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Working-Class Literature and the Promise of Affluence in Postwar America

by

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A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

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Adam Heidebrink-Bruno

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines literary representations of working-class life written between 1930 and 1960. My project draws on historical research and textual analysis to explore the response of a diverse group of writers to major economic developments that refigured American culture during the Great Depression, World War II, and the period of relative affluence that followed. I trace the tension between the pervasive working-class desire for a more economically secure future and the fear that this security would only be available to those who live in a certain way set by the twin pillars of the mid-century welfare state and the postwar economic order. I examine a variety of ways that working people resisted the social and economic coercion this emergent socioeconomic system instituted through government regulation, financial incentives, and labor relations. While individual authors in this study differ in how they portray working-class responses to the rising social order, each writer challenges the conventional progress narrative that presents the welfare state, postwar affluence, and homeownership as unambiguous improvements in the lives of low-income Americans. I add complexity to this historical narrative by foregrounding the particular forms of social, political, and economic coercion that emerged as part of these developments. Working people, and those writing about working people, recognized the growing tension between government-sponsored economic security and independence as the U.S. welfare state grew throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Threatened by a growing level of surveillance and control, working people invented new ways to rebel, resist, and escape the modes of life that restricted their ability to live a free and autonomous life. This project is a celebration of working-class ingenuity and a reminder that the liberated worlds we long for are always already present in the hearts and minds of working people.

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines literary representations of working-class life, written between 1930 and 1960. My project draws on historical research and textual analysis to explore the response of a diverse group of writers to major economic developments that refigured American culture during the Great Depression, World War II, and the period of relative affluence that followed. I examine the economic, political, and social changes that pressured many mid-century working-class families to abandon one way of life for another, as seen in this period's rural-to-urban migration patterns and the era's renewed emphasis on industrial wage-labor as the primary mode of working-class subsistence. In each of my three chapters, I explore rich and vibrant representations of working-class life and examine the ways in which mid-century economic, material, and social relations challenged established ways of being. My intentions are twofold. First, I aim to identify the complex working-class structures of feeling that emerged in response to this rapidly changing society. I trace the tension between the pervasive working-class desire for a more economically secure future and the fear that this security would only be available to those who live in a certain way authorized and endorsed by an emergent postwar welfare state and its associated economic order. Second, I examine literary representations of how working people resisted new forms of coercion that were introduced through mid-century government regulation, financial incentives, and labor relations. My dissertation begins with an emphasis on how a coercive state forced working-class people to relinquish residual ways of being in order to acquire federal benefits, and builds toward the recognition that, despite these structural changes, many members of the working class

found new ways to resist, rebel, and escape the socioeconomic systems that could limit their freedom and autonomy.

By the end of the 1950s, many working-class Americans lived in a society that was radically different from the one they knew prior to the Depression. This new era of working-class life in America was defined by greater access to welfare provisions, better wages, consumer goods, and more affordable housing. These notable developments offered new assurances of financial security and a comfortable middle-class quality of life for many working-class Americans.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, these government-sponsored assurances of a better life introduced severe threats to their autonomy and freedom that left many working-class Americans hesitant to embrace these new patterns of life. The forms of working-class independence threatened by the emergent welfare state and postwar economic order vary significantly from text to text in this study and evolve over the course of my dissertation, although it can generally be understood as the ability to act as one desires without hindrance or restraint. Moreover, as the U.S. government developed its regulatory capacities during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, it also actively promoted a specific mode of capitalist production that prioritized rapid growth, consumerism, and industrial wage-labor. Mid-century literary representations of this increased federal involvement in matters of social welfare and macroeconomics reveal widespread concern regarding the ability of working people to live in a state of

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<sup>1</sup> The rise of government-sponsored economic security was such a deviation from the longer politics of self-reliance that Jeff Cowie refers to the period between the 1930s and the 1970s as “the great exception,” in which the federal government “used its considerable resources . . . on behalf of the economic interest of non-elite Americans in a way that it had not done before or since” (9).

independence and self-determination under such conditions, despite the many notable material gains secured during this period.

I take a particular interest in three of America's most enduring economic legacies that emerged during the mid-twentieth century and how literature of the period responded to these historical shifts. Chapter one investigates the rise of the New Deal welfare state; chapter two examines the rapid growth of consumer affluence during and just after World War II; and chapter three focuses on the postwar homeownership boom. During each of these periods of economic development, the government played an active role in shaping the life prospects of working people. Working-class literary representations of these shifts highlight how each of these purported paths toward financial security came with a steep social and cultural cost for people who were often forced to give up established modes of life in order to attain the security and comfort promised by the modern welfare state. In many cases, members of the working class resisted these intrusive state interventions and struggled to remain free and autonomous in a period of heightened state surveillance and regulation, although they were not always successful in this endeavor. In my analysis of mid-century literature, I analyze the various modes of everyday resistance, rebellion, and escape imagined by working-class and middle-class authors who were concerned about the potential loss of freedom and autonomy. I conclude that alternate lifeways—ones rooted in residual working-class culture as well as ones emerging in response to the new social order—remain viable despite the dominant narrative that there was no alternative to the one particular version of American economic progress popularized in the years leading up to and following World War II.

My inquiry into U.S. history and culture begins in the late 1930s, a moment in which many American authors recognized the centrality of labor and the significance of working-class people in the production of American culture.<sup>2</sup> During this period marked by the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and the rise of New Deal politics in 1933, many American authors openly criticized the U.S. economic system and received a popular audience in a way that wasn't possible in earlier decades. Daniel Aaron explains that to write about working-class culture and labor after 1933 "was no longer the daring and rebellious gesture it once had been. Under the New Deal, the reforms fought and suffered for by the 'old men' were enacted into law. To champion liberal economic and social legislation was not merely undangerous; it became highly respectable" (270). My dissertation contributes to the field of working-class literary scholarship by revealing how literary texts from the era critiqued mid-century welfare policies and economic shifts.

The seven figures in my study—John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Meridel Le Sueur, Harriette Arnow, Harvey Swados, Paule Marshall, and Lorraine Hansberry—represent a range of ideological perspectives and occupy both middle-class and working-class positions. In placing canonical American literature (*The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*) alongside lesser-known working-class narratives (*The Girl*; *The Dollmaker*; *On the Line*; and *Brown Girl, Brownstone*), I ask readers to reconsider conventional literary boundaries and treat middle-class writing sympathetic to working people as part of a broader working-class literary tradition in which workers speak about

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*.

their own experiences. The desire to broaden the definition of working-class literature is consistent with Janet Zandy's description of the category in *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (2004), where she explains that working-class fiction is not only where "writers create a space for working-class people to represent themselves" but also any text that "centers the lived, material experiences of working-class people" (90). I believe this is the case for middle-class writers like Steinbeck and Hansberry just as it is for working-class authors like Wright, Le Sueur, Arnow, Swados, and Marshall.

Moreover, by reading across class differences, I demonstrate that both middle-class and working-class authors developed critical accounts of how mid-century socioeconomic transformations complicated the lives of working people. Such representations of the new socioeconomic order often contain internal conflicts and tensions – as, for example, by representing the ways in which the U.S. government sometimes protected working people from poverty, while also introducing new modes of political coercion and control.

Critiques of this kind appear in authors' representation of the inadequacies of the welfare state that emerged from the New Deal and the alienating effects of consumerism and the ideology of homeownership, even among higher-wage workers who allegedly had little to lose and much to gain from such transformations. While individual authors in this study differ in how they portray working-class responses to coercion, each challenges the conventional progress narrative that presents the modern welfare state, postwar affluence, and affordable homeownership as simply improving the lives of low-income Americans. In some respects, the progress narrative captures truths about this period, as Jeff Cowie makes clear in *The Great Exception*. The working-class impulse I trace, however, emphasizes how the particular version of the welfare state that emerged in the

U.S. during the 30s, 40s, and 50s was more invested in strengthening a particular kind of American consumer capitalism than it was in improving the lives of working people. Moreover, I argue that the forms of consumer affluence that emerged after the war were not simply liberating, because higher wages were tied to a way of life that forced working people to abandon independent and self-governed production in order to participate in a consumer economy that altered working people's priorities.

Each author eschews the conventional mid-century economic progress narrative in favor of a more nuanced story of working-class struggle to maintain autonomy and freedom amid rapid social change. Wright, for instance, shows how unemployment benefits coerce Bigger Thomas—an African American man who dreams of becoming a pilot—into demeaning domestic service work for a wealthy white family. This restraint on his capacity to pursue meaningful work is informed by both his class and race, and eventually results in his criminalization and death. The women in *The Girl* face a similar yet distinctively gendered threat to their autonomy in the pursuit of government aid. In this novel, Le Sueur demonstrates the lengths to which the federal government went to contain and control the sexual behavior of working-class woman who were labeled by relief officers as deviant and disruptive. Le Sueur both records the subtle violence of delayed distribution of aid to unmarried pregnant women and documents the more overt forms of violence associated with the modern welfare state, such as forced sterilization and electric shock therapy. In *The Dollmaker*, wartime economic pressures threaten the freedom associated with independent rural life when the Nevels are forced to migrate to the city in search of a livable wage. While this new mode of life is attractive to some of the members of the Nevels family, the central protagonist, Gertie, discovers the ways in

which urban life hinders her capacity to remain self-sufficient in an economy structured around consumer goods and industrial wage-labor. Government-sponsored access to affordable homeownership in the postwar era similarly lacked freedom as it often bound working people to an ideology of property and possession that prevented them from living a fuller and freer life. This appears especially true for Black Americans who experienced the desire for ownership against the painful history of belonging to a race of people that had once been owned. This conflicted relation to property diminished the political capacity of ownership to deliver something along the lines of liberty and left many members of the Black working class seeking alternate modes of freedom, as I suggest the young protagonists do in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Despite the many structural threats to working-class autonomy, the authors in my study also identify a working-class capacity to resist, rebel, and escape some of the most coercive elements of the modern welfare state and its associated economic order. Le Sueur's female protagonists, for instance, develop a mode of gender-based solidarity that gives voice to collective demands and holds the welfare state accountable for its coercive regulatory practices. In this way, Le Sueur reveals the power and agency of working-class women unwilling to sacrifice their shared agency in exchange for paltry government assistance. In *The Dollmaker*, Gertie Nevels finds a way to incorporate residual elements of her rural productivity to combat working-class dependency on industrial wage-labor. While the urban working-class laborers who fully assimilate to consumer capitalism struggle to survive during a postwar recession that leaves many out of work, Gertie keeps her family relatively secure through her independent mode of labor, carried forward from her previous life in the Appalachian mountains. I find another instance of this capacity to

escape the cultural and economic confinement of the postwar era in defiant young Black women's refusal of their parents' desire for property and possession. In its place, Marshall's and Hansberry's protagonists, Selina and Beneatha, invent new ways to pursue freedom and autonomy, experiencing emergent ways of life liberated from the powerful lure of postwar homeownership.

By focusing on working-class literature produced in the 1940s and 50s, I aim to extend the work of scholars such as Alan Wald<sup>3</sup> and Mary Helen Washington<sup>4</sup> who assert the value of mid-century literature in carrying forward the resistant traditions of the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. My research is both an extension of working-class literary scholarship and a revisionary account of postwar literary production in the age of Cold War conservatism. I join scholars like Linda Wagner-Martin who argue that "under that conformist lid extraordinarily diverse cultural energies were simmering" (108).<sup>5</sup> The collection of authors and perspectives I have selected and analyzed in this dissertation demonstrates that diversity included an emergent postwar working-class culture of resistance and rebellion. In these works, I identify the fears, desires, and insecurities of people being asked to conform to a dominant postwar culture that was, more often than not, detrimental to working-class lifeways. In some cases, individuals who faced immense pressure to adjust their way of life eventually gave in and resigned themselves

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<sup>3</sup> In *Exiles from a Future Time*, Alan Wald explains that the 1940s-50s can serve as a "'bridge' between the 1930s and the 1960s, which are relatively neglected decades for the study of Left writing" (xiii).

<sup>4</sup> In *The Other Blacklist*, Mary Helen Washington argues that "by extending the period of the Black Popular Front to include the 1950s and placing these artists squarely within Black activism, they carried the resistant traditions of the Black Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s into the 1950s and became a link to the militant politics and aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s" (12).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Alan Cecil Petigny's *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965*.

to a new cycle of alienating production and consumption, like the factory workers in Swados's *On the Line*. Others lost their lives in the struggle to retain some semblance of personal liberty in the postwar world, like the working-class men in Le Sueur's *The Girl*. Most of the time, however, I find that working-class people invented new strategic modes of resistance, rebellion, and escape that could protect themselves and their families from the many socioeconomic developments that threatened to undermine their freedom.

The positive and creative responses to postwar threats to working-class life are especially visible in the works produced by women writers in this study. Le Sueur, Arnow, Marshall, and Hansberry each identify and describe new ways to rebel, rooted in their particular circumstances, whether that be gender discrimination in New Deal relief policies (Le Sueur), the social pressure to adopt a consumer lifestyle (Arnow), or the punishing ideology of homeownership during an era of racial discrimination (Marshall and Hansberry). By highlighting the contributions of women writers to the field of mid-century working-class politics and resistance, this study can be placed in dialogue with a long tradition of feminist labor scholarship including: Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991); Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993); Constance Coiner's *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995); Laura Hapke's *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (1995); and Kathlene McDonald's *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* (2012). I carry this project forward by extending into the 1940s and 50s the analysis of labor literature produced by women, which has focused primarily on the 1930s. I join these earlier scholars in challenging the dominant

image of the postwar woman as a dissatisfied suburban housewife, as described in Betty Friedan's influential second wave classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Instead, by foregrounding literary representations of working-class women and women of color, I explore a broader range of gendered experiences emerging in the postwar period, including those that evolved from the radical activism described in Coiner's and Rabinowitz's studies of women's writing. In doing so, I place women writers at the center of the working-class struggle for autonomy in a period when men's experiences were often viewed as the focal point of labor disputes and economic progress.

My dissertation's emphasis on race reveals that the Black working class encountered new forms of social and economic coercion that were both similar to white working-class experiences and yet distinctive in its intensity and exclusionary practices. I initially explore these themes in chapter one with my analysis of Wright's *Native Son* where I discuss the process through which the New Deal government coerces a young Black man into domestic servitude. I offer additional insight into the racial dynamics of the modern welfare state in the third chapter where I examine the federal government's role in segregating the housing market in the 1950s. Through my dissertation, I draw on foundational race scholarship—including Michael Szalay's *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012); Tyler Schmidt's *Desegregating Desire: Race and Sexuality in Cold War American Literature* (2013); and Mary Helen Washington's *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (2014)—to study how race and class intersect in the period leading up to and following WWII. I find that many working-class strategies to create and secure social and economic autonomy are informed by a longer history of African-American political strategies. This

becomes clear when the Black working-class characters in this study (Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun*) invent the most radical solutions to the postwar threats to their working-class freedom and autonomy. In both cases, young Black women draw on the power of what James C. Scott, Robin Kelley, and Saidiya Hartman refer to as infrapolitics,<sup>6</sup> as well as what adrienne marie brown defines as emergent strategy.<sup>7</sup> By practicing decentralized and adaptive forms of political power, many of the working-class characters in my study initiate change, challenge dominant structures of power, and escape the social and economic forces that could otherwise restrict their lives.

In chapter one, I examine three working-class novels written during the latter part of the Great Depression. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939; 1978) each present a stark account of the New Deal welfare state that calls into question today's liberal praise of its policies. While the New Deal provided much-needed relief to working families, Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur demonstrate how New Deal welfare policies also instituted a new form of state power that subjected working-class families to a heightened level of surveillance, coercion, and moral scrutiny that continues to shape welfare practices to this day. I consider how critical perspectives on the New Deal can inform and challenge widespread assumptions regarding the social and economic value of the welfare state for working-

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<sup>6</sup> In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott defines infrapolitics as a "realm of subordinate group politics . . . that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors" (19).

<sup>7</sup> In *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown describes emergent strategy as a technique "for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions" (2). This mode of initiating change draws on the transformative power of adaptation, resilience, decentralization, and experimentation.

class Americans. This new relationship with the state required working-class families to comply with rigid work requirements and restrictive living arrangements in order to receive financial support. Depression-era literature describes the cultural conflict that arose between the working class and an increasingly interventionist state, highlighting a tension between the desire for autonomous working-class solidarity and a dire need for government assistance. This tension was exacerbated by federal policymakers who imagined that the so-called “undeserving poor” would exploit the rapidly expanding welfare state while the “deserving poor” grew dependent on federal aid. Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur respond to this conflict between policymakers’ elitist fantasies about the poor and the realities of working-class life through representing hard-working and generally self-sufficient Americans’ profound distrust of the welfare state.

Steinbeck juxtaposes a positive and non-coercive example of federal relief in Weedpatch with the frequent presence elsewhere of state sheriffs determined to enact a punitive form of poverty management. In this way, Steinbeck dramatizes the general failure of the federal government to implement a form of welfare that could live up to occasionally empowering experiments like Weedpatch. Through such contrasts, Steinbeck reveals the inadequacies and inconsistencies of a welfare state unwilling to give working people control over relief operations. Richard Wright adds a distinctively racial component to Steinbeck’s overwhelmingly white depiction of the New Deal welfare state. Wright exposes how the New Deal government embedded racial prejudice into its welfare policies. As I argue, *Native Son* illustrates the process through which the welfare state reinforced a racialized economy that disproportionately benefited white Americans. This is especially visible when Bigger is forced into domestic service under

the threat of losing access to unemployment benefits. Meridel Le Sueur's description of the New Deal welfare state in *The Girl* highlights the gendered violence enacted by relief officers. In this novel, Le Sueur further expands Steinbeck's and Wright's critique of the New Deal welfare state by asserting that the emerging welfare system acted as a coercive form of moral re-education that forced members of the working class to alter their behavior as a prerequisite to receiving aid. *The Girl* shows how this new form of gendered poverty surveillance coerced working-class people to trade their autonomy for basic economic security under the threat of violence.

