WASH YOURSELF WHITE: RACE, HYGIENE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY U.S. MULTI-ETHNIC WOMEN'S WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE

By
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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Wash Yourself White: Race, Hygiene, and Environmental Justice in Twentieth-Century Multi-Ethnic Women's Working-Class Literature

My dissertation argues that studying literary representations of women's labor helps us to understand the intersection of racial capitalism and environmental injustice. I examine how various twentieth-century working-class literary women characters' positionality within the private sphere of domestic labor gives them intimate knowledge of the material conditions of poverty and resulting racial discourses of hygiene. I argue that reading dirty materials like grime, dust, and garbage and the accompanying racial discourses of hygiene as environmental justice issues in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1924), Sanora Babb's *Whose Names are Unknown* (written in the 1930s but not published until 2004), Ann Petry's *The* Street (1946), and Alice Childress's *Like one of the Family* (serially published in Paul Robeson's *Freedom* 1951-1955 and re-published in 1956) reveals how such discourses re-direct the responsibility of environmental injustice away from its source, racial capitalism, and onto the individuals who bear the burden of environmental harm.

I explore how women in these texts resist gendered imperatives of hygiene by foregoing cleaning rituals and embracing dirty material to reveal the limits of liberal individualism and re-focus blame on structures of power and injustice. Finally, I argue that dirt, which transgresses physical and social boundaries, becomes a central material through which these women defy the constructed borders of gender, the body, and nationhood. Resistance to sexism, racial violence, and environmental injustice demonstrated by women in these novels can provide a roadmap for feminist approaches to the same systems of oppression that persist in our racial capitalist society today.

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To our little girl:
may your dreams be big, your worries be small, and your heart be full of love, community,
and a passion for justice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Abjection, Ambiguity, and Power in Twentieth-century U.S. Multi-ethnic Women's Working-class Literature

"Oh, I love trash!

Anything dirty or dingy or dusty

Anything ragged or rotten or rusty

Yes, I love trash."

—Oscar The Grouch, 'I Love Trash'.

I like to joke that I chose this dissertation topic because it gave me an excuse to talk about poop at the dinner table. The reality, however, is that while I knew I wanted to study literature and the environment and explore the quickly developing field of ecocritism, I was often bored with the beauty and always fascinated by dirt, grime, and waste. I came to this project over years of thinking through the ways in which dirty materiality has come to signify undesirable difference and otherness. Additionally, my father's tales of being an airline mechanic union steward and my own experience working many low-wage jobs and eventually serving in various roles for my labor union, the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (AFT Local 3544), inspired me to study working-class literature. It was when I united these two interests that I began to notice patterns in the ways twentieth-century U.S. working-class literature, especially texts written by women about women working in the domestic sphere of labor, discuss dirt, dirty work, and hygiene. What arose out of years of coursework, examination prep, and time fighting for fair working conditions for GEs were the following research questions that now guide this project.

Dirt and Dirty Work: Alternative Understandings of Multi-ethnic Women's Working-class Resistance

In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* philosopher Julia Kristeva defines and explores the concept of the "abject," or that which forces us to face the grimy, dirty, disgusting materiality and, ultimately, the mortality of human existence. Importantly, Kristeva notes, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). In other words, Kristeva argues that dirtiness or disease do not constitute the "abject," but rather the uncertainty and ambiguity that grime, bodily waste—and ultimately the corpse— represent force us to face abjection. Representations of the gross, discarded materials such as shit and vomit that create conditions of filth and decay and the human urge to demonize and/or erase such substances are largely the focus of this project. Building on Kristeva's work, I argue that in exploring literary representations of materials that force a confrontation with abjection—or abject materiality—we can begin to understand how U.S. obsessions with cleanliness, racial purity, borders, and order intersect with ideas of racial, class, and gender differentiation and environmental injustice.

This project looks at the ways in which non-white, provisionally white, and economically disenfranchised white characters—especially women laboring in the domestic sphere—are cast as inherently dirty and/or diseased and, therefore, subjected to *racial discourses of hygiene*.[1] By *racial discourses of hygiene*, I mean popular forms of

[1] By "provisionally white," I am referring to characters like the Jewish immigrants to the U.S. in the work of Anzia Yezierska who, in the 1920s especially, experienced both xenophobia and racial differentiation at the hands of U.S.-born white individuals that barred them from

communication (advertisements, public health education, etc.) that, as part of the process of racial formation, associate personal cleanliness with whiteness and wealth, and dirtiness with poverty and non-white identity. Such discourses are framed as imperative for upward mobility, racial uplift, and access to the full rights of citizenship. Racial discourses of hygiene, which are individualist in nature, function by focusing on personal cleanliness to distract from larger structural issues of racism, xenophobia, sexism, and environmental injustice. In particular, I argue that these discourses simultaneously shift energy away from restorative forms of collective power such as unionization and toward individual cleanliness in service of capitalism.

Specifically, I examine how attending to representations of dirt, waste, garbage, diseases, and the resulting racial discourses of hygiene in U.S. multi-ethnic women's working-class novels reveals the ways anxieties about individual hygiene are integral to U.S. racial formation. Because of the close proximity of women to the private, domestic sphere of labor, they are more frequently exposed to racial discourses of hygiene and imperatives of cleanliness. Therefore, these texts about working-class women are well positioned to expose the limits of figuring individual hygiene as a solution to the unequal distribution of resources and environmental harm. Such discourses are framed as imperative for upward mobility, racial uplift, assimilation, and access to the full rights of citizenship. I argue that these novels, in depicting largely the domestic work performed by working-class women, immigrant women, and women of color, expose racial discourses of hygiene as a mechanism of capitalism that redirects the blame and responsibility of the unequal distribution of environmental harm from the responsible parties (industrial polluters and capitalist ventures)

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the full rights of citizenship. While their access to whiteness has changed over time, it was and is still often provisional.

to the individuals who bear the burden of environmental injustice. Additionally, these novels move beyond a critique of racial discourses of hygiene by celebrating women characters who temporarily forego individual hygiene and sometimes even utilize dirt to act out against the environmental injustice they face in their working and living conditions. These acts of resistance re-focus blame away from the individual and back toward the perpetrators of injustice such as politicians, polluters, bosses, employers, and banks. Through this process, dirt, despite its material consequences, is tapped as a radical source of power through which women characters deconstruct the boundaries of gender, race, and nation.

By attending to representations of dirt, disease, and racial discourses of hygiene in various twentieth-century U.S. women's multi-ethnic working-class novels and short stories, *Wash Yourself White* seeks to answer the following questions: what can literary representations of discourses of hygiene and disease tell us about racial formation? How do racial discourses of hygiene shape who is relegated to often already gendered domestic labor (both paid and unpaid) and other forms of dirty work? How do racial discourses of hygiene individualize structural issues of racism and environmental injustice? How can literature help us to understand the importance of solidarity among racial, ethnic, and economic groups labeled as inherently dirty and/or diseased? In answering these questions, this project reveals that examining multi-ethnic women's working-class literary texts can help us understand how racial discourses of hygiene perpetuate injustice, liberal individualism, and racial capitalism.[2]

[2] By "liberal individualism" I am referring to the ideology—similar to but older than neoliberalism—that upholds the belief that anyone who works hard enough, tries hard enough, will be successful and happy. Such ideology is central to the myth of the American Dream and individual hygiene as a means of racial and economic uplift is one tool of liberal individualist ideology. This ideology erases structural inequities that prevents everyone from

Building on the work of environmental justice, waste studies, and critical race and ethnic studies scholars, I assert that discourses of dirt, disease, and hygiene operate as a racializing force that exists to serve racial capitalism as well as American liberal individualism. I look at women characters' responses to imperatives of hygiene in four central novels, Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1924), Sanora Babb's *Whose Names are Unknown* (written in the 1930s, but published in 2004), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and Alice Childress's *Like one of the Family* (1956), for insight into resisting structural environmental injustice rather than focusing on individual hygiene as the solution. Specifically, I argue that dirt, waste, and disease function as a fulcrum upon which the lever of racial, class, and gender-based justice pivots, and thus can be tapped as tools of resistance to structural oppression.

Working-Class Women's Writing, Immigration/Migration, and Environmental Justice: a Reading Methodology

I chose to work with the fiction of authors who were explicitly political in their writing and activism. In many ways, each of these women writers' fiction—whether explicitly autobiographical or not—is an extension of their political writings, thought, and/or

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approaching the goal of "success" with equal access to resources and opportunity. My use of this term is inspired, in part, by Jodi Melamed's description of the evolution of U.S. "antiracisms" (1). Melamed divides this strategic evolution into stages: "racial liberalism (1940s to1960s)," "liberal multiculturalism (1980s to1990s)," and "neoliberal multiculturalism (2000s)" that—in resistance to more radical feminist and anti-capitalist movements—sought to reconcile the contradictions of capitalism, power, and racial equality through individualist rhetoric (1-4).

activism. Reading these works of fiction alongside the unique biographical histories of these radical women of the literary left more clearly reveals the political interventions they are making through their storytelling. Fiction, especially in a world where working-class women, immigrant women, and women of color are silenced in overtly political spheres and whose relegation to the domestic spheres of labor often leads to their de-politization, provides a venue for these women to contribute their radical ideas about racial justice, women's work, class consciousness, and environmental justice.

Because of the co-constitutive nature of racial discourses of hygiene and the politics of immigration, I chose to analyze texts framed loosely by the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 and the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. These immigration policies shaped racial formation in the U.S. by basing access to citizenship on national origin and crafting a false, homogenous, white narrative of American identity. Racial discourses of hygiene tend to arise during moments of social tension such as shifting immigration policies/patterns, racial unrest, and/or economic strife. This is because, as this project demonstrates, discourses of hygiene are an environmental justice issue that is deeply intertwined with structures of sexism, racism, xenophobia, and capitalism. Through their interactions with the abject materiality they encounter, women characters in these texts force those in power around them to recon with the ambiguity and murkiness of racial/ethnic identity and the validity of geographical borders in ways that de-stabilize the systems of racial capitalism and white supremacy.

In keeping with environmental justice studies,' I look beyond the rural and see beyond only the beautiful. This approach expands our understanding of what counts as "the environment" and which aspects of the environment deserve our attention and care. In doing so, this dissertation address not only the hazardous ramifications of environmental toxins within the home and workplace which, for women, are often the same space, but also explore

how such an expansion of the environment can be liberating for individuals relegated to the margins of labor and society in general. I also build on the work of women of color feminisms, to unite environmental justice studies and U.S. labor studies. I expand on white male-centered approaches to working-class struggle through an analysis of multi-ethnic white women and Black women writing about women's relationship to dirt and dirty work. Such an approach allows me to expand our definition of what counts as labor to include paid and unpaid domestic work in similar ways to how environmental justice studies challenges our often narrow understanding of what counts as the environment. This method of analysis then brings the power of working-class consciousness and solidarity around issues of environmental justice such as poor working conditions to domestic spaces, which are far too often given short shrift in both environmental justice studies and labor studies.

Hygiene and the Economy: Intersections of Racial Capitalism and Critical Environmental Justice Studies

In this project, I draw on Black studies scholar Cedric Robinson's term "racial capitalism" to describe the dialectical relationship between racialism and capitalism.[3] I posit that these novels illustrate that racial discourses of hygiene function as a tool of the epistemological framework of racialism which is used to divide people into social groups based on race. Dirtiness and the resulting discourses of hygiene in the texts I analyze become

[3] Robinson proposes, in his description of racial capitalism, that capitalism did not emerge as a new system outside of European feudalism, which used racialism as a means of social organization, but rather evolved from it. As such, he argues, "it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism" (Robinson 4).

a means by which wealthy white characters organize working-class individuals marked by dirt, grime, and/or waste, into specific social groups they deem racially or ethnically other. This categorization, then, collides with ideas of white supremacy and racial essentialism and is used to further exploit these working-class communities in a racialized and gendered labor market. When read through this lens, the texts I analyze reveal the co-constitutive relationship between racism and capitalism and how American obsessions with cleanliness are weaponized to disguise and justify exploitation.

Each chapter also engages the intersections of critical race and ethnic studies and critical environmental justice studies as defined by environmental studies scholars such as David N. Pellow. Building on Robert Bullard's environmental justice work, Pellow asserts the importance of critical environmental justice studies as a lens that "seeks to push our analysis and actions beyond the human, the state, and capital via a broad anti-authoritarian perspective" (*What is Critical Environmental Justice* 18*).* Applying this approach to the texts I examine allows us to see characters' resistance outside of the state and structures of capitalism. Each of these texts reveals the fact that not only are racism and capitalism intertwined, but so too are racial capitalism and environmental injustice. The co-constitutive relationship between racial capitalism and environmental injustice is illustrated by the ways in which environmental injustice has historically and continues to map onto the racialization of spaces occupied by and lived experiences of people of color. As landmark studies such as the 1987 United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice's report "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States" which was one of the first of its kind to explicitly demonstrate the link between hazardous waste sites and racial/ethnic communities in the U.S. Such studies and the following decades of environmental justice activism demonstrate that relegating toxic/hazardous waste to communities occupied by racially and ethnically disenfranchised communities allows these communities to be used as sinks of environmental injustice for the

sake of saving money.[4] As such, the environment has long been deeply embedded in the way capitalism functions, yet discussions of capitalism and environmentalism don't always happen in the same intellectual spaces. By uniting labor studies and environmental justice studies lenses with a critique of racial capitalism in application to the texts I analyze, the following chapters help us to better understand the interlocking oppressive forces of racism, classism, and environmental injustice. This reading practice also illuminates how certain places, such as the title 116th street in Harlem of Petry's novel *The Street* or Hester Street from Yezierska's *Bread Givers* become the dumping grounds for environmental waste based largely on racial and ethnic hierarchy.

In focusing on the discourses of hygiene running throughout the texts I read and connecting those discourses to the processes of racialization experienced by the characters in these texts, this project interrogates racial discourses of hygiene as one important means of maintaining racial capitalist exploitation. These discourse fuel a positive feedback cycle of environmental injustice as they are used to determine who is inherently dirty/diseased and therefore fit for dirty work. The relegation of communities of color and working-class people to dirty working and living conditions, in turn, causes structural health and hygiene issues for these already marginalized communities. Finally, these health and hygiene issues are then further used to justify the racial essentialism that is used to relegate them to those toxic and/or dirty spaces in the first place. And, the cycle begins again/continues. As such, racial discourses of individual hygiene become weaponized—most often by wealthy white

[4] By "sinks," I mean the designated dumping places for environmental waste, or the places that do not receive the same attention from sanitary or waste removal services because their residents are deemed, as Pellow would argue, "expendable" ("Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies" 230).

characters in the texts I read—as a solution to structural environmental violence rather than addressing the institutionalized racism in which they are implicated that creates these conditions of injustice. Applying these frameworks to my reading of twentieth-century multi-ethnic women's working-class literature allows me to account for forms of resistance and survival outside of the purview of the state that challenge and expand upon popular approaches to class consciousness in the U.S. such as the American Communist Party's (CPUSA) efforts toward working-class solidarity.

The representations of dust, garbage, sewage, and other dirty materials in twentieth-century U.S. working-class women's literature I read highlight the material conditions of environmental injustice and the ways in which these conditions are shaped by racism, sexism, and classism. In response to these conditions, each of the authors of the novels and stories I examine approach their subject matter, at least partially, through a historical materialist lens, often espousing overtly Marxist politics or at least engaging with Marxist critiques of society. At the same time, all the texts in my archive also highlight limitations of efforts toward socialism and economic reform that center class over other forms of oppression, and, in doing so, fall short of meeting the needs of workers, especially Black women workers. I probe these limitations by reading racial discourses of individual hygiene in the novels as an environmental justice issue deeply intertwined with the structures of racial capitalism. Specifically, these novels expose discourses of hygiene as a mechanism of capitalism that redirects the blame and responsibility of the unequal distribution of environmental harm from the responsible parties (the polluter industrial complex and capitalist ventures) to the individuals who bear the burden of environmental injustice. I argue that because of the close proximity of women to the private, domestic sphere of labor, these texts about racialized working-class women are able to expose the limits of figuring individual hygiene as a

solution to the unequal distribution of resources and environmental harm.[5] I also assert that these texts move beyond a critique of racial discourses of hygiene by chronicling women characters who abandon or temporarily forego individual hygiene and sometimes even embrace abject materiality for the sake of speaking/acting out against environmental injustice. These acts of resistance re-direct blame away from the individual and back toward the perpetrators of injustice such as politicians, bosses, and the structures of white supremacy.

Finally, because of dirt's ties to disease, racial discourses of hygiene are inherently bound up in medical discourse as well. As such, my project draws on concepts from health humanities to articulate how real and imagined threats to public health in the texts I examine often trigger anti-immigrant, anti-Black, antisemitic, and anti-Communist, sentiment and shape the experiences of non-white and provisionally white characters' within a system of racial capitalism. As historian Linda Nash explains, "Any discussion of the body and its diseases cannot be understood without reference to the complex history of race" and, at times, class as well (13). As such, this project draws on the work of historians engaged in medical humanities research such as Natalia Molina and Nyan Shah, who explore how racial formation in the United States is shaped largely by biologically essentialist ideas of disease and by the false premise that non-white individuals and immigrants—often considered inherently dirty and diseased—posed a threat to the U.S. nation state even after the development of germ theory in the late 1800s. With this history in mind, *Wash Yourself White* examines the racial discourses of hygiene that are weaponized by wealthy white characters to individualize structural issues of racism, classism, and environmental injustice.

[5] While women were and are relegated to the private sphere of labor, it is important to note that women of color have always been an integral part of both the private and public spheres of labor.

Purity and Cleanliness: Interventions in Discourses of Hygiene within Cultural and Literary Studies

This project is certainly not the first to engage with questions of, environmental justice, or representations of materiality (abject or aesthetically pleasing) in literature and culture. Ecocritics have long examined the descriptions and interactions with the beauty of nature in literary texts. Environmental justice scholars such as Lawrence Buell (2005), Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein have expanded our definition of what counts as "the environment" and have challenged us to consider the unequal distribution of environmental harm. To help illuminate the ways in which these texts re-define what is "natural," destabilize the pure/impure binary, and display the social power of racial discourses of hygiene, I draw not only on Kristeva's concept of abjection, but also on the work of anthropologist and comparative religions scholar Mary Douglas regarding the centrality of purity and taboo as means of organizing society. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo,* Douglas explores the roots of humanity's obsessions with purity, arguing that the "rules of purity" are a helpful lens through which to study comparative religions (7). While this dissertation is not focused on religious ideology, Douglas's research on taboo, dirt, and hygiene are helpful context with which to understand fear of dirt and the role of cleanliness in the literary texts I read.

In particular, I argue that examining rules about pollution and taboo not only tell us about religion, but also about the process of racialization in the U.S. My argument builds on Douglas's assertion that "Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organized. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder" (xi). Following this logic through the novels and stories I examine, non-white individuals are socially marked as dirty and, therefore, taboo, in an effort to homogenize the nation state and maintain racial order. Thus, discourses of hygiene operate to maintain this racial order since, as Douglas

explains, “In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (3). By labeling non-white and provisionally white characters as inherently dirty, the white characters in the texts I analyze re-order their social landscape to make it conform to the ideology of white supremacy and to allow them to relegate non-white individuals to the less desirable often dirty work of society.

Wash Yourself White is also indebted to the waste studies and environmental justice scholarship of historians Suellen Hoy and Carl Zimring. Zimring’s *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* argues that the constitutive development of U.S. definitions of waste and the processes of racial formation have marked white people as clean and non-white or provisionally white individuals as inherently dirty which, in turn, has “shaped environmental inequalities that endure in the twenty-first century” (3). Zimring draws on Suellen Hoy’s *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* which traces the history of American obsessions with cleanliness and the role of women within the domestic sphere in shaping this history. Using the historical foundation established by Hoy and Zimring, I explore how literary texts about women’s work bring this history to life while also pushing back against individualist ideas of cleanliness as an answer to structural environmental justice.

Finally, *Wash Yourself White* adds to the growing body of work in literary studies focused on the intersections of race, waste, hygiene, and new materialism by scholars such as John Gamber and Hsuan Hsu. In his book *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures,* John Gamber draws on Mary Douglas’s analysis of the human urge to establish a binary between purity and pollution/contamination in order to make sense of a disorganized, murky, and often uncertain world. Gamber uses U.S. multi-ethnic literary texts to “question the us/them binary that

becomes buttressed by notions of purity and pollution and constructed along species, racial, ethnic, and cultural lines" (12). In doing so, he explores how characters in the texts he reads reclaim discarded materials in ways that mirror "the reclamation of cast-off individuals and communities" (5). Building on Gamber's work, *Wash Yourself White* considers the intersection of working-class identity, gender, race, immigration status, and leftist politics to interrogate the false binary of purity/pollution and to demonstrate how characters within several U.S. multi-ethnic women's working-class literary texts actively use waste to build class consciousness and multi-ethnic solidarity.

In his work on olfactory aesthetics and deodorization, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics,* Hsuan L. Hsu's explores how the efforts to "deodorize" air in particular areas are deeply entrenched in ideas of racial differentiation and that paying attention to the aesthetics of smell can help us to better understand how "atmospheric differentiation" is central to "capitalism's process of colonization, racialization, extraction, industrialization, urbanization, uneven development, and environmental depredation" (4-7). Similarly, I argue that attending to cultural representations of discourses of hygiene in literary texts can reveal the ways in which ideas about individual cleanliness are critical to the operation of racial capitalism. Additionally, Hsu argues that "While efforts to deodorize public and private space claim to improve public health, they frequently focus on semiotic and cosmetic forms of deodorization (covering up unpleasant smells or moving them around) rather than equitably reducing atmospheric risks" (14). Racial discourses of hygiene in the texts I read accomplish similar work in that they tend to push characters toward individual acts of personal cleanliness rather than work toward a collective solution to structural environmental injustice. The burden of both cleanliness and the stigma of dirtiness, as Hsu argues and my project articulates, falls on already marginalized groups who are cast as "'ecological others,' Sarah Jaquette Ray's term for groups that are stigmatized as

environmentally impure, careless, or disengaged" or—as I specifically address—deemed inherently biologically dirty as a function of their race (14).

While Marx and Engels called for humans to fight the alienation from their land and labor upon which capitalism depends (Bellamy Foster 75), new materialist scholars call for humans to re-evaluate the validity of the boundaries between humans and their environment all together. In this way, I use new materialism to enhance my environmental justice lens to reveal how the texts I read dismantle the multitude of false binaries including but not limited to town/country, humans/nature, private/public spheres of labor, and clean/dirty. Similarly, a new materialist framework helps to resist the idea of solidified borders and boundaries between the body and the environment; nature and the human; the public and private spheres of labor, etc. For example, Stacy Alaimo introduces the term "trans-corporeality" to capture how the "human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (*Bodily Natures* 2) If we take this concept to be true, then trans-corporeality "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2). A reading practice that utilizes this framework of trans-corporeality to destabilize socially constructed boundaries and borders (with very real and often harmful material ramifications) is more able to account for the power of often dirty and discarded residues that transgress such boundaries and seep through time, space, and the body.

If we take Alaimo's assertion and combine it with John Gamber's argument that we expand what is considered "natural" to include all materials, we arrive at my reading practice. Gamber specifically argues that "Cities are natural. And Traffic. And garbage. So are sewage and toxic waste. Human beings (*Homo sapiens*) are a biological species of the earth" (1). This is not to say that these substances categorized as "waste" or "toxins" can't be harmful, or that they mustn't be mitigated, but to think of them as outside "nature" further allows them to be used to classify certain—read non-white and/or impoverished—communities as an

inherent public health hazard not fit for the rights of citizenship. Additionally, as is demonstrated in the texts I analyze, such ideology enables for more privileged communities and corporations to further relegate already marginalized individuals to dirty and sometimes hazardous living and working conditions.

My work also expands on Alaimo's rendering of trans-corporeality in that it focuses less on invisible toxins as Alaimo does, and more on visible dirt. Visible material physically marks certain people, and as such, becomes its own social toxin of sorts, delineating those marked by it as impoverished, and/or racially, geographically, or ethnically other. Similar to the way in which John Gamber articulates the concept of "racism and other oppressive forces" as "cultural toxins," (8) I assert that visible dirt whether physically hazardous or not, functions as a visible social toxin that marks already disenfranchised communities as targets for the culturally toxic oppressive structures of xenophobia, white supremacy, nationalism, and environmental injustice. In focusing on the ways in which characters in the texts I analyze react to visible dirt and dirty work as well as the ways wealthy white characters use visible dirt to push imperatives of hygiene, I am able to reveal how the focus on visible dirt is used to mask the less visible structural causes of environmental hazards, poor working conditions, and racism.

Chapter Overview: Women Workers' Resistance to Racial Discourses of Hygiene

Chapter 1: "Up from Dirt": Anti-Assimilationist Abject Materiality in Anzia Yezierska's Fiction focuses on Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) and several of her short stories from her collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920). I explore how working-class provisionally white Jewish women immigrant characters' precarious relationships to whiteness are reflected in representations of dirt, disease, and racial discourses of hygiene. Yezierska's Jewish characters regularly butt up against white attempts to assimilate them

through forcing ideals of individual cleanliness and hygiene as a path toward Americanization. I argue that through dirty materiality and their ties to the Jewish diaspora, the Jewish women characters who are exploited in both the public and private spheres of labor destabilize the binary between Old World Jewish and New World American cultural expression as well as debunk the racial essentialism central to discourses of hygiene.

Chapter 2: The Dirty Thirties: Waste, Whiteness, and the Working Class in Sanora Babb's *Whose Names are Unknown* centers around Sanora Babb's Dust Bowl novel *Whose Names are Unknown* (written in the 1930s, but not published until 2004), which follows a white impoverished Oklahoma family of farmers as they encounter Dust Bowl storms and eventually migrate to the fields and farm labor camps of California. I examine how white farmers-turned-farm workers' encounters with the materiality of the Dust Bowl converge with their migrant status and, thus, impact proximity to the environmental and social privileges of whiteness. I also analyze women characters' rejection of racial discourses of hygiene in favor of multiethnic and multiracial class consciousness.

In Chapter 3: Health and Hygiene in Harlem: Environmental Justice in Ann Petry's *The Street*, using Terrion Williamson's *Scandalize my Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (2017) as a framework, I focus on Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and look at how Black working-class women characters "stake a claim" to the dirt, grime, garbage, and dirty work in ways that allow them to deconstruct individualist responses to environmental racism and racial capitalism. In particular, I examine the relegation of Black women characters to dirty, grueling domestic labor in the homes of wealthy white women, and the ways in which some characters resist this relegation and conformity to a system of private property through occupations like sex work in order to reclaim autonomy over their economic circumstances.

Finally, in Chapter 4: "There's nobody with common sense that can look down on the domestic worker": Housework in Alice Childress's *Like one of the Family*, I examine Alice Childress's collection of vignettes *Like one of the Family* (1956) and the original serial publications of these stories in Paul Robeson's *Freedom* (1951-1955). I assert that attending to dirt and disease in Childress's vignettes exposes the anti-blackness at the core of racial discourses of hygiene, reveals the resulting ramifications on Black women characters' labor, and provides collective mechanisms for resisting environmental racism. In reading the original format vignettes within the pages of a radical Black leftist paper alongside the revised and re-published versions of the stories in Childress's 1956 collection, I add to literary scholar Mary Hellen Washington's project of recovering Childress's incredibly important and historically specific contributions to Black liberation and the literary left that are still valuable today (189).

Conclusion: Racial Discourses of Hygiene Today

Given that environmental racism and racial discourses of hygiene are still weaponized to uphold white supremacy and racial capitalism, the lessons provided by my archive of texts remain relevant. The global COVID-19 crisis and the Black Lives Matter uprisings of the current moment have reiterated that the racialization of public health and the prevalence of American liberal individualism continue to serve racial capitalism. By exposing the limits of individual hygiene and the damage of racial essentialism, the novels I read give us a more just framework for thinking about public health and the value of living in community. Additionally, looking to fiction provides the creative space for us to imagine a path of resistance to environmental injustice and racial capitalism beyond the parameters of the inherently racist U.S. nation state.

Chapter 1: "Up from Dirt": Anti-Assimilationist Abject Materiality in Anzia Yezierska's Fiction

Introduction

Anzia Yezierska's 1920 short story "Soap and Water" from her collection *Hungry Hearts* follows the second-generation Jewish immigrant unnamed woman protagonist's/narrator's difficulty securing a job as a teacher because the dean of her college, Miss. Whiteside, refuses to give her a diploma based on the protagonist's lack of personal hygiene. Frustrated with this turn of events, the unnamed protagonist reflects:

> Miss Whiteside had no particular reason for hounding and persecuting me. Personally, she didn't give a hang if I was clean or dirty. She was merely one of the agents of clean society, delegated to judge who is fit and who is unfit to teach. (102).

In this passage, the protagonist both exposes and critiques the logic of white supremacy by which white bourgeois women police the boundaries of "clean society," education, and the job market. Though barred from access to "clean society" herself, it is the narrator's labor in the dirty work of a laundry that provides the "little niceties of the well-groomed lady" that are available to characters like Miss Whiteside. The irony of the fact that it is the protagonist's own dirty work that creates the means for the "clean society" from which she is ultimately barred captures how individual hygiene gets weaponized as a mechanism of environmental injustice in Yezierska's fiction. Miss Whiteside and other white, bourgeois characters throughout Yezierska's short story collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and semi-autobiographical novel, *Bread Givers* (1925) simultaneously demand cleanliness from Jewish working-class women and actively work against the redistribution of resources necessary for these women to maintain personal hygiene and have access to healthy living/working

conditions. Through racial discourses of hygiene that place the responsibility for cleanliness on the individuals experiencing environmental injustice, Yezierska's white middle/upper-class characters relegate Jewish women to the dirty, grimy ghetto, refusing them access to the means of economic advancement for the sake of maintaining the ethnoracial hierarchy that fuels racial capitalism and vice versa.

A pattern of Jewish immigrant women toiling amidst the dirt and grime of the New York ghetto runs throughout Yezierska's 1920s fiction. "Ghetto" itself is a racialized term that I will use within the context of Michael Denning's concept of the "ghetto pastoral" which includes "tales of growing up in Little Italy, the Lower East Side [where Yezierska's characters reside], Bronzeville, and Chinatown, written by plebeian men and women of these ethnic working-class neighborhoods" (230). According to Denning, ghetto pastoral tales are different from many proletarian novels in that they are more frequently a "memorial to daily labor: limning the rituals of a craft or wearing pure toil" than tales of "strikes as solutions to working-class issues" (244). Because of the focus on the ordinary, yet immediate and acute struggle of working-class women across both the domestic and public spheres of labor, the ghetto pastoral is an especially productive genre through which Yezierska reveals sites of daily resistance to ethnoracial violence and environmental injustice. It is in the ordinary, daily, dirty work of Jewish working-class women, who are often relegated to the domestic sphere of labor or take on the work of both the private and public spheres of labr that we find the roots of an often under-represented radical resistance.

Due to the poor distribution of resources largely based on their ranking in the prevailing racial hierarchy as "off-white," and their positionality within domestic spaces, Yezierska's Jewish working-class women characters' proximity to dirt is virtually

inescapable (Brodkin 1).[6] While, as new materialist scholars argue, the borders we conceptualize between our bodies and the matter around us are far more permeable than we would like to think, the porosity of these boundaries for Yezierska's Jewish women characters is made even more obvious by the environmentally unjust living and working conditions they face.[7] In this chapter, I examine the various tactics by which white bourgeois characters police, both literally and figuratively, the boundaries of working-class Jewish women's bodies and the surrounding environment as a way of reinforcing ethnoracial hierarchy in Yezierska's short stories "Soap and Water" and "Free Vacation House" from the collection *Hungry Hearts,* and in her novel *Bread Givers.* I argue that working-class Jewish women's close proximity to domestic labor and their resulting experiences of racial discourses of hygiene in Yezierska's fiction creates a particularly productive space from which to critique racial capitalism.

Specifically, I attend to the Jewish immigrant characters' various interactions with dirt, dust, and other "abject materials" in these three stories. I borrow the term "abject" from Julia Kristeva's essay "The Powers of Horror" in which she explains the various ways humans seek to reject abject material [such as human excrement and human corpses] in order

[6] Karen Brodkin describes that throughout U.S. history, "Prevailing classifications at a particular time have sometimes assigned us [Jews] to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit. Those changes in our racial assignment have shaped the ways in which American Jews who grew up in different eras have constructed their ethnoracial identities" (1).

[7] See Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality (to be discussed further below) in her foundational work *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self.*

to re-assert a sense of order and meaning (2-4).[8] In Yezierska's fiction, the dirt, dust, and grime of the Lower East Side of New York is abject and ultimately marks the Jewish immigrant characters as out of order, unnatural, and unfit for the white, bourgeois system of racial capitalism. I examine how this process of racial formation, facilitated by the trans-corporeal interchange between bodies and dirty material, marks Jewish characters as what Sarah Jaquette Ray would call "ecological others," which further justifies the relegation of these characters to their environmentally unjust living and working conditions. Ray argues that U.S. white bourgeois feelings of "'environmental disgust,' are what determine which bodies are 'good' for nature and which are not and justifies removing the 'unnatural' from sight," (2). Yezierska's working-class Jewish women characters are figured as ecologically other through white bourgeois sentiments of environmental disgust, which, in turn, is used to justify relegating them to the Lower East Side of New York. In this chapter, I argue that wealthy white characters' "environmental disgust" directed toward Jewish immigrants in

[8] Darieck Scott and Charles Mills have connected abjection with race, specifically as it relates to blackness.[8] In particular, using Kristeva, Scott argues while black sexuality is frequently figured as abject and thus used to restrict the freedom of Black individuals, such abjection can also "be a vehicle for, or the realization of, black freedom and power." Scott also notes the unique opportunity for the power accessed through abjection to destabilize the falsely constructed boundaries between "*identity, body, race, nation*." My argument specifically focuses on abjection as experienced by working-class Jewish immigrant women, but similar to Scott, I argue for reading abjection as a powerful tool for resisting the rigid boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nationhood. Also, I use the term "ethnoracial" not to conflate race and ethnicity, but instead to mark their interconnection especially for Jewish immigrants in 1920s America.

Yezierska's work is often fueled by abject material because of its ability to defy boundaries of the home, the body, and the nation. Specifically, Yezierska's white bourgeois American characters regard the Jewish first and second-generation immigrant working-class women with environmental disgust because of their close proximity to dirty and abject materiality, which is seen as inherent to their ethnic foreignness and their "off-white" racial status to use Karen Brodkin's term (1).[9]

Several scholars have examined the cultural role of dirt more generally as a racializing force and hygiene as a response to dirty material in U.S. history. Dana Berthold and historian Carl Zimring argue that while the American pursuit of cleanliness is partially a public health response to disease, hygiene was and still is tied up in cultural values and the processes of U.S racial formation (Berthold 1-26, Zimring 3). Literary scholars have also examined the role of dirt and hygiene more specifically in Yezierska's fiction. In particular, Ronit Berger notes that while some of Yezierska's characters internalize racial discourses of hygiene, others realize that dirt can only be vanquished when an individual understands that it is a product of material conditions, not an inherent ethnoracial characteristic of Eastern European Jews (19-35). I build on this scholarship to argue that discourses of hygiene in Yezierska's fiction are often weaponized against Jewish working-class women protagonists to incentivize the pursuit of whiteness—however precarious—as the un-marked, un-polluted ideal.[1] Yet, her protagonists eventually learn to critique this process by rejecting individual hygiene as a solution to structural issues of environmental injustice such as poor access to

[9] I use the term "off-white" as it is established by Karin Brodkin to describe the mechanism by which Jewish people in the U.S. are sorted into "categories by distinguishing not only immigrant from 'native' whites by country, but also native whites of native white parentage (i.e., children of immigrants) (60).

safe, clean housing and food resources in the tenements and the relegation of immigrants to difficult and often hazardous working conditions.[10]

Despite many of their attempts at washing themselves white, Yezierska's characters' off-white racial formation is facilitated by dirty material, which marks their skin and belongings, even if sometimes only temporarily. Literary scholar Lori Harrison-Kahan explains that the repetitious descriptions of the filth of the ghetto in *Bread Givers (*among Yezierska's other texts) such as the '"black, choking tenements" and references to the immigrants' 'blackest poverty'" function to associate blackness with their poor living and economic conditions (Harrison-Kahan 420). It is against this "Africanist presence," a term Lori Harrison-Kahan and Tyrone Simpson borrow from Toni Morrison in their analyses of *Bread Givers*, that American whiteness and purity is understood and idealized (Morrison 28-45).[11] Thus, despite not being Black, many of Yezierska's characters are fearful of the

[10] Throughout this chapter and project as a whole, I draw on Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein's definition of environmental justice: "the rights of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment" (4) For Adamson et. al, "Environmental justice initiatives specifically attempt to redress the disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination in communities of the poor and/or communities of color, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture" (4).

