were forbidden from communicating directly with any of their old associates, but Mary may have found a way to smuggle messages out of the asylum to her sister. Hepsy Depue arrived in August with a story identical to Mary’s: a year younger than Mary, she had been seduced in New York City at the very same time. She, too, had sold sex because her history had barred her from other employment; she, too, had migrated to Philadelphia in September 1812. If Mary had coached Hepsy for the interview, Hepsy seems to have followed her sister’s cues verbatim. She was admitted as a good candidate for reform. Three days later, Mary and Hepsy “eloped” from the asylum together. Rested, fed, washed, and reunited, they moved on in search of better prospects.

Mary and Hepsy Depue were just two among tens of thousands of young people who circulated through Atlantic port cities, selling services of all sorts to the maritime male workforce. Dating to the colonial period, this commerce surged during the Revolution and War of 1812. New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were three major nodes of service migration

during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and Magdalens in the Philadelphia Asylum reported having moved between these cities. The Depue sisters thus moved around a mid-Atlantic intimate labor circuit. They were also part of a much smaller group: they were the third set of Philadelphia Magdalens in the space of a few months to use the asylum for their own purposes before absconding. Teams of women followed an increasingly familiar pattern: they arranged to rendezvous in the asylum, coordinated plans, and left to pursue the next venture together. Some of the departing women shared last names; others apparently met during their travels through the Atlantic gig economy. Fed up with this disorder, asylum officers fired the matron, Mrs. Goodman, and her assistant, Rachel Crawford. The prior matron, Elizabeth Love, had been let go because she had refused to accept a lower rate of pay. Now, her ability to keep the “house” orderly and productive seemed like money well spent, and she returned to the asylum. In their own ways, the Depue sisters, Goodman, Crawford and Love all demonstrated the economic importance of gendered labor beyond the reproductive marital household. Their comings and goings also revealed conflicting agendas over control of that labor.

Chapter one argues that intimate laborers kept the Atlantic economy moving: they housed, fed, washed, clothed, entertained, nurtured, and sexually satisfied the sailors and other laborers who lived abroad for months or years at a time. Atlantic historians have shown that armies, navies, and corporations encouraged service workers to keep men indebted and therefore bound to renew their contracts, a practice that enabled some women to become established entrepreneurs (Smallwood, 2007; Brown, 2009; Zabin, 2009; Romney 2014; Fuentes, 2016). If the Magdalen officers had their way, the merchant and financier families who dominated the Atlantic economy would have monopolized intimate labor in the form of household service. Love could command a high salary by promising to transform independent service workers into

live-in domestics; matrons who failed in this effort—however pious they might be—were considered liabilities.

This chapter begins by reconstructing the migratory circuit of intimate labor in the seaboard cities of New England and the mid-Atlantic states before 1815. Next, it positions intimate labor as a foundational component of the political economy of the United States. Finally, it explores the role of institutions like the Magdalen Asylum in creating a racialized and gendered service class. Prior historians have interpreted feminized migration to urban service sector as a natural product of warfare, which forced war widows to cobble together “economies of makeshifts” (Crane, 1998; Ager, 2014). I argue instead that migrants deliberately chose environs known for hosting a constantly renewable prospective client-base of maritime workers. Just as employers benefitted from a hybrid workforce, workers hoped the flexibility of intimate labor might enable them to maximize control over their bodies and livelihoods by choosing among a range of services to offer. In the process, they forged intimacies and shared resources with each other in lieu of patriarchal families. Some cohabited in “housefuls” that doubled as taverns, inns, or shops (Hartigan-O’Connor, 2009). Others worked in brothels, calling madams “mothers” and adopting each other as fictive kin. The Depue sisters may have been related by blood, as asylum officers assumed, but their shared surname could also have expressed an affinal relationship. Some sex workers used the same surname to indicate the “house” where they had met, much like the drag houses of twentieth-century Harlem or the molly houses of eighteenth-century London (Chauncey, 1994; Lyons, 2007; Norton, 1992). These queer comparisons are especially apt because people of all genders sold sex. Yet most historians continue to present sexual commerce as if it consisted only of women servicing men. *Tender Traffic* explores the gender and racial diversity of intimate laborers in early American capitalism—and the changing racialized and

gendered associations with particular forms of intimate labor. The bonds intimate laborers established with each other in Atlantic port cities were economically significant because they enabled mobile workers to find each other during their travels, establish new households, and serve ever more clients.