When read together, Le Sueur's bold demand that the government provide meaningful and significant welfare provisions challenges Steinbeck's idealized vision of migrant solidarity that places the wellbeing of working people outside the purview of the state. Le Sueur's account of resistance and protest offers a more positive and creative response to state violence than we see in Wright's hopeless description of African-American criminalization and death. Ultimately, these three Depression-era welfare narratives document how American relief policies coerced working-class people into giving up one way of life for another as a prerequisite for receiving government-sponsored financial security. My discussion highlights how the welfare state used the rhetoric of self-reliance to limit government accountability and place the burden of responsibility on the working class itself. I demonstrate how the American approach to welfare harmed many working-class people by creating a system of bureaucratic state surveillance and a network of strict federal regulation that hindered the freedom and autonomy of working people made vulnerable by the Great Depression.

In chapter two, I investigate how working-class people responded to the United States' transition to a postwar consumer economy defined by rural-to-urban migration, compulsory wage-labor, and increased capacity to purchase consumer goods associated with a middle-class standard of living. I examine the misleading concept of "affluence" and consider what prosperity really meant to working people for whom higher wages provided access to buying more stuff, as opposed to directing one's own labor in ways that were satisfying and fulfilling. I argue that, despite the appearance of postwar abundance, this socioeconomic realignment was a painful experience for many working-class people who had to make difficult decisions to survive in this rapidly changing economy. My reading of *The Dollmaker* and *On the Line* demonstrates how cultural and material forces remade citizens into consumers, trained to seek satisfaction by buying commodities. My analysis provides a conceptual map of this emerging ideological system and highlights several working-class responses. In *The Dollmaker*, Arnow describes the shocking experience of a rural working-class family pressured to conform to the new norms of an industrial American city. By structuring the plot around three characters who mistrust and resist this new way of life, Arnow makes resistance a central theme of the novel. The novel begins with a rich meditation on the cultural value of rural Appalachian life. Arnow locates a viable alternative to the alienating consumerism of the city in the arduous but meaningful labor the Nevels family practices in the Kentucky hills. Here, Arnow suggests, the working poor can experience a more intimate and meaningful relationship to both work and money than they can under the cruel conditions of industrial wage-labor. For the rest of the novel, the Nevels struggle to attain the same level of freedom and autonomy they felt in the country but discover that the particular

material and economic structure of wartime Detroit forecloses such possibilities. In the end, Arnow replaces the progress narrative celebrating working-class affluence with a story that honors the forgotten and underappreciated knowledge and lifeways of the rural working class.

In the eight vignettes that make up *On the Line*, Swados demonstrates how the desire for upward mobility can betray the working class. The characters discover that their high wages fail to purchase the things that matter most, revealing the ultimate futility of consumer affluence and the postwar work-to-spend lifestyle. Swados develops a pattern of hope giving way to despair in story after story. In doing so, he exposes a cruel irony: that it was often the product of one's own alienated labor that served as the means of one's defeat. This was especially true for members of the newly prosperous working class who put far too much faith in the promise of affluence. In the end, the target of Swados's anger is not the alienating factory itself but working people's own misplaced faith in consumer culture. Ultimately, *On the Line* demonstrates how the postwar workplace functions as an ideological assembly line as much as a commercial one in which line workers produced resignation and defeat as efficiently as they made automobiles.

In both of these fictions, the authors identify a tension between established working-class lifeways and a desire to embrace at least some aspects of postwar affluence and consumerism. In *The Dollmaker*, this tension appears most clearly in the contrast between the intimate and largely self-sufficient rural economics of Appalachia versus the depersonalized industrial commercial exchange of the city. In *On the Line*, this tension appears as a generational conflict, in which an aging group of workers fail to comprehend

the consumer desires of a younger generation. In both cases, the characters in *The Dollmaker* and *On the Line* face difficult decisions regarding how to adapt to a new way of being while still retaining some sense of established working-class freedom and autonomy (such as Gertie's independent productive capacities). While Swados struggles to find an escape from this persistent pattern of hope and disillusionment, Arnow finds a way beyond the alienating postwar cycle of earning and spending in the residual presence of working-class work, exchange, and community. Arnow argues with clarity and compassion that residual working-class lifeways are not detrimental to America's socioeconomic wellbeing, but a blueprint for ensuring a more fulfilling and humane world. Together, Arnow and Swados offer powerful counterarguments to the ideological fantasies that deceptively promised upward mobility and affluence for all. *The Dollmaker* and *On the Line* demonstrated the value of working-class knowledge at a time when their lifeways were routinely discouraged by the U.S. government and the culture industry. Arnow and Swados gave voice to the betrayal that many working-class people felt regarding the hollow promises of consumer capitalist ideology and gesture toward the possibility of something better.

In chapter three, I investigate the strong postwar desire for homeownership and examine how this state-sponsored American promise was both extended to and withheld from many Black families. This chapter draws on the history of racial segregation in the housing industry to reveal how the pursuit of homeownership narrows the domain of justice to the realm of property and possession, thus foreclosing the many forms of political empowerment that lie outside this domain. Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* examine this dynamic and gesture toward a broader

plane of economic and political activity available to a generation of Black working people who reject the dominant postwar strategy of building and maintaining political power through property and possession. While homeownership can provide Black Americans with some degree of security, Marshall and Hansberry remain critical of what this figuration of power and property relations means for Black people struggling to live free and autonomous lives. Both authors end their stories with young Black women who choose to walk away from the false security of the home in search of new ways of living outside the confines of postwar property relations.

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* represents homeownership as a toxic desire with destructive consequences for the family. Throughout the novel, Marshall questions the value of ownership, especially for the Black people who populate the novel. Silla's obsession with homeownership at any cost leaves her daughter Selina yearning for something else. Selina does this by developing a new way to rebel, using the subtle power of infrapolitics as a means of making already existing capitalism livable and gesturing toward the possibility of alternate power relations. *A Raisin in the Sun*, on the other hand, has long been studied and appreciated for its clarity and precision in describing the social, emotional, and material costs of racial discrimination in the housing market. In this dissertation, I offer an alternate reading of this influential play that criticizes the widespread desire for homeownership. I argue that Hansberry is critical of a mode of political power that comes from possession. She fears that there are stark limits to the rights property can bestow on a race of people who had once been owned. To this end, Hansberry uses her young Black protagonist, Beneatha, to challenge and ultimately rupture the happy homeownership narrative that begins to take shape in the final scene of

*A Raisin in the Sun*. In this act of rebellion, disruption, and escape, Hansberry gestures toward a mode of living that operates outside the postwar logic of property and possession practiced by the rest of her family and rooted in transnational mobility instead.

The desire to own comes at a steep cost for the families in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. Marshall and Hansberry discovered that the postwar power of property and possession functioned as an impediment to achieving a freer and fuller life as often as a strategy for securing it. Together, these two texts demonstrate the hollowness of the state-sponsored happy homeownership narratives influencing the nation and gesture toward an alternate way of being. Marshall and Hansberry abandon a self-destructive desire for financial security through property and possession in order to pursue a more promising route toward mobility and self-determination unbounded by these dominant postwar values. The endings of *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* and *A Raisin in the Sun* gesture toward another kind of story in which young Black women discover new ways to escape the circumstance of their birth. In leaving the fragile promises of property and possession behind in search of something not yet fully realized, Selina and Beneatha pursue what Saidiya Hartman calls the “dreams of the otherwise,” risking postwar comfort and the relative security of property ownership to “catch a glimpse of the earth not owned by anyone” (349).

Many Americans continue to celebrate mid-century socioeconomic progress associated with the development of a modern welfare state and with consumer affluence and homeownership. In order to do so, Americans overlook the story of how it felt to live through this rapid socioeconomic transformation and deemphasize how that experience differed across classes. This dissertation restores the complexity and nuance to a set of

American economic progress narratives that have grown into a dominant ideological position of almost mythic proportions. For many, the rise of the modern welfare state is a story already told with its social value safely determined beyond repute. While reading the following chapters, however, I ask my readers to set aside their assumptions about the gains achieved by the American working class in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. I do not dispute that the transition to a postwar consumer economy supported by a new wave of federal policies and a social safety net resulted in a better life for many Americans. Working people have certainly benefitted from social security, unemployment insurance, and access to Medicare and Medicaid. At the same time, I am concerned about the particular structure many of these welfare policies took in the mid-century United States. In this account of postwar American progress, I focus on the new forms of state power that have threatened alternate ways of being, particularly those rooted in the independence and self-reliance of working-class Americans.

In the following chapters, I offer several literary examples of how working-class life was altered, disrupted, and sometimes even destroyed in the process of establishing the modern welfare state. In this sense, my dissertation is a story of the working-class struggle against institutional forces: economics, United State politics, and the dominant culture of the age. These chapters reveal about how mid-century literature can help us see new structural forms of coercion. My dissertation is also a study of political resistance. In this sense, I identify and document the strategic modes of protest, refusal, and escape members of the working class developed in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s to maintain some degree of freedom and autonomy in the wake of rapid socioeconomic transformation. Working-class literature of the period documents this struggle in great detail. More than

anything else, however, this dissertation is a story of emergence. I describe the persistent working-class desire to resist coercion. I demonstrate the many creative tactics members of the working class deployed to adapt strategically to a new socioeconomic order while continuing to search for a freer and more autonomous life among the tumultuous changes of the era. This extraordinary persistence brought new modes of being into existence, expanding what it meant to be a member of the working class in an age often associated with confinement and consensus.

## **Chapter One: Working-Class Anxiety and the New Deal Welfare State in Three Depression-era Novels**

The Great Depression left a large mark on the economic, social, and political history of the United States. In the first three years following the stock market crash of 1929, the real Gross National Product declined to 71% of the pre-crash measure, which signaled a dramatic end to the record prosperity many Americans experienced during the 1920s. In the early 1930s, U.S. unemployment rose to a peak of 24%, and with a quarter of the nation's workers without a job, many working-class families accrued debts from which they never fully recovered (Hoover). Promising swift and decisive action, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced a series of government initiatives and policies under the New Deal immediately following his inauguration in 1933. This wave of new relief programs aimed to pull the nation out of the worst depression the U.S. had experienced while also stabilizing the market to ensure that an economic crisis of this magnitude would never happen again. While many historians continue to debate the impact of the New Deal, FDR's unprecedented four-term presidency speaks to the popularity of his leadership during one of the most difficult times in U.S. history.

Nearly a century later, the New Deal remain commonly known across the U.S., making FDR's political legacy one of the most memorable contributions to popular politics to this day. By reading three Depression-era novels written during the latter stages of the New Deal, this chapter offers a critical reassessment of that legacy from a working-class perspective. I highlight a painful tension between working-class autonomy and the increasingly visible authority of the New Deal welfare state. In the end, this critique of the New Deal foregrounds the hidden costs of relief that emerged alongside

FDR's welfare state and draws attention to the working-class response to these economic developments as they occurred in the 1930s. As my analysis will reveal, working-class people were skeptical about the government's ability to provide relief and anxious about the new forms of bureaucratic authority and surveillance it would entail.

The 1930s has been a popular period of study by historians and literary scholars alike. As early as the mid-1930s, writers (especially those on the left) were recording the varied working-class experiences of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Since then, the 1930s has earned a reputation as the "red decade," a period in which the U.S. witnessed considerable socialist and communist activity resulting from extensive labor organizing and widespread economic crisis.<sup>8</sup> According to Michael Denning, the 1930s marked the first time in U.S. history that the literary left rose to a position of cultural hegemony. He argues that the "age of the CIO" can be defined by the centrality of labor concerns in literature, music, theater, and drama. The significance of left literary production was so pronounced during the 1930s that even the federal government got involved, supporting Popular Front texts through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and its "Federal Project Number One" program. The WPA provided employment, funding, and other resources to hundreds of artists. Many of these government-sponsored artists were already highly regarded as important liberal or radical thinkers, including all three authors I discuss in this chapter: John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, and Meridel Le Sueur. In the end, the WPA allowed U.S. cultural production to continue despite the

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<sup>8</sup> See Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* and Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* for more thorough explorations of communist politics and radical left literature of the 1930s.

hardships artists encountered during the Great Depression and ensured that a detailed cultural record of this period would be available to future generations.

In this chapter, I examine working-class representations of the emerging welfare state. I am interested in how these authors question the new forms of state power that arose in the 1930s as the federal government played a more active role in managing the lives of the poor. Since there was no formal welfare system in place at the federal level prior to the Depression, receiving federal aid was a new experience for many working-class families. Until as late as 1933, the federal government relegated welfare issues to individual states where poverty prevention was generally understood in terms of charity. Under this system, churches, nonprofits, and wealthy donors were instrumental in determining the type of aid provided and the conditions for receiving that support. This system signaled to Americans that relief was a form of charity rather than a right, creating a stigma about federal aid that continues to influence popular conceptions of relief today. As many Depression-era reformists recognized, this informal system of aid left much to be desired. Charity-based aid was susceptible to paternalism, condescension, and prejudice that stemmed from social anxieties regarding poverty.<sup>9</sup> Aid disparities were also exacerbated by the harmful ideologies regarding poverty commonly held (even by progressives and reformers) throughout the twentieth century. The historian James Patterson explains that two dominant beliefs about poverty circulating in the 1920s and

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<sup>9</sup> According to James Patterson (1981), a prominent historian of twentieth century poverty: “In the early 1900s, there was a social belief that poor folks had different values than other Americans and can be seen as a discrete subculture: ‘poor people were not merely rich people with less money, ability, and opportunity. In many ways they were in different societies altogether’ (12).

30s understood the poor as either a "dangerous class" or "as lazy, apathetic, childlike, and sensual" people (20). I argue that the federal government actively reinforced these attitudes through its New Deal policies and set the stage for what continues to be a narrow and morally prescriptive definition of relief. During the Depression, U.S. officials developed relief programs that would carefully observe, manage, and regulate aid recipients. While federal policymakers sought to alleviate poverty, they also feared that the so-called "undeserving poor" would exploit the rapidly expanding welfare state while the "deserving poor" would become dependent on federal relief. Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur witnessed the federal response to poverty relief with critical eyes and challenged the New Deal's misguided assumptions about poverty by documenting widespread working-class anxiety about federal authority in their Depression-era novels.

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) remains an iconic novel about the Depression. It documents the plight of displaced Americans during the 1930s while celebrating a particular form of working-class resiliency. Steinbeck emphasizes the discomfort that the central characters feel concerning the new regulatory power of the federal government, although they do not see all state interventions as equally invasive or suffocating. Instead, while New Deal relief policies and state sheriffs generally make the protagonists' migration to California more difficult, *Weedpatch* serves as a clear contrast to the punitive policing of poverty seen elsewhere along the route. Steinbeck's use of contrast suggests that some forms of relief could be beneficial and even spiritually uplifting when the government was willing to give poor people more control over the management of relief operations. In the end, however, the worker solidarity visible in *Weedpatch* is limited by Steinbeck's conservative rendering of the American work ethic

in which the value of hard work and personal responsibility undermine the radical forms of working-class solidarity described in the interchapters. In doing so, Steinbeck obscures the role of government relief work and reinforces an ideology of self-reliance that was also promoted by New Deal legislation. As a result, *The Grapes of Wrath* ends with an image of solidarity far removed from New Deal relief politics, essentially absolving the federal government of its responsibility in caring for its poor, while endorsing an ideological vision in which the poor are responsible for their own destiny.

In *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright exposes the racial prejudice embedded in New Deal policy. In contrast to the temporarily disadvantaged Joads, Bigger Thomas and his family live in a state of multigenerational poverty rooted in racial inequality. As a result, while the novel is set in the same historical period as *The Grapes of Wrath*, the poverty that Wright describes is neither new nor a product of the Great Depression. Many historians have already acknowledged how poorly the New Deal addressed this sort of racialized poverty. Nevertheless, Wright explicitly introduces Bigger and his family as recipients of federal relief. Then, Wright goes on to describe the family's access to aid as deeply tied to a private and paternalistic relief system controlled by rich white philanthropists such as the Daltons. In the novel, the relief workers hold the Thomas family's unemployment check hostage to coerce Bigger into domestic service. Wright's focus on the movement from formal state relief to private domestic labor reveals the racialized structure of New Deal relief policies, revealing how Black aid recipients became the target of state violence first by refusing to offer them the same employment opportunities that it gave unemployed white families, and then by authorizing a form of relief that forced many poor African Americans into demeaning jobs. In the end, *Native*

*Son* describes how New Deal policy reinforced a racialized economy that disproportionately benefitted white Americans. While Wright does criticize the U.S. government more directly than Steinbeck, the novel's naturalistic treatment of African American criminalization does not present an alternative approach to federal relief work. Instead, Wright's description of Bigger's trial explores how white fantasies of philanthropy strengthen and obscure the structural inequalities of a racialized welfare state.

Meridel Le Sueur's description of the New Deal era relief system highlights the gendered violence enacted by New Deal state bureaucracy. In *The Girl* (written 1935-1945; published 1978), Le Sueur describes how a group of white working-class women in 1930s Minneapolis struggle to acquire relief from a state system that imposes strict moral guidelines and invasive policies designed to exclude those the state deems immoral. Le Sueur expands Steinbeck's and Wright's critique of New Deal policy by asserting that the emerging welfare state acted as a coercive form of moral re-education. Throughout the novel, Le Sueur highlights the experiences of poor women trying to access aid and then discovering how federally authorized relief officers used their position to reshape the behavior of people in the U.S. as a prerequisite to receiving aid. *The Girl* shows how this new form of gendered poverty surveillance forces working-class people to trade privacy, agency, and autonomy for basic economic security under the threat of violence.