[11] Morrison describes her book as "an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (28) Through this study, Morrison claims that "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the

"Africanist presence" of their material ties to the Lower East Side ghetto of New York because of its ability to compromise their access to whiteness and their safety from anti-Semitism and environmental injustice.

The anxiety over gaining some proximity to whiteness—however marginal—through assimilation that Yezierka's Jewish characters face is heavily influenced by the types of labor to which they are relegated. Specifically, the Jewish women-centric focus of Yezierska's fiction demonstrates how women's relationship to the private, domestic sphere of labor puts them in very intimate relation to racial discourses of hygiene. As historian Suellen Hoy notes, "The burden of cleanliness fell primarily on wives and mothers. Although they came to America from a variety of places and brought different customs with them, immigrant women from southern and eastern Europe [like many of Yezierska's Jewish protagonists] were chiefly responsible for the care of their homes and children" (98). Thus, their intimate knowledge of the expectations of the roles of mother and housewife was heavily influenced by obsessive American messages about hygiene. Additionally, upon arriving in America Eastern European immigrants, were often funneled into unskilled jobs regardless of their occupation in their former country (Brodkin 55-56). These circumstances forced Eastern European immigrants, into performing the "dirty jobs" both in and outside of the home (56-57). This history is illustrated in part through Yezierska's Jewish working-class women protagonists, whose unskilled dirty work involves jobs such as working in a laundry, and/or being relegated to the unpaid domestic work of raising children and housekeeping in the

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self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (45).The interactions Sara and other characters in *Bread Givers* have with coal, dirt, and mud, demonstrate different levels of fear, acceptance, embrace, and distancing from the blackness of an "African presence."

ghetto. In Yezierska's fiction, as was the case in 1920s New York in which she wrote, this division of labor based on ethnic difference further fueled the racist argument that these immigrants were part of an inferior race and that "they too were dirty," and, thus, not Black, but also not fully white (Brodkin 57). Historian Carl Zimring explains that in early-twentieth-century America, "the rhetoric and imagery of hygiene became conflated with racial order that made white people pure and anyone who was not white, dirty" (Zimring 89). Attending to this history allows for a reading of Yezierska's work that highlights the role of dirt and racial discourses of hygiene in the process of "off-white" racial formation of her Jewish working-class women characters. In her work, working-class Jewish women's interactions with dirt, function as an inescapable signifier of working-class, off-white, ecologically other Jewish immigrant identity, against which whiteness is crafted and maintained.

White bourgeois characters in the texts fiercely protect the racial hierarchy by presenting individual hygiene rather than structural change as a path toward more secure whiteness for Jewish characters. "Free Vacation House," "Soap and Water," and *Bread Givers* all expose the limits of individual hygiene as a solution to structural injustice by showing how individual hygiene-focused policing of employment and the environment, white bourgeois philanthropic endeavors, and forced assimilation to white-coded spaces such as the university all distract from structural environmental injustice and serve racial capitalism. Additionally, their encounters with racial discourses of hygiene illustrate U.S. marketing of personal hygiene as a liberal individualist distraction from the structural change necessary to provide healthier working and living conditions for Jewish immigrants. Yezierska's fiction does not attempt to resolve the tension between the hazards of the New World dirt of

American life and the material ties to their Old-World communities in Eastern Europe.[12] Instead, the Jewish women of these texts resist the Old/New world binary altogether and in doing so, re-direct focus to the xenophobia and racial capitalist violence that have shaped their environmental conditions. The abject material that Jewish women encounter can indeed be detrimental to the health of them and their communities and it is often also accompanied by racial discourses of hygiene and expressions of environmental disgust toward any person who comes in contact with that material. Sometimes, Yezierska's characters respond through attempts to clean themselves and their home to stake their claim to middle-class whiteness. However, for some of the Jewish working-class women in her fiction, dirty material also serves as a source of power as well as ethnoracial and cultural identification in unexpected ways.

Using a Critical Environmental Justice Studies (CEJS) lens, I explore moments in which Yezierska's working-class Jewish women protagonists focus not on achieving whiteness through individual hygiene, but rather on exposing the structural inequity that causes this injustice. I read how dirty, abject material infuses Yezierska's texts in ways that reveal the porosity of her characters' bodies, social status, and ethnoracial identities. Reading Yezierska's work from a CEJS framework allows me to uncover how, as sociologist David

[12]I use "Old World" and "New World" in keeping with Sara Smolinsky's language that she uses to describe her past and her present/future. For example, Sara describes her more orthodox father as representing "the Old World" and herself as "the New" to indicate a break—albeit one she destabilizes throughout the novel—between the Old World of the shtetl she and her family lived in in Poland and the New World of America into which she attempts to assimilate, at least in part (Yezierska 207).

N. Pellow argues, "social justice is inseparable from environmental protection" (*What is Critical Environmental Justice* 2). This framework also helps to illuminate how efforts toward environmental preservation or a liberal individualist focus on hygiene are not adequate in addressing the environmental injustice faced by Yezierska's characters. Given the recurring instances of anxiety over individual hygiene and the way hygiene products/processes are marketed to Jewish women characters in Yezierska's fiction, a critical environmental justice studies perspective brings the co-constitutive relationship between racial capitalism and environmental injustice into full relief. Also, unlike some applications of environmental justice that rely on "the state and capital to accommodate demands via legislation, institutional reform, and other policy concessions," critical environmental justice studies critiques the role of the state in structural environmental violence against minoritized communities, noting that viable solutions to environmental injustice must come from outside of state power structures (*What is Critical Environmental Justice* 4). Reading Yezierska's work from a critical environmental justice studies lens brings to light the creative ways working-class Jewish women create spaces of resistance that actively work against racial capitalism rather than in service of it.

"Anyone Can be Clean": The False Promise of American Liberal Individualism in "Soap and Water"

Rather than understand and address the structural inequality that drives the environmentally hazardous living and working conditions of the Lower East Side, Yezierska's white, non-Jewish characters in her short story "Soap and Water" chalk these conditions up to individual laziness. This allows for characters like Miss Whiteside, the dean who rejects the unnamed protagonist's teaching application, to preach individual hygiene as the solution to anti-Semitic, ethnoracial environmental violence. The protagonist of "Soap

and Water" is all too familiar with the oppressive protection of cleanliness enforced by American ideals of purity. The story begins with the protagonist's account that the dean, Miss Whiteside,

> told me that my skin looked oily, my hair unkempt, and my finger-nails sadly neglected. She told me that I was utterly unmindful of the little niceties of the well-groomed lady. She pointed out that my collar did not set evenly, my belt was awry, and there was a lack of freshness in my dress. And she ended with: "Soap and water are cheap. Anyone can be clean." (*Hungry Hearts* 101)

First, this early message from the antagonistic dean, whose name, Whiteside, very obviously reinforces her racial privilege and articulates that cleanliness is a pre-requisite for upward mobility, social acceptance, and whiteness. Her name conjures an image of a barrier between the "white side" of humanity and the rest of the population. Within this false binarism, the protagonist falls into the tenuous racial category of "off white," against which Miss Whiteside's whiteness is solidified. Second, the dean's assertion that "Any one can be clean" serves as a re-articulation of the liberal individualist bootstraps mentality that is used to place the onus of responsibility for environmental injustice on those who bear the greatest burden of that injustice. Miss Whiteside falsely believes, like so many other white middle-class women, that hygiene is equally accessible. The protagonist of the story recognizes this individualist attitude, but also makes the connection that the comments Miss Whiteside directs at her are not specific to her, since, "She [Miss Whiteside] could see nothing in people like me, except the dirt and the stains on the outside" (101). The use of "people like me," arguably meaning working-class Jewish-American immigrants trying to become upwardly mobile, demonstrates the protagonist's awareness that Miss Whiteside's attitude is one that applies more generally to a broader racialized group, suggesting that her judgement is rooted

not in a concern for public health, but in the maintenance of her place in the ethnoracial hierarchy.

Yet, the tale is not one about achieving economic stability through hygiene, but rather, the protagonist actively revolts against the racial discourses of hygiene with which she is attacked. The dirt that marks her as "unfit" to be a teacher in the eyes of Miss Whiteside becomes the fuel for this revolt:

> I felt the suppressed wrath of all the unwashed of the earth break loose within me. My eyes blazed fire. I didn't care for myself, nor the dean, nor the whole laundered world. I had suffered the cruelty of their cleanliness and tyranny of their culture to the breaking point. I was too frenzied to know what I said or did. But I saw clean, immaculate, spotless Miss Whiteside shrivel and tremble and cower before me, as I had shriveled and cowered before her for so many years. (102).

The power that the protagonist takes back and wields over Miss Whiteside, so much so that she makes her tremble, comes from the unleashing of the "unwashed earth" that resides inside her. The "unwashed earth" could not provide this power without the trans-corporeal transit of dirt and "earth" across the boundaries of the domestic threshold and the body. Not only does this dirty earthy material fuel her passion, the protagonist also directly connects cleanliness to the culture of whiteness, which she describes as tyrannical. A few lines later, the protagonist asserts this connection of hygiene with culture when she reflects "She [Miss Whiteside] was merely one of the agents of clean society" (emphasis mine 102). The society itself, according to the protagonist, is built upon the principles of cleanliness and purity to which she has little access as a working-class Jewish-American woman laboring in a laundry. The protagonist's awareness of the connection between personal hygiene and access to economic stability as well as racial belonging is made clearer when she interrogates the

environmental injustices she faces. She reveals that "Even if I had had the desire and the energy to take a bath, there were no such things as bathtubs in the house where I lived" (103). Her living conditions, presumably on the Lower East Side of New York, are such that she is not only exposed to more dirt and pollutants, but also not given access to the resources with which to mitigate the social and physical damage of such materials.

The economic disparity that keeps the protagonist from upward mobility is also the same disparity that creates the conditions for the "clean society" of which Miss Whiteside is a part. The protagonist comes to this realization while reflecting on her work at the laundry, ironing and washing the clothes of middle-upper-middle-class members of "clean society." She admits, "I, the unclean one, am actually fashioning the pedestal of their cleanliness, from which they reach down, hoping to lift me to the height that I have created for them" (103). Just as a capitalist cannot accrue profit without the exploitation of the working class's labor, the members of "clean society" cannot maintain cleanliness and social status without the exploited labor of those relegated to the "dirty work" of society. In particular, it is working-class women who are relegated to dirty domestic work and, thus, exposed more frequently to discourses of hygiene. As Suellen Hoy notes, in the early twentieth century, "Struggling to keep their families fed and alive, many [immigrant women] also toiled as domestics, laundresses, and janitresses in private residence, commercial establishments, and public buildings" (96). Not only does the protagonist encounter the pressure of individual hygiene, she has the added gendered and racialized pressure of maintaining others' cleanliness through the expansion of her domestic labor out into the public sphere of labor in a laundry facility.[13]

[13] It is also important to note that while many immigrant women in Yezierska's fiction work as laundresses, much of this labor in the early twentieth-century U.S. was performed specifically by Black women. Dorothy Roberts reports that "In the early twentieth century,

Rather than pursue a clean whiteness, however, the protagonist of "Soap and Water" is repulsed by the "solid wall of the well-fed, well-dressed world—the frigid whitewashed wall of cleanliness" (104).[14] She clearly identifies the violence of the construction of a social and material "wall" that allows wealthy characters to ignore/reject the trans-corporeal interchange between the environment and human bodies. This act of rejection is only made possible through economic and ethnoracial privilege. However, because she understands her lack of personal hygiene as a product of systemic inequality, she appropriately targets her anger at the society that created the "whitewashed wall of cleanliness" instead of herself. Despite Miss Whiteside's assertion that "Soap and water are cheap. Anyone can be clean," the protagonist understands the structures of wealthy whiteness as the problem behind her lack of hygiene, rather than her own individual failure (101). The narrator of "Soap and Water" exposes that the barriers created by "clean society," are untenable and only serve to uphold racial capitalism. She actively resists the trap of liberal individualism and, I argue, is able to do so by embracing her own trans-corporeal relationship to dirt.

The power with which the protagonist of "Soap and Water" resists "clean society" and pushes back against ethnoracial oppression is generated through a re-attachment to abject material and trans-corporeal interchange. Her resistance comes from realizing a key feature

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nearly two-thirds of all employed Black women in the North were domestic servants or laundresses" (20).

[14] Berger marks "Soap and Water" as a text of "transition and tension for Yezierska between the impossible struggles of her housewives and mothers and her presentation of the possibility for a single young woman to elevate herself through education" (25). I take this argument one step further by demonstrating how the protagonist of this story actually uses abject materiality to regain agency and power over her own situation.

of abject materiality: that it can often "cause abjection" not by infringing upon "cleanliness or health," but rather by representing "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect the borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). In finding power in the "unwashed earth," Yezierska's protagonist deconstructs the "identity, system, order" of Miss Whiteside's false reality (102). This is not to say that abject material in Yezierska's fiction does not pose an environmental risk for her Jewish characters. Some of it absolutely does. However, the Jewish women such as the protagonist of "Soap and Water," understand that white bourgeois weaponization of hygiene is about more than just public health. It is about white supremacy and xenophobia. The abject, as Kristeva notes, is "radically excluded" and forces one to reckon with the place where meaning collapses" (2-4). Abjection, in this moment, forces Miss Whiteside to acknowledge where the "meaning" of the ethnoracial hierarchy she fiercely protects "collapses." Thus, Yezierska's story exposes and critiques wealthy white American obsessions with hygiene and its intertwined relationship with ethnoracial purity, which stem from the discomfort and perceived disorder that abjection creates.

The boundary between humans and the environment, as flimsy as it is for those who bear the burden of environmental harm, is fiercely protected, even policed, by economically privileged Americans throughout Yezierska's work. For example, when the protagonist attempts to escape the "shut-in-ness, in dark tenements and stifling sweatshops" of the ghetto, she travels to Central Park for an afternoon. The manicured lawns of the park reflect American obsession with order, boundaries, and rejection of the trans-corporeal traffic between human bodies and "nature." When she arrives at the park, she wishes to lay in the grass to relax amidst nature, a privilege not accessible from within the ghetto (105). However, just as she begins to relax and "breathe in the fresh-smelling earth, and lift up my eyes to the sky, a big, fat policeman with a club in his hand seized me, with: 'Can't you read

the sign? Get off the grass!" (105). While she does gain access to the park, she is not able to engage with the earth directly, since the rules of the park are structured around American pastoral ideals of preserving the purity of nature's splendor to be observed, not engaged directly. In this case, the border between bodies and the environment is regulated not to provide an environmentally just environment for the protagonist or to promote public health, since lying in the grass would be a perfectly healthy engagement with green space. Instead, what could be a healthy interaction with the environment is forbidden to protect the picture of pastoral perfection. Adam Rome, who draws on Yezierska in his study of American obsessions with environmental purity, explains that "common rule[s]" such as "Keep Off the Grass […] was meant to protect the pastoral beauty of the landscape" rather than public health (446). The border between pastoral beauty and the grime of other parts of the city is not to be sullied by humans, especially not Jewish working-class bodies. It is protected to preserve a piece of "nature" as a distraction from rather than a solution to the environmental injustice thrust upon communities such as the protagonist's in other parts of New York. At the same time, this protection of the "purity" of nature prevents the protagonist, who is regarded with "environmental disgust," from one of the few available healthy interactions with the environment (Ray 2).

"Cheap like dirt": Philanthropic Liberal Individualism in "Free Vacation House"

Similarly, in Yezierska's short story "Free Vacation House" from the 1920 collection *Hungry Hearts,* wealthy white women's philanthropy serves as a façade of concern for the environmental health of working-class Jewish women. In reality, however, these women's philanthropic endeavors serve racial capitalism. The top of every hierarchy requires a bottom, and by becoming the purveyors and main suppliers of hygiene through "charity" work, white bourgeois American-born women wield the power of whiteness. In the short story, wealthy white philanthropists encourage a young Jewish immigrant woman to visit a countryside

vacation house for free to escape the exhausting conditions of her working-class life in the ghetto for a while. Upon arriving, despite being relieved to escape the soot and grime of the ghetto to some fresh air, she discovers the vacation house comes with conditions. It is part of a charity mission and she is dismayed to find that every action at the house is regulated by strict rules of hygiene and behavior. The discipline and rules that regulate the working mothers' interactions with their surroundings and nature not only further alienate them from the philanthropists who run the house, but also reinforce the whiteness of the space against which the mothers' own off-white identity is formed. When the narrator arrives with her children to the country vacation house, she is taken aback by the clean state of the facility noting: "I never yet seen such an order and such a cleanliness. From all the corners from the room, the cleanliness was shining like a looking-glass. The floor was so white scrubbed you could eat on it. You couldn't find a speck of dust on nothing, if you was looking for it with eyeglasses on" (*Hungry Hearts* 67). The narrator directly conflates cleanliness with whiteness, demonstrating early the ways in which hygiene is integral to her conception of racial formation.

The narrator initially takes comfort in this astonishing cleanliness and begins to relax and enjoy herself, but this pleasure and comfort does not last long since the cleanliness comes at the cost of strict rules designed to preserve the whiteness of the space. She quickly comes to realize that it is a space of fabricated leisure and cleanliness designed to present a temporary image of charity so that the philanthropists don't actually have to work toward a structural redistribution of resources. Similar to the instructions to keep off the grass in "Soap and Water," the primary way in which the philanthropists maintain this distraction is through strict rules of individual hygiene including: "We dassen't stand on the front grass where the flowers are. We dassen't stay on the front porch. We dassen't sit on the chairs under the shady trees […] Everything on the front from the house must be kept perfect for the show for

visitors" (68-69). Such rules were designed not only to maintain the pristine image of white philanthropy, but also to force immigrants—especially their children—to assimilate. As historian Adam Rome notes, pointing to Yezierska' as an example, these rules of the country retreats "were meant to teach urban children a variety of virtues—cleanliness, decorum, and proper appreciation of nature," but ultimately, this was all for show, since there is not a feasible way for the women to maintain these habits upon returning to the environment of the ghetto (446). Therefore, the white philanthropists' carefully crafted vacation home environment facilitates their mission of assimilating Jewish women and their children to American ideals of pastoral purity without actually addressing the structural forces that keep Jewish women in poverty back in the city.

Quickly catching on to the façade, the protagonist expresses the ways the strict rules of hygiene actually preclude relaxation and make her anxious instead. She comes to understand that she is a "worn-out mother" being used as "part of the show" of charity rather than a part of a program designed to help her (71). When she sits down to eat, she notices that

> Always when the rich ladies came the fat lady, what was the boss from the vacation house, showed off to them the front. Then she took them over to the back to look on us, where we was sitting together, on long wooden benches like prisoners. I was always feeling like cheap like dirt, and mad that I had to be there, when they smiled down on us." (70)

The barriers of the free vacation house that force unnecessary hygiene restrictions upon the narrator and the other residents create a false image of a non-trans-corporeal existence that, in reality, feels like incarceration and is unattainable in the ghetto to which the residents eventually must return. The wealthy philanthropist women respond to the exhausted, overworked mothers with statements like "How nice for these poor creatures to have a restful place like this" (70). The philanthropists and the wealthy white visitors who come to gawk at

the residents use pity as a tool for upholding an economic and ethnoracial hierarchy and avoiding having to confront systems of racial capitalism and environmental injustice. The voyeurism of this scene also illustrates that despite the immaculate cleanliness of the house and its temporary residents, the erosion of the the residents' dignity through white wealthy saviorhood makes the protagonist feel "cheap like dirt" (70). As a result, the façade of generosity has the effect of furthering both the ethnoracial and economic hierarchies dominated by the wealthy white philanthropists.

Although "Free Vacation House" exposes the myth of charity and the nefarious uses of racial discourses of hygiene to maintain ethnoracial hierarchy, the story also depicts the protagonist's resistance to such oppressive structures through her reconnection with abject materiality. She realizes how the rules of environmental and hygiene-based restriction are antithetical to her own freedom and, as a result, longs for the agency afforded by the ghetto:

> I was always kicking that my rooms was small and narrow, but now my small rooms seemed to grow so big like the park. I looked out from my window on the fire escapes, full with bedding and garbage-cans, and on the wash-lines full with the clothes. All these ugly things was grand in my eyes. Even the high brick walls all around made me feel like a bird what just jumped out from a cage. And I cried out, 'Gott sei dank! Gott sei dank!" (71)

Here, the narrator embraces her cramped apartment and the clutter-filled fire escapes because despite their stuffiness, they are places she can access with freedom and autonomy, unlike the natural space of the vacation home. Similar to the instance in which she describes the vacation house as a prison, she compares herself directly to a bird that was caged—when she was at the vacation home—who is now free upon returning to the tenements. Thus, the urban environment of the Lower-East-Side is arguably portrayed as more natural not because of its

access to a temporary pastoral version of nature in which individual hygiene is a priority, but instead because of its freedom from white control and attempts at assimilation.

Hygiene and U.S. Jewish Racial Formation in *Bread Givers*

While *Hungry Hearts* provides short glimpses of individual hygiene as a nefarious assimilative force that distracts from structural environmental injustice, Yezierska's 1924 novel *Bread Givers* presents a more extended detailed depiction of Jewish immigrant women both internalizing and also resisting racial discourses of hygiene. Throughout the semi-autobiographical novel, the working-class Jewish immigrant protagonist, Sara Smolinsky, makes choices to maintain contact with cluttered and dirty, abject materials associated with the Lower East Side tenement, the Polish shtetl from which her family immigrated, and the "off-white" working-class roots from which she came.

Although Sara comes to accept and sometimes even embrace abject materiality toward the end of the novel, *Bread Givers* begins with the Smolinsky family's dirt-based anxiety and discourses of hygiene. While living with their family on Hester Street on the Lower East Side, Mashah, Sara's sister, makes cleanliness and acquisition of commodities her priorities in order to fit the ideal mold of American whiteness. After working as a seamstress in a "uptown house" occupied by wealthy white Americans, Mashah returns home gushing about how everyone there had their own towel and toothbrush for cleaning themselves, "not like by us, where we use one torn piece of a shirt for the whole family, wiping the dirt from one face to another" (*Bread Givers* 6). Within the first pages of the novel, Mashah establishes the association of cleanliness with individual, white, American identity. Each individual member of the wealthy family that employs her has purchased their own tools for personal hygiene, whereas collective approaches to hygiene in which Sara's family engages, like sharing a "piece of shirt for the whole family," just result in everyone

spreading dirt to one another (6). Thus, the ideals of cleanliness and individuality of American commodity culture are immediately put in tension with dirty, communal tenement life. Mashah uses the little money she makes to purchase her own individual white towels, toothpaste, and soap, while the rest of the Smolinsky family dreams of eventually obtaining their own "toothbrushes" and "toothpowder to brush our teeth with" as well (29). Personal hygiene, controlled primarily by the women in the household, becomes the weapon with which to combat the "Africanist presence" of the dark, dirty ghetto. Mashah's actions play into white bourgeois ideals of American individualism and racial capitalism. Her constant attempts to wash herself white reflects her intertwined fears of being racialized as off-white and cast as a foreign, ethnic other.

Historically, the rise in industrial capitalism not only allowed companies to profit from fears of racialization, but also enabled them to weaponize individual hygiene against immigrants like Mashah to distract from their rolse within an environmentally unjust racial capitalist system. American businesses both inspired and capitalized on early-twentieth-century fears of racialization through racially motivated personal hygiene product advertising. Zimring points out that "soap emerged as a potent weapon against dirt" and advertisements for soap were often composed of "racial illustrations" that included "unpleasant caricatures (large-lipped African Americans, slant-eyed Asian Americans, hook-nosed Jewish Americans)" (88-91). Such advertisements focused on the idea that dark skin was caused by dirt, and behind this explanation was the fear of the "Africanist presence." Soap was the tool that would "remove black skin, leaving the clean white skin beneath it" (93). The Smolinsky family, of course, lives in much closer proximity to whiteness than African American individuals who were also targets for such advertising albeit in different ways. However, the fact that the full benefits of whiteness seem so close within reach inspires Mashah's continuous attempts to solidify her place in a racial and economic hierarchy

through hygiene. While Mashah does secure some semblance of a white bourgeois American aesthetic, the experience is only ever fleeting and does not bring lasting privilege or happiness. She eventually marries a man Moe Mirsky, who appears to be a wealthy diamond dealer and who adorns her in diamond jewelry but turns out only to be a jewelry salesman. He eventually has to take the diamonds back from Mashah, and loses his job for letting her wear them, sending her back into poverty. Reading Mashah and other characters' interactions with dirt and hygiene with this context in mind highlights how the racial capitalist system Yezierska depicts depends upon selling individual access to hygiene while also keeping better long-term material conditions just out of reach.

The Smolinsky family's anxiety over and interaction with hygiene mirrors many working-class Jewish-American families who would have been considered not fully white in the rapidly transforming process of racial formation in early twentieth-century America. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which passed just one year before the publication of *Bread Givers,* dramatically transformed racial formation of Eastern European immigrants like the Smolinsky family. While the Johnson-Reed Act privileged immigration from Europe through a national origin quota system, as Mae Ngai notes, the quota divided Europe itself; it was "intended principally to restrict immigration from southern and eastern Europe and used the notion of national origins to justify discrimination against immigrants from those nations" while also discriminating against nonwhite immigrants from outside of Europe (27). Thus, southern and eastern European immigrants, especially Jewish immigrants like many of Yezierska's characters, experienced further racialization in the form of "off-whiteness" in addition to the centuries-long violence of anti-Semitism (Brodkin 1).

The quota system introduced by the Johnson-Reed Act not only served to strengthen American-born white individuals' place in the racial hierarchy, it also enhanced opportunities to capitalize off of the fear of racialization through the sale of individual hygiene products.

While *Bread Givers* never engages directly with immigration law or policy, the effects of attitudes against Eastern European immigrants, especially Jews, that drove such policies are illustrated clearly in the novel. Mashah's character demonstrates how, for some ethnoracial minorities with closer proximity to it, whiteness could function temporarily as a purchasable commodity that could free them from racial stigma and unhealthy living conditions and temporarily mask the inevitable trans-corporeal interchange of abject material across the porous boundaries of the body. Tyrone Simpson III argues that Yezierska's characters, through their relationships to white-coded commodities such as soap, wash cloths, toothbrushes, etc. "come to understand racial identity not as an immutable biological status determined by one's skin and blood, but as a potential possession, another commodity they can claim through rational and strategic acquisition" and through which Sara "fulfills her desire for white identity, which contemporary anti-Semitism would have denied her" (94). I expand on both Simpson's argument that Sara seeks to purchase whiteness, and on Harrison-Kahan's reading of Sara's ambivalence toward assimilation through her failed attempts at whiteness by arguing that Sara actively rejects assimilation.

Sara's first encounter with dirty material in the form of trash occurs when she ventures into the streets to scavenge in the trash for coal remnants to heat the Smolinsky home. The Smolinskys need coal for fuel, but because of their poverty, they cannot afford to buy it. Sara sets aside her pride and ventures out into the streets to search for coal in the wasted ashes of other families' trash. She reveals, "I didn't care if the whole world looked down on me. I was going to bring that coal to Mother even if it killed me" (*Bread Givers* 8). She sacrifices her own image for her family's well-being to fill her pail with the neighbor's coal waste before returning home. This is one of the first instances in which Sara, though cognizant of discarded coal's ability to mark her skin with ash and the risk of being labeled a thief, defies the cultural obsession with whiteness and sanitation for the sake of survival.

Instead, she chooses to provide for her family by digging for coal ashes in their neighbors' trash. Sara is fearful of the task and ashamed of the way the neighbors may look down upon her as "a beggar and a thief" dirtied by the coal dust (7). The hesitance Sara has when considering digging for coal scraps and her fear of being perceived as a thief comes partially from a long history of racist stereotypes of Jewish immigrant peddlers and scrap business operators, who took charge of these businesses because they required little capital investment (Zimring 129). However, such occupations dominated by immigrants "led to stereotypes of crime and fraud" as well as "popular perceptions of the child-corrupting, thieving Jew" (129).[15] Therefore, Sara's aversion to scrounging the ash cans for coal scraps is fueled by the fear of fulfilling the classist and racist stereotype of the "thieving Jew." Additionally, coal itself carries its own socially constructed connotations. As Barbara Freese explains, coal is "a commodity utterly lacking in glamour. It is dirty, old-fashioned, domestic, and cheap" and "does not make us think of the rich [as oil often does], but of the poor" (2). The residue of coal thus becomes a material marker of her working-class struggle and, for those who invest in the stereotype, her Jewish identity.

[15] Jewish communities were also closely associated with dirtiness and filth specifically in comparison to American Christians. For example, Karen Brodkin notes that views of the inherent dirtiness of Jewish people were quite common "within the early-twentieth-century scientific community" in the U.S. (29). She gives an example from the *New York Times* in which the Lower East Side tenements of New York to which Jewish immigrants were most frequently relegated are described as "the filthiest place on the western continent" and that "It would be impossible for a Christian to live there because he will be driven out, either by blows or the dirt and stench" ("East Side Street Vendors" qtd. in Brodkin 29).

The association of waste and the scrap trade with Jewish thievery compounds with Sara's anxiety that scavenging coal—an activity that is seen as both morally and materially dirty—endangers her access to whiteness. Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini explain about trash that "Because it is so ubiquitous, garbage is among the most immediate categories against which people are defined, and against which their identities as raced, gendered, and classed subjects are conceptualized (3). Sara is aware that her decision to directly engage with the trash of the ghetto through foraging influences the way others will define her class, ethnic, and racial identity. Ultimately, she decides that sacrificing class status and proximity whiteness is too costly for the reward of coal scraps and she refuses to scavenge anymore, declaring "I'm not going to let them look down on me like dirt, picking people's ashes" (*Bread Givers* 8). Sara is scared of being thought of as "like dirt" (8). Simpson explains about this passage that "Sara and the ashes—have apparently become one," in her psyche, which exposes her "anxiety about class marginalization through color discourse that intimates racial anxiety as well" (100). This reading emphasizes Sara's awareness of the potential social consequences of her family's material conditions, yet, I argue that like the material of coal itself, Sara's relationship to it is more multi-faceted and contradictory than it first appears.

Sara's actions are influenced strongly by her fear of racialization and class marginalization, but much like the protagonists of "Soap and Water," and "Free Vacation House," there is another side to her relationship with dirt: one that refuses to let go of the material traces of tenement life and its subsequent ties to race, class, and Jewish ethnicity. Although Sara gives up her coal foraging in the trash, she later finds satisfaction in a different interaction with coal when she has gained enough independence to purchase it herself. Coal exists both as a dark, dirty, racializing material *and* a material marker of upward American mobility when Sara is able to pay for it using the money she earns peddling herring. When a local fish peddler Muhmenkeh hears of the Smolinsky family's financial turmoil, she offers

to give Sara some of her "old herring left in the bottom of this barrel" that are "a little bit squashed, but they ain't spoiled yet" (20-21). As Sara peddles these fish successfully, she notes, "Earning twenty-five and sometimes thirty to fifty cents a day made me feel independent, like a real person. It was already back of me to pick coal from ash cans. I felt better to earn the money and pay out my own earned money for bought coal" (*Bread Givers* 28). Although she is left with little choice as to whether or not to peddle for money, since there would be "no bread for the next meal if I didn't sell the herring," the financial opportunity and associated agency that comes with this job enhances Sara's sense of self-worth and independence (22).

In this early scene, Sara clearly grapples with the tension of feeling that scavenging in the trash is "back of me" and her growing understanding that individualism and capitalism are not the path to environmental justice. The coal Sara purchases arguably does not register to her as abject, because it is not being foraged from the trash; however, she has replaced one dirty job with another. While the herring doesn't invoke a fear of the "Africanist presence" in the same way as the black, dusty coal would, it still has the potential for abjection given the hat it is the unused, dead, presumably smelly fish given to Sara by another peddler. While Sara may be unaware in the moment, this scene reveals is that it isn't dark, dirty material itself that determines abjection, but rather the socially constructed boundaries between commodities and trash that determine which type of product evokes the stereotype of the "dirty thieving Jew" and/or "African presence," and which is acceptable. In this particular moment, Sara does not feel more "like a real person" because she has access to purchasing coal by way of selling rejected herring, or because she can purchase whiteness through hygiene, but rather because purchasing the coal makes her "feel independent" (28). Sara's affinity for the dark, dirty, commodity of coal and willingness to peddle herring stands out

against other characters' obsession with the commodities of whiteness like diamonds, soap, and linens (Simpson 99-102).

While characters like Mashah, whose efforts for upward mobility are thwarted by their attachment to individual hygiene, Sara's engagement with "dirty work" grants her the ability to access independence and eventually a college education. These opportunities can still be read as commodities of American whiteness in tension with her communal upbringing on Hester Street. However, Sara's mantra throughout the text is *neither* "I want to make myself American," *nor* "I want to make myself white," but rather she wishes to "make myself for a person," a phrase that in its very structure defies monolinguistic boundaries by using the English language combined with the Yiddish syntax, as Brooks E. Hefner notes (202-203). Hefner argues that Yezierska's protagonists maintain a vernacular blend of Yiddish and English dialect not because they cannot speak conventional English, but as a way of illustrating "their own interstitial existence between languages" (201).Thus, language, much like abject materiality in *Bread Givers*, operates on different and often contradictory registers; it both marks Sara's ethnoracial identity as an off-white Jewish woman while also providing an important link to her Jewish heritage which she refuses to fully cast off. Additionally, this Yiddish sentence construction's inclusion "for a" in "make myself for a person" suggests personhood is an ever-evolving process rather than an end goal. As such, the syntax in this repeated phrase supports the idea that Sara is always in the process of rejecting categorization as either already assimilated or having entirely refused all parts of assimilation.

Progressively throughout the novel, Sara discovers that the idea of the home as a bounded, clean space that can be separated from the dirt of the surrounding environment is an impossibility, especially on the Lower East Side. While Sara does continue to fight with dirt throughout the novel, she learns to begrudgingly coexist with it to make time for her studies.

This time management is illustrated particularly clearly when Sara finds her first apartment for herself while attending classes. The description of the apartment resembles that of a mine or a subterranean cavern: “It was a dark hole on the ground floor, opening into a narrow airshaft. The only window where some light might have come in was thick with black dust” (*Bread Givers* 158). Sara’s independence has not offered her full freedom from the racializing force of dust despite her attempt at individual hygiene. When she tries to clean this window, she reflects “if only I could wash away the mud of ages from the window, it would make it lighter in the room” (162). She begins to scrub the window and the landlady above remarks that she never attempted to wash the window when she lived there because the neighbors above would continuously throw trash down that would dirty the window again. Sara comes to realize that this is still the case as a “shower of ashes blinded me” (163). The ashes collect on the window and dirty it once again, confirming the futility of attempting to escape the “mud of ages” through individual cleanliness. Attempts at removing the mud fail not only because of her environmentally unjust environment, but also because the idea that the threshold of the home can be an impenetrable barrier to abject material is merely an illusion bound up in the preservation of ethnoracial hierarchy. Stacy Alaimo argues that “domestic space has served as the defining container for the Western ‘human,’ a bounded space, wrought by delusions of safety, fed by consumerism, and fueled by nationalist fantasies” (*Exposed* 18). Sara, an immigrant woman performing gendered domestic labor in her own home and in the public sphere as a launderss, is hyper aware that the idea of the home as a impenetrable container of cleanliness is a complete facade. The “mud of ages” further shows Sara that assimilation through individual hygiene is not only impossible, but undesirable since the entire objective of this process is to bolster xenophobia, white supremacy and racial capitalism.

