

**Lori Merish, *Archives of Labor: Working-Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States* (Duke UP, 2017)**

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1 Lori Merish, in *Archives of Labor*, examines the robust literary culture of working-class women in the antebellum United States and succeeds in uncovering the complexities of the female experience that defined the various occupations in which women participated. Merish examines popular fiction, factory pamphlets, and dime novels in order to unpack the public perception of the female worker and in doing so, ascribes agency to working-class women employed as mill girls, seamstresses, missionary workers, and domestic servants. Merish also refracts the working class occupations through the lens of race by exploring the shifting public perception regarding the domestic servant as conveyed through popular contemporary novels. Historiographical trends tend to highlight gender roles and social expectations by evaluating the means in which working-class women push the boundaries of a traditionally patriarchal society in order to be economically or socially independent. Consequently, scholarship often collapses a variety of occupations into one seamless ‘working class’ experience. Merish’s work, on the other hand, addresses the complex composition of the working class and conveys the plurality of female occupations by analyzing them in separate chapters with distinct literary tracts. She succeeds in weaving together literary and historical analysis and produces a thorough and engaging text on antebellum working-class women.

2 Examining nineteenth-century working-class culture poses significant obstacles for meaningful analysis, primarily due to the ephemerality of the source material. In spite of the proliferation of literary texts catered to the working-class, there was little motivation to preserve these texts, often deemed of little value. Merish, however, overcomes this obstacle by finding and examining long-ignored textual archives and by approaching ephemerality as an analytical tool, rather than a burden for critical scholarship. Merish weaves together the narratives of each female occupation with both their respective literary genre and with their other female counterparts in similar occupations. In the first two chapters, Merish explores diverse literary genres that focus specifically on the factory girl. The *Voice of Industry*, a periodical that catered to the working-class population, often reprinted women’s speeches on labor reform in response to the degradation of working-class factory experience. In addition to *Voice of Industry*, Merish

critically analyzes the *Lowell Offering* and the *Factory Girl's Album*, both periodicals that provided an outlet for women's opinions on class struggle and their experiences as women in a factory setting. By analyzing periodicals published for consumption by working-class women, especially in the case of *Lowell Offering*, Merish uncovers a burgeoning literary culture among female factory workers specifically, and their professed solidarity with their fellow laborers against the degradation of the working-class population by elite factory owners.

3 From periodicals to dime novels, Merish then explores the trope of the factory girl in popular fiction. The gendered construction of the fallen woman speaks to a wider understanding of the factory girl in working-class society, as a vulnerable woman lacking agency and eventually seduced by an elite factory owner and rogue. Highlighting the dependence of factory women on the factory-owners, Merish extends this analysis to include the dependence of the entire working class on elite industry owners. Class dependence, a frequent topic in the working-class periodicals, ties in seamlessly with Merish's analysis of popular fiction and the extension of class concerns framed and refracted through the lens of gender.

4 Merish shifts from factory girl to seamstress through the trope of the fallen and seduced woman, but highlights the difference in social status between these two occupations. While the role of the two occupations are similar, as in they both deal with the manufacture of textiles, the image of the solitary seamstress evokes significantly more sympathy and sentimentality than their factory girl counterpart. Merish attributes this to the economic dependence of the solitary seamstress within the home compared to the factory girls' attempts at independence by leaving the home, and ultimately their domestic responsibilities. Merish juxtaposes the dependent class of seamstresses depicted in fiction with the militant seamstresses who, much like their factory-girl counterparts, developed a collective voice to speak on behalf of their downtrodden seamstress sisters. By comparing these divergent literary genres, Merish complicates the role of female laborers both within their respective class structures and as advocates both for their fellow women and for the working-class as a whole. Merish, through this venture, uncovers and unpacks how female laborers saw themselves in conjunction with how their male counterparts considered their labor and social roles within the broader working class.

5 The last chapters tackle the complexities of race, class, and empire by exploring the literary culture of female missionary workers in California and through fiction depicting domestic servants. In particular, Merish's analysis of Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel *Our Nig*

highlights what Merish refers to as the “‘blackening’ of domestic service for antebellum constructions of class” and interrogates the concept of the domestic sphere once it is refracted by race and gender (154). By incorporating an interracial girl, Frado, as the domestic servant, her responsibilities gradually increase, thereby entailing more of a slave-master relationship, rather than an extension of domestic duties performed by white women. The means by which Frado addresses this status and pushes against the mistress’s expectations are, according to Merish, the contested space for working-class women and their assimilation to, or avoidance of, social expectations in the antebellum era.

6 Merish’s final chapter explores the testimonies of Mexicanas who worked in missions, often alongside Native American women, in the California territory. While the content and argument are similar to the rest of the book, the shift to a different historical moment complicated by varied definitions of race and identity presents the reader with challenges in interpreting and understanding Merish’s claims. More historical context regarding the status of Native Americans before and after United States annexation, in addition to the complicated position of Mexicanas during this time, would complement and enhance Merish’s argument. This book achieves a substantial feat by seamlessly incorporating the comparison of slave narratives, popular fiction, the white female working-class, and the role of the domestic servant, and the additional layer of Californios, while similar in content and argument, reads as an anomaly and not as part of the same literary culture formed and analyzed by the rest of the book. While logically the arguments are similar, the context and content, a full continent apart, can arguably be part of a different historical and literary moment, rather than an extension of the culture that Merish is analyzing in the rest of *Archives of Labor*.

7 Merish’s book is an accomplishment both in literary interpretation and historical analysis, identifying complicated nuances in social and cultural ideologies and addressing them in an informative manner. The obstacle faced when exploring working-class popular culture—by default an ephemeral and elusive subject matter—is swiftly overcome by Merish’s incorporation of a variety of texts, both fiction and nonfiction, and engagement with an assortment of periodicals, dime novels, and sentimental books. This book is an essential read for anyone interested in working-class women’s history, literary culture, and the intersection of race and class in the antebellum period.