Reading Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* alongside Wright's *Native Son* and Le Sueur's *The Girl* extends the critical conversation regarding the 1930s literary Left in a number of ways. First, I reveal how three novelists criticized the forms of state power emerging in the 1930s, even though each of these authors come from a different

ideological, gendered, and racial position. I document a concern across all three texts regarding how relief programs targeted working-class people for intense moral scrutiny. Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur each condemn the moralizing approach to relief in their own way. Poverty is a complex and multifaceted experience, and relief novels like these show how the state responded to requests for aid differently depending on the recipient's race, gender, and perceived morality. These three novels pose crucial questions about the integrity and purpose of the emerging welfare state that remain relevant to this day and help explain why many working-class people continue to mistrust the government. This study also documents the range of political views held by these writers. While Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur were all clearly concerned with how new federal relief policies regulated the lives of poor people, these authors did not agree on how the state should approach American poverty. These differences imply that, while the literary Left may have agreed on the general nature of the problem, there was a considerable range of working-class perspectives regarding the solution.

### **Historical Context: The Birth of the Welfare State**

The New Deal is one of the most well-known political programs in U.S. history. Many of the United States' longest-standing welfare services, including social security and unemployment insurance, were introduced during this time. Many contemporary democrats continue to celebrate the achievements of the New Deal in popular and political discourse. Yet, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt accepted his nomination for the presidency in Chicago in 1932, the New Deal was not even a recognizable political slogan. It was a simply an expression penned by Louis Howe, a political advisor and speech writer for the FDR presidential campaign (Grafton 14). It wasn't until the press

picked up on this phrase the following day that the phrase “New Deal” became enshrined in U.S. political history. Nevertheless, during his acceptance speech, President Roosevelt promised something evocative when he assured the American people that “the Federal Government will assume bold leadership in distress relief” (16). To Depression-era Americans, this pledge indicated a dramatic reversal of federal priorities. In the four years prior to FDR’s first term, President Hoover stood firm in his position that the federal government should avoid direct aid to the poor, believing instead that the best way to bolster the economy was through strengthening private industry, including banks and railroads (Carcasson). In short, the Hoover administration instituted a policy of inaction justified by the belief that relief work lies outside the purview of the federal government. Given Hoover’s hands-off approach to relief that lasted for the first three years of the Depression, “bold leadership” sounded like a policy reversal.<sup>10</sup>

The sudden shock of the stock market crash in 1929 coupled with conservative leadership dismissing federal responsibility for the economic crisis led many Americans to assume personal responsibility for their poverty. In *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man*, historian Robert McElvaine argues that many Americans, "having convinced themselves that they were personally responsible for their economic success in the twenties, people had, initially at least, little choice but to accept personal responsibility for failure in the early thirties" (McElvaine 19). The culture of guilt and self-blame McElvaine describes made it difficult for many Americans to ask

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<sup>10</sup> President Hoover reinforced feelings of shame and personal responsibility by claiming that any sustained federal relief “would destroy the sense of community in localities,” “undermine self-reliance,” and “make people dependent,” all of which remain key aspects of conservative ideology to this day (McElvaine 20).

the federal government for aid, especially as the Hoover administration reinforced the ideology of personal responsibility in his political discourse. As a result, when FDR assumed the presidency in 1933, letters from desperate but anxious citizens poured into the White House. These letters requesting relief were riddled with the language of shame and humiliation—feelings that have haunted poor Americans in need of federal relief for generations. In one letter, dated December 14, 1934, a widow wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt asking for a winter coat. The writer explains that she felt “worthy of asking you about this” because she was supporting a “son of fourteen years . . . on a very small sum” and was still able to keep him in school (57). Even after this detailed moral justification, the widow ends the letter requesting Eleanor to “treat this confidentially” and then assured the First Lady that she “shall do likewise,” hinting at the shame embedded into this mother’s request for aid (57). In this one short letter, a wide range of values and emotions associated with 1930s poverty is on display, from maternal pride and faith in the American work ethic to feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, and the fear of dependency.

President Roosevelt’s acceptance speech contained a harsh criticism of federal inaction. “For years,” FDR said, “Washington has alternated between putting its head in the sand and saying there is no large number of destitute people in our midst who need food and clothing, and then saying the States should take care of them, if there are” (Grafton 16-17). Under Hoover’s *laissez faire* model of relief, private institutions managed poverty. President Roosevelt’s pledge to provide a “New Deal for the American people” was not only a rallying cry for a crestfallen nation in the throes of depression, but the beginning a new role for the federal government in the lives of ordinary American.

For the first time in U.S. history, the federal government took direct action to accept the responsibility for the welfare of its citizens.<sup>11</sup>

As many recent historians attest, however, the government aid came with limits and moral stipulations (Hiltzik, Kidd, Patterson, Valocchi). For these scholars, the New Deal was far from being the progressive fantasy frequently evoked in popular discourse.<sup>12</sup> For some, the New Deal was rather conservative in its form and severely limited in its effect. The goal, they explain, was simply to save capitalism from itself and foster a "far truer individualism." Evidence for this critique appears in New Deal policy where the promise of relief was tied to work requirements and means-tested surveillance systems, which set the United States on a path toward creating one of the most punitive and dehumanizing welfare systems in the Western world. In doing so, the Roosevelt administration institutionalized many of the flawed practices common in private relief efforts that supported an unequal, racialized, and gendered economy, rather than replacing them.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the transition from federal inaction to direct intervention, see Collins and Goldberg's *When Government Helped*. They argue: "Although there had always been in American political culture a fear of 'big government,' with the exception of the Civil War and World War I exigencies, the federal government had been largely absent in the lives and consciousness of most Americans. When it was clear that the private economy had collapsed and that the state governments with which the public was most familiar could not cope, there was only one remedy left. Thus, with no real personal residue of resentment against the federal government, most were willing to trust it to respond to their distress" (3).

<sup>12</sup> Collins and Goldberg, for instance, argue that the greatest achievement of the New Deal was its ability "to convey to the dispirited people of this nation the feeling that their government cared about them and could . . . help them solve their problems" (293).

<sup>13</sup> Contemporary scholarship on the New Deal demonstrates how New Deal policy failed to substantially address the racial discrimination or gender expectations that underwrote an unequal and unjust economic system. For one analysis of this topic see Steve Valocchi's "The Racial Basis of Capitalism and the State, and the Impact of the New Deal on African Americans."

Shortcomings in the New Deal were increasingly visible to the public by President Roosevelt's second term and the tensions surrounding government relief rose to new heights. Conservative critics of the New Deal attacked programs such as the WPA for their inefficiencies by invoking the fear of aiding the undeserving and mockingly referring to the program as "We Pay for All" or "We Piddle Around" (Patterson 44). Liberal thinkers argued that the New Deal didn't go far enough to support struggling Americans. Today, historians like Patterson described the ways in which the New Deal replicated older forms of social inequality: "the most obvious characteristic of the new order was its primary reliance on contributory social insurance and its concomitant distaste for welfare, a reliance reflecting the age-old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor" (74). President Roosevelt firmly believed that government aid should always come in the form of opportunities rather than handouts. As a result, New Deal policies promoted paths to self-sufficiency rather than a universal safety net independent of one's work status. By continuing to rely on a distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, the New Deal became a regulatory mechanism that imposed a punishingly individualistic moral order on the American public in exchange for temporary aid. President Roosevelt advocated for this stringent relief in his public addresses, as well. Following one of the most frequently quoted passages from his Second Inaugural Address—"I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished"—the president immediately offered a number of qualifiers: "We are determined," he says, "to make *every American citizen* the subject of his country's interest and concern; and we will never regard *any faithful law-abiding group within our borders* as superfluous" (Grafton 61, emphasis added). Here, the President limited the

scope of federal responsibility by citizenship status, moral conduct, and legal standing. Not only did the President's rhetoric exclude the many non-citizen workers who were disproportionately impacted by the Depression (such as migrant workers); he also implied that American citizens should be (and were) excluded from the federal responsibility of general welfare if they were either unfaithful or unlawful. These categories are complex. "Faithful" could be understood as a religious or a nationalistic requirement. If we take FDR's "faithful" literally, then the statement questions the moral worthiness of the many ethnic Americans who continued to practice their own religions rather than assimilating to the distinctly American version of Christianity outlined in Max Weber's 1905 text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. If we take "faithful" more figuratively, then the statement acquires sociopolitical dimensions as well. To be faithful to the American way of life implies a tacit belief in what FDR called "economic democracy" and its underlying premise that capitalism is the best economic system to ensure individual freedom.<sup>14</sup> Given the considerable presence of socialist and communist movements in the 1930s, this assumed faith in free market ideology and private industry disqualified some of the most vulnerable members of the working class. Citing lawfulness as a prerequisite to federal relief is concerning due to state and local ordinances against vagrancy, which made poverty itself unlawful, introducing a catch-22 where the needier one was the more likely that person would be excluded from receiving relief. My reading of working-class novels considers the extent to which the New

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<sup>14</sup> The language of "faithful" is also racialized rhetoric when considered in relation to African American laborers—who could either be "faithful" (accepting subordination) or deemed "uppity" and unworthy of aid.

introduced ways for the federal government to surveil and coercively manage the lives of poor people living in the U.S.

As the federal relief system developed into a bureaucratic regime espousing an ethic of personal responsibility and self-reliance, poor people learned how to describe their poverty in ways that were legible to the state. The majority of social workers were middle-class white women, many of whom scrutinized the moral behavior of potential welfare recipients before they allocated aid. As a result, moral policing became a central feature of the New Deal welfare state, requiring a certain set of narrowly defined middle-class behaviors as a prerequisite for receiving aid. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) serves as a telling example. The program was instituted in 1935 to provide relief funding to mothers who had no means of providing for their children. As a stringent, means-tested program, however, AFDC only granted funding to families who could prove that the father was entirely out of the picture (i.e., deceased, absent, or unable to work). Fearing that AFDC would become "a haven for immoral welfare mothers," relief officers instituted "midnight raids" in an attempt to catch men visiting overnight in welfare homes and thus disqualify the family from receiving any further government aid (Patterson 85). The poor strategically navigated the emergent federal relief bureaucracy and made difficult decisions regarding when, where, and how to apply for the aid they so desperately needed. As Fraser and Gerstle write: "the New Deal was not only an effort to deal with the particular problems of the 1930s; it was also a process of building government institutions where none existed, of choosing among various prescriptions for an expanded American state" (86). While the Roosevelt Administration introduced many strategies to mitigate poverty, its longest lasting legacy is an ideological one in which

federal relief serves as a re-educative tool pressuring poor people to adopt a particular set of American values in exchange for economic security.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*, and *The Girl* are part of the Depression-era's cultural turn toward the themes of labor, class, and economic justice.<sup>15</sup> In writing these novels, however, Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur each offer a distinct representation of the U.S. welfare system. All three authors reveal aspects of the structural violence enacted by the New Deal and revealed how the U.S. approach to welfare served as an impediment to financial security just as often as it helped. Steinbeck describes rural, migrant life in America at a period when the U.S. government caught between two competing systems of poverty management. Wright, in contrast, reveals how the U.S. relief system relegated poor African Americans to subordinate labor positions. Le Sueur demonstrates how New Deal policies functioned as a threat to women's autonomy and identifies a new form of bureaucratic state power developing in the 1930s. The central characters in each novel face numerous challenges in the text, but despite the presence of the New Deal in all three novels, U.S. welfare fails to provide them with sufficient relief from their circumstances. Instead, more often than not, the federal presence and policies on display in these novels are impediments to their survival and produce adverse psychological effect on the recipient. By analyzing these three texts together, I continue the work of scholars seeking to understand the culture of the Left during the 1930s, including Constance Coiner, Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, Paula Rabinowitz, and

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<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth exploration of the features of proletarian literature, see Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: politics and form in U.S. proletarian fiction, 1929-1941*, where she discusses John Steinbeck's work alongside several other proletarian writers such as John Dos Passos, Tillie Olsen, Myra Page, and Agnes Smedley. Part of what makes a text "proletarian," is its deep commitment to describing the interiority and complexity of work-class life, as Steinbeck's focus on decency does in this scene.

Michael Szalay.<sup>16</sup> These authors provide a foundation for the critical analysis of 1930s left culture by documenting how labor politics and radical literature produced during this time had a lasting impact on American society. My argument here contributes to these studies by foregrounding New Deal policies rather than labor movement and communist politics. This shift in focus provides new insight into the political commitments of Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur with regards to the labor movement as well as emerging welfare policies. Controversial federal policies regarding welfare, from vagrancy laws and residency requirements to racial and gender exclusion rules, appear frequently in Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur, and my reading of their novels below, I give my full attention to the authors' critical engagement with welfare politics.

### **Resisting the Faithful and Lawful Relief Subject in *The Grapes of Wrath***

Eighty years after its publication, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) remains one of the most recognized titles in 20th-century American literature and continues to serve as a canonical text for describing the plight of the poor and dispossessed during the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Given its description of the Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* is as frequently studied by historians and sociologists as it is by literary critics, which greatly expands its

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<sup>16</sup> Foley's work contributed to the recovery of proletarian literature from the so-called "trash heap of political propaganda," rehabilitating a neglected body of work, and making radical left authors fit for critical scholarship. Foley can be read alongside previous scholarship by Daniel Aaron, Alan Wald, and Cary Nelson. Denning argues that proletarian literature was in fact at the forefront of American popular culture throughout the 1930s and played an important role in shaping American culture. Coiner and Rabinowitz emphasize the role that women writers played in this project, adding authors like Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen to the long list of male authors already associated with the literary Left, challenging the masculinism of earlier accounts of this tradition, and showing the myriad ways women's voices broaden and strengthen our understanding of the proletarian genre.

<sup>17</sup> See Kathleen Hicks's "Steinbeck Today," for a brief overview of the continued scholarly interest in *The Grapes of Wrath* and other works by Steinbeck.

contemporary critical presence.<sup>18</sup> My reading lies at the intersection of these various approaches, incorporating historical analysis of the New Deal alongside interpretive literary analysis pertaining to the Joads and their relationship to the state. I find that Steinbeck expressed a high degree of concern about how federal relief could reshape the lives of Depression-era laborers. This new form of state power appears in the novel through two contradictory images of the state. On the one hand, sheriffs regularly enforce punitive measures of poverty management while the Joads journey westward. But on the other hand, Weedpatch demonstrates the liberal impulse to provide relief to those suffering from Depression economics. Steinbeck demonstrates how a working-class ideology of individual self-reliance structures the lives and expectations of laborers as they attempt to navigate these two competing systems. The state targets the Joads and other migrant workers as a threat to the national wellbeing, refusing to take responsibility for the poor as President Roosevelt promised in his speeches. While Steinbeck is critical of this misuse of state power, he is more conflicted about the ethics of self-reliance. As *The Grapes of Wrath* ends, Steinbeck presents an idealized image of working-class self-reliance that absolves the federal government of responsibility rather than condemning the government for its inadequate and misdirected response to Depression-era poverty. Thus, in a final analysis, Steinbeck—like his characters—is unable to embrace a more robust vision of working-class solidarity capable of demanding social provision from the New Deal government.

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<sup>18</sup> Recent scholarship ranges from discussions of the novel's political implications (Godfrey, Zirakzadeh), gender representation (Williamson), and its relationship to postcolonial thought (Cruz) to historical readings reimagining *The Grapes of Wrath* as an ethnographic work (Barden).

*The Grapes of Wrath* inverts Roosevelt's faithful and law-abiding rhetoric. The opening scene involves the protagonist, Tom Joad, being released from McAlester prison after serving a seven-year sentence for murder. While this criminal past marks Tom as a morally compromised individual according to the state, Steinbeck consistently portrays Tom as the novel's key moral actor. Tom is deeply concerned with the question of right and wrong even though his sense of goodness differs from the law. During the opening encounter with a trucker, for instance, Tom convinces the driver to give him a lift (which is against the law and company policy) by arguing that "sometimes a guy'll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker" (Steinbeck 7). Later on, after learning from a neighboring farmer, Muley, how the banks have been buying up property and driving folks off their land, Tom advocates for the displaced people such as Muley, even though the banks purchases are legal. In what amounts to a moral debate concerning trespassing and property rights, Tom sides with Muley and the dispossessed farmer more generally, explaining that: "settin' here restin' or sleepin' on the groun'—that ain't gettin' in no trouble. That ain't doin' nothin' wrong" (57). From the beginning, Steinbeck offers a kind of morality that operates independently from a U.S. legal framework that defends property rights at the expense of the working class. *The Grapes of Wrath* highlights how the federal legal system disadvantaged small farmers while giving banks a chance to expand aggressively, thereby calling attention to the legal forms of injustice that led to the Depression. In doing so, Steinbeck reveals that legal is not the same as moral. Troubling the boundary between the lawful and the good is a key form of dramatic tension throughout the novel, questioning the logical of federal welfare policies that segment the poor into distinguishable "deserving" and "undeserving" categories.