Sara's encounter with the mixture of the "mud of ages" and "shower of ashes" on her window combines the racializing and class-inflected force of dirt with the history of all the former tenants' muddy materiality. Rather than give up and move or continue to clean the window, Sara learns to live with the mud, ash, and dirt. She leaves the dirty material on the window in order to focus on her work and her studies. While Sara encounters many forms of grime throughout the novel such as dirt, coal ash, and soot, this window grime's specific name: "mud of ages" also suggests a material tie to the stratified, geologic history of tenement residents. The mud that dirties the window is described historically as if its layers represent the stratified remains of the former tenants' waste, the dirty residue of past lives. While Sara leaves the dirt mainly because attempts to clean it are futile, this historical geologic language ties the materiality of Sara's quest for upward mobility to the layered material history of working-class Jewish life. Berger argues that Sara's decision to "not be tyrannized by the racist discourses on [of] hygiene" in this passage indicates that she is "able to separate the stigma of 'dirt' from her cultural identity" (31). Yet, while upward mobility and abject material are figured in constant tension, they are not mutually exclusive in this passage. Berger is right in that Sara comes to understand that the dirt she faces is a result of poverty and not a biological product of race. Building on Berger's assertion, I argue that Sara imagines a seemingly contradictory and often tenuous process of upward mobility that is not dependent upon assimilation through hygiene. She neither attempts to separate from the dirty material that is linked to Jewish heritage in the minds of native-born whites, nor does she ignore dirt as a potential health hazard. Rather, she eventually learns to use certain forms of dirt to empower her resistance to oppression. In doing so, Sara's development evades both assimilation and cultural mediation and is, rather, a process of becoming that necessitates the existence of both education *and* the "mud of ages," in irresolvable tension with one another.

Still wary of the tension between the cultural mud of ages and the pursuit of American opportunity which hinges upon access to whiteness, Sara initially makes several attempts to escape from abject materiality when she ventures to college. The campus and its suburbs are, as Simpson argues, "special sites of canonized whiteness," and the commodity of education is Sara's ticket to upward mobility and whiteness (Simpson 106-108). There is no doubt that college does change Sara and provides her access to middle-class status. Sara's inner reflections reveal that her memories of Hester Street as "so black, so barren" and "buried under the ground," remind her of her immersion in the abject, subterranean materiality and blackness of the ghetto (*Bread Givers* 223). Thus, she marvels at

> the spick-and-span cleanliness of these people [her classmates]! It smelled from them, the soap and the bathing. Their fingernails so *white* and pink. Their hands and necks *white like milk* […] Even their black shoes had a clean look […] So ironed out smooth and even they looked in their spotless, creaseless clothes, as if the dirty battle of life had never yet been on them. (212-213, emphasis mine)

Her first response to this white cleanliness is to erase the residue of her connection to Hester Street through makeup and clothing to fit into the white space of the university, which proves unsuccessful. However, she ultimately achieves academic success through her ties to her working-class Jewish immigrant past, not through her initial attempts to integrate into the white space of the university. Sara later realizes that it is not until she digs up the subterranean, dirty, "black," energy potential of her working-class, Jewish origins that she will be able to complete her degree (223). For her final college assignment, Sara is asked to respond to the prompt: "Give an example from your own experience showing how anger or any strong emotion interferes with your thinking?" (223). She thinks to herself about her life on the Lower East Side:

> when I went through those experiences I thought them privations and losses; now I saw them treasure chests of insight. What countless riches lay *buried under the ground* of those early years that I had thought so *black,* so barren, so thwarted with want. (223, emphasis mine)

Her internal reflections thus shift with time to reveal that what she initially saw as a barrier to her own knowledge is actually what presents her with the most useful understanding of the world around her, unlike her classmates who, shielded by white affluence, have not yet truly experienced life. Once she begins to value her experiences of the ghetto as integral to her studies, these dark, dirty, cavernous memories become "treasure chests of insight" and "riches" that can only be extracted through lived experience (223). Rather than whiteness, it is the dark, "black" layers of her childhood memories from the Lower East Side, that become the fuel that make the commodity of the university degree accessible to Sara (223).

In addition, Sara's university experience reveals the myth she has been fed that college is one of "The high places *above the earth*, where minds are fired by minds" (224, emphasis mine). Rather than juxtaposing her working-class immigrant experience of the ghetto as she expects it to, the university is "only a factory, and the teachers machines turning out lectures by the hour on wooden dummies incapable of response" (224). Sara realizes that the high-brow, elite, "above the earth" white-coded space of the university is just another commodity that requires the exploitation of individual laborers, while Sara's recollections of her Jewish, communal, working-class childhood on Hester Street is where she finds subterranean "riches buried under the ground" (223-224). Thus, the exploitative white-coded space and commodity of university education can only be productive for Sara through the unearthing of the "black," dirty material of her subterranean past (223). The shift in Sara's attitude toward abject materiality from fear and disgust to embrace and appreciation marks her understanding that such material blurs binary categorization since it is both an

environmental hazard and a productive source of power within her. She learns to harness the "mud of ages" of her adolescence and of all those who came before her to rise "up from dirt" and "make myself for a person" (Yezierska 66, 172, 286). However, Sara is not the first individual in Jewish folklore or storytelling who is formed from abject material harnessed for its productivity.

By utilizing dirt to appreciate and protect her ties to her Jewish immigrant community, Sara's character mirrors the Jewish legend of the golem—a mud-man made from river clay by a rabbi in order to protect the Jewish residents of Prague from anti-Semitic violence—by presenting Sara as a golem-like figure whose creation from mud and dirt gives her the power to reject gender roles, assimilation, and environmental injustice. The golem. is the ultimate trans-corporeal creature as its body is literally made of river clay from its environment and is animated to protect Jews from anti-Semitic violence.[16] The golem gives new meaning to river mud, demonstrating that, as Alaimo has argued, "the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial" (*Bodily Natures* 20). The legend of the golem has evolved and shifted over time, but the first known origin story published in 1841 chronicles Rabbi Judah Loew's efforts to create a man-like creature out of river mud gathered from the Vltava River in Prague during the sixteenth century and bring it to life with a "secret ritual" (Baer 3). This man-like mud creature is tasked with patrolling the streets of Prague to protect the Jewish community from violent Christian persecution. While this is the most popular version of the golem legend, the golem's tale is ever evolving and never static. Marilyn Cooper explains:

[16] My reading of the golem is inspired by my brilliant colleague Molly Hatay who generously spent countless hours discussing representations of the golem throughout Jewish history and culture with me.

"much like the amorphous clay from which it is usually formed, the golem is a highly mutable metaphor with seemingly limitless symbolism. It can be victim or villain, Jew or non-Jew, man or woman—or sometimes both" (Cooper 18-19). Although, as Elizabeth Baer explains, the full spectrum of the golem's mutability available in post-Holocaust literature today was not accessible to Yezierska, there was a resurgence of adaptations of the golem legend in the early twentieth century in response to the "threat that Jewish communities felt as ritual murder accusations resurfaced and pogroms were government sanctioned" (Baer 33). While "mud of ages" initially seems like a barrier to Sara, she eventually learns to live with it and realizes that is quite literally a part of her embodied experience, eventually using it to, like the golem, rise "up from dirt" and "make myself for a person" (*Bread Givers* 66, 172, 286). By tolerating and later finding power in the "mud of ages" that ties her to her Jewish community on Hester Street, Sara learns, like the golem, to guard her Jewish roots while also resisting the gender norms established by her father's readings of the Torah in her process of becoming. By refusing to internalize racist discourses of hygiene and tolerating the "mud of ages," Sara learns to use her liminality to reject the false binary of the Old/New worlds. This process allows her to resist—if only momentarily—the anti-Semitism and sexism that she faces. Sara's identity is mutable and always in formation, just like the golem, whose name comes from the "Hebrew word *galmi*, meaning an 'unformed mass' (Cooper 18). The golem, however, "involves more than just legend. It also embodies a strategy: to meet irrational hatred head on, to undermine terror and mitigate its impact with resolve and persistence. Death is the threat; the Golem is the response" (Rothstein qtd. in Baer 2). Thus, through the power granted to it by the river clay and the words of the rabbi, the animated geologic river monster resists anti-Semitic hatred. Similarly, the environmentally unjust conditions Sara and her community experience on the Lower East Side are fueled, in part, by the anti-Semitism embedded in American xenophobia (Baer 24). Sara also pushes back on

her father's strict gender norms by setting aside hygiene and pursuing an education rather than be married off as a housewife. As Ruth Bienstock Anolik notes, several twentieth-century Jewish women authors have looked to the more fluid and adaptable stories of the golem rather than the Torah or Talmud in their attempts to preserve their Jewish heritage and "reconstruct the motif of the goelm to appropriate the authority of creation (and sexuality, the basis of biological creation) for women" (41). Though Yezierska's novel doesn't mention the golem by name, Sara uses mud and dirt to both protect her Jewish identity and defy her father's (a Talmudic scholar) gendered expectations for her of becoming a wife and homemaker. Sara, the golem-like mutable figure in the process of becoming, is able to use the very same geologic materiality that plagues her community to resist anti-Semitism and sexism by deconstructing the boundaries of culture, nationhood, and gender. In doing so, she actively fights to maintain connection to her Jewish community which is in constant tension with the pursuit of American identity.

The golem is not only a symbol of mutability and liminality, but also a cultural symbol invoked in response to ethnoracially targeted environmental injustice. Baer explains, the golem legend resurfaced again during the early twentieth century. This re-emergence coincided with the destruction of the predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Prague where the golem once supposedly roamed for the sake of "sanitation" (24). Rather than make structural changes to improve access to economic and health-related resources and opportunities for the Jewish residents of this neighborhood, the city attempted to eradicate all traces of the neighborhood's former presence. The end result was the erasure of much of the neighborhood's Jewish history and the uprooting of many Jewish residents who could no longer afford the new luxury housing that replaced their community's homes. The re-emergence of the golem during this time (1896-1912, notably not long before the publication

of *Bread* Givers) suggests that for Jewish people, anti-Semitism and environmental injustice are interwoven threats to their physical and cultural existence (24).[17]

While earning her degree affords Sara the ability to live more distanced from the environmentally unjust conditions in which she was raised, her sense of collective identity does not allow her to forget those of her family, neighbors, and friends still relegated to the ghetto. Sara's elation over earning her degree and securing a teaching job is continuously overpowered by her guilty feelings of solidarity with her family, her past, and the people of Hester Street. After graduation, Sara secures a job as a teacher. This new job reunites her with old surroundings as

> The windows of my classroom faced the same crowded street where seventeen years ago I started out my career selling herring. The same tenements with fire escapes full of pillows and feather beds. The same weazened, tawny-faced organ-grinder mechanically turning out songs that were all the music I knew in my childhood. (269)

Sara has brought her new education and middle-class job back to Hester Street, where she is forced to confront the environmentally unjust material conditions that once were her own. She recalls from her childhood how much she admired the teacher she would see walking into the very school building where she now teaches, but asks herself "Why didn't I feel as I

[17] The golem's story was also brought to a more widespread audience via popular media through the release of Paul Wegener's film re-telling the story of the golem's creation to protect the Jewish people of Prague in his film *The Golem: How he Came into the World* in 1920. Additionally, novelist Michael Chabon's draws heavily on golem's tale and folklore in his 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* for which he won the Pulitzer Prize.

had supposed this superior creature felt? Why had I not the wings to fly with? Where was the vision lost? The goal was here. Why was I so silent, so empty? All labour now—and so far from the light. I longed for the close, human touch of life again" (269-270). Despite escaping, gaining independence, and entering the white space of the university, Sara feels a sense of loss and longing for the communal life of Hester Street despite its very real environmental dangers. Her new life as a self-sufficient teacher with the clothing and apartment to prove it exists in constant negotiation and tension with Sara's childhood memories of communal tenement life. Upon exiting the school several months into her new job, Sara feels this tension once again. She notes that as she travels down Hester Street, "my joy hurt like guilt […] I felt like one sitting down to a meal while all the people around him were howling hungry" (281). The existence of Hester Street in the state she remembers from childhood brings guilt to Sara, rather than enhancing the joy she feels to have escaped it. Her sense of solidarity with the people who raised her cannot be silenced by her acquisition of American opportunity and individual hygiene. Gay Wilentz describes this as part of the novel's project which "deconstructs cultural mediation" pushing back against much of the scholarship that has labeled Yezierska's work as assimilationist or a negotiation of hybrid identity (Wilentz 40). For Wilentz Yezierska's text is one of lamentation, a mourning of the loss of culture and the painful tension of being a part of the "collective memory of diaspora Jews" (41). Certainly *Bread Givers* is mournful of loss, and deeply skeptical of cultural mediation. Unlike the protagonist of "Soap and Water," Sara achieves her main goal of becoming a teacher. Yet, this achievement does not end her efforts to "make myself for a person" and rise "up from dirt" (*Bread Givers* 66, 172, 286). Instead, *Bread Givers* forces readers to linger in the irresolvable tension of upward mobility Sara's historical material ties to the dirt, grime, and mud of Hester Street.

Mud finds its way back into the text at the end of Sara's story. This time it evokes a sense of attachment to her early life in Poland and a sense of community. After meeting and spending time with Hugo Seelig, who becomes her fiancé, Sara sweeps her room, attempting to restore it to cleanliness. However, she "halted at Hugo Seelig's muddy footprint. He leaped up at me out of that spot on the floor. I felt again his voice, I saw again his eyes as he looked at me. 'You and I—we are of one blood,'" which is a reiteration of Hugo's previous exclamation to her that "We had sprung from one soil" (*Bread Givers* 278-280). Hugo's declaration to Sara, and her vision of him arising out of the muddy footprint paint a picture of humans being born and created from mud much like the legend of the golem's creation. Sara directly associates this mud with Hugo's Jewish identity and the ties to the Polish town of origin he shares with her. This dirty substance becomes the trigger for a memory of shared diasporic Jewish immigrant identity. Coal dust, dirt, and mud, which would typically be considered abject and a danger to Sara's carefully crafted white "clean emptiness," become material, racializing forces and traces of ethnic identity that Sara chooses to appreciate rather than reject. This temporary but powerful moment of cultural recognition is, however, also marked by contradiction as Hugo himself is also a vehicle of assimilation through his continuous attempts to correct Sara's English grammar and pronunciation. The novel, thus, ends neither with full assimilation, nor successful cultural hybridity, but instead forces readers to linger in the constant tension between both worlds.

Sara's eventual refusal to cast off the residue of mud marks a different attitude toward the "Africanist presence" of dark, abject materiality than her sister Mashah, who reaches for, the commodities of whiteness as Simpson argues (98). Rather than fully accepting the discourses of hygiene that surround her, Sara responds to dirty material with increasing acceptance throughout the novel. She draws a sense of power from the historicizing force of these materials not only because of their association with her former home on Hester Street.

In spite of the environmental risk, Sara utilizes the trans-corporeal transit of abject material across her body and home to resist the false binary of being either an Old World Jewish woman or a New World American. As Mary Douglas explains in her formative text *Purity and Danger*, and as is illustrated by the persistence of the golem legend, "dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness […] The danger which is risked by boundary transgression [of dirt and pollution] is power" (Douglas 162). Thus, for Sara, the act of accepting and eventually embracing dirty material becomes a source of powerful transgression over the violent assimilationist boundaries of white American nationhood. It is through abject material that Sara experiences the power of "creative formlessness" of being neither an Old-World Jew nor a New-World American, but also not happily in-between. (162). As several scholars as well as I have noted, the attempts at casting off the blackness of the ghetto either through hygiene and/or the commodities of whiteness are destined to fail because "The final paradox of the search for purity is that it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction" (165). Although Sara's choice to accept and even, at times, embrace dirty materiality is still riddled with contradiction, she is able to find moments of personal independence and growth rather than constant despair through this tension. It is also within these contradictions that she rejects assimilation, the boundaries of American nationhood, and the classification of Jewish immigrants as inherently dirty or unnatural.

Dirt and mud help Sara to understand and utilize her connection to her Jewish identity to resist assimilation to the individualist, white, American nation. Yet, her new middle-class, college-educated self remains in a state of mourning and longing for the past and for the present residents of Hester Street. While stories of Jewish immigration are often glorified for the success of assimilation, or celebrated as some form of cultural hybridity, Yezierska

challenges these narratives by representing her protagonist as always in the process of becoming. Yezierska's destabilization of the dichotomy of Old/New Worlds is particularly relevant to Jewish immigrants like Sara's family, for whom Poland was one temporary place of residence, but not a homeland in her ancestors' long and violent diasporic history.

Sara is never relieved of the "weight" of her ethnic history that she feels when she offers to take her father into her and Hugo's home at the end of the novel (*Bread Givers* 279). She refuses to cast off her past because to do so would be to ignore history, a practice that is neither ethical nor sustainable. As politically and environmentally fraught as dirty material is, Sara's deliberate use of it throughout *Bread Givers* resists the de-historicizing power of assimilation with the material traces of race and class and presents a new deconstructive narrative beyond the hierarchies of the Old or New World. Sara Smolinsky's journey is a process of becoming that is not over at the end of the text. It is neither a failure of assimilation, nor a successful tale of Americanization. Instead, Sara's engagement with abject materiality demonstrates an attempt to "make myself for a person" who exists *outside* of a pre-determined unified vision of nationhood (*Bread Givers* 172).

Conclusion

Throughout Yezierska's fiction, first and second-generation Jewish working-class women characters' enjoyment of healthy green spaces is regulated and/or literally policed and they are relegated to dirty work, dirty living conditions. While some fall prey to the false promise of individual hygiene as a pathway to whiteness and environmental justice, not all of Yezierska's Jewish characters do. In fact, multiple Jewish immigrant women characters in *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers* actually interrogate, critique, and eventually reject white bourgeois racial discourses of hygiene. In doing so, they expose the danger of such liberal individualist discourses that distract from systemic forces of environmental injustice,

xenophobia, and racism. Instead of hygiene, these characters actively maintain their connection to abject materiality, linger in the tension between the Old and New worlds, and in doing so eventually find power in their own liminality. Although this liminal space is often uncomfortable and even, arguably dangerous, it allows these women to reject the values of assimilation and individualism that fuel racial capitalism.

Chapter 2: The Dirty Thirties: Waste, Whiteness, and the Working Class in Sanora Babb's *Whose Names are Unknown*

Introduction

In Sanora Babb's 1930s Dust Bowl farming novel, *Whose Names are Unknown,* a small farmer and neighbor of the central Dunne family, Max, responds to the damaging effects of the Dust Bowl on dryland farming, declaring:

> when something dies and rots something new and healthy grows up to take its place. Not everybody in the world is rotten, there'll be a few won't decay. They're the clean seeds that fell off the old tree. Right now the tree still stands and it's hard for people to see the little one, but it grows while the rotting one dies […] I believe there must be some people like that who are working hard to grow up clean, people who believe in liberty and justice for all' (as the kids say every morning in school in flag salute) and really work for that. (*Whose Names* 99-100).

Using a farming-based metaphor, Max points out the importance of rotten matter (and people) for the growth of productive, new social movements and material conditions. While, upon first glance, his comment is filled with the language of cleanliness and, ultimately, what seems like an individualist bootstraps mentality, Max's metaphor inspires a conversation with his neighbors about collective power and living in community. Old Gaylord, another neighbor, responds to Max and says "Seems to be it [a man's duty] ought to have something to do with making the best kind of life for ever'body" (100). To this, Max agrees wholeheartedly. This scene is one of many moments of class consciousness in Babb's novel in which a growing understanding of collective power arises from "rotten" material and circumstances. Dirty, dusty, and even sometimes rotten material is often the fulcrum upon

which the lever of collective power and multi-racial working-class solidarity pivots in *Whose Names.* In this chapter, I argue that close reading characters' interactions with real and metaphorical dirty or rotten material in Babb's novel uncovers a liberatory multi-racial, anti-capitalist, women-led approach to environmental justice.

Whose Names follows the white, Oklahoma-based Dunne family (Milt, his wife Julia, their children, and, initially, Milt's father) who own their own struggling farm that is constantly in peril from the environmental conditions of drought and violent dust storms. The first portion of the novel, set in Oklahoma, chronicles the Dunne family and their neighbors' desperate attempts to keep their crops alive and resist the bank's attempts to seize their land, all while trying to keep their families safe and clean. Faced with a lack of other options, the Dunne family, with the exception of Milt's father, and a couple of their neighbors leave their land and move west to California, shifting from impoverished farm owners in a largely white community to migrant farm workers amidst a much more racially and ethnically diverse labor force.

Throughout the novel, particularly the portion set in California, the Dunne family and their neighbors are racialized, albeit in very different and less permanent ways than farm workers of color. They are characterized by wealthy elites as inherently inferior "Okies" who, while predominantly white, have brought their poverty and dirt with them from the Great Plains to an already saturated labor market in California.[18] I argue that, much like in Yezierska's work, dust and dirt function initially as class-coded forces that radicalize white farmers and eventually become a racializing "Africanist Presence" later in the novel

[18] Although the central family of *Whose Names* are white, it is important to note that, As Jeanetta Calhoun Mish and Cullen Whisenhunt point out, "Okies were not only white but also mixed white and Native American—or full Cherokee" (162).

(Morrison 28).[19] Simultaneously, discourses of hygiene are the vehicle by which racial and economic hierarchies are established and maintained by banks, crop growers, and other bourgeois whites. I examine how these economic elites use racial discourses of hygiene as a means of dividing the working class by race and how the Dunne family, their neighbors, and their coworkers eventually learn to resist this division by attending to the nuances of multi-racial working-class consciousness. These features set Babb's novel apart from many other white-authored texts of the literary left such as John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* since, as Erin Battat explains, "While her liberal peers defended the Okies' rights as white citizens, Babb highlighted the permeable boundaries of whiteness in order to make room for class-based unity" (63). By showing the white Dunne family's shifting proximity to the environmental privileges of whiteness based on their relationship to land ownership, dirty material, and discourses of hygiene, Babb's novel demonstrates the interwoven forces of class, race, and environmental injustice.

If we read Babb's novel with attention to the details of racial discourses of hygiene, her broader critiques of racial capitalism, American liberal individualism, and whiteness come into full relief. This approach also reveals the ways working women and workers of color—because of their intimacy with gendered and racialized labor—lead the resistance against racial discourses of hygiene. Despite the intent to divide, racial discourses of hygiene actually help the white Oklahoma migrant farm workers to understand the futility of liberal individualist cleaning efforts in pursuit of whiteness as a response to environmental injustice and racial capitalism. As the novel progresses, Babb's characters also eventually model the

[19] Toni Morrison describes this "Africanist presence" not as the reality of lived African American experiences in the U.S., but rather a white creation against which whiteness, in particular literary whiteness, is defined (28).

critical realization that rejecting individualism for collective power does not depend upon erasing racial difference, but rather requires a nuanced understanding of disparate processes of racial formation.

Leftist Politics, Activism, and Sanora Babb's Fight for Environmental Justice

This rather unique approach to fictionalizing the Dust Bowl and migrant farm work was shaped in part by Sanora Babb's personal life. Babb often wrote on issues close to home, and her unusual childhood upbringing, particularly for a white child, influenced not only her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post,* but her fiction as well. My intention in outlining the influence of Babb's personal experiences of racial and ethnic diversity, poverty, and leftist politics on her writing is not to suggest as Alan Wald describes, "causality between literal and fictionalized events or of correlations between actual people and literary characters" (A. Wald 14). Instead, I embrace Wald's framework for thinking about Babb's "art and her life as interactive elements of the same analytical framework" (14). By viewing Babb's biography in this way, we can better recover her radical leftist and anti-racist commentary on the intersections of racial, economic, and environmental injustice in her fiction. Babb grew up first on the plains of Oklahoma in Otoe-Missouria Native territory. Her father owned a bakery and spoke several Native languages, while Sanora spent much of her time playing with children of the Otoe tribe (Smith 124). As a result, her childhood immersed in the Otoe community "was in direct contradiction to white stereotypes of native populations, and her experience was one of support and acceptance" (Smith 75). When her father's bakery eventually failed, the Babb family moved to the Colorado plains to live with her grandfather and help him farm.

Her experiences of the dry Colorado landscape and, in particular, the poverty caused by "bad weather, starvation, isolation, and the fragile class system in rural areas" is

chronicled in *An Owl on Every Post*, but also lent personal perspective to her novel *Whose Names are Unknown* (Smith 124). Babb drew inspiration—and sometimes even direct quotation—from her mother's diary entries about living on the Colorado plains (Battat 55-56). Her grandfather's socialist politics also helped shape Babb's radical leftist writing. He had a subscription to the weekly socialist publication *Appeal to Reason* and had taken Sanora's father, Walter, to local socialist meetings in his youth (Smith 124-125). The influence of these politics can be traced through Babb's affiliation with the American Communist Party, her interaction with other leftist writers, and her own approach to multi-racial class solidarity and environmental justice.[20]

In 1929, Babb moved to Los Angeles to pursue her dream of being a writer. There, she "experienced poverty and often homelessness, published her short stories and poems, and enjoyed the camaraderie of fellow writers and leftists" (Dearcopp and Hill Smith 3). In 1938, she began volunteering for the Farm Security Administration, documenting the lives of migrant farm workers in federal migrant camps overseen by Tom Collins, an FSA administrator. From these experiences, Babb drew much of her inspiration for her Dust Bowl novel about Oklahoma farmers-turned-migrant farm workers titled *Whose Names are Unknown,* which gained support from an editor at Random House, but ultimately was not published due to the publishers' concern that "the market could not support two Dust Bowl

[20] Alan M. Wald outlines Babb's affiliations with the Communist Party and close relationships to other leftist writers and artists of the time including her cinematographer husband, Jame Wong Howe, and writers Ralph Ellison, and Carlos Bulosan (17-18). She participated in the work of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) as an "activist-organizer," and even when she broke from the party, she "never voiced bitterness or criticisms of the movement" (21, 20).

novels," in reference to her manuscript and John Steinbeck's 1939 Dust Bowl novel *Grapes of Wrath* (Dearcopp and Hill Smith 3).[21]

Thus, the complicated process of white Okie racial formation, especially in 1930s labor camps of California, was a subject Babb was intimately familiar with as she covered the plight of these farm workers in her journalism. She relied on the intimate relationships she built with workers during her time volunteering for the Farm Security Administration alongside Collins, with whom she "set up tent camps and provided supplies for newly arrived Dust Bowl refugees who slept in their overburdened flivvers and roadside ditches" (Wixson 29). In this role, Babb saw firsthand how white anxiety about individual hygiene became central to the white racial formation, and her reflections about racialization appear in both her field notes and *Whose Names*.[1] For example, in a section of her notes labeled "A day in the camps," Babb reflects on the enormous amount of effort women in the camps put into hygiene. She notes, "Cleanliness of women in camps. Few dirty" and "Young woman in tent—so pretty & clean" even despite the difficult and dirty conditions (*On the Dirty Plate*

[21] Both Babb and Steinbeck wrote about Dust Bowl farmers with the help of Collins, the manager of the Resettlement Administration of the Farm Security Administration. Both Babb and Steinbeck volunteered for the FSA with Collins, but Babb's engagement was more extensive (Bowman 106-107). While Babb knew Collins was reviewing her field notes/reports and handing them off to writers, it is unknown whether she knew that Collins shared these notes specifically with Steinbeck, whose novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published instead of hers, as Babb's editor did not believe there was room for both Dust Bowl novels on the market (Johnson and Whal 181). That said, Babb was also "adamant throughout her life that she held no ill will toward Steinbeck for her novel's delayed publication" in 2004 (Bowman 106).

Trail 74-75). Yet, regardless of the amount of labor camp residents put into their hygiene, there was still "measles everywhere" (74). Many scenes about hygiene like this from Babb's notes and from her own childhood are reflected in her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post,* and her fiction. I note this not to assert that *Whose Names* is autobiographical—although some of the descriptions of the Oklahoma dust storms are taken word-for-word from her mother Jennie's diary—but rather to draw attention to the conditions that allowed Babb's unique insight into the processes of white migrant farm worker racialization. This approach is especially useful for unpacking the ways Babb utilizes Marxist ideology and makes necessary adjustments to common working-class treatments of racial and ethnic difference in her fiction. While Babb's fiction is not strictly autobiographical, her experiences of her own poverty growing up and her time volunteering in the labor camps of California are reflected in the nuance with which she explores issues of environmental injustice, developing class consciousness, and attempts to divide the working class by race in *Whose Names*. Because of her intimate knowledge of the racially and ethnically diverse communities she wrote about, I argue, as others have before me, that Babb's work is an important contribution to the legacy of the literary left and multi-ethnic U.S. working class literature.

The recovery of *Whose Names* and its eventual publication in 2004 has led to an exciting resurgence of interest in and scholarship on her work. This chapter draws on the existing efforts of literary scholars to revive Babb's unique and valuable voice as part of the literary left. In her book *Ain't Got no Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left,* Erin Battat argues for Babb's inclusion in the "constellation of documentarians of California's agricultural labor crisis" and explores how Babb's relationship to leftist politics and the day-to-day lives of farm workers as well as Indigenous peoples of the Midwest shaped her unique approach to migrant working-class rights, feminism, and multi-racial labor organizing. In her book *The Nature of California: Race,*

Citizenship, and Farming since the Dust Bowl, Sarah Wald examines how *Whose Names* advocates for a multi-racial and multi-ethnic approach to farm worker rights in contrast to other Dust Bowl narratives, such as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, that prioritize the restoration of white Okie privilege (53). Douglas Wixon's edited collection of Babb's field notes and other archival material titled *On the Dirty Plate Trail: Remembering the Dust Bowl Refugee Camps,* presents Babb's first-hand accounts of her encounters with migrant farm workers during her time volunteering for the Farm Security Administration, and puts these archived notes in conversation with her sister Dorothy's photography. This collection gives readers a window into the Babb sisters' experiences witnessing the environmental, racial, and economic challenges of the Dust Bowl. Finally, in the new 2022 collection *Unknown No More: Recovering Sanora Babb,* edited by Joanne Dearcopp and Christine Hill Smith, Babb's work is reinvigorated by essays from Alan M. Wald, Erin Battat, Babb's literary executor and agent, Joanne Dearcopp, among many others who seek to examine the interconnection of Babb's own personal and political experiences and her fiction. In doing so, as Dearcopp and Smith argue, "Essays in this volume investigate how Babb's lived experience gave rise to a unique voice that has been overlooked by earlier recovery projects" (2). Building on the work of these scholars, I explore how Babb's representations of dust, dirty work, and discourses of hygiene in *Whose Names are Unknown* can give us clues for a more equitable multi-racial and multi-ethnic fight for environmental and economic justice.

"dust, dust, dust. Seems it will outlast us": Dust and Class on the Oklahoma Great Plains

Whose Names is set during the 1930s Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, which forced many white and some Black farmers to migrate west and take jobs to which workers

of color were typically relegated.[22] This setting paired with Babb's intimate knowledge of not only the people of the Great Plains, but also of California migrant labor camps make *Whose Names* a particularly poignant text for studying the effects of racial discourses of hygiene on characters' perceptions of their own whiteness. While farm workers of color did and still do face more permanent and overt racial discrimination, the poverty of the thirties and the environmentally dirty conditions of the Dust Bowl extended different versions of these concerns to economically disenfranchised white farm workers as well. The Depression accompanied by drought heightened hygiene-based anxieties, particularly in the regions of the U.S. impacted by the violent dust storms such as the Dunne family's home state of Oklahoma.[23]

The focus on personal hygiene apparent in Babb's novel illustrates one example of how white workers responded to the mechanisms for maintaining social status affiliated with whiteness. Though the Okies in Babb's novel are white, the Dust Bowl destroys their crops, the bank takes advantage of their vulnerability and forces them to relinquish their property, which then drives them to migratory farm work positions typically performed by workers of color. Such shifts in occupation to exploitative farm work expose the Dunnes and other

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[22] Although Dust Bowl migrants are frequently all cast as farmers-turned-farm workers and *Whose Names* centers such characters, the reality is that only about five percent of were. Many of the Great Plains migrants of the 30s were "tradesmen, teachers, lawyers, and small business owners, brought low by the economic depression" (Wixson 13).

[23] Hannah Holleman explains that "By the 1930s, colonial soil scientists described the massive soil erosion problem then plaguing colonies and frontier regions around the world, including the U.S. Southern plains, as the result of the imperial "rape of the earth" of preceding decades" (25).

migrants to more dirt, which in some cases, as Carl Zimring notes, became synonymous with "dark skin color" in popular "common sense" notions of race (83). Thus, dirt was, and still is associated with non-white and even not-fully-white identity, while whiteness became dependent upon purity of the skin and blood. Erin Battat explains that "Babb recognized that whiteness has varying degrees and thus considered the Okies a kind of ethnic minority without full access to the cultural and material benefits of differential treatment based on race" (63). I build on Battat's assertions by exploring how the materiality of dark, dirty material contributes to the precarity of the Okies' access to whiteness in Babb's novel.

Although the Dunne family and their neighbors are white, their proximity to dirt, dust, and poverty shifts, especially after they relinquish their farms, move to California, and are cast as migrant workers, thereby threatening their access to the privileges of whiteness. The level of racial consciousness the Dunne family has increases throughout the novel, but the first section set in Oklahoma focuses more prominently on class consciousness and environmental toxicity given their rather insular community of white neighbors. Notably filled with mostly impoverished white characters, this section of the novel highlights the farmers' relationship to dust and dirt as a factor of their social status as well as a direct material toxin. Additionally, the portion of *Whose Names* set in Oklahoma highlights the radicalization of women in the novel through their intimate relationship with the domestic sphere of hygiene and sets the stage for their more multi-racial approaches to organizing later in the novel.

When the dust crosses beyond the threshold of the home and across the borders of the human body, the Dunne family and their neighbors not only share concern over both its effect on their physical health, as well as the class-inflected social ramifications of the material on their skin. Throughout the beginning of *Whose Names*, dust is a foreign, imposing, dark material presence on the Dunne's farm in Oklahoma. Julia describes the storms as "black

duster[s]," which are, as her husband Milt reflects, composed "of alien texture" carried from another region (93, 87). While there is little direct discussion of race in the early section of the novel set in Oklahoma, Dunnes' use of "alien" casts the dust foreign and unwelcome using language similar to that used to derogatorily describe migrant laborers to this day.

These early descriptions from the narrator and the Dunne family members also foreshadow the family's future identity as "foreign" and racialized migrant workers in California. Additionally, while residing in Oklahoma, Julia repeatedly describes the dust negatively within this color palate as "dark and dirty," "A black one," "almost black," "Black as night nearly all day," (*Whose Names* 94) "the brown wind" (67), "the brown mass," attaching a dark color palate to the destructive dust that kills her family and neighbors' crops and damages their belongings (91, 94, 67, 78). The repetitive reminders of the dust and dirt's dark color give the dirt a negative connotation that maps onto existing racial hierarchies and gestures toward the more overtly racializing force of dirty materiality that the Dunnes will experience once they move to California. With its anxiety-producing social connotations dust not only destroys their crops, it invades their domestic space and crosses the corporeal boundaries of their skin, shattering any illusion that it will respect anthropogenic boundaries or their tenuous place within the established racial hierarchy. At one point, Julia reflects: the dust "beat a soft tattoo along the wall" of their home in Oklahoma (124). Julia's use of the verb "tattoo" illustrates her association of the material boundaries of the home with the epidermal boundaries of the skin, which functions as the main remaining vehicle of white privilege for the Dunne family. Thus, the Dunne family and their neighbors are not only working against the material conditions of poverty caused by the dust, but also its social connotations that further mark them as economically disenfranchised and expendable in the eyes of those in power such as the banks.

