

DOMESTIC WORKERS, SEX WORKERS, AND THE MOVEMENT: REIMAGINING  
BLACK WORKING-CLASS RESISTANCE IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM  
ATTAWAY, RICHARD WRIGHT, AND ALICE CHILDRESS, 1935-1960

by

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

### **Domestic Workers, Sex Workers, and the Movement: Reimagining Black Working-Class Resistance in the Work of William Attaway, Richard Wright, and Alice Childress, 1935-1960**

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To novelists, short story writers, poets, and playwrights of the early twentieth century, works of fiction provided spaces to explore the ways that black women workers shaped and were shaped by the theory and practice of working-class resistance. This dissertation is an analysis of domestic labor and sexual labor that imagines the possibilities of black women's resistance through the lens of literature. It examines four key figures, who considered these possibilities by centering domestic and sexual laborers in their work: sociologist, theorist, and longtime Communist activist, Esther Cooper Jackson, proletarian novelist William Attaway, famed author Richard Wright, and playwright, essayist, and short story writer, Alice Childress. For contemporary scholars, fiction (and the process of writing fiction) provides us with an intellectual framework that emerges from its historical moment, with which we can further understand and historicize black women's sexual and domestic labor, both at the places where they overlap and those at which they diverge. More importantly, in analyzing domestic work as wage work, sexuality, sexual violence, and sexual desire, Wright, Attaway, and Childress generate new questions and new understandings of black womanhood, labor, and

activism. While the writers' evolving theorizations are certainly flawed and by no means comprehensive, an examination of their methodological processes (both those that work and those that don't work) demonstrate a cultural, political, and historical significance of black women workers that cannot be ignored.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate every word written here to my mother, Paula Russell, who, when asked if she had ever been ashamed of the history of domestic work in our family, replied, “Why would you be ashamed of someone for working?” I hope to one day embody the same pride, dignity, power, and grace that you (and those who came before you) possess.

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## INTRODUCTION

It's a brisk September day in New York in 1935. On the corner of 167<sup>th</sup> and Jerome Ave a group of black women are gathered at what is known as the Bronx Slave Market, hoping to secure a day's work from the numerous white housewives who travel there in search of domestic help. Known as the "paper bag brigade" these women are easily identified by their pristine uniforms and the paper bags they carry containing the tools necessary for cooking, cleaning, ironing, and serving. Soon, a lower middle-middle class Jewish woman arrives at the market. She asks the first two women she sees, "You girls want work?" Unable to pay the wage demanded, she eventually finds a woman who is willing to work for the lowest price, a mere fifteen cents an hour.

On the adjacent corner, another group of women gather, also in search of work. This time, a day's labor comes from men who approach the corner and offer money in exchange for a "good time." A day's wages for these women is slightly higher than those of their comrades in the "brigade." But in the midst of America's economic recession, both groups of women barely made enough to survive. This was the story recounted by Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke in their groundbreaking exposé, "The Bronx Slave Market," that appeared in the *Crisis* in 1935. The street corner markets rendered these two seemingly invisible workforces, domestic workers and sex workers, hypervisible. The exchange of labor for wages on street corners meant that these two groups of workers faced their oppression as black women laborers on a miniature and very public economic battlefield. Yet to journalists, activists, sociologists, and scholars of the period

it was the severity of their degradation rather than the possibilities for resistance that mattered in the midst of the nation's crisis.

But to novelists, short story writers, poets, and playwrights, works of fiction provided space to explore the ways that these black women workers shaped and were shaped by the theory and practice of working-class resistance. My dissertation examines four key figures, who, during the interwar period, considered these possibilities by centering domestic and sexual laborers in their work: sociologist, theorist, and longtime Communist activist, Esther Cooper Jackson, proletarian novelist William Attaway, famed author Richard Wright, and playwright, essayist, and short story writer, Alice Childress. For contemporary scholars, fiction (and the process of writing fiction) provides us with an intellectual framework that emerges from its historical moment, with which we can further understand and historicize black women's sexual and domestic labor, both at the places where they overlap and those at which they diverge. More importantly, in analyzing domestic work as wage work, sexuality, sexual violence, and sexual desire, Wright, Attaway, and Childress generate new questions and new understandings of black womanhood, labor, and resistance. While the writers' evolving theorizations are certainly flawed and by no means comprehensive, an examination of their methodological processes (both those that work and those that don't work) demonstrate the cultural, political, and historical significance of black women workers that cannot be ignored.

From a historical perspective the Depression is a particularly rich moment for examining these issues of blackness, gender, sexuality, and labor. The recession marked an end to the opportunities outside of domestic work that opened up for black women during World War I, and created the kind of economic desperation that produced the

slave markets. It also meant that live-in help was a luxury most families could no longer afford. Day labor, which was the new norm, helped to distinguish between domestic labor as wage work and that which was done on behalf of one's own family. This placed domestic workers squarely within the context of the American labor movement, which reached the peak of its influence during the period.

Working-class resistance during the interwar period was characterized by the intersection of American radical movements. Together, this coalition, made up of black nationalists, labor organizers, Communists, socialists, and women's groups, came together during this historical moment around a critique of fascism, global capitalism, and imperialism. For the black Left, this moment created what Robin Kelley calls a "hybrid movement that combined Garveyism, Pan-Africanism, African American vernacular cultures and traditions, and Euro-American Marxist thought." Cooper, Attaway, Wright, and Childress, juxtaposed these ideologies in their work and lead us to question, quoting Kelley again, "categories that we too frequently regard as mutually exclusive in African American communities, nationalism and communism, religion and communism, Pan-Africanism and internationalism."<sup>1</sup>

For my purposes, the convergence of American Communism and black nationalism is particularly compelling. While the relationship between black liberation movements and the CP has, at times, been contentious, in black Left circles these seemingly competing ideologies often existed simultaneously. Economic self-determination has always been the cornerstone of black nationalist movements. During the early twentieth century, organizations like Marcus Garvey's United Negro

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 11.

Improvement Association and the Nation of Islam advocated black capitalism. It is important to note, however, that alongside, and sometimes in response to, this framework, folks like W.E.B. Du Bois defined black economic self-determination as the absence of capitalist oppression in addition to the elimination of white supremacy.

The CP, in 1928, undertook a similar analysis and published a resolution on what was known as the “Black National Question.” This Marxist theorization of black oppression asserted that the concentration of black workers in the South, “who were subject to the most ruthless exploitation and persecution of a semi-slave character,” constituted an “oppressed nation.” For the CP, the ideal would be the establishment of what was essentially a black soviet republic. The “Black National Question,” or the “Negro Question,” was based on the idea that capitalism in the South had developed unevenly and the character of the Southern economy could be understood using Marx’s meditations on European feudalism.<sup>2</sup> In radical Left literature, and certainly in the work of Cooper, Wright, Attaway, and Childress, “slavery,” “semi-slavery,” and “feudalism” are metaphors that appear frequently. The symbolic use of slavery and feudalism, however, is inconsistent and often inaccurate in the work of these writers. I want to make clear that this particular kind of nationalism was important to both communists and black activists, and the language produced by this discourse is the same language used by Attaway, Cooper, Wright, and Childress to theorize black domestic and sexual labor.

### **Defining Reproductive Labor**

To demonstrate the connections between domestic and sexual labor, I include both within the purview of reproductive labor. Theorist Lise Vogel’s work is useful for

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<sup>2</sup> Lowell Young, ed., *The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions on the Black National Question in the United States* (Washington, DC: Revolutionary Review Press, 1975).

defining reproductive labor and differentiating between the separate but overlapping processes that work together to reproduce the labor-power of the working class. Vogel states,

First, a variety of daily activities restore the energies of direct producers and enable them to return to work. Second, similar activities maintain non-labouring members of subordinate classes—those who are too young, old, or sick, or who themselves are involved in maintenance-activities or out of the workforce for other reasons. And third, replacement-processes renew the labour-force by replacing members of the subordinate classes who have died or no longer work.<sup>3</sup>

Vogel makes these distinctions between forms of labor in order to disentangle the concept of reproductive labor from heteropatriarchal family contexts. Although these things do occur within families, they can also be organized in other ways.

The universality of the family and the household essentially suggests that all women have the same relationship to reproductive labor. But, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn explains, reproductive labor, or what she calls social reproduction, includes social, psychological, ideological, and cultural reproduction as well. It is within this context that black women's labor, particularly that of domestic and sex workers, takes on a particular character, one that is key to the "distinct exploitation of women of color and is a source of both hierarchy and interdependence among white women and women of color."<sup>4</sup> The distinctness of black women's oppression as workers is essential to my analysis and requires that the theorization of their labor take this into consideration. Taking my cue from Vogel, who foregrounds the relationship between women and capital, rather than women and men, I center black women's identity as workers, rather than their position

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<sup>3</sup> Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 188.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Reproductive Labor," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18.1 (1992): 2-3.

within networks of family and kinship, in order to locate their oppression within its particular racial, gendered, and historical contexts.

This dissertation adds sexual pleasure to Vogel's configuration and considers sex work a part of what Gayle Rubin calls a "political economy of sexual systems."<sup>5</sup> Mireille Miller-Young contends, "Sex work can be seen as an extension of reproductive service work, where black women actively participate as a result of the simultaneous and repressive forces of race, gender, and class on their labor and life choices."<sup>6</sup> While certain factions in the black community were concerned with the "moral consequences of black women's economic subjection," the reality, as Cynthia Blair explains, is that "sex work was the only occupation that promised to pay a living wage."<sup>7</sup> Sexual labor and reproductive labor are blurred in the work of William Attaway in a way that reveals the linkages between the two seemingly antagonistic forms of labor. In the work of Childress and Wright sex and labor are often juxtaposed, much like the proximity of the two groups of women observed by Marvel and Cooke.

There is a peculiar contrast among the writers examined in this dissertation along lines of gender and the representation of sexual violence. In the work written by Wright and Attaway, sexual violence figures prominently, and their writing includes graphic scenes of rape and domestic violence. One literary critic suggests that violence against women in Attaway's fiction was used to "jolt bourgeois readers out of their

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<sup>5</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex,'" in *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Mireille Miller-Young, "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography," *Sexualities* 13.2 (2010): 8.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn of the Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010) 58; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 25.



complacency.”<sup>8</sup> But the frequency and the realism of these scenes suggests that there may have been more to it. Perhaps Wright and Attaway, as male writers, were engaging in representation as redemption, using violence to shock readers into confronting the very patriarchal violence that they benefitted from. While I am certain that Esther Cooper heard stories of sexual assault from her informants, her research contains little to no mention of sex or sexuality. Although Alice Childress does mention the occasional unsolicited flirtation from male employers or houseguests, her fictional writing on domestic workers, which lasted for almost a decade, never tackles the issue of sexual assault. A writer like Childress, who worked as a domestic for a short time, was engaged in self-representation. In this sense, at least for Childress, to subject these fictional characters to the kind of violence that characterized domestic workers’ reality would make it difficult to imagine these spaces of black women’s radical protest.

### **Esther Cooper**

The introductory chapter to my dissertation is centered on Esther Cooper Jackson’s 1940 master’s thesis, “The Negro Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism.” Esther Cooper Jackson was born into a quintessential black, middle-class, talented tenth, Progressive era family. By her early twenties, she was a member of the CPUSA and deeply engrossed in the activism of the black Left as the executive secretary of the CP-endorsed Southern Negro Youth Congress. Borrowing from historian Erik McDuffie, the chapter asks what moves “a young woman reared in a talented tenth

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<sup>8</sup> Erin Royston Battat, *Ain’t Got No Home: America’s Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left*.

southern black family toward the Left?”<sup>9</sup> The answer is her research and work as a sociologist and an activist among domestic workers and within the movement for domestic worker rights.

Cooper’s thesis is an investigation of successful domestic worker unions in Washington, D.C., New York, and Chicago, and less successful but noteworthy attempts at organizing in other cities like Philadelphia, Newark, and Milwaukee, and in the South, which she lumps together in one regional category. Cooper was very clear about her purpose in writing the thesis: to argue that trade unionism was the key to gaining rights for domestic workers. She conducted her research over the course of three years while traveling around the country interviewing union representatives, employers, leaders of organizations like the YWCA, the Urban League, and the National Negro Congress, and government officials. It is the most thorough examination of domestic worker organizing ever produced.

As a historical document its significance is unmatched. Cooper replicates the language of the particular era. She clearly relies on Marxist frameworks, which she was introduced to while at Fisk. Her thesis includes a thorough analysis of the strategic exclusion of domestic workers from the Social Security Act and other forms of labor legislation. Her choice to focus on black women workers (white immigrant workers made up a noticeable albeit small portion of domestic laborers) is also important. Her ethnography of union organizers attests to the fact that black women’s attraction to the labor movement was organic and rooted in local contexts of black women’s resistance in each community. Her commentary on New Deal policies makes sense of the racial and

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<sup>9</sup> Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 100.

gendered division of labor that was important to the institutionalization of programs that were designed to provide relief from the economic recession. For me, Cooper's thesis laid the foundation for the developing theorization of black women's labor that occurred in Wright, Attaway, and Childress. Their narratives reimaged the reality that is documented in Cooper's sociological study, while creating fictional worlds within which the kind of activism for which Cooper advocates is entirely possible.

### **William Attaway**

The second chapter explores proletarian writer William Attaway's only two novels, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939) and *Blood on the Forge* (1941). Sex workers figure prominently in both novels, and sexual labor is essential to Attaway's political landscape. In *Blood on the Forge*, Attaway literally juxtaposes sex work and industrial work, and locates sexual laborers within the context of labor organizing. In this sense, Attaway's fiction forces a reconfiguration of analyses of gender by distancing women from their roles as wives and mothers and imagining other possibilities for women's relationship to the class struggle.

*Blood on the Forge* is representative of the relationship between reproductive and sexual labor. In it, the protagonists, Melody, Chinatown, and Big Mat, the Moss brothers, leave the Kentucky plantation where they labor as sharecroppers and travel North to work in a mill in Pennsylvania as strikebreakers. The geography of the mill, which is based on that of Carnegie Steel, looks like this: there is the mill, mill workers live in boardinghouses that are adjacent to the mill, and when not working they spend their wages in a vice district known as Mex Town on gambling, liquor, and sex. The Moss brothers, and other strikebreakers, frequently traveled North leaving wives and families at

home in the South. As a result, the reproductive labor that maintains this group of male workers is done by sex workers.

In addition to engaging in sex for pleasure (or for wages), the men of the mill and the women of the brothels recreate seemingly normative kinship structures. The women cook and clean and perform what Mary Romero calls emotional labor, providing the men comfort in times of crisis, etc. This is done in addition to the women's sexual labor, which is sometimes taken on as a way to supplement the wages lost by the striking mill workers, most of whom are Eastern European.

Attaway's novel relies heavily on the conventions of proletarian literature, but in adding sex workers to his fictional proletariat he opens up the ideology of the labor movement by disrupting its singular focus on the male worker. More importantly, for the purpose of a discussion of reproductive labor, *Blood on the Forge*, and his lesser known novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, juxtapose care work and sex work in a way that often blurs the lines between the two. This, in turn, complicates the way we understand reproductive labor, on the one hand, but also domestic work and sex work in the context of working-class resistance.

### **Richard Wright**

I titled the Richard Wright chapter "Richard Wright's Native Daughters" as an obvious play on the title of his seminal novel *Native Son*. Since the publication of *Native Son* in 1940, literary critics have readily critiqued Wright's depiction of women in the novel, particularly the character Bessie Mears, Bigger Thomas's girlfriend. Bessie is a domestic worker who soothes herself with liquor and sex. She gets raped by Bigger,

beaten to death with a brick, and shoved down the airshaft of an abandoned tenement. So those criticisms are not exactly unfounded.

What is interesting about Wright, however, is that two years before the publication of *Native Son*, he began to revise and reimagine the domestic worker in his fiction. This is something he would continue to do for almost two decades. In 1938 he created Aunt Sue, the washwoman in “Bright and Morning Star,” featured in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Much later, in 1957, he wrote a radio play called “Man of All Work,” where a black man dresses in drag when he cannot find work in order to obtain domestic work as a black woman. In between these two short works, Wright worked on an unpublished novel, “Black Hope,” his answer to *Native Son* and *Bigger Thomas*. As research for the novel, Wright conducted 159 interviews with domestic workers in New York, went undercover at an employment agency that charged naïve women in the South a fee to transport them north with the promise of domestic jobs but then funneled them into sexual labor, and obtained confidential government reports on the street corner markets exposed by Baker and Cooke. He then wrote two separate drafts of the novel, totaling over a thousand pages, before abandoning the project all together.

The great thing about examining Wright’s unpublished novel and his accompanying research notes, is that these things are unmediated by editors, publishers, and Wright’s own meditations. As a result I was able to take into account Wright’s writing process over the course of several years, which seriously complicates the body of scholarship dedicated to exposing the “gender problem” in his work. This methodological process also shed light on the theoretical importance of fiction to understanding the dynamics of blackness, gender, and labor. Wright’s research notes for the novel include

some pretty rigorous theoretical meditations on the novel's subject matter. Even the places where Wright fails and his fictional frameworks are flawed, these moments elicited a number of interesting questions for my analysis of reproductive labor and sexual violence, questions that are also significant to the larger ideological frameworks that this dissertation explores.

### **Alice Childress**

Alice Childress already has a reputation among scholars of black literature for her work as a playwright, specifically the award-winning *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich*. This chapter, however, is focused on her lesser known protagonist, Mildred Johnson, a fictional black domestic and day laborer from South Carolina living in Harlem. Mildred began as a serial column for Paul Robeson's black Left newspaper, *Freedom*. The stories were then collected in an anthology entitled *Like One of the Family* and later re-serialized in the *Baltimore Afro-American*.

The format of the Mildred columns is particularly interesting. They are monologues, or one-sided conversations that Mildred has with her best friend and fellow domestic, Marge. In most of the columns Mildred is recounting a confrontation she had with one of her employers. The reader only hears Mildred's voice. Marge's responses are marked only by ellipses. Mildred is radical. She does not fear to speak back to her employers. She is the kind of character that the reader cannot help but root for.

What is most compelling about Childress's character is that her acts of protest all happen in the homes of her employers. Childress uses conversation and confrontation to make theories of gender and labor plain for her mostly working-class readership. Paying special attention to Childress's *Afro* columns, most of which have never been

anthologized or examined by scholars, the final section of the chapter, using *Afro*'s reporting on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, analyzes the relationship between Mildred and her readers. This consideration of Childress's work, alongside the newspaper's content, engages the real-life implications of works of fiction on domestic worker activism.

### **Conclusion**

For the last few years, in addition to reading, writing, and teaching, I have been involved in the current movement for domestic worker rights. Contemporary domestic worker activists and advocates are really attentive to representations of their work in American culture and repeatedly emphasize that domestic work is skilled work and their labor and their activism are done with pride and dignity. I can't help but see the resemblance that these women (and the women in my family) have to the fictional domestic workers examined in my dissertation. Similarly, I am indebted to these women and their work for being able to do the work that I have done here and to write something that might, in some small way, contribute to the movement imagined by Wright, Attaway, Childress, and even Cooper. And that is what I hope will be the most important intervention of my work: that contemporary scholars are similarly indebted to these writers of fiction and the stories they created.

## **CHAPTER 1: “It was our party as much as it was theirs”: Esther Cooper, Domestic Workers, and the CPUSA**

Esther Cooper Jackson is an author, activist, and noted member of the Communist Party. She is the only scholar of the interwar era to conduct an in-depth analysis of domestic worker organizing. Her master’s thesis, “The Negro Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism,” is a foundational document for contemporary scholars as it relates to historicizing black working class women’s organizing. Her work is an important introduction to any analysis of the representation of household workers’ resistance in literature. At the same time, Esther Cooper’s subject position as a young woman of black, middle-class origins who arrives at her political radicalism through the lens of domestic worker organizing, provides some perspective on the writing processes of the fiction writers explored in the following chapters.

Esther Cooper was born in Arlington, Virginia in 1917. Cooper’s father, George P. Cooper, was an accomplished World War I army officer. Her mother, Esther Irving Cooper, was well respected for her work with the Arlington NAACP. Esther Irving Cooper worked as a teacher at the prestigious Helen Burroughs National School for Women and Girls. The Coopers were a quintessential black, middle-class family of the Progressive Era, frequently visiting Ohio and spending summers in Sea Isle City, New Jersey. They were members of St. John’s Baptist Church and followers of W.E.B. Du Bois. Education, in the Cooper family, was paramount. Esther Irving Cooper was active in the Parent Teacher Association and insisted that her daughters attend the celebrated Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School. Following her graduation from Dunbar, Esther



Cooper became one of three black students at Oberlin, the first American college to enroll black students.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Cooper is ninety-seven. For fifty years, along with her husband James Jackson, Cooper was a member of the Communist Party. She served as the Executive Secretary of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a Popular Front organization, and one of the founding editors of *Freedomways*, a progressive black political and cultural journal. Her most significant contribution to the study of domestic workers, and the subject of this chapter, is her graduate thesis, “The Negro Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism,” which she completed in 1940 to fulfill the requirements for her graduate study in sociology at Fisk University. The thesis remains, according to historian Erik McDuffie, “the most thorough sociological and historical study written on the working conditions and status of black women household workers and their efforts to unionize during the Depression.”<sup>11</sup> Even now, seventy years after she penned her seminal study of domestic worker organizing, Cooper still advocates for women workers.

Cooper’s biography does arouse a certain scholarly curiosity. To use the McDuffie’s words, what moves “a young woman reared in a ‘talented tenth,’ southern black family toward the Left?”<sup>12</sup> Though she is best known for her political work during and after the 1950s and her marriage to James E. Jackson, leading member of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), according to Cooper, it was domestic workers that

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<sup>10</sup>McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 100; Sara Elizabeth Rzeszutek, “Love and Activism: James and Esther Cooper Jackson and the Black Freedom Movement in the United States, 1914-1968,” (PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2009), 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> Erik McDuffie, “Esther V. Cooper’s ‘The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism’: Black Left Feminism and the Popular Front,” *American Communist History* 72.2 (2008), 203.

<sup>12</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 100.

set the foundation.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, this chapter’s analysis of Cooper is twofold. As a historical document, her thesis alters the way that government officials and investigative journalists interpreted the lives of black women workers during the Depression.

Moreover, as we move into analyses of the representation of domestic worker resistance, Cooper’s writing sheds light on the early twentieth-century discourse on the “servant problem” as well as the exclusion of household laborers from the Social Security and Fair Labor Standards Acts, two dynamics that served as the impetus for domestic worker organizing during the period. Secondly, the development of Cooper’s activism, beginning with her time at Oberlin and continuing through her tenure with the SNYC, embodied the ideology of the black Left<sup>14</sup> in practice. New meanings of black Left organizing emerge from Cooper’s writing and the perspective of one woman who worked tirelessly for five decades organizing, writing, speaking, and searching for a way to liberate black women workers.

### **Oberlin College and Fisk University: The Beginning of Cooper’s Journey Leftward**

Cooper’s introduction to the Left began while at Oberlin. When she arrived the campus was a hub of political activity. McDuffie explains, “Galvanized by social and political upheavals of the Depression, the growing menace of fascism, and a looming world war, leftist and Christian student groups had proliferated at Oberlin...They focused

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<sup>13</sup> Cooper shared this as a part of her comments in October 2014, at the “Justice in the Home: Domestic Work Past, Present, and Future” conference co-sponsored by the Barnard Center for Research on Women and the National Domestic Workers Alliance at Barnard College in New York City. See also McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 115.

<sup>14</sup> I use the term black Left here, and throughout the chapter, to denote black political organizations that considered a class analysis the basis of their activism. While many of these organizations were sponsored or endorsed by the Community Party, this is not a necessary condition of their placement in this category.

on free speech labor, civil rights, unemployment, peace, and anti-fascism.”<sup>15</sup> The Popular Front was comprised of Communists, civil rights activists, churches, and New Deal democrats. This engagement with intersecting political movements, a crucial aspect of the Popular Front era, attracted a significant number of people of color to the Communist Party. This unlikely collaborative considered itself a coalition against fascism. Although the Popular Front rallied around a transnational political network, Robin D. G. Kelley argues that the organizations were primarily “mediated and determined by local contexts.”<sup>16</sup> From within these local enclaves, a number of women quickly emerged as leaders. The most popular among them were CPUSA head Claudia Jones, and, eventually, Esther Cooper.

Esther Cooper entered Oberlin in the fall of 1934. Reflecting on her time there in 1988, Cooper vividly remembered Oberlin’s legacy of radicalism dating back to the abolitionist movement. The college did not, however, live up to its progressive reputation. Cooper recalled that segregated dormitories were just one way that administrators policed relationships between black and white students.<sup>17</sup>

As a resident in Oberlin’s dormitories, Cooper carefully observed the women who kept the college going: “poorly paid, non-unionized black women who cooked and cleaned up on campus.” At the end of each workday, these women returned late in the evening to poor neighborhoods near the university. According to Cooper, “they had little

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<sup>15</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 119.

<sup>17</sup> Della Scott, “An Interview with Esther Jackson,” *Abafazi: The Simmons College Journal of African Descent* 9:1 (Fall/Winter 1998): 2-9.

future and no union.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, very few, if any could afford to send their children to the very college they labored to keep running. In spite of her repeated observation that the domestic laborers of Oberlin were unorganized, Cooper had yet to take a scholarly interest in black domestic worker activism. She did, however, conduct a survey of over a thousand white immigrant women who worked as household workers in Connecticut as part of her undergraduate studies.<sup>19</sup> But she never forgot the women she encountered at Oberlin, and was determined to head south for graduate school to study black women’s labor.

Following her graduation from Oberlin in 1938, Cooper entered Fisk University, a historically black institution in Nashville, Tennessee. There, she received an M.A. in sociology under the tutelage of noted black sociologist and former head of the National Urban League, Charles S. Johnson. Cooper’s graduate fellowship mandated that she live and work in a nearby settlement house. She said later that the house was “the worst poverty I’d ever seen.” As a young social worker, Cooper frequently encountered cases involving black women who worked in white homes under abysmal conditions.<sup>20</sup> Stirred by her encounters with domestic workers at Oberlin, and then at Fisk, Cooper “approached her advisor, white economist Addison Cutler, about writing a thesis on black women domestics, and he gave his enthusiastic support for the project.” Cooper received

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<sup>18</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 115; McDuffie, “Esther V. Cooper’s ‘The Negro Woman Domestic Worker,’” 204; Cooper, Comments at Justice in the Home Conference.

<sup>19</sup> Esther Cooper, “Household Employment in Hartford, Waterbury, and Litchfield,” Box 8, Folder 29, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University.

<sup>20</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 101-102; Rzeszutek, 66; McDuffie, “Esther V. Cooper’s ‘The Negro Woman Domestic Worker,’” 204.

pushback from other members of the faculty. Aside from Cutler, Charles Johnson was the only other professor who offered his unwavering support.<sup>21</sup>

Cooper's eventual decision to focus on organized domestic workers was certainly influenced by the small, interracial collective of Communist professors whom she met in Nashville. She shared with Robin Kelley, who interviewed her as research for his book *Hammer and Hoe*, that one professor invited her to "a little 'Anne Frank'-type room at the back of his house where he lifted up the curtains and it was just full of books by Marx, Lenin, [and] the Communist International." Over the next three years, while she completed her thesis, Cooper joined the professors for their Marxist study circle. At the time of her graduation in 1940, Cooper was officially a member of the CPUSA.<sup>22</sup>

It could be argued that Cooper's decision to join the Party marked her break from the ideology of racial uplift that characterized her black middle-class upbringing. For black women, McDuffie argues, the anti-fascist sentiment of the Popular Front was an alternative "vehicle for fighting against racial inequalities and social injustice outside of traditional black protest groups."<sup>23</sup> Historian Lashawn Harris extends this analysis when she asserts that embracing the CP was a means for black women to challenge "prevailing black political strategies" and to embrace the principles of women's liberation outside of the prescriptive mores of black clubwomen.<sup>24</sup> Although Cooper's husband James Jackson dedicated all of his time to Party activities, Cooper characterized her membership in the CP as often inactive. The influence of Marxist ideas on Cooper's writing and her

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<sup>21</sup> McDuffie, "Esther V. Cooper's 'The Negro Woman Domestic Worker,'" 204-205.

<sup>22</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 205; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Lashawn Harris, "Running with the Reds: African American women and the Communist Party during the Great Depression," *The Journal of African American History* (2009), 22.

activism, however, is undeniable. Throughout her life she navigated numerous black political, social, and cultural spaces with ease. Cooper's class consciousness was always the cornerstone of her activism.

### **“The Negro Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism”: An Introduction**

Cooper conducted the research for her thesis over the course of three years, from 1938-1940. This included traveling around the country to interview union representatives, employers, leaders of organizations like the YWCA, and government officials. The thesis was organized into six main sections, including an introduction and a conclusion. The first section, entitled “Frontiers of American Trade Unionism,” explained concepts like collective bargaining and the current state of labor legislation as it related to domestic workers. The next four chapters were separated by region, beginning with Washington, D.C., and followed by New York/Newark, Chicago, and finally one chapter dedicated to less successful attempts to organize in San Diego, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Scranton, and the Southeastern region. The final chapter, “Attitudes of Others Toward Domestic Worker Unions,” surveyed representatives from the National Urban League, the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), the National Negro Congress (NNC), the National Council on Household Employment, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and members of local organizations of housewives and employers. It seems that the breadth of information that Cooper was able to obtain was the direct result of the relationships she formed with union leaders and organizers. Even so, her twelve-page bibliography listed a host of scholarly sources, government documents, magazine and newspaper articles, and pamphlets.