While Tom occupies the position of the moral felon, Casy plays the similarly ambivalent role of the preacher who lost his faith. As adamant as he is about his status as a *former* preacher, Casy rarely misses a chance to deliver a sermon to fellow migrants. As with Tom, the substance of Casy's moral discourse differs from the official script concerning the deserving poor inscribed through New Deal policies and rhetoric. Casy refigures what it means to be faithful to himself, his community, and his nation during the Depression. This transformation leaves "a lot of sinful idears" seeming "kinda sensible" (20). Casy explains that his conflicted spirituality is tangled up with his sexual desires and the expectation for preachers to remain celibate. Unable to resolve the conflict between his love of God and his love of women, Casy bursts out, "the hell with it! There ain't no sin and their ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say" (23). Casy describes a humanist morality grounded in lived experiences rather than holy texts, acknowledging that a moral system isn't useful unless it accounts for the messiness of real life. Sin and virtue are not absolute categories ordained by an almighty power, but "just stuff people do" that must be contextualized before determining its practical and moral value

As the Joads and Casy move west in the hope of finding work in California, the migrants encounter situations that test the limits of their sense of morality and working-class solidarity. At times, Casy's faith in people is confirmed, such as when other dispossessed families use mutual aid networks to travel "as a unit" (163). By working together, working-class families overcome challenges that individual families would struggle to master on their own (such as car troubles). Mutual aid networks also allow for

the sharing of food, supplies, and knowledge in accordance with one's needs and abilities. In one of the text's interchapters, Steinbeck describes this sort of mutual aid as a "zygote," or the originating moment where two beings become one, engendering growth and transformation (151). Steinbeck defines this new beginning further as the transition from "I to 'we,'"—from individualism to collectivism—and continues to develop proletarian kinship structures right up until the final scene where Rose of Sharon sustains a dying stranger with her breast milk, transforming the family-oriented maternal impulse into a community ethic of care (152).<sup>19</sup> Throughout the novel, Steinbeck presents collective ethics,<sup>20</sup> working-class solidarity, and extended kinship networks as the solution to the difficult economic situations his characters face during the Depression.

For some critics, this turn to the social rather than the political is a mark of the novel's conservatism. Cyrus Zirakzadeh, for instance, argues that "the emergence of a new social order is in a sense apolitical, because the book says very little about the function of government in facilitating the transformation" (614). Considering the bold promises of the New Deal circulating in the 1930s and the general absence of relief available to the Okies in Steinbeck's novel, I agree with Zirakzadeh's critical assessment. Given the emphasis the Roosevelt Administration placed on providing relief to impoverished farmers through programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Civilian Conservation

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<sup>19</sup> See Jennifer Williamson's "Caretaking, Domesticity, and Gender in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: 'His Home Is Not the Land'" for a thorough discussion of gender in the novel's concluding scene.

<sup>20</sup> For a deeper analysis of Steinbeck's collective ethics, see Godfrey, who suggests (in part) that "the novel ultimately argues that this ethic has to be modified—moved from the limited and potentially racist community offered by kinship or blood to the broader community offered by Marxism—but its initial grounding in familiar American values is clear" (111).

Corps (CCC), and the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOCL), it is shocking that the Joads and the other impoverished families in *The Grapes of Wrath* struggled to find adequate relief. Considering Steinbeck's knowledge of New Deal policy, the complete absence of federal relief in the first half of the novel is a subtle critique of the government's welfare programs.

The mutual aid and working-class solidarity that appears throughout the novel typically occurs in spite of—and in direct conflict with—capitalist economics and state authority. In one interchapter, Steinbeck demonstrates that not everyone on the road has the Okies' best interests in mind, criticizing the commercial cunning, upselling, and exploitation the Joads face on their journey. Car salesmen, shopkeepers, gas station attendants, and mechanics seek to maximize the profit margin on their second-hand wares and take advantage of a desperate population who need cheap transportation fast. Steinbeck denounces the cutthroat profiteering that animates this group of unscrupulous business owners and draws a clear contrast between the working-class collective ethics and the unrestrained capitalism of the roadside opportunists. In these moments, Steinbeck implies that capitalist ideologies are an impediment to working-class solidarity.

Steinbeck is also critical of state authority, which appears first in the form of law. Federal legislation complicates the Okies' safety and comfort throughout the novel. When Grampa Joad dies in route to California, for instance, the family discusses what to do with the body. Here, Pa reminds his family that “they's laws. You got to report a death . . . an' when you do that, they either take forty dollars for the undertaker or they take him for a pauper” (139). The cost for a state-sanctioned burial represents a serious financial burden to the family, but Uncle John isn't sure that a pauper funeral is better. He declares

with pride that “we never did have no paupers,” to which Pa readily agrees, asserting his faith in American self-reliance: “we never took nothin’ we couldn’ pay; we never suffered no man’s charity” (139). This moment marks the beginning of the Joads’ conflation of charity and relief that stigmatizes federal aid throughout the novel. At the same time, Pa is troubled by the way modern laws obstruct traditional working-class burial practices. In the end, he declares that he’s got the right to bury his own, justifying the decision as follows: “sometimes the law can’t be foller’d no way . . . not in decency, anyways . . . sometimes a fella got to sift the law” (140). Uncle John and Casy readily agree with Pa’s logic. Soon after, Steinbeck describes how Ma prepares Grampa Joad’s body with great compassion, showing how unsanctioned acts of remembrance still contain a great deal of dignity and respect. This scene exposes the tension between federal law and working-class life. For Pa, the civil responsibility of informing the government of a death in the family appears abstract, expensive, and ill-suited to an agrarian ethics of care where a man can “shape the grave nice with his own shovel” (140). Paying an undertaker to do this feels like a double insult, first by charging them a hefty fee, and then by taking away the honor of preparing the body themselves, which feels more dignified than giving such intimate work to a stranger. The situation leaves Tom feeling jaded about state relief, complaining that “the gov’ment’s got more interest in a dead man than a live one” (140). Scenes like this establish an antagonistic relationship between Working-class Americans and the federal government. The Joads are familiar with the government’s hands-off approach to agrarian life, so when federal authority does appear, its rules and regulations are not only expensive, but also ill-fit to their self-reliant way of life. As a result, Steinbeck criticizes the misguided presence of

the government rather than its absence, which seems counterintuitive at a time when federal relief programs were actively targeting families such as those in *The Grapes of Wrath* for support.

Once the Joads reach California, the tension between conflicting forms of state authority erupts into a series of violent encounters with local law enforcement. Word about vagrancy laws reach the Joads as they approach a roadside camp where the owner expresses a belief in property rights that clashes with the Joads' agrarian expectation to rest wherever there is space enough to lie down. Tom suggests that "we can sleep in the ditch right beside the road, an' it won't cost nothin'" (186). The owner informs them that is illegal and adds that the: "deputy sheriff comes on by in the night. Might make it tough for ya. Got a law against sleepin' out in this State. Got a law about vagrants" (186). This scene reminds readers about the high cost of poverty in the U.S. as laws concerning when and where one can sleep make migrant life expensive. This scene also prepares readers for a moment when, just a few nights later, the local sheriff accosts the Joad women while they are parked on the side of the road and the men are cleaning up in a nearby river. The sheriff's message is short and to the point: "you can't stay here . . . if you're here tomorra this time I'll run you in. We don't want none of you settlin' down here" (213). On one level, these encounters with local state authority show how preexisting legislation clashes with New Deal policies designed to help the poor. On another level, however, these scenes reveal how relief policies operated in practice, both in how relief distribution depended on local management and by highlighting the presence of strict residency requirements that the Joads did not meet. As an out-of-state family, the Joads were a threat and a burden to the regional relief infrastructure, and thus targeted by local

sheriffs who were tasked with the official responsibility of carefully regulating their district's allotment of federal relief funding.

One particularly bad encounter with state authority in *The Grapes of Wrath* involves red baiting and violence. While scouting out employment opportunities in a Hooverville settlement, Al and Tom meet Floyd Knowles, a migrant worker familiar with the region. When a recruiter arrives with news of workers needed in Tulare County, Floyd demands better details regarding its pay, knowing all too well how recruiters overpromise the amount of work to create a surplus labor pool and lower wages. Floyd announces this insidious recruitment strategy to the crowd of migrants only to discover that the contractor is accompanied by a deputy. Once the contractor explains to the deputy on duty that Floyd is “talkin’ red, agitating trouble,” the force of the state law enforcement is unleashed on the workers. The deputy responds to his summons as follows:

The deputy turned back to them. “Might be a good idear to go,” he said. The thin smile was back on his face. “Board of Health says we got to clean out this camp. An’ if it gets around that you got reds out here—why, somebody might git hurt. Be a good idear if all you fellas moved on to Tulare. They isn’t a thing to do aroun’ here. That’s jus’ a friendly way a telling you. Be a bunch a guys down here, maybe with pick handles, if you ain’t gone.” (264)

This scene reveals the collusion between the owners of capital and official state power. Backed by federal authority, the recruiter knows he can advertise misleading work terms to migrants without fear of reprisal. A deputy on hand legitimizes the recruiter’s message,

allowing the land owners and capitalists of Tulare County to operate above the law. Steinbeck highlights the role of the state in creating and maintaining unfair labor conditions for the very people the Roosevelt Administration promised to protect. This concern about federal government's priorities regarding labor and capital is consistent with some critical histories of the New Deal that claim its central mission was to "to revive and promote American capitalism," rather than "replace it with a state-directed economy" that might prove more egalitarian (Himmelberg 48). President Roosevelt's public addresses reinforces this priority, as well. In a campaign speech delivered October 1936, for instance, the President defended the New Deal from claims that the policies were hostile to business, arguing that "behind the growing recovery of today is a story of deliberate government acceptance of responsibility to save business—to save the American system of private enterprise and economic democracy" (Grafton 53). Later, he adds: "I have always believed, and I always will believe in private enterprise as the backbone of economic well-being in the United States" (54). When considered alongside the putative state presence in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Roosevelt's faith in business and private enterprise as the backbone of economic well-being seems misplaced or hypocritical from a working-class perspective. The "deliberate government acceptance of responsibility to save business" in *The Grapes of Wrath* does not create economic well-being for Floyd, the Joads, or other migrants in search of farm labor. Instead, the deputy's presence makes it easier for business to exploit vulnerable workers by authorizing a form of American capitalism in which the employer sets the wages. By describing the collaboration between private enterprise and the state, Steinbeck demonstrates how the

New Deal welfare state could further disadvantage already disenfranchised workers through prioritizing full employment over workers' rights.

Floyd's outburst regarding the injustice of the recruiter's methods nearly cost him his life. Fearing what will happen to him now that he's labeled a communist agitator, Floyd punches the deputy in an effort to escape his impending arrest. Tom and Casy intervene and knock the deputy unconscious, allowing Floyd to escape. In the pages following this fight, Steinbeck considers the psychological impact of the federal government's increased involvement in working-class life. Casy assumes full responsibility for the attack to protect Tom from receiving a parole violation. As a result, the deputy arrests Casy, who is not seen or heard from again until the final pages of the novel where a sheriff kills him for organizing migrant workers. Ma Joad despises all of this violence and expresses as much to her family. Tom agrees, and then justifies his behavior saying:

I know, Ma. I'm a-tryin'. But them deputies—Did you ever see a deputy that didn' have a fat ass? An' they waggle their ass an' flop their gun aroun'. Ma . . . if it was the law they was workin' with, why we could take it. But it *ain't* the law. They're a-workin' away at our spirits. They're a-tryin' to make us cringe an' crawl like a whipped bitch. They tryin' to break us. Why, Jesus Christ, Ma, they comes a time when the on'y way a fella can keep his decency is by takin' a sock at a cop. They're workin' on our decency." (Steinbeck 279)

Tom describes these working-class encounters with state authority as dehumanizing. The deputy takes advantage of his position to disparage and denigrate migrants. His prejudice

against Okies manifests as an attack on Tom's "spirit" in an effort to exert both physical and psychological dominance over these outsiders. Tom feels that these representatives of state power demand that the Joads "cringe an' crawl" like a dog under his master's threatening presence, which is as far from Roosevelt's vision of federal responsibility as one can imagine. Yet it is the New Deal's celebration and support of private industry that emboldens the deputy to stretch his authority in such a manner. Law enforcement in *The Grapes of Wrath* demand subservience from the Joads and other migrants, who use their demand for livable wages as justification to arrest the poor. In the end, Tom describes this police behavior as an assault on "decency," something that the Joads and many other working-class families try to hold on to even when it means breaking the law or risking their lives. Over and over, state authority makes decent living harder for laborers.

It is the need to escape the cruelty of the state rather than the agony of poverty that drives the Joads to seek shelter at Weedpatch, the nearby government-sanctioned worker camp.<sup>21</sup> Tom justifies the decision as follows: "Gonna look for that gov'ment camp . . . A fella said they don' let no deputies in there. Ma—I got to get away from 'em. I'm scairt I'll kill one" (280). The camp has many modern amenities that improve migrants' quality of life during their stay, such as warm water, sanitation, showers, sufficient food, and decent lodgings. The Joads have struggled to acquire these

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<sup>21</sup> Steinbeck modeled Weedpatch after a New Deal relief camp he visited in California while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. After hearing about the everyday management and general culture of government relief camps from the manager, Tom Collins (to whom the author dedicated the book), Steinbeck was amazed by the warmth and vitality of its occupants, which he tries to capture in the novel. See Jackson Benson's "'To Tom, Who Lived It': John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch." for a detailed description of the model California worker camp.

necessities elsewhere on the journey, even when paying fifty cents to sleep along the road. What really stands out to the Joads, however, is the camp's protection from local state authority. Not only are deputies not allowed in the camp without a warrant, but also many of the vagrancy laws and residency requirements that have given the Joads so much trouble on the road do not apply here. Steinbeck highlights the role of the central committee governing the camp and ensuring that everything runs smoothly. Steinbeck's description of the democratic leadership and autonomy at Weedpatch comes from his experience visiting a worker camp in California. In an article studying this real-life camp, Jackson Benson explained that the "scheme of operation was based on the premise that the worst thing that could happen would be for the migrants to be thrust into a cold, bureaucratically run camp, bristling with rules governing every aspect of their lives" (Benson 164). Unfortunately, many New Deal programs relied on precisely that kind of bureaucratic management, making this camp an exception to the rule. Steinbeck's preoccupation with the harm caused by increased state presence throughout *The Grapes of Wrath* can help us view Weedpatch as a policy recommendation. In this section, Steinbeck advocates for relief and welfare programs that honor local knowledge and direct, working-class governance rather than top-down support allocated through bureaucratic systems. Under these conditions, the Joads and other working-class families remember what it means to be "treated as human" (Steinbeck 296).

Despite Steinbeck's celebratory description of Weedpatch, the relief camp faces at least four distinct threats to its existence, two of which lie outside the camp's jurisdiction and two that emerge from within. The two external threats include the forces already described above: state authority and private industry. Deputies see Weedpatch as

a constraint on their power and places many migrant workers outside of their jurisdiction. Private industry views the camp as a threat because it raises workers' expectations and gives them grounds to demand better work and pay. They fear that treating migrants as humans will make workers "hard to handle" and limit their profits (296). Since the camp presents a threat to both forms of entrenched power in California, private industry and local state authority work together to undermine federal policies that could better protect the poor. Deputies and landowners share the same antagonistic sentiment regarding the role of the federal government in local labor issues, which one deputy describes as follows: "Them goddamn gov'ment camps . . . give people hot water, and' they gonna want hot water. Give 'em flush toilets, an' they gonna want 'em. An' . . . they hol' red meetin's in them gov'ment camps. All figgerin' how to git on relief" (333). The deputy cannot contain his anger and contempt for a government willing to grant migrant workers the most basic comforts, such as hot water and appropriate sanitation facilities. Moreover, he immediately turns to red baiting and hyperbole to emphasize his distaste for federal aid, expressing a common conservative myth that providing relief damages one's desire to work even though—more often than not—members of the American working class trying to stay *off* relief in an effort to provide for themselves.

But these external threats are not the only forces that jeopardize the government camp. Weedpatch is also plagued by competing moral frameworks and a welfare stigma that conflates relief with charity. These ideological challenges are more insidious than the two threats above because many members of the working class have internalized them. Thus, even though many of the migrants at Weedpatch practice the collectivist ethics Steinbeck describes elsewhere in the text, he introduces a second moral framework

embodied by the Lady's committee. These women hold on to middle-class domestic values of cleanliness, decorum, and femininity which appear ill-fit for the daily challenges of migrant life. Ma Joad senses the Lady's committee's temperament so acutely that she feels compelled to tidy up their home and pressure Rose of Sharon to wash her legs, put on her shoes, and braid her hair, just so the family doesn't appear "frawny" when the ladies enter (303). When the Lady's committee arrives, they discuss religion, Rose of Sharon's pregnancy, and the immorality of dancing. Then, without prompting, the leader of the Lady's committee looks at Rose of Sharon's pregnant body and says,

"You be a good girl . . . you be good. If you got sin on you—you better watch out for that there baby . . . they's scandalous things goes on in this here camp . . . Ever' Sat'dy night they's dancin', an' not only squar' dancin', neither. They's some does clutch-an'-hug dancin'! I seen 'em." (308)

She goes on to tell a story about how a young woman impregnated out of marriage—like Rose of Sharon—was punished by God for her sin until "she thinned out and she skinnied out, an' . . . dropped that baby, dead" (330). The story terrifies Rose of Sharon, partly due to its awfulness, but also because she has engaged in the same behavior with Connie. The camp manager consoles her by retelling the same story with a more reasonable set of facts: "they were too hungry and too tired. And they worked too hard. And they rode on a truck over bumps. They were sick. It wasn't their fault" (311). This does little to alleviate her fear, as she has suffered all of the hardships the manager just described during her

own pregnancy, and the threat of a stillborn baby haunts Rose of Sharon until the end of the novel, where that terrifying possibility becomes reality.

