

**Danielle Phillips-Cunningham.** *Putting Their Hands on Race: Irish Immigrant and Southern Black Domestic Workers.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-978800-46-5.



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**Published on** H-SHGAPE (July, 2020)

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Danielle T. Phillips-Cunningham's *Putting Their Hands on Race: Irish Immigrant and Southern Black Domestic Workers* seeks to understand how women and their labor were central to debates about race from roughly 1840 to 1950 in the American North. The work's central metaphor of "laying hands" (p. 1) is used to describe all kinds of labor, including domestic work but also labor organizing, institution building, and intellectual work. In so doing, this work is a history of two groups of racialized women and the labor they performed to take "hold of the imaginary ideology of race that informed their identities, labors, and the materiality of their lives" (p. 35). In the case of Irish immigrant women, it was to enter the realm of the native-born white middle class, and in the case of southern Black women, it was to distance themselves from the legacy of slavery and assert their right to full American citizenship.

The work uses domestic service and labor organizing within that industry as a lens to address histories of race and whiteness, which are currently dominated by studies of men. The first chapter

introduces a framework for placing the lives and labor of women at the forefront of constructions of race. Phillips-Cunningham's work employs theories of racial projects and race-making, which argue that race must constantly be made and re-made. Chapters 2-4 largely chronicle how women's racial identities were constructed and placed upon them, while chapters 5 and 6 focus on Irish immigrants and southern Black women's labors to re-make race. As such, the content of the first two-thirds of the book is well-trod ground.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 work together to introduce the individual histories of Irish immigrant and southern Black migrant women before investigating how they interacted in a labor marketplace. The second interprets how Irish women were racialized, as nonwhite but also as Catholic non-Protestant, in British-occupied Ireland before their migrations to America. Homes and labor within homes were a prominent point of contact between Irish and English women and central to the construction of the Irish as a race. Such constructions were used to justify colonialism and the exploita-

tion of Irish labor. As Irish women began to migrate to the United States in the 1840s, this labor-oriented racialization continued as they entered the domestic service labor market, a class of labor that was defined by the legacy of slavery.

Chapter 3 continues this discussion by interpreting the figure of “Mammy” and the experiences of southern Black women who migrated to the North. Especially after emancipation, Mammy was a backward-looking figure that naturalized slavery and upheld white supremacy. So employed, the figure of Mammy justified the subjection of Black women and the exploitation of their labor. Southern Black women continued to be placed under the burden of this image when they moved north beginning in the 1870s. At the same time, when they moved north seeking domestic service work, they encountered a labor market that for a generation had been defined by the Irish. Chapter 4 addresses how Irish immigrant and southern Black women defined themselves and were defined by others once competing in the domestic service market. This chapter emphasizes the similarities in depictions of and attitudes toward both groups of women.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus to how Irish and Black women resisted or remade race. Chapter 5 argues that Irish women were able to whiten themselves, while Black women attacked the systemic racism and misogyny inherent in domestic work, both beginning in the mid-1880s. Both cases introduce some newspaper articles written by domestic workers but focus on the efforts of settlement home and labor organizers. Phillips-Cunningham argues that Irish women whitened in the early twentieth century, decades after their male counterparts, by inserting themselves into the Progressive Era discourses of white slavery, purity, and ladyhood. While Irish women certainly worked to whiten themselves, the conclusion that all Irish women in the North were white, or even on the fringes of whiteness, comes too quickly. In chapter 6, the author draws on legal interpretations of citi-

zenship in the secondary literature to prove that the Irish were white. However, there is a twenty-year gap between the two chapters (chapter 5 leaves off at roughly 1900, while chapter 6 begins in 1920), and the author does not deal with the heightened nativism and anti-Catholicism of this period. While the Irish may have been granted full legal citizenship, unlike Black women of the period, this does not address how they were seen in the eyes of potential employers.

The efforts of two Black clubwomen are a counterpoint to the Irish history as they sought to disrupt existing labor discourses, rather than enter them. However, Phillips-Cunningham does not address the paternalism and nativism that pervaded the settlement homes and other social welfare institutions at the turn of the century. How Black clubwomen making these homes employed these concepts in their institutions and how the domestic servants themselves conformed to or resisted these trends have affected Black women’s discursive work in pursuit of full American citizenship.

Chapter 6 chronicles how the gains of Irish women, now on the fringes of whiteness, were unsteady. They moved back and forth between domestic work, homemaking, and other employment as they continued to try and work themselves into the middle class. The chapter quickly moves on to Black women’s labor organizing in the first half of the twentieth century. It is here that the work is at its best, tracing the change from labor organizing in clubwomen’s settlement homes to a series of unions focused on or including domestic workers. The chapter also traces how Black women used the organizational skills developed in settlement homes and unions to contribute to larger labor and political movements. Here, however, the comparative framework disappears, and the two groups are treated in parallel as opposed to intertwined, as in the previous chapters.

Throughout the work, though exemplified in the discussions of the two Irish and two Black labor organizers, there is a tendency to extrapolate

beyond what the evidence shows. Much of the primary and secondary research is grounded in New York City, though the phenomena here are taken to be representative of “Northeastern” cities or “the North.” Evidence from other cities, especially Chicago and Philadelphia, is sometimes referenced, though this is sporadic, not systematic. Phillips-Cunningham never mentions Detroit, a glaring omission as it experienced the greatest per capita change in demographics during the Great Migration.

*Putting Their Hands on Race* is strongest in two places. First is in chapters 1-4, which articulate explicitly how Irish immigrant and southern Black women’s histories influenced each other and how women’s struggles proceeded along a different course than those of men. This was especially so for Irish women, whose whitening process lasted decades longer than that of their male counterparts. Here also the book is effective at illustrating how southern Black women were integral to Irish immigrant women’s histories, in the same manner that African American men are central to Irish men’s history. Later in the work, the author demonstrates how Black women’s labor organizing variously worked in tandem with and separate from existing labor movements.

However, the work is not supported by a wealth of primary documents. The first four chapters are primarily synthetic and draw heavily on direct quotations from the existing literature. Furthermore, there does not seem to have been a systematic review of a body of documents until chapter 6. Approximately seventy newspaper articles from across an eighty-year period comprise half of the primary documentation used in the book, with the remainder made up of intellectual products, oral histories, and the minutes of labor societies. Here again, there is a focus on New York City and in particular the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Individual phenomena are often supported with reference to one news article or one labor publication, and as a result it is difficult to tell how widespread such phe-

nomena were, either in New York City or in the North. Perhaps as a result of the author’s emphasis on labor organizers and institutions, the documents used also do not provide a wealth of insight into the happenings inside private homes. While some cases are referenced through news articles written either by domestic servants or employers of domestic servants, these are filtered through an editor. The more personal sources of diaries, letters, and other documents which get at the experiences of average (those not actively engaged in labor organization) domestic workers as they would have understood them are absent.

Despite some shortcomings, *Putting Their Hands on Race* remains an effective synthesis of the existing literature on the intersections of race and labor, with a focus on the unique experiences and efforts of women. It is a good starting place for those interested in intersectional and comparative forms of history. The focus on Irish immigrant and southern Black migrant women also offers plenty of room for comparison to other groups of women.

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**Citation:** Jared Asser. Review of Phillips-Cunningham, Danielle. *Putting Their Hands on Race: Irish Immigrant and Southern Black Domestic Workers*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020.

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