The second section of chapter one analyzes the role of intimate labor in systematic plans to develop the “domestic industry” of the United States. Economic nationalists such as Alexander Hamilton, Tench Coxe, and Mathew Carey wished to break the new republic’s dependence on foreign, especially British, manufactures in part by employing “idle women.” They used this phrase to refer to those who had come to seaboard cities to sell sex, liquor, or other services and remained after early national wars ended. Although intimate laborers worked hard, political economists such as Adam Smith deemed service a non-productive endeavor that generated no wealth. Following Smith, American writers deemed spinners and seamstresses integral to the national economy but erased intimate labor by conflating it with leisure and vice. The same logic initially prompted the creation of Magdalen Asylums for “penitent prostitutes” in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, which trained inmates for “productive work” that would benefit the nation. The institutions emulated London’s Magdalen Asylum, founded in 1758 “to enable fallen but penitent women to escape from a life of vice and degradation, and by restoration to friends or by a return to service, to re-enter a life of respectability and happiness.” (Hanway, 1761) The London Asylum bound “Magdalens” as apprentices in the needle trades, yet managers considered their task equally successful when former inmates married. The American asylums they inspired also nodded to marriage as evidence of a Magdalen’s successful transformation, but their *raison d’etre* was to divert women from “idleness” to “productive” labor.

At first, Magdalen Asylums channeled former sex workers into proto-industrial textile production. Only over time would asylum officers come to consider waged household service as a form of “productive” labor. Using institutional records, I attribute this change to matrons and a new generation of female asylum administrators after 1815. I also narrate the impact of their economic theory of intimate labor as inherently productive. This idea especially affected the rising wave of benevolent institution-building throughout the United States, which surpassed efforts to eliminate prostitution. Asylums founded between 1790 and 1850 encompassed populations described as widows, orphans, half-orphans, indigent females, and “the friendless.” Historians have interpreted the disciplining discourses promoted within asylums and observed their practices of “placing” wards in service (Freedman, 1976; Ginzberg, 1990; Hill, 1993; Boylan, 2002; O’Connor, 2004; Lyons, 2006). However, we have so far failed to appreciate the significant economic implications of asylum work in the aggregate. My research in asylum records has yielded two new and important findings. First, the originators of the American System of capitalist development encouraged the growth of institutions that produced waged domestic service and presented it as a vital economic contribution. Second, as middle-class women gradually took over asylum administration, they increasingly operated as investors in and brokers of intimate labor

To make this case, I offer a fresh examination of the first American Magdalen Asylum in Philadelphia, founded in 1800. This institution has been the subject of archaeological and discursive analysis (De Cunzo, 1995; Hessinger, 2005). To this literature I will add a social history of the 520 women it trained as household laborers between 1800 and 1850 and analyze the way its financial model shaped subsequent trends in asylum administration. The Magdalens and matrons of the Philadelphia asylum shaped a national template for remaking economies of

intimate labor. Magdalens often told asylum managers that they had been “seduced” while they labored in bound service, barred afterward from waged employment afterward on account of their “character,” and forced to “live in infamy” after their indentures expired. For the first two decades of the institution’s existence, therefore, male trustees did not consider placing Magdalens in domestic labor the best way to eliminate sexual commerce or aid the national economy. Instead, they envisioned Magdalens spinning yarn, weaving textiles, and sewing clothing. This plan built on an established method of poor relief, the house of industry. It also served economic nationalists’ visions of domestic production: Magdalens would produce commodities to be sold in American markets.

As a “home” as well as a small-scale manufactory, the Asylum at first appeared an extension of the familiar colonial model of household production. Male founders, such as Mathew Carey, Benjamin Rush, and several directors of the Bank of the United States, valorized domestic economy but lacked the practical knowledge to implement it in the asylum. They hired professional matrons to manage the Magdalens’ labor, market the textiles they produced, and look after the bodily needs of the workers. Like the prudent goodwives of yore, asylum matrons were commissioned to steward the resources of their “households.” Later, they would answer to “lady visitors,” who assessed the domestic economy of the institution and reported regularly to the male trustees. This responsibility, along with the corporate charter of the asylum, empowered middling women to see their work as both philanthropy and investment. They invested in railroads, canals, bank stock, and real estate, kept apprised of market conditions, and recognized by the 1820s that small asylum manufactories could not compete with the burgeoning textile industry. They therefore transformed the mission of the asylum to produce employable

household workers. Matrons trained Magdalens, not merely to *perform* domestic labor, but also to *quantify and standardize* it—to present service as a commodity for sale, rather than sex.