The description of the Lady's committee demonstrates the destructiveness of the narrow, judgmental, and prescriptive morality used to determine one's worth. In the context of a migrant camp where men, women, and children work side-by-side in the field, the committee's desire to see Ma and Rose of Sharon practice middle-class domesticity feels ill-fit. Their commitment to feminine purity of mind, body, and spirit is similarly misplaced for working-class women trying to survive the Depression. Small pleasures such as dancing are essential to maintaining hope and building community. The righteous rhetoric deployed by the Lady's committee is harsh after nearly three-hundred pages of Casy's celebration of love, human relationships, and working-class solidarity. Steinbeck's critical presentation of this alternate morality draws attention to the alarmist rhetoric used in many relief agencies, which often employed middle-class white women who shared the rigid set of moral ideals held by the Lady's Committee.<sup>22</sup>

It is neither the external threats nor middle-class morality that pressure the Joads family to leave Weedpatch. In fact, Steinbeck shows how none of these forces alone can overcome the extraordinary power of working-class ingenuity when the migrants have a place to gather and organize. Welfare, at its best, can create spaces such as Weedpatch where solidarity can flourish. It is here that migrants defend themselves against the combined might of private industry and state authority when a group of men try to

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<sup>22</sup> This was especially true for female aid recipients, since women have often been held to a higher moral standard throughout American history. See Michael Hiltzik's *The New Deal: A Modern History* to read more about how relief applicants were often perceived to be "morally deficient" (158).

infiltrate the camp to incite a riot. The plan fails due to the foresight, resourcefulness, and solidarity of the working-class community. The moral order practiced by the Lady's committee fails to gain a secure foothold in the community as the camp manager and other migrants learn to ignore their fear-of-God rhetoric. The manager's decision to downplay the righteous authority of the Lady's Committee shows a preference for sympathy and tenderness over rigid moral principles, granting the community the power to tackle challenges as they appear and by supporting one another along the way.

What ultimately convinces the Joads to leave Weedpatch after one month is ideological. The idea of receiving relief remains unsettling to this working-class family because of a belief in the value of self-reliance that stigmatizes any aid that bears a resemblance to charity. The central committee has to remind camp residents that they can access groceries on credit and pay the debt with labor if they do not have money. Even then migrants like Mrs. Joyce are hesitant to accept support, asserting that she "ain't never took no charity" and assumes that she does not deserve food if she cannot afford it (316). The statement demonstrates how many working-class people internalized a toxic myth about self-reliance that conflates charity (a concept rooted in religion that suggests those with greater wealth have an obligation to give to the needy) with welfare (a political entitlement that ensures access to basic material needs). The only way the committee can get residents to feed their starving families on the camp's supply is by reminding residents that "they ain't no charity in this here camp" (316). While the Joads and other migrants have a hard time accepting this claim, it is nevertheless true, as they all pay a dollar a week to stay at the camp, which secures their access to its amenities, including food credit and access to camp labor. Federal funds subsidize the camp, which

allows their dollar to buy more than it would outside the camp, but this does not make it a charity, as the government camp is funded through shared federal resources (taxes) to meet the needs of its people. But this critical distinction between charity and welfare is beyond the purview of Steinbeck's working-class characters.

The New Deal increased political entitlements for working-class families, although it did little to alleviate the anxiety associated with giving up some part of their self-reliant culture. As a result, the Joads experience conflicted feelings about receiving aid while camping at Weedpatch. As the last of the family's savings are spent, the guilt associated with receiving aid is so severe that the Joads show signs of emotional distress and physical discomfort. Ma Joad speaks up:

“We got to do somepin,” she said. And she pointed at Winfield. “Look at ‘im,” she said. And when they stared at the little boy, “He’s a jerkin’ an’ a-twistin’ in his sleep. Lookout his color.” The members of the family looked at the earth again in shame. “Fried dough,” Ma said, “One month we been here. An’ Tom had five days’ work. An’ the rest of you scrabblin’ out ever’ day, an’ no work. An’ scairt to talk. An’ the money gone. You’re scairt to talk it out. Ever’ night you jus’ eat, an’ then you get wanderin’ away. Can’t bear to talk it out. Well, you got to. Rosasharn ain’t far from due, an’ lookout her color. You got to talk it out. Now don’t none of you get up till we figger somepin out. One day’ more grease an’ two days’ flour, an’ ten potatoes. You set here an’ get busy!” (350)

The entire family is on edge as their desire to work clashes with their newfound access to federal provisions. The Joads enjoy the comforts of the government camp and appreciate the many basic conveniences it affords (such as toilets, baths, and hot water), but it is an uneasy comfort that feels unearned. Even ten-year-old Winfield can sense something is amiss. The Joads view the camp as a paradox: they can have either a safe place to live or leave to find work that supports them, but they can't have both in the same location. Despite the ability to work off their expenses doing through camp labor, their anxiety reaches its height as the family runs out of money. The last of their food supply acts like a countdown clock toward destitution. The Joads leave camp before this happens with the hope of finding work that aligns with their desire for self-reliance.

The Joads briefly mourn the lost comforts of the government camp as they ride north, but soon replace these feelings with a sense of accomplishment in earning wages again. On the first day of picking peaches at five cents a box, Tom hurries back from the fruit checker to share this good fortune: “‘I got a nickel,’ he called. ‘I got a nickel. On’y got to do that there twenty times for a dollar’” (372). Tom’s pride is unmistakable here, immediately replacing the frustration he endured moments earlier when his employer rejected his first box of peaches. Instead of dwelling on the work he had to complete to earn five cents, Tom looks toward the future with optimism, grossly overestimating how the earnings will add up when the whole family is working together. The feeling of earned income energizes the family as they continue to work throughout the day, counting their profits as they fill each subsequent box and thinking about all of the comforts that this money will buy. Their stay at Weedpatch strengthens the Joads’ commitment to wage-labor and self-reliance, rather than diminishing it, although this

renewed faith in the American work ethic doesn't last long. The Joads soon discover that a day's wage is hardly enough to sustain the family. The Joads receive company scrip rather than U.S. currency and must spend their wages at the company store where groceries and other supplies are overpriced. When the Joads discover they have no other option to procure essential goods, they experience a sense of disillusionment. Despite the growing realization of being cheated, the family not only continues to work, but even begins work harder, hoping that they will eventually come out ahead. Fear and anger mingle with hope and desire as the Joads desperately try to earn a living under the exploitative conditions of migrant farm labor. The Joads are unable to abandon the assumption that individuals should each be able to provide a decent life for their own families through one's own wages. This ideological attachment ultimately proves damaging to the Joads as it pressures them to abandon the forms of welfare and other government support that could otherwise ease the burden of structural poverty.

*The Grapes of Wrath* foregrounds many harmful contradictions built into the emerging welfare state. In some cases, New Deal relief programs, including worker camps, created spaces that helped American meet immediate material needs while also serving as a place where the working class could organize with protection from local law enforcement and private industry. Steinbeck also reveals that working-class access to relief was limited by a desire for self-reliance and a painful history of government intervention that destroyed or uprooted traditional working-class lifeways. There was little reason for the Joads and other migrants to trust that the federal government would come to their aid, and so they planned to go it alone. Together, these cultural and political challenges prevented the federal government from creating a more robust system of

welfare provisions. Even though the Roosevelt Administration had temporarily unemployed families in situations such as the Joads', stigma among the working class remained a problem. To complicate matters further, the distribution of New Deal relief depended on local leadership, which often replicated preexisting prejudices, reinforced the status quo, and thereby limited the effectiveness of relief efforts. Michele Landis argues that *The Grapes of Wrath* "was an intentional effort to win public sympathy for federal intervention and relief" (Landis 294). This is true in many respects and is evident in the compassionate tone that Steinbeck uses to describe the plight of Depression-era laborers. At the same time, Steinbeck's concern about the potential harm caused by increased state presence complicates this desire for federal intervention. Rather than unequivocal support, then, Steinbeck presents a tenuous exchange of agrarian freedoms for economic relief. This was not a deal that all members of the working class were willing to make.

Self-reliance shifts the burden of responsibility from the government to the family. For the Joads, this is both a blessing and a curse. Yet, by citing the Joads' dedication to self-reliance as the primary source of their pride and self-worth, Steinbeck minimizes the role the government has in shaping the lives of its people. This is most visible in the novel's conclusion where Rose of Sharon offers her breast milk to a starving stranger.<sup>23</sup> This act symbolizes a kind of self-reliance in which members of the working class rely on their own solidarity, generosity, and ingenuity for survival rather than expecting or demanding aid from the government. The central promise of the New

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<sup>23</sup> Mollie Godfrey describes this scene as the final act of reorienting a traditional family-first commitment to a broader collectivist ethic, which fits well with the socialist ethos of the interchapters (122).

Deal was that Americans should not have to shoulder the burden of poverty alone. Steinbeck's final scene shows the Joads doing exactly that: supporting others when they don't even have enough for themselves. By presenting Rose of Sharon's act of kindness as a solution to hunger, Steinbeck aestheticizes poverty and absolves the government of its newly acquired responsibility to care for those in need. Many readers imbue this scene with hope, viewing Rose of Sharon's "mysterious smile" as a celebration of working-class generosity and maternal sacrifice. But if this is an act of solidarity, then it is one that works just as much against the interests of the working class as it does for them. The ideology of self-reliance that shapes the Joads' values and priorities removes the federal government from the process and idealizes a form of American independence in which the burden of relief falls to the working class itself.

### **Reinforcing the Racialized Economy: The New Deal in Richard Wright's *Native Son***

Questions regarding Bigger Thomas' violence loom so large in discussions of Richard Wright's *Native Son* that it is easy to forget the novel is a welfare narrative gone terribly awry.<sup>24</sup> For the first sixty pages, Wright describes one Black family's experience with welfare as it solidified into a highly bureaucratic system in the late 1930s. Wright demonstrates the processes through which relief programs partnered with private employers to reinforce a racialized economy that enriched white communities at the

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<sup>24</sup> Critical scholarship about *Native Son* overwhelmingly focuses on Wright's representation of racialized violence and the extent to which the book is either a valuable contribution to progressive race politics (Ellison) or politically dangerous (Baldwin). For an overview of these major critical debates, see "Alternative Readings of Bigger Thomas" in *The Politics of Richard Wright: Perspectives on Resistance*.

expense of African Americans.<sup>25</sup> Although the Roosevelt Administration often used colorblind rhetoric in New Deal policy, which obscured the impact of state racism on Black families receiving relief, Wright renders these connections visible through his description of a racialized welfare system that involves three parties: the relief recipients (the Thomas family), the relief office, and philanthropic employers (the Daltons). *Native Son* reveals how the federal government uses the welfare system to coerce Bigger Thomas into the racialized domain of domestic service. The novel describes how wealthy white philanthropists justify their involvement in racialized relief work as a strategic form of aid that does nothing to address the root causes of racial injustice and economic disparity. Wright is critical of this partnership between white wealth and the relief system and shows how the government was responsible for the economic exploitation of African Americans and the trauma poor Black families experienced from the federal conflation of charity, relief, and opportunity in U.S. welfare rhetoric.

Many historians have argued that the New Deal failed to address the problem of African American intergenerational poverty rooted in racial injustice.<sup>26</sup> Much recent scholarship further supports this claim, contending that the New Deal not only overlooked the root causes of African American poverty but in some cases intensified it. Steve Valocchi (1994), for example, "tempers and deepens" the historical claims about New Deal racial oversight by arguing that "the creation of the New Deal welfare state

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<sup>25</sup> Economic readings of *Native Son* highlight the important role the Daltons (a wealthy white family) play in determining the educational and work prospects of poor African Americans, such as Bigger Thomas. See, for example, John Reilly's "Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in *Native Son*."

<sup>26</sup> For one of the first comprehensive accounts of these shortcomings, see Gunnar Myrdal's landmark study of race in America, *An American Dilemma* (1944).

was a racially-based affair" (347). The author provides a detailed list of racial exclusions found in the New Deal's key relief policies. Using five central examples, the author finds that: (1) the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) negatively impacted Black farm laborers by distributing aid to landowners (who were predominantly white) instead of sharecroppers (who were predominantly Black); (2) National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) lowered the purchasing power of urban Black workers; (3) the Works Progress Administration (WPA) worsened African American unemployment by focusing its recruitment efforts on young white men; (4) Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) forced Black families into exploitative landlord-tenant relationships by expanding mortgage opportunities to white families while prohibiting African Americans from accessing credit; and (5) the Social Security Act excluded many African Americans because two economic sectors that employed the most Black laborers were not covered by the policy (352-4). In short, while historians acknowledge that some African Americans (including Richard Wright) benefited from New Deal policies, contemporary scholars of race and politics find that these gains occurred *despite* numerous racial exclusions, rather than as an intentional effort to mitigate the long-term effects of poverty rooted in racial inequality.<sup>27</sup>

Richard Wright understood the potential value of New Deal relief for African Americans. He benefited from its cultural work relief programs as a member of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) from 1937 to 1939, where he wrote a number of federally

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<sup>27</sup> In *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, for example, Robert Himmelberg remarks that while the New Deal enforced racial discrimination even as he claims that African Americans "did, however, receive relief payments under the FERA, and large numbers of them held WPA jobs" (72).

funded texts, such as the *New York Panorama* guidebook. During this time, Wright was also a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America and working as an editor for the *Daily Worker*, a Communist newspaper. With one foot in New Deal liberalism and the other in Communist politics, Wright witnessed Communist Party's inadequate response to African American concerns and the New Deal's unwillingness to address racial injustice. By the time *Native Son* was published in 1940, Wright came to understand how the Communist Party, state-sponsored Capitalism, and liberal reform all engaged in racial politics that disadvantaged African Americans.

*Native Son* begins with an account of African American life in Chicago's Black Belt. The Thomas family lives in a crowded and uncomfortable one-room apartment that is representative of the substandard housing available to poor Black families in the 1930s and 40s. In the opening scene, Bigger kills a rat scurrying around the room and taunts his younger sister with its corpse. Their mother chastises Bigger for his immaturity and links this childish behavior to a broader structure of feeling about labor, welfare, and personal responsibility:

“Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then” she asked. “Suppose those rats cut out our veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!” (12)

Here, Bigger's mother gives voice to an ideology of self-reliance and personal responsibility commonly used to stigmatize one's dependency on government aid. While her reprimand first focuses on the rat, her attention quickly shifts to Bigger's selfish pursuit of pleasure and his unwillingness to work "even when the relief offers you a job."<sup>28</sup> This scene foregrounds how poor families internalize blame when they reflect on their welfare status. Mrs. Thomas believes that improving their condition is a matter of hard work and personal responsibility and thus finds considerable fault in the carefree way that her son approaches his adolescence.

Bigger views the relief opportunity differently, feeling that the situation is forcing him to choose between two undesirable outcomes. He could either "take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of actions" (16).<sup>29</sup> For Bigger, the job doesn't signify hope, upward mobility, or financial security. Instead, he believes that relief work will cause him misery. However, refusing the job is also unpleasant, as it would increase the burden of poverty for his family. This is especially true after being offered a relief job since federal welfare policies required its recipients to accept any job opportunity available at risk of losing one's welfare benefits. By juxtaposing these two perceptions of relief work, Wright considers the family dynamics and tensions involved in the political complexities of the emergent welfare state. While it is Bigger's mother who receives aid

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<sup>28</sup> Bigger's mother speaks accurately when she expresses concern about relief offices threatening "to cut off your food and starve you." Since the Roosevelt administration introduced the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in 1933, relief payments have required proof of the recipient's willingness to work.

<sup>29</sup> Bigger eventually considers robbery as an alternative to these two options, although the idea comes with its own set of problems.

in *Native Son*, Wright understands that the state identifies economic need at the household level. Gender is also important. Mrs. Thomas receives aid because she is a single mother; however, it is ultimately Bigger's work placement decision that determines the future status of the household. The opening pages of *Native Son* reveal that U.S. welfare system creates divergent effects within the household. For Bigger, the threat of losing the family's access to welfare forces him into a tough situation that leave him feel trapped and resentful. For his mother, however, federal relief policies reinforce the working-class values of self-reliance and personal responsibility. She never wanted to be on welfare in the first place and thus imagines Bigger's relief work opportunity to be an important step toward economic independence and financial security for the family.

Chicago's commercial culture offers Bigger an escape from his constrained labor choices. Unable to decide whether he should "starve from a lack of self-realization" or "a lack of bread," Bigger finds solace in the wealth of options available to him on the market (366). Despite his poverty, Bigger can still afford cheap urban amusements such as magazines, movies, and pool. Spending money on small pleasures prevents Bigger from thinking about the coercive situation relief workers placed him in. Wright's description of commercial entertainment is interesting in relation to the conservative critique of the New Deal that asserted welfare recipients were lazy.<sup>30</sup> According to these

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<sup>30</sup> As soon as FERA was established in the mid-1930s, conservative critics of the New Deal sent letter after letter to the White House condemning President Roosevelt's imprudent use of federal tax dollars. In a letter dated May 1936 and addressed to Harry Hopkins—the head of FERA—one critic wrote that "True relief is approved by the people of the U S A but merely making loafer out of individuals who don't want to work is definitely to the detriment of the country and is disastrous to the taxpayers of the country" (McElvaine 125). A second letter, this time addressed to the President himself, adds "Mr. Roosevelt I really believe if you could see aven what I do everyday you would change your mind and put this relief out of sight, and let men and wimen go to work and keep out of so much sin and the terrible things idleness leads to" (126).

critics, the New Deal gave poor people an incentive to remain unemployed, thereby encouraging the kind of idleness Bigger performs in these early scenes. In *Native Son*, however, Wright offers a different account of this behavior where idleness isn't the problem and relief isn't the cause. Instead, Bigger seeks out these pleasures because his relief work options are limited and demeaning. This is especially clear on his way to the movie theater when Bigger spots a plane in the sky and reflects "I could fly one of them things if I had a chance," hinting at his desire for meaningful work (20). Nevertheless, Bigger's race and poverty restrict access to more desirable forms of employment, which eventually leaves him with no other option than to take the job with the Daltons even though he views the mandatory relief work with contempt.