Though the men in the novel are often most directly exposed to dust's material danger in the public sphere of labor, the women characters are left to deal with the social ramifications of dust's presence in the home. Given Julia's place in the gendered domestic sphere of labor taking care of the children and of maintaining the cleanliness of the family's home, her character's reflections and diary entries provide an intimate perspective of dust and discourses of hygiene. The Dunnes and their neighbors—in particular, the women characters in charge of housework and child rearing—initially respond to the incessant dirt and dust by repetitive attempts to clean their homes and individual bodies. Julia Dunne and her family try to resist dust and preserve their access to their environmental white privilege through acts of hygiene such as bathing rituals, scrubbing the house, and, ultimately, relinquishing their farm and moving across the country.

Julia's consciousness of the futility of individual hygiene as a response to environmental injustice and racialization develops over the course of the novel; however, her family's first response to dust storms of the Oklahoma plains that pose a threat to both their safety and social capital is to clean. The day after a particularly violent dust storm in Oklahoma, Julia writes in her diary, "Lovely morning. Cleaned and had everything fresh. We all took baths and changed our clothes and dressed up so nice" (*Whose Names* 93).[24] The happy and hopeful tone of this entry depends entirely on the family's ability to rid themselves of the persistent traces of dust through acts of hygiene, which, however, never produce lasting results. After one particularly nasty dust storm, the Dunne family is left to clean up the filthy residue. After cooking breakfast, Julia "began a thorough cleaning […] and when the dust was carried out in buckets, she scrubbed the floors and washed the windows. The day

[24] As Battat notes, Julia Dunne's diary entries in *Whose Names* were modeled after Babb's mother Jennie's diary of life on the plains of Oklahoma and Kansas in 1935 (55).

was fine for washing, but there was no choice but to clean" (82). Any break from the blowing dust is used to clean or bathe. In her diary, Julia explains that the family just experienced one of the "worst [dust storms] we ever had […] I don't know where this dirt is coming from but not here" (93). The foreign dust and dirt that crosses the threshold of their home in this instance, while bad for their crops and thus a cause of their hunger, is not described as a direct threat to their physical safety within the domestic space. Rather, the "black duster," which is once again marked as geographically foreign, serves as an invasive social threat to the purity of their home and skin.

As a woman bound in many ways to the domestic sphere of housekeeping and childrearing while in Oklahoma, Julia is very well attuned to the color- and class-based connotations of dirt. No matter how well she cleans, however, hygiene rituals fail to free the Dunne family from assumptions that they are inherently dirty and do not guarantee them access to the full environmental privileges of whiteness. As the novel progresses, Julia's awareness of the futility of hygiene becomes more apparent. For example, one night when the Dunne family is getting ready for bed, Milt chastises his father about his hygiene. Milt urges his father to bathe or at least take the time to wash his feet to which Julia responds, "Oh shut up! […] Haven't you growled enough for one day!" (*Whose Names* 23). Milt retorts, "Dad's dirty!" to which Milt and Julia's daughter, Myra, says "Leave Konkie [the children's nickname for their grandfather] alone" (23). In this moment, Julia and Myra understand both that dirty feet do not jeopardize the family's health, and also that, on some level, individual hygiene will not solve their financial troubles or provide any lasting protection from ever looming environmental danger of the dust. Through Julia's developing consciousness about the futility of individual hygiene and the need for structural change, *Whose Names* critiques liberal individualist attempts to place the onus of health on individual impoverished farmers and workers.

The need for systemic economic and environmental reform becomes more obvious to Julia and other characters as the novel progresses, but even the federal New Deal attempts at reform often prove harmful to small farmers and beneficial for absentee or larger growers. Though Babb herself worked for a New Deal agency, the Farm Security Administration, her experiences only increased her wariness of the government's approaches to economic and environmental justice, informing her hygiene-based critique of relief programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in *Whose Names*. At one point, the Dunne's Oklahoma neighbors, the Long family, are forced into dirty living conditions by the "Agricultural Adjustment Act, which paid farmers not to produce" as many crops in order to limit supply and drive up demand (*Whose Names* 53). In theory, the AAA should help small farmers both immediately, through direct payments and reduced labor, as well as long-term through the increase in demand for agricultural products and, thus increased prices. However, it ultimately does the opposite for small farmers like the Long family, driving them further into poverty and quite literally into the dirt.

When the Long family reduces their crop acreage in order to receive federal payments, they are never able to come back from "the losses of livestock suffered under the Agricultural Adjustment Act" (*Whose Names* 53). Specifically,

> Due to the poor condition of their cattle, many were shot, and after paying the process tax on the ones they shipped, they had no return at all. The drought forced him [Mr. Long] to buy feed for what remained of his herd, until the bank took the cattle on a loan. So he was totally dependent on his crops in the dust years. (53)

As a result, the Long family has no choice but to rip up their wood floor to use as fuel during the winter, leaving only the dirt as the floor of their home. Presumably, this type of hardship could befall any one of the "sweeping and scrubbing farmwomen, [for whom] the summer

dust was a nightmare in their homes" (53). However, as the novel's narrator notes, "Almost anyone in the neighborhood could have lost a floor with less irony" as "Mrs. Long was a shy, meticulous little woman whose cleanliness was fanatical" (53). Through the use of irony, this early scene illustrates several critical concepts regarding hygiene that are carried through the rest of the novel: first, hygiene is an obsession for many farmwomen, since it was largely seen as an indicator of class and respectability despite being futile under such devastating environmental conditions. Second, the nearly impossible labor of keeping the farmhouses clean falls almost entirely to women and girls, making Babb's choice to highlight Julia's voice as well as the experiences of her women neighbors (Frieda, Mrs. Starwood, Granny Cyclone, and Mrs. Long) throughout the novel particularly powerful. And third, Mrs. Long's experience shows that the lack of hygiene for the farmers is almost always due to structural economic oppression, not individual choices. Even in the attempt to help them, the federal government misreads the needs of small farmers. Or, from a more cynical and probably more realistic lens, the federal government deploys aid like the AAA under the guise of helping small farmers in order to mask their true goal of aiding large industrial agricultural pursuits in service of racial capitalism.

Babb's reference to the Agricultural Adjustment Act demonstrates another way in which her training as a journalist and time living among small, struggling farmers and farmworkers informed the way she critiques larger structures of racial capitalism and environmental injustice in her fiction. Her direct engagement in the plight of the farm workers she wrote about brings much-needed exposure to the insidious ways powerful absentee growers co-opted the language of public health to keep farm workers vulnerable. While the AAA may have helped larger corporations and growers, historically, many small farmers felt that such measures "should be directed toward opening the avenues of distribution rather than curtailing output" (Fite 666). In other words, many workers believed

federal aid should go toward distributing the surplus of food to hungry people, such as the small farmers and workers themselves, rather than focusing entirely on limiting production to influence prices. Limiting crop output for small farmers slaps a band aid on much larger structural issues such as the rise of industrial agriculture, monocrop farming, and resulting environmental injustice. Ultimately, the Act did little to help small farmers who were suffering the most and "absentee owners rather than actual farmers would be in line for many of the benefits" (667). Rather than glorify the New Deal as a beacon of progressive success, through Mrs. Long's futile desire for hygiene, Babb highlights the ways in which New Deal policies such as the AAA operated within and even *for* a system of racial capitalism rather than outside of or against it.

The domestic sphere of the home is not the only woman-centered space in which individual hygiene becomes a central concern; the care of children's hygiene in school also becomes a priority for teachers—another feminized profession of care work. Anna Brennerman, a local teacher and one of the Dunne family's neighbors in Oklahoma, tells Max Brownell, another neighbor, about the maturity of the school children when she prepares to give them their end-of-year gifts, toothbrushes: "You should have seen the morning tooth inspection they initiated […] it amazes me how they can be such real children; they know many of the serious problems of living already […] Children shouldn't have to worry about these things!" (*Whose Names* 105) Anna, unlike many of the women in the novel, works in the public sphere of labor as a teacher, but her job still centers around childcare and labor that puts her in intimate proximity to discourses of hygiene. As such, this gendered labor gives her an understanding of the way poverty shapes the children's psyche, particularly when it comes to personal hygiene. Additionally, Anna's synthesis of this early maturity comes specifically when she is gathering toothbrushes to give to the students before school lets out. Toys would presumably be a gift that would provide more childhood joy, but the toothbrush,

one of the most iconic instruments of personal hygiene, brings to the fore how individual cleanliness is both hard to access for these children, but also necessary for health and social acceptance. The focus on the toothbrush in this passage evokes the racialized history of this instrument of hygiene in American culture and foreshadows the more overt racialization the Oklahoma farmers face when they move to California. Historian Suellen Hoy notes that Booker T. Washington, one of the most notable African American leaders of the nineteenth century, preached the "gospel of the toothbrush," and individual cleanliness for Black Americans (89-90). He believed that "through his educational methods" he could "'resolve the antagonisms, suspicions, and aspirations' of freed people, white Southerners, and white Northerners" (Washington qtd. In Hoy 91). While this passage in Babb's novel is presumably about poor majority white farm children for whom discourses of hygiene will have a different resonance than for African American individuals, the particular reference to the toothbrush as a key tool of individual hygiene evokes Washington's "gospel of the toothbrush," highlighting the powerful messaging of cleanliness as not only necessary for physical health, but also as a means for upward mobility, and in the case of racialized individuals, uplift. Despite Washington's crusade for hygiene as a means for racial uplift, Hoy explains that efforts for cleanliness became more and more futile as systemic racism continued to exclude Black Americans from healthy living conditions, and socioeconomic mobility. Similarly, though they are white and, thus, maintain privilege within the U.S. racial hierarchy regardless of hygiene, some of the Oklahoma farmers/farmworkers eventually come to realize that hygiene is only a temporary tool that can aid white flight rather than a useful instrument in the fight against larger structures of injustice.

The farmers' concern about the social ramifications of dust's dark, dirty, and classed presence is compounded by dust's material ability to function as a dangerous environmental toxin as well. The most acute display of the dust's destructive material power is demonstrated

through its ability to kill not only crops, but also humans. Most notably, one of the Dunnes' Oklahoma neighbors, Mr. Starwood, is suffocated by the dust while trying to drive home. In her diary entries, Julia writes on April 29, "Poor Mr. Starwood got caught in it [dust] last night and when it got black he ran his truck into a ditch and couldn't get out" and on April 30, "Mr. Starwood died. Mailman just told me. We all feel bad […] Dust is still blowing, sometimes light, sometimes dark. No use to keep on writing dust, dust, dust. Seems it will outlast us" (*Whose Names* 95). These diary entries, depict the danger dust poses to individuals who do not have the luxury of maintaining the illusion and physical safety of being in a protected, bounded, clean space separate from the environment around them. The dust does not respect the boundaries of Mr. Starwood's vehicle or his body. Struck by the permeability of her husband's corporeal boundaries, Mrs. Starwood asks: "How could fine soft dust and flesh together make that queer hard rattle that came at the last?" referring specifically to his dust-filled lungs (122). The material violence of the dust forces the Dunne family and their neighbors to acknowledge that, despite desperate efforts to escape the dust, they are not able to separate their human bodies from the non-human elements around them even with vigorous acts of individual hygiene.

Dust functions as a direct environmental toxin when it kills Mr. Starwood, but it also operates as an indirect lethal force. The dust's ability to ravage the Oklahoma farmers' crops combined with the rise of industrial agriculture and the failure of the federal government to provide enough aid for small farmers and farmworkers creates the conditions that cause Julia's miscarriage. Julia is in need of milk for the family and decides, despite the incoming storm, to walk to Mrs. Brennerman's house to purchase some. The Brennerman family is more financially secure than the majority of the Dunne's neighbors, yet Mrs. Brennerman is stingy. She still charges Julia for the milk despite her dire need and lack of funds and pushes the Dunne family to leave before dinner so that she doesn't have to feed them. As a result,

Julia and her children are forced to walk home in the middle of a violent thunderstorm. The stress of the storm and the overall damage of poverty sends Julia into labor, and she delivers a stillborn baby. In this instance, the large-scale structural greed of industrial agriculture which has, in part, caused the conditions of the Dust Bowl in combination with the individual greed of Mrs. Brennerman culminate in the death of Julia's baby.[25] This passage not only highlights dust's lethal potential, but also stages a critique of Mrs. Brennerman decision to privilege individualism over community care.

Skunks and Buzzards: Oklahoma Women's Resistance to Racial Discourses of Hygiene

Despite the fact that the dirty material of the dust storms does not carry with it an overtly racializing force within the community of white Oklahoma farm owners, the social and material anxiety it causes primes the Oklahoma farmers, particularly the women characters, for a more nuanced understanding of and resistance to the overtly racial connotations of dirty material that they encounter later in California. While still in Oklahoma, some of the women characters in *Whose Names* hone their approach to combatting discourses of hygiene by recognizing the futility of individual hygiene and learning to target the structural sources of the environmental injustice they face. Understanding that the borders of

[25] This scene of the novel may have been influenced by Babb's early experience witnessing her mother endure a similar loss. She describes her mother, Ginny Babb's, miscarriage in her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post*, Similar to Julia Dunne, Ginny Babb was forced to leave a neighbor's house before dinner and walk home in a storm with her children, she has a miscarriage. Babb's recollection of this childhood event brings to the fore the very real, material dangers of the structural inequity she fought against in her adult life as a journalist and author.

the home and skin are far more permeable than they would like to believe is the first step in these women characters' push for radical environmental justice. As such, Babb's novel contributes to a larger critique of individual health and hygiene as solutions to structural injustice put forth by other writers of the literary left. Drawing on Linda Nash's work, Stacy Alaimo explains that while in the early twentieth century "'modern' medicine" worked to "sever human bodies from their environments," various "leftist writers" and "certain strands of the industrial hygiene movement" saw this effort to be futile and resisted the harm such an ideology inflicted on workers (Nash qtd. in *Bodily Natures* 32). Thus, highlighting workers' health became instrumental to analyzing and ultimately combatting "economic systems; hierarchies of class, race, and gender; and the flows of potentially harmful substances and forces" (32). Babb is one leftist writer who engages this fight for environmental justice through her fiction by illustrating the permeability of domestic spaces and individual bodies and pointing to the limits of individual hygiene as a solution to the ramifications of industrial farming and drought.

Rather than continuing to devote more time to cleaning the home, themselves, or their families, some of the Oklahoma women characters actually recognize the futility of individual hygiene and utilize dirty or disgusting material to fight the main structural forces of economic and environmental injustice: the bank. One of the most striking examples of a woman character staging resistance to the bank's attempts to capitalize off of environmental destruction does not involve dust specifically, but rather the rotting corpse of a skunk. In response to a letter from the bank threatening to repossess her farming machinery and livestock, the Dunne family's neighbor, Mrs. Starwood, brings a dead skunk to the local bank in protest. The letter is the last straw for Mrs. Starwood in a series of horrible events caused by the dust storms that have destroyed her crops and ultimately killed her husband who, as noted earlier, suffocates from dust when stranded in a storm. In contrast to Mrs. Starwood's

living conditions, the bank is "clean and quiet with only the small private sound of money clinking and the polite low voices of clerks" (*Whose Names* 111). Thus, cleanliness is immediately and directly associated with money and wealth in the narrator's description of the setting which is seemingly protected from the outside world with a barrier of hygiene. Traumatized by environmental and economic injustice exacerbated by the bank, Mrs. Starwood shatters the pristine image of wealth as she "walked firmly over to the manager's railing and letting the newspaper wrapping fall to the floor, she lifted something by a long fluffy tail and laid it on his desk. It was a skunk, and suddenly everyone in the bank new it was a skunk" (111). Mrs. Starwood radically interrupts the sanitized space by forcing the bankers to face the ultimate smelly, lifeless embodiment of unsanitary disgust, a corpse.

Mrs. Starwood's resistance to the bank is rooted in the power of abjection which, as Julia Kristeva explains, "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Thus, through its ability to disturb order and reject borders, abject material such as the skunk corpse forces the bankers to reckon, if only temporarily, with the tenuous nature of the constructed boundaries of class, cleanliness, and economic superiority. Rather than put her energy into domestic cleaning, Mrs. Starwood foists abjection under the eyes and noses of the bankers as a way of contrasting the clean, yet corrupt space of the bank and forces the bankers to temporarily experience a breakdown in the borders of their enclosed space of privilege. Through the stark contrast of the smelly, dead animal and the immaculate, pristine bank, Mrs. Starwood intentionally shatters the mental separation the visitors and employees of the bank wish to maintain between their clean, well-ordered, and elitist space and the outside world filled with dust and impoverished workers. She specifically chooses to use an abundantly smelly animal that is frequently characterized as a pest in its most abject state: death. As Kristeva notes, while humans eliminate waste (feces, vomit, bodily fluids) to avoid facing the condition of mortality, the corpse is the ultimate abject material embodiment

of the "border of my condition as a living being […] the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3). Through the skunk, Mrs. Starwood also ruptures the illusion of existential human separation from unpleasant waste and, ultimately, mortality. This act of protest is powerful because it demolishes the carefully-crafted yet false world in which wealthy white residents can remain remote from the farmers and farmworkers most directly affected by the deadly environmental conditions of the Dust Bowl and the economic depression. Although this protest against the bank's predatory actions does not yield any economic relief for Mrs. Starwood and her family, it does present a brief moment of agency and power of expression in resistance to the structural economic and environmental inequality they face.

The skunk is not the only corpse with which Mrs. Starwood confronts the bankers. She also attacks the imaginary corpse of the "American banks" exclaiming:

> I hope you blow up and bust with your gluttony. You eat up our land like a filthy hog, you banks do. You and your flunky loan companies. I hope all the banks in America eat themselves to death. We poor people will then have to eat the corpse. We'll be good and hungry by then. Understand? Good and hungry. (113)

Here, she takes abjection to a new level in her confrontation with the bank employees by threatening to literally eat the rich after they fall prey to the inevitably self-cannibalizing nature of capitalism. Her own family's ability to stay clean and healthy has been radically eroded with the presence of the dust storms and magnified by the bank's attempt to capitalize off of the farmers' dust-caused strife. Not to mention, the reason for the dust storms in the first place is at least in part tied to a rapidly industrializing agricultural system that fuels

racial capitalism.[26] Mrs. Starwood sees right through the hygienic façade of the bank's cleanliness and the behavior of the bankers to the exploitative nature of racial capitalism, which to her is "filthy" with corruption rather than physical dirt. In focusing her critique on the filth and corruption of the banks as a vehicle of racial capitalism is, Mrs. Starwood attacks the systemic causes of environmental injustice rather than focusing only on the symptom of dirty materiality. In waging this war against the bank, Mrs. Starwood recognizes as well that such a system is unsustainable both economically and environmentally. Her identity as a woman recently widowed by the violence of the dust storms, driven further into poverty by the banks, forced to both perform the farm work and all of the domestic labor of child-rearing, housekeeping, etc. positions her to sharply critique the violent capitalist system at the root of her family's struggle. She resists all of these forces through a dirty, smelly, abject, and un-ladylike display in order to flip the discourse of hygiene back on the banks and in doing so, expose the cruelty of their response to large-scale economic and environmental strife.

Another woman who flips the discourse of hygiene back on those in power is Mrs. Blankenbaker. Mrs. Blankenbaker, also nicknamed "Old Granny Cyclone" by her neighbors, farms her own land with the help of hired workers. She has weathered many a storm and drought and even maintained her farm through a second drought that caused her to "mortgage her animals and machinery" (*Whose Names* 66). Despite the difficult circumstances, Granny

[26] Industrial monocrop agriculture exacerbated environmentally difficult farming conditions throughout the 1930s, which were already plagued by drought. As is the case with many of Babb's characters, "the combination of Depression and drought in the 1930s brought them down the economic scale yet another notch to become farm laborers and, finally, migrants" (Wixon 20).

Cyclone manages to stay out of debt and her employees pass along a story of a confrontation between her and bank employees that likely inspired her nickname:

> She had 320 acres of wheat up, and the hands [her workers] told how she greeted two men from the bank when they stopped at her place for a little visit. As they were getting out of their car, she said, "What are you buzzards sailing around my farm for? Got your greedy hawk eyes on my wheat, eh? And your manikerred claws ready. Well, you ain't gonna git none of it. Just put that in your craw. Why, I never even laid eyes on my wheat check from the elevator when I owed you. You didn't trust me to pay you back free will. Well, now I don't trust you neither since then, so you git off my place. Git, you buzzards!" They tried to talk to her, then saying she didn't understand, but she went back in the house and came out with the shotgun. "This is what I use for hawks and buzzards," she said and she stood in the yard watching them get back in the car and go out the gate and back down the road. (66)

Granny Cyclone turns the discourse of hygiene back on the bankers, calling them "buzzards," which, refers to a "vulture," or a bird that scavenges the rotting corpses of other dead animals as its main source of sustenance. While Granny Cyclone uses this discourse disparagingly, she does not do so for the sake of denigrating dirty work or those who are impoverished. Instead, she indicates the choice behind their dirty behavior through her description of their "manikerred claws" which they presumably plan to use to tear her apart financially (66). Granny Cyclone's intimate relationship to the dirty work of farming and her close bond with the workers she hires gives her the perspective to see through the deceptive and exploitative intentions of the bankers and to further defy gender roles by chasing them away with a shotgun. Though the majority of the field labor throughout the novel is done by men, the revolutionary shift in class is not inspired by men's work, but instead by women characters,

who, through their intimate proximity to gendered domestic labor, and in some cases, field work are hyper aware of the rhetorical strategies behind racial discourses of hygiene.

"I'm no better'n he is; he's no worse": Multi-racial, Multi-ethnic, and Gender-inclusive Organizing in Babb's California

The Dunne family and their neighbors' experiences with dust and resistances to racial discourses of hygiene in Oklahoma, particularly for the women characters, prime them for a more nuanced understanding of the overtly racial connotations of dirty material that they encounter and ultimately combat in California. While dust and dirt carry connotations of class inferiority and deadly material consequences for the white farmers in Oklahoma, the social connotations of dirty material become more directly racializing as they relinquish their farms and migrate to a more racially and ethnically diverse working environment in California. It is in California where they are first given the disparaging name "Okies," in reference to their migratory or "foreign" status in California. The shift from being farm owners to farm workers—a job often reserved for non-white laborers as Carl Zimring notes—collides with their new status as migrants, heightening their fear of being thought of as inferior, and foreign or unwelcome themselves (Zimring 4-5). Even after they leave the dust storms behind, however, they face new struggles with the dirt of labor camp life, poor working conditions, and the prejudice of middle/upper class whites in California who view them with what Sarah Jaquette Ray calls "environmental disgust," or the assessment of "so-called economic immigrants, environmental refugees, and other 'ecologically incorrect third worlders' (Adamson, "Encounter" 169)—threatening to corrupt the nation" (Ray 2, 139).[27] Thus,

[27] While Ray's book focuses largely on the perception of disabled bodies as "ecological others," Chapter 3, "The Poetics of Trash: Immigrant Bodies in the Borderland Wilderness,"

whether facing the dust of "alien texture" that blankets their fields in Oklahoma or the dirt of the labor camps in California, dirty material adheres to them and personal hygiene proves to be a temporary solution at best and impossible at worst (*Whose Names* 87). The dust and dirt that Babb's white workers encounter in California's more racially diverse landscape of labor functions similarly to that in Yezierska's work and represents Toni Morrison's foundational idea of the "Africanist presence," or the "disrupting darkness" against which white literary characters initially attempt to define their whiteness (Morrison 322). This process of racialization further incentivizes the white Okies to reach for property ownership and personal hygiene as means of differentiating themselves from workers of color.

Although the Okies at the center of Babb's novel are white, the hygiene-focused racialization they do encounter shifts their tenuous position on the scale of white privilege by subjecting them to forms of oppression that that mirror the mechanisms of anti-Black racism. There are three primary ways white migrant farmworkers are racialized in Babb's novel: through being called "white niggers," through attempts to segregate their children from other white children in California schools, and through the threat of forced sterilization. While the unnamed narrator and Julia Dunne initially describe the dust and dirt in the novel as dark, foreign, and as a marker of poverty, the overt connotation with racial identity comes later, after the Dunnes move to California, where the environmental conditions of farm labor infringe upon their proximity to whiteness. The Dunne family and their fellow workers' dirtiness and poverty first inspire middle/upper-class Californians to call them the derogatory name "Okies," a nickname that emphasizes their geographic otherness.

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discusses the ways migrants, environmental refugees, and immigrants from other countries are figured as threats to the "nation-as-ecosystem" (Wald qtd. In Ray 140).

While "Okie" is not inherently racial and instead signifies their cross-country migrant status, the white Oklahoma farm workers are also given a more overtly racial nickname as well: "white niggers." When in town shopping, the white migrant farm workers encounter two white men who Milt suspects are vigilantes hired by the railroad company to intimidate working-class laborers. The two men are well-dressed, one in a "good leather jacket" and one in a "suit coat" as well as a white woman who "wore too much powder," "lipstick," and a diamond ring (*Whose Names* 153). The detailed descriptions of the wealthy Californians' expensive attire and well-manicured appearance starkly juxtaposes the Okies' hunger, poverty, and migrant status which marks them as "ecological others," or "corporeal threats in a world of increasing immigration, travel, and urbanization" (Ray 16). Though the wealthier Californians need the Okies' labor to harvest the food they eat, they are disturbed when they are forced to encounter their impoverished migrant bodies in the store. The geographically based name-calling quickly escalates and becomes directly racializing during an altercation, when a wealthy white woman accuses one of the white farm workers of attempting to "get fresh" with one of the Californians' wives (*Whose Names* 154). The wealthy white men proceed to bludgeon the farm worker with a club and call them all "white niggers" (154). Not only, as Erin Battat points out, do the Californians use the "same triangular lynch myth that was used to terrorize black men" by accusing a (white) "nigger" of assaulting the purity of a white woman, they also conflate the "Okies" with the Black farm workers simply by adding "white" to the racial slur (Battat 154).

The Californians' false accusation of sexual assault of a white woman reveals their anxiety over the white woman's sexual hygiene under threat of the "Okie's" perceived hyper-sexuality. Although the Californians do distinguish the "Okies" as white, their derogatory nickname and the "triangular lynch myth" they use to support their assumptions about the farm workers reveals their fear of racial mixing. The accusation posed by the wealthy white

woman suggests she was already conditioned, presumably by the "Okies'" physical markers of working-class identity to think of them as not fully white and, in keeping with racist ideas of sexual hygiene, a threat to her purity. Intonations of racial hygiene are at play in this passage, as the affective response to the perceived threat of a white Oklahoma farm worker sexually mixing with a white bourgeois woman parallels that of white supremacist attitudes regarding miscegenation. The racial slur, though it certainly does not carry the weight of historical violence towards the Okies as it would toward Black farm workers, when modified with the adjective "white," doubles as a way of both further marginalizing the Okies, while also serving as a reminder of hierarchical differentiation between white farm workers and their Black coworkers. Discourses of hygiene, particularly sexual hygiene in this passage, are central to the division of workers that helps to maintain a racial capitalism system of exploitation.

The effect of hygiene on the Dunne family's proximity to whiteness as a claim to economic and social stability becomes even clearer when they are faced with the prospect of segregation from the middle/upper-class white community. Milt reports back to Julia that he heard one of the other men say that in the neighboring county, wealthy whites don't want Okie children at their schools because they "don't like their kids mixing" to which Julia responds "Our kids are as good as theirs, and they're clean when we have soap and water" (*Whose Names* 171). The threat of these policies of segregation, which are intimately tied to ideals of hygiene, historically incentivized "Okie efforts to delineate a color line that had been blurred by their dire economic circumstances, outsider status, and performance of jobs usually relegated to African American and foreign-born workers" (Battat 62). Thus, their access to whiteness is jeopardized by their proximity to dirt and their occupation as farm workers, which in the eyes of wealthier white people, mark them as somehow biologically different and a possible contaminant to other white children. The color line is still there, as

the Dunnes will always be white, but their migrant identity, relegation to racialized labor, and resulting proximity to dirt contribute to their ostracization. Additionally, individual hygiene is the superficial (and ultimately futile) beacon of liberal individualist hope for a re-assertion of whiteness. The above passage illustrates Julia's internalization of discourses of hygiene, since she uses standards of hygiene in an attempt to resist the notion that the Okies are somehow inherently racially inferior to the other white California residents. However, her argument is nuanced in that she specifies that she and her children are not dirty as a product of their class, or race. By noting the fact that the family is clean when they have access to the tools of hygiene, Julia not only overtly states the connection between discrimination and hygiene, but also clarifies that their lack of hygiene is a product of their economic condition rather than an essential biological difference. Despite the draw toward hygiene as a solution to her family's struggle, Julia does not highlight her family's ability to be clean given the right resources in order to differentiate her white family from the farmworkers of color, but rather to assert that cleanliness has nothing inherently to do with race or biology. As Julia's character evolves, so too does the nuance with which she critiques racial discourses of hygiene.

Despite Julia's awareness of the absurdity of racial discourses of hygiene, the social connotations of dirt impact her children's sense of self. In one of the most heartbreaking scenes of the novel, the Dunne children express their anxiety about their own hygiene-based alienation when they are called "Okies" at their new school by their middle-class Californian classmates. The Dunne children from Oklahoma wonder about their new nickname: "*Why does it hurt? […] Why does it make me feel all by myself? And sad? […] Someone different. Someone not as good"* (*Whose Names* 164). This moment is particularly striking since the hurtful internal recognition of their own ostracization occurs "When they washed their feet at night, bending low over the small pans, seeing the toes come up clean through the brown water, clean for school" (164). The visible presence of the "brown" dirt, a marker of class

inferiority, triggers their anxiety about being different. This anxiety compounds with each instance of alienation and, racialization. They are, of course, still white and can literally wash the brown pigment from their skin, but their access to the privileges of whiteness continuously shifts based on their proximity to dirt throughout the novel, undermining the children's ability to better their economic situation through education. In focusing this scene on the children's racial consciousness, Babb's novel demonstrates how early racial discourses of hygiene take effect and how even very young individuals pick up on the power of dirt as a central force of alienation and differentiation.

Finally, the Dunnes are racialized through the threat of forced sterilization.[28] Julia recounts to Milt, "Frieda was telling about a bunch of club women who want to have us all sterilized […] they want to fix us like horses. Just good for work" (*Whose Names* 170). Here, by revealing the rumor that forced sterilization is being considered as an approach to population control for the "Okies," despite their whiteness, Babb draws parallels between the threat of this experience of white "Okie" women and the lived experience of women of color (particularly Black women) who, as Dorothy Roberts argues in her foundational book *Killing the Black Body* have historically been and continue to be most targeted by eugenic policies of forced sterilization (4).[29] The threats of segregation and sterilization Babb depicts through

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[28] In this instance, I specifically use the term "racial hygiene" rather than "racial discourses of hygiene" because forced sterilization more directly fits within the pseudoscientific ideology of eugenics. While racial discourses of hygiene can encourage and/or be used to justify acts of racial hygiene (as is the case in this scene of Babb's novel), not all instances of such discourses are used specifically to further the eradication of a specific group of people.

[29] Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body* is a deep dive into the many state-sanctioned ways Black women's reproductive freedom has been manipulated and outright denied "from

Julia draw a parallel between her potential future and the experiences of women of color, providing an even greater incentive for white Okies to differentiate themselves and reassert their whiteness through personal hygiene. Though the Dunne family ultimately prioritizes multi-racial working-class solidarity over asserting their whiteness, they always have the possibility of solidifying their whiteness with upward mobility and through acts of hygiene, unlike the other farm workers of color they encounter in the text. In this sense, Babb's novel diverges from historical reality, in which white Okies often leaned into the color line, doing whatever they could to distinguish themselves from workers of color within the existing racial hierarchy (Battat 62).[30] *Whose Names*, therefore, imagines a world in which white workers learn, throughout the course of the novel, to put their energy into organizing across racial and ethnic lines rather than into reifying the racial hierarchy for their own gain.

The racialization and associated alienation the Okies experience socially is reinforced structurally through the actions of absentee growers, who seek to divide the migrant farm workers by race and discourage them from organizing. Upon moving to California, as noted

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slave masters' economic stake in bonded women's fertility to the racist strains of early birth control policy to sterilization abuse of Black women during the 1960s and 1970s to the current campaign to inject Norplant and Depo-Provera in the arms of Black teenagers and welfare mothers" (4).

[30] Battat explains that historically, Okies did "clash" with African American workers when "faced with the prospect of sending their children to integrated schools" or when the competition for jobs increased economic insecurity (62-63). Yet, Battat points out that while white Okie workers did often cling to their whiteness over solidarity across racial lines, "A monolithic understanding of 'whiteness' fails to explain why unions integrated before other institutions, for example, or the vilification of white migrants in California" (63).

above, the Dunne family and other white farm workers are thrust into a much more racially and ethnically diverse working environment. Babb's cast of non-Okie farm workers in the California fields includes a diversity of non-white individuals, mirroring the reality of the California fields of the 1930s, which were occupied largely by Mexican and Filipino laborers (Wixon 14). In some cases, growers were eager to replace farm workers of color, who had more experience with organized labor, with newly displaced Okies who were desperate, unorganized, and willing to work for lower wages (14). In Babb's novel, this initially has the effect of further incentivizing the Okies to invest in their own whiteness through hygiene rather than band together for workers' rights. Understanding that many white farm workers will fall prey to racial discourses of hygiene and attempt to use individual hygiene as a means to distinguish themselves from farm workers of color, crop growers and other middle-upper-class white Californians in *Whose Names* take advantage of this desperation by further racializing the white workers.

Dividing the working class by race magnifies the power of the growers and banks within a system of racial capitalism. The representation of this dynamic in *Whose Names* parallels Babb's more general concerns expressed in her field notes for the Farm Security Administration upon which much of the novel was based. In reference to these notes, Battat points out: Babb "was troubled by the prejudice of white migratory workers in California, particularly because the farm owners [aka growers] manipulated these views to keep their workers divided" (62). In her novel, Babb expands upon these growers' tactics by showing how this dynamic is enabled through the weaponization of individual hygiene. Once in California, the Dunnes often find themselves forced into squatters' camps on private land without permission, into growers' camps on privately-owned land with permission but often at a fee, or if they were "lucky," into FSA camps subsidized by the government with better sanitation. At one point, the Dunne family is forced out of a squatter's camp and into a

growers' camp, which further endangers them and the other farm workers. First, these camps tie their shelter to their labor, undermining their ability to organize against labor violations because of the constant threat of eviction. Second, the camp structure allows the growers to profit further from the farm workers who are already grossly underpaid. Third, it gives the growers more control over the farm workers' access to sanitation and hygiene. As Babb reports in both her field notes and *Whose Names*, growers' camps sometimes charged farm workers for tents or electricity and had "the poorest kind of toilet" (*On the Dirty Plate Trail* 65). All of these factors are designed to keep the farm workers vulnerable, dirty, disorganized, and fearful of losing proximity to whiteness, and as Milt eventually notices, segregated by race. This camp organization is an attempt to incentivize white Okies and other white laborers to chase their access to the full benefits of whiteness through hygiene rather than unite with farm workers of color over shared experiences of environmental injustice and exploitation.

As in the case of Mrs. Long's floor, Babb uses irony to highlight how growers' weaponize hygiene to undermine workers' collective power and threaten their ability to survive. Ironically, it is under the false pretenses of concern for proper sanitation and public health that the growers subject the farmworkers to increasingly dirty and environmentally hazardous living conditions and attempt to divide them further through discourses of hygiene. The Dunnes directly experience this exploitation strategically disguised as growers' concern for workers' sanitation and safety when they are kicked out of their squatter camp. When the Dunne family gets forced to move once again because of their decision to strike, their camp is posted with a "notice" demanding that all the workers "move off the property or return to the fields" (*Whose Names* 192). Despite the fact that "About half of the men and women went back to work," the Dunnes refuse to cross the picket line and, thus, are evicted. Through this eviction, in combination with the ban on squatter camps allegedly enforced "on the basis of

stricter health rules," the Dunnes are uprooted again (192). Their refusal to scab means "There was nothing they could do, so they began loading their belongings into their cars and trucks. They stood there a little while when they were ready, wondering where to go. The health ordinance would not permit them to camp on open land. They had no money to rent a space in town" (198). The migrant farm workers' ability to maintain basic hygiene is actually compromised under the guise of "stricter health rules" from the growers, who ultimately have no concern for workers' sanitation and only wish to capitalize off of what little the workers have left. Their belongings are physically thrown from their tents and into the dirt as Frieda, their neighbor, notes: "Look at this mess […] Everything will be full of dirt" (197). Not only does their eviction result in their belongings being covered in dirt, the rationale for kicking the laborers out of the camp suggests that it is the workers themselves that create hazardous living conditions, not the poor wages and grower-owned housing that keeps them in a dirty state of abject poverty. Through this scene, Babb exposes how growers reinforce systems of environmental injustice, by displacing and trapping workers in dirt and poverty all under the auspices of a "health ordinance." The dirtiness that results ironically from alleged concern for public health further fuels growers' ability to label the Okies as inherently dirty, inferior, and expendable in similar but not identical ways to their Mexican, Filipino, Black, and Japanese coworkers; the hope of escaping dirt and, thus, the physical marker of their racialization through hygiene is only available to white workers.