In order to provide the necessary context for Esther Cooper's thesis, this chapter uses a series of interviews conducted by Richard Wright, the subject of chapter four, as research for his unpublished manuscript, *Black Hope*. Wright began researching domestic workers as early as 1937, which means that he would have conducted his ethnographic research at the same time as Cooper. Over the course of ten years, Wright conducted a total of 159 interviews with domestic workers in New York. The testimonies of these women offer a detailed account of the intimate relationship between sex work and domestic labor; a connection that is alluded to in newspaper articles and government documents (and expounded on in works of fiction) but not mentioned at all in Cooper's thesis.

While a few literary scholars and Wright biographers mention the interviews as a part of Wright's substantial research for his unpublished novel, the interviews themselves have never been subject to scholarly study and treated as an independent archive. Wright's ethnography, like Cooper's thesis, is unique in its focus on urban women workers. Several oral history collections, including those of the Works Progress Administration, record the voices of Southern women workers, but, with the exception of a few select interviews with members of the New York Domestic Workers Union, the experiences of domestic laborers in cities like New York, Chicago, Washington D.C., Newark, and Baltimore, are rarely heard. In the absence of these first-person narratives, historians generally rely on newspaper articles, government reports, transcripts of local and state depositions, and other sources where the voices of domestic workers are mediated by the institutional frameworks that policed them.

While the thesis is certainly well researched, and remains a groundbreaking document for contemporary historians, it does not give a sense of the everyday life of a domestic worker, even a union organizer. Wright's interviews are included in this chapter because of their significance to the history of domestic labor and domestic worker organizing rather than simply research for Wright's unpublished novel. When used as context for Cooper's thesis, Wright's ethnography creates a more robust historical narrative that remains geographically focused in the urban North.

The most glaring omission from Cooper's early work is an assessment of sexual violence as an everyday reality for domestic workers. As the forthcoming chapters will show, sexual violence played a pivotal role in fictional treatments of domestic workers. Rape and sexual assault also figure prominently in Wright's ethnography. Of the one hundred and twenty interviews that narrate instances of employer mistreatment, roughly thirty of these make reference to the threat of sexual violence. These include requests for a more desirable or fetishized appearance (one male employer even requested that the woman fix her hair like Shirley Temple and then asked to see her sensually walk across the room), or a particular weight, height, and skin color. Some women recounted being inappropriately touched by their employers' husbands. One woman stated, "I was in the kitchen and I had to stand on a chair to reach something in the top closet as I reached up, the husband came in and put his hand up my dress." Many of the interviews describe encounters such as this one, and other forms of sexual harassment that occurred while the women were working or even sleeping.

While a few of the interviews allude to the use of violence by men to intimidate women into doing what they wanted, only one explicitly described rape, and that one was



second hand. Recounting a story she heard from another woman, one interviewee stated, “They gave the girl a job. When she went to bed at night, the grandfather molested her. She said she didn’t have any room.” This referenced the lack of accommodations given to live-in domestic workers who, instead of being provided with a private room, were sometimes expected to sleep out in the open or on cots in the kitchen or hallway.<sup>25</sup> In general, when faced with sexual harassment or the possibility of sexual violence, the most common form of self-protection was to immediately leave the job and find other work. In two cases the women responded with violence, one with a razor and the other with a stick.<sup>26</sup> Though graphic depictions of sexual violence were uncommon in the work of black women writers, it is peculiar that Cooper’s thesis doesn’t contain even a passing reference to sexual harassment. But she did make her political aims very clear: to advocate for the creation and continuation of domestic worker unions in the United States. Perhaps such horrific narratives would have made her argument less palatable to her audience. Alternatively, to address the specific vulnerabilities of domestic laborers would emphasize their separation from other members of the working class rather than their relationship to which was Cooper’s intention.

Throughout her thesis, which she completed in 1940, Cooper fervently defends Marxism as the ideal, and at times only, discourse well-suited for understanding the experiences of working-class black women. Cooper’s choice to designate black women as the explicit focus of her thesis, when she had already done work on white immigrant

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<sup>25</sup> Vanessa May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 39-40.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Wright, “Black Hope” Notes, box 19, folder 332, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

women, is an interesting one. In the introduction to her thesis she explains, “Negro women often have to face discrimination and prejudice in addition to the problems with which domestic workers as a whole must face. Since Negro women continue to be employed in domestic work in large numbers, this study is concerned with a consideration of their problems and their attempts at unionization.”<sup>27</sup>

From a historical perspective, the racial specificity of Cooper’s thesis makes a number of correctives to the historiography of black labor organizing. While domestic workers figure prominently in black social and cultural history, their organizing efforts are rarely mentioned.<sup>28</sup> Vanessa May’s 2011 book *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940*, in spite of its focus on middle-class reform, does contain a detailed section on Dora Jones and the Domestic Worker’s Union of New York. In this sense, an analysis of Cooper’s work reiterates many of the arguments made by May from the perspective of domestic worker activism rather than white middle class reform.

With the exception of scholars like Jacqueline Jones and Phyllis Palmer, histories of African Americans and the Depression-era Left exhaustively examine industrial labor, which was dominated by men during the interwar period. While both Jones and Palmer mention domestic workers’ unions in their historical investigations, the focus of these texts is not organized resistance. Instead, the authors focus on issues like the relationships

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<sup>27</sup> Esther Cooper, “The Negro Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism,” Box 8, Folder 31, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers.

<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that the momentum of the current movement for domestic worker rights that began in 2007, has fostered a renewed interest in the history of domestic worker organizing. Similarly, Premilla Nadasen’s history of domestic worker organizations throughout the country, *Domestic Workers Unite!*, is scheduled to be released at the end of 2015.

between employers and workers, the impact of policy on black women workers, and black family life.<sup>29</sup> This is not to take away from the important contributions made by these scholars, and others like Tera Hunter, whose monograph *To 'Joy My Freedom* is specific to the South. Esther Cooper's examination of domestic workers in the industrial North both complicates and completes these contemporary analyses. Contemporary studies of the New Deal era labor movement, however, routinely exclude domestic worker unions from their historical narratives.<sup>30</sup> Herein lies the strength of Cooper's contribution.

Black domestic workers also attest to the fact that for many black women an attraction to labor organizing was organically rooted in a history of black women's resistance. Prior to the growing popularity of the labor movement among black women workers during the Depression, household laborers had already devised and instituted a

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<sup>29</sup> See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) and Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> The following texts exclude the experiences of African American women laborers: Harvard Stikoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1970), and John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982). A number of texts do acknowledge the role of women in industrial trades, while still neglecting domestic workers, despite the fact that more than half of black women worked in household employment. See for instance: Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Ralph Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), and Herbert Roof Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1944). Cheryl Greenberg does pay a significant amount of attention to black women working in domestic service. She does not, however, make any mention of domestic worker organizing or black women's labor activism in any trade. Cheryl Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

methodology for resisting exploitation as workers. These included work stoppages, ‘pan-toting’ (bringing home food from the workplace with permission or without), threatening to quit, feigning illness, and refusing to complete arduous tasks like washing windows or floors. Robin Kelley explains that although these acts were done by individuals working in private homes they “had a collective basis that remained hidden from their employers.” Kelley refers to these methods as incipient strikes, because they depended on the refusal of fellow domestic workers to accept these open positions.<sup>31</sup> It is important to note however that domestic worker organizing also has a long history (both within and outside the labor movement) that precedes Cooper’s study. Tera Hunter found that laundry workers in the South formed what were then known as Washing Societies (though they functioned like unions) as early as 1870. This, in Hunter’s view, was a part of a larger effort on the part of black women workers to “gain concessions from employers to mitigate the impositions of wage labor.”<sup>32</sup>

The collective activism of black women dating back to slavery, Hunter explains, was very strategic and highly organized. Thus, it is not surprising that the Communist Party made attempts at organizing domestic workers as early as the 1920s. According to McDuffie:

The American Negro Labor Congress’s newspaper, the *Negro Champion*, publicized the Harlem Women Day Workers League, a domestic workers union. While its exact relationship to the [Workers Party] is unclear, the group reportedly counted one hundred members. Fanny Austin, a domestic worker, dynamic labor organizer, and Communist, led the organization. The group signaled Harlem Communists’ belief that unionization, not bourgeois respectability, offered exploited black domestic workers the best protection.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 17-19.

<sup>32</sup> Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 58, 71.

<sup>33</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 46.

The history of Fannie Austin and the Harlem Women Day Workers League also spoke to the roots of class consciousness in black communities. Austin frequently encouraged domestic workers to join the CP in her writing.<sup>34</sup> Another *Negro Champion* article, published on August 28, 1928, characterized her work with the union in this way: “Sister Austin and her associates are drawing a large number of workers into the organization which has adopted a militant program of action...The Harlem Day Workers League is supplying a long felt need and should be supported by every class-conscious worker engaged in this line of service.” The idea that rights for domestic laborers had implications for all workers was an important underlying theme in Cooper’s thesis.

The first chapter of Cooper’s thesis contextualized her study of domestic worker unions. She began with a detailed categorization of black household workers by age and marital status based on figures from the 1930 census. Cooper noted a number of stark contrasts between black and white women who worked in the field. For instance, white domestics were generally young and single or older and widowed, while the age range for black women was much wider and they were typically married. Cooper summarized these statistics briefly and without commentary. Instead she followed the data with the exclamation that the circumstances illustrated by the numbers should be understood in their proper historical context.

Cooper then used feudalism (a concept she clearly borrowed from the Marxist discourses of the era) to construct a metaphor for both the cause and the character of domestic labor. She stated, “The plantation owner and his wife looked on the Negro house servant with an air of benevolence and maternalism. The relationships between

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<sup>34</sup> Harris, 28.

servant and mistress exhibited all the characteristics of the feudal relationships of master and serf.”<sup>35</sup> What stands out about Cooper’s master-serf relationship is that it was between two women. The use of “maternalism” as opposed to “paternalism” or “patriarchy” gave white women equal responsibility as it related to the enslavement of black women. Cooper’s metaphor also genders the concept of “benevolence.” The presumed “benevolence” of the employer was also used to justify to denial of basic labor protections for domestic workers, as mandated by law for all other workers.

At this early stage in Cooper’s activism, and certainly inspired by her introduction to Communism, she viewed domestic worker unions in the USSR and other European countries as proof that organizing household laborers in the United States was both possible and necessary. She gestured towards unions in the United Kingdom, Italy, Lithuania, Denmark, and Sweden, but reserved her most detailed commentary for the Soviet Union. She summarized the deplorable conditions of domestic workers in the country before the Russian Revolution, followed by the achievements of trade unions which included a seven-hour day, paid vacation, and mandatory rest periods throughout the day. Cooper concluded that domestic workers in the USSR enjoyed the same social standing as all other workers. The difference, she concluded, was that there was “no stigma attached to the occupation such as we find in the United States.”<sup>36</sup>

The promise of the Soviet model, however, was weakened by the racial stigma of domestic work in the United States. In the remaining chapters of her thesis Cooper proved that unionization in select American cities had improved the working conditions of domestic workers. But the issue of the racial stigma remained. Though it was

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<sup>35</sup> Cooper, “The Negro Domestic Worker,” 3.

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, “The Negro Domestic Worker,” 29.

important enough for Cooper to restrict her analysis to black women, she never quite addressed the significance of the racial dynamic and the ways that it would have complicated the implementation of the European model.

Prior to Cooper's examination of domestic worker unions in specific cities, she pinpointed several barriers to domestic worker organizing, including the isolation of workers in private homes, the independence of each worker, a lack of strong bargaining power, frequent changes in employment, and a lack of class feeling and unity. These challenges, she felt, could be overcome as evidenced by the European model. There were, however, two issues that could not be easily resolved. The first was the categorization of domestic labor as unskilled by both the labor movement and government reports. The affirmation of domestic work as skilled labor was an integral part of the cultural and political work done by domestic worker unions. The hierarchy of workers as skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled perpetuated an idea that there were multiple working classes, which created a divided collective of laborers who believed that they had different and sometimes competing interests. The categorization of domestic workers as unskilled also carried with it a particular social stigma. Quoting the Women's Bureau, Cooper wrote: "Household employment is generally viewed as unskilled work and persons so engaged are looked down upon socially. This belief holds despite the fact that household tasks varied and when they are done differently demand intelligence and a considerable variety of skills."<sup>37</sup> Cooper believed that cultural beliefs concerning household work, paid and unpaid, had an impact on the way that women were able to receive recognition and representation as workers.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 15.

The second hindrance to domestic worker organizing was the exclusion of domestic workers from New Deal policies. Cooper explained, “In the Social Security Act...household employers were exempted from Federal old-age and unemployment insurance.”<sup>38</sup> Cooper was referring to the Social Security Act (SSA) passed by then President Roosevelt in 1935. The exclusion of domestic workers (and agricultural workers) from the SSA meant that the program covered only sixteen percent of African-American women.<sup>39</sup>

What was important about the division of labor deepened by the Depression and institutionalized by the SSA was the way that white women benefitted from this along racial lines. One *New York Times* writer, in a November 1932 article entitled “Depression Ends Servant Problem,” reported that the unregulated nature of the domestic labor market meant that women “with the fatal housewives’ instinct for a bargain” could get a “shuffle-footed but affable Negro” to “fry your chicken and do your washing for \$8 a month.” After the passage of the SSA, articles on what was known as the “servant problem,” or the inability to find quality service for a low price, appeared in mainstream publications regularly. The pervasiveness of this discourse on domestic work precipitated the formation of the National Council of Household employment in 1934 and a series of special reports by local governments in several industrial cities. Cooper’s investigation of domestic worker organizing in specific cities, and her advocacy of unionization for domestic workers across the country, was a timely and important intervention in this national discourse on household labor.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Greenberg, 57. For a complete discussion of the process behind the New Deal’s exclusionary policies see Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).



### **Bible, Bath, and Broom: Unionizing in Washington, D.C.**

The racial division of labor and the stigma associated with domestic work were also rooted in local contexts. Washington D.C. was an exceptional location because its economy was “skewed toward service rather than industrial work.”<sup>40</sup> This made the city an ideal location for the National Training School for Women and Girls. Founded by Nannie Helen Burroughs in 1909, the National Training School offered young, black migrant women classes in household labor, laundering, sewing, millinery, and missionary work. Burroughs’ vision, one that she remained committed to for two decades, was twofold. She sought to create a cadre of skilled workers in Washington, while simultaneously uplifting the race by advocating personal hygiene, hard work, and moral uprightness. The school’s motto alluded to its mission, what Burroughs called the three Bs—“Bible, Bath, and Broom.”<sup>41</sup>

Burroughs’ solution to the national discourse on the “servant problem” was to transform domestic work from menial labor, as the stigma mandated, to skilled labor. This, in Burroughs’ view, enabled black women to raise wages and improve working conditions. From the perspective of racial uplift, insofar as black women served as the barometer of piety for the entire community, promoting domestic work as a skilled profession was absolutely necessary. Domestic work “became translated to service to families and communities through economic stability and well-kept homes.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, “‘Bible, Bath, and Broom’: Nannie Helen Burroughs’s National training School and African-American Racial Uplift,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9.1 (1997): 92.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

The National Training School's emphasis on Christian mores was rooted in a pervasive fear that single black women were particularly naïve and would easily succumb to the debauchery of urban cities. Hazel Carby describes this phenomenon as a "moral panic" based on a belief that female migrants were "sexually degenerate and therefore socially dangerous." Carby continues, "These responses were an active part of 1920s bourgeois ideology that not only identified this moral crisis but also produced a language that provided a framework of interpretation and referentiality that appeared to be able to explain for all time the behavior of black women in an urban environment." In Carby's view, the migrating black woman threatened to impede racial progress, undo the development of the black middle class, and encumber amicable black-white relations in Washington.<sup>43</sup>

As an active member of the National Baptist Convention, Burroughs certainly believed very strongly in Christian temperance, but this did not prevent her from advocating for black working-class women in the realm of labor rights. In 1920, she founded the National Association for Wage Earners, a short-lived advocacy organization that sought to improve conditions for domestic workers, including the establishment of a minimum wage. The same year, she was at the forefront of a campaign that sought to undo the categorization of laundresses as unskilled workers.<sup>44</sup> For Burroughs, however, skilled labor and racial uplift were inextricably linked. The National Training School did not make the distinction between domestic work as wage work, and that which was done on behalf of a worker's own family. Training in domestic science, she believed, was vital

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<sup>43</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Women's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 739-741.

<sup>44</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, editor, *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc, 1993), 204.

for working class women. It gave them job security and prepared them to properly care for their own families. This conflation of wage work with unpaid reproductive labor hindered labor organizing because it perpetuated the idea that domestic workers were an extension of (or relief for) the housewife rather than a worker in her own right.

In addition to the ideology of the National Training School, domestic labor organizers in Washington had to contend with public and private employment agencies. These agencies served as liaisons between individual workers and employers and charged workers a fee for their services. By law, agencies were required to be licensed and could not charge more than ten percent of the first month's wages. Esther Cooper's analysis focused solely on government agencies in Washington like the Public Employment Bureau. These organizations supported the racial division of labor and funneled black women workers into a segregated section specifically for "colored domestics."<sup>45</sup> But private agencies, as Richard Wright's research demonstrates, frequently operated underground without licenses and charged women up to a full month's pay as compensation for helping the women to relocate from the South to the North and to secure employment. In New York, domestic workers often appealed to the union to assist them in acquiring stolen wages from agency jobs.

Wright's interviews confirm that employment agencies were more than a hindrance to unionization. There was an antagonistic relationship between union representatives and agency proprietors. Unions were an affront to the agencies' profit making enterprise. One group of agents, calling themselves the New York Household Placement Association, represented the largest and best-known employment agencies in

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<sup>45</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Domestic Worker," 31.

the city. In 1941, the collective embarked on a vicious anti-union campaign in order to undermine the efforts of domestic worker organizers. They distributed their propaganda to domestic workers encouraging them to steer clear of the union. They also published advertisements in local newspapers declaring: “The New York Household Placement Association is your **Friend**.” The ad included the creative adage: “One man alone cannot build a house, an automobile, run a ship, nor a mine, —BUT one person CAN run a home even though she may not like to do so.” In a dramatic crescendo, the advertisement concluded: “WORKERS! UNITE!!! PRESERVE YOUR FREEDOM FROM UNION TYRANNY!!!”<sup>46</sup> Although the absurdity is evident, the sentiment behind the advertisement was very real. The anti-union campaigns were a concentrated effort on the part of employers and agents to incite the fear of loss of employment at a time when domestic workers were already struggling under the weight of the Depression, and frequently taking on the responsibility of being the primary wage earners for their families.

Union representatives were overwhelmed by requests from women who had been mistreated by employers who hired them through a private agency. The following narrative from Wright’s research notes about a woman who contacted an agency in Baltimore to acquire a “cheap, southern, domestic worker” was representative of this dynamic:

The agency in Baltimore gave the girl a ticket and told her she was supposed to be met at the station in New York by the husband of the family. She agreed to work for \$25 a month, sleep in, do everything, one half day off and to give one half of her first month’s wages back to the employment agency. The girl worked one month and began to talk to a Union for she was being underpaid and overworked.

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<sup>46</sup> May, 162. Tom O’Connor, “Union Fights for Domestic Workers,” *New York PM Daily*, January 21, 1941.

The employer overheard the girl's talking and issued a strict order that as long as the girl was in her home, she was not supposed to talk to any other girls in the neighborhood. This girl did contact the Union and is planning, as soon as she finished another month, to leave the job.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to illustrating the exchanges between agencies and unions, this passage highlights the significance of word-of-mouth communication to domestic worker organizing. Wright interviewed roughly twenty union members as a part of his research. Every one came to the union based on a recommendation from another worker, either at church, in the neighborhood, or on public transportation. For this reason, it is not an accident that an employer would be fearful of any contact with other domestics.

The first meeting of the Domestic Workers' Union of the District of Columbia, Cooper explained, was held in March of 1935. In response to the exploitative nature of fee-charging agencies, the D.C. union opted not to require membership fees. Instead, they raised funds by hosting "dances, garden parties, and other entertainments." Under the leadership of Mrs. Minnie Poole, the union sent pamphlets to local black churches and wrote articles for the black press to promote their cause.<sup>48</sup> Storytelling was a particularly effective recruitment method for the women of the District. Union members gave testimonials in public and in print detailing maltreatment by employers and identifying the union as that which saved them from poor working conditions and low wages.

Cooper described the early aims of the Washington union as "ambitious." They promised a minimum wage of \$10 a week, a ten-hour workday, overtime pay, training, and representation from the union in the event of a dispute between a worker and employer. While its aims were certainly grand, the Washington union enjoyed some

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<sup>47</sup> Wright, "Black Hope" Notes, box 21, folder 332.

<sup>48</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Domestic Worker," 33.

immediate success. By 1940, the union had become very popular among employers.

Cooper exclaimed, “Today the union has more calls for workers than it can place.”<sup>49</sup>

### **“Every Domestic Worker a Union Worker”: The Domestic Workers Union of New York**

Unlike Washington, New York was a hotbed of Left political activity. It was also the source of a national discourse on women’s labor and the “servant problem.” As historian Vanessa May reveals:

New York was the forefront of political changes affecting domestic service and labor regulations generally. Women activists in New York were experts on labor regulation for women workers and pioneers in the national movement to provide working women with a minimum wage and maximum hours...By the time the fight for inclusion of domestic workers in state labor laws heated up in the 1930s, New York had become the center of New Deal political power, domestic worker activism, and middle-class women’s reform.<sup>50</sup>

The presence of the “slave markets,” where scores of lack women would gather on street corners, hoping to secure a day’s work from white housewives who traveled to “the market” in search of domestic help, fueled the projection of domestic laborers onto the national stage. While Cooper would have certainly been aware of these dynamics, her chapter on the New York union provided no information about the contexts within which organizers carried out their work. The visibility of domestic workers in the city made these dynamics particularly important. Wright’s interviews again provide an important supplement to Cooper’s analysis.

According to a copy of the “Report of Committee on ‘Street Corner Markets,’” published in 1940, the same year that Cooper completed her thesis, and obtained by Wright, “in New York in 1834 a place was set aside in every public market where those

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 34-37.

<sup>50</sup> Vanessa May, 5.

seeking work might meet those who wanted workers. This informal exchange probably functioned for servants only.” The report posited that these public markets represented the origin of the Depression-era markets in New York. Their reemergence after 1929 was the direct result of the economic recession and the “economic stress and strain with which Negro members of the population, in particular, are burdened because a large proportion of them are forced into areas of uncertain and poorly paid jobs.” The committee, made up of representatives from the Welfare Council, the WPA, the NAACP, the Urban League, the YWCA, the WTUL, the Women’s City Club, the Department of Labor, and an organization of employers, identified at least thirty “markets” in the greater New York City region. They found that roughly fifteen to thirty women congregated at each corner as early as seven a.m.<sup>51</sup> Wright’s interviews also record information about the women who populated the markets. One of his informants revealed, “There is a big row of girls and the women go there and go from one girl to the other until they get their price...Once I saw one and she got off at the station with me and her hands were white from washing and she said she worked all day from nine o’clock and just got \$2 dollars.” The woman added, “My heart burned when she said, ‘Two dollars a day.’ It’s a shame.”

Baker and Cooke’s exposé, “The Bronx Slave Market,” identified the spirit of labor organizing that permeated the markets, a full year before the beginning of the official union. Because Cooper’s chapter began with the founding of the union in 1936, her thesis does not give a sense of the political climate building up to its formation. Baker and Cooke described the “slave market” at Simpson Avenue:

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<sup>51</sup> Frieda S. Miller, “Report of Committee on ‘Street Corner Markets,’” box 21, folder 332, Richard Wright Papers.

An embryonic labor union now exists in the Simpson Avenue 'mart.' Girls who persist in working for less than thirty cents an hour have been literally run off the corner. For the recent Jewish holiday, habitués of the 'mart' actually demanded and refused to work for less than thirty-five cents an hour.

In reference to the women who work for less, known as "cheapies," one of the article's informants exclaimed, "We got to do something about those girls. Organize them or something."<sup>52</sup> The public nature of the markets, in spite of its role as the site of their degradation, gave domestic workers a meeting place and a means of combating the isolation of household labor. The choice to boycott Jewish holidays, for instance, was a way to collectively bargain in the absence of union representation.

In spite of the belief that the "slave markets" were a "miniature economic battlefield," Baker and Cooke were not confident in the ability of domestic workers to organize as a result of "general ignorance and apathy towards organized labor action" and a belief that the women were "unaware of their organized power."<sup>53</sup> Black women reformers, many of whom supported industrial organizing, shared this belief. Cooper quoted a "sophisticated New Yorker," a black woman who was also an employer, as saying, "Negroes should join unions, but domestic workers wouldn't know what to do even if they had a union. They're too ignorant and like good times too much to take them seriously."<sup>54</sup> Like Nannie Burroughs, this nameless woman was more concerned with the moral decency of young, single, migrant woman than their fight for basic labor rights. This sentiment was exactly what Cooper sought to combat in her writing. She repeatedly declared that the efforts of domestic worker organizing in several cities undermined the

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<sup>52</sup> Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, "The Bronx Slave Market," *The Crisis* 42 (November 1935) 340.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Woman Domestic Worker," 53.



belief that household laborers were unorganizable. The New York Domestic Workers' union, the most successful in the nation, affirmed her assertion.

Although Cooper identified 1936 as the union's inaugural year, an article that appeared in the *Daily Worker*, and subsequent research by historian Vanessa May, suggest the presence of a domestic workers' union two years earlier. The union began when an interracial group of nursemaids met in Sunnyside, Queens, to discuss their low wages and poor working conditions. May narrates,

In its early days, the union was actually made up of several unions of African American and Finnish women in Yorkville, Harlem, Portchester, and Sunnyside, Queens. Dora Jones, an African American domestic worker, headed the Sunnyside contingent and went on to become the public face of the organization, guiding it through its initial organizing campaigns. As the union began to cohere, it established a headquarters in a Finnish neighborhood in Harlem, a location that was convenient to both its white immigrant and African American members. When those offices were destroyed in the 1935 Harlem riots, Jones and the other union members relocated their offices to the Upper East Side.

The interracial makeup of the union might be the reason why its efforts were openly supported by organizations like the WTUL, the YWCA, and the League of Women Voters. Although the leadership of the union frequently touted its interracial membership and advocated interracial unity, black women from Harlem made up an overwhelming majority of its membership.<sup>55</sup> Within a two years, the union, under the slogan 'Every Domestic Worker a Union Worker,' had become local 149 of the Building Services Employees International Union (BSEIU). By the time Cooper traveled to New York to

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<sup>55</sup> May, 155-158. Vivian Morris, "Domestic Workers' Union," February 2, 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project Collection, Folklore Project.

conduct her research, Local 149 boasted one thousand members, eighty percent of whom were black women from Harlem.<sup>56</sup>

The first section of Cooper's chapter on New York focused on the union's campaign to include domestic worker's in state labor legislation. The extensive campaign, which lasted five years, advocated for a 60-hour workweek, workmen's compensation, an increased minimum wage, and social security. The concentration on legislation, rather than education for workers (which was the focus of the Washington union) placed Local 149 squarely within the context of New Deal politics. The union also paired workers with employers, provided a detailed and comprehensive contract, and represented workers in disputes with employers.

In 1937, the New York union, with the support of the WTUL, held a series of mass meetings in Harlem to drum up support for a bill that would mandate a six-day, sixty-hour workweek. These meetings were attended by policy makers, activists, and workers. One such meeting, held at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, demonstrated the influence of the union in the black community. Scores of black women workers gave their testimonies concerning working conditions and worst job experiences. These testimonies inspired one observer to describe the atmosphere as one of "seething militancy." Though the mass meetings were successful in increasing union membership, the legislation received considerable opposition from the New York Assembly's Committee on Labor and Industry and after two years was ultimately unsuccessful. In the absence of legislation, the practice was implemented by members of the Women's City

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<sup>56</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Domestic Worker," 44. Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, "Domestic Workers Organize!" *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 11 (2008): 418.

Club, the League of Women Voters, and the WTUL, which demonstrated that some white women reformers in New York considered domestic workers essential to their advocacy for labor rights for all women.<sup>57</sup>

By 1939, the union, in conjunction with the WTUL, continued to introduce legislation for increased wages and maximum hours, the focus then shifted to workmen's compensation. This occurred in response to the harsh conditions of day work, which left many black women with severe back pain and other physical ailments. The Wicke-Breitbart Bill, as it was called, only applied to homes where two or more domestic workers were employed, which excluded women like those who populated the "slave markets," working individually for several hours rather than consistently in one home.<sup>58</sup>

The next section of Cooper's chapter focused on the hostility with which some New Yorkers responded to the work done by the union. While investigating the opposition to domestic worker organizing in the city, Cooper uncovered a pervasive sense of fear among union activists in the face of such severe pushback.<sup>59</sup> While the WTUL must be given credit as a part of the union's success, they were the exception when it came to white women reformers. Feminist scholar Eileen Boris and historian Premilla Nadasen summarize the resistance to domestic worker unions in this way:

"Housewives, including organized club women, generally were more concerned with

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<sup>57</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Domestic Worker," 50-52; Vanessa May, 120, 137, 141-142, 160-160; "Domestic Workers Seek 60 Hour Week," *New York Age*, April 24, 1937; Marvel Cooke, "Modern Slaves," *Amsterdam News*, October 16, 1937; Anne Peterson, "60-Hour Week for Household Workers to Get a Practical Test," *New York Times*, December 11, 1938.