The Daltons' role in *Native Son* is central to understanding Wright's criticism of the U.S. welfare system. Many scholars interpret the Daltons as a depiction of misguided white liberalism and acts of philanthropy that do little to improve the lives of African Americans.<sup>31</sup> Mr. Dalton is a wealthy real estate investor who benefits from Chicago's racialized housing market, which allows him to extract higher rents from African American families living in the Black Belt. To stave off feelings of guilt, Mr. Dalton is also a vocal member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and engages in philanthropic work targeting racial inequality. He donates to "colored schools" and African American community centers. Mrs. Dalton shares these reformist sentiments and encourages Black men to get an education, which she views as

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of these claims, see Amy Carreiro's "Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: 'Negrotarians' in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." and James Richard Giles's *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man*.

the best way to break the cycle of poverty. Wright draws attention to the limits of these charitable acts throughout the novel, especially in the third section where Bigger's lawyer Max mocks Mr. Dalton's decision to donate ping-pong tables to a South Side community center rather than lowering the exploitative rent he charges the Mrs. Thomas and other Black families.

But the Daltons are more than misguided philanthropists; they are an integral part of the emerging welfare state. Since African Americans were largely excluded from the federal work programs, including the CCC and WPA, most relief work for unemployed Black men came from private employment such as that offered by the Daltons in *Native Son*. Wright demonstrates the connection between private employment and relief work when the Daltons welcome Bigger into their home. In this scene, Mr. Dalton explains to his daughter Mary that ““This is the boy the relief sent”” (48). Mary, a Communist sympathizer, responds that ““the relief people were very anxious for you to work for us,”” implying a formal relationship between private employers and the state (48). The comment about the relief officers' anxiety also reveals a desire among relief officers to be rid of the public responsibility to care for the Thomas family. By placing Bigger with the Daltons, the welfare state ends its obligation to support Mrs. Thomas and her children, as their wellbeing is now a matter of private employment and white liberal philanthropy.

To ensure a speedy transition, the relief office provides the Daltons with the Thomas's welfare case records. From these documents, the Daltons learn about Bigger's work ethic and history of petty theft. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton use this information to further establish a paternalistic relationship with Bigger that lets them to view their job offer as a form of charity. After greeting Bigger, Mrs. Dalton explains to her husband: “using the

analysis contained in the case record the relief sent us, I think we should evoke an immediate feeling of confidence” (48). Mrs. Dalton assumes the case records provide an accurate account of what Bigger needs to feel comfortable in this new environment, even though Wright assures us that this cold, clinical approach has the opposite effect. Mrs. Dalton’s decision to address her husband rather than Bigger suggests that Mrs. Dalton views Bigger as a passive recipient of aid. This exclusionary gesture highlights the racial prejudice that structures the unequal relationship between Bigger and his new employers. Mr. Dalton continues in this vein and sits Bigger down for a serious conversation regarding his adolescent misbehavior. Bigger anticipates where the conversation is going, thinking to himself: “Yes, goddammit! He knew what was coming. He would be asked about that time he had been accused of stealing auto tires and had been sent to the reform school. He felt guilty, condemned. He should not have come here” (51). The Daltons’ knowledge of Bigger’s personal history and economic circumstances further shift the balance of power in this already unequal race and class relationship. The Daltons use these case records to shape their impressions of Bigger before they even meet him, exposing the racial bias embedded in white liberal philanthropy and revealing the strategic alliance between federal relief and private employers. In the end, the Daltons’ efforts to create an emotionally trusting work environment backfire. Bigger is nervous and confused as Mr. and Mrs. Dalton discuss how to make their new chauffeur comfortable working for a wealthy white family under the threat of losing access to welfare. Thus, even as Bigger transitions from relief recipient to gainful employment, he never ceases being an object of charity to the Daltons.

Bigger's time in the Dalton house is cut short by a series of tragic events. Bigger's first task as chauffeur involves driving Mary to a lecture at the University. On the way, Mary informs Bigger that this isn't her actual plan and instructs Bigger to pick up her boyfriend, Jan, instead. Jan is a member of the Communist Party and wants to get to know Bigger by going to "one of those places where colored people eat" (69). Bigger originally refuses to join them because he is uncomfortable with the racial dynamics of being seen with white folk in a Black establishment, but he eventually caves under the pressure. After eating, Jan and Mary get drunk in the backseat of the car as Bigger drives around a park. Bigger drinks as well, at Jan's insistence. Eventually, Bigger drops Jan off at his place and returns to the Dalton residence with the young, intoxicated woman. Mary is too drunk to get to her room unassisted. Bigger escorts Mary to her bedroom where he takes advantage of her inebriated condition by "tighten his fingers on her breasts" and "kissing her" (84). Before Bigger can leave Mary's room, Mrs. Dalton comes to investigate the noise. Bigger knows that for a Black man to be found in the presence of a white woman under these circumstances means death. Bigger covers Mary's face with a pillow to keep her quiet but suffocates her in the process. Mrs. Dalton smells whiskey and assumes that Mary is passed out, and then leaves the room without being alerted to Bigger's presence.

Bigger panics after realizing he killed Mary and tries to cover up the murder by carrying Mary's body to the basement and burning her corpse in the furnace. He makes it look like Mary left for Boston the next day, as she had originally planned, buying a little time. He devises a plan to pin the murder on Jan, who the Daltons already dislike due to his Communist politics. Taking his plan further, Bigger convinces his girlfriend Bessy to

write a ransom note (signed “Red”) in an effort to procure getaway money. When Bigger tells Bessy that he has killed the Mary, Bessy grows fearful, thinking if Bigger murdered a white woman, then nothing would prevent him from killing her as well. Sensing Bessy’s doubt, Bigger rapes and kills her. Reporters discover Mary’s remains in the furnace while a detective interviews Bigger in the basement of the Dalton house. Bigger evades capture for two days, but after thousands of white volunteers join the efforts to arrest Bigger, he is caught after a rooftop shootout. The rest of the novel is a courtroom drama, in which Wright describes details and motives about the crime. At the trial, Bigger’s lawyer Max argues that his client should bear only a “degree of responsibility” for these murders, as all of the actions above were a response to the violence of racism that condemned and criminalized Bigger from birth. While scholars often criticize Max for naturalizing Black masculine violence, Bigger leaves the trial with a greater awareness of systemic racial injustice. Unfortunately, this defense has no significant effect on the judge, who agrees with the state prosecutor that the only solution to such a brutal display of violence is the death penalty.

As this plot summary suggests, Wright’s original focus on welfare disappears throughout the novel’s rising action. From the moment Bigger murders Mary to his capture at the end of the “Flight” section—roughly 200 pages—there is no mention of his economic status or the role that Bigger’s relief work played in this sequence of events. The welfare narrative is overwritten by a racial one that overdetermines Bigger’s actions.<sup>32</sup> Bigger fears that his Black criminality erases his economic circumstances

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<sup>32</sup> Examples of racial determinist rhetoric are visible throughout this middle section of the novel, such as this one: “Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an

entirely, and this appears true when newspaper reporters pick up the murder story for the press. Even before they discover that Bigger is the murderer, the reporters gathering at the Dalton residence express interest in “slanting this [story] to the primitive Negro who doesn’t want to be disturbed by white civilization,” thereby reinforcing racial stereotypes. (201). This strategic erasure of Bigger’s economic status allows the reporters to imagine Bigger as a white racist caricature of Blackness: passive, compliant, and disinterested in the workings of “white” society. The reporters assume Bigger’s race can tell them everything they need to know about his circumstances. Once the reporters discover that Bigger is the murderer, they draw on racist assumptions to falsely claim that Mary’s murder had been a “sex crime,” thus inciting five thousand police officers and three thousand additional volunteers to join in the manhunt (228). The reporters’ singular focus on Bigger’s racial identity obscures the important economic context that could help explain the socio-economic dynamics that resulted in Mary’s death. Instead, the white characters in *Native Son* regard Bigger “as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control” and nothing more (257). To them, the combination of Blackness and criminality reduces Bigger to a racialized threat that needs to be contained.<sup>33</sup>

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accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her” (101).

<sup>33</sup> For additional discussion about Wright’s “refiguration of race,” see Cynthia Tolentino’s “The Road out of the Black Belt: Sociology’s Fictions and Black Subjectivity in ‘Native Son.’”

Wright returns to the subject of class and welfare during the trial.<sup>34</sup> In this final section, Wright explores how white philanthropy and federal relief policies fit into the larger context of the U.S. legal system. As Bigger awaits trial, the Daltons consider what went wrong with their attempt to help this African American man earn a living and better himself through education. In a conversation with state prosecutor Buckley and defense attorney Max, Mr. Dalton explains that his “heart is not bitter” about the murder or the racial strife that Bigger’s criminal actions imply (273). But Max is not impressed by this empty rhetoric. At the trial, Max questions the motives and utility of Mr. Dalton’s philanthropy, inquiring as to why he donates “millions of dollars to educate Negroes” while exacting “an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep” (302).<sup>35</sup> Mr. Dalton responds that it is a combination of following “an old custom” and wanting to live up to a “code of ethics in business” by refusing to undersell his competition (303-4). Max concludes by asking Mr. Dalton to imagine how “the terrible conditions under which the Thomas family lived in one of your houses may in some way be related to the death of your daughter,” but Mr. Dalton fails to understand Max’s point (304).

Max’s line of questioning redefines Bigger’s relationship with Mr. Dalton. Most of the white characters in the novel view Bigger mainly (if not exclusively) through the lens of race, but Max reminds the court of his economic status. He explains Bigger’s relationship with Mr. Dalton as “that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant,

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<sup>34</sup>Jane Anna Gordon offers a detailed analysis of Wright’s position on class in “Richard Wright and the Critique of Class Theory” in *The Politics of Richard Wright: Perspectives on Resistance*.

<sup>35</sup> Isabel Wilkerson describes Chicago’s African American living conditions during the 1930s in great detail in her award-winning study: *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*.

employee to employer” and knows that these unequal economic relations hold the key to better understanding Bigger’s crimes (362). Max’s emphasis on economic status establishes a link between poverty and racial injustice. Yet, as Max pursues this line of reasoning, he pathologizes Blackness, suggesting to the court that Mary’s murder was “the first full act” of Bigger’s life (366). This misrepresentation of African American agency deprives Bigger of his autonomy and complexity. Max argues that Bigger is incapable of experiencing love because “the circumstances of his life” could not allow it and concludes his defense by suggesting that life in prison holds “more advantages” for Bigger than “a life of freedom ever had” (368-9). Scholars read Max’s speech as a critique of the Communist Party’s failure to fully address U.S. racism. Max’s understanding of racial justice is only marginally better than Mr. Dalton’s since they both essentialize African American life and use Bigger’s racial identity to shape a narrative of white sympathy that sets the stage for the prosecutor’s closing argument.

Buckley’s account of Bigger’s circumstances draws on white fantasies of philanthropy that simultaneously strengthen and obscure the racial inequalities of the welfare state. In this final version of events, Buckley rewrites the original Thomas family welfare narrative from a white reformist perspective by celebrating the work of philanthropists such as the Daltons and chastising the ungrateful response of Black relief recipients such as Bigger. As he explains:

“A wealthy, kindly disposed white man, a resident of Chicago for more than forty years, sends to the relief agency for a Negro boy to act as chauffeur to his family. The man specifies in his request that he wants a boy who is handicapped either by race, poverty, or family

responsibility. The relief authorities search through their records and select the Negro family which they think merits such aid: that family was the Thomas family . . . A social worker visits the family and informs the mother that the family is to be taken off the relief rolls and her son placed in private employment. The mother, a hard-working Christian woman, consents. In due time, the relief authorities send a notification to the oldest son of the family, Bigger Thomas, this black mad dog who sits here today, telling him that he must report for work.” (374)

Buckley goes on to explain that when the relief authorities inform Bigger of this “opportunity,” he is neither “grateful” nor “glad” of the chance to improve his condition. Buckley explains, “he did not want to work! He wanted to loaf about the streets, steal from news-stands, rob stores, meddle with women, frequent dives, attend cheap movies, and chase prostitutes!” (374). He goes on to suggest that Bigger only takes the position with the Daltons because “the relief would cut off their supply of food if he did not accept,” and even then, remains “outraged that he had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow” (374-5). Buckley uses this narrative of white sympathy to justify the politics of gratitude that structures relief work arrangements between poor African Americans and their white employers. What makes Bigger’s violence so awful to Buckley is not only the racial dynamics of a Black man killing a white woman, but the lack of gratitude Bigger shows to “a wealthy, kindly disposed white man” who wants to lift an African American family out of poverty. According to Buckley, the Daltons’ willingness to work with the relief agency to employ “a boy who is handicapped either by race, poverty, or family

responsibility” is a gift to the Black community. From this perspective, Bigger’s murder is not a racially motivated crime, but a transgression against the welfare state, as well. By framing Bigger’s situation in this way, Buckley reinforces the white paternalistic fantasy that overestimates the power of liberal reform to overcome racial inequality. He vindicates the Daltons of any wrongdoing and absolves the government of its responsibility by suggesting that the problem at the heart of African American poverty is an unwillingness to accept the “opportunities” provided by wealthy white benefactors. Bigger must die not only because he’s Black, but because he represents a threat to the racialized economic order that ensures an ample supply of cheap, compliant labor (i.e., welfare recipients coerced into domestic servitude). Bigger’s hatred of white people and his indifference to their charitable gestures breaks the unspoken racial contract of gratitude that structured Jim Crow-era economics, resulting in a situation where Bigger’s thanklessness becomes as unforgivable as the act of murder itself.

*Native Son* is an important portrayal of how U.S. welfare policies supported a racialized economy that benefited white Americans by relegating African Americans to second-class jobs. Wright demonstrates the coerciveness power of relief programs that threatened to take away the Thomas family’s aid if Bigger did not comply with a state-mandated job offer. At the same time, Wright explores how white characters render that coercion invisible by deploying powerful racist narratives about Bigger when he refuses to practice the politics of gratitude that shape the labor relations between white employers and Black workers. Bigger’s life story exposes these systems of economic exploitation and racial subordination and is a threat to the emergent economic order. In the end, Wright shows the relationship between race and the welfare state and models the way in

which this relationship becomes invisible through strategically reframing welfare narrative in ways that obscure the intersectionality of race and class.

### **Gender and the Re-educative Force of Relief Policies in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl***

Meridel Le Sueur is more direct in her critique of coercive governmentality embedded in the New Deal than either Steinbeck or Wright. In her representation of the emergent welfare state, Le Sueur identifies working-class women as the primary target of state power. In *The Girl*, federal relief workers refuse to give a young pregnant woman nutritional supplements and uses the threat of sterilization to control and reeducate licentious women. Le Sueur's relief officers institutionalize the narrator's friend, Clara, for sex work, where the state uses electric shock therapy as a cure for her sexual transgression. These are not acts that historians typically consider when they describe the Roosevelt Administration and the rise of the U.S. welfare state. As *The Girl* reveals, however, the 1930s ushered in an era of growing state power used to monitor and manage the lives of poor people, especially women. By highlighting the considerable force relief authorities hold throughout the novel, Le Sueur demonstrates how the federal government used welfare programs to re-educate working-class women by promising economic security in exchange for women's privacy and bodily autonomy.

Women's bodies play a central role in the construction of morality throughout American history. The New Deal was no exception. The suffrage movement won extraordinary political victories for women in the early twentieth century, including the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. At the same time, residual notions of gendered spheres remained common throughout the 1930s. Many Americans still believed that "women's place" was "the realm of domesticity," even as dissenting voices said

otherwise (Himmelberg 69). When women did work, as a majority of working-class women did, they predominantly occupied gendered positions such as “nurses, teachers, secretaries, clerks, saleswomen, the needle trades, and household servants” (70). Even so, the very idea of women working was controversial in the 1930s. As Laura Hapke explains in *Daughters of the Great Depression*, many men saw wage-earning women as a threat to the traditional way of life and believed that female employment “implicitly challenged notions of feminine moral purity and the companion ideal of family-as-vocation” (Hapke 4). When jobs were scarce, as they were during the Depression, working women faced increased moral scrutiny because many Americans mistakenly believed that women worked for “pin money” rather than out of necessity (11). Thus, as Himmelberg explains: “despite this growing role of women in the workplace, the New Deal did little or nothing to change their subordinate status” (70). Eleanor Roosevelt did occasionally express concern over the marginal support the New Deal provided women but was unwilling to work against the belief that women should focus on “homemaking and childrearing” (Hapke 10; Goldberg 295). In a period where a single-family wage and male breadwinners were the operational norm, the Roosevelt Administration assumed that women would benefit from welfare policies through a trickle-down effect as the men returned to work through programs like the CCC and WPA. As a result, more often than not, the New Deal reinforced conservative gender norms and upheld traditional conceptions of women’s work.

New Deal policymakers rarely thought of women as workers. While relief for men was tied to work requirements, relief for women hinged on their status as a wife, caregiver, and mother. In fact, federal aid for women with dependent children predates

the New Deal by over two decades, beginning with the establishment of the United States Children's Bureau in 1912. The Roosevelt Administration expanded relief measures available to mothers by including the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program in the Social Security Act of 1935. ADC provided single mothers with financial support, but it was also replete with restrictive requirements that prevented many families from benefiting from the program.<sup>36</sup> Crucially to my discussion of *The Girl*, gendered welfare policies like ADC mandated that in order to receive any support, fathers must be “deceased, absent, or unable to work.” This “man-in-the-house” rule empowered relief officers to disqualify families if there was any adult male present in the household. In practice, this stipulation authorized state officials to determine welfare eligibility based on “the sexual morality of the mother” (Williams and Hardisty). If we use ADC and CCC as representative of New Deal gender politics more broadly, the distinction is clear: men were expected to work while women were required to act as mothers, caregivers, and symbols of sexual purity.