These findings have caused me to reconsider Jeanne Boydston’s influential argument that wives’ unpaid housework became “pastoralized” in the American imagination as wage work became increasingly associated with industrialized workplaces away from households (Boydston, 1990). Boydston argued that pastoralization erased the economic importance of housework, representing it as an outgrowth of women’s “nature,” a form of leisure rather than work, and a labor of love that required no payment. There is little doubt that pastoral and domestic ideologies circulated in the early republic. However, the economic consequences of these ideologies demand scrutiny. A comparison of Magdalen asylums with other institutions in which matrons placed women and children in household service—such as New York’s Society for the Relief of Poor Widows and the Orphan Asylums of Albany and Troy—suggests common and pervasive patterns. I suggest that matrons, as professional housekeepers, resisted pastoralization. On the one hand, they revived an older reverence for “the art and mystery of housewifery” by insisting that it did not come naturally; it required the careful and intensive training that made the matron an expert teacher (akin to a skilled craftsman). On the other hand, matrons also helped to construct a market for intimate labor. While emphasizing the value of the work, they assigned it a monetary price. Service workers had earned wages in prior generations, but now matrons aimed to remake them from household dependents to fungible workers offering a standardized service in a wage economy. In the process of asserting the economic value of domestic labor, they contributed to its commodification.

The final section of this chapter analyzes the racialization of paid and unpaid household service during a period of gradual emancipation statutes throughout the North. In Massachusetts,

Pennsylvania, and New York, these laws stipulated that the children of enslaved women would be freed after a term of indenture (Nash & Soderland, 1991; Melish, 1998; Hodges, 1999). How did the economic approach to household service, formed by Philadelphia Magdalens and matrons, translate to institutions administered by white women that bound black girls as “apprentices” in service? How did black parents and children try to use these institutions to situate their families in a post-slavery economy, and to what effect? How did the children placed by these institutions experience household apprenticeship and its aftermath? In what ways did race and statutory service contribute to the discursive and lived relation between housework and sex work? In sum, how did racialized gender shape markets for intimate labor as they became increasingly central to American capitalism? To answer these questions, I survey the documentary record of orphan asylums, houses of refuge, and other institutions that specialized in placing black women and children in service.

Chapter Two: Seduction and Procurement.

Seventeen-year-old Mary Jones landed in New York harbor in 1818 with a plan. She had traveled from Liverpool alone, and she knew she needed to find income and housing immediately. A live-in service position could meet both needs at once, and she had heard it was possible in New York to leave an employer’s house if she discovered that it did not suit her. Inundated by scouts distributing handbills, it took little time to make her way to Francis Wittenberg’s “intelligence office”—an employment agency that placed workers in service positions for a fee. Wittenberg remarked on Jones’ good looks, wrote her a ticket of employment, and sent her to an address near his office. When Jones arrived at the house where she thought she had been placed as a chambermaid, she found herself locked in a brothel and instructed to sexually entertain men. She eventually escaped, found the night watch, and brought them to

arrest Wittenberg. He became one of the first men in the United States to be convicted of procurement, the common-law crime of tricking a young woman into sexual service for one's own profit.

The Jones-Wittenberg case, which revolved around two immigrants working in the shadows of the urban economy, prefigured the stereotype of immigrant-as-pimp/prostitute that would resurface in subsequent panics over Chinese immigration and “white slavery” from Europe. Its immediate significance, however, was as a precedent for cities and states to begin regulating intelligence offices. Procurement trials became a mechanism by which municipal officials, such as Cadwallader Colden (New York City) and Josiah Quincy (Boston), tried to rid their cities of the sexual commerce that had boomed between the late colonial period and the War of 1812. Authorities suspected that the growing number of urban “intelligence men” abetted this sexual marketplace. At the same time, the *Wittenberg* verdict justified the use of license laws to tax the hugely profitable service sector. Licensure not only generated revenue, it gave city governments the power to shape the service economy according to wealthy voters' demands. Intelligence offices were becoming key sites where workers accessed household service, sex work, and other forms of intimate labor. In this context, Wittenberg was found guilty of procurement not simply because he had profited from sexual exploitation but because he had diverted a worker from domestic employment to sexual commerce. He knew Sarah Davis hired “prostitutes”; his crime was sending her a chambermaid. Mayor Colden describe Wittenberg's action as comparable to “selling by false weights and measures in a grocery.” A commodity—Mary Jones' labor—had been marketed under false pretenses.