<sup>58</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Woman Domestic Worker," 52; May, 142.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

protecting their homes from dirt and disease that black women might bring inside than with the wages and hours of workers.”<sup>60</sup>

Many employers were outraged at the prospect of a union dictating how they should run their households. In January 1938, members of the Women’s City Club shared their outrage in an explosive meeting held at Rockefeller Center to discuss pending domestic worker legislation. Dora Jones represented the union at the meeting and was unreserved in her remarks explaining the working conditions of domestic laborers and the need for regulation. Following Jones’s comments, several of women in the Club stood to express their opposition. A journalist reporting for the *New York Times* reported, “One after another housewives arose to say in no uncertain terms that they treated their servants well, but that no union was going to regulate their home routine.” Another reporter recounted that club members “appeared unable to distinguish between legislation and unionization.”<sup>61</sup>

In spite of the significant opposition to their efforts, Cooper reported, household workers in New York were extremely pleased with the union.<sup>62</sup> The same can be said of Wright’s interviewees. The union’s most notable achievement, it seemed, was the ability to combat the isolation of household labor. The offices of Local 149 included a kitchen with a gas stove, bulletin boards documenting ongoing campaigns, and a host of local newspapers. Women who were unsuccessful in finding a day’s work used the kitchen to prepare their meals. Typically, one woman would read the latest news in addition to

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<sup>60</sup> Boris and Nadasen, 419.

<sup>61</sup> May, 106; “Housewives Want No Servants’ Union,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1938.

<sup>62</sup> Cooper, “The Negro Domestic Worker,” 54.

helping those with limited education.<sup>63</sup> What the New York union demonstrated was a multi-faceted process of radicalization for black women workers. Beginning with the formation of a community of household laborers and providing a meeting place at union offices, Local 149 was able to present itself as a united front to policymakers. Though their efforts to change existing legislation were fruitless, the history of the New York Domestic Workers' Union provides new contexts for understanding the role of black women on the Left in the 1930s.

### **“They Should Have Revolted Long Ago”: The Domestic Workers’ Association of Chicago**

The last of Cooper’s full-length local investigations was concerned with organizing in Chicago. The political dynamics of Chicago made it another interesting site for analysis. The city possessed a large number of white immigrant women engaged in domestic work, which created an interracial collective of advocates and activists in the interest of rights for household laborers. As home to the largest and most active membership of Communist-backed organizations like the National Negro Congress (NNC) and the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, Chicago exemplified the juxtaposition of Marxism and black nationalism that characterized the 1930s black Left.

Cooper was attentive to these various contexts throughout the chapter, beginning with the history of organizing domestic workers that predated the formation of the union. In her words, “Before the actual emergence of unionism, however, the activities of individuals and groups sympathetic to the plight of domestic workers helped prepare the way.” Cooper’s analysis in this section focused on white women’s reform organizations,

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<sup>63</sup> Boris and Nadasen, 418; Vivian Morris, “Domestic Workers’ Union.”

specifically an education campaign championed by the YWCA and the WTUL. The campaign advocated a standard wage and hour agreement between employers and employees. Campaign organizers appealed to the heartstrings of employers by speaking at women's clubs on the conditions of domestic labor. They also proposed legislation but were unable to convince a state congressman to sponsor a bill.<sup>64</sup>

Cooper did not mention the work done by the National Negro Congress in the interest of improving conditions of household labor by organizing black women workers rather than appealing to employers. The NNC was strongly endorsed by the CPUSA, and as such represented a bridge between American Marxism and black liberation.<sup>65</sup> As a part of the Popular Front, the NNC was “committed to civil rights, anti-fascism, and internationalism.”<sup>66</sup> At their inaugural convention held in 1936 in Chicago a resolution was passed that called for a national movement led by the NNC to organize domestic workers. Granted, a national movement would never come to fruition, but local councils took the resolution as a call to action. In Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Houston, New York, Washington, and Chicago, local councils organized household workers, fought for the inclusion of domestic workers in the SSA, and offered free employment services and education classes.<sup>67</sup>

It was within this black Left political context that Hazel Hayes and Neva Ryan formed the Domestic Workers' Association in Chicago. Cooper credited Hayes and Ryan

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<sup>64</sup> Cooper, “The Negro Domestic Worker,” 61-62.

<sup>65</sup> Rzeszutek, 42.

<sup>66</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 93.

<sup>67</sup> John Baxter Streater, “The National Negro Congress, 1936-1947” (PhD Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1981), 109-110, 174; Lawrence S. Wittner, “The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment,” *American Quarterly* 22.4 (1970): 887-895; Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2012), 31, 127-128.

with bringing visibility to the conditions of domestic workers in the city and dedicated much of her chapter on Chicago to their work.<sup>68</sup> Though Cooper placed the origins of this union in 1945, Ryan stated in a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender*, published on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1934, that the Domestic Workers' Association was founded, with the cooperation of the National Urban League, in November of the previous year.

The two founders of the Domestic Workers' Association, Hayes and Ryan, were an interesting case study of differing ideologies among black women regarding their position in the labor movement. Although Hayes wrote a serial column for the *Defender* in conjunction with the union for a few months, her time with the organization was short-lived. Two years after she began working with Ryan, Hayes took on a new position as national director of women's auxiliaries for the International Brotherhood of Red Caps, which represented railway station porters. This organization was intimately connected to the celebrated Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded by A. Philip Randolph.

The International Brotherhood of Redcaps Auxiliary identified its primary goals as supporting the labor unions "in which their husbands carry on the fight for economic security," in addition to "spreading the principle of trade unionism throughout the length and breadth of the land."<sup>69</sup> Though black women workers labored as ladies' attendants and domestic workers on railways, they too were funneled into the women's auxiliaries alongside the wives of Pullman porters and Red Caps. According to historian Melinda Chateaufort, this practice was inspired by the idea, championed by Randolph, that "women's exploitation was the result of the low wages paid to their husbands." At the same time, Chateaufort observes, women's auxiliaries served as one means through

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<sup>68</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Woman Domestic Workers," 62-67.

<sup>69</sup> "Chicago Group Forms Auxiliary of Red Caps," *Chicago Defender*, February 19, 1938.

which black women became knowledgeable about class struggle. Not to mention, they “recognized the economic significance of housework long before ‘the reproduction of labor’ became a colloquialism among socialist feminists.”<sup>70</sup> Whatever her motivations were for choosing to head the organization, Hayes’s work with the Red Caps represented the more conservative end of black women’s labor activism, as support for a labor movement designed to support men’s labor.

Neva Ryan, active member of the CP-endorsed National Negro Congress, was much more audacious in her activism. This may have been due, in part, to the fact that, unlike Hayes, she labored in the homes of white women. In her 1934 letter to the *Defender*, Ryan explained, “I wish time and space permitted me to give some of my own experiences showing some of these abuses. Some of these experiences would show why maids slam doors and dishes when company is invited.” Ryan was less interested in sitting on the sidelines of the labor movement as a woman. She ended her letter with this prophetic statement: “I am concerned, however, that [domestic workers] have not openly revolted...But the hand is now writing on the wall. Domestic workers are now organizing and seeking standards in household employment.”

Out of all the work done by the Association, Cooper was especially interested in their contract, which she considered the most clear and complete of all the unions she surveyed. This document required that employers recognize the Association as the bargaining agent for the worker as it related to wages, hours, and working conditions. The Association required that wages be paid in cash, a provision that was not included in contracts of any other union. Another unique aspect of Chicago contract was the

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<sup>70</sup> Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 3, 9, 72, 84, 138.



provision that, in the event of an employee's injury or illness, the union would supply a temporary worker until the permanent worker was able to return to work.<sup>71</sup>

Though Cooper lauded Hayes and Ryan for their work with the Association, her short chapter on Chicago does not really do justice to the impact of their work in the city and across the country. The Association intended to cooperate with the training program that had already been established by the WPA, but they soon discovered that the practice of segregation in training schools did not align with their mission of interracial cooperation. Hayes observed in her column for the *Defender*, "It may be a deliberate effort to divert all Race girls and women to one training center so that segregation, which is not officially condoned, may become an unofficial practice as it has on certain other WPA projects." In another column, Hayes insisted that, "Unions must be interracial in order to avoid undercutting by the excluded group."<sup>72</sup> A 1938 photo of the Association, also published in the *Defender*, showed that the organization was truly interracial and not just ideologically, as was the case in New York. Thus, Hayes's fears concerning competition among black and white immigrant women were very real. As a seasoned labor organizer, she was certainly aware of the exacerbation of those tensions by factory bosses. The Association's insistence on an interracial union and their boycotting of the WPA's program meant that they were determined to not allow racism and segregation to undermine their work with women laborers.

The militancy of the Chicago union garnered national attention. The inaugural conference included delegates from the NNC, the Urban League, the WTUL, and the

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<sup>71</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Domestic Worker," 63-65.

<sup>72</sup> Hazel Hayes, "Domestic Worker Forum," *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1936 and September 19, 1936.

National Council on Household Employment. Their 1938 conference estimated 500 attendees, including the head of the Cincinnati Domestic Workers Union who intended to use Chicago as a model for organizing in her city. At the conclusion of this conference, Ryan hosted a citywide radio broadcast reporting on the event that included the results of a questionnaire given to attendees regarding wages, hours, and working conditions.<sup>73</sup>

In 1939, the Association collaborated with the Chicago Friends of the Sharecroppers to hold a “Social Security Rally.” An advertisement for the event stated, “The purpose of the meeting will be to focus attention on the plight of the Southern sharecroppers and the domestic workers, both of whom are now barred from the benefits of the Federal Social Security Act, and to elicit public support for an amendment to the Illinois State Wages and Hours Act which does not now protect domestic workers.”<sup>74</sup> The choice to align themselves with sharecroppers, who were also excluded from New Deal policies, demonstrated that although the Chicago union was an interracial collective, the plight of marginalized black workers was central to their political ideology. They were an independent, interracial collective of women, supported by the CP, women’s organizations, and the black Left, that centered the experiences of black women workers without excluding native or foreign-born white women in the industry. In spite of the brevity of her analysis, Cooper was impressed. After graduating from Fisk, she considered accepting a contract to work in Chicago organizing domestic workers, but declined, choosing instead to begin working with the Southern Negro Youth Congress.<sup>75</sup>

### **“Least Successful of All”: Organizing Domestic Workers in the South**

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<sup>73</sup> “Ill. Domestic Workers’ Asso. Will Confer,” *Chicago Defender*, May 21, 1938.

<sup>74</sup> “Rally Friday to Help Weld North and South,” *Chicago Defender*, February 18, 1939.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Helen Washington, “Interview with Esther and James Jackson,” June 13, 2000, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 8, Folder 23.

Considering Cooper's repeated retrospective disclosures that the domestic workers she encountered in Nashville served as inspiration for her thesis, the brevity of her analysis of domestic worker organizing in the South was rather peculiar. Here, Cooper's editorialized commentary deviated from her previous optimism. She wrote:

Efforts at unionization of domestic workers in the South have been least successful of all... In the South the belief still exists that the relationship between housewife and domestic worker is personal rather than contractual. Often housewives cling to the old benevolent attitude toward Negro domestics which was the accepted attitude during slavery. The Negro domestic in turn often feels dependent upon the white employer... This type of Negro domestic is often docile or full of flattery for his employer. To such Negroes, unionism is "preposterous."<sup>76</sup>

This was Cooper's most detailed examination of the relationship between the housewife and her domestic employee. Yet, as debates surrounding legislation for domestic workers in several cities showed, this attitude was certainly not unique to the South. Similarly, the sense of benevolence that Cooper described was also characteristic of relief agencies like the WPA. The docility of domestics detailed above is entirely unsupported. Cooper does not cite any references in the text or footnotes to support her conclusion. In fact, the use of male pronouns seems to reference the nineteenth-century cultural trope of the Uncle Tom, rather than the twentieth-century woman worker.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn's work on reproductive labor is useful for historicizing the idea of "benevolence" as it relates to the relationship between housewives and their employees. She suggests that the prevailing cultural belief, particularly in the South, was that women of color were well-suited for domestic work because they were "incapable of governing their own lives and thus were dependent on whites—making white employment of them an act of benevolence." Glenn makes it very clear that this was a

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<sup>76</sup> Cooper, "The Negro Domestic Worker," 71.

social construction used to restrict black women to domestic work. She continues, “Even though racial stereotypes undoubtedly preceded their entry into domestic work, it is also the case that domestics were forced to enact the role of the inferior.” Glenn specifies that black women had not internalized this inferiority. Instead, they were “acutely aware” that they were performing this role as a means of survival and, at times, a form of resistance.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps what Cooper observed in the South was this performance of docility, a necessary part of being a black female wage laborer in a community characterized by unbridled racial violence.

It is still unusual that Cooper, a native Southerner and a woman who lived and worked among Southern black women for three years while at Fisk, would make such disparaging comments about Southern domestic workers. In light of this, her choice to begin working for the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), instead of taking the job in Chicago (or continue her graduate studies, which she was also given the opportunity to do) is interesting. The SNYC was an offshoot of the National Negro Congress, founded in 1937. Cooper joined the organization in the summer of 1940, serving as office director and administrative secretary.<sup>78</sup>

Cooper’s decision to take the job was undoubtedly influenced by her burgeoning romance with one of its co-founders, James E. Jackson, who would later become her husband. But what more than likely inspired her continued advocacy on behalf of domestic workers beyond her thesis was the case of Nora Wilson, “a black teenage domestic worker from Elmore County, Alabama who was serving time in Wetumpka

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<sup>77</sup> Glenn, 413-414.

<sup>78</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 200, 204; Johnetta Richards, ‘Fundamentally Determined: James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson and the Southern Negro Youth Congress 1937-1946,’ *American Communist History* 7.2 (2008): 192.

Women's Prison for using abusive language to a white woman."<sup>79</sup> The SNYC embarked on their campaign to free Nora Wilson from prison the same year that Cooper joined the organization. Nora Wilson's case was a singular focus for the organization for several months. Although she never discussed the case in writings or interviews, Cooper's daily work at SNYC headquarters meant that she would have been intimately familiar with the campaign and its importance.

The Nora Wilson case was first discovered by the SNYC's Caravan Puppeteers, a group of young people who used puppets to educate rural black southerners about the labor movement, voter registration, and organizing against the poll tax. While performing in Elmore County, the troupe met Nora's mother, a sharecropper and mother of seven children. Mrs. Wilson explained to the Puppeteers that Nora was in jail serving an eight-and-a-half year sentence for using abusive language towards a white woman. Even more troubling was the intention of the district attorney to try Nora for assault and battery with intent to kill at the end of her sentence.

The center of the conflict was actually Nora's eleven-year-old sister, Adrien, who was accused of stealing six ears of corn while working for a neighboring white woman named Mrs. Woodburn. Soon Nora found out about the accusations, and confronted Mrs. Woodburn for slandering her sister. Additionally, Nora demanded that Adrien be compensated for the ironing and other tasks she had done for her employer. Shocked that a young black teenager would talk to her in such a manner, Mrs. Woodburn slapped Nora and then instructed her husband to bring a gun. Nora, fearing for her life, ran home. Nora's willingness to risk her life to advocate for her sister's dignity and demand lost

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<sup>79</sup> Richards, 197.

wages stood in stark contrast to Cooper's commentary on the docility and loyalty of Southern domestic workers. No doubt, this was a rude awakening for Cooper, who was barely twenty-one when she began working for the SNYC.

Shortly after Nora arrived home, she was visited by Mr. Woodburn, accompanied by the sheriff who presented the family with a warrant for her arrest. In the absence of an attorney, family, or friends who could advise her, she waived a jury trial and was quickly convicted and sentenced. Once SNYC leadership was made aware of Nora's unfair imprisonment, they sent field representative Arthur C. Price to investigate. The mass campaign, which began that fall, included securing an attorney for her defense, sending telegrams and petitions to Alabama Governor Frank Dixon and the Justice and Solicitor of Wetumpka, and using SNYC publications to inform readers of her case and solicit support. Their efforts were enormously successful. Before the end of Nora's eight-and-half month sentence, all charges were dropped and she was immediately released.<sup>80</sup>

Preserving the history of the Free Nora Campaign was clearly important to the Jacksons, who included a number of documents related to the case in their papers, which they donated to New York University's Tamiment Library Archives in 2006. In the aftermath of the campaign, while James was abroad fighting in the Second World War, Cooper took over his position as Executive Secretary, which propelled her onto the national stage as a leader of the organization. The visibility of Cooper's leadership during the war garnered the attention of authorities, including the famed Eugene "Bull" Connor, who was the commissioner of public safety in Birmingham. In a private meeting between

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<sup>80</sup> "The Image and Accomplishments of the Southern Negro Youth Congress," 18-20, undated, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 11, Folder 24; Richards, 197-198; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 216.

Connor, James Jackson, and Birmingham mayor Cooper Green, Connor called Cooper a “dangerous woman” for her work with the SNYC.<sup>81</sup> Which brings us back to McDuffie’s query: how does one groomed for entry into the talented tenth become a dangerous woman? For Cooper, it began before she joined CP or Executive Secretary of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. It was domestic laborers that inspired Cooper’s commitment to the Left and the liberation of the working class.

### **Conclusion**

The year after the Free Nora Campaign, in 1941, Cooper married fellow Communist and SNYC leader, James E. Jackson.<sup>82</sup> Like Cooper, Jackson rejected the path outlined for him by his black middle-class origins in favor of joining the CP and working towards the liberation of the black working class, something he and Cooper did side by side for over five decades. When asked why she never resigned from the Party, even after it began to unravel in the 1950s, Cooper responded: “But this Party is as much ours as it is theirs.”<sup>83</sup> SNYC leaders, most of whom were members of the Party, worked to make Communism their own. In doing so, they developed a gender egalitarian ideology that, in many ways, surpassed the theory and practice of the CPUSA.

While Cooper later downplayed her participation in the Party, her thesis exemplifies the impact that Marxist discourses, particularly those related to feudalism and union organizing, had on the 1930s black Left. More importantly, Cooper’s early fascination with domestic workers allowed her to execute the work of the Southern Negro Youth Congress in a way that made ample space for the advocacy of black women

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<sup>81</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 146-147.

<sup>82</sup> Rzeszutek, 3.

<sup>83</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 122.

workers. Her assertion that the Party belonged to black activists in the South, implies that their work influenced American Marxism as much as Marxist language influenced the intellectual work of the black Left. Thus, an examination of writings about black domestic workers reveals the importance of this mutual exchange between and among radical activists of the era.

Cooper's continued support for domestic worker rights, even at the age of 97, shows a sense of personal admiration for black women workers long after she published her seminal study of their activism in 1940. While organizing domestic workers served as Cooper's political foundation, her thesis, "The Negro Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism," remains a pivotal moment in the study of the history of black women's labor organizing. In spite of its shortcomings, Cooper's thesis is one of the only, and certainly the most extensive, sources of information on domestic worker unions for contemporary scholars. As a historical document, it shows that domestic workers themselves and their activism should be a foundation for rethinking women's reproductive work, the racial division of labor, the "servant problem," New Deal policies, and the evolving theorization of the black Left. This belief was certainly shared by the writers examined in the remaining chapters of this dissertation; those for whom domestic worker resistance laid the foundation for their reimagining of black proletarian revolution.



## CHAPTER 2: “I’m for the union too”: Sexual and Reproductive Labor in the Novels of William Attaway

Author William Attaway is well-known for his naturalistic portrayals of black life, labor, and migration. In his seminal novel, *Blood on the Forge*, Attaway uses naturalism to dramatize the migration of its protagonists from rural sharecroppers to industrial scabs. The degradation of the environment in the Northern industrial city is juxtaposed with the degradation of the worker’s body. This degradation also extends to the novel’s female characters, though they are excluded from the labor process that occurs on the factory floor. Their sexual and reproductive labor, in Attaway’s framework, is also subject to the destructive nature of capitalism. As such, gender is an essential part of Attaway’s literary exploration of industrialism and resistance to capitalism; one that he remained committed to during his short-lived literary career.

William Attaway’s tenure as a proletarian writer began with the publication of his short story “Tale of the Blackamoor,” which appeared in the literary quarterly *Challenge* in 1936. Three years later, his novel *Let Me Breathe Thunder* debuted, followed by *Blood on the Forge* in 1941. Both novels received rave reviews in the Left, mainstream, and black presses. Literary critics predicted a long career for Attaway as a writer. Yet *Blood on the Forge* was his last novel. The end of Attaway’s tenure as a proletarian novelist may have been the result of poor sales, which plagued the literary Left for decades.<sup>84</sup>

Attaway’s protest literature enjoyed a brief resurgence during the 1960s and early 1970s as a result of a renewed interest in the study of black literature. But Attaway

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<sup>84</sup> Samuel B. Garren, “William Attaway,” in *Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940* (Detroit: Gale Research, Co., 1988), 3-7; Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 101.

remains absent from most historiographies of proletarian literature.<sup>85</sup> Even to his comrades and colleagues the author remained a mystery. Bruce Wierick, a former English professor and longtime friend of Attaway's, described the author as "too serious, a kind of Negro Hamlet, shrouded in melancholy, and feeling more than I liked to see the oppression of color discrimination."<sup>86</sup> Fiction writer John Oliver Killens, who met Attaway in the 1940s at a meeting of black left-wing writers, described him as "moody and depressed." Attaway, he lamented in 1987, "was trying artistically to tell us something about the so-called revolutionary working class, but very few would listen to him."<sup>87</sup>

Attaway was deeply committed to the literary Left (though his official membership in the CP is unknown), yet the ideological complexity of his fiction suggests that the author had difficulty reconciling his racial melancholia (and the influence of black nationalist politics) with the idea of an interracial proletariat.<sup>88</sup> His male protagonists, the white vagrants of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, and the black migrants of *Blood on the Forge*, never quite achieve class consciousness. Attaway's fictional proletariat is beleaguered by racism and racial violence.

Both of Attaway's groundbreaking novels present a racialized and gendered working class, yet his female characters remain on the margins of literary criticism. This chapter places these characters in the center. Through the lens of women workers, most of whom are sexual laborers, Attaway presents a complete and complex analysis

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<sup>85</sup> Garren, 3-4; Richard Yarborough, afterward to *Blood on the Forge*, by William Attaway (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 310.

<sup>86</sup> Bruce Wierick, "Confidential Report on Candidate for Fellowship," undated, box 390, folder 8, Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives, 1917-1948, Fisk University, Nashville, TN.

<sup>87</sup> John Oliver Killens, foreword to *Blood on the Forge* by William Attaway, 7-9.

<sup>88</sup> Battat, 35, 72.

working-class resistance to capitalist oppression. He gives them histories, but more importantly he locates his critique of capitalism in their dialogue, rather than in the storied awakening of the male worker, which was characteristic of much of the radical literature of the period.

Although Attaway's discursive framework concerning sexuality and sexual labor is certainly flawed, as we shall see, sex workers are essential to Attaway's political framework. He pushes the limits of proletarian fiction by including gender, and, in doing so, challenges the ideological frameworks of reproductive labor and the tendencies of black reformist organizations to hold up sexual labor as a manifestation of moral degeneracy rather than a reflection of working class oppression. While it may seem incongruous to align domestic labor and sexual labor, Attaway's juxtaposition of the two demonstrates that they are, in fact, inextricably linked. An analysis of Attaway's work reveals a great deal about the role of sex and sexuality reimagining of proletarian revolution in fiction with black women workers at the center.

### **William Attaway's Fiction: An Introduction**

William Attaway was born in 1911 in Greenville, Mississippi. His parents, a physician and a teacher, moved the family to Chicago in search of better opportunities for their children outside of the segregated South. Like the Coopers, Attaway's parents typified Du Bois' talented tenth. They were unsuccessful in convincing their son to pursue a career in the medical field, as they had planned for him. He decided upon vocational training at the University of Illinois, instead of academia, but soon dropped out after his father's death to submerge himself in labor organizing. In 1931, Attaway headed west in a freight train with just forty dollars in his pocket. For two years he

traveled through the United States, Canada, and Mexico as an itinerant worker and organizer. Attaway briefly joined his sister Ruth in Harlem in 1933 and then hit the road again as a part of a traveling theater company. In 1935 he returned to the University of Illinois and finished his degree.<sup>89</sup>

The following year Attaway moved back to New York and published his first short story in the literary quarterly *Challenge*. The magazine was edited by Dorothy West and was an attempt to recapture the black literary renaissance of the 1920s and infuse it with Left politics.<sup>90</sup> In 1939, Attaway's debut novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, was published by Doubleday, Duran, and Company. The novel narrated the adventures of Step and Ed, two white migrants who travel the country by illegally hopping freight trains in search of work.

*Let Me Breathe Thunder* was the first time since Paul Laurence Dunbar's nineteenth-century commercial romances that a black writer had achieved success by publishing a novel in which the central characters were white.<sup>91</sup> Doubleday was particularly proud of this detail and included the following words of praise as a foreword to the novel:

This first novel by a young Negro discloses a fresh and amazing talent. At twenty-five, his feet dusty from wandering, William Attaway has brought to his publishers a book as poised, as perceptive, as honest and tender as many an older writer with a solid list of books behind him would be proud to claim...*Let Me*

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<sup>89</sup> Battat, 31; Garren, 4; Dan Burley, "Review of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*," undated, box 390, folder 8, Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), 117.

<sup>91</sup> Darryl Pickney, Introduction to *Blood on the Forge* by William Attaway (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005, xiii.

*Breathe Thunder* is a rare thing, a novel by a Negro about whites; a novel that reveals a powerful and objective talent at work upon the very fabric of life.<sup>92</sup>

Though his editors viewed Attaway's choice of white protagonists as a reflection of objectivity and racial progress, literary critic Edward Margolies argued in 1968 that there was a racial politics in *Let Me Breathe Thunder* that was "muted and disguised." In his words, "Yet his protagonists, hobo migrant farm workers, are Negroes under the skin—pariahs, consumed at the same time with wanderlust and the desire to stay put. Their agony is a Negro agony, and their allusions to race problems are more 'inside' than Attaway might have cared to admit."<sup>93</sup> This analysis, while provocative, misses Attaway's more overt engagement with race in the novel. His most poignant examination of the convergence of the black and white working classes in *Let Me Breathe Thunder* occurs in a brothel. It is a space where black and white workers both examine the circumstances of their juxtaposition while participating in the exchange of meager wages for sexual pleasure.

The success of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* afforded Attaway enough notoriety that he was awarded a \$1200 grant in 1940 from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation to write his second novel. Between 1928 and 1948, the Rosenwald Foundation awarded open-ended grants to African-American artists, scholars, and researchers, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes.<sup>94</sup> Attaway outlined the novel in his application materials: "A book (factual novel) on the Pittsburgh industrial area with

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<sup>92</sup> William Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (New York: Double Day, Doran, and Company, Inc.: 1939), n.p.

<sup>93</sup> Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Black American Authors* (Philadelphia; J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1968), 50-52.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel Schulman, *A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 11.

special attention to the steel mills and the Negroes' place in them from the beginnings to world war to the great steel strikes of 1919." The library research for the novel had already been completed, he wrote. Attaway used the grant to conduct oral histories in Pennsylvania steel towns.<sup>95</sup>

Attaway completed *Blood on the Forge* in 1941 amid a significant amount of fanfare from radical and mainstream critics. One reviewer likened Attaway's novel to the work of Richard Wright "because he writes of the frustration and suffering of his people and does so with crude power and naked intensity."<sup>96</sup> Another considered the book a call to the white working class "to live up to its revolutionary responsibilities and expectations."<sup>97</sup> Shortly after *Blood on the Forge* appeared Ralph Ellison penned a harsh and memorable critique of the novel arguing that the political struggle of the proletariat failed to register in the consciousness of the characters, however, which prevented to novel (and its author) for achieving their full power.

It could be argued, however, that the power of Attaway's novel lies in the political awakening of the reader, rather than the consciousness of the characters. The presence of gender, reproductive labor, and sexuality as crucial elements of his narrative expanded the parameters of the proletariat beyond the consciousness of the male worker and outside of the factory floor. In order to accomplish this, Attaway's fiction depicts the multiple forms of labor that women perform simultaneously in the interest of the maintenance of the working class. The vast majority of his female characters are childless and do not engage in child rearing. They do, however, provide the necessary

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<sup>95</sup> William Attaway, "Plan of Work," box 390, folder 8, Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives.

<sup>96</sup> Milton Rugoff, "New Novels of Trouble," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 24, 1941.

<sup>97</sup> Killens, 10.

environments within which the male worker's labor power is reproduced. What is interesting about these women, however, is that they are able to reproduce the male worker daily in brothels rather than single family homes.