When the marginalization of farm workers at the hands of growers' eviction policies doesn't entirely divide workers by race or stamp out the power of organized labor, the county steps in to force the migrants to either work or leave. The narrator notes that protests from the remaining striking workers who are left with nowhere to live, forces the county to provide them with a plot of land to establish camp. However, the county officials strategically choose a plot that will flood as the weather shifts, using nature to inevitably force the workers to

move again. Through the voice of the unnamed narrator, Babb once again highlights the effect this migratory existence has on the workers' access to hygiene: "the continuous walking broke the dry surface of the earth and left deep fine dirt underfoot, which rose up in a mist and settled in the tents. The floors of the tents also became soft and dusty; there was no water to spare for sprinkling them down" (*Whose Names* 200). The narrator adds that "Of course, there were other means of preserving migratories as such" including "a particular system of bookkeeping, ordained to keep migratory workers from registering and voting" (200). By keeping a database of farm workers' license numbers, growers work together to make sure farm workers wouldn't be employed in the county for more than six months at a time, the time necessary to register to vote in the county. If a worker was approaching the six-month employment mark within the county and was searching for work with another grower, the collective growers' records "showed he should be on his way to another county" (200). This is another way, at the county-wide political level, that Okies and fellow migrant farm workers experienced voter suppression and further alienation from the benefits of citizenship, as well as keep them displaced and dirty.

The sanitation rules established by the growers ultimately prevent basic hygiene for farm workers and serve racial capitalism by generating greater profits all under the guise of public health concern. Even when the Dunne family is employed and actively working—before the strike begins—their access to hygiene is purposefully suppressed by growers' rules. While setting up their temporary home at one grower's camp, the Dunne family is told that they can't live in their own tent because there is a sanitation rule that prevents it. In reality, that rule is put in place in order for the entity in charge of the camps to make more money off of the impoverished farm workers: "'We offered to live in our own tent,' Milt said, 'but you got some kind of 'sanitary' rule so's you can get the six dollars a month lights. That it?' (*Whose Names* 172). This forces the family to spend money unnecessarily on a tent

provided by the camp instead of on goods they need to survive and that would provide some small level of critical hygiene. Thus, the push for individual hygiene is both an attempt at distracting individuals from the systems of oppression they face, as well as a way to marginalize them further in a very concrete material way. Here, through Milt, Babb's novel demonstrates the way that American liberal individualism serves those in power in a racial capitalist system by focusing the responsibility of environmental injustice on vulnerable, working-class individuals' actions. In doing so, banks, growers, and large-scale farmers are able to co-opt sanitation in a performance of care so they can continue to exploit laborers and amass wealth all while destroying the environment. Thus, Babb's novel paints a critical picture of the ways in which the federal government distorts and co-opts environmental justice initiatives—a federal tactic employed to this day—in order to uphold a racial capitalist system that depends upon the very environmental injustice it claims to combat.[31]

[31] In their article, "Marketisation of Environmental Justice," Tianna Bruno and Wendy Jepson highlight one example of how the state has coopted grassroots environmental justice efforts for the benefit of industry under the false guise of public health concern. Specifically, they argue that U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Environmental Justice Showcase Communities (EJSC) programme project in Port Arthur, TX reinforces "advanced inequality, soft regulation, and structural racism" by adhering to "neoliberal principles" that put the burden of change on communities that bear the brunt of environmental injustice rather on industrial polluters. They suggest that similar dynamics are at play in other federal approaches to environmental justice that attempt to mitigate with "market-based interventions" rather than combatting industrial pollution (288). Laura Pulido, in her article titled "Geographies of race and ethnicity II," argues that "the state is deeply invested in *not* solving the environmental racism gap because it would be too costly and disruptive to

Despite moving to California in search of better work and opportunities, the Okies cannot escape the class and racial undertones of the dirt, dust, and grime that continue to plague them; however, armed with their tools of resistance to the banks and other structural sources of corrupt power in Oklahoma, the Okie women in the novel recognize that individual cleanliness will not fix the structural issues that keep them and their neighbors and coworkers of color in a constant state of abject poverty and starvation. Instead, it is the shift of various women characters' (both Okie and non-Okie) from the private to public sphere of labor and/or political organizing that inspires the other white farm workers' turn toward multiracial class consciousness in the novel. Through close interaction with the racializing forces of dust, these women begin to understand what Battat labels "the interlocking forces of their [the "Okies'"] identity as white citizens, racist attitudes, and racial privilege" (62). Dust facilitates their economic downturn and marks them with the temporarily inescapable Africanist presence of dark material. However, this same dust and dirt eventually forces them to realize that despite their privileges of whiteness, they have more shared stakes with their Black, Filipino, Mexican, and Japanese coworkers than they do with crop growers or bank owners.

Due to the Dunne family's economic desperation and despite Milt's fervent resistance to the idea, Julia moves from a private realm of domestic cleaning to working in the public sphere of the fields. Instead of becoming anxious about the dirty tasks and her increasing distance from the domestic work of cleaning, Julia "feels empowered by wage work" (*Whose*

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industry, the larger political system, and the state itself. Instead, the state has developed numerous initiatives in which it goes through the motions, or, 'performs' regulatory activity, especially participation (London, Sze and Lievanos, 2008; Kohl, 2015), without producing meaningful change" (529).

Names 60). Similarly, Frieda, the Dunne's neighbor who joined them on their journey to California, is also separated from the domestic sphere of labor and hygiene when she is arrested for her radical ideas about unions, striking, and workers' rights. One of the more detailed initial descriptions of Frieda comes from Mr. Burdik her neighbor and love interest, who is attracted to her attention to hygiene saying she is "a fine girl […] Sensible and clean as a pin. I like a clean woman" (207). However, when Frieda's beliefs about labor rights land her in jail, Mr. Burdik explains that jail is "no place for a woman" (208). Frieda's incarceration for her ideas about fair working conditions in the fields results in her forced removal from home and placement in jail where she cannot participate in domestic cleaning. Comprehending the stakes for all farm workers, she ultimately privileges labor activism over cleanliness because she understands that the dirt is not an inherent characteristic of racial difference or laziness, but rather the effect of the institutional disenfranchisement of the working class. Therefore, she puts her efforts into structural change over individual hygiene. Ultimately, Julia's and Frieda's separation from the private sphere of domestic labor allows them to define themselves outside of false notions of domestic purity and gendered labor. This is not to say that domestic labor cannot also be the valuable productive work of resistance. However, Julia and Frieda demonstrate that focusing solely on domestic hygiene leads them into an endless cycle of futile individualism and hinders multi-racial solidarity.

Women's movement to the public sphere facilitates the other white farm workers' shift from personal hygiene to striking alongside the farm workers of color. The dust and dirt against which the Dunne family desperately attempts to define their whiteness becomes the material that inspires multi-ethnic working-class solidarity and resistance to environmental injustice. When the women characters relinquish domestic hygiene to work in the fields, they recognize that their economic and racial otherness is bound to systemic injustice rather than individual cleanliness. Though powerful growers may use dirt as fuel for racial essentialism,

anthropologist Mary Douglas explains, "dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness […] The danger which is risked by boundary transgression [of dirt and pollution] is power" (162). By transgressing the boundary between the private and public spheres of labor, the white Okie women of Babb's novel are separated from American liberal ideals of individual hygiene and brought even closer to dirt, forcing them to reckon with not only their own treatment, but the treatment of their coworkers of color. Rather than universalize the proletariat with her depictions of multiracial class consciousness and solidarity, however, Babb's novel explores the nuances of different proximity to whiteness and economic/environmental uplift. While their gritty material connection to land and labor empowers the Okies and their fellow workers to defy the racial division of the working class, this ideological shift does not require the erasure of racial and ethnic difference.

Although the dirt initially threatens to divide the workers by race, working women are pivotal in shifting this dynamic. When struggling to survive in the California labor camps, Milt demonstrates compassion for non-white farm workers when he complains about the storekeepers charging Mexican laborers for items they never purchased, leading to compounding debt. Yet, he still struggles to see the ways in which the farm owners and bankers attempt to divide the working class by race until Julia, who has now begun working in the fields, calls him out for his ideological inconsistencies. Julia points out to Milt, "You were just growling about the Mexicans the other day working for nothing" (*Whose Names* 180). Julia's comment spurs Milt to then consider that "I reckon they work for nothing for the same reason we do," re-routing the blame to the actual perpetrators of injustice, "rich bastards" who "can't make enough sweating the blood out of us" (180). In this scene, Julia dispels Milt's inconsistent empathy by pushing back against his racist rhetoric that characterizes Mexican farm workers as job thieves. Such shifts in racial and class

consciousness are inspired by women's work in the fields and increasing distance from the racialized rhetoric of hygiene.

Julia's critique of Milt's understanding of racialized labor shapes his growing class consciousness and his approach to multi-racial and multi-ethnic organizing. While working in the fields one day, Milt meets Garrison, a Black farm worker. Speaking with Garrison leads Milt to reflect back on the experience of being called a "white nigger" and thinks to himself "We're both picking cotton for the same hand-to-mouth wages. I'm no better'n he [Garrison] is; he's no worse" (185). On first glance, Milt's expression of class solidarity through "sameness" with Garrison could be read as an example of colorblind racism. Yet, Milt is also aware of the racialized power differential between himself and Garrison. For instance, when Garrison introduces himself, Milt is surprised, but relieved that Garrison does not address him as "suh" (185) and also realizes in this particular interaction that he hasn't met Garrison at camp before because Black farm workers' as Garrison points out, "got a camp of our own three miles away," noting that they are segregated from non-Black workers' camps, making it even harder for them to organize for better conditions (185). The dirty conditions into which the Dunnes are forced and through which they are racialized both present a starting point for white workers to empathize with workers of color, while also helping them to better understand their own privilege within the racial hierarchy upon which capitalism depends.

Part of depicting the nuances of the white Okies' positioning within the racial hierarchy includes presenting a much more demographically accurate picture of farm workers and labor struggle than other white-authored texts of the 1930s. As Battat points out, while John Steinbeck's Dust Bowl fiction largely "erases workers of color," Babb's work (both her FSA field notes and *Whose Names*) "recognizes Mexican and Filipino leadership" in labor struggles (Battat 62). For instance, the strike in *Whose Names* is led by a Filipino worker named Pedro. Additionally, the novel moves beyond the politics of representation by resisting

popular racist depictions of scab laborers. Historically, as literary scholar Mark Noon explains, "In some of the most significant radical fiction of the early twentieth century, black workers—more than any other group—are curiously cast in the villainous role of 'scab'" (429). Babb's novel addresses this issue head on through Garrison, who is hesitant to join the strike without the presence of a clear labor organizer. Rather than demonize Garrison or depict him as a scab who threatens the power of a strike, Milt "found himself drawn to Garrison's logic" (186) and sympathizes with Garrison's statement: "I need this job powerful bad" (187). Milt's reaction of empathy rather than judgement seems to be influenced by his understanding of the specific vulnerabilities of Black farm workers like Garrison.[32]

Finally, though not prominently featured in the novel, the organization of the strike is also aided by the labor of women, in particular Garrison's wife Phoebe. Despite his hesitance, it is Garrison and Phoebe who open their home to labor organizers for a meeting about a

[32] Unsurprisingly, Babb made similar observations about the intricacies of multiracial organizing in her field notes. One section of her notes in particular seems to have been the inspiration for the scene at the Garrisons' household described above. Babb recorded, "Be sure to put in novel about Negro committee with woman chairman—and conversation. (Suggestions to organizer instead of relief man.) Also, first meeting of white Texans with Negroes—group goes by house at night to pick him up for meeting. They like him. "He's a fine fellar.' He "kept them laughing but he ain't just bein' funny—he's always sayin' something serious right in the fun. Notice it?." (*On the Dirty Plate Trail* 87)
While her field notes are brief, they seem to reflect the characters Phoebe (Madame Chairman) and Garrison. Yet, the novel deals with the racial dynamics of Milt's encounters with Garrison with even more nuance by illustrating the enhanced vulnerability and segregation faced by Black workers in comparison to the white migrant Okies.

potential strike at the end of the novel. When Milt arrives Garrison introduces Phoebe who then explains to Milt that the other men present are "our friends here" among whom include a tattered man named John Lacy and a "Filipino boy" named Pedro, both labor organizers (193). At one point in the conversation, Lacy reverses the gender roles between himself and Phoebe when she offers to get a glass of milk for his stomach troubles. In response, he tells her "I'll get it," leaving Phoebe to participate in the conversation about the potential strike. Though not a fully-formed or organized union, this multi-racial group of picketers and labor leaders value and rely on Phoebe's contributions as she occasionally reminds "them of something they had forgotten" (195). As a respected member of the group Phoebe even earns the name "Madame Chairman" (195). As brief and subtle as these moments are, Phoebe's participation, especially as a Black woman in the labor organizing meeting, demonstrates a refreshing and necessary shift in the worn-out trope of whitewashed and masculinized literary representations of labor movements in the U.S. Unlike Steinbeck's portrayal of Rose of Sharon in *The Grapes of Wrath,* for example, who is reduced to her reproductive capabilities and the related sustenance that comes from her gendered body, Phoebe's intellectual participation in labor rights activism is valued separately from any biological capacity to bear children or clean the home. The meeting at Garrison's house demonstrates a space of multi-racial and gender-inclusive class consciousness not predicated on ignoring difference, but rather on appreciating the value of each member's unique perspective.

Conclusion

Rather than create a cast of white characters unrepresentative of reality, or demonize workers of color as scabs, *Whose Names* presents a story of migrant workers of various ethnic and racial backgrounds struggling together for better conditions. While the Dunne family, in particular Julia and Milt, are the central characters of the novel, Babb breaks the mold of

many male, white-authored working-class texts of the 30s through her cast of labor organizers: Garrison, Phoebe, Pedro, and a young girl, Martha Webb, who is sent by the union to help with the strike. Through Milt and Julia's increasing consciousness, Babb paints a picture of the racism, sexism, and added danger faced by the most vulnerable workers. *Whose Names* also differs from many U.S. proletarian novels by ending with a lost strike instead of a victory. By continuously jailing, threatening, and beating striking workers while hiring scabs to take their place, the growers win the strike, forcing the farm workers to migrate again. Of all the workers jailed, the most marginalized are also those who face the most jail time. Garrison and his fellow worker Barth are held longer than the other workers because "they had called in the union when they saw the men were going to strike without being organized" (*Whose Names* 215). Pedro, and Martha are held longer as well because of their role as union organizers. Babb's choice to cast the most vulnerable characters as the fiercest leaders of the fight against the growers challenges the false history of heroic labor struggle as predominantly white and male and the racist trope of non-white scab labor. Though there are Marxist through lines throughout the novel espoused by workers like Max, these ideological approaches are complemented by Babb's nuanced depictions of multiethnic/multiracial class consciousness that grapple with difference rather than erase it.

Attending to hygiene in *Whose Names* not only illuminates one of the main mechanisms by which the white Okies are racialized, but this approach also reveals the tools characters such as Milt and Julia use to resist racial discourses of hygiene for the sake of multi-racial class consciousness. This unity allows the characters to move beyond liberal individualist values of personal hygiene as investment in their own whiteness to instead critique and fight structural environmental injustice led by workers of color. Examining these modes of resistance in Babb's novel provides useful clues for fighting racist, individualist approaches to public health that seek to fracture the working class. The forms of resistance

and solidarity-building across racial and ethnic divides in *Whose Names* also speak to Babb's ability to illustrate the complexity of working-class struggle, making it an invaluable part of the history of U.S. working-class literature.

Chapter 3: Health and Hygiene in Harlem: Environmental Justice in Ann Petry's *The Street*

Introduction

In Ann Petry's 1946 novel, *The Street,* dirt functions as both an environmental hazard and a social hazard. By illustrating dirty materiality, its social dangers, and the failed attempts to mitigate it through domestic cleaning and personal care, Petry's text works to expose dirt as an environmental justice issue that cannot be solved with liberal individualist ideals of individual hygiene. Though she includes the perspectives of various minor characters, the primary way that Petry exposes the limits of hygiene as a means to individual racial and economic uplift is through the perspective of the primary protagonist, Lutie Johnson.

The opening scene of *The Street* describes the wind that stirs up the filth of 116th Street in Harlem, the home of Lutie Johnson: "It did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street. It found all the dirt and dust and grime on the sidewalk and lifted it up so that the dirt got into their noses, making it difficult to breathe; the dust got into their eyes and blinded them; and the grit stung their skins" (2). A repeating motif throughout the novel, the wind agitates the filth of the street, forcing Lutie to reckon with her material conditions of poverty and environmental harm largely facilitated by racism. The dirty wind not only physically threatens the Harlem residents' health by restricting their breathing and sight, it also, as literary scholar Alan Wald notes, is Petry's way of using "'naturalist imagery' to reify social oppression" (Wald 126). I argue that the wind not only reifies social oppression, but the dirt is stirs up is a direct material product of social oppression in the form of environmental injustice. Petry's novel exposes the effects of environmental injustice through the protagonist Lutie's and the text's minor characters' interactions with racial discourses of hygiene. While Lutie often gets caught in the false promises of uplift embedded in racial discourses of hygiene, she is acutely aware of the tension between these promises

and her own reality as a working-class Black single mother. Additionally, Petry's depiction of environmental injustice avoids determinism. The novel's representations of dirt, dust, grime, and garbage, when depicted from the perspectives of disparate working-class Black women like Lutie, Min, and Mrs. Hedges, illuminate that environmental injustice is perpetuated by racial capitalism, rather than, as popular racist notions of dirt and disease falsely suggest, caused by Black people's inherent dirtiness.

Discourses surrounding hygiene in *The Street* demonstrate capitalism's dependence on racism and the unequal distribution of environmental harm. Several literary scholars, Scott Hicks, Jane Haladay and Scott Hicks, and Hsuan L. Hsu have argued that Petry's novel should be read through an ecocritical lens and/or as a text of environmental justice. I also concur that *The Street* is an environmental justice novel and that such a reading must examine discourses of hygiene as the primary means through which the text deals with issues of environmental injustice. I build off the work of environmental studies scholar, David N. Pellow and historian, Carl Zimring's work to assert discourses of hygiene as a mechanism of racial capitalism and American liberal individualism in *The Street.* The subtle yet consistent references to hygiene in the text, I argue, allowed Petry to participate in exposing federally sanctioned environmental racism to a large readership without attracting the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation during a time of heightened censorship.

Borrowing from American Studies scholar Terrion Williamson's articulation of "Black social life," I examine what happens to a reading of Black women's relationship to dirt, "dirty work," and hygiene in *The Street* if we examine the ways Black women characters "stake a claim" to dirt and dirty work rather than wholeheartedly reject them (Williamson 22). Minor characters like Min, Mrs. Hedges, and, occasionally even Lutie, disarm discourses of hygiene by "claiming" their relationship to dirt rather than by rejecting it or distancing themselves from it through acts of individual hygiene. Through this claim-staking process,

they are not only able to expose the structures of racial capitalism that fuel environmental injustice, but also find ways to generate community beyond the parameters of racial capitalism. Williamson articulates that "Black social life is, fundamentally, the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence but is the rich reminder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms, traditions, and ways of being (9). By highlighting these disparate Black female perspectives, Petry's text re-figures Black women's relationship to hygiene, demonstrating their ability embrace Black social life and to thrive not *as a reaction t*o but, rather, *in spite of* racial capitalism.

Critical to unpacking Petry's use of hygiene is understanding its relationship to capitalism and racism. Environmental racism functions both as a tool and product of racial capitalism by marking of people of color as expendable ("Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies" 230), exploiting the labor of those marked expendable, and relegating these exploited individuals to neighborhoods and workplaces most heavily burdened by environmental toxins. Petry's text illustrates the materiality of environmental injustice and its relationship to racism and capitalism through the focalization of various voices of working-class Black individuals' experiences with waste, dirt, and grime. By revealing the conditions of environmental injustice and the material as well as interpersonal effects these conditions have on the characters of her novel, Petry establishes a complex critique of discourses of hygiene, environmental injustice, and racial capitalism.

In order to reveal this critique, I pay special attention to various characters' interactions with dirt, dirty work, and racial discourses of hygiene in the novel. Such a reading reveals the sedimented layers of class, race and gender oppression and the concurrent and repeating historical layers of resistance waged by working-class Black women. Such an approach, guided by Robinson, centers the expression of "Black social life" as a means to

preserving the ontological totality of Black existence, rather than reading Petry's fiction merely as a response to the evils of capitalism.[33] In a 1950 essay titled "The Novel as Social Criticism," Petry explores both the value and limitations of a strictly Marxist approach to writing. She explains "The novel, like all other forms of art, will always reflect the political, economic, and social structure of the period in which it was created" (32). Yet, Petry also notes in the same essay that "not all of the concern about the shortcomings of society originated with Marx" (33). Here, Petry's discussion of the novel foreshadows the work of Black Studies scholars like Robinson, who expose the limitations of relying on a universalized proletariat. This approach risks erasing not only difference but also modes of survival from within Black culture that originated before capitalism ever existed. Such an approach is particularly important when examining contributions to the Black Radical Tradition—which includes, I argue, *The Street*—because so often contributions of from Black writers of the Literary Left such as Petry are framed as reactions to capitalism and the legacy of slavery. By presenting the points of view of a wide variety of characters, Petry's

[33] Robinson, argues that the Black Radical Tradition "cast doubt on the extent to which capitalism penetrated and re-formed social life and on its ability to create entirely new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness embedded in culture" (170). This is not to say that texts like those Robinson examines, or Petry's novel don't present important radical critiques of capitalism's deadly affects, but instead that Black labor is not shaped only by capitalism. Black labor carries with it "African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics of habits, beliefs, and morality" (122). Applying this understanding to *The Street* allows for a reading practice that frees the text of study, in this case, *The Street*, from the "intellectual weight and authority of the official European version of the past" (Robinson 170).

text illustrates the different registers of the effects of racial discourses of hygiene based on race and gender. For, as literary scholar Clare Virginia Eby posits, "By embracing the unique perspectives of secondary characters, *The Street* rejects the notion that oppressed people have uniform experiences" (36). In doing so, Petry refuses to universalize the working class, which, as she knew from her activism and journalism, was not a historical reality while also demonstrating ways of preserving "Black social life" in spite of racial capitalism. These disparate characters' accounts of dirt, dirty work, and hygiene in *The Street* allow us to read Black women's resistance not strictly as a reaction to racial capitalism, but, instead, as an ongoing effort to preserve the collective being of working-class Black women.

Ann Petry and the History of Hygiene: Writing in the Backdrop of Wartime Anxiety

While discourses of hygiene affected all working-class Americans, the stakes of individual hygiene were and are higher for Black people and, in particular, Black women. There were many ways racial discourses of hygiene diverged from general discourses of hygiene within the U.S., particularly during the Civil War and Reconstruction. As historian Suellen Hoy explains, "Cleanliness had first been wrapped in a mantle of patriotism by the United States Sanitary Commission and the Freedmen's Bureau during the Civil War" as hygiene became tied to Union victory (89). Emancipation increased the pressures of hygiene further for freed slaves, since it was directly tied to social acceptance: "cleanliness […] became a route to citizenship, to becoming American. It was, in fact, confrontation with racial and cultural outsiders that transformed cleanliness from a public health concern into a moral and patriotic one" (87). The idea of cleanliness as a patriotic duty and a manifestation of racial anxiety was further fueled by medical studies that showed higher rates of diseases such as syphilis, leprosy, and tuberculosis among African Americans as compared to whites

(Brown 119).[34] These figurations of hygiene and disease combined with the lack of attention paid to structural racism's role in disease rates led to the "racist constructions that posited that white people were somehow cleaner than non-white people" (Zimring 3). Despite the fact that Black physicians "stressed the role of class, education, and environment in the cause and solution" of diseases, white doctors often looked to race as the prominent factor (Brown 107). These types of assertions of race science from white medical professionals and the resulting racial discourses of hygiene became part of what "defined white supremacist thinking" in American society (Zimring 3).

Additionally, Petry's novel *The Street* was written and is set during World War II and was published a year after the end of the war, a time when the threat of disease to soldiers on the frontline was once again brought to the forefront of American consciousness. Anxiety

[34] In her essay "Purity and Danger in Color: Notes on Germ Theory, and the Semantics of Segregation, 1885-1915," JoAnne Brown argues that "Health concerns were central not only to the violent and shameful segregationist rhetoric of white supremacy, *but to its most thoughtful critics*" and that the "public health 'crusade' against tuberculosis" that started in 1888 "translated both racial and medical precepts from an environmental-hereditarian vocabulary into a contagionist idiom (emphasis hers 102). Brown reveals that while segregation is a term used mainly to describe processes of social separation based on race, like Jim Crow Laws, the term had medical and religious meaning that "was in part hygienic: 'Clean *segregated* from all kinds of unclenliness'" (OED qtd. In Brown 116). Just as Brown argues that the use of this "contagionist idiom" gave segregation (formerly a medical term) its racial meaning, I argue that this "contagionist idiom" also shaped the racial discourses of hygiene that arose as a reaction to racialized constructions of disease.

about disease as a threat to American patriotism reared its ugly head as it did during the Civil War through the racialization of disease and the circulation of racial discourses of hygiene exemplified in public health projects like the racist Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the more progressive Negro Venereal Disease Education Project.[35] Black women's experience of these challenges was heightened since many had always been forced to work both the private sphere of domestic labor as well as the public sphere of industrial labor to make ends meet. These conditions, in combination with segregated housing, subjected Black women to racist assumptions that they were "dirty and diseased" (Hoy 163). This increased pressure on Black women to maintain a level of domestic hygiene that was difficult to balance for most including women like Petry's protagonist, Lutie Johnson, of *The Street*. Through Lutie and other minor characters of *The Street*, Petry exposes the absurdity, danger, and futility of racial discourses of hygiene, which figure cleanliness not only as a means to economic mobility, but also as a mechanism of racial uplift.

[35] Given that Petry's novel was published in 1946, it impossible to account for racial discourses of hygiene without considering the Negro Project (or Negro Venereal Disease Education Project) and Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment that arose in the U.S. during the 1940s. Alankaar Sharma discusses this history in his article "Racialized Disease: The Story of the Negro Project of American Social Hygiene Association Against the Backdrop of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment." Sharma establishes the anit-racist approach of the Negro Project, which attended to the ways poverty and racism influenced the spread of disease in contrast to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-1972), which was "premised on the belief that syphilis manifested differently in black men as compared to white men due to what it considered to be the fundamental difference between white and black bodies" (258).

Ann Petry was no stranger to racial discourses of hygiene that asserted cleanliness as a staple of American identity. Perhaps one of the most prominent examples of Petry's exposure to such value systems is the brief time she spent studying at the Hampton Normal Agricultural Institute in Virginia. Petry shares her alma mater, Hampton, with the famous Black leader, Booker T. Washington who attended decades previous. Understanding Washington's contribution to racial discourses of hygiene which he learned at Hampton lends context, then, to Petry's treatment of hygiene in her novel. Born a slave and emancipated in 1865, Washington became a leader of African American civil rights by dedicating his life to racial uplift through personal hygiene. He took up the crusade of Black cleanliness for the objective of racial uplift while attending Hampton then run by General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a former commander of Civil War Black troops (Hoy 89). Armstrong was a firm believer in proper hygiene as a sign of civilization and made it his goal to teach Black students "habits of regularity" and cleanliness, to help "civilize" them (90). Washington was so inspired by the education he received at Hampton and the potential he believed it had to transform the lives of newly emancipated slaves that he opened his own school, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, modeled after Hampton. He asserted that "Armstrong's 'gospel of the toothbrush' […] was part of the Tuskegee creed" (91). Aware of the common assumptions that Black people were inherently dirty and uncivilized, Washington claimed that "while African-Americans might be excused their poverty and lack of comforts [post-emancipation], they would not be forgiven their dirt" (qtd. In Hoy 91). This anxiety about the link between personal hygiene and American belonging fed racialized discourses of hygiene within the Black community. Such concern over hygiene as a path to the rights of citizenship and a future of social acceptance appears throughout *The Street.*

Given Hampton's legacy, it is not surprising that Petry did not attend long. While there, she did not take up the crusade of Black personal hygiene as Washington did and,

instead, “actively engaged in protests at Hampton,” eventually leaving after a year and a half (Griffin 83). Although Petry did not publicly discuss her decision to leave the school, her daughter Elisabeth commented that “Petry was ‘dissatisfied with her courses in meal preparation and management of household expenses’ and wanted to learn more than the domestic sciences’” (Elisabeth Petry qtd. in Griffin 82-83). Thus, early on, Petry expressed a professional interest in venturing beyond the private sphere of domestic labor and into the public sphere of journalism, activism, acting, and writing. As literary scholar Jasmine Griffin notes, that inspired by his time at Hampton, “Washington later develop a disavowal of protest politics” (82-83). Unlike Washington, Petry did not find fulfillment in her education at Hampton since her approach to resisting institutionalized sexism and racism as reflected in her journalism, activism, and fiction was to combat systemic injustice at its core, rather than focus on individual or domestic hygiene. Seeking a much more politically active role for herself, Petry took a different route from Washington by directly confronting white supremacy and racial capitalism.

Although reluctant to claim affiliation to any political party, Petry’s fiction, journalism, and activist pursuits demonstrate her radical commitment to social justice for working-class Black women. I assert that if read through the combined lenses of Black Studies, new materialism, and environmental justice studies, *The Street* illustrates Petry’s commitment to social justice through her conscious effort to expose U.S. racial discourses of hygiene of the 1940s that enable and maintain the knowledge systems of racial capitalism. Highlighting these discourses reveals how cultural obsessions with hygiene shift the focus of blame from structural environmental injustice to individual cleanliness in service of capital. By exposing the futility of Black women’s investment in the individual pursuit of hygiene as a means to economic and racial uplift, Petry’s text resists the false promises of liberal

individualism *and* racial capitalism, presenting examples of alternate economic and social fulfillment rooted in the Black Radical Tradition and social life instead.

An Petry's *The Street* follows a young, single, working-class, African American mother, Lutie Johnson, as she moves from her and her husband's house to the home of a wealthy white family for whom she is a maid, and eventually to 116th street (the title street) in Harlem with her son Bub. Although the narrative is primarily focused on Lutie's story, the text includes perspectives of many minor characters such as the superintendent of Lutie's building, Jones, who becomes obsessed with seducing her and attempts to rape her; Min, a woman who lives with Jones and has been battered by many years of life as a maid for white people; Mrs. Hedges, another tenant of the building who runs a brothel out of her apartment; and Miss Rinner, Bub's white, racist school teacher, among others. Lutie seeks work as a singer in a nightclub band led by a man name Boots, who is employed by Junto, a friend of Mrs. Hedges and the owner of a local bar. The singing job is eventually revealed to be a ploy to get Lutie to sleep with Junto and Boots (a ploy partially orchestrated by Mrs. Hedges). Meanwhile, Jones orchestrates a ploy to have Bub arrested in order to have Lutie all to himself. In desperation to get Bub released from a shelter for delinquent boys, Lutie seeks out Boots's help and asks him to borrow money for Bub's bail. Boots agrees, but when Lutie goes to his apartment to pick up the cash, Junto is there. The men argue over who should get to have sex with Lutie, Boots kicks Junto out, and attempts to rape Lutie who then bludgeons Boots to death and escapes on a train to Chicago, pondering what will happen to her son Bub. Throughout the text, Petry details the material conditions of poverty, racism, and sexual violence experienced by residents of 116th Street in Harlem through the various perspectives of Lutie and the multiple minor characters mentioned above.

Destructive Dirt and Dirty Work in *The Street*

Much of *The Street* is devoted to making visible the specific conditions of poverty, racism, sexual violence, and abjection that mainly Lutie, but also other minor characters, experience on 116th Street in Harlem. The presence of abject material throughout the text is articulated in two main forms: dirt and dirty work. The instances in which characters encounter dirt outside of their hired jobs and domestic labor point to the limits of hygiene, whether it is part of a job in the public sphere or personal hygiene efforts, when attempting to combat environmental injustice. Similarly, Petry's depiction of various forms of dirty work, both domestic and public (a divide her text continuously destabilizes), illustrate both the futility of cleaning as a means to racial, economic, or social uplift and the injustice that results from the racial division of labor. Examining various characters' frustrated encounters with dirt and dirty work in *The Street* and the resulting anxiety surrounding racial discourses of hygiene demonstrates why Petry's novel should be read as an environmental justice novel that deconstructs the liberal individualist solutions to structural environmental injustice.

Though *The Street* begins with a description of the outdoor wind-swept dirt of 116th Street in Harlem, Lutie Johnson does not just battle outdoor "dust and grime;" abject materials also permeate her various homes throughout the text, presenting a nearly impossible task of maintaining a clean household. The stairs inside her building are "filthy, with wastepaper, cigarette butts, the discarded wrappings from packages of snuff, pink ticket stubs from the movie houses. On the landings there were empty gin and whiskey bottles" (12); the rooms of her 116th Street apartment emit a "heavy, sour smell of garbage" (16); the walls of the apartment show "finger marks and old stains" (19); and the rest of Harlem is filled with similar apartments that are "nothing but traps. Dirty, dark, filthy traps […] Dark little hallways. Stinking toilets" (73). Lutie's primary goal throughout the text is to escape these

conditions in order to create more opportunities for herself as well as her young son, Bub, by way of personal hygiene and escaping the confines of a racialized labor force.

Despite Lutie's efforts, however, Petry's text reveals the structural racism that stands in her way, and illustrates how the conditions of Black poverty are falsely framed as a result of the inherently dirty nature of Black people for their conditions of poverty. *The Street* achieves this through the focalization of a variety of disparate characters' perspectives and their engagement with racial discourses of hygiene. The chapter of the text that details Bub's white, middle-class teacher, Miss Rinner's account of teaching at a school in Harlem is one of the most striking examples of structural scientific racism that permeates the consciousness of white people in the text. The material ramifications of Bub's lack of access to healthy living conditions imprints every aspect of his life including his education. As an elementary school teacher assigned to Bub's school district in Harlem, Miss Rinner reflects that "this Harlem school contained a peculiarly offensive odor" (328). She then notes that she believes the odor to be connected to the specific food that these Harlem children consume: "'that fried smell'—identifying it as the rancid grease that had been used to cook pancakes, fish, pork chops" (328). But rather than recognize that the poverty that create such odors or that necessitates using rancid grease for cooking are the results of structural racism and environmental injustice, Miss Rinner takes an essentialist approach based in false race science: "She came to think of the accumulation of scents in her classroom with hate as 'the colored people's smell,' and then finally as the smell of Harlem itself—bold, strong, lusty, frightening" (328). As literary scholar Hsuan Hsu notes, "Miss Rinner's reactions to these smells thus represent the process of stigmatization whereby the effects of the racially uneven distribution of air are perceived to be a *racial fact*: not the smell of poorly maintained, segregated housing units, but 'the smell of Harlem itself'" ("Naturalist Smellscapes" 804, emphasis mine). This racist attribution of the odor as an inherent characteristic of people of

color reinforces her false assumptions not only about the idea that Black people are inherently dirty and smelly, but also plays into the racialized discourse of Black people being hypersexual and natural-born criminals. Additionally, such a racist understanding of the odor allows Miss Rinner to turn a blind eye to the structures of inequality that have created the living conditions for her students. Each of these assumptions feeds off one another creating an endless feedback loop of racial essentialism. David Pellow elaborates on this state-sanctioned cycle of violence, noting that "philosopher and critical race theorist Charles Mills argues that people of African descent are considered 'trash' by policy makers and institutions promoting discriminatory environmental policies because these populations are associated with filth, waste, and uncleanliness in the popular imagination—thus locating pollution in their communities actually makes cultural common sense" ("Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies" 230). Such an understanding of race then reinforces the idea that places like Harlem, since they are supposedly filled with inherently dirty, smelly people, are appropriate dumping grounds for present and future environmental waste as well.