Chapter two presents a new materialist interpretation of procurement and seduction in early nineteenth-century courts. Historians have thoroughly analyzed these concepts as discourses on

gender, sexual power, and republican virtue (Smith-Rosenberg, 1971; Hobson, 1990; Cohen, 1998; Bloch, 2003; Block, 2006; Ryan, 2014). In dialogue with this literature, I analyze the economic significance of procurement and seduction. Before the mid-1840s, when moral reformers campaigned at state and national levels to criminalize seduction as a violation of a woman's sexual sovereignty, prosecutions focused more heavily on gendered labor markets than on sexual politics. Consider Mary Rothbone, convicted in 1817 of having "seduced" a nineteen-year old servant to work in her New York bawdyhouse. The Mayor's court defined seduction not as a crime of illicit sex but one of property: Rothbone had deprived the girl's master of her labor. Using court records and newspaper reports spanning four decades in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, I argue that early seduction and procurement jurisprudence channeled workers away from the sexual side of the intimate labor spectrum and toward domestic service.

Second, I argue that intimate laborers like Mary Jones shaped emerging legal definitions of seduction and procurement when they reported having been tricked, kidnapped, and held to sexual service while searching for other employment. Not all objected to sex work itself. Many indicated through their actions that they preferred it to housework, at least for certain periods of time. Rather, they protested coercion and exploitation in any setting. Across lines of color and status, household workers challenged the bifurcation of housework from sex work by recounting their experiences of sexual harassment and assault within "respectable" homes. While officials invoked seduction and procurement as reasons to purge vice and ways to manage resources, intimate laborers used the courts and the press to seek justice for specific harms. Their seduction narratives named names, recorded dates, and reconstructed concrete circuits of exploitation. Workers and urban officials agreed that seduction constituted a material, not just a moral,

problem – even as their desired outcomes differed. This chapter tells the story of how these conflicting uses of the courts shaped urban labor markets between 1815 and 1848.

Chapter Three: “Sold by Her Own Desire.”

Intimate laborers sought paths out of economic, as well as sexual, exploitation. Labor historians have recorded workingwomen’s organized protests between 1820 and 1850. Craft and industrial workers pursued mass tactics such as strikes, parades, and petitions. The story of how male labor leaders initially supported workingwomen, then excluded them from both workplaces and labor unions in order to secure a “family wage” for every workingman, has become familiar (Kessler-Harris, 1983; Blewett, 1988). Yet service workers, by far the largest group of wage-earning women in the nineteenth century, appear nowhere in histories of labor organizing before the Civil War. In part, early labor historiography’s bias toward industrial and craft workers reflects archival silences: service workers did not produce print records on the same scale as textile operatives and shoebinders. But the larger obstacle has been one of perception: because the early republic saw no spectacular demonstrations of household and sex workers marching by the thousands for their rights, they have been deemed too isolated, dependent, and vulnerable to have been capable of organizing. When black laundresses struck in postbellum Atlanta, they entered the historical record because contemporaries recognized the tactic they used as labor organizing; indeed, the strike grew out of the newly industrial conditions of municipal laundries. (Hunter, 1997). Prior service workers’ collective actions have been overlooked because they seldom resembled those of industrial workers.

Chapter three argues that the intimate laborers of the early republic did share a structural critique of the emergent service sector and took collective actions to control the conditions of their employment. They did so by appropriating the central institution in which their labor was

marketed: the intelligence office. In 1814, a Boston laundress named Bridget Ann Keef created the first “female intelligence office,” an employment agency conducted by and for women. After decades of service work, Keef and her network of associates combined their energies and resources to sell their services to women of the employer class. Other intimate laborers followed, insisting that female intelligence offices were uniquely qualified to prevent seduction and procurement by connecting workers with safe, well-paying employers. At least 44 seamstresses, laborers, and housekeepers opened similar offices in New Bedford, Dorchester, Salem, Portland, New York City, and Philadelphia. In Boston, the number of female intelligence offices sometimes outnumbered those staffed by male labor brokers. The movement was subtle, but its effects were profound. Intelligence women assisted thousands of service workers in negotiating their positions before 1850, transforming local markets for intimate labor in the process.