### **Racial Dualisms and Clichéd Symbolism in *Let Me Breathe Thunder***

At the outset of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, we find Step and Ed in the red light district of a nameless American southwestern city. The narrative begins with a shocking scene of violence. At a saloon, the two men encounter a Mexican prostitute. When Step becomes frustrated with her inability to speak English, he strikes her. Ed narrates, "She fell against the floor, all her pain held, like a dog bitch... Her eyes were dull lead in her face. She was an animal waiting for her master's mind that would be her mind."<sup>98</sup> As illustrated by this scene, Attaway's early engagement with gender was crude at best. Attaway could have done a great deal with his nameless character, her position as a Mexican migrant woman, and the relationship between her labor as a sex worker and her position in the American racial hierarchy. Instead, he relies on violence to carry the weight of his analysis. But in the absence of context, and without giving the character a voice, the potential political commentary falls flat.

Shortly after their encounter with the nameless prostitute, Step and Ed meet and take in an orphaned Mexican boy who they call Hi Boy and together, the three of them hop a freight headed for Yakima Valley Washington, where Step and Ed have been promised work for the season by a man named Sampson. The boxcar in *Let Me Breathe Thunder* is a space of racial egalitarianism and interracial working-class solidarity. It is

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<sup>98</sup> William Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 12.

also, to use Battat's words, "emblematic of mobility and masculine freedom."<sup>99</sup> While on the freight train, Step and Ed meet a group of itinerant workers, fellow clandestine travelers, and the group begins a conversation about the freedom of being on the rails. One man, simply known as Black Face, exclaims, "When I settles down it's gonna be where I can still mix with guys on the road...Guys on the road ain't got prejudice like other folks." For Black Face, the greatest expression of this racial equality is his sexuality. He continues, "There was a yeller-haired girl in the empty with a bunch of us. Some of them gave her money. She let me love her up all the way in to Chi for a piece of cake."<sup>100</sup> At the outset of the novel, racial equality is premised on female economic desperation. This boxcar scene demonstrates that Attaway was acutely aware of the taboo of interracial sex and its violent consequences. It prefigures the lynching scene that concludes the novel. With this in mind, the racial harmony of the freight train that Black Face imagines seems idealistic.

Step and Ed's first stop in Yakima is a boardinghouse, owned by Step's old friend Mag, a former prostitute turned madam, and her former pimp and current lover, Cooper. Mag's introduction further complicates the paradigm of sex, desire, race, and power in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*. One reviewer calls Mag and Cooper "the best realized characters in the book." He contends that "Mag and Cooper, whose lives, hardened and rough, are those of folk walking precariously on the fringe of society which itself is none too stable."<sup>101</sup> Ed recounts his meeting with the woman: "Mag, herself came to the door at our knock. She was fat and black as a tar ball. I was knocked off my feet for a second.

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<sup>99</sup> Battat, 35.

<sup>100</sup> Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 57-58.

<sup>101</sup> Ulysses Lee, Review of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 18 (1939): 283-4.



Step had not told me she was black.”<sup>102</sup> Aside from Ed’s surprised reaction to Mag’s blackness upon their arrival at the boardinghouse, Mag and Cooper’s blackness is never addressed directly in the narrative. While the brothel is a space of racial egalitarianism in the novel, it is clear, albeit unsaid, that Mag and Cooper’s race dictates their marginal relationship to other workers in Yakima.

Mag’s boardinghouse exists on the margins of Yakima. The space is essential to the plot of the narrative as a contrast to Sampson’s edenic farm and apple orchard, where Step and Ed acquire temporary labor for the summer. Battat explicates:

Mag’s place sharply contrasts with Sampson’s farm: It is a site of leisure, illicit sex, violence, and racial mixing as opposed to work, family, nurture, and whiteness. While Ed likes the tranquility of Sampson’s farm, Step chafes under its domestic and labor routines and prefers the pleasures on Mag’s roadhouse.<sup>103</sup>

Attaway’s early novel relies (perhaps too much) on dualisms. One of the most glaring of these dichotomies is racial. Whiteness stands in for the nuclear family, as Battat points out, but also sexual purity. Because Mag and Cooper are the only African-American characters in the novel, they become emblems of blackness and immorality. This simplistic configuration demonstrates Attaway’s reliance on antagonisms in *Let Me Breathe Thunder* and an inability in the novel to make sense of the relationship between blackness, sexuality, and class oppression.

When Ed spies Cooper as he looks through the door of Mag’s boardinghouse he asks Step if he is her pimp. Step replies, “Used to be, but not now, of course, Mag don’t turn no more tricks. She don’t have to. So he just manages business things for her.”<sup>104</sup>

The romantic relationship Between Mag and Cooper reverses the dynamic of

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<sup>102</sup> Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 63.

<sup>103</sup> Battat, 33.

<sup>104</sup> Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 69.

pimp/prostitute and turns its gendered hierarchy on its head. Yet, the history of Mag and Cooper's relationship returns to the trope of gendered violence that pervades Attaway's novels. In a conversation with Step and Ed, Cooper narrates their love affair:

You know me and my old woman was together for a long time...She was doing good, but everything was business to her. She didn't know what a real man was till I pushed her back off her heels. There never was but one way to do a sportin' woman. While you in the mood call her every low-down thing that comes to your mind and slap the hell out of her while you're cussing. After that, nothing was too good for me. I was her man for as long as I could make it good.<sup>105</sup>

Cooper differentiates between turning tricks and romantic love, leaving room for Mag to engage in sex for both wages and pleasure. But the pleasure that he articulates is also rooted in violence. While this could be interpreted as another form of what scholars consider Attaway's misogynist politics, it is also a conversation that happens among men, fellow travelers in the masculinized space of the freight, the scene of the novel's opening and closing scenes. Cooper's description of his sexual proclivities with Mag is a display of his bravado, and, some would argue, overcompensation for his blackness and its assumed deviance. This sentiment also underlies the characterization of Black Face, the nameless character that Step and Ed encounter during their initial migration, who uses taboo of interracial sex to express a certain bravado.

Cooper continues, "We got so we liked each other just liker regular folks. And she was proud of me too. Maybe 'cause I was the only man she every took up with that could really hit the ball...and almost every time."<sup>106</sup> In contrast to the circumstances of their early engagement, Mag and Cooper develop a normative relationship "just liker regular folks." In their own way they recreate the home-like space of the farm without the

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 233-234.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 234.

restrictions of morality that characterize Sampson's edenic apple orchard. The conflation of sex and violence that characterizes their sexual relationship, however, makes it difficult to disentangle whatever argument Attaway might make about Mag's desire and its relationship to her work as a madam.

In spite of the alternative domesticity of the boardinghouse, it is Cooper's inability to please Mag sexually that precipitates the dissolution of their relationship. Cooper discloses, "But she's a good woman still...wants her man often and regular. I could do nothing about it anymore, and I couldn't tell her what the matter was—I got my pride." Cooper's pride made him violent. When his impotence causes Mag to seek pleasure elsewhere he beats her for beginning to "feel around with guys that ain't laying a cent on the wood."<sup>107</sup> Again, Cooper differentiates between sexual labor and sexual pleasure. In this reversed gender dynamic, it is Mag who is entitled to make demands on their sexual relationship. But violence (sexual or otherwise) in the novel is still the exclusive privilege of men. Cooper discusses this gendered violence so casually, contributing to its normalization in the novel. There remains, however, an underlying suggestion that it is capitalism (the absence of wages for sex) that lies at the root of the problem. Attaway's early attempt at making this connection is clumsy, but is made more explicitly in his second novel.

### **Racial Revision in *Blood on the Forge***

Attaway's second novel *Blood on the Forge* narrates the transformation of the Moss brothers, Big Mat, Chinatown, and Melody, from Southern sharecroppers to urban industrial workers. The novel begins on a Kentucky plantation, where the Moss brothers

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 234-5.

labor as sharecroppers. We find the family in crisis following the death of their mother, who was trampled by a mule-driven plow as she was working in the fields. The reader is quickly introduced to Hattie, who is identified by two distinguishing characteristics: the bruises on her body, the result of her husband Big Mat's rage, and her barrenness. The only form of labor that Hattie performs is done in the home, which is unusual for the wife of a sharecropper. Since the other brothers are not married, this detail emphasizes her inability to bear children and her role as the one who is singularly responsible for reproducing the workforce.

Although Attaway's most effective political commentary on gender is located within his dialogue, the opening scenes of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* and *Blood on the Forge* feature female characters with little to no dialogue. These characters carry the heavy weight of symbolism and shock the reader with their realism. Like the nameless prostitute in the opening scene of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, Hattie is an essentially voiceless character. The reader learns about her from Big Mat, who repeatedly laments that she cannot bear children and that the ground, similarly, will not produce a sufficient crop. In his words, "Muck ground git big every year just like a woman oughta... Maybe muck ground my woman... Only muck ground never fail if you plows it."<sup>108</sup> The double entendre of the work plow, which references the agricultural labor process and sex, reduces Hattie to a sexual object, in Mat's eyes, making sex (for reproduction and not for pleasure) her primary form of labor.

There is a disturbing normalization of violence against women in Attaway's fiction. In her recent monograph, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and*

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<sup>108</sup> William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 41.

*the Making of the Interracial Left*, Erin Royston Battat expounds on the phenomenon in this way:

For a woman of any age, class or color, William Attaway's novels are a very dangerous place. They feature the gang rape of a ten-year-old, incest, the date rape of a fourteen-year-old Anna in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, the forced prostitution and concubinage of Anna (also fourteen) in *Blood on the Forge*, and the prostitution of Zanski's granddaughter, Rosie. The only grown female characters in the stories are Mat's wife Hattie, whom he abandons, and Mag, a former prostitute who winds up in jail.<sup>109</sup>

Another scholar states simply that Attaway's novels "exclude positive images of women from its mythmaking."<sup>110</sup> Battat is right when she argues that the repeated acts of violence against women in Attaway's fiction are unsettling. While the reader is certainly sympathetic to the plight of Attaway's male characters, every one of them ultimately fails at resisting or escaping the degradation of industrial labor, individually and collectively. Battat never entertains the possibility, however, that depictions of violence against women constitute a critique of misogyny (in addition to racism, which is central to *Blood on the Forge*) as a barrier to working-class solidarity. If the purpose of proletarian literature is to create images that compel readers to adopt Leftist politics, violence against women is one way that Attaway, to use Battat's words, "jolts bourgeois readers out of their complacency."<sup>111</sup> Whatever judgments we might make about Attaway's female characters, they must be seen in the context of their complexity.

Like that of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, *Blood on the Forge*'s opening juxtaposition of sex and violence is followed by the men's migration. Attaway takes his time developing his exploration of the possibilities of an interracial Left and uses the

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<sup>109</sup> Battat, 189 footnote 35.

<sup>110</sup> Jane Campbell, *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 76.

<sup>111</sup> Battat, 32.

migration to dramatize the physical and psychological movement of the Moss brothers from their Kentucky plantation to a Pennsylvania steel mill. The impetus for their migration is a violent confrontation between Big Mat and the riding boss followed by a serendipitous offer from a jackleg to travel north for work. At midnight the brothers leave Hattie barefoot in the doorway and board a freight train headed for the Monongahela Valley.

What ensues is one of the most lyrical passages of Attaway's final novel. He narrates:

Squatted on the straw-spread floor of a boxcar, bunched up like hogs headed for market, riding in the dark for what might have been years, knowing time only as dippers of warm water gulped whenever they were awake, helpless and drooping because they were headed into the unknown and there was no sun, they forgot even that they had eyes in their heads and crawled around in the boxcar, as though it were a solid thing of blackness.

The image of the men blindly crawling on the floor of the boxcar harkens back to that of the Mexican woman as an “animal waiting for her master's mind that would be her mind.” The image of the boxcar as a figurative womb is unmistakable, making the emergence of the Moss brothers and their comrades from the freight a birth of sorts. The narrator continues:

When the car finally stopped for a long time and some men unsealed and slid back the big door they were blinded by the light of a cloudy day. In all their heads the train wheels still clicked. Their ears still heard the scream of steel on the curves. Their bodies were motionless, but inside they still jerked to the movement of a bouncing freight car.<sup>112</sup>

In the boxcar, Attaway continues the figurative exploration of reproductive labor that he began with Hattie at the outset of the narrative. In the afterward to the novel, Richard Yarborough describes the Moss brothers' journey as a “symbolic rebirth into

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<sup>112</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 59,63.

industrialized, mechanized society but also a second, harrowing Middle Passage.”<sup>113</sup>

More than this, however, the opening of the freight car also represents the rebirth of the steel mill’s labor force amidst the impending strike that occurs at the end of the novel.

The Moss brothers and their southern compatriots are strikebreakers, or scabs, a strategy frequently used by mill owners to exploit racial tensions in order to keep wages down and prevent working-class resistance.

Using migration as a literary device, *Blood on the Forge* shifts back and forth between a focus on industrial labor (and interracial labor organizing) and Southern pastoralism. Barbara Foley argues that in the novels of antiracist writers like Attaway, these “conflicting representations of race and class...require the novelists to place strains upon the premises—and hence the narrative conventions—of the realistic novel.” She goes on to caution that “such contradictory elements can be adjudged flaws—political or literary—only from a standpoint that ignores the actual complexities of the CPUSA’s construction of the ‘Negro Question’ and that, moreover, privileges ideological unity as a prerequisite to aesthetic value.”<sup>114</sup> Though Ellison derides Attaway in his review of *Blood on the Forge* for the novel’s lack of “ideological unity,” *Blood on the Forge*’s proletariat reflects, in Foley’s words, “the dialectical tensions of the political vision that he is attempting to articulate.”<sup>115</sup> Though Attaway’s membership in the Communist Party is uncertain (but likely), the migrations of *Blood on the Forge* and *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, may be a reflection of his own internal political tensions; a push and pull between American Communism and black nationalism.

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<sup>113</sup> Yarborough, 303.

<sup>114</sup> Barbara Foley, “Race and Class in Radical African-American Fiction of the Depression Years,” *Nature, Society, and Thought* 3.3 (1990): 312-313.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

Taking raced and classed dynamic one step further Attaway adds another group of migrants to his framework: the women of Mex Town. The brothels and the women who labor in them are also a part of the economy of the mill. The geography of *Blood on the Forge*, which takes place in 1919, the same year as the famed strike, mirrors that of Carnegie Steel and the surrounding community. The mill dominates the lives of its workers. Thus, adjacent to the mill are the boardinghouses (or the Ward), brothels that cater only to mill workers, a lunch counter where the wives and daughters of the mill workers labor, and so on. Big Mat, Melody, and Chinatown repeat the cycle of working at the mill, and then spending their insufficient wages on gambling, liquor, and sex.

As the Moss brothers attempt to locate the boardinghouses following their journey northward, they encounter their first sex worker. She is described in this way:

A fat-cheeked black girl moved along the river front road. Bright red lipstick had turned purple on her lips. A man's hat was pulled down over her ears. She wore an old overall coat over a stained satin dress. Melody stared at her. She drew the coat tight around her hips and began to swagger... The girl passed them. Her swimming eyes invited. They caught a heavy scent of perfume. Under the perfume was a rot stink. The stink sickened them. They were unnerved.<sup>116</sup>

The brothers soon learn from a fellow mill worker that the putrid smell is caused by a rotting left breast. Margolies considers the nameless woman a foreshadowing of the disintegration of the Moss brothers under the conditions of industrial capitalism.<sup>117</sup> But the nameless woman is more than a representation of the destruction of the male worker. Attaway's naturalistic description of the mill is paired with the literal decomposing of bodies, a consequence of industrialism that extends to the sex workers that populate the mill town, making them an essential part of its working class. In this way, Attaway's uses

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<sup>116</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 71-2.

<sup>117</sup> Margolies, 53.



his naturalistic style to connect women workers to his larger critique of capitalism. It is important, however, to remember that the labor performed by sex workers is also reproductive in the same way that Hattie's implied role on the farm was the daily maintenance of male workers.

Attaway expands his examination of sexual labor and discourses of power in *Blood on the Forge* through the characterization of Sugar Mama, the madam. Sugar Mama runs a boardinghouse in Mex Town, a series of brothels on the outskirts of the mill town named for the ethnicity of its inhabitants, migrant women from Mexico. The position of Mex Town, on the margins of the city, mirrors the racialized geography of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*. Sugar Mama is described as "heavy hipped and fat breasted, stringy black hair falling in lines over her khaki face."<sup>118</sup> Sugar mama is a complicated character. On the surface she is a fun-loving and free spirited woman who openly flirts with the mill workers and takes playful slaps on her behind. Unlike Mag, her business acumen is more important than sexual desire or familial intimacy. Sugar Mama is the least idealistic of all the characters in *Blood on the Forge*. She understands that the grim reality of industrial capitalism is destructive and the best the working class can hope for is survival. Sugar Mama is willing to go to great lengths to do so. She facilitates her niece, Anna's, migration from New Mexico to Pennsylvania and forces her to work in the brothel, retaining all of her wages. Sugar Mama illustrates the way that Attaway revises the simplistic dichotomies of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*. Economic power is no longer a simple division between capitalist and worker. Sugar Mama exploits her niece by forcing

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<sup>118</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 96.

her to work for no wages, yet she is powerless against the institutional power that limits her economic opportunities as a Mexican migrant worker.

### **The Annas of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* and *Blood on the Forge* and Revision as Redemption**

Sugar Mama's role in the world of *Blood on the Forge* is further complicated by her fourteen-year-old niece, Anna, who shares her name with Sampson's daughter, also fourteen. While these young girls are seemingly only the same in age and name, I examine them together with the understanding that the second Anna is a revision of the first. The first Anna serves as *Let Me Breathe Thunder*'s representation of innocence lost in the face of capitalist development. Step and Ed first encounter Sampson's daughter Anna during their first visit to their temporary home and new job on Sampson's farm. The farm itself is overtaken by clichéd symbolism. It is an edenic apple orchard, and Anna is its Eve before the fall. Ed describes Anna in this way: "Anna wasn't bad looking and she wasn't good looking. I guess she was like any other late teen-age country girl... a little plump and a little giggly. Just a towheaded kid, except for her eyes. They were deep with that same quiet saneness that marked Sampson's."<sup>119</sup> Step is quickly smitten by the young girl in spite of her young age. Anna's youthfulness makes Step's flirtation seem almost predatory. He justifies this lustfulness by saying, "She's old enough to play around like she knows what it's all about."<sup>120</sup>

Anna represents Attaway's dependence on whiteness as a part of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*'s analytical framework. Anna is young, blond, and naïve, the personification of whiteness and virtue. When she is not pining after Step, she reads love-story magazines

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<sup>119</sup> Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 78.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

and dreams of the kind of mobility and freedom that is the exclusive purview of men in the novel. Her love for Step becomes a part of her fantasy, a way out of the stifling domesticity of her father Sampson's farm. Considering the novel's various settings (the farm, the train, the brothel), Sampson's is the only place where normative domesticity is experienced. This glorifies a fictional past, where the agricultural economy reigned in the absence of industry.

Once Sampson and Ed become aware of Step's attraction to Anna, they begin to protect her in the interest of preserving her virtue. In contrast to Mag, who is not entitled to protection from lynch mobs or from male violence, Anna's purity is something to be guarded. At this point, the blatant biblical symbolism is almost comical. Sampson cultivates his apple orchard with the same attention that he provides his daughter. Anna laments to Ed:

But you wouldn't know what it means to be a girl and not be able to burn around the country or do anything exciting or romantic. Maybe you don't know what it is to have a father who thinks about you like—like one of his apples... Well, he can't stand to see any of his apples fall to the ground...and he won't let his 'little girl' mix with any of the pickers or the young people around town who get high at dances... It ain't that I want to do anything bad. It's just that I'm tired of being an apple when I'm a woman.<sup>121</sup>

Anna's vision of the freedom of vagrancy is clearly misguided and stands in complete contrast to Step and Ed's reality. It is the domesticity of the farm that protects Anna from the immorality associated with migrant laborers. Her whiteness makes her entitled to this protection.

In spite of her idyllic innocence, Anna is at the center of the novel's conflict and climax. Her fall from grace is the result of her association with Step, Mag, and Yakima's

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 100.

underground economy. One night she convinces Step and Ed to let her accompany them to the boardinghouse. Away from the farm, Anna is no longer protected from male violence. The moment she is out of Ed's sight, Step brutally rapes her.

Belle, one of the women on the brothel, explains to Anna in the aftermath of the rape that "some girls have a lot of trouble the first time." From this Anna concludes, "I guess it wasn't his fault 'cause I was so dumb...I got to hold him here now. I got to be in love with him after what happened."<sup>122</sup> Anna internalizes the normalization of sex and violence that characterizes Attaway's fiction. Her yearning for the fantasy of romantic love means that she must accept the fixed hierarchy of masculine/feminine, active/passive, and dominant/submissive. Attaway's use of rape as that which precipitates Anna's fall simplifies the framework of sexuality by eliminating female desire. He revises this in *Blood on the Forge*. The second Anna uses her sexuality more consciously than the first, and with less naïveté.

Following the rape, Anna develops a strange and unsettling determination to "make Step love her." Her innocence falls away and she persuades Step to return to Mag's for another rendezvous. She describes her second encounter with Step to Ed: "I knew that I was going to be hurt again, but I was ready...Then, I wanted to be hurt—I can't say why. That was just before this feeling happened to me. It was like knowing everything and going everywhere all at the same time."<sup>123</sup> This is a simplistic rewriting of Christianity's origin story. It is the violence of patriarchy that precipitates Anna's fall, and the forbidden knowledge she gains causes her to fixate on satisfying male desire at her own expense.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>123</sup> Attaway, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 185-186.

Unfortunately, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* is too ambitious (and too short) a novel to reconcile its myriad of racial, gendered, sexual, and class-based political conflicts. For this reason, it seems that the Anna of *Blood on the Forge* is Attaway's attempt at novelistic redemption. In the novel, Attaway discards the edenic symbolism and transforms his innocent 14-year-old virgin into a young Mexican sex worker. He removes the "quiet saneness" of her eyes. In its place Melody observes:

This girl has more than one woman shackled in her eyes. All the women he had seen were here. Here was the fat-cheeked black girl he had seen walking in the rain, the woman whose left breast died and rotted until she stank so no man would buy her for a dime... Here were women smelling of rut and sweat and some of milkweed crushed in the field under their raw buttocks, the blues singer in a Kentucky jook joint, lifting her skirt to cover coins on table corners...<sup>124</sup>

In this passage Attaway inserts the women of *Blood on the Forge* into the migratory narrative of South to North. The use of the term "shackled" subtly suggests a connection between gendered, racial, and class exploitation. The presence of slavery as a metaphor in this passage connects wage-slavery in the North to the history of black enslavement in the South, which produced the sharecropping system that the Moss brothers sought to escape.

Anna has a brief affair with Melody, but is soon quite smitten with his brother Big Mat. She blurs the lines between sexual and reproductive labor by shifting back and forth between seemingly normative "marital" relations with Big Mat and sex work, which she returns to in order to supplement Sugar Mama's loss of income as the result of the strike. A number of the women in Mex town develop relationships with migrating mill workers (these relationships should be distinguished from their sexual encounters as sex worker and client), many of whom have wives at home that they never send for. These

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<sup>124</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 102.

momentary family relations juxtapose sexual and reproductive labor in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish sex for pleasure from sex work as wage work.

This blurring of sexual and reproductive labor, the space of the home and the brothel, is perhaps Attaway's most significant theoretical intervention. Like domestic workers, sex workers labor in a space that is both a home and a place of work.<sup>125</sup> They are a part of the maintenance of the working class, while at the same time using the brothel to nurture the mill workers, provide them with pleasure, and, as we will see in the final section, engage with them politically. Like that of the mill workers, their relationship to capitalism is complicated; they simultaneously reinforce economic hierarchy while resisting the structures of capital by participating in underground economies and retaining all of the wages for their labor in the absence of pimps, who would not become regular fixtures in the sexual economy until after the time in which the novel is set.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in these reconstructed domestic spaces, Attaway centers the care work that sex workers do, and locates class-conscious dialogues within the brothel and between sex workers and mill workers. In this sense, Attaway prioritizes the gender politics of his proletariat.

Soon after Big Mat and Anna take up residence together we learn of her motivation in entering this partnership with him. She states:

All the time I am not in Vaughan. Sometimes I am in Mexico with my old people... The young fella in Mexico do not pay for love. They come in from watching the goats and digging in the fields and they do not give me money... The peons are all barefooted and do not even have white bread to eat. There are many cars pass with Americanos, and the cars stop sometimes, and the men have cameras and take pictures of the goats and the peons. The women in the cars wear shoes with high heels. The Americano get many things for the women. And so I

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<sup>125</sup> Blair, 58; Kelley, 48.

<sup>126</sup> Blair, 10.

say that I will not marry with the fella who has no house and watches the neighbors' goats. He cannot buy shoes with high heels. All the time I dream of high heel shoes with bright stones in the heels that will make me like the Americanos, and nobody will take my picture along with the goats.<sup>127</sup>

As Stacy Morgan explains, Anna “misapprehends the complexity of American class identity by reducing it to material cultural signs.” In an attempt to make this ideal a reality for Anna, Big Mat uses his wages to buy her a dance-hall dress and a pair of high heels. Anna wears these commodities while cooking and cleaning the house and they eventually become tattered and worn. There are a lot of things that can be done analytically with Anna’s memory of Mexico and her fascination with consumer culture. These contexts are important to Attaway’s critique of capitalism and the illusion of economic participation. For the purposes of this analysis, however, what these details imply about Anna’s character are most important. Morgan continues:

Ironically, then, the icon intended as a symbol of maturity and class status comes to signal Anna’s childishness; particularly as Big Mat refuses to allow Anna to venture into the public sphere for which such ostentatious apparel is designed, the clothing soon appears tragically pathetic in light of her virtual entrapment before a crude oil stove with a dim and suffocating domestic sphere.<sup>128</sup>

The description of her wearing the worn dress harkens back to the woman with the rotting breast, thereby making Anna a part of the working class rather than a bourgeois wife.

There is also an underlying racial implication to Anna’s constructed image of American socioeconomic relations. I find it interesting that Attaway uses Anna (a teenager, a sex worker, a migrant laborer, a Mexican) to characterize the racialized dynamics of American capitalism. When explaining to Big Mat why she ultimately

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<sup>127</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 149.

<sup>128</sup> Stacy Morgan, "Migration, Material Culture, and Identity in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* and Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*," *College English* (2001): 731.

returns to sex work at the end of the novel, she states that she intends to leave him, punctuating her pronouncement with the following statement: “In Mexico peon on ground. Here peon work in mill... You are a peon.” She continues, “You are not Americano. Americano live in big house in back hills.” Big Mat, she concludes, is a black peon.<sup>129</sup>

At this point Melody remembers being taunted in Kentucky with the following rhyme: “Nigger, nigger never die. Black face and shiny eye.” Melody’s memory is in fact Attaway’s. In a letter to the Rosenwald Fund’s director, William Attaway confessed “like all writers, I am addicted to telling on myself even when it hurts.”<sup>130</sup> He did just that in an interview with Dan Burley, who reviewed *Let Me Breathe Thunder* for an unknown publication. Attaway told Burley that the taunt remembered by Melody was his only memory of the South. He recalled a “little charcoal-colored girl singing over the fence as she passed with her load...’Nigger Nigger never die, black face and shiny eye...”<sup>131</sup>

The binary of Americano and peon is, at the same time, capitalist and worker, but also white and black (and immigrant). Even as Anna criticizes Big Mat for his position in the hierarchy, she, too, is part of a racialized social caste. White women work in the general store or at the lunch counter. Women of color work in the brothels of Mex Town. The division of peon and Americano also exposes the absurdity of working-class racism. White immigrant workers are also not Americanos, yet they treat the scabs as enemies rather than comrades. Attaway uses historical context to amplify his contention that racism destroys working-class solidarity. The so-called “Red Summer” of 1919 was

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<sup>129</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 275-276.

<sup>130</sup> Attaway, Letter to Dr. M.O. Bousfield, December 13, 1939, Rosenwald Fund Archives.

<sup>131</sup> Dan Burley, Review of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, undated, Rosenwald Fund Archives.



characterized by the political repression of foreign-born workers for suspected (or actual) community activity *and* by a string of lynchings and racially motivated uprisings.<sup>132</sup>

Instead of dramatizing the lynching narrative, as he does in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, Attaway sets his narrative in the past in order to comment on the contemporary hurdles to interracial working class solidarity.

Mat's inability to overcome his feelings of racial inferiority is accompanied by the same violent impotence that plagues Cooper in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*. A number of scholars identify impotence in *Blood on the Forge* as sexual symbolism that foreshadows the destruction of all three brothers under the conditions of industrial capitalism.<sup>133</sup> These analyses miss the critique of gendered violence that underlies the relationship between Big Mat and Anna.

Big Mat confesses, "In bed she just lay there and don't say nothin' and don't do nothin' ...seem like bein' on top of a piece of ice. She a long way away all the time—jest like I doin' something to a dead body. But I do it. And then I feels bad. So I starts hittin' her."<sup>134</sup> The juxtaposition of sex and violence exhibited here resembles that of Mag and Cooper in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*. The key difference is that Big Mat, in admitting that he "feels bad" and hit Anna as a result of his feelings of inferiority, does not possess the same kind of simplistic male bravado as Cooper. While this is not an admission, on his part, that Anna does not deserve the violence he inflicts on her, it does, at the very least, deepen Attaway's exploration of gender.

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<sup>132</sup> Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 12; Battat, 77-78.

<sup>133</sup> Margolies, 57; Yarborough, 307; Campbell, 81.

<sup>134</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 196.