Rather than address the structures of racial inequality that result in her students' material conditions, Miss Rinner attempts methods of olfactory hygiene by opening windows and "pressing a handkerchief saturated with eau de Cologne tight against her nose" (*The Street* 328). Both acts prove to be futile. She then fantasizes about a solution to the odor, yet, because of her refusal to acknowledge the uneven distribution of environmental resources and harm by race, this solution is destined to fail. Instead, "she dreamed of the day when she would be transferred to a school where the children were blond, blue-eyed little girls who arrived on time in the morning filled with orange juice, cereal and cream, properly cooked eggs, and glasses of milk […] they would wear starched pink dresses and smell faintly of lavender soap" (330). Miss Rinner's dream of escaping the children of Harlem reveals that not only does she believe dirtiness and malnourishment is a biologic characteristic of

Blackness, but she also believes that cleanliness is an inherent characteristic of individuals with blond hair and blue eyes, or, in other words, white children. Her attempt to rid the room and her nose of the smell is an investment in preserving her own whiteness not even through the process of cleaning, but a process of covering up the problem with new odors. Essential to the construction of her own whiteness, however, is an "other," the stench of Harlem, which positions the children as, as Hsu argues, "what Sarah Jaquette Ray (2013, 332) calls 'ecological others'" (804). Despite the fact that Miss Rinner is one of the only middle-class white people in Harlem in the text, in her own mind she is the pure moral standard defending the school against the ecological invasion of dirty non-white children. In figuring the children this way, Miss Rinner's thoughts reveal how the converging ideologies of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and race science generate the myth that victims of environmental injustice like the children are actually the cause of pollution. By presenting Miss Rinner's inner thoughts, Petry demonstrates the ways in which racialized discourses of hygiene are not only internalized by its victims, but also how such ideology is reinforced by middle-class white individuals in positions of authority for the sake of reifying their own claim to whiteness.

Like Miss Rinner, Lutie, also invests in forms of hygiene within her own home and within the public sphere of labor to seek financial and social security, yet she is far more aware of the conditions of poverty and racial violence that have created her living and working conditions. The racial division of labor that designates dirty, low-paying work to Black people limits their opportunities while also reinforcing the idea that Black people are inherently dirty and, thus, only fit for dirty work. The ability to maintain a clean home is further complicated by the fact that Lutie must manage underpaid and unpaid work within both the private and public spheres of labor that is often invisible or thankless. As Erin Battat notes, "Domestic labor produces not products but services, such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare, that are so quickly consumed so as to erase the domestic worker's labor" (Battat

109). This is especially true for Lutie, who, like many Black women, is hired on as a domestic worker in a white family's home, but is also the only caretaker of her son, Bub. Lutie's labor is at risk of being doubly invisible since one of her jobs early in the novel is paid domestic work, which is situated in a liminal space between private and public labor. This liminal position also precludes the benefits of unionization, since domestic workers are so often isolated as the sole housekeepers in private white residences. These conditions create, as Lutie expresses, a difficult bind that predisposes Black women like herself to poverty despite the enormous amount of labor they perform:

> The women work because the white folks give them jobs—washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families […] And what did it add up to? She pressed closer to the wall, ignoring the gray dust, the fringes of cobwebs heavy with grime and soot. Add it up. Bub, your kid—flashing smile, strong, straight back, sturdy legs, even white teeth, young, round face, smooth skin—he ends up in reform school because the women work. (389)

Yet, given the social and economic pressures of survival, Lutie has very little choice but to continue the dirty work of cleaning, whether it be in white people's houses, at a public laundry, or in her own home with very little prospect of upward mobility. The invisibility of Lutie's labor to those outside her home, then, further obscures the structures that make cleanliness particularly difficult in her Harlem apartment.

Struggling with the contradiction between her reality and the liberal promises of domestic hygiene as a path to American acceptance, Lutie reflects back on her life with her husband Jim when they used to take in state foster children, for which they received money from the government, to make ends meet: "It had been nothing but work, work, work—

morning, noon, and night—making bread, washing clothes and ironing them, looking after the children, and cleaning the house. The investigator used to compliment her, 'Mrs. Johnson, you do a wonderful job. This house and the children fairly shine'" (171). At first glance, the state investigator's words may be read as a compliment, but, as Lutie quickly reflects, "That wasn't half the story" since she "was feeding eight people on the money for five and squeezing out what amounted to rent money in the bargain" (171). The fact that the "children fairly shine" or that Lutie keeps the home clean, while she is commended for her adherence to white bourgeois principles of hygiene, does not ameliorate her family's struggle for survival. The cleanliness also allows the investigator to ignore the structures of inequality that plague Lutie's family by making their living situation seem sanitary and well-maintained. The responsibility of making up for the poverty and lack of resources, then, falls on Lutie rather than on the structures of the state that create and reinforce the uneven distribution of resources based on race. Thus, through Lutie's internal reflections about her and her family's poverty, Petry is able to illustrate the futility of individual hygiene as a path to social acceptance and upward mobility for Black women.

Lutie's pursuit of hygiene extends beyond her own home, into the mansion of one of her employers, the wealthy Chandler family, for whom she is a houseworker. Her time working for the Chandlers illustrates not only the dirty work that gets forced upon working-class Black women, but also how families like the Chandlers directly contribute to structures of environmental injustice. Lutie's reflections about her work for the Chandler family illustrate the close relationship between capital accumulation, and environmental injustice. The Chanders' entire fortune is dependent upon a racialized and class-based discourse of hygiene, since their disposable paper goods business is built on the production and sale of one-time-use paper products such as tissues, napkins, and paper towels. Their business is sustained through its ability to profit off of environmental injustice in three main ways: by

capitalizing on hygiene-based anxiety generated by events such as the Great Depression of the previous decade, by selling one-time-use products that necessitate continual financial investment from consumers and that serve as an ongoing source of waste, and by creating a pastoral suburban paradise that allows their family to remain remote from the communities impacted most strongly by environmental waste. The patriarch of the family and business-owner, Mr. Chandler, having witnessed the Great Depression of the previous decade, is well aware of the economic turmoil they avoided. Chandler secures his own wealth by taking advantage of hygiene-based anxiety during a time when dust and grime was sweeping across the Great Plains of the U.S., threatening environmental and economic security:

> because little Henry Chandler's father manufactured paper towels and paper napkins and paper handkerchiefs, why, even when times were hard, he could afford to hire a Lutie Johnson so his wife could play bridge in the afternoon while Lutie Johnson looked after Little Henry. Because, as Little Henry's father used to say, 'Even when times are hard, thank God, people have to blow their noses and wipe their hands and faces and wipe their mouths. Not quite so many as before, but enough so that I don't have to worry. (29)

This business in paper disposable hygiene goods allows the Chandler family to capitalize off of individual hygiene, and ensure continuous profit, which, in turn, creates more waste inevitably bound for places considered expendable, such as Harlem. The Chandler business depends both on the production of waste and the fear of it. These waste products, as scholars such as Pellow and Pulido have pointed out, are unevenly distributed based on race, and those living in waste sinks like 116th Street become burdened with hazardous material and the

essentialist assumptions that they themselves are inherently dirty as a product of their race.[36] Lutie's residence with the Chandler family places her within a constructed boundary between the clean, wealthy suburb and the dirty, wind-swept urban environment of the street, but this boundary necessitates a racial hierarchy facilitated by racial discourses of hygiene.

It is by later comparing her experience of the Chandler's pastoral suburb to her own home on the grime-ridden 116th Street that Lutie becomes fully conscious of the environmental injustice she faces. The Chandlers' wealthy existence in the clean, pastoral, suburbs necessitates an opposite: the grime-ridden, trash-filled urban environment of 116th Street. Mr. Chandler's business not only helps him construct a false boundary between his family and the city, it reinforces that boundary through the alteration of the natural environment. Lutie observes the boundary Mr. Chandler has created, noting that their house is situated on

> a wide street lined with old elm trees whose branches met high overhead in the center of the street. In summer the sun could just filter through the leaves, so that by the time its rays reached the street, it made a pattern like the lace on expensive nightgowns. It was the most beautiful street she had ever seen" (29).

The Chandler's street exists in stark contrast to 116th Street in Harlem both physically and symbolically. Lutie's description directly connects the pastoral environment with consumerist symbols of wealth such as "expensive nightgowns" (29). As Scott Hicks argues, "Most egregious [of Mr. Chandler's household] is the paradox that his industry relies on and

[36] By "sinks," I mean the designated dumping places for environmental waste, or the places that do not receive the same attention from sanitary or waste removal services because their residents are deemed, as Pellow would argue, "expendable" ("Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies" 230).

demands the very trees that distinguish his environment from Lutie's" (31). Thus, in the pursuit of capital in order to create his pastoral utopia, Mr. Chandler must destroy elements of the environment that mark his own privilege. However, the trees he uses for his paper products are, of course, not from his neighborhood, allowing for a convenient remoteness from the environmental injustice he perpetuates.

The profits and environment the Chandlers enjoy from an American obsession with hygiene are what allow them to outsource their own domestic hygiene to Lutie, thus reinforcing racialized and essentialist ideas about hygiene and who is fit for dirty work. Domestic work has long been primarily performed by women and the domestic work of middle-upper-class white families has been largely outsourced to women of color. This trend increased throughout the twentieth century and by 1940, "60 percent of Black women worked as domestics […] Barred from entry into white-collar work, and educated in segregated, underfunded schools, African-American women remained trapped in domestic work, even though it usually served as an occupational stepping-stone for other groups" (Wrigley qtd. In Wooten and Branch 302). While this work does provide a job for Lutie, it is a job that limits her upward mobility and agency, while also exposing her to the spoils of whiteness. Not only does the system of capital accumulation through disposable paper products reflect "the sense that racial, socioeconomic, and gender minority or marginal groups—particularly African-American women workers—are ostensibly disposable and interchangeable," (Hicks 26) but also, I argue, this method of wealth accrual reinforces the idea of individual hygiene as a step toward upward mobility in Lutie's mind.

Although she is frequently reminded of her difference by the racist comments from the Chandlers and their friends, Lutie's positionality within the constructed boundary of the white wealthy suburbs predisposes her to absorb colorblind liberal individualist ideology anyway. This separation from the city in a white space not only precludes her from

organizing with other laborers, it also contributes to Lutie's internalization of the Chandlers' colorblind individual bootstrap mentality that "Anyone can do it [get rich in America]" (43). She reflects: "After a year of listening to their talk, she absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough" (43). This internalization of American liberal individualism traps Lutie in a cyclical and futile pursuit of hygiene. Lutie continues to grapple with the tension between this notion of bootstrap ideology and her lived experience as a Black woman in Harlem throughout the text, demonstrating the immense power of the ideological apparatuses of liberal individualism on those it oppresses most.

While the Chandler's home may have provided the illusion of a physical boundary between the suburbs and the city and between the private and public spheres of labor, Lutie's experience straddling both spheres reveals the limits of this illusion. At one point, after leaving her job with the Chandlers and moving to Harlem with her son, Lutie reflects on her time working with them in their pastoral paradise complete with a gleaming, fully stocked kitchen. Her memories are sparked by an advertisement she sees on her ride back to 116th Street:

> For the advertisement she was looking at pictured a girl with incredible blond hair. The girl leaned close to a dark-haired, smiling man in a navy uniform. They were standing in front of a kitchen sink—a sink whose white porcelain surface gleamed under the train lights. The taps looked like silver. The linoleum floor of the kitchen was a crisp black-and-white pattern that pointed up the sparkle of the room. Casement windows. Red geraniums in yellow pots. It was, she thought, a miracle of a kitchen. Completely different from the kitchen of 116th Street flat she had moved into just two weeks ago. But almost exactly like the one she had worked in Connecticut. (28)

Lutie marvels enviously at the picture-perfect domestic scene in the advertisement. Though the kitchen pictured is not described directly as "clean," the surface of the sink, an instrument used for domestic cleaning, "gleamed," the floor appears "crisp" with the contrast of its black and white tiles, and whole room has "sparkle" (25). The image of domestic bliss is populated by presumably a white woman, since she has "incredible blond hair" and a man who is in the Navy.

The perfection in this advertisement is so striking to Lutie because it contrasts her own living situation so distinctly yet reminds her of the kitchen she worked in at the Chandlers' house. This contrast creates a confusing tension within Lutie who, as Maria Balshaw notes, is so alienated from the pristine domestic scene yet also in touch with that environment from her work for the Chandler family. Her labor has straddled the opulence of a wealthy white kitchen and her own dingy kitchen on 116th Street. Yet, as Balshaw explains, "she [Lutie] still has a strong identification with the scene, one that is not simply self-delusion. The contradictory calling is testament to the gendered complexity of Lutie's racial location" (114). Lutie's location in the spheres of public and private labor is blurred because of her gender, which allocates domestic work to women, and race, which largely determines which women perform hired housework and which women can afford to hire them.

Thus, Lutie's encounter with the bus advertisement illustrates another falsely constructed boundary between the domestic home and the public world that exists outside it. Stacy Alaimo explains that "domestic space has served as the defining container for the Western 'human,' a bounded space, wrought by delusions of safety, fed by consumerism, and fueled by nationalist fantasies" (*Exposed* 18). The advertisement generates an image of the perfect "bounded space" free of dirt, cut off from the outside world, and filled with whiteness. This bounded space, however, is contrasted directly by Lutie's own reflections of life on 116th Street and thus reveals the limits of the bootstrap mentality she absorbed from

the Chandlers. Unlike the kitchen in the advertisement, the dirt of Harlem does not respect the boundary of Lutie's apartment door. As Alaimo argues, "The home […] is never impermeable: electricity, media, advertising, and consumer goods stream in along with water, air, particulate matter, human inhabitants, guests, microbes, and nonhuman pests" (22). These false boundaries between town and country, human and environment, and the public and private spheres of labor, all function to serve capital (18). Dirt permeates Lutie's home and illustrates that such idealistic constructions of domestic life depend not only upon a perception of the world that invests in these constructed boundaries, but also upon the erasure of racial difference. The advertisement uses a racial discourse of hygiene to achieves two intertwined goals: it reinforces the idea that white people are clean, and it attaches that clean, white, American identity to products that can be sold for profit. This advertisement is the quintessential picture of American racial capitalism because it encourages viewers to invest both in the racist ideology of hygiene and the products used to create the image. Advertisements such as this, despite Lutie's awareness of the difference between the fake kitchen and her own, work to reinforce individual hygiene as a means to racial uplift.

Despite her awareness of the fact that her opportunities are shaped by her race and gender, Lutie maintains a close attachment to hygiene, which seems, at least in part, to be inspired by Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. The Founding Father's words, which she uses as a guidebook, are the backbone of Lutie's internalized liberal individualist values of cleanliness despite her awareness of the temporal, geographic, and racial differences between him and herself. On her walk home from the market one day, Lutie reflects on Franklin's self-proclaimed ability to provide bread for himself and exist on a small budget: "Only you ought to remember while you eat that you're in Harlem and he was in Philadelphia a pretty long number of years ago. Yet she couldn't get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper,

then so could she" (64). This moment of self-reflection is a clear articulation of the internal struggle between liberal individualism and the reality of her own raced and gendered differences from Franklin.

While commonly remembered as a Founding Father of the U.S., in his essays, Franklin's concern for personal hygiene converges with his fear of immigrants to create a dangerous sense of nativism and white supremacy. According to historian Suellen Hoy, Franklin's *Autobiography* was one of the first American texts to preach the importance of cleanliness as a sign of civilization. In his *Autobiography,* Franklin establishes thirteen "moral virtues," one of which is "Cleanliness" under which "he urged Americans to 'tolerate no Uncleanliness in Body, Clothes or Habitation'" (Franklin qtd in Hoy 4). Thus, much like Bub's teacher, Miss Rinner, he equates individual cleanliness with morality by divorcing it from individuals' material conditions. Franklin was equally, if not more, concerned with maintaining white Anglo homogeneity in the early U.S. as he was about cleanliness. He expresses in his essay, "I am Partial to the Complexion of my Country," his concern that very little of the world's population is truly white (Anglo Saxon) and that Americans should do what they can to increase the numbers of white people, rather than allow immigration of Africans and Asians, who he describes as "tawny," and other Europeans who he describes as "swarthy" (12). Although, in this same essay, he speaks out against the idea of bringing African people to the U.S., he does so not in opposition to slavery, but because of his fear of racial mixing: "Why increase the sons of Africa, by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all blacks and tawneys, of increasing the lovely white and red?" (12). The fact that Lutie attempts to live her life by the words of a racist, wealthy, white man is likely due to his prominence in the sanitized false narrative of American history. Her use of Franklin, thus, further exposes the stark contrast between her

access to resources and his expectation that all Americans have equal access to social and economic uplift presumably because, ideally for him, they are all white.

Additionally, Petry's choice to chronicle Lutie's internal struggle with liberal individualism and her own reality rather than providing resolution is in keeping with her reflections on the role of literature and the limits of a colorblind, universalizing portrayal of working-class life. In speaking about characterization in her essay "The Novel as Social Criticism," Petry herself asserts that characters in books that are overly didactic or depict a clear-cut victory over their material conditions " are pawns in the hands of a deaf, blind, stupid, social system" (35). Petry rejects this approach and, in doing so, refuses to take agency from her characters, instead illustrating Lutie's internal battle between her material reality and the imperative of individual hygiene as a solution to environmental injustice. In representing this struggle, Petry's text also demonstrates the ways in which focusing on individual hygiene serves to re-route the responsibility of environmental injustice away from the structures that created it and onto those who bear the brunt of it. Environmental injustice, however, is impossible for Lutie to ignore or escape, since she experiences it through her living conditions, and it is reinforced through the racial division of labor.

Lutie's consistent critique of the racial division of labor created to serve capital reveals not only the limits of racial capitalism, but also that the problem is not dirt or money as much as whether an individual's relationship to dirt and selling one's own labor is voluntary or not. She fiercely chases the dream of a better life for Bub who she hopes will never have to do a white person's dirty work. Lutie expresses her desire for Bub to have a bright future dictated by his own choices, but is also aware of how white supremacy undermines this desire. After Lutie leaves her job with the Chandler family and takes Bub to live in Harlem, Bub becomes keenly aware of their financial struggle. In an attempt to help out, Bub decides to begin shining shoes on the street for money. When she discovers Bub's

new source of income, Lutie grows angry and admits that it is not Bub's desire to make money, but rather:

> 'It's the way you were trying to earn money that made me mad,' […] 'You see, colored people have been shining shoes and washing clothes and scrubbing floors for years and years. White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they're fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least.' (70)

In this passage, Bub receives from Lutie an early education about the racial division of labor, a facet of working-class dynamics that is inadequately addressed through classical Marxism. Although Lutie herself has participated in "dirty work" as a domestic laborer, she is well aware of the structural forces that forced her into such work and she desperately wishes to give Bub a different future. While Lutie does express her discomfort with the "way" Bub is earning money, it is not the proximity to the dirty street that bothers her as much as the fact that these types of "dirty work" are forced upon working-class Black people by white people without their consent. Thus, what is considered by white people to be a labor force that engages in "free labor" enabled by capitalism, is actually a racialized labor force.[37] By articulating this critique through Lutie, Petry is able to illuminate the injustice of racial capitalism while also noting a flaw with many white-centered approaches to economic justice: the failure to fully account for discrepancy between the level of agency the white working-class has over their own labor and that of people of color. Lutie's reaction to Bub shoe shining deconstructs the illogical universalization of the working class and asserts her desire for Bub to be able to sell his labor as he chooses, rather than be relegated to "[t]he hard

[37] By "free labor" here I mean the myth that under capitalism, everyone is equally free to choose who to sell their labor to and what kind of labor they wish to perform.

work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least" (70). Even though she grapples with racial discourses of hygiene at times throughout the text, Lutie's aversion to Black individuals' lack of freedom over their labor power ultimately guides her feelings about dirty work more so than an idealistic vision of personal hygiene.

Similar to Lutie, her neighbor Mrs. Hedges is also acutely aware of both the unequal distribution of environmental harm as well as the importance of distinguishing between healthy and harmful interactions with dirty work. Mrs. Hedges runs a brothel out of her apartment, and thus is a participant in what would be considered by many, particularly at the time, to be "dirty work". At one point, Mrs. Hedges greets a man who comes to visit Mary, one of the girls that works for her. She examines the man and wonders, "if a creature like this was the result of electric light instead of hot, strong sunlight; the result of breathing soot-filled air instead of air filled with the smell of warm earth and green growing plants and pulling elevators and sweeping floors instead of doing jobs that would develop the big muscles in shoulders and thighs" (249). Mrs. Hedges's thoughts reveal her acute awareness of both the unequal distribution of dangerous forms of dirty work that force one to breathe "soot-filled air" as well as the unequal access to healthy dirty work such as manual labor involving life-giving "warm earth" out of which plants grow. Rather than cast off dirt as taboo entirely, she distinguishes between dirt that bears the weight of exploitation and environmental risk and the type of dirt that provides sustenance and growth both for plants as well as people. This distinction is crucial since it allows Mrs. Hedges to focus her energy on interrogating the systems of oppression that force people of color into jobs riddled with undesirable and harmful forms of dirt. She understands that it is not the dirt, but rather that racist essentialism and white supremacy have relegated him to a menial, environmentally risky task without adequate compensation, that has resulted in the man's dissatisfaction with his job. The effects of environmental racism are, as Mrs. Hedges's assessment shows,

tangible and visible from one look at the man. Yet, she does not believe that the border between his body and the environment needs reinforcing through precautionary hygiene, but instead takes issue with the exploitative relationship of his body to the labor forced upon him by the structures of white supremacy.

Similar to Mrs. Hedges, Lutie demonstrates awareness of how race affects her access to financial independence and a healthy environment, but this does not keep her from struggling with the idea that individual hygiene can combat environmental injustice. Despite all of her efforts to keep Bub from the clutches of white supremacy, Bub ends up getting arrested, which drives Lutie to engage in a series of hygiene acts in a desperate attempt to distract her from Bub's predicament. When Lutie enters the waiting room at the shelter for juvenile delinquents where Bub is being held for pilfering mail under the guidance of the nefarious superintendent of their apartment building, she is overcome with a stifling silence as she observes the other women there seeking information about their children. Disturbed by this silence, Lutie attempts to distract herself from it upon leaving the shelter through a series of cleaning rituals. These acts of hygiene—cleaning her apartment, escaping to the fictional, clean, space of a movie, getting her hair shampooed, and taking a bath—are not successful in quelling her fears about Bub and demonstrate most clearly the futility of hygiene as a path toward upward mobility for Black women.

Lutie's first attempt to distract herself from Bub's predicament upon leaving the shelter is to clean, an act that she quickly realizes is futile. After scrubbing the same windowpane over and over, Lutie reflects that: "The soft sound of the cloth did nothing to disturb the pool of silence that filled the apartment" (411). The silence from the shelter that she shared with all the other mothers follows her home and cannot be eradicated through the act of domestic hygiene. Unsatisfied, Lutie ventures out to the theater to see a movie.

However, this effort to "take her mind away from these fears" of Bub's future also fails to comfort her (412). Instead, Lutie concludes that

> The picture didn't make sense. It concerned a technicolor world of bright lights and vast beautiful rooms; a world where the only worry was whether the heroine in a sequined evening gown would eventually get the hero in a top hat and tails out of the clutches of a red-headed female spy who lolled on wide divans dressed in white velvet dinner suits. (412).

While the movie is the type of melodrama Lutie hoped would distract her, it fails, much like the bus advertisement, as "The glitter on the screen did nothing to dispel her sense of panic. She kept thinking it had nothing to do with her, because there were no dirty little rooms, no narrow, crowded streets, no children with police records, no worries about rent and gas bills" (412). Every attempt to distance herself from the grime and bills of 116th Street that contribute to Bub's incarceration reminds her of the disparity between the clean opulence of the picture and the life she lives.

Although Lutie is fully cognizant of the ways racial capitalism excludes her from the scene she sees in the movie theater, she remains stuck in the futile loop of personal hygiene. Upon departing the theater, she decides that "She would get a shampoo that she couldn't afford" to distract her (413). Understanding her financial precarity, Lutie's choice to have her hair shampooed reinforces the power of the intimately intertwined discourses of hygiene and consumerism that are tools of racial capitalism. Lutie buys into hygiene as a distraction that she hopes will distance her from her problems, if only momentarily, and someone else is able to profit from her decision. The salon, however, is not as busy as Lutie expects and the hairdresser who is "normally talkative, was for some reason in an uncommunicative mood," allowing the silence from the shelter to once again follow her (413). Sensing this fact, Lutie reflects with dismay that the silence, which is a marker of Bub's predicament and of the

material conditions that led him there, will eventually "seep into the apartment before she got there, so that when she opened the door it would be there. Formless. Shapeless. Waiting. Waiting" (413). The walls and doors of her tenement are no match for both the material conditions and formless silence that permeate her home no matter how much scrubbing she does.

Lutie's 116th Street apartment is the final place where she seeks refuge from the racial violence of the criminal justice system enacted upon Bub, but it is there that she is forced to confront both the mental turmoil she feels as well as the embodied manifestation of her fear for Bub. When she arrives back home, "She decided that a bath would make her relax. But in the tub she started trembling so that the water was agitated" (418-419). The bath water, which typically is soothing, becomes a vehicle through which Lutie's embodied fear of and anger at the effects of racial violence on her son are made visible. While 116th Street, despite the material conditions of poverty, has at times provided a space of refuge from the immediate gaze and judgment of white people, Lutie's trembling dissolves the hope that the boundary of the domestic space of the home can protect her and Bub from the racial division of labor, the unequal distribution of environmental harm, and the violence of a racist police state. Perhaps it is scenes like these that cause scholars to read Petry's text as a naturalist novel depicting the inevitable destruction of body and spirit at the hands of white supremacy.[38] Yet, such a reading necessitates an erasure of the many daily forms of social interaction and life that allow Black women to thrive in spite of their material conditions. The only time Lutie is afforded respite from the threat of white supremacy, though brief, is when she relinquishes

[38] See Don Dingledine's essay "'It could have been any street': Ann Petry, Stephen Crane, and the fate of Naturalism." For a literature review of naturalist readings of *The Street,* See pages 33-34 of Clare Virginia Eby's "'The Street' as Humanitarian Narrative."

her attachment to individual hygiene and claims Harlem as a site of community. However brief this respite is, it is central to Petry's text in that it destabilizes classification of the text as a work of naturalism and opens up possibilities for readings of the momentary eruption of "Black social life" that occur in spite of white supremacy.

Productive Dirt and Dirty Work in *The Street*

As discussed above, much of the dirt and dirty work that Petry depicts in *The Street* is harmful, undesirable, and poses direct risks to physical, and economic health, yet various Black women in the novel "stake a claim" to this dirt and dirty work as a form of resistance to racial discourses of hygiene. Lutie as well as the minor characters Mrs. Hedges and Min articulate an understanding of the difference between dirt and dirty work that is destructive and that which is productive or life-giving. Sometimes, dirt and dirty work is both destructive and productive in *The Street*, further complicating any sense of a simple binarism. It is in the fleeting, but powerful scenes where characters claim dirt and dirty work that moments of joy and hope occur in Petry's novel. By "claiming dirt" I do not mean that any of Petry's characters happily embrace environmental toxins, nor that they find fulfillment because of the trash and grime of 116th Street. Rather, I mean that Petry's Black woman characters shift their efforts from distancing themselves from the racist assumption that Black people are inherently dirty, to instead, claiming their relationship to the grime and dirty work of the street. It is through this process of staking a claim to dirt and dirty work that these women find community beyond the strictures of racial discourses of hygiene. This shift from refusal to claim allows places like Harlem to become a venue for the creation of what Williamson calls "Black social life." Additionally, in staking this claim, Black women's resistance to liberal individualist imperatives of hygiene is made visible, further demonstrating that environmental injustice will only be properly addressed with structural change. While there

are many illuminating Marxist and historical materialist readings of *The Street*,[39] I argue that attending to instances where Black women "stake a claim" to dirt and dirty work in Petry's novel reveals the ways in which *The Street* expands on Marxism as a solution to oppression. These instances focus less on uniting the working class—a task for which these women are not given the collective means—and instead, gesture toward tools specifically available to Black women a means to survival and agency.[40]

Reading for moments where abject material or labor is claimed in *The Street* reveals the ways in which Harlem serves as a refuge and venue for "Black social life" in spite of white supremacy. While neither the salon nor the bath provides the comfort Lutie seeks after visiting Bub at the shelter, her walk from the salon back to her apartment provides a brief moment of solace. When she reaches 116th Street, the bustling life of the street in Harlem provides a temporary moment of relief. The very material conditions she seeks to escape—the trash, the grime, the commotion—are what create a space of refuge from her troubles, if

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[39] See Bill V. Mullin's essay "Fetishization and Class Consciousness in Ann Petry's *The Street*" and Rachel Peterson's "Domestic Service and Meritocracy in Ann Petry's Novels" from the collection *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left*; and "Chapter 4: A Rage in Harlem" of Alan Wald's *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade*.

[40] Petry was in touch with various resources to help address the combined class-, race-, and gender-based oppression experienced by Black women. However, as Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, such resources are not readily available to the Black female characters she writes into *The Street.* In particular, "Lutie is a consumer who is fully aware of the issues that Petry outlined in her call for Negro Women Incorporated—such as lack of access to adequate food an" (Griffin 109).

even for a moment. Maria Balshaw argues about an earlier scene in the novel where Lutie returns to 116th Street, she experiences a "positive subjective transformation" fueled by Harlem's isolation from the immediate white gaze. Because of this Black space, she notes, "There is, it seems, at least the possibility of community and forms of racial solidarity" (Balshaw 113). In this scene that Balshaw analyzes, Lutie reflects that "she never felt really human until she reached Harlem and thus got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway. Escaped from the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes seemed to go through her clothing to her long brown legs" (*The Street* 57).

This same "escape" and "positive subjective transformation" occurs when Lutie returns to the Street after going to the salon. Specifically, Lutie stumbles upon children engaging in garbage warfare as a game. While the garbage-filled Street is certainly an environmental hazard, the children of the street use the hazardous materiality to have fun. Lutie encounters the children playing a game with the garbage as she walks home from getting her hair shampooed. Rather than turn away in disgust, she pauses and watches:

> Kids were using bags of garbage from the cans lined up along the curb as ammunition. The bags had broken open, covering the sidewalk with litter, filling the air with a strong rancid smell. Lutie picked her way through orange skins, coffee grounds, chicken bones, fish bones, toilet paper, potato peelings, wilted kale, skins of baked sweet potatoes, pieces of newspaper, broken gin bottles, broken whiskey bottles, a man's discarded felt hat, an old pair of pants. Perhaps Bub had taken part of this kind of warfare, she thought, even as she frowned at the rubbish under her feet; possibly a battle would have appealed to some unsatisfied spirit of adventure in him, so that he would have

> joined these kids, overlooking the stink of the garbage in his joy in the conflict just as they were doing. (415-416)

Though Lutie frowns at the garbage beneath her feet and recognizes the foul garbage "stink," she pauses to consider what Bub might think of this situation. This slight shift from Lutie's perspective to Lutie's imagined version of Bub's perspective helps reveal the potential for garbage to function as a toy that satisfies the "spirit of adventure" in the children that reside on the Street. This imagined perspective for Lutie works similarly to the way Petry's use of focalization works for her reader and pushes back on the inevitability of the naturalist imagery of environmental racism that characterizes much of the novel. Lutie can recognize the difference between being forced by white employers into dirty labor, such as shoe-shining or domestic work, and the choice to make a game out of the filthy material conditions of the street. While this scene reveals that Lutie cannot immediately escape the environmental injustice of the street, nor, as literary scholar John Gamber argues, can we fully "partition ourselves from the waste we produce (13), she and the children can recognize joy in spite of the white supremacist structures of racial capitalism that have facilitated environmental injustice.

Lutie recognizes that the garbage game presents a momentary opportunity for "joy" instead of shame or disgust. This opportunity is made possible by the fact that the game takes place in a space temporarily isolated from the white gaze and by the fact that the children's interaction with waste is voluntary rather than coerced (as it would be through the process of being relegated to dirty labor). 116th Street in Harlem, while not an impermeable space, is consistently, in Petry's novel, a place that makes possible the existence of "Black social life" in spite of white supremacy rather than because of it.

Black women "stake a claim" not only to dirt, but to dirty work as well in *The Street.* Mrs. Hedges's own business defies narratives of women's sexual hygiene and purity by

creating a space where Black women can profit from sex work, an occupation popularly considered dirty. Although Mrs. Hedges works with Junto to try to convince Lutie to sleep with him, none of the girls who do work for her demonstrate signs that their labor is being exploited. Rather, Mrs. Hedges seems to be a well-respected, powerful member of the Street. In this sense, she engages in informal labor, that by the standards of many would be considered "impure," as a means to financial independence and, by proxy, empowerment for herself and potentially for her girls. Historian Lashawn Harris argues, that in engaging in the "underground labor" of sex work, Black women in New York City "imagined and explored the varying possibilities of transforming their immediate socioeconomic circumstances and personal lives" (2). Mrs. Hedges uses "underground" labor that is considered "dirty" rather than individual hygiene to achieve economic uplift and community status within Harlem. This is not to say that Mrs. Hedges and the girls she works with are not put in danger by this occupation, nor to say that the material ramifications of such work were always positive or that their labor was never exploited. However, as Harris also points out, such labor did allow Black working-class "women's refusal to permit structural constraints and detractors from shaping their labor and personal decisions" (7). Thus, depending on the situation, sex work could provide a way for women to undermine racial capitalism's power through the creation of markets in which they sometimes had more agency over their labor.[41] Despite the potential material and psychological risks as well as the use of such work to further reinforce racist beliefs that Black people were inherently criminal or overly-sexual, women like Mrs. Hedges found ways to use this "dirty" underground labor to their advantage.

[41] It is also important to note, as Harris does, that women chose underground labor like sex work for a diverse set of reasons from financial need to sexual pleasure (7).

Mrs. Hedges's awareness of the damaging material effects of life in Harlem comes from her own experience of hazardous living conditions that resulted in disfigurement and nearly death. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson reads disability in The Street, specifically that of Mrs. Hedges, much the way I read abject material like dirt and garbage: as a source of power and resistance. She argues that *The Street* portrays disabled women as "'ambiguous wom[e]n,' who place ourselves at odds with the cultural roles that construct womanhood under patriarchy" and argues that "avoiding normative womanhood [a move Mrs. Hedges makes by refusing plastic surgery after suffering severe burns in a tenement fire] might produce scripts that are fulfilling is an important step toward framing disability as an—ironically—enabling condition" (604). Garland Thomson builds from sociologist Mary Douglas's argument about dirt from her iconic text *Purity and Danger,* arguing that "Like dirt, all physical disability is in some sense 'matter out of place' in terms of the interpretive frameworks and corporeal exceptions our culture shares" (Douglas qtd. In Garland Thomson 605). Just as Garland Thomson argues that disability presents an opportunity for ambiguity and defying cultural norms of womanhood, I argue that Mrs. Hedges through her disavowal of sexual hygiene, and even the children of the Street through their playtime garbage wars use dirt to resist racial discourses of hygiene and instead form community.

Petry also presents alternative representations of dirty work through the minor character Min's use of a conjure that involves domestic cleaning. As literary scholar Carol Henderson argues, Min has not received much critical attention within scholarship on *The Street* because "her presence [is] veiled by the fact that she does not wish to pursue the 'American Dream'" and instead simply pursues "a safe space—to exist free of pain or danger" (854). She initially seeks, and for a time, finds that safety in the same apartment building as Lutie. Min lives rent-free with Jones, the superintendent of Lutie and Mrs.