This chapter presents a group portrait of “intelligence women” and their clients based on newspaper advertisements, city directories, censuses and business records, a study no prior scholar has undertaken. Historians of labor and capitalism have presented intelligence offices as spaces in which intelligence men mediated between women of the employer and service classes. According to this view, the sexual misconduct attributed to intelligence offices masked anxiety about the commodification of wage labor in a capitalist society. (Dudden, 1983; Rockman, 2009; Luskey, 2013; Van Arsdale, 2016). Others have suggested that working-class women used the offices to negotiate with prospective employers. (Stansell, 1986; Lasser, 1987). Few have acknowledged the existence of female intelligence offices, and I am the first to attribute their early development to women of the service class.

The remainder of the chapter analyzes workers’ uses of female intelligence offices between 1814 and 1850. While some intelligence women certainly had entrepreneurial aspirations, I have

found no working-class broker who enriched herself at the expense of other service workers. Most entered the business late in life or after an injury, hoping to support themselves when they could no longer perform hard physical labor. Unlike Wittenberg and other intelligence men, they often charged employers—but not prospective workers—a placement fee.

Above all, I argue, the offices should not be seen as merely individual concerns. Workers who shared the experience of performing gendered labor gathered in them regularly, politicking with each other and reminding employers that they had other options when household dynamics soured. Like the seduction and procurement cases examined in chapter two, service workers put an institution devised by people who did not share their interests to their own uses. In both cases, they identified a structural issue: the commodification of intimate labor created the conditions that led to exploitation and violence. A sense of solidarity developed within the offices as intelligence women cooperated with service workers. They inverted the flow of “intelligence” by vetting employers, rather than demanding character references from prospective workers.

Intelligence offices also posted lists of acceptable wages just as trade unions fought to establish price lists for each craft. The chapter’s title, “sold by her own desire,” comes from period sources describing the prices of gendered service labor posted in intelligence offices. The phrase derived from earlier efforts of indented workers to find purchasers to buy their remaining contract time from undesirable masters. The wage worker’s “desire to sell” her own intimate labor by establishing a price list for specific services expressed a labor theory of value. Like artisanal republicans, intimate laborers presented household service as a skilled craft whose value should be determined by those who performed it. Yet journeymen artisans’ masculine, “producerite” version of the labor theory of value privileged the work involved in producing commodities for sale (Wilentz, 1984). Service workers, by contrast, used intelligence offices and

the workingmen's press to insist that any human being who performed hard and necessary work deserved to earn a decent living—whether or not their labor produced articles of capitalist exchange.

Understanding this “intimate labor theory of value” enables us to move beyond the productive/reproductive framework established by Marx and Engels. This old dichotomy continues to encourage historians to prioritize studies of commodities and finance over other themes in the history of early American capitalism. Key studies focus, on the one hand, on commodity production (waged industrial work and enslaved agricultural labor) and, on the other, on the reproduction of the workers who produced those commodities within husbands' and enslavers' “households” (Morgan, 2004; Johnson, 2013; Baptist, 2013; Beckert, 2014). Critics of the New History of Capitalism have pointed out that centering commodities can tend to replicate the dehumanizing commodification of work and workers in a capitalist, slaveholding regime. I push against this tendency by taking seriously the economic ideas of intimate laborers who are so often discounted in studies premised upon the productive/reproductive formula.

The chapter concludes by documenting the flow of service workers' argument concerning the value of *all* labor through women's trade unions and into Workingmen's newspapers and party politics. The lines between service workers and trade union women blurred during the late 1820s and early 1830s. Organizations such as the United Tailoresses' Society adopted the strategy of creating female intelligence offices for women in particular crafts. By the mid-1830s, workingmen also began to establish hiring halls where workers could set the price of their own labor. Whether they knew it or not, male labor leaders borrowed the intelligence-office tactic from intimate laborers. This contribution is significant because labor historians have tended to assume that the working women of the early republic adapted their activism to the forms

developed by the men of their class. I turn this historiographical convention on its head by recovering intimate laborers' forgotten importance to the early labor movement.