Gender relief policies also had perverse effects on the distribution of welfare. As one Depression-era social worker explained, “if you’re the female head of a household and you don’t have an identifiable father of all the children, you’re really up against it. Welfare has broken up families because of the ‘man-in-the-house rule. It’s venal. The damage we’ve done to human beings is incredible” (Terkel 443). Since an absent father offered more financial security than an unemployed one living in the house, some working-class families strategically separated during the 1930s in the hopes of qualifying

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<sup>36</sup> For a detailed analysis of how the ADC systematically excluded African American families, see Collins and Goldberg’s *The Government Helped*.

for federal aid. The man-in-the-house rule remained in effect until the 1960s, when the absent father rhetoric was replaced by other moralizing euphemisms.<sup>37</sup> In the end, the New Deal reinforced the assumption that women were and should be mothers (not workers) and defended the practice of governing women's sexuality in exchange for federal aid.

Meridel Le Sueur was an astute critic of New Deal gender politics.<sup>38</sup> Since motherhood and sexuality are intimately tied to corporeality, the physical body holds special significance in working-class women's writing. Much of the critical scholarship discussing *The Girl* centers on reading and understanding women's bodies as texts. Erin Obermueller, for instance, argues that "*The Girl* situates the body as a register for physical, social, and political struggles. The novel asks its characters and readers to read the body as a text and chart its various discourses" (48). Julia Leyda's study considers both the male and female characters, examining how gendered bodies operate differently in the text. As she explains: "while the male bodies in *The Girl* are destroyed through their attempts to work or obtain money, the female bodies are manipulated and strictly controlled, especially in terms of sex and reproduction" (50). Lisa Orr argues that Le Sueur develops a form of working-class sexuality that is a "performance which both conforms to normative discourse and subverts it" (26). For all three of these scholars,

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<sup>37</sup> Ambiguous moralizing language like "suitable homes" continues to define aid to dependent children programs in the United States. See, for example, Michael Hiltzik's *The New Deal: A Modern History*.

<sup>38</sup> Like Wright, however, Le Sueur's radical politics and antagonistic relationship with the pro-capitalist state did not prevent her from accepting a WPA job as a writing teacher during the Great Depression. During this time, Le Sueur wrote her own 77-page textbook called *Worker Writers*, which was full of class-conscious writing samples for her young working-class students to study. See Jane Greer's "Refiguring Authorship, Ownership, and Textual Commodities: Meridel Le Sueur's Pedagogical Legacy."

women's bodies act as a key site of federal authority, highlighting the tension between autonomy and the state. This issue is especially visible in relation to women's welfare access, as Obermueller makes clear when she explains that "Le Sueur positions [women's] bodies as the register for social welfare policy, rendering its effects in physical and psychological terms" (57). It is from this nexus of class and gender justice that I investigate Le Sueur's representation of the emergent welfare state as a strategy for poverty surveillance and limiting women's autonomy.

*The Girl* begins by highlighting some of the same themes explored in *Native Son* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, including a description of working-class life and feelings of shame associated with receiving welfare. The reader learns on the first page that the narrator has left her family's rural home to find work in the city even though her mother views Minneapolis and St. Paul as a modern day "Sodom and Gomorrah," filled with immorality, vice, and sexual temptations (1). It isn't until chapter nine that readers learn more about the motives behind her decision to relocate. When a letter from her father arrives unexpectedly, the narrator reflects on her poor childhood, a period defined by her father's misguided belief that "he was going to fall into something great, something that would end all our troubles" and her mother's constant weeping (30-31). In this scene, the father's dream of upward mobility conflicts with the mother's knowledge that such desires are unobtainable. They cannot earn enough to feed their family, forcing them to accept welfare. Like Wright, Le Sueur suggests relief is cruel and exploitative rather than beneficial. A relief officer places the narrator into domestic service at a wealthy household where she "worked eighteen hours a day" and ultimately has to leave the job because the "old man" was coming into her room every night seeking sexual favors

(31).<sup>39</sup> The best situation the narrator could imagine for her parents was to become “one less mouth to feed” and reduce the burden of poverty for her family (31). The narrator’s memories of adolescence suggest the lengths working-class families went to avoid welfare. The girl’s last memory of her father is one in which “he was mad because mama wanted to go on relief” and shouts “as long as I got two hands at the ends of my arms I’m gonna feed my own family” (35). Life did not work out that way for them, however. The father’s faith in “something great” eventually drives him to violence, bitterness, and self-pity leaving the narrator’s mother struggling to hold the family together. The mother accepts welfare only when the family is on the brink of starvation, after reaffirming to herself that her children are “decent and good” (40). Even then, she takes pride in the fact that “we don’t owe a cent” to anybody (40). Throughout the narrator’s backstory, Le Sueur describes a commitment to self-reliance similar to the Joads. Yet, rather than idealizing self-reliance as an undeniable virtue, as Steinbeck does, Le Sueur allows readers to consider the extent to which self-reliance may be a destructive illusion.

A hunger for something more than sustenance animates the novel. After the girl moves to the city and meets other working-class people, such as Clara and Butch, this desire takes a more concrete form. Hard work and self-reliance remain central values in the urban working-class environment.<sup>40</sup> Clara uses the rhetoric of self-reliance to justify her sex work, which she views as an extension of the bootstraps narrative in which

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<sup>39</sup> This experience echoes Bigger’s experience of the New Deal. In both cases, the government pressured working people into demeaning domestic service. This was especially common for women and African Americans, as they were excluded from programs that granted access to better work and higher wages.

<sup>40</sup> Carmela McIntire argues that “Clara provides an important third voice, a cautionary presence delineating the way in which the values of the much-touted American Dream can be particularly insidious for women” (1).

“everybody can get along if they try” (Le Sueur 9). Clara’s faith that everybody can make it motivates her work, even though she recognizes that the box where she puts her money is empty most of the time due to “sickness and the clothes she has to have” (9). Yet, behind Clara’s cheerful veneer, there is a sadness, as well. Clara’s constant references to new clothes, a house, and other middle-class desires appear hollow. She knows that the ideology of self-reliance is ultimately self-defeating, even if she cannot admit it to herself. In presenting Clara’s desire in this fashion, La Sueur describes the underlying capitalist values that animate this particular kind of working-class ambition without validating or endorsing them.

Butch—the narrator’s boyfriend—displays a similar attachment to the American myth of success, although Le Sueur is attentive to showing how this desire manifests differently in men and women. Butch wants to be a “winner,” which involves beating men in the game of property ownership and wealth accumulation. Butch doesn’t have the same desire for commercial goods as Clara displays, but dreams of buying a service station to “be my own man” (7). This desire for financial independence leads Butch to perform desperate and criminal acts to secure the money he needs to finance this particular vision of success. In the end, Butch’s desire to own property culminates in an ill-devised plan to rob a bank. Butch is shot during the robbery and later dies from the wound, but not until after he discovers his dream was a fantasy. As the girl and Butch drive away from the crime scene and stop for gas at a roadside service station, Butch strikes up a conversation with the owner by remarking on the man’s success in acquiring such a fine service station. But the station owner disagrees, explaining:

I put everything me and my wife had into this place, he said, and now the Standard Oil is going to take it away from me . . . they make you feel like you got your place, like you're going to be the boss, a big shot. They take all your dough and they got it fixed so you can't make good. You could work 28 hours out of 24, you could starve your wife and kids and throw them in with it. They got you milked from both ends. It's a racket. They hold the cards, you can't win. And when you give up, when they've sucked you dry, they get another sucker. (99)

This scene reveals the futility of working-class entrepreneurship, exposing the way that corporate entities exploit the American desire for upward mobility, autonomy, and self-reliance. A lease on a Standard Oil service station hints at the promise of being your own boss, as Butch desires, but the terms are such that the owner will never get ahead. Instead, all of the profits—and thus all of the power and agency—go to Standard Oil Incorporated, rather than those working “28 hours out of 24” trying to “make good” on their investment. In the end, owning a service station proves no better than any other kind of exploitative working-class labor. The economics of the industry are carefully calibrated to inspire the desire we see in Butch until industry titans such as Standard Oil can get these hardworking people under contract. Once bound by legal documents and locked into monthly lease fees, there is little that working-class people like Butch or the service station owner can do to escape the exploitative grasp of corporate capitalism. The revelation that “they got you coming and going” is too much for Butch, especially in his current condition, and he dies from his gunshot wound shortly after this painful act of disillusionment (100).

By continuing the story after the men die, Le Sueur develops a narrative that is attentive to the gendered dynamic developing between working-class women and the U.S. welfare state. After the men either die in the robbery (Butch, Ganz, and Hoinck) or are sent to prison (Ack), the women (the girl, Clara, Belle, Amelia, and Butch's mother) are left to fend for themselves. In a society structured around male breadwinners, this is no simple task. Their bootleg business is no longer viable because Ganz was the one who paid off the cops. This leaves the women without a reliable source of income and in need of government aid. As they apply for welfare and begin to receive relief, however, these working-class women encounter a range of gendered policies that complicate their lives. For the final third of the novel, Le Sueur's focus on the violence of U.S. capitalism shift to a new villain: the welfare state. In this section, as the girl and Clara attempt to navigate welfare bureaucracy, both women face difficulties not regularly attributed to the New Deal, including institutionalization and electric shock therapy, which is used to reeducate poor women. Le Sueur shows how welfare policies operated along both gendered and classed lines.

In Chapter Three, the narrator encounters barriers to accessing the same benefits that Clara, Belle, and Butch's mother already receive from the state, largely because the narrator is visibly pregnant. In the absence of the father, the girl's pregnant body marks her as an immoral woman and makes her target of additional scrutiny, leading to delays in receiving relief. Welfare policy restrictions like the man-in-the-house rule provided welfare officers with the federal authority to withhold resources from women as they saw fit. Since sexual morality is written into the policy, the one status that could grant her benefits—motherhood—produces considerable complications instead. Le Sueur reveals

how federal restrictions around sexual purity created an uncomfortable tension between the spirit of the New Deal that supported mothers of dependent children and the actual distribution of that relief that often withheld such aid. When the narrator uses her status as an expecting mother to justify her need for nutritional supplements, she makes little progress: “I was trying to get on relief and I went to the clinic and they told me that to have a good baby you got to have one quart of milk per day and oranges. . . Well, oranges don’t grow in the fine tropical climate of Minnesota” (117). Later, the girl provides an update on her welfare application status: “I haven’t gotten relief yet, and I get scared when I think of the days going by and no oranges or milk. Every day counts now they tell me” (121). In both encounters with the welfare system, relief workers deny the girl’s request in ways designed to make the narrator feel ashamed of her inability to support her unborn child. To be told that she needs “one quart of milk per day and oranges” and then prohibited from receiving it leaves the narrator feeling bitter and betrayed. Without any other prospects for income or support, the girl returns several times, facing a similar situation with each new encounter with the U.S. welfare state and its network of relief officers.

After being turned away from the relief office for months—most of her pregnancy—the girl finally obtains a meeting with the relief officer managing her case, Miss Rice. Miss Rice determines that the narrator should have four dollars and eighty cents per month for food, which isn’t even enough to pay for the milk and oranges needed for her pregnancy and does not include any allowance for clothes or lodging. Nevertheless, Miss Rice justifies the sum as follows:

Then Miss Rice says, holding up a paper like she was reading something very serious, and her tight little mug gets very serious, you know, she says as if reading from the paper that if you live with a man you ain't married to then you won't get relief, we can't have any immorality around here she says, still studying the piece of paper.

(127)

The relief officer assumes that a pregnant woman unable to produce the father must be hiding a man from the federal authorities or acting with sexual “immorality.” Miss Rice uses these moral judgements first to delay relief and then limit the amount of support the girl receives. The girl’s dismissal of this claim—“Jesus I don’t go with anybody”—does not persuade the case worker. Instead, Miss Rice advances her moralizing argument further, warning that “girls like you got to be mighty careful . . . men will take an advantage over you (128). Just then, the girl makes a startling discovery: “the paper [Miss Rice] had fell down on the floor and I picked it up for her, and it was a blank sheet of paper. There was nothing on it at all. I looked at her and she looked at me and I knew we were enemies” (129). The paper is a conceit the relief worker hides behind, a blank symbol of federal authority that gives Miss Rice the power to pass moral judgement on the girl. Yes, living with a man can disqualify women from receiving relief payments, but the second part of the relief officer’s appraisal—“we can’t have any immorality around here”—is her own design. Federal policies like the ADC relied on local relief officers to carry out aid distribution. In an oral history of the Great Depression, a former relief worker recalled that while “most case workers” felt some mixture of guilt and insecurity in their jobs, “there were also quite a few who were self-righteous. They felt some of the

people weren't looking hard enough for work. Or they were loafers . . . They sometimes made it very difficult for the clients. There was a lot of hypocrisy and sham" (Terkel 481). This case worker history describes aid distribution problems during the Depression and explains how relief officers could use their authority to make life hard for clients whose moral principles or sexual habits differed from their own. Miss Rice models the process through which the prejudices of middle-class white women could exacerbate the moral policing that was already written into U.S. welfare policies.

When the narrator returns to the relief office the next day for another appointment, the state reveals its power to pathologize, institutionalize, and sterilize immoral women as they deem fit. Alone in the office for a minute, the girl peeks at her own case file and reads the following:

*The girl is maladjusted, emotionally unstable, and a difficult problem to approach. A most unfortunate situation. A change of environment would be helpful, with continuous casework followup, to inspire poise, and educational interests should be encouraged as a solution. In our opinion there should be a referral to a psychiatric clinic if she shows indications of further or aggravated mental and emotional disturbance. She should be tested for sterilization after her baby is born. In our opinion sterilization would be advisable. (129)*

The severity of this judgment shocks the girl. Given the recent difficulties in her life—including unemployment, poverty, and emotional trauma—the girl is holding up well. While the relief officer's opinion to sterilize the girl after her pregnancy is appalling in its own right, what breaks the narrator's spirit is the way Miss Rice pretends to be her friend

even as she attempts to coerce the narrator into consenting to her own sterilization. Miss Rice's smile intends to comfort the narrator, but it is insincere and leaves the girl afraid of a relief system that is more interested in limiting her agency and autonomy than ensuring she received appropriate nutrition for mothers.

Realizing that her experience is not an isolated incident, the girl refuses to sign the medical paperwork authorizing her sterilization. Looking around "at all the people at the desks talking to the interviewers," she discovers that many other women face the same bureaucratic pressure to accept severe restrictions to secure relief. In a moment of panic, the narrator attempts to escape the relief office only to discover that welfare is not a gift to be accepted or refused as she sees fit, but state-mandated discipline for her sexual behavior. Police forcefully stop the girl from fleeing, first by sexually assaulting the narrator and then beating her when she resists (130). Le Sueur's description of police brutality foregrounds the gender dynamics of the bureaucratic welfare state. Despite the lengthy process the girl navigates to access the aid she needs most (money, milk, and oranges), the welfare state offers its own diagnosis and cure, instead: forced hospitalization and sterilization. Acting on this diagnosis, relief officers create and respond to a stereotyped account of the girl's situation—the abandoned mother—rather than addressing the more complex reality of the narrator's life. The presence of cops at the relief office reveals that the soft power of relief is backed by the full disciplinary power of the state. Thus, when the girl refuses to consent to a voluntary surrender of her bodily autonomy through the bureaucratic violence of signing legal documents under duress, she faces a more direct form of state violence instead: police officers and institutionalization. Once the case worker marks the girl as sexually imprudent, the police

feel emboldened to act with extrajudicial violence against the girl, showing how the state's moral indictment of the narrator as a "naughty girl" can result in additional patriarchal punishment.

Clara's narrative presents an alternate path through the welfare system. While there are notable differences in these two women's circumstances (Clara is a sex worker while the girl is soon to be an unwed mother), the state's goal appears the same: to rid women of sexual deviancy and then coerce them into practicing a more conventional image of womanhood as authorized by the state. Clara is a streetwise woman who taught the narrator how to survive in the city as a poor working woman. Without Hoinck and Ack around to run the German Village or Ganz to pay the police to keep the bootleg operation running, however, Clara eventually loses her regular sources of income. As a result, Clara gives up her strategic underclass invisibility and applies for welfare, which marks the beginning of an official relationship between Clara and the state. Relief officers begin monitoring Clara's behavior as soon as she applies for welfare. When a case worker finds evidence that Clara is still engaging in sex work, the state intervenes with incredible speed and severity, seizing Clara from her apartment without warning. The girl learns about this nighttime raid from a roommate, Amelia, just after she escapes the maternity house: "*they just took Clara to give her electric shock treatments. Nothing we could do could stop them. Nothing*" (134). This is all the girl ever hears about Clara's swift and sudden capture. Amelia does not say who "they" are or what sort of justification the state used to mandate electric shock therapy. Since the scene comes immediately after the narrator's own violent encounter with the welfare state, readers can

assume that Clara's situation involves a web of federal authority. After some time, "they brought Clara back from Hastings Mental hospital," at which point the narrator remarks:

I never seen anything like she looked. It wasn't that she was white, she was always very white, it was that look in her eyes and her stillness.

She was very very still as if she had gone out of herself, as if the shock like an explosion had sent the doves of her spirit flying away never to come back. (138)

Electric shock therapy—or Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)—was introduced in U.S. mental health facilities in 1939, the same year Le Sueur began writing *The Girl*. While the treatment method was controversial from the start, mental health facilities used the technique throughout the mid-twentieth century to treat patients experiencing depression and bipolar disorder. It was sometimes used as a punishment for poor behavior as well.<sup>41</sup>

A social worker accompanying Clara home explains that "these treatments reduce anxiety;" however, Le Sueur's description suggests the procedure removes much more than that (138). The state's cure for sexual deviancy is a form of brain damage that strips Clara of her strength and independent personality. These are qualities that Clara relied on as a working-class woman and sex worker. The loss her vitality is most visible when the social worker remarks that "I hope you will be careful not to have any men up here. You can't get any help if there are goings on with men. You have to be mighty careful" (138).