When Big Mat discovers that Anna has been turning tricks again in order to leave him, he beats her savagely. The scene is one of the most brutal and disturbing in the novel. The narrator explains, “The flat of Mat’s hand across her face was like a butcher slapping wet meat...Big Mat unbuckling the heavy leather around his waist...Big Mat’s muscles knotted, and the belt snapped down. A shoulder strap of the beaded dress parted under the leather.”<sup>135</sup> Like her namesake in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, Anna internalizes this violence by saying, “It is right for the man to beat the woman.”<sup>136</sup> Here, Attaway’s revision of Anna becomes less redemptive. While the first Anna’s determination to please Step and justify his violence is connected to her own desire to leave the repressive environment of Sampson’s farm, the impetus behind the second Anna’s justification for male violence is less clear. While the second Anna is more independent and defiant than her namesake, she still asserts that it is “right” for Mat to savagely beat her even as she makes plans to leave him.

Robert Bone, who contributed to the resurgence of critical scholarship on Attaway in the 1950s, attests to Anna’s symbolic importance:

As a sex object, Anna is a symbol of Big Mat’s rootlessness; more broadly, she echoes the main theme of the novel. Born a peon, she aspires to wear high heels in the American fashion. But like the Moss boys, she is denied self-realization by the circumstances of her life. Ironically, Big Mat and Melody seek to ‘count for something’ through a woman whose life is as empty and hopeless as their own.<sup>137</sup>

While Bone’s contributions to literary criticism of Attaway’s are important, he, and other scholars, only considers the figurative use of female characters to bolster the novel’s understanding of the male worker. Yet the women of *Blood on the Forge* are far more

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>137</sup> Bone, 136.

complex and deserve critical attention. Before they began shacking up, Anna found pleasure in sex with Big Mat. It is not until they emulate the life of a bourgeois married couple that Anna must contend with Big Mat's violence. In this sense Attaway exposes the idealism of heteronormative domesticity as false. As a sex worker, Anna is able to resist class oppression even as she strives to be the wife of an Americano. But in the domestic sphere, a shack that is literally in the shadow of the mill (standing in for capitalism), she is subjugated by patriarchy.

### **The Women of the West End and the Political Awakening in Blood on the Forge**

It is through the wives, daughters, and sisters of the mill's union workers, however, that Attaway explores the real political possibilities of sexual labor. As a consequence of the strike that occurs at the novel's climax, these women take on sex work to supplement the wages lost by their brothers, fathers, and husbands. Their participation in labor organizing replaces the conventions of popular front literature that demand the protagonists political awakening.

As the racial tension between black and white workers builds towards the conclusion of the novel, the Moss brothers abstain from any conversations concerning the strike specifically, and labor organizing in general. Yet, before the novel's dramatic dénouement, Melody and Chinatown have a conversation with a group of women, "town gals out to pick up some change," in a secret brothel concerning their relationship to the union and the strike. It is not just the strike that differentiates the women of the West End from those who labored in Mex Town. They are the daughters, sisters, wives and granddaughters of the striking men, who are all white. These were "real women", according to Zanski, a union member who had earlier befriended the Moss brothers

before the racial tension of the strike made them enemies. The women of Mex Town weren't women, exclaims, Zanski. He continues, "That ain't no woman who keep white curtains in a fellers house. Whore girl ain't wash curtains."<sup>138</sup> Interestingly, Anna, a sex worker, does do these things for Big Mat.

This shallow differentiation between wives and sex workers demonstrates the varied ways in which the reproduction of the male worker is accomplished. The statement also reveals a great deal about the underlying racial differences between the groups of women. Mexican women, the "whores" in Zanski's framework, are stripped of their humanity. This prefigures the irony of the West End brothel. These "real" (read *white*) women became an integral part of the illicit economy during the strike, performing emotional labor for black strikebreakers, but also a part of the politics of the class struggle. Their proletarianization depends on their sexual labor.

Attaway foreshadows this important corrective to *Let Me Breathe Thunder's* veneration of white sexual purity in an earlier scene where he depicts the gang rape of a young girl. *Blood on the Forge* is more careful in its approach to the taboo of interracial sex. The scene begins as the brothers witness a young girl, no more than ten, come out of an outhouse behind a row of shanty houses. The narrator continues,

Her pants were still down in back, and she was carefully holding her dress high...Out of the back yard next door came a gang of little towhead boys. They saw the girl and turned into hunting dogs circling something they had flushed out of the brush. Too late the little girl saw them. Without a sound she went down on her back, fighting silently. Twisting and turning a furious little figure was dragged away to the tall weeds up the riverbank. The weeds tossed violently and then trembled for a little time.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 111.

<sup>139</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 131.

This scene typifies Attaway's literary naturalism. The young boys are likened to dogs, like the nameless Mexican prostitute in the opening scene of *Let Me Breathe Thunder*. This time, however, it is male violence that produces animal-like behavior. The women of *Blood on the Forge* are not passive victims of capitalist violence, even silently, as the young girl in the weeds does. Anna, who justifies Big Mat's violence towards her, is still defiant, berating Big Mat and continuing to call him a peon as he beats her.

But the most defiant women of *Blood on the Forge* are the women of the West End for whom sex work serves as both a form of wage work and a means of participating in the strike. It is at the West End brothel, the site of sexual pleasure where the brothers spend the wages they earn as scabs, that they indulge in their curiosity of the union. Rosie, Zanski's granddaughter, explains, "You can't just take home eight dollars a week...not if everybody is gonna eat." When asked by Melody about the men in her family she responds, "They are all with the union. My brothers—they have not been on the job since a month ago. They go crazy. But they gotta stick by the union." Before Melody can interject she adds, "I'm for the union too."<sup>140</sup> Women's reproductive and sexual labor is not rendered marginal in the novel, as it is in other works of proletarian fiction, even those written by women. The strike, in fact, makes sex work central. This is the political awakening of the novel.

### **Conclusion**

The participation of women in the steel unions was not unheard of. At the time of the novel's publication, the Women's Auxiliary of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers of North America encouraged women's active participation in the

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<sup>140</sup> Attaway, *Blood on the Forge*, 257.

labor movement, while educating them on the principles of labor organizing.<sup>141</sup> These women, however, conformed to the Popular Front's fetishization of the nuclear family. "For the Popular Front CP," explains Barbara Foley, "sex roles in the conventional nuclear family furnished a ground on which to base working-class political activism, rather than a target for political critique."<sup>142</sup> Though Attaway only published two novels (he applied for a Rosenwald grant reappointment in 1941 with the intention of writing a prequel to *Blood on the Forge* set in the South but the novel never materialized), his fiction provides an important corrective to the Popular Front's gender politics.

Attaway does not glorify housewifery, choosing instead to explore a multi-layered framework of reproductive labor that blurs the lines between sexuality and domesticity. The juxtaposition of domestic labor and sexual labor in the novel confirms that these two groups of workers must be understood together. In adding sex workers to his fictional proletariat, Attaway opens up the ideology of the labor movement by disrupting the singular focus of the male worker. The voiceless Hattie, the unnamed Mexican woman, the woman with the rotting breast, Mag, Sugar Mama, and both Annas represent the breadth and depth of Attaway's analytic. In the absence of historical records of the inner lives of those who lived seemingly on the margins of the labor movement, Attaway's fiction re-imagines them on the front lines of the proletarian revolution.

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<sup>141</sup> Mollie Lewis, "Negro Women in Steel," in *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940*, eds Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), 277.

<sup>142</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 219.

**CHAPTER 3: Richard Wright's Native Daughters: Fictional Domestic  
Workers and the Theorization of Black Women's Labor**

Richard Wright's preoccupation with black women's labor more than likely began with his mother and maternal grandmother, both deeply religious women, who raised him together without assistance from Wright's father. Their influence on his work was unmistakable. Religion and gender, in the words of one Wright scholar, were "two unreconciled dilemmas" that pervaded the bulk of his work.<sup>143</sup> But it was Wright's own fictional domestic worker, Bessie Mears, the girlfriend of Bigger Thomas in his seminal novel *Native Son*, who would haunt him for the next two decades. Since the publication of *Native Son* in 1940, scholars and literary critics have readily critiqued Wright's depiction of women.<sup>144</sup> The criticisms of Bessie are justifiable. She is a marginal character in the novel, a mere symbol of Bigger's psychosis. Bessie is beleaguered by the work of a domestic laborer and soothes herself with liquor and sex. As literary scholar Julieann V. Ulin succinctly explains, Bessie's "exhausted sighs are punctuated by

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<sup>143</sup> Michael Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1993), 33; Jerry Ward, Jr. and Robert J. Butler, eds., *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* (London: Greenwood Press, 2008), 414.

<sup>144</sup> For the most thorough critiques of Wright's gender politics see Sylvia Keady, "Richard Wright's Women Characters and Inequality," *Black American Literature Forum* 10 (1976): 124-128, Sherley Anne Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright" in *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminine Criticism* edited by Fritz Fleischman (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1982), Maria Mootry, "Bitches, Whores and Women Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Richard Macksey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), Jane Davis, "More Farce Than Human: Richard Wright's Female Characters," *Obsidian II* (1986): 63-83, and Nagueyalti Warren, "Black Girls and Native Sons: Female Images in Selected Works by Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: Myths and Realities*, edited by James Trotman (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 59-77.

helpless moans, agonized wails, and whimpering until she is raped by Bigger, beaten to death with a brick, and shoved down an abandoned tenement's air shaft."<sup>145</sup>

To borrow a quote from Cedric Robinson, what these scholars fail to see are the "brilliant insights" that sometimes materialize as a result of the "pain of discovery."<sup>146</sup> Two years before the publication of *Native Son*, Richard Wright had already begun to revise and reimagine the domestic worker in his fiction. In 1938, he created Aunt Sue, who, in his short story "Bright and Morning Star," labors as a washerwoman to support her two sons and their work within the Communist Party in a rural Southern town. The following year Wright began working on his answer to *Native Son* and Bigger Thomas, a massive novel that he would eventually call "Black Hope," which was never published. Finally, in 1957, Wright would pen a radio play entitled "Man of All Work," in which a black man dresses in drag when he cannot find work as a cook in order to obtain domestic work as a black woman. The play alludes to many of the same themes as *Native Son*, even recreating the novel's anxiety of the taboo of interracial sex. Taken together, Wright's fictional domestic workers demonstrate an inability, on the part of the author, to reconcile sexual, racial, and class-based exploitation with black women's resistance to this oppression.

In spite of the ideological confusion in Wright's fiction, particularly in "Black Hope," the "pain of discovery" of his two decades of research and writing on domestic workers is a rich archive that demonstrates the significance of cultural production to the theorization of black women's labor. More specifically, the author's writing process

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<sup>145</sup> Julieann V. Ulin, "Talking to Bessie: Richard Wright's Domestic Servants," *American Literature* 85.1 (2013), 152.

<sup>146</sup> Cedric Robinson, "The Emergent Marxism of Richard Wright's Ideology," *Race & Class* 19.3 (1978): 236.



during the period lasting from the late thirties to the early fifties complicates the body of scholarship dedicated to exposing the “gender problem” in his work. The significance of Wright’s research in preparation for “Black Hope” has already been demonstrated in a previous chapter. It is important to note here, however, that Wright also used that research to create the imaginary world of his never-published novel.

While some scholars are clear that one does not understand Wright without paying attention to his theorization of gender, what this chapter will show is that fiction, and the process of writing fiction, provides contemporary scholars with an intellectual framework that emerges from its historical moment with which we can begin to examine and historicize black women’s sexual and domestic labor, both at the places where they overlap and those at which they diverge. Of all of the writers examined in this dissertation, Wright spent the most time developing his theory on domestic and sex work through fiction.

Wright’s preoccupation with black women’s labor extended beyond works of fiction. In fact, his approach to “Black Hope” was almost more sociological than it was literary. The novel encompassed several years of painstaking research on the conditions of domestic work, a process that, though it greatly deepened his understanding of women and work, repeatedly disrupted his writing process and prevented the novel from reaching its audience. Some of this research found new life in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright’s materialist history of black America.<sup>147</sup>

Because “Black Hope” was never published, the novel is unmediated by editors, publishers, and even the author’s own reservations about the text, which were

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<sup>147</sup> Ulin, 154-159; Fabre, 239.

posthumously discovered by scholars in Wright's correspondence with his agent and editor. The testimonies of real women troubled Wright so much that he could not create a composite of the symbolic domestic worker figure. The weight of black women's oppression was too heavy for one character to carry. Thus, the places where "Black Hope" fails are also those that expose Wright's developing theory of domestic labor, one that takes on the specificities of race and gender, sexual desire, sex work, and sexual violence.

This chapter considers Wright's domestic workers, those who emerged from the shadow of Bessie Mears: Aunt Sue, the washerwoman of "Bright and Morning Star," Maud (Eva), Clara, and Ollie, of "Black Hope," and finally, Carl "Lucy" Owens, the protagonist of the radio play "Man of All Work." These characters, when placed at the center rather than the footnotes of analyses of Wright's work after *Native Son*, reveal the author's introspective process. The development of his thinking also happened alongside Wright's very public collaboration and then break with the American Communist Party. As was also the case for Cooper, Attaway, and Childress, a theoretical approach to domestic and/or sexual labor as wage labor required one to stretch the limits of contemporary analyses, which, for Wright, proved extremely difficult.

### **Understanding the Parameters of Richard Wright's Marxism**

Unlike the other writers examined in this dissertation, Richard Wright was a prominent figure in the CPUSA, which he joined in 1933 after participating in the CP-sponsored John Reed Club, a collective of leftist artists and writers. Several years later, in 1944, Wright very publicly broke with the Party, an occasion marked by the publication of his now famous essay, "I Tried to be a Communist," in *Atlantic Monthly*. Before

analyzing Wright's theorization of women and labor, it is necessary to establish the parameters of his Marxism.

Wright's motivations for joining the Party were both political and cultural. He admired the Party's aim of liberating the working class, and found an opportunity in the Party's publications to pursue his writing career. He was initially cynical and did not believe in the sincerity of white radicals as it related to the liberation of black people. The pull of black nationalism, for Wright, was too strong to abandon. He believed that "the nationalistic character of the Negro people is unmistakable. Psychologically this nationalism is reflected in the whole of Negro culture, and especially in folklore." Wright's commitment to examining the psychological impact of racism underlies his fictional meditations on black women's labor. In the drafts of "Black Hope" the main character takes (or is forced to take in another version) arsenic in order to lighten her skin so she can pass for white. This torments the character throughout the novel, which includes the protagonist's internal dialogue, long meditations on her own racial identity and her relationships with other black characters that go on for pages at a time.

In spite of this, Wright knew that black liberation could not be achieved under capitalism. Marxism, he believed, was a starting point. In his words, "After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of his will to live."<sup>148</sup> It was through literature and black folk culture that this complete social theory could be developed. This is where Wright found his purpose, to give the CP's abstract proletariat language and meaning by depicting ordinary black working people in his fiction. Wright's work on domestic laborers was where he made

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<sup>148</sup> Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *The Richard Wright Reader*, edited by Ellen Wright and Michael Fabre (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 41-44.

space to include gender as an integral part of “planting flesh on the bones” of the skeleton of society laid bare by Marxist theory. He stated, “I wanted to be a Communist, but my kind of Communist.” Wright committed himself to solidarity with the Party’s goals, but ultimately could not achieve artistic freedom from within its confines.<sup>149</sup>

To define Wright’s Marxism, I turn to Cedric Robinson’s examination of the author in the final chapter of his 1982 monograph, *Black Marxism*. In it, Robinson argues that Wright’s collected works “constitute studies of Marxism as a theory of history and social revolution, of the social and psychological development of the American working class, and of the historical and ideological development of American Blacks.” Robinson confirms that even Wright’s nationalism was based on a “materialistic dialectic,” as illustrated by the history he narrates in *12 Million Black Voices*. Robinson continues:

In his criticism of Marxism, then, Wright was not entirely rejecting it but was attempting to locate it, to provide a sense of the boundaries of its authority. By itself it was insufficiently prescient of the several levels of collective consciousness. As an *ideology*, he recognized that it had never transcended its origins. It remained an ideology *for* the working classes rather than an ideology *of* the working classes...He had not abandoned the conception of the relations of production as a basis for the critique of capitalist society nor the importance of the class relations of production. Still, the critique of capitalism was only the beginning of the struggle for liberation.<sup>150</sup>

Following the publication of *Native Son*, Wright imagined this “ideology of the working classes” from the perspective of domestic workers. Because Wright completed much of “Black Hope” while he was still a member of the party, this chapter’s analysis recognizes Wright’s materialist approach to gender and women’s labor as evidence of his developing theory. But it is also important not to overstate the influence of the CP on Wright’s

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<sup>149</sup> Wright, “I Tried to Be a Communist,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1944, 51.

<sup>150</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 292.

fiction. After all, his class consciousness predates his membership, and the basis for his intellectual meditation on women's oppression was also developed through his own lens as a man of Southern black working-class origins who was raised by two women.

Wright's materialist approach to black women's labor is best evidenced by the analysis of domestic work he made in *12 Million Black Voices*. Wright's history is an important introduction to an examination of "Black Hope" and an example of the author's own commentary on the research he conducted for the unpublished novel.

Wright begins, "In the main, we black folk earn our living in two ways in the Northern cities: we work as domestics or laborers. Our work inside the homes of the Bosses of the Buildings does not differ greatly from the work we did in the homes of the Lords of the Land."<sup>151</sup> Wright's conception of the "Lords of the Land" and the "Bosses of the Buildings" allowed the author to draw a direct relationship between domestic work and industrial labor, as well as enslavement and wage labor. The latter was an important metaphor for black Marxist theorists like James Allen and C.L.R. James. Allen, in his 1936 monograph *The Negro Question in the United States*, argues, "The economic slave survivals make themselves felt in all phases of southern economy, not only in agriculture but also in forms of labor exploitation sometimes taken over by industry."<sup>152</sup>

Wright, James, and Allen all based their representation of the black proletariat on Hegel's "Master Slave Dialectic," which he outlined in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In it, Hegel states, "The lord is the consciousness that exists *for itself* no longer merely the notion of such a consciousness. Rather, it is a consciousness existing *for itself* which is

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<sup>151</sup> Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1941), 117.

<sup>152</sup> James Allen, *The Negro Question in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 57.

mediated with itself through another consciousness, i.e. through a consciousness whose nature it is to be bound up with an existence that is independent, or thinghood in general.” In other words, the master cannot exist without the slave. His identity as “Lord” is dependent upon that of the servant. Hegel continues by arguing that “what the lord does to the other, he also does to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other.” Neither the master nor servant possesses an independent self-consciousness. Their knowledge of self is wrapped up in the identity of the other. Yet, as Hegel explains, “Through work...the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is... Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own.” In defining this reciprocal relationship between the master and slave rather than a one-sided exchange of power, Hegel opens up the possibilities for resistance on the part of the slave, and, for Wright, James, and Allen, the descendants of slaves, the black proletariat. This resistance is dependent upon the self-consciousness of the slave as a laborer.

Richard Wright, in his research notes for “Black Hope,” adapts Hegel’s dialectic to black women through the metaphorical use of the Depression-era “slave markets” exposed by Baker and Cooke. He even considered “Slave Market” and “Slave to Whites” as alternative titles for the novel before settling on “Black Hope.”<sup>153</sup> Wright states in his notes, “Slave Market is to be used in a varied [sic] and symbolic sense.” He then outlines these various uses in a list:

1. Slave market, the status of women in society.

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<sup>153</sup> Ulin, 153; Fabre, 239.

2. Slave Market, the compulsive role of the outcast, the personality which must fight to reenter society, the psychological outcast.
3. The domestic work, as the most common and hard symbol of it.
4. The wife and mother, slave of biology.
5. The woman (as man), a slave of the mental and physical [sic] limits of life.
6. Social unit, the voluntary union for living, (which in the psychological outcast assumes a form of struggle to conform which in other is done involuntary [sic]).<sup>154</sup>

Here, Wright momentarily abandons the racial specificities of domestic work in the interest of using the symbolic “slave market” as a metaphor for the social and biological aspects of women’s oppression. Numbers five and six even suggest the “slave market” as a symbol of the human condition, but one that replaces the oft used “man” as a representation of humankind with “woman.”

Elsewhere in his notes Wright rewrote Hegel’s dialectic concerning self-consciousness and enslavement as another iteration of his symbolic use of the “slave market.” He stated:

There is yet another angle from which the term SLAVE MARKET can be used: that is, the slave of the cult of self which in term gives those who have denounced self the opportunity to enslave those who are slaves...Also, those who take others, that is, the slaves of self in slavery, in turn, become them-slaves [sic], the slaves of the slaves...A middle road, the right to freedom with others, acting with others, an idea which has not yet been adequately expressed or dramatized.<sup>155</sup>

When used as a blueprint for understanding “Black Hope,” and taking into consideration the role that colorism plays in the novel, to “denounce self,” as Wright explained, is also to denounce one’s blackness. Once the protagonist of “Black Hope” lightens her skin, she oscillates between blackness and whiteness, as well as “Master” (one who employs domestic workers) and “Slave,” (one who works as a domestic worker). Wright uses her

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<sup>154</sup> Wright, “Black Hope” Notes, box 19, folder 302, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

internal dialogue to flesh out Hegel's dialectic as it existed in the mind of one woman, thereby heightening the exchange of power that happens between domestic and employer while deemphasizing the sense of absolute power and victimhood that characterized mainstream media coverage and government reports of the women who populated the "slave markets." Lastly, the presence of the domestic worker's union at the conclusion of Wright's unpublished manuscript, allowed the author to create the "middle road" or "the right to freedom with others." In this case, the freedom to join in the larger struggle of the proletariat and enjoy the rights granted to all other workers. Wright concludes this section by saying that this "middle road" had not yet been "adequately expressed or dramatized." Thus Wright fulfills his promise to "plant flesh on the bones" of Hegel's dialectic through a fictional reimagining of domestic worker resistance.

This is not something Wright could accomplish in his historical examination of black women's labor, as it appears in *12 Million Black Voices*. It is something that could only be accomplished in the literary form, which underscores the importance of narrative to the theorization of domestic labor during this period. In fact, Wright devotes only a small section of his materialist history to the particularities of black women workers. He states, "In the Black Belts of the northern cities, our women are the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives...Surrounding our black women are many almost insuperable barriers: they are black, they are women, they are workers, they are triply anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts."<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> It is worth noting that Wright's adaptation of Marxist ideology prefigures Communist theorist Claudia Jones' concept of the "superexploitation" of black women that she outlined in her 1949 *Political Affairs* article entitled "An End to the Neglect of Negro Women!" Her analysis mirrors the triple oppression (gender, race, and class) that Wright outlines here.



In addition to their oppression as workers, Wright asserts, black women must also contend with the fact that “they are sold, by white men as well as by black, for sex purposes.” To cope, Wright argues, black women cling to Christianity and a life beyond the boundaries of the modern world. This disassociation from the real world within which black women live and work, he laments, is a part of the tragedy that is black women’s lives.”<sup>157</sup>

**“Bright and Morning Star”: Aunt Sue and the Theology of the Communism<sup>158</sup>**

In a letter to his agent about his plans for “Black Hope” Wright explained that his new novel would be “a dramatic picture of woman from feudalism to fascism.” Although Wright was clearly influenced by Hegel’s dialectic and its relationship to the CP’s “Negro Question,” the lives of black southerners do not figure prominently in the novel. In this vein, Aunt Sue, the protagonist of Wright’s short story “Bright and Morning Star” serves as the historical ancestor and Southern counterpart of Wright’s genealogy of domestic workers. Richard Wright intended for “Bright and Morning Star” to appear in the first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* but it was rejected by Harper and Brothers. He published the story instead in the 1938 issue of *New Masses*. Two years later Wright gave the rights to the story to the Earl Browder Defense Fund. The story was then rereleased by the organization and International Publishers and was eventually included in the second edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children*.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 131-135.

<sup>158</sup> The analytical framework for this section stems from several conversations with my friend and colleague Chris Randall, who shared with me his perspective on black liberation theology’s class consciousness.

<sup>159</sup> Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 266; Fabre, 220-221.

“Bright and Morning Star” opens in a rural southern town with its protagonist Aunt Sue deep in thought, and singing. The narrator explains, “She was thinking of nothing now, her hands followed a lifelong ritual of toil...She was deep in the midst of her work when a song rose up out of the far off days of her childhood and broke through half-parted lips.” Then she begins to sing, “Hes the Lily of the Valley, the Bright n Mawnin Star/Hes the Fairest of Ten Thousan t mah soul...”<sup>160</sup> The song from which the story derives its title is a reference to the biblical book of Revelations and Jesus, “the offspring of David and the bright and morning star.”<sup>161</sup> The context for the song’s inspiration is the condemnation of the unjust and the heavenly reward of the righteous. The righteous, in “Bright and Morning Star,” are the Communists. The condemned, as we shall see, are the police as agents of capitalism and the violence of white supremacy.

Aunt Sue’s song is meant to comfort her as she laments the loss of her son, Sug, who is serving a long jail sentence as the result of the anti-communist campaign that underlies the storyline. At the onset of the narrative, she sings to quell the fear that her second son, Johnny-Boy, will become the campaign’s next casualty, since he had not yet returned from an underground meeting. The narrator continues, “She ironed again, faster now, as if she felt the more she engaged her body in work the less she would think.”<sup>162</sup> On the surface it seems that Aunt Sue epitomizes the “tragedy of black women’s lives” that Wright outlines in *12 Million Black Voices*. She is engaged in the mindless toil of domestic work, while escaping the corporeal world in the interest of finding favor in a spiritual one. Yet, in spite of the narrator’s insistence that Aunt Sue was “thinking of

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<sup>160</sup> Wright, “Bright and Morning Star,” in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, 222.

<sup>161</sup> Rev. 22:16 KJV.

<sup>162</sup> Wright, “Bright and Morning Star,” 223.

nothing,” she is clearly tormented by her thoughts, which are narrated in detail and then disrupted by her continued singing.

Moreover, Aunt Sue’s toil as a laundress would have been anything but mindless. According to historian Tera Hunter, laundry work was more difficult than any other form of domestic labor, especially in the South “where the adoption of technological advances lagged and manual laborers predominated.” In this region, Hunter continues, even “poor whites sent out part or all of their wash to black women.” These women typically worked out of their own homes six days a week and delivered clean clothes to their employers on Sunday. “Washerwomen made their own soap from lye, starch from wheat bran and wash tubs from beer barrels cut in half,” Hunter explains. “Once the clothes were dry, several heavy irons were heated on the stove and used alternately. After each use, the irons were rubbed with beeswax and wiped clean to minimize the build up of residue.”<sup>163</sup> Though the flexibility of laundry work is what allowed Aunt Sue to support her sons’ work in the Party, the demands of the job are a physical symptom of class oppression. Aunt Sue may also be another manifestation of Wright’s Hegelian dialectic. The backbreaking drudgery of her work blurs the line between the “Lords of the Land” and the “Bosses of the Buildings.”

Wright’s decision to make Aunt Sue a washerwoman is not accidental. Historically, the washerwoman had been a strong figure black literature. Aunt Sue strongly resembles the central figure of a 1925 Langston Hughes poem, “A Song to a Negro Wash-Woman.” The poem concludes:

And for you,  
O Singing wash-woman,

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<sup>163</sup> Hunter, 56-57.

For you, singing little brown woman,  
 Singing strong black woman,  
 Singing tall yellow woman,  
 Arms deep in white suds,  
 Soul clean,  
 Clothes clean,—  
 For you I have many songs to make  
 Could I but find the words.<sup>164</sup>

The same year that Hughes published his ode to the washerwoman, a similar poem by Anne Spencer appeared in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* anthology entitled, "Lady, Lady." In it, the narrator states:

Lady, Lady, I saw your hands,  
 Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,  
 Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,  
 Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub.<sup>165</sup>

The washerwoman was clearly significant to the elevation of folk culture that characterized the Harlem Renaissance.

Carter G. Woodson, who, in 1930, feared the diminishing significance of the washerwoman in the black cultural lexicon as the visibility of the black, male industrial worker increased, published an essay in *The Journal of Negro History* entitled, "The Negro Washerwoman: A Vanishing Figure." Woodson's essay is considered one of the most important black scholarly treatments of domestic labor, and is often placed alongside Esther Cooper's thesis as an essential historical examination of domestic work for contemporary scholars of black women's labor. The essay is a useful reference for understanding Aunt Sue. Woodson elevates the washerwoman as the cornerstone of black history and culture beginning with slavery. He states, "She was all but the beast of burden

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<sup>164</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), 42.

<sup>165</sup> Anne Spencer, "Lady, Lady" in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 148.

of the aristocratic slave-holder, and in freedom she continued at this hard labor as a bread winner of the family. This is the Negro Washerwoman.” Woodson makes the “beast of burden” the highest type of all selfless heroes.

Like Wright, Woodson connects slave labor with post-bellum domestic wage work in order to construct a history of the black political economy. Woodson asserts the washerwoman as singularly responsible for black survival. He continues:

And why should the Negro washerwoman be thus considered? Because she gave her life as a sacrifice for others. Whether as a slave or a free woman of color of the antebellum period or as a worker in the ranks of an emancipated people, her life without exception was one of unrelenting toil for those whom she loved, in the history of no people has her example been paralleled, in no other figure in the Negro group can be found a type measuring up to the level of this philanthropic spirit.<sup>166</sup>

For Woodson, the washerwoman becomes an almost allegorical figure that represents the black past. In connecting Aunt Sue to Southern black Communism, Wright gives the washerwoman a renewed significance as a bridge between feudalism and industrialization, enslavement and the promise of freedom through the destruction of capitalism.