Chapter Four: Trafficking in Rescue.

The advent of the female intelligence office had unintended consequences. This chapter explains how women of the employer class took over the female intelligence business, remade workers' efforts to stop seduction and procurement into a moral crusade against sexual "trafficking," and built the infrastructure for what would come to be called "the rescue industry" (Augustín, 2007). Trafficking historiography concentrates on the period between 1870 and the present. (Pivar, 1973, Peiss, 1986; Guy, 1991; Walkowitz, 1992; Tong, 1994; Yung, 1995; Luibheid, 2002; Clement, 2006; Laite, 2012; Rubin, 2011; Pliley, 2014). Chapter four establishes the early origins of the movement to end "trafficking" in the transatlantic abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. What were the economic consequences when nineteenth-century reformers popularized the concept of "trafficking" in their campaigns against slavery, seduction and procurement?

I argue that employer-class women joined together to assert control over the service economy in direct response to intimate laborers' initiatives. Wealthy women began operating female intelligence offices during the 1820s, in hopes of solving the so-called "servant problem"—a shortage of loyal, docile household workers. Elite women initially cooperated with men of their class, including political economists and philanthropists such as Mathew Carey and Lewis Tappan, in creating "Societies for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants." Organized in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston between 1825 and 1829, these societies claimed to prevent seduction and procurement by placing workers in the homes of trustworthy employers. Historians have tended to focus on one or another of the societies, overlooking their tandem

organization and communication (Strasser, 1982; Harris, 2003; Lynch-Brennan, 2009). In this chapter, I offer a close, comparative study of the societies, the workers they recruited, and the employers they served.

Societies for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants should be understood not merely as expressions of elite arrogance or an abstract desire to discipline poor and formerly enslaved workers. Rather, they functioned very specifically as *employer cooperatives*. The Boston group operated on a subscription system: “Any lady who shall pay one dollar annually for a domestic, stating for what class of domestics she subscribes, shall be a member of the Society, and shall be entitled to apply at any time for such a domestic” (Constitution, 1827). Members in New York and Philadelphia also signed pledges to stop outbidding each other in their competition for service workers. They aimed to set a wage ceiling instead of the price list established by workers in female intelligence offices. Others vowed to refuse to write glowing character references for undeserving former employees. Both measures were designed to limit the options of intimate laborers who were inclined to leave one job for another when better wages or conditions beckoned.

Women of the employer class recognized competition over household labor as harmful to their interests and strove to replace it with intra-class cooperation. They built their own intelligence offices, hired salaried women to staff them, and elected committees of “patronesses” to inspect them. Though relatively short-lived, these societies transformed markets for intimate labor by undercutting the precarious agencies operated by and for workers. They used membership dues to pay a “premium” to any worker who stayed with one employer longer than a full year—something intelligence women like Bridget Ann Keef could not afford. The promise of an annual bonus attracted thousands of workers who might otherwise have used the small-

scale female intelligence offices operated by current and former service workers. By 1830, employer cooperatives succeeded in driving poorer female intelligence offices out of business. This outcome eliminated venues that had enabled workers to move between positions on their own terms.

Benevolent intelligence offices also transformed seduction and procurement narratives into a new panic over sexual “trafficking.” Sincere reformers led this effort beginning in the early 1830s. They adopted the language of human trafficking from the transatlantic abolitionist movement and began applying it as an umbrella term for forms of sexual coercion that ranged from the “licentiousness of slavery” to the forced prostitution of legally free women and girls. A radical, biracial corps of abolitionists broadened these connections in 1835. They identified the commodification of women’s bodies as a fundamental condition of a patriarchal and slaveholding society. Black abolitionist women, especially, interrogated the gendered and racialized dimensions of the market economy in which labor was bought and sold, testified to the continuing oppression of the formerly enslaved, and drew attention to sexual exploitation within domestic workplaces. In short, they challenged both slavery and the “free labor ideology” so often generically attributed to abolitionists.

Female moral reformers—activists against sexual oppression as well as “immoral” behavior—took these concerns in new directions. Between 1836 and 1841, they instituted Offices of Direction for Female Domestics in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Bangor. Like employer cooperatives, moral reformers used membership dues to hire salaried agents. However, the reform offices were larger, more expansive, and longer lived than those of their predecessors. The Boston office thrived for more than two decades and annually placed over a thousand workers in service positions.