Hedges's building, who becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea of seducing Lutie. As his obsession grows, Jones becomes verbally and physically abusive toward Min, since he believes her presence is what is preventing him from an affair with Lutie. This abuse threatens Min's formerly safe space and, desperate to avoid conflict and regain a sense of agency in her own home, Min seeks the help of a root doctor, David the Prophet, who is recommended by Mrs. Hedges. Min's identity as a Black woman domestic worker isolates her from forms of organized labor resources that can address poor working conditions and poverty; thus, she looks instead to an older, non-Western solution to the violence and exploitation she faces: conjure.

Min's decision to visit David the Prophet stands out so starkly from her past, during which she passively suffered the abuses of her ex-husbands and of white employers, who took advantage of her as a domestic worker: "The little cleaning would increase and increase until it included washing windows and walls and waxing floors" (*The Street* 126). This constant barrage of exploitative dirty work has driven Min into poverty and physical pain. But, because she is a Black woman working in the private sphere of white families' homes, she has little access to the power of organized labor. Therefore, unlike the plot of many white-authored social realist twentieth-century American novels, and in keeping with the values Petry espouses in "The Novel as Social Criticism," no union or revolution comes to her aid. Instead, she turns to an expression of "Black social life," conjure, for help. While she admits that the preacher at her church would be displeased with her decision, Min visits the root doctor anyway, noting that "there were some things the church couldn't handle, had no resources for handling. And this was one of them" (123). Unlike Christianity alone, the root doctor does hold the power Min seeks because his advice blurs the falsely constructed boundary, as Henderson argues, of "African culture" and "Christian theology (rooted in Euro-American culture)" (856). Min chooses conjure because she recognizes that, just as

traditional organized labor cannot currently free her of her exploitation as a domestic worker, Christianity alone cannot offer her the tools to overcome the exploitation she faces as a working-class Black female domestic laborer. Conjure also offers a means to protection that is rooted in a Black Radical Tradition that is more than a reaction to capitalism. As Cedric Robinson argues, "*obeah, voodoo, myalism, pocomania*—the religions of the oppressed" function not as a reaction to white supremacy, racial capitalism, or slavery, but instead as a way of preserving the ontological totality of Black existence (169). To preserve her own agency specifically within the ontological totality of Black women's social life, Min looks to conjure.

When Min explains her plight to David the Prophet, he gives her instructions that involve candles, a liquid, a powder, a cross to hang on the wall, and directions to clean the apartment "until there isn't a speck of dirt anywhere" (*The Street* 135), which upon first glance may seem like another attempt to use hygiene for economic and physical security; however, within the context of conjure, cleaning becomes the dirty work of resistance rather than a means of upholding white bourgeois values of purity. What makes David the Prophet's help so valuable to Min is that he understands conjure and Christianity to be "not mutually exclusive," but instead, interconnected, and because he takes the time to understand the material conditions that have led Min to seek his help (Henderson 856). The first sign that this act of domestic hygiene will be empowering rather than exploitative is the way David the Prophet listens to Min with empathy and respect for her experience. Despite being hesitant to even visit the Prophet due to her fear of angering her Christian preacher, Min agrees to his conjure prescription with enthusiasm, since he was the first doctor to truly listen to her plight. However, unlike the Western medical practitioners Min had seen previously, the Prophet listens to her, and through this act, understands that Min's poverty and her volatile living situation are caused by structural racism rather than laziness or inherent dirtiness. Her

experience with the Prophet directly contrasts her trips to Western doctors for help with her painful bunions earned doing hard domestic labor for white families. Unlike the Prophet, these practitioners of Western medicine refuse to acknowledge the racial division of labor that forces Min into exploitative domestic labor and causes her painful bunions, choosing instead to assert the biologically racist conclusion that she simply has "nigger feet" (136).This racist essentialism from Western medical professionals is the type of race science that then marks Black people as expendable and appropriate targets on which to deposit the burden of environmental injustice. David the Prophet, by contrast, gives "her all his attention" and does not attempt to separate Min's predicament from the material conditions of a racialized labor force (136). This is a key difference between traditionally Western medical practices, and practices of "folk medicine" such as the root doctor's, which "assume[s] 'a total coherence in the operation of the world' so that 'whatever happened was *caused*,' not accidental or random" (Jackson qtd. in Drake 77, original emphasis). The Prophet's root medicine, then, functions as a materialist approach to problem-solving that takes into account that all conditions, including Min's, are reflective of a socially created material history. This type of medicine, then, directly counters the racialization of diseases like tuberculosis and syphilis in the early twentieth century which shaped the racist assertion that Black people were inherently diseased and dirty. As literary scholar Kimberly Drake argues,: "In creating a dialogue with Min, the Prophet gives her a fuller recognition of her value as a person and reinforces her desire to survive, to outwit Jones" (79). This attention to Min's particular situation guides the Prophet's prescription and differentiates his instructions to clean from the disparaging diagnoses she has received from other doctors.

The fact that the prescribed cleaning is part of a conjure process intended to protect and empower her makes the dirty domestic work Min performs upon returning home life-giving rather than exploitative. When Jones arrives at the apartment, he notes a shift in Min's

attitude toward cleaning. He reflects: "'she dominated the apartment. She cleaned it tirelessly, filled with some unknown source of strength that surged through her'" (293). As Drake notes, in this particular instance, cleaning allows Min to use "conjure to claim a territory for herself—a domestic territory," rather than exist as a nearly invisible mass who, when Lutie first encounters her, blends almost completely into the furniture (80). Initially figured as an absence herself through both Lutie and Jones's perception of Min as "shapeless," quiet, and nearly invisible, conjure transforms Min into an active, visible, strong, and even dominant presence (231). More importantly than Jones's recognition of her shifting attitude is Min's own recognition of her spirit of resistance. While waiting to see the Prophet, she reflects, "Never once had she protested" ill treatment from bosses or her previous husbands, "And here she was […] committing an open act of defiance for the first time in her life […] in trying to prevent Jones from putting her out, she was actually making an effort to change a situation" (*The Street* 127). By visiting the Prophet, Min is able to begin to recognize and assert her own value.

After cleaning, Min is able to further secure her power within her home through the cross that the Prophet tells her to hang above her bed. When Jones initially reacts to the cross hanging in the bedroom, he is filled with deep discomfort. He is not religious but sees the cross as a "symbol of power" and is fearful of "the power of darkness it could invoke against those who outraged the laws of the Church" (*The Street* 148). Here, Jones's thoughts reveal his fear of the powers of religion despite his personal lack of faith Jones fears "the evil the cross could conjure up" (148). Even after Min has left the apartment permanently, her presence is made visible as a result of the conjure. Jones is so struck by fear that he sees the cross, and by association, Min, everywhere he goes. He even sees the cross and Min as physically united since "When he looked at Min, he could see its outline as sharply as though it had been superimposed on her shapeless, flabby body" (231). For Jones, as literary scholar

William Scott argues, the cross "short-circuits the ideality of the model [of women as silent, shapeless, and invisible]" (105). For Min, this effect on Jones enables her to "finally view herself as a subject, an agent in her own right, as when 'she looked at herself in the mirror and automatically she sought the reflection of the cross hanging over the bed,'" which shifts Min's attitude so that to Jones, she appears "smug and satisfied" rather than shapeless and invisible (Petry qtd. In Scott 105).

The cross maintains this power over Jones's misogyny and violence even after Min is gone because of the cleaning ritual she performs before hanging. Not only does this act of cleaning empower Min, the results of the cleaning process eventually turn her into an inescapable and formidable presence for Jones. After Min moves out, Jones becomes extremely disturbed when he visits her empty room to find that she had left

> it [the cross] behind. 'God damn her,' he said. 'She left it here to haunt me.' He looked again. No. The cross was gone, but while it hung there the walls had darkened with grime and dust, so when it was removed its outline was left clear and sharp on the wall—an outline in the exact size and shape of the cross itself. It was everywhere in the room. He was it again and again plain before his eyes. She had conjured him with it—conjured him and the apartment and gone. (*The Street* 378-379)

The cross, which Min has taken with her, only leaves a mark because of the initial cleaning that The Prophet's prescribed. Cleaning first and hanging the cross after enabled the walls to collect dirt around the cross, leaving its imprint in the grime as a lasting, indelible reminder of Min that haunts Jones and interferes with his ability to sexually dominate Lutie. The cross, and its owner, Min, both become absent presences through the cross's imprint in the grime that had collected around it. This absent presence is even more disturbing for Jones, who:

> could see the cross on the floor in front of his feet; it appeared suddenly over the kitchen stove; he had to look twice before he saw that it wasn't actually suspended from the center of the ceiling in the narrow confine of the bathroom. Min had done this to him. And if he went on like this, seeing crosses all about him and never being certain whether they were real or figments of his imagination, he would go to pieces. (379)

The imprint of the cross's ability to haunt Jones's imagination suggests that the acts of cleaning the apartment and hanging the cross prescribed by the root doctor were not intended to present an image of white, bourgeois, religious and domestic purity, but instead are used a way of creating the clean canvas of wall on which to imprint Min's presence. The collection of grime around the cross leaves a mark in the dirt that signifies Min's presence which haunts Jones even after she is physically gone. Thus, through conjure, hygiene, and the eventual collection of dirt, Min transforms from a "shapeless small dark woman" who literally blends into her surroundings and "take[s] up the least possible amount of space" to a presence that challenges Jones's gender-based violence and assumptions about womanhood even in her physical absence (*The Street* 23-24).

Just as Christianity alone cannot help Min resolve her living situation, unionization or organized labor cannot resolve the exploitation Lutie and Min experience as Black domestic workers alienated from other women in the same situation. Scholars, such as Alan Wald, have noted the infrequent, but important moments of heightened collective class consciousness expressed by Lutie. In particular, Wald asserts that "one sees glimmers of ambient factors that could, under other circumstances, lead toward a dereified consciousness and eventual social amelioration. These include Lutie's startling recognition that the women in the waiting room at the Children's Shelter were bonded by poverty, not race" (127-128). This scene suggests a sense of class consciousness and solidarity with all working-class

women regardless of race. While this is a valuable form of class consciousness for Lutie, it must also be read in conversation with the forms of resistance tied specifically to Black culture and social life such as Min's use of conjure. Such culturally-rooted approaches to economic and bodily autonomy, as Terrion Williamson reiterates, "reveal the contours of a black feminist practice that need not be tethered to discussions of movements, organizations, or overt political activism" (6).

The scene in the Children's Shelter that Wald mentions deserves particularly close attention in relationship to Black women's resistance to the universalization of the working class. Upon entering the Shelter, Lutie notices that the women in the back of the room are all women of color and asks herself, "Why were all of them colored? Was it because the mothers of white children had safe places for them to play in, because the mothers of white children didn't have to work?" (*The Street* 408). She then directly contradicts herself, noting that "There were some white mothers, too […] Perhaps, she thought, we're all here because we're all poor. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with color" (408-409). Although Lutie notes that there are some white mothers occupying the waiting room, the way she describes the demographics of the group indicates that they are the minority. While the back of the room is "filled with colored women," she goes on to describe the white women in detail, of which there are only six. Three of these six white women appear, to Lutie, to be "foreign" (409). These three "foreign" women, much like the group of "colored women" who occupy the back of the room are mentioned as a mass, rather than individuals, not only reiterating their overall appearance, to Lutie, as a homogenous demographic group. In contrast to the women of color and the "foreign" women who appear as collective groups, Lutie distinguishes the non-foreign white women as individuals in the room. The other three non-foreign white women each are given individual detailed descriptions by Lutie, emphasizing their individuality and the fact that they stand out from the crowd of women of color and "foreign" white women.

While Lutie expresses a working-class consciousness that unites all of the women based on their poverty rather than race, the specifics of her description of the women complicates this assertion by differentiating between the "colored women," the "foreign" women, and the three individual white women.

It is also important to read this scene in the context of the end of the novel, when Lutie bludgeons Boots to death. As she is killing Boots, Lutie fights not only Boots's sexual violence, but every social system that has brought her to this point:

> Finally, and the blows were heavier, faster, now, she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape; and at the turn of events which had forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so that he now faced reform school, now had a police record. (*The Street* 430)

Lutie does not attribute her predicament to poverty alone. She links her poverty to the "white world," which creates a racialized division of labor, forcing Black women like herself to take time away from their children to work in order to provide for their families. Although throughout the text, there are moments where Lutie demonstrates her investment in the liberal individualist ideology of racial capitalism at various points throughout the text, she ultimately understands that racial oppression is dialectically related to her class-based oppression. It is the racial division of labor, the poor distribution of resources based on race, the racial discourses of hygiene, and other manifestations of white supremacy, *not* the struggle of a universalized, colorblind working class, against which Lutie lashes out when she bludgeons Boots to death. Thus, the preservation of "Black social life" will not arise from white working-class struggles alone. Lutie's consciousness made visible in this scene echoes Petry's assertions in "The Novel as Social Criticism" that "not all of the concern about the shortcomings of society originated with Marx," nor can all resistance to societal oppression

be waged through Marxist theory (33). Throughout the novel, liberal individualist values of hygiene expose the interlocking forces of capitalism and white supremacy. Thus, it is not through uniting the workers of the world that Lutie, Mrs. Hedges, or Min stage a revolution; they are barred access to the resources to accomplish such a task. Rather it is through the subtle, yet powerful claim they stake to dirt and dirty work that they each find their own ways, if only temporary, to survive in spite of racial capitalism.

Conclusion

Min, Mrs. Hedges, and even, at times, Lutie understand the fact that the boundaries between the body and its environment, the suburbs and the city, the outdoors and the home, and the public and private spheres of labor are falsely constructed. It is through the realization of the constructedness of these boundaries within their existence on the Street that Petry's novel exposes the limits of personal hygiene as a means to environmental justice. It is through blurring these boundaries and claiming certain forms of dirt and dirty work that Black women in Petry's novel are able to survive and even, at times, thrive not as a reaction to, but in spite of white supremacy and racial capitalism. While the permeability of the border of their neighborhoods, homes, and spheres of labor is made hyper-evident by the constant barrage of environmental toxins, grime, dirt, and garbage that surround Black women workers every day, Petry's text demonstrates that it is not the boundaries of these spaces that must be made more secure, but rather the dismantling of structures of inequality such as racial segregation that might present a hope of a more environmentally just future. Ultimately, because discourses of hygiene are experienced materially as threats to one's environmental health and as limiting factors of social mobility as well as tied to socially constructed ideas about race and gender, it is an apt discourse through which to examine the connections between environmental justice, racial capitalism, and Black studies.

Therefore, examining the presence of dust, dirt, grime, and garbage in Petry's novel as well as the constant discourse of hygiene surrounding these materials helps us understand the constructedness of the boundaries between the body and its environment, the futility of individual hygiene as a response to environmental injustice, and the limitations for Black women of a politics that universalizes the working class. This approach to Petry's text reveals that it is not dirt itself that creates a problematic or environmentally unjust relationship to the environment, but rather the means by which one's labor with dirt is mediated (whether it is exploitative or sustaining) that determines whether that relationship is detrimental or not. Solutions to such injustice, however, cannot only be examined through generalized working-class politics that universalize all workers, as Petry has argued and as her novel reveals. One must also look to the persistence of "Black social life" rooted in a long history of cultural expression in order to see a means for collective Black existence to survive and thrive.

Chapter 4: "There's nobody with common sense that can look down on the domestic worker": Housework in Alice Childress's *Like one of the Family*

Introduction

In her 1956 collection of stories titled *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life,* Alice Childress devotes the entire story "Hands" to celebrating the labor of working people. The story begins with a conversation between Mildred Johnson—the central character of the collection—and her best friend Marge, both of whom are Black women domestic workers. Mildred compliments Marge on her nail polish and tells her, "Oh, don't belittle your hands, child—I think they are lovely. Yes I know you are tired of being a house servant … Yes, you should have the right to be as much as you can be. But when you come to think of it, everyone who works is a servant. Why we couldn't live without the hands and minds of millions of people" (60). We as readers are not privy to Marge's specific responses, only Mildred's words, creating an opportunity for reader-imagined dialogue. Though Marge's words are not provided, Mildred's reply to Marge's presumed reactions make it clear that Marge is concerned about how her hard work cleaning the houses of white people has affected the appearance of her hands, which experience weathering and grime in the process. Following the (il)logic of the assumptions of racial discourses of hygiene that presumably drive Marge's self-consciousness and appear throughout the rest of the vignettes, Marge's hands would be deemed weathered and dirty as a result of her inherent inferiority, lack of personal hygiene, and/or laziness as a Black woman. However, Mildred combats these manifestations of racial essentialism by celebrating the beauty of working hands as symbols of essential care work deserving of a living wage and environmentally safe working conditions. While Mildred appreciates Marge's desire for other career paths and understands the corporeal effect such labor has on the bodies of Black women workers, she does so without denigrating housework as a trade and, instead, advocates for collective labor

organizing as a solution to the environmental injustice Black women like Marge and herself face daily.

In this chapter, I explore how Childress's engagement with racial discourses of health and hygiene through her character Mildred's unique literary voice and initial venue of publication—Paul Robeson's 1950s Black leftist newspaper *Freedom*—cement her place in a community of Black radical thinkers, creatives, and activists fighting the environmentally hazardous conditions of racial capitalism.[42] Building on the work of literary scholars such as Mary Hellen Washington and Trudier Harris, I argue that attending to Mildred's reactions to dirty work and to racial discourses of hygiene espoused by wealthy white people in *Like One of the Family* illustrates Childress's commitment to using her fiction as a tool for centering Black women's work in the fight for economic and environmental justice. In particular Childress's text calls out how white women's focus on racial discourses of hygiene functions as cover for their essentialized racism and obfuscates the actual health risks that economic deprivation, the resulting poor living conditions, and hazardous working conditions (through overwork, exposure to germs, and other dangers) that Black women face. Through Mildred, a Black woman domestic worker, Childress's text not only critiques white women's deployment of racial discourses of hygiene that individualize and naturalize actual hazards, but also advocates for labor unions as a collective and more effective means of combatting environmental injustice.

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[42] The stories were initially published in Robeson's *Freedom* as part of a column titled "A Conversation/Conversation from Life" between the years of 1951-1955), were then published in the *Baltimore Afro-American* under the column "Here's Mildred" after Robeson was blacklisted, and finally revised and collected into a novel titled *Like one of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* in 1956.

Additionally, examining the dynamics surrounding dirty work in Childress's stories and placing them in conversation with the work of other Black leftists published in the same pages of *Freedom* uncovers necessary critiques of the tendency within U.S. labor movements to universalize the working class and neglect the expertise of Black women workers. Reading for dirt and hygiene in Childress's serially published vignettes within the pages of *Freedom* (1953-1956) alongside the revised and re-published collection titled *Like One of the Family* (1956) helps us envision a labor movement that instead centers Black women workers. Through a critique of racial discourses of hygiene, Childress's stories present a necessary approach to labor that prioritizes dismantling racism and sexism—as weapons of racial capitalism—rather than treating them as merely symptoms of economic exploitation. Through a combination of health humanities, and environmental justice lenses, I will explore how Childress's vignettes—in both their original form (1951-1955) in Paul Robeson's newspaper *Freedom* and in the re-published novel version *Like one of the Family* (1956)—critique the white supremacy that underpins racial discourses of hygiene, expose racism as a health hazard, and provide necessary interventions in leftist treatments of race.

The radical nature and historical relevance of Childress's vignettes are magnified by their form and publication venue. The creative license short fiction affords and the stories' original, pre-collection placement serially throughout a radical leftist Black newspaper are critical to Childress's critique of the limits of individual hygiene in the fight for racial, economic, and gender justice, especially for Black women relegated to the domestic sphere of white women's housework. All of Childress's vignettes are told as snapshots of Mildred's conversations with Marge and cover a large range of topics including working in white households, racialized police violence, interracial working-class solidarity, and the politics of representation. Mildred's positionality as a Black, working-class domestic worker cleaning

white people's homes exposes her constantly to the racial discourses of hygiene. As such, these experiences also make her an expert at rhetorically discrediting such discourses.

Readers' connection with Mildred's character is enhanced by Childress's choice to present only Mildred's side of the dialogue between her and Marge. Rather than using typical dialogue that includes multiple characters' speech, Childress gives only Mildred a voice, removing all other responses from the text. In this sense, reading the vignettes is like hearing one side of a phone conversation; the reader experiences Mildred's unfiltered account of her encounters with other characters as told to Marge as well as her responses to Marge's reactions, but never Marge's or any other character's direct speech. Thus, as literary scholar Claudia May has argued,

> When Mildred speaks in the first-person voice, she provides an intimate and uncompromising interpretation of the individuals with whom she interfaces […] As an interpreter of what she sees and hears, Mildred does not self-edit her views or tone down her claims when she disagrees with the opinions of her employers; in this, she refuses to conform to the stereotype of the mammy figure who is forever subservient and compliant. (151)

Childress's decision to craft Mildred's first-person "uncompromising interpretation," and place her in intimate proximity to dirty racialized labor, positions the vignettes to expose and combat the racial discourses of hygiene faced by fictional characters like Mildred and Marge as well as other Black women workers who read the stories in *Freedom*. Additionally, as Patricia Hill Collins and Trudier Harris have noted, many women who read Childress's column in *Freedom* were Black women domestic workers [themselves]; thus, they could connect with Mildred's frustrations and find satisfaction in her direct accounts unfiltered by white women characters' responses or the need to fit the mold of mammy to please a white audience. This style of writing, as Colins notes, "illustrate[s] an increasingly rare practice in

the intellectual production of African Americans – an African American author writing to an African American, working-class audience, using a medium controlled by people of African descent" (4). Childress's form and venue of publication allow her to present an accurate and unapologetic picture of the struggles of being a Black woman domestic worker. By choosing a monologue format, with Marge's responses denoted by ellipses, Childress invites the reader to participate in conversation with Mildred about the absurdity of racial discourses of hygiene and the importance of unions in combatting racial and environmental injustice.

For example, in the vignettes "Hands" and "We Need a Union Too," Mildred's singular point of view allows Childress to invite her readers into a conversation about forth unionization as a large-scale, structural solution to poor working conditions and center the specific needs of Black women workers in a racialized labor market. In "Hands" after trying to comfort Marge about the condition of her hands, Mildred explains,

> Well, for example, Marge, suppose all you had was money and you wanted to make some more money …. Oh hush, girl! I know you wouldn't, but let's suppose ….Well, you'd hire ten people without any money who knew how to make tablecloths …. and you'd sell them for four hundred dollars and pay the folks who made them one hundred of that ….Marge, I didn't say you would do that …. I'm only pretendin'…. Well, never fear, honey, we would form a union and tell you we wouldn't sew any more for you until you paid us fair …. and then you'd either do that or make nothin'! (*Like One* 61)

In this instance, Mildred uses a Marxist framework to show how the racial capitalist system of exploitation depends upon paying workers less than the value of their labor for the sake of turning a profit. She does not cite the work of sewing as the problem, but rather the fact that the labor is undervalued and exploited. She also dispels the myth—often targeted at Black laborers—that trade workers are lazy and therefore unhealthy, noting instead that "healthy

folks love to work" but they only wish to do so if they are given "decent pay and clean places to work where they won't be burnt up in no fire trap building" (61). Her push for unionization is not to avoid housework, nor does she advocate for individual hygiene practices as a solution to unhealthy working conditions. Instead, as Mildred notes in "We Need a Union Too," houseworkers deserve "set hours and set pay," "vacation pay," and protections in relation to hazardous or "very heavy work" such as waxing the floors (136). Mildred calls for structural change to unjust working conditions so that all workers have safe environments and are paid a living wage. The fact that Mildred's voice is presented in, as Trudier Harris notes, "monologue" format, allows the reader to transcend the role of reader and "become a part of an audience" to whom Mildred is speaking directly ("I wish I was a poet" 25). Readers of the vignettes, especially Black women workers consuming them serially in *Freedom,* are invited into a privileged space intimacy in the conversation for unionization, and this format evades the appearance and feel of what might otherwise be labeled as propagandistic (25). This mode of fictional monologue also allows for Childress to present leftist arguments for working-class rights in a format that perhaps provided a layer of protection from McCarthy Era blacklisting experienced by other Black leftists and Communists who were censored for in their non-fictional journalistic approaches such as Paul Robeson and Claudia Jones.

By centering the dirty, environmentally hazardous working conditions of Black women domestic laborers in a racialized labor market and the racial discourses of hygiene they encounter, Childress's vignettes also stage a critical intervention in white-centered approaches to unionization, which so often over-universalize the working-class. Mildred's character continuously reminds readers of the fact that the dirty, difficult, and menial labor is most frequently the only work Black women can secure. For example, she points out the gendered and racialized labor of hired housework in the story "All About my Job" stating, "And it's a rare thing for anybody to find a colored family in this land that can't trace a

domestic worker somewhere in their history" (*Like One* 36). Mildred's assertion here reflects the history of care work in the U.S., as Trudier Harris notes, "'Nearly all black women who were not involved in farming became domestic workers" ("*From Mammies*" 8). However, instead of focusing solely on escaping labor that is seen as menial and dirty, Mildred pushes to change society's perceptions of this work and dismantle the racist ideology that associates Black women with dirt and thus relegates them to such work. She encourages Marge to support unions and to celebrate rather than be ashamed of the material evidence of her hard work and the labor of all working people. Since "it's the work of their hands that keeps the world alive and kickin'" (62). In this passage, Mildred's approach to domestic work simultaneously emphasizes the fact that Black women's work is the backbone of society *and* the reality that all labor is skilled labor worth of respect and a living wage.

Alice Childress, Mildred Johnson, and Black Women of the Literary Left

This chapter is indebted to the scholars who have revived Childress's stories of Mildred and explored the radical politics of her tales of domestic service. Specifically, I build on the scholarship of Trudier Harris, Dayo F. Gore, and Mary Hellen Washington to situate Childress's work within a strong tradition of leftist Black women's writing in order to uncover the truly radical nature of her work. I follow Mary Hellen Washington's lead in reading Childress's vignettes in their original format within the pages of Paul Robeson's radical Black newspaper *Freedom* alongside the revised and re-published collection *Like one of the Family* (1956). Washington argues that we must read Childress's stories in *Freedom,* positioned in a "left-wing newspaper in the midst of Cold War tensions, dramatically transformed by their position on the page and by their dialogic relationship to their audience and to the other stories in the paper" (189). Without this context, it becomes easier to obscure Childress's incredibly important and historically specific contributions to Black liberation

and the literary left that are still valuable today. Thus, I engage with both *Freedom* and the re-published version of Childress's vignettes to capture a more accurate portrayal of the radical responses to racial discourses of hygiene in her work.

Publishing in *Freedom*, however, was not Childress's first creative encounter with leftist politics and literature; while never directly blacklisted herself, Childress's love of writing and her involvement in radical left circles began at a young age and continued through 1950s, which was an especially dangerous time to be both Black and a leftist.[43]. Originally from South Carolina, in her childhood, Childress moved to New York to live with her grandmother Eliza, who encouraged her love of writing ("Introduction" xvi). In her youth, Childress was also introduced to both theater and leftist politics and, as Mary Hellen Washington notes, "was part of the Urban League and the Negro Youth League of the Federal Theater Project as early as junior high, which would "almost certainly [have] exposed [her] to radical politics" ("Alice Childress: Black, Red, and Feminist" 132). Her first play, *Florence,* was originally published in the Marxist magazine *Masses and Mainstream* in 1950. Shortly after, she began writing a column titled "A Conversation/Conversation from Life" for Robeson's *Freedom* from 1951-1955. It was in this column where Childress's character Mildred from the later collection *Like One of the Family* was born and took shape. This early political education, experience as a Black woman worker in Harlem, and engagement in the arts situated Childress to challenge the relegation of Black laborers to dirty and often hazardous working and living conditions through her short fiction. In the wake of World War II and with the rise of Cold War paranoia, anti-Blackness and anti-Communism converged as

[43] For more on Childress's encounters with federal organizations such as the FBI and McCarthy-Era censorship, see Mary Helen Washington's *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s.*

Black artists, journalists, and activists were targeted and silenced.[44] For example, as a *Baltimore African American* columnist once said, "You can kiss the feet of Stalin, have a sickle and hammer engraved on your teeth … and you will only be a 'suspected Communist.' But if you dared reveal that you hate Jim Crow … you immediately became a Damn Red" (qtd. In Elnaiem n.p.). The threat of the McCarthy-Era crackdown on leftist and anti-racist activism along with watching the dismantling of *Freedom* as Robeson was blacklisted may have contributed to the less overtly leftist and historically specific nature of the 1956 re-publication of Childress's collected stories, as Washington claims (164).

Given this historical backdrop, Childress's choice to challenge racist, anti-Communist language of disease as a means of critiquing racial discourses of hygiene is both radical and risky. Despite the revisions made in the 1956 collection, Childress's searing critique of white women's weaponization of racial essentialist narratives about Black women's hygiene throughout her vignettes remains extraordinarily radical, given the climate of anti-Blackness and anti-Communism in which all versions were published. Specifically, one of the threads that tied anti-Blackness to anti-Communism in the late 1940s-1950s was the deployment of racial discourses of hygiene within the political efforts to curb all leftist and anti-racist efforts. For example, as Charisse Burden-Stelly explains, J. Edgar Hoover's March 26th 1947 HUAC speech was a pivotal moment in linking anti-Communism and anti-Blackness within the U.S. political imagination through his assertion that radical politics, which often included pushes for "racial equality and justice" were used to "conceal communist aims" (54). In doing so, Hoover, then F.B.I. Director, directly employed language

[44] While Jones was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party and was the secretary of the Women's Commission of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), Childress's affiliation with the Communist Party was less formal.

of disease, public health, and hygiene to express his anti-Black, anti-Communist ideology by describing communism as "not merely a political party but rather a 'malignant way of life" and a "'disease that spread like an epidemic' and threatened to infect the entire nation" (Hoover qtd. In Burden-Stelly 54). The risks Childress took to expose such attacks against Black leftist thought makes reading her all the more important since, as Dayo F. Gore notes, she was part of a network of "black women leftists who became politicized in the 1930s and 1940s and defiantly maintained communist affiliations in the midst of a politically repressive 'red scare' of the 1950s" (2). Gore's account of these Black women's work gives an "alternative narrative" to the popular conception that "the U.S. left was decimated by Cold War anticommunism" (11-12). Instead, Black women radicals including Childress kept the struggle for racial and economic justice alive throughout the censorship of the McCarthy Era and beyond. Building on the work of Harris, Washington, May, and Gore, my aim is to recover the radical leftist politics of Childress's writing specifically through an examination of dirt, dirty work, and discourses of hygiene in *Like One of the Family*

The form of Childress's stories may also have been one way of mitigating the risk of anti-Communist, anti-Black censorship as well as centrist/colorblind literary critique, as Sonya J. Lancaster explains:

> Childress' choice of narration is also affected by the time in which she wrote and set the text, the mid-1950s. Having Mildred narrate the stories allows Childress to accomplish what she could not with an omniscient narrator because, as Trudier Harris says, "The literary climate that would deter an author from using a didactic, propagandistic approach to the racial situation in the mid-1950s would not exert the same influence on a character who speaks her own mind and who experiences so intensely the problems she creates." (Harris qtd. in Lancaster 119)

Therefore, not only does Mildred's singular voice eliminate the literal white noise that so often obscures the experiences of Black women workers, it also provides some level of freedom to stage a direct, unapologetic critique of racial capitalism in the McCarthy era.

Through Mildred's unrelenting critique of racial capitalism as well as her celebration of Black women's domestic work, Childress's writing reminds readers of the fullness of Black women's critical interventions in the politics of the literary left. As Mary Hellen Washington has argued, "the 1950s as a period of creative black struggle has disappeared or been omitted from most histories including most African American literary histories, and the terms 'U.S. radicalism,' 'left-wing,' 'Old Left,' 'New Left,' and 'Communist' have come to signify white history and black absence" (185). This erasure of Black contributions to 1950s working-class struggles has only perpetuated the whitening of literary history and labor history. Childress challenges this erasure, offering critical interventions in representations of U.S. labor struggles. Specifically, Childress's treatment of racial discourses of hygiene in *Like One of the Family* allows us to see racialism as dialectically related to capitalism and racial essentialism as a tool that fuels capitalist exploitation. This core tenant of Childress's work provides a necessary reminder that centering class over race and universalizing the proletariat is another means of Black erasure and hinders any attempt to dismantle the violent system of racial capitalism.

The Racialization of Disease in "Health Card" and "In the Laundry Room"

One of the most striking denouncements of racial discourses of hygiene from Childress's 1956 re-published collection comes in the story titled "Health Card," which combats white racist assumptions of Black Harlem residents as inherently dirty and diseased. In this story, Mildred tells Marge about when her wealthy white employer, Mrs. Jones, finds out she lives in Harlem. Mrs. Jones then asks Mildred to provide a "health card" to prove she is free of

disease since "one must be careful, mustn't one?" (*Like One* 43). Mrs. Jones makes this request unprompted by any concerning symptoms of illness from Mildred, exposing her investment in racial discourses of hygiene that mark Black women, especially working-class Black women, as inherently dirty and diseased. Mrs. Jones does not offer to pay Mildred enough to change what she assumes are dirty, disease-ridden living conditions in Harlem, and instead seeks proof of Mildred's personal health. As such, Mrs. Jones exposes that she has no intention of addressing the structural inequality that might contribute to the dirty or hazardous living conditions she suspects Mildred faces.

Mildred's experience with Mrs. Jones mirrors employment conditions for Black women domestic workers in the 1940s and 50s. Such racist assumptions and requests for health records from Black women were especially common throughout the U.S., and workers in the food service business and housework were sometimes required to obtain "Health Cards" or "Health Certificates" in order to prove to their employer they were free of contagious diseases. This requirement was often, if not always, guided by racist beliefs that Black workers, particularly those living in Harlem, carried diseases as a biological product of their race and that Harlem was, thus, an unsanitary home (Green 95). Tracy L. Walters explains that the fears expressed by wealthy white women hiring Black houseworkers inspired politicians to implement "public health policies in New York and New Jersey as safeguards to keep white homes sanitary, and the black women wo worked in those homes were forced to prove themselves worthy of entry" (*Not Your Mother's Mammy* 16).[45] Law

[45] In particular, Walters explains that "In New Jersey, Thomas V. Crasner created an ordinance requiring Newark's domestics be tested for syphilis, while in New York, Charles Breitbart proposed a statewide bill requiring domestics to have blood work done prior to being hired" (*Not Your Mother's Mammy* 16).

enforcement was then recruited to enforce these policies and, as Laurie Green notes, police often disproportionately targeted Black women workers, stopping them on the street and sending them to forced quarantine, "requiring treatment for venereal disease in the city's penal farm" (Green 95). Additionally, Walters explains that the racist stereotypes that cast Black women as "sexually immoral" presented an opportunity for white women to maintain their place of superiority in the racial hierarchy. White women-led organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) created "public health ordinances to regulate and stigmatize black women" under the guise of allyship and public health (*Not Your Mother's Mammy* 15). The assumptions and resulting criminalization of Black working womanhood behind these attempts to control Black women's freedom are steeped in racial discourses of hygiene that mark, as Carl Zimring argues "white people [as] pure and anyone who was not white, [as] dirty," and reinforce the racist myth of Black women's inherent hypersexuality (Zimring 89). These racist beliefs result in over-policing and direct violence against Black women workers—an issue that continues to this day—and also serve as a way to further "justify" the relegation of Black women to dirty and exploitative working and living conditions.