It is the sacrifice of Aunt Sue’s labor that, in part, sustains the Party. The story continues, “While shoving the iron a cluster of toiling days returned; days of washing and ironing to feed Johnny-Boy and Sug so they could do party work; days of carrying a hundred pounds of white folks’ clothes upon her head across fields sometimes wet and sometimes dry.” At the onset of the narrative Aunt Sue repeatedly sings, irons, and remembers. Eventually, she reflects on her own genealogy, which she constructs using the juxtaposition of labor and Christian faith. Speaking of Aunt Sue’s mother, the

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<sup>166</sup> Carter G. Woodson, “The Negro Washerwoman: A Vanishing Figure,” *The Journal of Negro History* 15.3 (1930), 269-270.

narrator states, “Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word.”<sup>167</sup>

Her inherited faith causes Aunt Sue to “love hardship with a bitter pride.” But her sons’ membership in the Party created an abrupt shift in her theology. She explains, “And day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision, and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace.” Aunt Sue then creates her own biblical metaphor, one that replaces Christianity’s promise of freedom in the afterlife with a promised liberation through Communism. The narrator continues, “The wrong and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross, the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection, and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went.”<sup>168</sup>

Aunt Sue’s new vision is the most frequently referenced passage from the narrative by critics of proletarian literature. Barbara Foley considers Aunt Sue’s conception of her new grace a conversion of her faith from Christianity to Communism.<sup>169</sup> This is based, in part, on Wright’s critique of black religion in his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” which appeared in *New Challenge* in 1938, the same year as the writing of “Bright and Morning Star.” In it, Wright asserts black religion as “the archaic morphology of Christian salvation.”<sup>170</sup> It is important to note, however, that Aunt

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<sup>167</sup> Wright, “Bright and Morning Star,” 223.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>169</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 208.

<sup>170</sup> Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in *Richard Wright Reader*, eds. Ellen Wright and Michael Fabre (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978), 39.

Sue's Christianity is but one specific black theological interpretation, one that compels the believer to "love hardship" in the world in order to gain access to freedom in the next. This would have certainly characterized the Seventh Day Adventist beliefs of Wright's grandmother.

Black liberation theology, alternatively, is defined by contemporary theologian and author of several seminal texts on the relationship between black religion and political resistance, James Cone, as a "nationalist, race-oriented institution whose identity is inseparably connected with the struggle for freedom in this life *as well as* the eternal freedom believed to be coming in God's eschatological future" (emphasis mine). During the 1930s, the labor movement was heavily supported by black churches in industrial centers like Detroit and Chicago. Contemporary scholars like Cone and Cornel West rely on historical materialism in order to contextualize the history of black liberation theology. In their view, black theologians like Howard Thurman, who talked often about class consciousness from the pulpit during the 1930s and 40s "indigenized Marxism," to use Cone's words, and reinterpreted theology through a Marxist inspired, class-conscious lens.<sup>171</sup>

It is this indigenized Marxism that would have characterized the ideology of the southern Communists depicted in "Bright and Morning Star." According to Robin Kelley, "The prophetic Christian tradition, so characteristic of the Afro-American experience has historically contained a vehement critique of oppression. Ironically, this radical, prophetic tradition of Christianity was a major factor in drawing blacks into the

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<sup>171</sup> James Cone, "The Black Church and Marxism: What do They Have to Say to Each Other," (The Institute for Democratic Socialism, April 1980), 6-10; Howard Thurman, "Good News for the Underprivileged," in *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*, eds. Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York: 1941), 687.

Communist Party and its mass organizations.”<sup>172</sup> The black church was poised to be a vehicle through which class consciousness and Marxist frameworks could be disseminated to the black masses. This must have been particularly meaningful for domestic workers who worked long hours in isolation. Church was one place where these women could connect with other members of the black working class.

Taking his argument one step further, Kelley explains, “Furthermore, not only were most black Communists in Alabama churchgoing Christians; for quite some time, Communists in Montgomery opened all their meetings with a prayer.”<sup>173</sup> There is nothing in Wright’s story to suggest that his fictional southern black Communists would open their meetings by thanking God, but this relationship between black Communists and the church reveals the flawed argument that Aunt Sue’s conversion is a replacement of her Christian faith with a faith in the CP. Aunt Sue’s significance lies in her inability to discard her faith even as it is challenged by the violence of racism and capitalism. As the narrator explains, the past and the present were “merged in her, while toiling under a strange star for a new freedom the old songs would slip from her lips with their beguiling sweetness.”<sup>174</sup>

The dichotomy of black religious expression and Marxism is also a part of a larger framework that places black nationalism and Marxist theory in opposition. Often, black nationalism is associated with black capitalism and black ownership of the means of production, as advocated by Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement

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<sup>172</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “Comrades, Praise Gawd for Lenin and Them!”: Ideology and Culture among Black Communists in Alabama, 1930-1945,” *Science and Society* 52.1 (1988): 61-2.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Wright, “Bright and Morning Star,” 226.



Association during the early twentieth century. But the discourse surrounding the Negro Question and its “Black Belt Thesis” leaves open the possibility for a class-conscious black nationalism. Wright writes in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” “And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness. It means a nationalism that knows...its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America.” Returning to his Hegelian dialectic, the author argues that the reason for this nationalism “lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.”<sup>175</sup> Wright’s dual focus on Communism and folk culture in “Bright and Morning Star” delves into this possibility for a new and different nationalism rooted in the juxtaposition of Marx and black theology.

The remainder of the story cements Aunt Sue’s image as the sacrificial washerwoman venerated by Woodson. While awaiting Johnny-Boy’s return, she is visited by his girlfriend and fellow Communist, Reva, who warns Aunt Sue that “somebody done turned Judas,” and has infiltrated the Party in order to inform the police who its members are. Aunt Sue is immediately suspicious of the white members of the Party and fears that her son’s trust of these folks would lead to certain death. She states, “Ah knows ever black man n woman in this parta the county... There ain none of em that *coulda* tol! The folks Ah know just don open they dos n ast death t walk in.”<sup>176</sup> Aunt Sue’s distrust of an interracial proletariat reflects Wright’s inability to easily discard black-nationalist ideology. As Foley proposes, though “Bright and Morning Star” is the most explicitly Marxist and pro-Communist of Wright’s fiction, “the felt requirement to

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<sup>175</sup> Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 42.

<sup>176</sup> Wright, “Bright and Morning Star,” 234.

do justice to both the class-based and nationalism aspects of the party's antiracist position—impelled the writer to devise rhetorical strategies for exposing the reader to quite divergent and often competing lines of argument."<sup>177</sup> In this sense, "Bright and Morning Star" ultimately considers whether or not Marxism and nationalism can exist simultaneously, though the tragedy of the story's conclusion leaves this unresolved.

Although Johnny-Boy scoffs at his mother's nationalist sentiment, it is clear, as Richard Yarborough points out in his introduction to *Uncle Tom's Children*, "that her mother-wit and well justified suspicions of whites prove to be her most reliable tools in her attempt to safeguard an interracial group of local Communists." This, Yarborough continues, "demonstrates Wright's refusal to reduce the relationships between culture and ideology between race and class to simple formulas."<sup>178</sup> Aunt Sue's suspicions prove correct as the story reaches its climax. Following Reva's visit, the sheriff and his white cronies come to Aunt Sue's in search of Johnny-Boy. Aunt Sue defiantly refuses to cooperate and disclose the names of Party members. As a consequence, she is violently beaten.

After several hours, Booker, a white stoolpigeon pretending to be a member of the Party, discovers Aunt Sue's trampled body. He compels Aunt Sue to tell him the names of Party members so that he can warn them of the impending threat of anti-communist violence. Against her better judgment and out of pure exhaustion, "a moment of weakness that came from too much strength," Aunt sue complies. Soon, she learns that her reservations about Booker, whose presence is described as "a challenge to her right to

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<sup>177</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 207-212.

<sup>178</sup> Yarborough, *Uncle Tom's Children*, xxviii.

exist upon the earth,” are true.<sup>179</sup> Booker, Reva tells her, is the Party’s Judas. Aunt Sue then devises a plan to right her wrong, to sacrifice herself in order to save the Party. In doing so, Aunt Sue is saving the organization from total destruction by anti-communism, but also from the poison of white racism, which, if allowed to continue, would also destroy the Party.

Aunt Sue derives the strength to make her sacrifice from God. In her words, “Gawd in Heaven, Ahma go lika nigger woman with mah windin sheet t git mah dead son!”<sup>180</sup> She plays on her presumed deference as a black washerwoman who has been beaten into submission. Aunt Sue knows that to leave the house with her winding sheet would be a symbol of her resignation that white supremacy had taken her son’s life. But hidden under the sheet is a gun, which suggests the real intent behind Aunt Sue’s plan. The winding sheet, in which a corpse is wrapped for burial, is a subtle but significant relic of Aunt Sue’s Christianity. It is, historically, an important African American funeral rite and a symbol of the Resurrection as all that remained in Christ’s tomb. At the same time, the sheet itself also represents Aunt Sue’s labor as a washerwoman. She sacrifices herself as a mother but also as a member of the laboring class.

After walking for some time in the rain Aunt Sue discovers her son in the midst of a violent interrogation by the sheriff. When Booker arrives on the scene she shoots him. The police shoot Johnny-Boy as retribution, forcing Aunt Sue to witness her son’s death before suffering the same fate. But death for Aunt Sue is represented as something she chooses. The end of the story portrays Aunt Sue as a martyr for the class struggle, a

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<sup>179</sup> Wright, “Bright and Morning Star,” 242-251.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

Christ-like figure who gives her life, like the allegorical washerwomen of Woodson's essay, for those she loves.

Aunt Sue's repeated sacrifice of self and safety is what makes her such a compelling and sympathetic character. Her sense of maternal protection coupled with her defiance of white supremacist rule make her both familiar and exemplary. This image would have been familiar to both Wright and his readers. Considering the influence of Wright's mother and grandmother on his life, the nurturing, yet defiant, washerwoman is a natural starting point for Wright's exploration of the experiences of domestic workers. His research, however, completely disrupted this familiar image. Wright's later writing on black women's labor would contain a shocking amount of realism. The protagonist of his unpublished novel bears no resemblance to Aunt Sue in any way.

#### **“Black Hope” Version One: The Exploitation and Resistance of Ollie Knight**

Considering the breadth and depth of Wright's analysis of the Southern working poor during his early career, it is peculiar that he would choose to make Eva, the protagonist of the first and longest draft of “Black Hope,” an upwardly mobile Harlemit. Eva's college degree and her employment as a social worker place her squarely within the black professional class. As the story opens, the reader finds that Eva is in the process of voluntarily lightening her skin so she can cross the color line and free herself from the limited positions afforded to black women socially and economically. In spite of the objections of her lover Freddie, Eva goes through with her plan. Once Eva has completed her transformation, she begins to look for employment and quickly learns that her inability to provide references that would not reveal her true identity meant that opportunities are just as limited. While reading the paper she comes across a classified

advertisement written on behalf of Cleveland Spencer, an aging white invalid, for a head housekeeper. Out of desperation Eva immediately heads to the home of Henry Beach, Spencer's attorney, introduces herself as Maud Hampton, and convinces him to hire her.<sup>181</sup>

The absurdity of Eva's (hereafter referred to as Maud) situation is an interesting backdrop for the political commentary of this early portion of the novel. Much of this commentary is developed through Maud's internal dialogue, which exists in direct contrast to her aspirations as a "ex-colored woman". During her transformation, Maud poetically ponders her existence as a black woman worker in a passage that echoes *12 Million Black Voices*. The narrator states:

She was poor. She was black. She was a woman. She had to work for a living. She was ill. Her back was bent beneath those five burdens. Those riches, those warm smug days, that moist dampness were not for her. Only hot winds, filled with dry sand, were hers, winds that blew always through the desert of her days, blew without ceasing.

These introspective meditations go on for pages at a time. Maud ponders her gender, race, religion, and economic status. Her critique of these various political systems is quite nuanced and on occasion politically radical. For instance, concerning gender and marriage, the narrator explains that Maud "shrank and hardened at the men who wanted her and looked upon her as someone to cook their meals, wash their clothes, bear their children and be bed-partners for them at night. Instinctively, she felt a deeper worth in herself; that was not to be her destiny."<sup>182</sup> In spite of the radical politics of Maud's innermost thoughts, instead of feeling comfort in the solidarity of community with her fellow women and/or black workers, she escapes her circumstances by distancing herself

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<sup>181</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," box 19, folders 302 and 303, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>182</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," Box 19, folder 302, Richard Wright Papers.

from them, beginning with the process of “becoming white.” Furthermore, like that of the master of Hegel’s dialectic, Maud’s identity depends on the dichotomy between herself and the other women (and men) whom she supervises as Spencer’s head housekeeper.

At Spencer’s, Maud gets right to work hiring new staff. Her first employee is her lover Freddie, whom she brings on as Spencer’s chauffeur. When the reader is introduced to Freddie early in the narrative, he is reading a novel about the Chinese Revolution written by French novelist and philosopher André Malraux. Freddie is clearly a brilliant intellectual. This, coupled with his work with black Left organizations like the National Negro Congress, makes his relationship with someone as self-centered as Maud almost unbelievable; not to mention his decision to remain her lover after she begins passing for white and then work for her. To add to this implausibility, Maud also hires Freddie’s mother, Clara, as a cook, though the elderly woman is completely unaware that her new employer is actually Eva, her son’s romantic companion. While the circumstances that bring these characters together could turn into a comedy of errors, Wright never completely fleshes out their relationships. Freddie and Clara quickly become characters who function as foils to Maud’s newfound identity and living manifestations of her former life.

Maud’s last, and most important, new hire is Ollie Knight, who migrated from Natchez, Mississippi (Wright’s birthplace) with the help of an agency run by Mr. Downy. Ollie’s birthplace connects her to Wright’s mother Ella, who worked as a domestic laborer after her husband left her alone to care for two sons.<sup>183</sup> Through Ollie, and her

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<sup>183</sup> Debbie Levy, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 16.

engagement with the Domestic Worker's Union at the conclusion of the novel, Wright could imagine a different life for Ella, one that did not leave her children hungry.

Although Ollie's migration is a minor detail in this version of narrative (as opposed to the centrality of migration in Attaway's novels), female migrant laborers were an important part of Wright's own journey from South to North. According to Wright biographer Hazel Rowley, shortly after the author moved to Chicago in 1927, he found community with Southern women in the city who worked as domestics.<sup>184</sup> Migrating women also made up a noticeable portion of Wright's interviewees. One of Wright's male informants, who also worked as a household laborer, explains succinctly:

Then there are the young girls that come up from the South. There is a fellow who goes to these girls and asks them: "Do you want to go up North and make some money in domestic work?" And, of course, they readily assent. They expect to get domestic work, but there are no jobs. These fellows want to get these girls to be prostitutes... If she does get a job, it will be for some cheap Jew who desires a green girl from the South who will give her \$5 a week; and, if she works there for about two or three years, she will probably meet other domestic workers and become wise to herself.<sup>185</sup>

The agency is the driving force behind Ollie's oppression, but for most of the first version of "Black Hope," its violence remains an allusion. It appears based on the organization and pagination of Wright's drafts and research notes that his extensive investigation of these organizations didn't occur until after Wright had written several hundred pages of the novel's first draft. For this reason, the second draft of "Black Hope" (to be discussed in the forthcoming section) places the agency at the center of the novel's conflict.

Mr. Downy's agency, during this early part of the novel's preliminary draft, is clearly rooted in Wright's own limited knowledge and secondhand stories from his

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<sup>184</sup> Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 61.

<sup>185</sup> Wright, "Black Hope", box 21, folder 332, Richard Wright Papers.

comrades in Chicago and later New York. The same is true for Maud, who hires Ollie with an understanding of the system within which she participates. In one of her long internal monologues, she reveals that she “had heard tell of tales which recounted the experiences of young Negro girls who were lured from small towns and farms in the South to come North to do domestic work...When they reached the North they would be hidden in homes, forbidden to go out until they had been safely placed in employment.”<sup>186</sup> Maud justifies her participation in this exploitation by observing the “utter simplicity” of the young woman. But Maud’s conscience begins to haunt her. Ollie becomes an outward manifestation of Maud’s secret life. Ollie is everything that Maud sought to escape by passing for white: “She was poor. She was black. She was a woman. She had to work for a living.”

The mental anguish that Ollie’s presence causes Maud is also the point at which Wright’s Hegelian dialectic becomes clear in the novel. Maud denies her self, her blackness, and takes the opportunity to “enslave those who are slaves.” Yet, she relies on Ollie to maintain her illusion. According to Ulin, “Indeed, Maud believes that her ability to pass as white depends on her sustained efforts to distance herself from Ollie and all that she represents.”<sup>187</sup>

Nearly halfway through the novel’s extended draft, Ollie begins to confront Maud regarding her wages. The impetus for the initial confrontation is a conversation with Maud’s lover, Freddie, whose engagement with the National Negro Congress would have given him an acute awareness of the plight of domestic workers. As we saw in this dissertation’s opening chapter, the NNC authored a resolution at its inaugural convention

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, box 19, folders 306, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>187</sup> Ulin, 164.



in 1936 that called for a national movement to organize domestic workers. The confrontation between Maud and Ollie also triggers Maud's feelings of isolation. "Maud was hotly angry with her," the narrator explains, "yet she knew that she herself...had sprung up from the environment which had produced this bashful and shamed girl. And because she knew it, she wanted to drive her away from her, for she seemed to live before her as a sort of caricature, mocking her."<sup>188</sup>

Though Maud forbids Ollie from discussing her wages with other workers at the mansion, she, like Aunt Sue, is defiant. "Here and throughout the text," Ulin asserts, "Ollie consistently chooses the welfare of the community over self-interest, speech over silence."<sup>189</sup> When asked by Maud why she defies her by continuing to discuss the matter of wages with Freddie, Ollie insists on her right to speak with him because "He's my own color...I can always talk to my folks ma'am." Thus, Ollie's sense of solidarity and community is both racial and class-based. Although it is unusual that Freddie would take the job at the Spencer mansion, his relationship to Ollie is an important beginning of Ollie's newfound sense of self-consciousness as a worker and sense of solidarity with other members of her black working-class community.

When threatened by Maud with the loss of her job if she does not "obey," Ollie tells her employer, "I'm your servant, but I ain't your slave!"<sup>190</sup> Wright's inspiration for using enslavement as a metaphor in this instance may have come from his interview with Dora Jones, then head of the Domestic Workers' union local 149 of New York, and a former informant of Cooper's. At the conclusion of the transcription, in a section entitled

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<sup>188</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," box 21, folder 332, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>189</sup> Ulin, 166-167.

<sup>190</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," box 19, folder 307, Richard Wright Papers.

“Psychological Results,” Jones states, “they have to be a laundress, a good cook, a nurse, know how to take care of a child and at the same time, she must be able to prepare a palatable meal and clean a home not forgetting the corners and wait at the table. It’s impossible for a household worker to do all this without becoming a slave to the whole business.” Similarly, a flyer for the union included in Wright’s notes concludes, “Do not be a slave because you do housework. Be wise. Organize.”

Ollie’s rebellion reaches its climax when it is revealed that she has been sexually accosted and then raped by Mr. Downy. Maud finds the young woman weeping on the porch following a meeting with Spencer’s attorney, Mr. Beach. The woman exclaims that she wants to die and then finally confesses that Mr. Downy had forced her at gunpoint to perform sexual acts with a dog.<sup>191</sup> This horrific scene is adapted from one of Wright’s interviews. His informant recounted, “Sometimes a man wants you to work with him and sometimes it is something else. One time a girl went with a man and he had a dog and a gun. They made her do what they wanted.”<sup>192</sup> From the brief interview transcription, it is unclear whether or not the dog was a part of the abuse the woman encountered or just a strategy used by the men to intimidate her. This makes Wright’s choice to assume the former and then imagine the situation in greater detail significant. Perhaps, like Attaway, Wright depicts violence against women to “jolt bourgeois readers out of their complacency,” as Erin Battat argues. It could also be the case that Wright’s graphic imagery is one way for him to account for his role as a male writer; by using representation as a form of accountability.

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., box 19, folder 309, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>192</sup> Wright, “Black Hope” Notes, box 21, folder 332.

Freddie, who is the only redeeming figure in the novel, allows Wright to take his commitment to gender politics a step further. In a conversation between Maud and Freddie, Wright posits that class consciousness is the only way to resist patriarchal violence. Freddie states, “A few class-conscious women will stand up and fight. But the rest, feeling that their husbands are fighting for their security, will stand by and say nothing and wait, hoping that things will turn out all right.” He tells Maud that the fight for women’s liberation will be led by women like Ollie. In his words, “it will take women working like she works, doing hard and thankless work, under the whims and will of others to revolt. They are so situated in this system that their fight for their rights will be a fight in defense of all women.”<sup>193</sup> Here Wright explicitly makes domestic workers the crux of political liberation at the point where several movements converge. Black, working-class women, he suggests, will lead the struggle for the liberation of women of all classes. The dichotomy that Freddie constructs between working-class and middle-class women, suggests that housewives, dependent on the protection of their husbands, are the most in need of liberating.

Although Freddie is a politically active *man*, and, at the very least, sympathetic to Marxism if not Marxist, he creates space for women like Ollie, domestic laborers, to lead the movement against capitalism. Although Wright was insistent that he was not writing a piece of “feminist propaganda,” it is curious that the author would include such an explicitly feminist male character in “Black Hope.” Nearly eight hundred pages into the novel’s first draft, this is the first time that Wright approaches his intention to address the

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<sup>193</sup> Wright, “Black Hope,” box 20, folder 310, Richard Wright Papers.

universality of women's oppression across lines of race.<sup>194</sup> It is important to remember, however, that Wright did not complete his extensive research for the novel until after he had written more than half of the first draft, which contained almost a thousand pages. It may have been the interviews, which would have been a rare and intimate look into the plight of domestic workers, that created a sense of urgency on the part of the author to tackle the issue of sexism more directly. This may also explain why Wright does not foreground the narrative's feminist politics earlier in the novel.

This abrupt shift also marks the point at which the novel becomes less consumed with by Maud's inner monologue and includes larger sections of dialogue, mostly between Freddie, Maud, Ollie, and Clara. This also happens shortly after Maud has completed her mission to marry Mr. Spencer, kill him, and then split her inheritance with Mr. Beach, her accomplice. It is through this melodramatic plotline that Clara, Freddie's mother, emerges as a minor but important character in the novel. An older religious woman, like Aunt Sue, she is Maud's spiritual conscience. Once Clara makes her suspicions of Maud's murderous activity known, she begins to taunt Maud with Negro spirituals. She sings softly, "I'm going home, I'm going home/I'm going home, to my father/I'm going to where I'll be loved." Maud begins to see Clara as a "dark and brooding cloud." She knew that the "old black woman carried the burden of her guilt in her heart."<sup>195</sup> While Maud fears the woman's prophetic abilities, Clara develops a close relationship with Ollie. We, the readers, are never privy to the conversations between Ollie and Clara. These exchanges immediately precede Ollie's decision to join the

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<sup>194</sup> Fabre, 189-190.

<sup>195</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," box 20, folder 310, Richard Wright Papers.

Domestic Worker's Union. It is as though Clara represents the ghost of Aunt Sue, passing the baton, the grace of a new vision, to Ollie.

After an intimate conversation with Clara, Ollie appeals to the Local 567 (inspired by the Domestic Workers' Union of New York) for protection from Mr. Downy.<sup>196</sup> She is accompanied by Maud who follows her in an attempt to defend herself for her role in the exploitation of Ollie's labor. The two women are greeted by Bernice Sterling and an interracial group of women who are waiting in the lobby. The narrator observes that Maud "felt as though she had come up for her last judgment upon this earth." At union offices, Maud is confronted by Sterling and a white woman named Bertha Silverman regarding her exploitation of Ollie. Initially Maud diminishes the severity of the allegations and then offers a part of the fortune she inherited after Spencer's death as penance on the condition that Ollie continue to work for her and not take her grievances to court.

Ollie's willingness to testify in court concerning her experiences, particularly her rape, is meant to, according to the women of the union, "give other girls the courage to fight." Testimony was also an important catalyst for a number of Wright's interviewees' engagement with the Domestic Worker's Union. Ollie's resistance is repeatedly rooted in her testimonies about her own exploitation, first to Freddie, then to Clara, and then to Local 567. Testimony is clearly one way to garner visibility and to recruit new members, but also to render the private and concealed exploitation of domestic workers public.

Eventually Maud realizes that she is powerless against Ollie and the Union, and finally donates Mr. Spencer's home to the women as their new headquarters, without any

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<sup>196</sup> Wright's novel is, to my knowledge, the only fictional treatment of a domestic worker's union.

further consideration of Ollie's intention to take her to court. While Local 567's representatives accept Maud's gift, they are insistent that they (and Ollie) are not for sale. Bernice concludes, "For us to fail her would be to kill her. For us to stand by her is to lift her from the dead." After reassuring the women that she intends to fulfill her promise, Maud immediately returns to Spencer's mansion and writes her last will and testament leaving the home, furnishings, and grounds to the Union. Then, during a final conversation with Freddie, Maud confesses to her former lover that she is pregnant with his child before drowning herself in the bathtub.<sup>197</sup>

The novel draws to a close as the women of Local 567 settle into their new headquarters. The women, acting on Ollie's recommendation, hire Freddie to assist them in taking inventory. Ollie recites each item of value in the house from memory. The story concludes as the narrator declares, "Ollie talked on; she had the floor."<sup>198</sup> The conclusion of "Black Hope," Ulin argues, "endorses a hope found in collective action such as that chosen by Ollie rather than the self-interest at the expense of solidarity exhibited by Maud... Collective action in 'Black Hope' represents a way out of enslavement and the isolation forced on domestic servants."<sup>199</sup> The shift in the ownership of the house, from the wealthy to the working class, exhibits an optimism concerning interracial class cooperation that does not exist in the fiction of William Attaway.

## **"Black Hope" Version 2: Maud Wilson, Sexual Violence, and a Renewed**

### **Commitment to Realism**

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<sup>197</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," box 20, folder 311, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ulin, 167.

Once Wright completed his extensive research on the conditions of domestic labor, he began working on a second draft of his unpublished manuscript. This time the narrative begins as Maud, a mulatto woman, enters Ed Basin's employment agency in North Carolina. Mr. Basin offers Maud a job as a driver, accompanying young, unsuspecting women from the South to New York City where they will presumably be placed in domestic employment. He offers the woman ten dollars per girl as commission in addition to a two-hundred dollar advance. This was a very common practice among employment agencies, which made profits off the naïveté of Southern women in search of better economic opportunities by taking their wages as a fee for bringing them up from the South and placing them on jobs.

Wright's notes include an extensive amount of research on agencies like Mr. Basin's in addition to the myriad of stories he collected from migrant women who joined the union after being taken advantage of by Southern agencies. Wright found that New York law mandated that agencies take no more than ten percent of the first month's wages as their compensation. Additionally, they were required to obtain a written contract from the employer and provide the worker with a receipt for fees paid. Since most domestic worker agencies in New York and in the South operated underground, the majority of these institutions did not abide by the law. They frequently demanded as much as an entire month's wages for their services and rarely, if ever, determined whether workers were treated fairly by employers.

To uncover the illicit world of domestic worker agencies, Wright spoke to a man referred to as Mr. G., who worked for one such organization. Mr. G. recounted, "There was a man named Frasier who had a big car, I believe it was a Cadillac, who used to go

down to South Carolina and tell these girls about the riches that they could get...He had connections with a Jewish man, a Mr. Wahlberg, at 950 Fulton St. This man had a clientele of about 250 or more people whom he used to supply with domestic help.” Like most agents, Frasier and his colleague retained the first month’s wages for each woman.

What is compelling about Mr. G.’s testimony is that he confirms what has only been alluded to by other treatments of household workers from the period: the undeniable relationship between domestic and sexual labor. Mr. G. remembered that on Thursday and Sunday nights (the usual days off for domestics), the women would congregate at Frasier’s apartment to drink whiskey and enjoy his Nickelodeon machine. Wright’s informant recalled, “He also had some pimps to get the girls as drunk as possible and then take their money.” Before the end of their second month of employment, Mr. G. explained, the women would usually be dismissed from their jobs and return to Frasier’s looking for further assistance. At this point the women’s last resort would be to rely on the pimps for work as sexual laborers in order to live and eat in this new city where they had no support. Mr. G. recounted, “The pimps seem to be secure [sic] by the one in charge of the house. Usually the proprietor was a sort of guiding spirit for these pimps.”

Immediately following the transcript of Mr. G.’s testimony is a summary of Wright’s own commentary following a visit to an employment bureau. It appears that he was able to locate Mr. Wahlberg and confirm that he was unlicensed and operating “behind the pale of the law.” Wright states, “The profits from this illicit traffic enables operators to purchase and operate fine expensive cars which in turn creates a profound impression on the minds of the girls they deal with. The backward minds of these girls react positively to these symbols of power which their money and degradation make



possible.”<sup>200</sup> This insight into Wright’s personal feelings concerning the “backward minds” of migrant women and the ways in which they are taken advantage of by employment bureaus is a rare occurrence in Wright’s research notes. His visceral reaction may have been what inspired Wright to utilize his artistic license once again to selectively interpret the experiences of his informants in the second draft of “Black Hope.” This time, sexual coercion becomes another horrific scene of sexual violence.