In the process, moral reformers invoked “trafficking” to present themselves as the only appropriate brokers of intimate labor. They circulated stories of intelligence men who used their offices to procure sexual labor and minimized workers’ voices in these narratives. In the new trafficking narrative, survivors appeared not as workers testifying against systemic exploitation but as passive victims of predatory men. This representation fed a maternalist impulse to rescue impoverished and racialized women, which has become familiar to historians of reform and social movements (Pascoe, 1990; Boris, 1994; Gordon, 1995; Jacobs, 1999). This chapter shifts the analysis by framing rescue as a pattern of gendered economic behavior, and not simply an instance of cultural hegemony. Bourgeois women, who are often presented as cultural but not economic actors, shaped markets for intimate labor by positioning it as the opposite of trafficking. At the same time, they created a precedent for moving intimate laborers from one location to another in the name of rescue. Coordinating flows of intimate laborers proved both a costly investment and a profitable enterprise. By the mid-1840s, reformers’ offices of direction had generated enough revenue from fees to reinvest in institution-building. The new initiatives ranged from housing for migrants awaiting placement to transportation services to ensure they reached rural households. Together, they formed a wealth-generating rescue industry.

Reformers framed their brokering of domestic labor in terms of Christian “tenderness,” yet their placement system also involved coercion. In 1842, Boston agents visited the House of Correction and launched a recruitment program targeting those incarcerated for vagrancy (a charge that disproportionately targeted women suspected of selling sex in city streets). When the selected prisoners’ sentences ended, prison officials released them to a moral reform agent, who transported them to the countryside where there was “great demand for help in household duties.” A wave of municipal police reform acts during the middle of the decade further

intensified state involvement. Moral reform agents enlisted the help of newly empowered police officers to forcibly remove women from brothels and detain them until they could be assigned to domestic employers. Female moral reformers had inverted the dynamics of procurement: now it was they who trafficked “captive” women—out of sex work and into housework.

Some intimate laborers had reason to actively seek out assisted migration between domestic workplaces. Beginning in the late 1830s, black abolitionist women operated antislavery intelligence offices to place free women of color and fugitives from slavery in trustworthy service positions where employers would have a stake in preventing them from being taken by “slave catchers.” However, employment in white abolitionist households meant navigating power dynamics no less complex than those of other workplaces. My reading of hundreds of abolitionists’ letters in the collections of the William P. Clements Library, the Boston Public Library, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania reveals that many employers who thought of themselves as saviors consciously and unconsciously leveraged their ability to protect black workers from re/enslavement. Such manipulation had material consequences when it enabled them to justify nonpayment of wages, extract forms of labor that had not been agreed upon, and assert control over employees’ children. Aware that intimate laborers often experienced rescue as coercion, black abolitionist women created alternatives. Yet their small, semi-underground offices lacked the state power and material resources white reformers wielded.

Intimate laborers also challenged these asymmetrical power relations, and the final section of this chapter interprets their experiences. Those who had been transported to rural household service wrote letters of protest to organizational leaders, the reform press, and former co-workers. The letters described wage theft, sexual harassment, and “mental torture” in employer households—even those vetted by female moral reformers. Others used the institutions of the

burgeoning rescue industry to their strategic advantage. Some inverted the intention behind moral reformers' temporary homes and transportation networks, whether in their lifelong travels along the continuum of intimate labor or to organize new nodes of sexual commerce in tandem with other "rescued" workers. The chapter ends with longitudinal studies of these workers, whom I call "troublesome rescues." What were the cumulative and generational effects of navigating and resisting the tender traffic in intimate labor? I conclude that, despite workers' self-directed uses of reform institutions, the rescue industry cohered mainly around the interests of white women of the employer class.

Chapter Five: "A Better Capital than the Gold of the Mines."

Eliza Wood Farnham, a prison matron in New York, watched the work of moral reformers with interest during the late 1840s. She understood a critical characteristic of the emerging rescue industry that historians have overlooked: only two decades earlier, employer-class women used intelligence offices to buy information about prospective workers in order to avoid bringing "bad characters" into their homes. Now, many seemed willing to hire service workers who had been incarcerated on suspicion of selling sex. What had changed? The employers who promised to rescue the "fallen women" of Sing Sing by hiring them as domestics tended to come from rural areas west of the Atlantic port cities that had attracted so many workers in prior decades. Rural and settler families were desperate for laborers: they could not perform the heavy labor of country housekeeping on their own, and their demand far exceeded the number of nearby workers willing to perform live-in service for wages. Observing that tight labor markets could drive up the value of service, Farnham devised a business plan to extend the rescue industry much deeper into the American West, first to settler towns in "prairie land" and then to California.