This misguided attribution of health and hygiene struggles in Harlem to biological essentialism exemplified in Childress's story demonstrates how racial discourses of hygiene distracted from the very real environmental issues facing Harlemites such as gentrification and the unavailability of local affordable food detailed in the pages of *Freedom* or the 1950s planning of the North River Waste Water Treatment Plant in West Harlem. Though the plant was not fully constructed until the 1990s, the initial plans for locating the facility in Harlem began in the 1950s. Once constructed, the plant generated pollution that subjected the

predominantly Black local residents to increased rates of respiratory diseases including but not limited to asthma ("West Harlem's Battle for Clean Air" n.p.).[46]

Rather than complying in response to her employer's assertion of racial essentialism that Mildred is dirty and/or diseased, however, Mildred flips the discourse of hygiene back on Mrs. Jones, and feigns relief, stating that she was wondering how to ask for the Jones family's cards in return since she has to "handle the laundry and make beds" ("*Like One"* 43). Shocked and embarrassed by the suggestion that her wealthy white family could be a health hazard to Mildred, Mrs. Jones quickly backs down from her request because she does not want to have to be accountable to the racial essentialism behind her request. After Mrs. Jones rescinds her request, Mildred does as well, explaining, "On second thought, you folks look real clean, too, so," (43). In taking back her own request by noting the white family's appearance of cleanliness, Mildred forces her employer to confront her own racism. By voicing a concern about the white family's hygiene, Mildred reiterates to Mrs. Jones that in dealing with her literal dirty laundry, also has access to the Jones family's figurative dirty laundry, such as how they likely don't pay Mildred a living wage and think of her through a lens of racial essentialism. Additionally, Mildred's specific rhetorical reversal of Mrs. Jones's racial discourses of hygiene further highlights the absurdity of the assumption that Blackness is equivalent to dirt and disease or that residents of Harlem are somehow inherently diseased based upon their race. Throughout *Like One of the Family,* Mildred neither accepts racial discourses of hygiene as fact, nor undermines the value and importance of domestic labor.

[46] The treatment plant's construction was initially planned for a rapidly gentrifying, wealthier area of Manhattan. However, after pushback from wealthier residents, "The city then moved their prospects to a 28-acre, 8-block stretch between 137 and 145 Streets in a largely black community of Harlem" (Maantay and Maroko 197).

Rather, she deconstructs discourses of hygiene surrounding Black women's work and exposes the underlying ideology as a manifestation of racial essentialism. In having Mildred verbally standing up for herself in this vignette as well as throughout the entire collection, Trudier Harris explains, Childress "restored individuality and life to a worn-out literary pattern" that has long chronicled Black women domestic workers' grateful acceptance of the "mammy" role or their attempts to escape housework or other forms of "dirty" work ("*From Mammies*"133). Mildred's character refuses the "grateful and obedient mammy" role without denigrating housework.

The fact that access or lack thereof to clean, stable housing, healthcare, and other resources is based on racial hierarchy and the whims of white supremacy is even clearer in the original 1951 version (untitled) of the same story in Childress's column "Conversation from Life" from Robeson's *Freedom.* In this version, the story is placed right next to a news column titled "It Happened in Harlem,"—which focuses on real-world examples of gentrification—creates a spatial link between Black Harlemites' material conditions and Mildred's fictionalized encounters with racial discourses of hygiene that figure Harlem residents as inherently dirty and diseased. The plot of the original version of "Health Card" does not differ significantly from the 1956 re-print, but the added context of the newspaper's reporting on the gentrification of Harlem forces readers to connect the processes of Black geographic displacement and disenfranchisement to their access to healthy food and living conditions. Additionally, in encouraging these connections, the two columns blur the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, allowing readers to more vividly picture, by way of Mildred, an individual's (even their own) experience of the reality similar to that reported on the same page of the paper.

Specifically, in this issue of *Freedom*, "It Happened in Harlem" details various examples of how the cost of living has increased in Harlem. First, the unnamed author notes

the installation of parking meters on the streets, making it too expensive for Black business owners and residents to park their cars. While parking may not seem directly related to health and environmental conditions, the collective attacks on Black financial security likely hampered these Harlem residents' access to proper living conditions and medical care. Second, the author of the "It Happened in Harlem" column details how high meat prices in Harlem have made it difficult for Black families to buy meat. This results in a Tuesday/Thursday "Don't Buy Meat" boycott organized by the Harlem Tenant and Consumers Council. Despite the fact that "housewives who travel out of the community to do their shopping are getting dead serious about making the city come through with that long-promised and often-budgeted public market for Harlem," the ramifications of the increase in meat prices are already affecting residents' diets and nutritional access ("It Happened" 3).

Finally, the column notes that "San Juan Hill tenants are up in arms over being displaced by the proposed high-rent Manhattanville housing project. They have no place to go now and they couldn't afford to move back into the new project at $30 a room" (3). The displacement of these Harlem residents leads to a request from the Harlem Tenants Council for "more low-rent projects in the slum areas" (3). This historical account of Harlem residents being priced out of their homes and pushed out of their former neighborhoods illustrates the ways in which 1950s Black Harlemites were subject to financial disruption, geographic displacement, and food insecurity, all of which are bound to affect their living conditions and health. It is this point that Mildred makes in the neighboring column on the page through her rejection of her white employer's racially essentialist belief that Harlem is filled with inherently lazy and diseased Black workers. As Mildred illustrates, this is an example of pseudoscientific racism that is in no way grounded in logic or reality. Rather, if there are higher rates of disease in Black Harlem communities, this can be largely attributed to the processes of unequal resource access detailed in "It Happened in Harlem." This contextual

placement of the original version of "Health Card" in Robeson's *Freedom*, thus bolsters Washington's assertion that Childress's vignettes should not be divorced from their radical, historically-poignant context (189).

Childress's 1956 re-published version of the story "In the Laundry Room" (originally untitled) also stages a detailed critique of racial discourses of disease and hygiene. In this vignette, Mildred tells Marge a story about encountering a white houseworker at the laundromat. She sits down next to the white worker's employer's laundry pile and brushes up against it. The white houseworker reacts with a "sickly grin" and "snatched her clothes away real quick" ("A Conversation from Life" 105). In recounting the story to Marge, Mildred conjectures that the white houseworker fears her touching her employer's clothes because Mildred might "give her folks gallopin' pellagra or somethin'" (105). In this moment, Mildred's critique of racial discourses of hygiene becomes clear since the specific disease she uses as an example, pellagra, is an illness with a racialized history in the U.S. While pellagra is now known to be a nutritional disease, its causes were initially shrouded in a racist cloud of mystery. Pellagra's actual cause comes from a deficiency in niacin, a compound found in locally-grown foods that became less available in the early twentieth-century American South for a variety of reasons. Some scientists have theorized that one of these reasons was the replacement of locally-grown niacin-rich foods with more profitable cotton monoculture crops. Thus, struggling tenant farmers and impoverished workers, many of whom were Black, were subjected to symptoms of pellagra such as skin rash, diarrhea, nausea, and inner mouth sores (Clay, Schmick, and Troesken 35).

Initially in the beginning of the twentieth century, when cases of pellagra spiked in the U.S., physicians and scientists thought pellagra was an infectious disease. However, by 1930, after establishing the connection between cotton monoculture in the South and pellagra cases, the disease was deemed nutritional (32). Thus, by the 1950s setting of Childress's

stories, pellagra was known as a non-contagious disease caused by lack of access to a healthy diet. Despite this fact, social discourse surrounding it still reinforced racist attitudes and fear of contagion. K. Rajakumar notes that "The pellagra epidemic created a culture of 'pellagraphobia.' Patients were shunned as 'lepers' and ostracized. The diagnosis of pellagra resulted in social isolation and despair for the affected" (247). Despite the scientific evidence that pellagra was not contagious, the social construction of pellagra as a racialized disease persisted. The fact that it is a disease caused by poor nutritional access and spurred by monoculture farming for greater profit emphasizes that rather than being an essential product of racial identity, the risk of contracting disease like pellagra is determined by one's positionality within in a racial capitalist society.

After confronting the white houseworker about her reaction to her presence, Mildred attempts to unpack the racist assumptions about hygiene and "Black disease" by getting to know the white houseworker, discovering that the woman is paid even less than herself, and convincing her that they have common interests as working-class domestic laborers. Mildred highlights the absurdity of racial discourses of hygiene that her white employers espouse and that the white domestic worker has internalized by asking "'How come," "The folks I work for are willin' to have me put my hands all over their chopped meat patties and, yet ask me to hang my coat in the kitchen closet instead of in the hall with theirs?'" (*Like One* 106). In posing this question, Mildred demonstrates another critical yet illogical point: white people's concerns about disease and infection are not about an actual fear of germs, but rather about asserting and maintaining their own position at the top of the racial and socioeconomic hierarchy. In highlighting this reality, Childress's vignette critiques the racist structures of public health in the U.S.

Rather than finish the conversation with her critique of the white woman's racialized beliefs about health and hygiene, Mildred takes the opportunity to build multi-racial

solidarity. At the end of the story, having seemingly convinced the white woman that the fact that she herself is Black does not mean she is inherently more dirty or diseased, Mildred says to the white houseworker, "Now when you got to plunge your hands in all them dirty clothes in order to put them in the machine … how come you can't see that it's a whole lot safer and makes more sense to put your hand in mine and be friends?" (106). Here, Mildred once again flips the discourse of hygiene, pointing out that the white houseworker's white employer's dirty laundry is far more likely to transmit a disease than simply taking her (Mildred's) own hand in solidarity in the fight for better working conditions. As such, Childress's story pits their hazardous individual working conditions against the much safer option of collective multiracial working-class solidarity. By rejecting racial discourses of hygiene, pointing out the potential risks posed by white employers' germ-filled laundry, and presenting unity in a common struggle, Mildred combats the biological essentialism and individualist rhetoric behind the racialization of disease, highlights the true environmental risk of their shared profession, and advocates for collective organizing across racial difference.

Although the 1956 versions of Childress's stories are likely the more commonly read versions today, the original text of "In the Laundry Room" published in *Freedom* situates the plot within the historical context of what Washington describes as "Cold War tensions," more specifically revealing the stakes of working-class solidarity. In this earlier version of "In the Laundry Room," Mildred uses discourses of hygiene, within the context of these Cold War tensions and racist 1950s immigration policy not to universalize the working class, but to demonstrate that she and the ethnically marked houseworker have a shared struggle from which neither of will truly be free when faced with policies such as the McCarran-Walter Act. The version of "In the Laundry Room" that appears in the 1956 novel publication is poignant, but the original 1953 version in Paul Robeson's *Freedom* differs significantly in content and, thus, even more directly illuminates the broad expansiveness of white supremacy

at the core of U.S. economic and social relations.[47] This version was published in an issue of *Freedom* centered around the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act which, as Mae Ngai notes, "maintained national origin quotas" established by the 1924 Johnson Reed Act (discussed in Chapter 1), that "reflected that logic which cast the native-born as the most loyal Americans, especially whites of British and north European descent, and the foreign-born as subversive, especially Jews, who were imagined as Bolsheviks, and Italians, who were viewed as anarchists" (237). This policy, initiated by Senator Pat McCarran, a "dedicated anti-Communist and Cold War warrior," encouraged the racist and sometimes deadly collision of ethnocentrism and anti-communism (237). In addition to targeting Jewish immigrants, Italian immigrants, and Communists, the McCarran-Walter Act was invested in anti-black racism as it "imposed quotas on the former British colonies in the Caribbean, a move that was designed to limit the migration of black people into the United States" (238). Seeing the similar thread of white supremacy underpinning this expression of ethnocentrism and anti-black racism, Mildred makes a point of expressing the need for also finding common ground in the fight for workers' rights across difference. Without ignoring the specific oppression of Black women domestic workers during the 1950s, Childress, through Mildred, demonstrates that exposing capitalism's dependence on antiblack racism and expressing the importance of multi-racial working-class solidarity are not mutually exclusive acts.

To facilitate this multiethnic, multiracial solidarity in the original publication of "In the Laundry Room," Childress includes direct references to the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act and casts the domestic worker Mildred encounters as an ethnic (presumably

[47] The version of the story in the January 1953 issue of *Freedom* is not titled "In the Laundry Room," but is simply included in Childress's regular serialized column titled "Conversation from Life."

Eastern or Southern European) white woman—references that are later removed in the 1956 version of the story. Mildred declares to the white domestic worker, "I notice you speak with an accent … Tell me, do you have to register as a foreigner under the new McCarran Act?" (*"*A Conversation from Life" 10). When the woman says yes, Mildred continues, "Now I know you are probably scared that if you are half-way decent to me you'll be shipped out of here faster than greased lightnin', but am I doin any of these things to you?" (10). In posing this question of blame, Mildred highlights how the environment of the McCarthy Era and policies such as the McCarran-Walter Act—established largely to curb the spread of Communism and keep non-northwestern European immigrants from entering the U.S.—function to pit ethnic white workers against Black workers to under the threat of revoked citizenship. As such, this story exposes how powerful white politicians' immigration policies such as the McCarran-Walter Act work in conjunction with wealthy white women's deployment of racial discourses of hygiene to maintain a vulnerable, cheap labor force and to deter a multi-racial collective fight for safer working conditions.

The push for multi-racial solidarity in original 1953 version of "In the Laundry Room" within the context of the McCarran-Walter Act is enhanced by the column's positioning amongst the rest of the articles in this issue of *Freedom*. In addition to detailed articles about the ramifications of the McCarran-Walter Act on Black immigrant communities, Childress's story is accompanied by an article on the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, calling for Black-Jewish solidarity against white supremacy. By grouping this story in with other examples of the effect of the McCarran-Walter Act and the white supremacist violence foisted upon well-known, leftist Jewish figures like the Rosenbergs, Childress and Robeson create the space for a nuanced discussion of solidarity across racial difference without conflating white Jewish and non-Jewish Black experiences of white supremacy.

The racial discourses of hygiene that are weaponized to uphold white supremacy become the means by which Mildred organizes across racial difference for working class rights. She accomplishes this not by espousing colorblind racism by ignoring racial difference, but instead by pointing to the absurdity of these discourses of racial essentialism and individual hygiene perpetuated by her wealthy white employers. In doing so, Mildred demonstrates that she and the white houseworker have low wages in common. Additionally, in the original vignette published in *Freedom*, Mildred finds commonality with the white worker in discourses of racism and nationalism of the McCarran-Walter Act without conflating anti-Black racism and xenophobia. The original version ties the division of the working class to race, centering white supremacy as the problem. In doing so, through Mildred, Childress refuses to privilege an analysis of class over her critique of racism and ethnocentrism. As such, as both May and Washington have noted, Childress's story diverges from approaches to class that universalize the working class. Rather than employing a colorblind approach for the sake of economic solidarity, Mildred expresses the value of difference in solidarity, framing a future in which both women could hold hands and be friends as a future that is truly free.

"workin' myself into such a lather:" Racism as a Health Hazard

In several of the vignettes from *Like one of the Family,* Mildred clearly demonstrates that white women's racial discourses of individual hygiene distract from the true source of environmental harm and workplace hazard: institutional racism. The first step in revealing the insidious intention of white women's deployment of such discourses involves demonstrating that actual health is not the driving concern of such rhetoric. Building on the work of Trudier Harris, I argue that attending to Mildred's encounters of racial discourses of hygiene in *Like One of the Family* also pokes holes in the logic of white women's obsessions with hygiene. In

particular, Harris, quoting Studs Terkel in her larger argument about white women's "spatial ownership" in the home, notes that white women depend on the very women of color they cast as dirty and diseased to clean their homes. Speaking from experience, Terkel elaborates, "when they say about the neighborhood we live in is dirty, why do they ask me to come and clean their house? We, the people in the slums, the same nasty women they have come to their house in the suburbs every day. If these women are so filthy, why you want them to clean for you?" (Terkel qtd. in *From Mammies* 20-21). In other words, white women's desire to maintain their own cleanliness as a signifier of their moral and inherent superiority over Black women exists in tension with their desire to exploit Black women's labor and relegate them to inferior, unclean areas of the household. The superiority of white women depends upon both the belief that Black women, especially those from Harlem, are inherently dirty, and their contrasting dependence on these same women workers for the cleanliness of their own households.[48] Mildred is fully aware of the mental gymnastics that her white employers use to rationalize this thought process, and, through her storytelling, seizes opportunities to expose just how nonsensical these types of racist mental gymnastics truly are.

For example, In "Inhibitions," Mildred recounts to Marge an incident in which she is chastised by her white employer for stopping the employer's son from playing with the

[48] One of the ways, Harris notes, that white women navigate this tension is by designating specific spaces within the home, such as the kitchen, as inferior, dirtier places where the presence of Black women workers is accepted. She explains, "kitchens have connotations of hard work and meniality—sweat, grime, broken fingernails, and other things from which the mistress wishes to dissociate herself. Passing *that particular* space on to the domestic is a royal decree of her subservience and inferiority" ("*From Mammies*" 15).

dinner meat. Mildred reprimands the young white boy when he puts his hands in the hamburger meat that she has to prepare for that evening's dinner and upon witnessing this, the boy's mother tells Mildred, "you can't deal with children abruptly, you always have to let them know the reason why things take place or else they will feel unwanted and inhibited" to which Mildred responds, "it is not his *right* to walk over everybody, to be rude and sassy, to hold me up from doin' my work, to make everybody sick 'cause he feels like playin' in their food" (*Like One* 129). In pointing out the white woman's lack of concern about the actual health risks of letting the young boy handle the food in unsanitary ways, Mildred reveals the fact that health and hygiene/prevention of disease are not the true concerns of the white women who employ her. If Mildred's employer was actually concerned about sanitation rather than the perceived threat of Mildred's race, she would understand Mildred's concern over the health risks of the boy fondling the ground beef. Rather, as Mildred exposes to her employers throughout the vignettes, such concerns over purity and hygiene—which are conveniently forgotten when it is a white boy putting his dirty hands into the dinner meat—are actually rooted in racial essentialism that marks Black people as inherently impure and dirty and white people as the unmarked, pure ideal.

Additionally, in the title vignette of the 1956 collection, "Like One of the Family," Mildred exposes the façade of white women's concern for hygiene by challenging her employer's statement to fellow white guests that she is "like one of the family." Mildred responds to her employer exclaiming,

> I am not just like one of the family at all! The family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen. Your mama borrows your lace tablecloth for her company and your son entertains his friends in your parlor, your daughter takes her afternoon nap on the living room couch and the puppy sleeps on your satin spread. (*Like One* 2)

In this moment, Mildred directly calls out the white woman's lie, making clear the hierarchical organization of space in the home and challenging the illusion that she is welcome in the sanitized areas of the house designated for the leisure of white bodies, not hard racialized labor. Even the pet dog, Mildred notes, is a more established member of the family and is welcome in these "clean" spaces of white leisure. In rejecting the white woman's lie, Mildred exposes her employer's attempts to disguise her own racism and embody the gracious and generous white savior role. Mildred, of course, sees right through this deception and recognizes that Black women workers such as herself aren't family, but rather are as Colins argues, "tolerated" only so long as they do not challenge the racial hierarchy and stay in their "proscribed places," namely the kitchen, not the couch (Colins 5).[49] In feigning kindness and pretending to see Mildred as a member of her family, her white employer attempts to mask her investment in the racialized labor market in similar ways to how the racial discourses of hygiene are used to shroud racism under the cloak of "public health." Colins importantly notes that "this is not a politics of exclusion, but one of containment" (5). Women like Mildred cannot be "excluded" because their labor is cheap and exploitable, but her freedom—and perceived inherent dirtiness—must be "contained" since the racial hierarchy must be maintained to keep her labor cheap. As such, Mildred's class analysis depends upon a critique of racial and gender hierarchies. By exposing her white employer's fakery in front of the white house guests, Mildred centers the specific oppression of Black women workers and combats prominent but tired stereotypes such as the grateful mammy indebted to her "generous" employer.

[49] For more on the kitchen as a space of segregation but also of Black women's authority, see Sonya J. Lancaster's "Too Many Cooks: Contested Authority in the Kitchen."

The second step in deconstructing white women's use of racial discourses of hygiene as a means of maintaining racial hierarchy is to demonstrate the link between working for white employers and "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism (28). The truly consistent health hazard that disproportionately affects Black workers throughout Childress's vignettes is structural, state-sanctioned racism, as Mildred reveals to Marge in the stories "I Hate Half-days Off," and "I go to a Funeral." In "I hate half-days off," Mildred discusses the connection between overwork and individual health. She recounts to Marge her recent interview for a job cleaning for a white woman's household in which the woman manipulates Mildred's potential schedule to maximize her work while minimizing her time off/pay through the use of half-days. Mildred, alarmed at the amount of overwork the woman is demanding, exclaims to Marge "In the first place I could see me workin' myself into such a lather that there wouldn't be nothin' to do but crawl into the doctor's office on the first and fifteenth [pay days] and give every blessed nickel I had in order that he could try and straighten me out in time to meet the second and the sixteenth" (*Like One* 96). Mildred marks the overwork and exploitation of Black women's work as a risk factor for health, thereby exposing racism as a health hazard rather than racist ideas that Black women are inherently dirty or diseased. Mildred reverses the positive connotations of cleanliness by describing how working for this manipulative white woman would distress her by using the language of hygiene, "workin' myself into such a lather"—as in agitating soap for scrubbing. Here, "lather" carries an association with distress and anxiety rather than the ideals of cleanliness and purity cherished by Mildred's white employers. In utilizing a cleaning-based idiom with a negative connotation, Mildred flips the discourse of hygiene to highlight that when cleaning becomes exploitative or is used as a means of establishing racial hierarchy, it is doing the work of racial capitalism. This rhetorical move on Mildred's behalf also

emphasizes hygiene can be a harmful rather than helpful construct that facilitates racism itself as a public health hazard and disease-causing agent.

Similarly, Mildred figures racism as a health hazard and, ultimately, a cause of death in "I go to a Funeral." In this story, Mildred describes to Marge a funeral for her close friend's brother, a Black man named Mitchell. Marge asks what caused Mitchell's death, to which Mildred responds, "No, he wasn't sick long, he just went like that, real sudden. You know he had been tryin' to get a nice shop location for a long time, but people wouldn't rent it to him because he was colored" (*Like One* 78). She then proceeds to explain the process of redlining in Harlem and the ways white people "bar your way when it comes to tryin' to buy money-makin' property" (78). While his death was officially ruled a heart attack by the coroner, Mildred asserts "I do believe he died of discouragement" (78). Rather than accept this cause of death, Mildred questions the random nature of such a sudden heart attack, suggesting that it was caused, instead, by the barriers Mitchell faced at the hands of white supremacy that kept him from being able to fulfill his dream as a small business owner.

The direct connection Mildred makes between systemic racism via processes like overwork and redlining to declining health in Black people works to contrast the racial discourses of hygiene she encounters from white employers throughout the collection. Through Mildred's stories, Childress does not stop at simply exposing the faulty logic of racial discourses of hygiene; she presents detailed anecdotal evidence of real health hazards that are the result of structural racism. None of this is to say that Mildred does not appreciate cleanliness or recognize the importance of clean living and working conditions. She does, however, poke holes in the racist ideology behind white women's deployment of racial discourses of hygiene under the guise of concern for their own and their families' health. In focusing on debunking racial discourses of hygiene rather than seeking individual uplift, Mildred's character fights for the dignity of all workers regardless of trade or occupation.

Throughout Childress's vignettes, Mildred illustrates that the work of domestic labor itself is not an issue, but rather that institutional racism relegates Black women to environmentally hazardous working conditions in white people's homes, deprives them of a living wage, and subjects them to white women's individualist rhetoric of hygiene as a solution to their struggles. Mildred combats this rhetoric by demonstrating that domestic labor—and all labor for that matter—is dignified work worthy of a healthy, environmentally safe working environment and a living wage. In "All About my Job," when recounting to Marge her efforts to describe her occupation to fellow attendees at a church bazar, Mildred says, If I had a child, I would want that child to do something that paid better and had some opportunity to it, but on the other hand it would distress me to no end to see that child get some arrogant attitude toward me because I do domestic work" (*Like One* 36). While she shares *The Street's* protagonist Lutie Johnson's concern that her prospective children's occupation could be determined by the racist whims of white people that govern the labor market, Childress has Mildred take her critique of racial capitalism a step further than Petry's protagonist Lutie by deconstructing *both* the ideology that figures housework as menial unskilled labor *and* the racist assumption that such dirty, environmentally hazardous work is only fit for impoverished Black women.

Rather than buying into the narrative of domestic work as inferior or undignified because of its association with dirty labor or its false classification as unskilled, Mildred emphasizes the critical role of Black women domestic workers in the survival and preservation of Black community and culture. Despite white attempts to obscure the racialization of labor with discourses of hygiene or excuses such as "it's *smart* to not talk about *slavery* anymore," Mildred asserts that "after freedom came, it was domestics that kept us from perishin' by the wayside" (*Like One* 37). Mildred recognizes that classifying Black women's work as unskilled or nonexistent and reinforcing the ideology that Black women are

inherently dirty and, thus, well-suited for domestic work are central tactics of white efforts to erase the ongoing legacy of slavery and preserve the exploitation of Black labor for profit. Therefore, her attack on such ideology centers the destruction of both the racial hierarchy and sexism in the struggle against capitalism. None of this is to say that Mildred approves of the racialization of labor, the myth that such labor is unskilled, or the relegation of Black women to low-paid, undervalued domestic labor in white homes. Rather, as Harris explains, "Childress was not attempting to elevate the status of scrubbing floors. Her attempt was to help black domestics expand their conception of themselves. In doing so, she restored individuality and life to a worn-out literary pattern" (*From Mammies* 133). While critical of her relegation to the labor of dealing with white people's filth on the basis of her race, Mildred also makes a point of defending the importance of housework and other difficult and "dirty" work that is cast as "unskilled," In doing so, she also challenges the assumption that performing essential domestic work in these dirtier spaces is a marker of inferiority.

In staging her critique, Mildred also resists the determination of worth based on labor value by embracing the full complexity of Black women's historical legacy beyond wage labor. She explains that in addition to "clean up people's houses," domestic workers have "taken care of our brothers and fathers and husbands when the factory gates and office desks and pretty near everything else was closed to them; we've helped many a neighbor, doin' everything from helpin' to clothe their children to buryin' the dead" (*Like One* 36). Thus, the work of Black women domestics is the backbone of society and the pillar of Black cultural survival. The dirt and waste encountered along the way, especially when experienced in the service of community, is not inherently the issue since dirty materiality is an inevitable byproduct of life processes. As Mary Douglas points out, "Dirt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous" (xi). Rather, the real issue is exploitative labor in a racialized and gendered labor market that disproportionately exposes Black workers to avoidable health

hazards. In "All about my Job," as in the other vignettes, Mildred consistently makes a point not to lament Black women's difficult and often dirty labor as domestic workers, but rather to acknowledge and celebrate the critical role of Black women houseworkers in the preservation of Black culture.[50] While *The Street* depicts Black women's resistance to racial capitalism despite a lack of resources for labor organizing, Childress's vignettes interrogate this lack of resources, suggest structural solutions such as unionizing domestics, and celebrate the critical role of Black women workers in labor struggles.

Through her presentation of Mildred's encounters with racial discourses of hygiene, Childress's vignettes intervene in common depictions of domestic labor as unskilled dirty, and, thus, inferior. Her representations of housework as well as Mildred's reactions to discourses of hygiene, instead, expose the racial essentialism with which white employers assert their superiority, celebrate Black women domestic workers' value to the Black community, and present collective strategies for achieving racial, economic, and

[50] In this sense, Childress's work reiterates one of fellow Black leftist Claudia Jones's central arguments: because of their positionality within the history of racialized labor, Black women workers are well-situated to be leaders in the fight against capitalist exploitation (Jones 19). Regardless of whether they interacted directly with one another throughout the 1950s, both women were deeply devoted to disrupting the racism and sexism Black women workers faced at the hands of racial capitalism, but also from their own comrades. Both Jones and Childress directly confront the oppression Black women faced both in their work environments and in leftist spaces. For example, the refusal of men to socialize with Black women at leftist social events and the issue of white women employers tacking on extra tasks not covered in the employment agreement they have with Black domestic workers, are also plot points in stories from *Like one of the Family* such as "Dance with me Henry" and "On Leavin' Notes."

environmental justice. As such, Childress's stories, especially in their original versions within the pages of *Freedom,* illustrate that central to the destruction of racial capitalism is the realization that "there's nobody with common sense that can look down on the domestic worker" (*Like One* 37).

Conclusion

Examining Childress's vignettes in both their original form within the pages of *Freedom* and in their revised form in the collection *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life,* reveals sharp critiques of both the environmental injustice faced by Black women workers as well as white women's use of racial discourses of hygiene as a cover for their essentialized racism. In deploying rules such as requiring a health card from Black domestic workers or suggesting that their houseworker is "like one of the family" when their belongings aren't even allowed in the same closet as the white family's, white women reinforce dangerous stereotypes of Black women as inherently dirty/diseased. These racial discourses of hygiene also serve to distract from the real cause of the environmental injustice faced by Black workers, institutional racism, and put the onus of cleanliness and health on the workers themselves. Mildred, however, will have none of this. Through Mildred's character, Childress's work joins the ranks of other brilliant Black leftist women such as Claudia Jones, Gwendolyn Brooks, Marvel Cooke, Lorraine Hansberry, and many others in rejecting racist, individualist solutions to environmental injustice and, instead, paves a path for a collective, unionized future of multi-racial solidarity led by Black women workers.

Conclusion: "Matter out of Place," Matter as Power

"If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place."

—Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis on the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* pp. 44

In her landmark anthropological study on the cultural significance of dirt, Mary Douglas defines dirt as "matter out of place" (44). Similar to Julia Kristeva, Douglas figures dirt and pollution as substances that disrupt our sense of order and defy the boundaries we construct to maintain a façade of control. Yet, while dirt is a material that sometimes carries with it damaging material consequences, it also carries with it—whether dangerous or not—socially constructed meaning. As Douglas points out, "Dirt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous" (xi). Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated the ways in which various works of twentieth-century multi-ethnic women's working-class literature illustrate the material and ideological consequences of the social construction of dirt's meaning, specifically for women of color, immigrant women, and impoverished women. Reading for dirt, dirty work, and racial discourses of hygiene in these texts exposes how wealthy white characters mask the harmful environmental effects of dangerous or toxic dirty material on marginalized communities by re-focusing attention on superficial dirt that they use to cast people of color and impoverished individuals as inherently filthy, diseased, and/or lazy. Rather than confronting the systems of inequality and environmental injustice from which they benefit, wealthy white characters, especially wealthy white women, espouse racial discourses of hygiene that re-direct blame for environmental hazards away from racial capitalism and onto the individuals they cast as inherently dirty, diseased, lazy and a threat to the white nation state.

Representations of racial discourses of hygiene in the texts I read mirror the ways in which wealthy white communities seek to preserve a racial hierarchy through figuring communities of color, immigrant communities, and working-class people as an impure environmental threat to the public health of the nation. As is the case with other social constructs such as gender and race with which discourses of hygiene intersect, the way we think about dirt is used to determine who falls where on the racial hierarchy, justify gendered and racialized system of labor, and further enable the exploitation of non-white and provisionally white workers in service of capitalism. Dirt, waste, and other abject materials defy this system of order and hierarchy, and, as such, "Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise" (Douglas 200). Discourses of hygiene, cleanliness, and purity—which are constructed as oppositional to processes like immigration and racial equity—attempt to restore order, allow for hierarchical categorization, and reject change—especially racial, ethnic, and economic change. As such, racial discourses of hygiene, such as those exposed by the texts I have analyzed, have been and continue to be one of the cornerstones of ideological frameworks that figure environmental purity as dependent upon racial purity.

The racial discourses of hygiene that I examine in mid- twentieth-century literature continue to exert a powerful ideological influence today. Increased political unrest, climate catastrophe, and global pandemic have exacerbated much of the current racist discourse surrounding individual hygiene, disease, and public health exemplified in the texts I analyze. For example, the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in anti-Asian hate and violence fueled by racial discourses of disease and hygiene that mark Asian and Asian-American individuals as inherently infectious threats to U.S. Public health. Such actions have been fueled by the rhetoric of politicians such as former President Donald J. Trump, who labeled the COVID-19 virus, which is believed to have originated in Wuhan, China, the "kung flu," the "Chinese virus" and the "Wuhan virus" (Trump qtd. in Reed n.p.).

Much like associating certain racial and economic groups with dirt and disease, attaching national and ethnic identity to a global pandemic that has reportedly killed 6,908,554 people and counting is not only scientifically inaccurate but directly fuels anti-Asian and anti-immigrant hatred and leads to frightening environmental rhetoric ("World Health Organization" n.p.). For example, as Deja Newton explains, some environmental groups like Common Dreams responded to the pandemic with the sentiment that COVID-19 is "nature's response to human transgression" (n.p.). Additionally, as Kai Bosworth notes, some individuals turned to Twitter and other social media sites to theorize that "nature is healing" with examples like: "Swans and dolphins had returned to the canals of Venice" (Bosworth 354). These assertions that COVID-19 is somehow good for the environment depend on the assumption that "human social life is inherently anti-ecological" (Bosworth 354). Such an assumption currently and historically, then, leads to the ideology that certain groups of people—read non-white and/or impoverished—are inherently more anti-ecological than others. These sentiments along with the idea that the pandemic is inherently linked to individuals from China collide and have the potential to create conditions ripe for ecofascist violence through policies such as border enforcement, racist travel bans, and further immigration restrictions under the guise of protecting public health.[51]

- As this dissertation demonstrates, such dangerous rhetoric is not new. It plays into long-standing tropes that are used to determine who is bad for the environment and should be

[51] I use the term "ecofascism" in the same way my colleagues and I define it in our web zine "Against the Ecofascist Creep": "Ecofascism is environmentalism that 1. Advocates or accepts violence and 2. Reinforces existing systems of power and inequality. Ecofascism suggests that certain kinds of people are naturally and exclusively entitled to control environmental resources" (Anson, et. al 12).

viewed with what Sarah Jaquette Ray calls "environmental disgust" (155). Racial discourses of hygiene, I argue, are a tool that helps generate "environmental disgust." This feeling of disgust then, as Ray notes, obscures the larger "dominant agendas" of patriarchy, capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism to name a few (182). Racial discourses of hygiene, thus, continue to allow wealthy individuals, large corporations, and federal institutions like the military industrial complex to ignore the larger structural issues that put communities of color and impoverished communities in greater proximity to dirt and waste both harmful and not.

- Yet, the texts I read do not approach this old but powerful problem with hopelessness. Rather, they provide avenues of resistance to racial discourses of hygiene and environmental injustice through women workers' stories. In Yezierska's work, especially *Bread Givers,* the central working-class Jewish woman protagonist learns to defy mandates for individual hygiene that allow her to resist the false binary of fully assimilated American/Old World Jewish immigrant in her fight for environmental justice for her community on Hester Street. In Sanora Babb's *Whose Names are Unknown,* working-class women migrant unite with farmworkers of color around their exposure to dust and dirt for inter-racial solidarity in their fight healthier working conditions. Ann Petry's Black women characters defy the racial discourses of hygiene surrounding work cast as materially and morally dirty in search of economic independence. Finally, Childress's protagonist Mildred exposes white women's attempts to mask white supremacy through discourses of hygiene and turns these discourses back against said white women in her fight for racial and economic justice for Black women workers. It is through reviving the radical potential of these women characters and the authors who created them that we can begin to see that, as Mary Douglas points out, "dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness. But it is from its first phase that it derives its force. The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power" (199). Each of these authors' fiction as well as their own personal efforts toward activism and journalism

tap into this transgressive power to reveal the constructed nature of racial discourses of hygiene; expose the reality of the racism, xenophobia, and poor distribution of resources that create the conditions of environmental injustice they face; and provide new avenues for thinking about the power of resisting racial capitalism through living in community.

- Some of these tactics of resistance are alive and well in the fight for environmental justice today. For example, grassroots environmental justice initiatives like WEACT, as Malini Ranganathan notes, take up the struggles articulated previously by Black radical feminists like Claudia Jones such as "segregated housing; a lack of affordable food, childcare, and jobs; and the poor health of working women" in their fight for environmental justice (n.p.). By drawing on the experiences of communities of color, WEACT rejects neoliberal individualist approaches to public health and, instead, advocates for structural solutions based in community care in the fight for climate justice, healthy living conditions, and responsible land use ("Areas of Work" n.p.). Such movements, by centering the experiences of working-class communities of color and rejecting the limits of racial capitalism, provide hopeful pathways toward an environmentally just world rooted in the history of multiethnic working-class feminisms.

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