The story continues as Maud, believing that she would be able to deceive Mr. Basin, takes the advance he offers and leaves the agency with no intention of returning. Mr. Basin arrives at her home with the intention of retrieving the now stolen money. Basin brutally rapes Maud and kidnaps her, placing her under the careful watch of his associate Granny Butts.<sup>201</sup> Much like the compulsory sexual labor performed by the women of the agency, Maud’s rape is retribution for Basin’s stolen money. At the same time, the graphic depiction of sexual assault this early in the novel’s second draft suggests that Wright felt he had not done enough to demonstrate the violence endured by black women workers in the first version of his manuscript. Instead of learning of the rape through a retrospective account like the one Ollie gives Maud after her experience with Mr. Downy and the dog, the reader of the novel’s second draft witnesses the sexual assault as it happens. Wright’s literary agent found these scenes of sexual depravity so off-putting that he requested that the author censor the language of the sex scenes before he would send the manuscript to Harper.<sup>202</sup> The author, however, stood firm in his commitment to depicting the severity of the situation of domestic workers. Wright

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<sup>200</sup> Wright, “Black Hope” Notes, box 21, folder 332.

<sup>201</sup> Wright, “Black Hope,” box 21, folder 327, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>202</sup> Ulin, 154

ignored the recommendations of his agent and magnified the sexual violence in the novel's second draft.

Soon the trio, Basin, Maud, and Granny Butts, accompany a group of girls to New York. Although Maud attempts to escape once they arrive she is quickly caught by Granny Butts and, fearing for her life, surrenders to Basin's demands and her new job. In Brooklyn, they all meet Mr. Waldien, Basin's colleague and New York contact. The scene at Waldien's is recreated almost verbatim from Mr. G.'s testimony, which demonstrates the realism that Wright intended for the novel, the same realism that his agent rejected from the previous draft. Mr. Waldien takes one look at Maud and immediately chides Mr. Basin for bringing him a light-skinned girl. Basin explains that he didn't bring her to work, as Waldien interjects that his clients reject women with light skin because of the fear that they will sexually assault their husbands.<sup>203</sup>

In reality the opposite was true. During the Depression, organizations like the YWCA and the Urban League experienced an increase in demand for attractive light-colored women. Some women workers believed that this was sometimes done in cooperation with white women who preferred black mistresses for their husbands to prevent them from sleeping with other white women. One of Wright's informants, when interviewing for a job, was told that the employer preferred lighter women because when dark-skinned women put on a uniform, "all you can see is her teeth."<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Wright, "Black Hope," box 21, folder 327, Richard Wright Papers.

<sup>204</sup> May, *Unprotected Labor*, 152; Anonymous, "We Are Little More Than Slaves," in *Black Women in White America*, Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage Press, 1992), 156; Wright, "Black Hope Notes," box 21, folder 332, Richard Wright Papers.

Because the second version of “Black Hope” is fewer than fifty pages, it never becomes clear why Wright chose to invert this system of colorism in the novel, in spite of his devotion to realism. But Waldien’s aside is the only instance in either draft of the novel where white women emerge as active participants in the exploitation of black women’s labor. Although “the mistress” is a common and important trope in narratives about domestic workers (as illustrated by the work of writers like Childress), it could be argued that Wright eliminates the image of white female employers in an effort to connect the plight of domestic workers to the oppression of all women. Nevertheless, the abrupt ending of the novel’s second draft means we will never know Wright’s plan for this revision of “Black Hope.” It is undeniable, based on the beginning pages of the second version, that Wright felt his work on “Black Hope” was unfinished. But after years of struggling with the novel’s subject matter and several attempts at completing the manuscript, Wright abandoned the project sometime in 1948 after losing all inspiration.

**“Man of All Work”: Carl “Lucy” Owens and the Limitations of the Male Perspective**

It could be argued that Wright’s inability to publish “Black Hope” stemmed from a problem of perspective. In his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright defines perspective as “that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts on paper. It is a fixed point in intellectual space, where a writer stands to view the struggle, hopes, and sufferings of his people.” The intimacy of that intellectual space, for Wright, was unusually in-depth. Wright had seen with his own eyes how the “slave markets” and employment agencies preyed on black women and exploited them to maximize profit. He then spoke to more than a hundred domestic laborers. His firsthand knowledge of the

domestic labor market exceeded that of any writer of his era, even Esther Cooper. He struggled with “Black Hope,” and its subject matter, for several years. Wright continues, “There are times when he may stand too close and the result is blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.”<sup>205</sup> Wright’s “blurred vision” may explain why he could not reconcile the requests from his agents and editors for revisions in order to publish “Black Hope.” It can also be said that there were limitations to Wright’s perspective as male writer that could not be overcome with time and knowledge.

In this vein, Wright’s 1959 radio play “Man of All Work” represents the author’s renewed perspective on domestic labor and his position as a male writer, a decade after abandoning “Black Hope” forever. The farcical story, as Wright biographer Michael Fabre explains, was inspired by an article that appeared in *Jet* several years earlier. Fabre reports, “A white woman had shot her Negro servant because she found her husband making advances to her. It is discovered, however, that the wounded person is actually a man who, having been refused a job as a cook, had dressed as a woman in order to be hired.”<sup>206</sup>

The play begins as Carl Owens laments to his wife, Lucy, while reading the paper, “No jobs for men in this paper...But there’s plenty of ads for domestic workers. It’s always like that.”<sup>207</sup> Carl expresses a common sentiment among black working class men, who, in the 1950s, were still limited by racial barriers as it related to employment. Soon, Carl stumbles upon the following advertisement for a domestic worker: “Cook and

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<sup>205</sup> Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 45.

<sup>206</sup> Fabre, 502.

<sup>207</sup> Wright, “Man of All Work,” in *Eight Men: Stories by Richard Wright* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1961), 121.

housekeeper wanted. Take care of one child and small modern household. All late appliances. Colored cook preferred. Salary: fifty dollars a week. References required...Mrs. David Fairchild.” Carl devises a plan to dress in drag and take on his wife’s name so that he can pass for a woman and obtain employment. He attempts to quell Lucy’s fears by exclaiming, “I’ve got on a dress and I look just like a million black women cooks...What’s more I don’t need any make-up. A cook isn’t supposed to be powdered and rouged.”<sup>208</sup>

Julieann Ulin argues that Carl Owens and his absurd plan are manifestations of “Wright’s own earlier ignorance of the particular plight of the domestic servant.”<sup>209</sup> It is the arrogant assumption espoused by Carl that one can know the experience of a domestic worker simply by creating an outward and shallow representation of any black women that underlies the simplistic framework within which Wright created Bessie Mears. Yet, Carl’s attentiveness to his lack of makeup foreshadows the centrality of white male desire to the story, and the fears of white housewives regarding the possibility of sexual contact between domestic workers and their husbands.

Once Carl, now “Lucy,” begins working for Anne and David Fairchild, the narrative becomes one long charade built on perception and misperception as the audience awaits the moment of discovery. A pivotal scene occurs once Anna asks “Lucy” to come into the bathroom and wash her back. This is not the first time that Wright depicts such an intimate moment between a black man and a vulnerable white woman. In *Native Son* Bigger Thomas finds himself having to assist an inebriated Mary Dalton, the daughter of his employer, upstairs to her bedroom without disturbing her sleeping father.

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>209</sup> Ulin, 154.

Suddenly, Mary begins to make noise. Unable to keep her quiet and fearing what will happen if he is found alone in a white woman's boudoir, Bigger puts a pillow over her face and accidentally smothers her to death. The encounter between "Lucy" and Anne reverses the paradigm of the black brute preying on a white woman, while also shedding light on the forced intimacy between black women and their employers.

As "Lucy" assists Anne the growing anxiety that the truth will be revealed is pervasive. Building on a multilayered framework of sexuality and sexual innuendo, Anne exclaims, "I want to talk frankly to you as one woman to another." Anne confesses that their last maid was let go because she had improper relations with David. She warns "Lucy," "As long as you don't drink, my husband won't bother you... Just push him away. Now, as one woman to another, understand each other?"<sup>210</sup> Here, gender performance serves as a literary device that allows Wright to give his black male character access to forbidden spaces and knowledge. Ulin states that this encounter disturbs Carl "both for the proximity to the white woman's naked body and for the revelations that accompany it."<sup>211</sup> Fabre expands upon this analysis when he asserts that although this is a repeated and crucial scene in Wright's fiction, "the reversal of roles satirizes the behavior of the white man toward a black woman."<sup>212</sup>

As Anne finishes her bath, David Fairchild returns from work for lunch. With Anne occupied and their daughter Lily napping, David seizes his time alone with the new maid. Wright makes use of sexual dynamics in this scene by assigning the predatory sexuality usually reserved for black male figures to his white male character. David

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<sup>210</sup> Wright, "Man of All Work," 137-138.

<sup>211</sup> Ulin, 171.

<sup>212</sup> Fabre, 502.

places his hands on “Lucy” in the kitchen while exclaiming, “I bet your old man’s no good to you.” “Lucy” staunchly resists his advances and threatens to pick him up and throw him. To which David responds, “You’re a sassy nigger bitch, aren’t you?”<sup>213</sup> The two scuffle as “Lucy” repeatedly knocks David to the ground. Although “Lucy” derives her physical strength from her true identity as Carl, when placed alongside Ollie and Aunt Sue, she is a part of Wright’s narrative framework, which allows for the possibility of resistance to violence. Unlike Ollie and Aunt Sue, however, “Lucy” is able to prevent David from assaulting her. The underlying and undisclosed fact of Carl’s true identity gives Wright the space to make this commentary about gender and violence. What Carl as “Lucy” can do, Aunt Sue and Ollie cannot. Viewing “Lucy,” Ollie, and Aunt Sue as a part of Wright’s fictional genealogy of domestic workers is a necessary part of understanding Wright’s evolving theorization of gender and complicating previous criticisms of the author as inherently misogynist. Wright’s “Native Daughters” illustrate that Bessie Mears is in no way representative of Wright’s female characters, as many literary critics suggest.

As David and “Lucy” continue to struggle, Anne walks in and discovers what she expected all along that her husband would do. Even as Anne bears witness to her husband’s misbehavior, she still defends him. Before “Lucy” can escape, Anne brandishes a gun and shoots “Lucy” exclaiming that she will “be made a fool of no longer.”<sup>214</sup> What is interesting about this scene is that although Wright’s research notes and his correspondence with his literary agent reflect the author’s intention to explore the universal condition of women (which he does briefly in “Black Hope” when Ollie visits

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<sup>213</sup> Wright, “Man of All Work,” 142-146.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

Local 567), he relinquishes this opportunity to create a moment of solidarity between “women.” The encounter between Anne, David, and “Lucy” is divided along lines of race rather than gender. “Lucy” becomes a symbol of the white woman’s shame rather than a representation of their shared oppression as women.

Realizing that “Lucy” has been shot, the Fairchilds immediately call a doctor and begin crafting a narrative that will absolve the couple of responsibility. David relies on the prevailing stereotype of domestic workers as dishonest, and decides to take the blame for shooting “Lucy,” by telling the police that he found her stealing and shoots her after she attempts to flee. Anne resists and the two argue. They are interrupted by the arrival of the doctor.

It is the doctor who discovers Carl’s true identity, which inspires another alibi. “I’ve got it solved. It’s simple,” explains David, “this nigger put on a dress to worm his way into my house to rape my wife!...Then I detected ‘im. I shot ‘im in self-defense, shot ‘im to protect my honor, my home.” David projects his own sexual deviance onto Carl by settling comfortably into the myth of the sexually ravenous black man. David makes this plain when he states, “I was protecting white womanhood from a nigger rapist impersonating a woman!”<sup>215</sup> The ease with which Carl creates these alternative accounts makes Carl and “Lucy,” black man and woman, unable to advocate for themselves and construct their own narratives. The irony of this set of circumstances is, of course, the way that Carl similarly relied on these kinds of misperceptions in order to obtain domestic work in the first place.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 154.



In the end, Carl comes to, and, with the encouragement of the doctor, the Fairchilds give him two hundred dollars in exchange for his silence. Carl circumvents his wife's Lucy's myriad of questions by telling her, "I was a woman for almost six hours and it almost killed me. Two hours after I put that dress on I though I was going crazy."<sup>216</sup> Ad it is this simple statement that ends Wright's twenty-year artistic journey and his theorization of black women's labor, exploitation, and resistance. Ulin summarizes, "Through the character of Carl Owens...Wright traverses his own growing awareness, as a black male writer, of the position of the black female domestic worker."<sup>217</sup> What is particularly interesting about "Man of All Work" is the way in which its humor stands in stark contrast to the realism of "Black Hope" and "Bright and Morning Star." It seems that Wright can do more with humor than he can with realistic violence of his earlier fiction. Furthermore, his theorization does not become complete until he locates himself, and his masculinity, within his fiction.

### **Conclusion**

Before settling on "Black Hope" as the title for his unpublished novel, Wright's agent, Paul Reynolds, wrote to the author and suggested the title "Native Daughter." Creating a composite black female character, a counterpart to Bigger Thomas and an answer to Bessie Mears, proved impossible, even after writing thousands of pages and two drafts. Yet, through Wright's genealogy of domestic workers, a group of characters that might be called his "Native Daughters," the process of theorizing black women's labor is revealed. And we, as contemporary scholars, are granted insight into this process, both where it succeeds and fails, through Wright's archives. Wright accomplished so

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>217</sup> Ulin, 154.

much more through the voices and experiences of Aunt Sue, Maud, Ollie, Clara, and “Lucy,” than he could in his nonfiction writing.

This, in turn, requires a reevaluation of Wright’s place in the black literary canon, one that considers his research and unpublished writing on black women workers. We can no longer see Wright as one who writes exclusively within a male context, at the expense of his female characters. The stories of Wright’s “native daughters” are historically grounded explorations of black womanhood and labor, beginning with the washerwoman and tracing her lineage to the urban domestic workers of the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, characters like Freddie allowed Wright to explore the possibilities of men’s engagement with feminist theory and practice. Thus, Wright’s theoretical process is also an introspective one. These dynamics completely change the way that one looks at Wright’s work.

## CHAPTER 4: Not “Like One of the Family”: Alice Childress and Domestic Worker Protest

In a 1951 article for *Masses and Mainstream*, Alice Childress wrote, “My people stand weary with fatigue, half asleep, in the subway, my people have been scrubbing floors and washing walls and emptying, carrying, fetching, lifting, cooking, sweeping, shining, and polishing and ironing, washing, ironing, washing. But they fight drowsiness. No one must say they are lazy or sleepy or slow.” These people, known to Childress as the “have-nots in a have society,” were the subjects of her plays, novels, and short stories during a career that lasted over forty years. People like Childress’s grandmother Eliza and her Aunt Lorraine dedicated their lives to domestic work and, according to Childress, “refused to exchange dignity for pay.” Childress sought to depict their work, their weariness, and their refusal to take their oppression lying down. The fatigue that Childress assigns to her people, black people, was also metaphorical. It was a political fatigue brought on from generations of battling white supremacy and class oppression. “But they fight drowsiness,” Childress exclaimed, foreshadowing the activism of the turbulent 1950s. The author was a part of that political awakening and used literature to translate theories of oppression into everyday language.

It was her work as an actress that earned Childress a place in the black cultural canon. Yet, it was her first work of fiction, *Like One of the Family*, that represents the most lasting achievement in a career that spanned four decades. The book was a series of monologues delivered by Mildred Johnson, a fictional black domestic from South Carolina living in Harlem. Mildred, speaking to her best friend and fellow day laborer

Marge, recounts her experiences in the homes of middle-class white families and the black radical community, as well as her own musings on the peculiar experience of being a black woman in a white supremacist culture.

Childress began writing the Mildred monologues in 1951, as a serial column entitled “Conversations from Life,” for Paul Robeson’s black Left newspaper, *Freedom*. Early on, Childress received no compensation for her contributions. Once the paper had gained enough subscriptions to pay its contributors, the author received five dollars per column. In 1956, the year her collection was published, the monologues were reprinted individually in the seemingly more conservative *Baltimore Afro-American*. *Afro* ran the columns once a week for two years, paying Childress twenty-five dollars per issue.<sup>218</sup> In 1958, Childress resurrected her character in order to write new columns for *Afro* (all of which have never been published in a collected volume). She penned these new columns this for two years before she decided to discontinue the column to pursue other writing projects. Mildred was a constant presence in the lives of African-American readers for almost ten years. In spite of the character’s popularity at the time it was written, within a decade Mildred had vanished from public discourse and the *Like One of the Family* was out of print until literary historian Trudier Harris precipitated its only reprint in 1986.

The character Mildred is evidence that black women’s working-class resistance, in addition to the cultural work done by writers like Wright and Attaway, persisted well into the 1950s. But Childress’s most important contribution to this cultural canon is the way that she made theories of class oppression, which are always couched in the most casual conversations with Marge, plain for her readers. She advocated for the formation

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<sup>218</sup> Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 111.

of domestic workers' unions, higher wages, better working conditions, paid time off, and health benefits, while demonstrating how these things could be won through negotiation (usually confrontation) with employers.

Like Mildred, Childress was born in South Carolina and migrated to Harlem as a child, where she was raised by her grandmother Eliza. Her career as an artist began in 1941, when she became an apprentice for the American Negro Theatre (ANT) in Harlem. For almost ten years Childress, and her compatriots in the company, worked four nights a week without salary.<sup>219</sup> This took quite a financial toll on Childress, who was a single mother. In the author's words,

Some writers sit down and write every day, regardless. I am not that disciplined...Early on when I was writing, I didn't have the opportunity to be disciplined, to write at a set time. I had to work; I had to take care of my daughter. Many women writers are wearing so many hats—they work, have to care for the children, pick them up from school—they write when they can.<sup>220</sup>

From the beginning of her career, Childress conceived of herself as a cultural worker. Wages and labor were central to her understanding of herself and her writing. To support her small family while apprenticing for the ANT, Childress worked as a photo retoucher, insurance agent, and, most importantly, a domestic worker. A number of the Mildred stories were based on her own experience working in white women's kitchens. Childress shared a great deal in common with her fictional counterpart. In the true spirit of what would later become Mildred's characteristic rebellion, Childress once terminated her

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<sup>219</sup> La Vinia Delois Jennings, *Alice Childress* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), ix. Alice Childress, "But I Do My Thing," *New York Times*, February 2, 1969, 69.

<sup>220</sup> Jackson R. Bryer, ed., *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 69.

tenure at one home by “throwing her keys at the head of her white female employer as she departed.”<sup>221</sup>

Literary critics like Cheryl Higashida, Mary Helen Washington, and Trudier Harris, who have critically examined *Like One of the Family*, are useful in establishing the significance of Mildred in the black Left literary canon. In creating a character with such longevity, Childress demonstrates the ways that fiction can be used as a space to imagine the possibilities of black women’s resistance. Mildred uses conversation and confrontation as a form of protest and as a means of advocating for the formation of unions. These analyses, however, only consider the collected volume and, in Washington’s case, a few select *Freedom* columns. This chapter examines the full run of the Mildred columns, which includes roughly 150 conversations. Over a hundred of these vignettes were written exclusively for *Afro* and have never been collected in one volume. These columns, and the adjacent coverage in the newspaper, demonstrate Mildred’s influence on readers, particularly the women who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the 1950s.

### **Understanding Mildred**

The title monologue of *Like One of the Family* is representative of the conventions of the Mildred monologues. It begins in the everyday space of the kitchen, which would have been very familiar to Childress’s audience. Mildred begins, “Hi Marge! I have had me one hectic day.”<sup>222</sup> This proclamation is followed by a set of ellipses, a visual signifier used in every monologue to represent Marge’s narrative

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<sup>221</sup> Jennings, 8. Trudier Harris, introduction to *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life*, by Alice Childress (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), xiii.

<sup>222</sup> Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 1.

interruptions. These strategic textual silences emerge as disruptions in the text, compelling the reader to fill in the missing portions of dialogue. The textual orality of the monologues coupled with what the readers brought to the narratives rendered the truth of Mildred's stories irrelevant. As Childress once professed, "Drama is the controversy of life, the contradictions in history."<sup>223</sup> Mildred's storytelling is a means of theorizing the contradictions and controversies in the world around her.

Continuing her story in the title monologue, Mildred describes a confrontation with Mrs. C., her employer. She states. "Well I had to take out my crystal ball and give Mrs. C...a thorough reading." Mildred always referred to her employers with the title Mr. or Mrs. followed by a single letter and a set of ellipses. Jennings argues that the absence of proper names allowed Mildred to "indict without malice not a single individual but rather a representative type guilty of these racist infractions."<sup>224</sup> While the racial implications of the social hierarchy at play between mistress and maid is certainly significant, the absence of personal identifiers presents the white mistress as the proverbial "boss" of proletarian fiction. It is worth noting, however, that racial signifiers are also absent from Mildred's accounts. Jennings argues, "Mildred signifies on the shameless actions of her mistresses but never speaks condescendingly of their whiteness."<sup>225</sup> The racialization of labor underlies the entire run of the Mildred columns, yet she avoids the critique of the individual as racist to emphasize the systemic nature of racism and the power afforded to her employers based on their status as white middle-class women who are the mistresses of their homes. Mildred's female employers most

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<sup>223</sup> Bryer, 67.

<sup>224</sup> Jennings, 38.

<sup>225</sup> Jennings, 35.

often do not work, making their actions as supervisors of domestic workers their primary identity. Sociologist Mary Romero describes this relationship in the following way:

By the act of supervision, the homemaker's home becomes a showpiece, a symbol of *her* womanhood as well as of her husband's success. As domestic service becomes increasingly dominated by women of color...the occupation that brought women of different class backgrounds together in the women's sphere is now bringing race relations into the middle-class homemaker's home. The struggle between women that was once based on different class interests now has the added dimension of race and ethnic conflict.<sup>226</sup>

Romero places class conflict at the core of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. She denotes race as an added complexity to their interactions but also as intertwined with the relationship between middle-class housewife and working-class black woman. Mildred's blackness is presented almost as a given, making the emphasis on her identity as a worker necessary to the class critique that she makes in each monologue. There was a pervasive belief in American culture that black women were innate caretakers, thus naturalizing domestic work as the "only work" suited for them. In this sense, Childress relies on the image of the black domestic worker as the all-encompassing American caretaker and then continuously disrupts the archetypal image of the black maid by emphasizing her labor and her identity as a worker.

As Mildred continues her conversation with Marge she describes a dinner party that she is serving for Mrs. C. during which, from her place in the kitchen, she overhears her employer make the following exclamation about her "beloved" Mildred: "We just love her! She's *like* one of the family and she *just adores* our little Carol! We don't know *what* we'd do without her. We don't think of her as a servant."<sup>227</sup> Mildred's response to her employer expresses her unbelonging to the family, and therefore to Mrs. C. Mildred

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<sup>226</sup> Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 99.

<sup>227</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 1.



waits until the guests had departed and entered the living room demanding to speak to the mistress. Her response expresses her unbelonging to the family, and therefore to Mrs. C.

She tells Marge,

In the first place you do not *love* me; you may be fond of me, but that is all... In the second place 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...so you can see I am not *just* like one of the family.<sup>228</sup>

Although Mildred is responsible for maintaining the comforts of the home, preparing meals that were eaten in the dining room, cleaning the lace table cloths and satin spreads, and attending to the family's houseguests, she was never able to enjoy the home that she created. While her "thorough reading" of Mrs. C. almost sounds like a lament, it actually creates the necessary distance between worker and boss. Mildred's analysis of Mrs. C.'s commentary prefaces her insistence on being identified as a laborer.

Mildred continues,

You think it is a compliment when you say, 'We don't think of her as a servant...' but after I have worked myself into a sweat cleaning the bathroom and the kitchen...making the beds...cooking the lunch...washing the dishes and ironing Carol's pinafores...I do not feel like no weekend houseguest. I feel like a servant, and in the face of that I have been meaning to ask you for a slight raise which will make me feel much better toward every one here and make me know my work is appreciated.<sup>229</sup>

Instead of mourning her role as one who is not one of the family, which is something that might have been characteristic of other "loyal servants," Mildred uses the contrast between family and maid to assign a value to her work. Her identity as a laborer, rather than a member of the family, is what allows her to make demands concerning her wages.

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>229</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 3.

She very intentionally places herself within the larger framework of the working class, by demanding that her work be compensated and appreciated.

**Jesse B. Simple, Alberta K. Johnson, and Candy: Mildred in Context**

Mildred has been described as the “spiritual cousin” to Langston Hughes’s character, Jesse B. Semple, because of her “strong ties to the black community, an ease with vernacular speech, and a militant race perspective.”<sup>230</sup> It is clear that Childress had a reverence for Hughes’s work. In 1951, a year before she began writing for *Freedom*, Childress produced a theatrical adaptation of the Semple stories, entitled *Just a Little Simple*.<sup>231</sup> Semple first appeared as a serial column in the *Chicago Defender* in 1943. Hughes created Semple out of a desire to “create a working class character for a working class audience.”<sup>232</sup> Like Childress, Hughes used Semple to respond to events as they happened. The early columns were most concerned with World War II and the Double V campaign to defeat fascism abroad and Jim Crow at home. As the war came to a close and white soldiers returned to the workforce, Semple became more concerned with finding a job in the segregated industrial workforce. After a consistent run in the *Defender* and several collections of stories, Jesse B. Semple made his last appearance in print on January 8, 1966. The first collection of stories, published in 1950, remains Hughes’s best selling book to date.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Mary Helen Washington, “Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front,” in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, eds. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 188-9.

<sup>231</sup> Jennings, 5.

<sup>232</sup> Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 71, 103.

<sup>233</sup> Dolinar, 116.

Although Hughes' influence on Childress is evident, Childress's character is more closely related to another Hughes creation, Madam Alberta K. Johnson, the subject of a series of poems written by Hughes in the 1940s. Johnson describes herself as a cook and a day laborer. The structure of the poems and Johnson's insistence that she be referred to as "Madam," imbue her working-class identity with dignity.

The poem "Madam and Her Madam" describes Alberta's work for a white woman in her twelve-room house. She states:

Had to get breakfast,  
Dinner, and supper, too—  
Then take care of her children  
When I got through.

Wash, iron, and scrub,  
Walk the dog around—  
It was too much,  
Nearly broke me down.

Following this detailed description of her tasks and working conditions, Alberta has an exchange with the Madam that mirrors Mildred's "thorough reading" of Mrs. C. The poem ends:

I said, Madam,  
Can it be  
You trying to make a  
Pack-horse out of me?

She opened her mouth.  
She cried, Oh, no!  
You know, Alberta,  
I love you so!

I said, Madam,  
That may be true--  
But I'll be dogged  
If I love you!<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Hughes, 285.

The comparison of the domestic worker with a packhorse harkens back to the symbolic importance of animals in *Blood on the Forge* and its relationship to black women's work. While Alberta does not make demands for higher wages, her acknowledgment of poor working conditions and her willingness to confront her employer set her apart from the depictions of the doting, complacent mammy of film and literature.

The "mammy" figure, and, more broadly, the representational history of domestic workers, was also great importance to Childress in creating her character. In her seminal study of representations of domestics in black American literature, Trudier Harris describes mammies as those who "acquiesce in the paternalistic and place-defined relationship between mistress and maid... Whether on northern or southern soil, they generally make few, if any, claims of dignity and self-worth within the established employer/employee relationship." She adds, "These women usually compromise everything of themselves and of their connection to the black community in order to exist in the white world."<sup>235</sup> Harris argues that the appearance of Mildred marks a clear shift in this image, which gives way to the more militant figures of black literature in the sixties and seventies.

Childress began using Mildred to comment on mammy figures, or as Mildred called them "handkerchief heads," early on. A vignette entitled "About Those Colored Movies" that first appeared in the June 1952 issue of *Freedom* is representative of Mildred's analysis. At the core of the issue, according to Mildred, is the author of the images. Speaking to Marge, Mildred exclaims, "I only wish that those who are still living

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<sup>235</sup> Harris, *From Mammies to Militants*, 23.

will make some pictures and plays sometimes all about how we are not to blame for everything that happens to us... Yes, Marge. I know THEY don't pick out the stories...but after all SOMEBODY DOES." Prior to publishing the Mildred stories, Childress, as writer, director, and actor, attempted to correct this problem in black popular culture by creating works framed and written from a working-class perspective.