For her own part, Farnham was literally, as well as ideologically, invested in settler colonialism. Her husband, Thomas Jefferson Farnham, sold prairie acreage to eastern speculators during the 1830s. Eliza had accompanied him as a settler housewife and later recalled having been unable to find any “stout Irish or colored woman” to do her scrubbing (Farnham, 1846). She returned to New York to work as a matron while Thomas pushed further West, participating in the American conquest of northern Mexico. As Eliza taught the women of Sing Sing principles of domestic economy, Thomas amassed 2,000 acres formerly held in trust by the Catholic Church on behalf of the “Indians of the Mission of Santa Cruz” (Levy, 2004). Thomas died in 1848, and Eliza moved to California to farm the land he had claimed. To earn income before the first harvest, she devised a plan to transport service workers from eastern cities to western homesteads. Farnham hoped to live on the profits of brokering intimate labor in regions where white women had already settled and proved reluctant (or unable) to employ Indigenous household workers. Over time, she also worked up a sales pitch to investors: assisting the migration of prospective servants would attract greater numbers of settler women. Presenting settler women as the key to the future stability and prosperity of the region, Farnham spoke the language of “manifest domesticity” and masked the violence of settler colonialism (Kaplan, 2002; Wolfe, 2006). Many settler women currently resisted migration, she argued, because they would not consent spend the rest of their days as “pioneer drudges.” Therefore, Farnham organized two female emigration societies in 1849 and 1857 to raise funds, transport workers, and place them in service.

Farnham was not alone. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, female emigration societies recruited “surplus women” whom they deemed vulnerable to prostitution and trafficking and, with corporate or state sponsorship, arranged to transport them to the North

American West, the Caribbean, Africa and the South Pacific. One emigration proponent described skilled household workers as “a better capital than the gold of the mines” in California. Support for emigration schemes spiked after 1850. Chapter six interprets the sprawling rescue industry and spreading markets for intimate labor as key components of nineteenth-century imperial economies, which ranged from the Second British Empire to the “antebellum American empire” (Greenberg, 2005). The convergence of the rising rescue industry with settler colonialism produced a newly coercive circulation of intimate laborers between nodes of Atlantic and Pacific commerce.

Chapter five compares three kinds of female emigration societies. The first section focuses on those of the North American West. My research departs from prior scholarship on transported labor and settlement (Belich, 2009; Tomlins, 2010; Urban, 2017) by emphasizing the interactions of female emigration agents, settler women, intimate laborers, and corporate actors.

The next section of chapter five establishes the significance of intimate labor to colonizationist, abolitionist, and black American emigration efforts. The sponsors of these projects ranged from proslavery white racists to radical black abolitionists; proposed destinations also varied widely (West Africa, Canada, the Caribbean, Kansas and Nebraska). What all schemes to assist the migration of black Americans shared was a concern with the economic value of intimate labor in establishing new settlements.

The final section of this chapter connects the initiatives detailed in the first two sections to the rise of British emigration societies, which flourished after midcentury. British philanthropic and government actors sponsored female emigration to furnish the male settlers of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand with wives and household workers. These programs have been separately studied by historians of gender and empire (MacDonald, 1990; Swaisland, 1993;

Levine, 2003; Chilton, 2007). Based on my own research at the London School of Economics, the British Library, and the School of African and Oriental Studies, I interpret British women's emigration projects in conjunction with each other and as part of a growing global traffic in intimate labor. Leaders of all three types of female emigration societies knew about the others. Together, they formed a circuit of imperial competition and labor contestation during the 1850s, an age in which British and American empires grew.

Tender Traffic ends with the themes of settler colonialism, and the circulation of intimate laborers throughout nineteenth-century imperial economies in order to challenge the national bias of much labor historiography. In light of today's transnational migrations and the resurgence of a highly capitalized and state-sponsored rescue industry, the history of intimate labor demands a transnational focus. Both of these developments were made possible by nineteenth-century transportation and financial structures. My book charts the creation and expansion of these structures.

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