An extended version of "About Those Colored Movies" appears in the book collection. Childress extends her critique by addressing specific representations of fictional maids, which becomes the center of the narrative. Mildred states:

As soon as I see a colored maid that's workin' for somebody, I know that she will have a conniption-fit 'cause the lady she works for won't eat her dinner... I know that maids don't be carryin' on like that over the people they work for, at least none of 'em that I've ever met! I will also bet that we'd never be able to figure out how much we have polished up in movin' pictures and how many dishes we've washed and all such as that. Yes, pictures and plays will pretty much show the same kind of thing. It seems that the maid can never me be married, or if she is, her husband always has to be no good, but contrary to real life, she likes him cause he's that way...Ain't that disgustin'?"<sup>236</sup>

Mildred plainly refutes this understanding of the doting maid, first in her confrontation with Mrs. C. and again here by referencing her own experience and that of her comrades. Again, Mildred's analysis returns to labor, by referencing the number of rails polished and dishes washed. Even on the silver screen, working conditions are oppressive. Mildred's exasperation illustrates the formulaic predictability of movie maids. Mildred also comments on attempts at revising fictional domestic workers that occurred as a result of the visibility of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. These women were depicted as sympathetic (albeit marginal) characters rather than subjects of ridicule. Mildred was not fooled. In her words, "No, Marge, they're not pinnin' as many bandana handkerchiefs

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<sup>236</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 125. The same monologue appeared in *Afro* accompanied by the headline: "Mildred Mocks at Movie Maid Roles."

on our heads these days, but they get the same result in other ways...[the maid] will walk right nice and dignified-like, but when you boil everything down to the nitty-gritty she'll be talkin' the same old line."<sup>237</sup> The issue with cinematic portrayals of domestic workers is not the mammy trope itself (although, it does have its own set of problems), but the false intimacy between mistress and maid and its real world implications.<sup>238</sup> Childress resists the portrayal of this implied intimacy by making confrontation the center of Mildred's engagement with her employers. Thus, Mildred's self-made mythology serves as a running political commentary on her own representation.

While historical and literary scholarship has exhaustively assessed the centrality of mammy to the American imagination, the sexually available black house worker, though she is the antithesis of the asexual mammy, is equally as important. The most compelling depiction of the lascivious maid, was created, interestingly, by a black woman. The flirtatious and playful Candy, the brainchild of cartoonist Jackie Ormes, was the subject of a weekly single panel cartoon that ran in the *Chicago Defender* from March to July 1945. The *Defender* was very attentive to the inequities of black servitude as a result of wartime labor shortages. Perhaps, the short run of the cartoon was due to the absence of critical commentary in favor of humor and sexual innuendo. Ormes biographer Nancy Goldstein describes Candy as a "subversive housemaid who took amusing verbal jabs at wartime black marketers, hoarders, and hypocrites, as personified by the detested lady of the house. Candy establishes her moral superiority over her

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<sup>237</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 126.

<sup>238</sup> See Shana Russell, "When Folks Is Real Friends, There Ain't No Such Things as Place: Feminist Sisterhood and the Politics of Social Hierarchy in *The Help*," in *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help*, eds. Claire Oberon Garcia et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 73-81.

madame in panels that invite readers to reflect on the upside-down order of things.”<sup>239</sup>

Yet *Candy*'s subversion, usually in the form of borrowing her mistress's clothes, makes domestic labor seem more like play than work. She eavesdrops on dinner parties so she can learn the latest gossip amongst white high society folks. She rendezvous with her dates at her employer's home. She is rarely seen doing any task most associated with domestic workers, yet she always wears her characteristic maid's uniform.



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<sup>239</sup> Nancy Goldstein, *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Cartoonist* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 75-6.

The above image, from the April 14, 1945 column, embodies the characterization of Candy.<sup>240</sup> She was modeled after the pin-ups of the era, a part of Ormes larger intention of challenging perceived notions of black beauty that are characteristic of her entire oeuvre. Candy is frequently shown in various states of dress, and often from the backside, looking over her shoulder, to showcase her statuesque figure and ample behind. She always wears high heels and red lipstick. Instead of confronting her employer in person, she competes with her in private. She ridicules her mistress for her big feet and expanding waistline and makes fun of her party guests as less fashionable than her own social circle. Yet, she mirrors her mistress's fashion by borrowing her clothes and participates in similar forms of leisure when not at work.

This world of fantasy also eliminates the very real risk of sexual violence endured by many domestic workers, as Richard Wright's work so aptly demonstrates. This was not lost on Childress. In an article she wrote for the *Negro Digest* in 1967, she explained:

It is a known fact that, in certain states in the Union, the black woman (in and out of bondage) was 'free,' with or without her consent, and to the detriment of her children, to have her body exploited as unpaid and cheap labor and/or illegal sex. In these same states, the white man was free to use her wrongly for these purposes but not free to offer her or their offspring the protection of his name and property.

Childress's acute awareness of the history of sexual violence inflicted on black women by white men makes her choice to eliminate the risk of sexual harassment from the everyday encounters between Mildred and her employer (with two exceptions) an interesting one. She is careful not to make Mildred asexual, as mammy figures often were. Mildred frequently gossips about time spent with her lover, Eddie, in her conversations with Marge. Part of Childress's reservations could be related to her identity

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<sup>240</sup> Jackie Ormes. "Candy." Illustration. *The Chicago Defender*, April 14, 1945.



as a woman writer. Her penchant for fictionalizing her own experiences demonstrates an intimate relationship to her characters, prompting Mary Helen Washington to call Mildred Childress's "politically idealized self."<sup>241</sup> Mildred, as a character, always retains control over her body and her labor. This is an important part of Childress's reimagining of the domestic worker and the possibilities for her to resist her own exploitation. To depict her character as the victim of sexual violence, as Wright and Attaway do, would mean that Childress would have to grapple with her own oppression as a black woman.

### **“We Need a Union, Too!”: Labor Organizing in the Mildred Monologues**

Childress's strategic distancing from the fictional mammy figure set the stage for Mildred's demands for labor rights for domestic workers. Although Childress dedicated several columns exclusively to union organizing, the appropriately titled “We Need a Union Too!” outlines Mildred's demands plainly. The monologue opens, “Marge, who likes housework?...Honey, I mean to tell you that we got a job that almost nobody wants!” This sets the parameters of a conversation that posits union organizing as that which could change the stigma concerning domestic work and its reputation as unskilled labor. Mildred continues:

That's why we need a union! Why shouldn't we have set hours and set pay just like busdrivers and other folks, why shouldn't we have vacation pay and things like that. Well, I guess it would be awful hard to get houseworkers together on account of them all workin' off separate-like in different homes, but it would sure be a big help and also keep you out of a lot of nasty arguments!

Here, Mildred expresses a common difficulty that a number of domestic worker organizers had (and still have): organizing a dispersed set of workers around a series of common goals. While individual negotiation and “nasty arguments” with employers are a

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<sup>241</sup> Washington, 189.

practice that is well documented by the Mildred monologues, this is the first time that it is presented as an occupational hazard. Fear of losing one's job is one that all black women domestics experienced. This vignette sets aside Mildred's position as a day worker in favor of speaking to this reality.

The remainder of the conversation presents a number of workplace scenarios and the impact that a union would have on them. In Mildred's hypothetical, heavy work would be against union regulations. Abusive employers would be forced to face consequences.<sup>242</sup> While laws like the Social Security Act historically focused on that which would benefit employers, Mildred creates a fictional, yet believable, scenario where the worker matters and had a voice.

Mildred returns to the issue of unions in a column published in *Afro* on June 14, 1958 entitled "Why We Need a Union." The revised title suggests that Mildred was speaking directly to the reader in addition to Marge. This is substantiated by the editor's headline: "Domestic workers need a union too, says our Mildred. Whenever other workers start talking about coffee breaks, lunch hours, or sick leave, the domestics are out in the cold. When we get too old to work, we're just out of luck." The use of the possessive "we" and "our" was a testament to the significant number of domestic workers who read *Afro*. In fact, the paper may have exposed the largest number of domestic workers to Mildred. Concerning this specific readership of *Afro* Harris states, "The domestic workers who subscribed to that paper and who found themselves in situations

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<sup>242</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 140-41.

equally or more restricting than Mildred's could applaud her victories; the conversations thereby transcended their individuality and responded to a collective consciousness."<sup>243</sup>

The *Afro* column reiterates many of the points made in the previous conversation concerning benefits, wages, and working conditions. Mildred adds hospital insurance, worker's compensation, and job security to her list of demands. This is couched in a discussion of the disposability of domestics. In Mildred's words: "If you fall sick, they will send to the employment agency, replace you, and won't hire you back when you get well." She also considers the concerns of live-in house workers by asking "will you kindly tell me what does a forty hour week mean to somebody who's sleepin' in?" To end the conversation Mildred declares, "If we had a union, things would go the way they ought and we wouldn't have to depend on somebody's good-heartedness. I tell you, we need a union more than anybody in this world. I would love to see a sign in the kitchen where's I'm workin' now...that sign should read...'This is a union house.' How 'bout that?"

Black women were not the only ones who Mildred believed would benefit from this solidarity movement. In one conversation, entitled "In the Laundry Room," which originally appeared in the July 1953 issue of *Freedom*, Mildred recounts a chance meeting with a white immigrant domestic laborer. The woman looks at Mildred with distrust and recoils when the protagonist brushes up against her employer's clothes. Noticing the woman's racist microaggressions, Mildred tells her, "Sister... You are a houseworker and I am a houseworker—now will you favor me by answering some questions?" Mildred then learns that the woman earns less than she does, is required to do

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<sup>243</sup> Harris, Introduction, *Like One of the Family*, xxv-xxvi.

extra work, and is expected to do eight hours worth of work in much less time. She then discovers that the woman is forced to register as an immigrant under the McCarran Act, which was designed to discipline subversives and communists through the use of a national registry.<sup>244</sup>

When the woman looks at her with a befuddled expression Mildred concludes their encounter by saying that instead of shirking at the presence of her hand brushing up against clothes that don't belong to her, it would "make more sense to put your hand in mine and be friends." This is the only instance where Mildred considers interracial cooperation or the existence of white domestic laborers. But the location of the conversation, the laundry room, was historically a meeting place and a site of domestic worker organizing. Historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis explains this dynamic by recounting what she learned from her interview subjects, female migrant workers who traveled North in search of domestic jobs:

The women also identified laundresses as critical in their search for autonomy. Laundresses served as role models who validated the migrant servant's self image, and, unlike the other staff members did not belittle the migrant woman's desire to gain household work on a non-residential basis. Laundresses alone knew the categories and rules related to operating within several households simultaneously. The laundresses also informed the women of households seeking the services of females, on a live-out basis, for one or two days per week.<sup>245</sup>

Laundresses also have a history of collective organizing, using work stoppages to demand higher wages and time off among other things. More importantly, however, Childress used "The Laundry Room" to comment on the historically fraught relationship

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<sup>244</sup> It was this policy that allowed the government to revoke Paul Robeson's passport in 1950, the year the act was passed.

<sup>245</sup> Elizabeth Clark Lewis, "This work had a' end": The Transition from Live-in to Day Work, (Memphis: Center for Research on Women, Memphis State University, 1985), 19.

between white immigrant workers and black workers, using a similar intellectual framework as William Attaway had twenty years earlier.

### **Mildred in Practice: Domestic Workers and the Montgomery Bus Boycott**

Mildred's individual advocacy of unions and collective organizing connects her, in many ways, to Wright's Ollie Knight. Like Ollie, Mildred repeatedly refused to stay silent in the face of the injustices done to her. Each conversation is like her own personal testimony. She continues to tell her story, as Ollie does, first to a close friend, and then to those who understand her plight, like the white laundress. And like Ollie, Mildred had no problem tacking her grievances with her employers head on.

But would Mildred's confrontational protest strategy work in practice? Mary Helen Washington, in her analysis of the Mildred monologues, expresses sincere doubt. She calls into question the believability of the monologues, describing them as "static and one-sided." In her words, "Mildred is in many ways Childress's politically idealized self, always presenting a black Leftist viewpoint with such self-assurance that I always found [*Like One of the Family*] problematic." *Freedom* was, for Washington, a revelation. She continued, "What I now realize is that it is important to read the Mildred monologues as they first appeared...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 other stories in the paper."<sup>246</sup> While Washington argued that Childress "excised the sharp political critique" of the *Freedom* columns in the book collection, an examination of the full breadth of the *Afro* columns alongside the paper's commentary on the Civil Rights Movement, specifically the Montgomery Bus Boycott,

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<sup>246</sup> Washington, 189.

demonstrates that Childress in no way abandoned the radicalism of the earlier columns. This kind of analysis also allows for a speculative evaluation of audience reception. Mildred's largest audience was made up of *Afro* readers who, Childress recalls, flooded her mailbox with praise for the working-class heroine.<sup>247</sup> In the only review of the collected volume, Helen Davis asserted that Childress, "maintaining a light and charming tone, and the greatest readability, *does* move the reader—to tears and to laughter—but mostly to anger, the kind of anger which is the courage to change and fight against the ugliness surrounding us."<sup>248</sup> Mildred encouraged her readers to act as evidenced by the stories of protest that Childress received from domestic workers all over the country.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was an ideal testing ground for the realism of the Mildred stories. Public transportation was, historically, one of the rare meeting places for domestic workers. This setting was not lost on Childress who used the bus as the location for a few of the conversations between Mildred and Marge. In a vignette entitled "Ridin' the Bus," Marge and Mildred, on their commute home from work, discuss the political implications of living in the North and riding in the back of the bus because you want to versus being compelled to by Jim Crow laws. According to Mildred, segregation was more than just separate seating. In her words, "You get rudeness, meanness, and less for your money in every other way." She then reflects on her time living in segregated South Carolina, bringing her experience as a migrant worker to the forefront of her analysis of racial oppression. "There's been many a time when I was down home when the driver wouldn't stop when I pulled the cord, that is if I was the only one who wanted to get off, or if it was any colored for that matter...I've been left standing with my hand held up to

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<sup>247</sup> Harris, Introduction, *Like One of the Family*, xxvi.

<sup>248</sup> Helen Davis, "Laughter and Anger," *Masses and Mainstream*, July 9, 1956, 51.

stop the bus and the driver would go whizzin' right on past."<sup>249</sup> Childress could have been talking about Montgomery whose rules for riding buses were "appallingly detailed, obviously designed to inflict as much humiliation as possible on black riders, most of them female domestic workers."<sup>250</sup>

Childress was clearly aware of the climate leading up to mass boycotts in Alabama and Tallahassee. Because the book version was published in 1956, she would have been writing and editing her columns at the height of the movement. In order to explore the relationship between Mildred, domestic workers, and the bus boycott it is necessary to call into question the image of the movement as an antagonism between charismatic male leaders, like Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy, and white politicians. In her study of women's resistance during the long Civil Rights Movement, Danielle McGuire remakes the boycott as a women's labor movement. She argues, "More than any single individual, the city's domestic workers put the Montgomery City Lines out of business." Quoting one of the boycotts chief grassroots organizers, Georgia Gilmore, the passage continues: "The maids, the cooks, they were the ones that really and truly kept the buses running... And after the maids and the cooks stopped riding the bus... well, the bus didn't have any need to run."<sup>251</sup> Domestic workers were frequently called the foot soldiers of the boycott. They filled the pews of local churches during meetings organized by the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). They raised money to keep the movement going. Most importantly, they gave their own testimonies

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<sup>249</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 14.

<sup>250</sup> Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 87-88.

<sup>251</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 112; Olson, 114-15.

of maltreatment on the buses everywhere they could be heard. They spoke to journalists, researchers, at church, at meetings, and like Marge and Mildred, to each other.

Robert Graetz, a prominent Lutheran clergyman in Alabama and ally to the boycott, remembered that the testimony of house workers at mass meetings was what prodded the movement's leaders to be more radical.<sup>252</sup> In reality, the movement's male leaders were initially hesitant. With the exception of E.D. Nixon, former Pullman porter and protégé of A. Philip Randolph. Nixon was credited with the design of the movement, which was based on his experience as a union organizer and chairman of the Alabama NAACP. At a meeting of the MIA, during which influential women organizers like Rosa Parks and Joann Robinson were conspicuously absent, Nixon told the more moderate male leaders: "Here you have been living off the sweat of these washwomen all these years, and you have never done anything for them. Now you have a chance to pay them back. And you are too damn scared to stand up on your feet and be counted!"<sup>253</sup> Much of the work that had been done to create a male-centered image of the boycott happened after its historical moment. The role of black women, specifically domestic workers, was not disregarded by the entirety of the movement's male leadership.

Contemporary scholarship has recovered the role of house workers in the boycott. What is missing from these analyses, however, is the role of white women, particularly those who employed black women in their homes. Oral histories with black female boycotters were rife with stories of confrontations between black maids and their employers. There were also narratives of white women who, unwilling to lose their

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<sup>252</sup> Stewart Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 16; Olson, 117.

<sup>253</sup> Earl and Miriam Selby, eds., *Odyssey: Journey Through Black America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 61-2; Olson, 115; McGuire, 104.



beloved house workers, drove their employees to and from work, thereby contributing to the inability of the buses to run. It is clear that white women had a significant impact on the boycott. Lynne Olson, who, like McGuire, resists the image of the male-centered movement leadership, explains:

It was a complicated dance between the black women and white women of Montgomery, whose ties with each other were much more personal and intimate than those between black and white men... While the relationship was clearly unequal, while many whites demeaned and exploited their black employees, others developed a close bond with those who worked for them. Regardless of the relationship, white women considered black women essential to the running of their households, and when the boycott began, many white women, even those who opposed the action, gave rides or taxi fare to their maids, to the great displeasure of city officials and sometimes their husbands.

Undermining the resistance to the boycott by driving your employee to work equated to an “affront to white supremacy.”<sup>254</sup> This practice was so prevalent that some white women who opposed the boycott advocated for a counter-boycott, sometimes called a “starve the maids” campaign, where they encouraged the white citizens of Montgomery to stop giving their domestic workers taxi fares and to fire those who participated in the boycott.<sup>255</sup> The intimate encounters between mistress and maid were emblematic of the racial and class antagonisms that characterized the boycott and the greater movement for black liberation.

More importantly, however, the relationship between white housewives and their employees revealed a great deal about the politicization of working-class black women. Their testimonies and protest strategies conformed to the frameworks that Mildred presented in her conversations. Jennings describes the antagonistic relationship between Mildred and her employers in this way: “Mildred’s female employers repeatedly violate

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<sup>254</sup> Olson, 119.

<sup>255</sup> Burns, 118-9.

her personal and professional space, while she, in turn, breaches verbal and spatial boundaries to resist exploitation, take a political stand, or raise her mistresses' class and racial consciousness."<sup>256</sup> The women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott were, in essence, what Mildred's fictional accounts look like in practice; the radicalism of domestic workers in the real world.

Mildred's employers frequently ask her about black politics and admonish their employee for her political activism. In *Freedom* these exchanges often surround Paul Robeson, whom Mildred met during a trip to the paper's offices, before becoming a seller of the paper and encouraging Marge to do the same. Later, Childress used these conversations to comment on current events as they happened. In one conversation, "Ain't You Mad," a seemingly mundane exchange becomes explosive. The column originally appeared in the October 1952 issue of *Freedom* and was concerned with the attack on singer Pearl Bailey, who was severely beaten by three unidentified white men who shouted racial epithets at her. In the book, and again in *Afro*, the subject of the conversation was Autherine Lucy, who was in the middle of an arduous struggle to become the first black woman to be admitted to Alabama University. Both the attack on Pearl Bailey and the Lucy case were hotbed issues that dominated the black press, including extensive coverage in *Afro*. In spite of the change in subject matter, the exchange between Mildred and her employers, Mr. and Mrs. B., and its political implications, remains the same.

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<sup>256</sup> Jennings, 38.

The conversation begins when Mr. B greets Mildred and asks, “Isn’t it too bad about Pearl Bailey?”<sup>257</sup> Mrs. B chimes in and says, “I know you colored women are mad about this—what is going to be done?” Mildred immediately responds with rage and is told by Mr. B to calm down so she does not upset his delicate wife. Mildred flies into an uproar and slams her pocketbook on the table in front of the couple. She states, “Don’t you worry about Mrs. B. bein’ upset ‘cause if she gets too wrought up she can scream and the law, the Klan, and them men that beat up Miss Bailey will come runnin’ in here and move me off the premises piece by piece.” It was this same logic of protecting white womanhood that served as the discursive justification for the creation of the Ku Klux Klan, as immortalized by the film *Birth of a Nation*, based on the novel *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon. In the American racial imagination the villain in this narrative was the hypersexual black brute. Yet, as the bus boycott demonstrates, black women were frequently the victims of racialized violence.

Next, Mildred places the onus of violence against black women at the hands of white men on her employers. She states, “How do I know you wasn’t the one that kicked Miss Bailey—you got a foot aintcha?” In the later versions of the story Mildred exclaims, “how do I know you wasn’t in sympathy with them grown-up men that was throwin’ eggs and stones at a defenseless colored woman? In the first place, you are white and you haven’t opened your mouth to do a thing but put toast in it.”<sup>258</sup> Mildred continues her outburst as she fights back tears. The narrative concludes when she storms out, the first and only instance in the entire run of the conversations that Mildred quits a job.

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<sup>257</sup> In *Afro* this is changed to: “Isn’t it too bad about this girl tryin’ to get into Alabama University?”

<sup>258</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family*, 172.

Anger was an important rhetorical device in these political exchanges. Jennings argued, “Foremost, the anger in Childress’s work does not exist solely for the sake of anger. Her treatment of anger converts it from a disruptive, useless principle into a constrictive liberating force...[T]hese women vocalize racially provoked anger and access verbal and rhetorical gestures of triumph and transcendence over white female disempowerment.”<sup>259</sup> It was essential that Mildred’s lament not be interpreted as reactionary. As a black woman, and a domestic worker, she was not entitled to protection in the same way that Mrs. B would be. Thus, Mildred’s willingness to risk getting fired by challenging her employers and her departure were political acts.

Black domestics in Montgomery similarly faced their employers without fear. When Beatrice Charles was asked by her employer whether she rode the bus to work, she proudly told the woman about her participation in the boycott. The woman, Mrs. Prentiss, then threatened to join the White Citizens Council’s campaign to starve the maids for a month. Charles responded, “I sure won’t starve...I was eating before I started working for you.”<sup>260</sup> An unnamed domestic worker, who was interviewed by Willie M. Lee, who conducted hundreds of oral histories with women in Montgomery during the boycott, had a similar experience. Following a confrontation with her employer where she “told the ‘omen off” she stated, “The next time I worked fur dat ole ‘omen, she said, ‘You know we could starve y’all maids for a month.’ I told ‘er she wuz already starving [me] and I pity anybody who waits fur me to starve.”<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Jennings, 19.

<sup>260</sup> McGuire, 113-14; Burns, 223-5.

<sup>261</sup> Burns, 231-232.

There are hundreds of narratives recounting the political participation of these real-life Mildreds but nothing would compare to the delightful coincidence that appeared in *Afro* on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1956. Childress's regular column appeared as usual. It was a witty sketch about the perils of caring for white children. The remainder of the coverage in the two-page spread was news from the ground in Montgomery, Alabama, where the bus boycott was in full swing. The content was a part of a multi-part series of articles on the boycott written by journalist Ted Poston, and reprinted in *Afro* from the *New York Post*. The first several articles in the series, entitled "This is Montgomery," featured interviews with men of the black middle class who provided their commentary on the status of the boycott and profiles of the movement's prominent male leaders, like King, Abernathy, and Nixon. By the fifth installment, however, Poston found himself inside a carpool made up of domestic workers who were more than willing to tell the journalist of their experiences.

The headline for the column read, "Boycott Capital Cannot Do Without Servants." The woman being interviewed did not want to be named in the article. I am not sure whether I should credit the interviewee, the interviewer, or the editor for this amazing irony, but throughout the article her alias was inspired by Childress's heroine. She was simply called Mildred. *This* Mildred very candidly told Poston about her experience working as a domestic laborer while participating in the boycott. Her employers accused her of being involved in Communism, fired her, and then quickly rehired her when they realized that it would be impossible to maintain their lifestyle without two incomes. After all, it was Mildred who allowed the wife to work by taking care of her home and family. Poston explains, "That night she was hired back for \$15 a

week (\$3) raise. Without Mildred, the wife would have to stay home from her \$52 a week job, mind the children, cook and clean the house. The family made a profit of \$40 a week by having a \$12 a week maid.” This sophisticated economic analysis came from a woman whom Poston described in the introduction to his article as “unlettered.” She was able to use her everyday experience as a worker to make sense of the role of domestics in the economy of Montgomery.

What was especially significant about this interview is what was narrated between the details of this elaborate story. The women, together, outlined a set of circumstances that made the movement effective. Like the fictional Mildred, they asserted themselves as workers whose labor was necessary to maintaining Montgomery’s class hierarchy. This put them in a position to make demands. At the conclusion of the interview, the women established the significance of everyday women, Childress’s “have-nots in a have society” to the movement. Speaking of King, Abernathy, and other charismatic male leaders, (the real life) Mildred stated, “They didn’t really start it, you know...and they can’t end it either. The people, the plain, ordinary, colored people, here started this thing and only they can stop it.” The confidence and straightforwardness of women like Mildred, many of whom were interviewed in the remaining parts of the series, dispelled the belief that the fictional Mildred was simply a product of fantasy.

### **Conclusion**

Childress chose to discontinue the Mildred monologues at the onset of 1960. In honor of Mildred’s retirement, Carl Murphy, who was the president of *Afro*, sent Childress the following note: “You have done a wonderful job exposing the thinking of a working girl, endearing her with dignity, pride, and independence. Thousands of our

women still work in domestic service and will continue for some years to come. You can be proud of the fact that you have helped in their upbringing.”<sup>262</sup> In trying to recover the history of the working girl, *Like One of the Family* is a text that demonstrates the way that works of fictions are windows into historical narratives. Over the course of ten years, from newspaper to novel and then into the homes of working class blacks, Mildred reshaped the identity of the black woman worker, the representation of domestic workers in literature, and the analytical parameters of the Civil Rights Movement. Echoing Murphy’s words, Mildred helped the black woman worker develop her own language and become one of the proletariat in theory and in practice.

Herein lies the significance of Mildred to this continuing legacy of domestic worker activism. Childress’s vignettes made more sophisticated theories of labor organizing plain for her readers, even those struggling with limited education. Beyond this, Mildred demonstrates what these theories would look like in practice. This is particularly poignant in light of the contexts within which household laborers work. The labor movement provided no model for collective bargaining or wage negotiation for those who worked in isolation. Readers witnessed Mildred accomplishing these things repeatedly. More importantly, Mildred normalized the juxtaposition of labor and protest that characterized the lives of women like those who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. For contemporary scholars, Mildred (and Childress) present a new and important image of the domestic laborer as worker, as activist, and as a central figure in the labor movement of the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>262</sup> Carl Murphy, letter to Alice Childress, February 23, 1960. Alice Childress Papers, Sc Mg 649, Box 7, Folder 1.

## Conclusion

During the 1960s, my maternal great grandmother, Josephine, worked as a domestic worker for Miss Horowitz in Kansas City, Missouri. At 13, my mother began working with her, to help support my grandmother, a single mother, and her eight siblings. On weekends my mother traveled from her public housing project to the other side of town to help Nanny, as we called her, polish silver, iron, wash linens, and set up for bridge parties. By the time my mother completed high school, her brief tenure as a domestic worker was already over. But her work as an activist was just beginning. In high school she organized a protest with other black students to advocate for the observance of a day to honor slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Later, she helped to run a free breakfast program for children at a local Lutheran Church near the poor neighborhood where she was raised. What has always intrigued me about my mother's history is the sense of pride she exhibited in both her labor and her activism. They both allowed her to nurture and support her family and community. These were the lessons she learned from Nanny and then passed on to me.

It is through this lens, the juxtaposition of black labor and black radicalism, that I began my cultural and historical inquiry into the activism of black domestic workers during the interwar period; what Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke called the miniature economic battlefield of the Depression. In response to their systemic exclusion from the protections provided to workers under the New Deal, black women throughout the country placed themselves on the front lines of this battle through collective action and organizing. The same way my mother had done. Though many of the domestic workers examined in this dissertation are fictional, my mother and Nanny made them real to me.



This presented my greatest challenge: How do I pay homage to domestic workers' labor *and* their activism? How do I honor the story of domestic work in my own family; the labor done by four generations of black women who came before me, as one who has never had to work in a white woman's kitchen?

To mitigate some of these feelings, for the last few years, in addition to writing and teaching, I have been involved in the current movement for domestic worker rights. As a part of this movement, led by working-class women of color like my mother and the fictional domestics examined here, I was ecstatic to find out that on August 21<sup>st</sup> 2015 the Supreme Court ruled that homecare workers are entitled to basic minimum wage and overtime protections. This major victory arrives eighty years after the exclusion of domestic workers from the protections of the Social Security Act in 1935.

I often ask contemporary domestic worker activists, seasoned organizers and representatives of organizations like the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and Domestic Workers United, how they managed to win this victory when the marginalization of household laborers has been entrenched in our culture for so long. Their answer is simple: storytelling. Just like the activism of black women workers during the interwar period, the current movement began with conversations between workers on park benches, in laundromats, on buses and trains, on street corners, and in churches. Allison Thompson Julien, who works with the New York chapter of the NDWA, explained to me that their organizing strategy centered on the movement of these conversations "beyond the park bench." These stories, she exclaimed, paved the way for legislation.

This, for me, highlighted the importance of fiction to an analysis of black women's labor. The fictional domestic workers of Attaway, Wright, and Childress allowed me to replicate the juxtaposition of labor and activism that characterized my mother's stories. These fictional worlds of domestic workers' resistance shock readers with their realism while imagining the possibilities of a labor movement with black women at the center. The challenge for scholars is to trace these historical movements to the places where these stories are told. Therein lie the intellectual frameworks that produce new and different understandings of women's activism, gender, sexuality, blackness, and labor.

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