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<sup>41</sup> As recently as 2010, Minnesota state legislators unanimously passed House File 1680 and Senate File 1135, an official state apology for the cruel treatment of patients at Hastings Mental hospital. The author of this document, Senator John Marty explained: "For over 100 years Minnesota had public policies that took people with mental illness and disabilities away from their families and communities and committed them to state institutions. In those institutions, some were forced to work without pay, some were subjected to medical experiments and procedures without their consent, some were subjected to punitive shock treatments, aversive treatments and isolation" ("Legislation Signed - A Century Later, State Is Sorry").

In the past, Clara had never let such moralizing rebukes go unchallenged. The girl, Belle, and Amelia know this and wait for Clara “to say something awful to her,” but this moment never comes to fruition due to the pacifying effects of electric shock therapy (138).

Clara and the girl experience a welfare that is far more disciplinary than it is supportive. For many Americans in need, the additional scrutiny and surveillance introduced by New Deal welfare policies complicated their lives. This was especially true for working-class women who became the target of middle-class judgement. As welfare programs solidified into a bureaucratic system in the late 1930s, relief officers played an increasingly large role in authorizing legitimate forms of need that included strict moral guidelines. For women who fell outside of these notions stated-authorized forms of femininity—that of the mother, caregiver, and homemaker—the state implemented punishments rather than relief. This happens to both Clara and the narrator in *The Girl*.<sup>42</sup> Le Sueur show how state used incentives (relief) and punishment (institutionalization) to control women and limit their autonomy. For many, receiving welfare was an adequate incentive to practice state-mandated behavior. But this is not the case for the women in Le Sueur’s novel. The girl, Clara, Belle, Amelia, and Butch’s mother all recognize the coercive force of the welfare state and challenge its legitimacy. In the final scenes of the novel, Le Sueur introduces a form of protest and solidarity notably different from the that seen in either *Native Son* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck’s image of working-class

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<sup>42</sup> Julia Leyda describes this process in relation to the rhetoric of “white trash.” She concludes that: “the institutional view of the Girl as white trash becomes clear as she learns first-hand that forced sterilization and shock treatments are the primary forms of ‘relief’ for sexually active single poor women like herself and her friend Clara” (43-44).

maternal sacrifice celebrates a form of solidarity that absolves the state of its responsibility to those in need. Wright refuses to imagine anything other than death in *Native Son*. Le Sueur, by contrast, insists that working-class women can respond to state violence and hold the government accountable for its actions through protest. Obermueller explains that the relief system controls women's body through "authoritative discourses" that "invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (57). Le Sueur's women fight back against the authoritative discourse of the state, even as it presents challenges to their agency. While women's bodies do serve as "the register for social welfare policy," Le Sueur demonstrates that their signifying power can be reclaimed through political action (57). By showing working-class women holding the state accountable, Le Sueur picks up where Steinbeck leaves off. The women in *The Girl* support those in need just as Rose of Sharon does in the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but Le Sueur shows the importance of making demands of the welfare state while Steinbeck does not. The girl recognizes that she has the capacity to challenge state authority during a discussion with a Workers' Alliance member she meets in the mental hospital, where she discovers strength of "the word *demand*" (Le Sueur 133). In the company of other working-class people, the girl learns that women can be seen on their own terms—as workers and active agents of their own lives, rather than narrowly-defined mothers and symbols of purity. To underscore this point, Le Sueur redefines mother as a symbol of protest and an agent of change in the final scene, rewriting the maternal narrative. In *The Girl*, the birth of a new generation of the working class is the reason to demand state recognition and support. This message

challenges Steinbeck's vision of solidarity which depends on a form of self-reliance and mutual aid that places working-class wellbeing outside the purview of the state.

The rage we see in *Native Son* is present in *The Girl*, as well. However, Le Sueur shows that anger can find expression through protest rather than isolated acts of violence. The welfare state structures the lives of Le Sueur's characters just as it does Bigger Thomas. With a broader cast of characters, however, Le Sueur shows that criminalization and death are not the only end for working-class people. The welfare state acts as a dynamic and variable system of rewards and punishments, sometimes following through on its threat of violence, but not always. In other words, for every Bigger and Butch killed by working-class criminalization, others survive. *The Girl* tells the survivors' story, showing how violent encounters with the emerging welfare state informs working-class demands for justice, but cannot determine their future. Le Sueur believed strongly in the ability of language to shape reality; this is especially true in the realm of welfare policy. By demonstrating how the welfare state inflicts gendered violence, Le Sueur reveals how federal policies can structure women's life possibilities and limit their bodily autonomy. Yet she does not end on a note of defeat. Instead, Le Sueur explores how the collective voice of working-class women can challenge the belief that women are respected only as mothers and caregivers.

Depression-era novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*, and *The Girl* question the contemporary liberal praise of both the New Deal and the welfare state. While the New Deal certainly provided some much-needed aid to working families, it also created a new form of state power that subjected poor and working-class families to a heightened level of surveillance and moral policing that continues to shape welfare

practices to this day. These novels document how U.S. welfare complicates the lives of families in need of aid. My discussion highlights how the state used the rhetoric of self-reliance to limit government accountability. This model of welfare was inaccessible to many working-class families, such as the Joads. It harmed many poor people by introducing a system of bureaucratic surveillance and strict federal regulation. These novels demonstrate how the welfare state punished working-class women's sexual behavior, confined poor African Americans to low paid work, and maintained a submissive labor force. Steinbeck, Wright, and Le Sueur each focus on a different working-class population, but all three authors were concerned that the emerging welfare state contained ideological principles and restrictive policies that limited the extent to which the government could support those who needed it most.

## Chapter Two: Resistance and Adaptation in the Postwar Working-Class Novel

The New Deal lost momentum by the end of the 1930s as the nation focused on preparing for World War II, but the welfare state was here to stay. While the United States didn't formally enter the war until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, America began manufacturing and selling arms in 1939, signaling an economic interest in WWII from the beginning, despite an official position of neutrality. In March 1941, President Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease Act authorizing the Allied nations to access over \$50 billion worth of food, oil, and materiel between 1941 and August 1945 (Tassava). Production soared while Americans enjoyed a period of near full employment that brought wartime prosperity to millions. Economically, life was improving for many Americans who had struggled to make ends meet during the Depression.<sup>43</sup> With a more favorable economic outlook, welfare generated less political anxiety than it had when nearly one third of the nation depended on federal aid to survive. Many Americans turned their attention to a new cultural nexus and considered what it meant to live in an affluent society that gave many members of the working-class access to a middle-class quality of life. Yet, even as many workers celebrated this prosperity, texts like Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1956) and John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) argued that something valuable was being sacrificed as the nation prioritized growth and productivity above all else. Mid-century critics feared that Postwar America was defined

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<sup>43</sup> Unemployment dropped from a Great Depression peak of 25 percent to 14.6 percent in 1939, and then shrunk to an all-time low of just 1.2 percent in 1944 (Pruitt).

by a feeling of purposelessness and disillusionment rooted in an emergent middle-class consumer culture paid for through alienating Fordist labor.

In this chapter, I investigate the rise of a new American consumer culture emerging in the United States between 1940 and 1960 from a working-class perspective. During this period, U.S. advertising became a powerful ideological tool through the use of psychological market research techniques pioneered by Peter Drucker, George Horace Gallup, Ernest Dichter, and others. Historical documents from influential advertising agencies and market research firms reveal the lengths to which advertisers and marketers went to influence public opinion and shape national identity. Their combined efforts influenced American culture in numerous ways, from shaping how the perceived quality of life to introducing a form of consumer patriotism that defined making and spending money as American acts. By the end of these two decades, millions of Americans learned to love postwar consumer capitalism and appreciate its middle-class values.

For many others, America's transformation into a commodity-driven postwar consumer economy was undesirable. Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954) and Harvey Swados' *On the Line* (1957) are two mid-century novels that question the dominant postwar culture. Both texts show working-class people becoming increasingly dependent on and eventually defined by the commercial goods that surround them. But the characters in both novels push back against the disciplinary power of these material influences. Arnow's *The Dollmaker* challenges the working-class progress narrative that uncritically claims mid-century economic developments made life better for low-income

families.<sup>44</sup> Instead, Arnow highlights the price that one poor, rural Appalachian family—the Nevels—must pay to gain access to postwar material comfort. In this novel, Arnow describes the painful experience of a rural working-class family pressured to conform to the social and economic norms of the industrial American city. By structuring the plot around three characters who refuse this new way of life, Arnow makes resistance a central theme in the novel. Furthermore, by beginning the novel with an extended meditation on rural Appalachian life, Arnow locates a viable alternative to the alienating consumerism of the city in the arduous but meaningful labor Gertie Nevels practices in the Kentucky hills. Here, Arnow suggests, the working poor can experience a more intimate and meaningful relationship with both work and money than they can under the cruel conditions of factory labor. Once the family relocates to Detroit, Gertie, Cassie, and Reuben Nevels resist the ideological current of the city after finding the promises of consumer affluence to be hollow. In the end, Arnow replaces the traditional progress narrative celebrating working-class affluence with a more complex story that honors the forgotten and underappreciated knowledge and lifeways of some of America’s most resilient people: the rural working class.

No examination of mid-century consumer culture is complete without acknowledging the role of automobiles in postwar American life. Swados examines this important cultural symbol in his Ford factory novel *On the Line*. In a series of eight vignettes, Swados demonstrates how automobiles, and the force of industrial capitalism, influenced the lives of the working class. The iron-willed boys and proud men who

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<sup>44</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith describes the origins and features of America’s so-called “age of affluence” in *The Affluent Society* (1958).

populate the novel face ideological pressure as they work the line. In all eight stories, the factory workers' desire for upward mobility betrays them. The characters discover that their high wages fail to purchase items of value and purpose, revealing the futility of consumerism. For instance, the automobile that is meant to transform Kevin, an Irish immigrant, into a "proper American" leaves him instead with a "bitter clarity" that life in America is meaningless. Similarly, the car intended to carry Pop's son Rudy off to college sends him to an early grave instead. As Swados develops this pattern of hope giving way to despair, he exposes a cruel irony that it was often the product of one's own alienated labor that served as the means of one's defeat. This was especially true for members of the newly prosperous working class who put too much faith in narrative of affluence. In the end, however, the target of Swados' anger is not the automobile itself, but the workers' misplaced faith in consumer culture. *On the Line* describes the postwar workplace as an ideological assembly line as much as a commercial one where line workers produced resignation and defeat as efficiently as they made automobiles. Swados describes the painful experience of the postwar work-to-consume lifestyle that feels too much like the metal finishing process, hammering and filing down the exterior until the product looks attractive and uniform from the outside, while suffering great damage beneath the surface.

My reading of *The Dollmaker* and *On the Line* demonstrates how cultural and material forces rebranded citizens as consumers trained to desire postwar commercial spending. I discuss the ways in which postwar American society rewarded those who were willing to adjust to the growing work-to-consume lifestyle and the how emergent sociocultural systems targeted and punished those who refused. My study highlights

working-class responses to this socioeconomic transformation and provides a conceptual map of this emerging ideological system. I argue that these two novels document the painful experience of working-class people undergoing material and ideological transformation, even though some embraced it. Arnow and Swados consider the psychological and cultural cost of postwar affluence by giving an account of what working-class people sacrificed in order to gain access to a glamorously advertised middle-class quality of life. In *The Dollmaker*, Gertie abandons a mode of life and work that she enjoys despite its relative detachment from the modern consumer economy. In *On the Line*, factory workers sacrifice their highest aspirations and most cherished relationships in their pursuit of middle-class possessions. In both cases, the authors describe a pattern of acquiescence and resignation among working-class people as they encounter a powerful economic and ideological realignment promoted by advertisers, industry, and government alike. At the same time, many characters in *The Dollmaker* and *On the Line* hold on to residual aspects of their working-class life even as social, cultural, and economic forces pressure them to adjust.<sup>45</sup> As a result, Arnow and Swados not only identify the strategic collaboration between public and private institutions in structuring postwar life in America. They also offer powerful counterarguments to the ideological fantasies that deceptively promised upward mobility and affluence for all. In doing so, Arnow and Swados looked beyond the narrow horizon of possibility that structured the lives of many working-class Americans who were stuck in an alienating cycle of earning

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<sup>45</sup> In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams describes the residual aspects of culture as “effectively formed in the past, but . . . still active in the cultural present.” He also explains that the residual “may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture,” as it does in *The Dollmaker* (122).

and spending. Together, these novels demonstrate the value of working-class knowledge at a time when such ways of life were discouraged. Arnow and Swados argue with clarity and compassion that residual working-class modes of exchange, work, and community are not a detriment to the nation's economic wellbeing but a blueprint for ensuring a more intimate and humane world.

### **Affluence, Advertising, and Consumer Desire in the Postwar Era**

The 1940s and 50s offered opportunities for working-class people and private enterprise alike. Wartime employment and rising wages lifted many Americans out of poverty. By the end of the war, the U.S. government had introduced several economic policies that kept the wartime boom going. This stark change to the national economic outlook improved the quality of life for many Americans and reinforced middle-class aspirations for the many working-class families who saw this period as a chance to improve their family's economic position. As Historian James Patterson explains, "millions of people in the late 1940s also thought that the American Dream was alive and well . . . defined by the belief that hard work would enable a person to rise in society and that children would do better in life than parents" (Patterson 65). With the help of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the Veterans Administration (VA), and the standardized 30-year mortgage, families who had previously rented small apartments were able to purchase their first home, which signified to many working-class families that they had finally "made it."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Mortgage terms were so affordable by mid-century standards that, by 1960, over 60 percent of American families owned their own house, although many of the best loan opportunities were only available to white Americans, since federal policies included racial exclusions (Patterson, 1996, 72). See chapter three.

For advertisers, higher wages and more disposable income helped expand the industry's reach and influence. Prior to the 1940s, consumer goods—such as milk and canned foods—were packaged in generic containers and sold in bulk. Early twentieth century marketing materials provided informative descriptions of products, alerting consumers about new products or models. However, marketing techniques changed dramatically over the next twenty years with the rise of mass communication technologies, such as nationally distributed magazines and newspapers as well as radio and television. With the advent of uniform mass messaging, advertisers developed the idea of a national brand and ushered in an era of advertising founded on the principles of product differentiation and the now familiar practice of cultivating emotional attachments to specific brands and products. In *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979*, Daniel Horowitz charts the unprecedented rise of advertising that occurred during this period. He found that "expenditures on advertising in America had grown from less than \$2 billion in 1939 to nearly \$12 billion by the late 1950s" and recognized that "ads had become more sophisticated, visual, and subtle in approach and more pervasive in reach" (109).<sup>47</sup> The 1940s and 1950s were a turning point in the role advertising played in American economic and cultural life. Over these two decades, prominent advertising agencies and industry leaders forged partnerships with the federal government to influence the direction of American life. This transformation did not occur overnight, however. Horowitz offers the following timeline. The 30s and 40s were a time of "far-reaching ideological redefinition of polity and

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<sup>47</sup> James Patterson cites similar figures in his comprehensive history of mid-century America, *Grand Expectations: the United States, 1945-1974*: "\$5.7 billion in 1950 and \$11.9 billion in 1960 (315).

society,” which involved "a state sponsored guarantee of private consumption" that found its clearest expression in the corporate promotion of household appliances, packaged goods, and new forms of leisure (21). By the early 1940s, the United States was “clearly on its way to becoming a country where possession of a standard package of consumer goods was the key to community membership" (32). Horowitz explains that “American consumers were critical to the promotion of economic growth, democracy, and social stability,” linking consumption “not only with private pleasure but also with democratic aspirations and a resurgent capitalism" (32-49). Throughout the 1950s, advertising worked diligently to redefine U.S. gender norms and encouraged women to embrace their new role as consumers. By the end of the age of affluence, government and industry leaders insisted on an association between “capitalism, freedom, and consumer culture,” and the impact of this deliberate branding of consumer culture remains a vital part of American life today (58).<sup>48</sup>

The renewed focus on growth and a middle-class standard of living altered the social and political priorities for the United States. During this period, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) served as a key measure of prosperity. For many politicians and economists, this metric was used as evidence of widespread wealth and proof of a healthy economy. For many others, including several social critics and historians, the narrow focus of this metric was problematic. After all, there is much that the GDP cannot measure, including wealth disparity and average quality of life, both of which challenge

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<sup>48</sup> Horowitz (2004) explains that the 1950s were a period when "the market researcher thus served as a therapist who helped people get over their guilt, find pleasure in consumption, and resolve the tensions of their lives" (60).

narratives of mid-century affluence.<sup>49</sup> Even though the 50s brought with it increased anxiety about security, historians like Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle argue that broad worker solidarity was difficult to achieve as laborers atomized into suburban families units preoccupied with isolated fights for their own wellbeing. As a result, many unions took industry-specific approaches to organizing that eventually produced unequal labor conditions for many working Americans and eroding the universal sense of solidarity.<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite the narratives of affluence circulating in 40s and 50s, labor historians remind us that the many economic benefits were not felt evenly across the working class. Consumerism played a key role in this economic and cultural realignment as higher wages caused many workers to redefine their class identities and affiliations based on what they could afford to buy rather than on their economic relations.

Cold War anxieties for security and middle-class aspirations for a high quality of life also affected the daily lives of mid-century Americans.<sup>51</sup> Prominent advertising industry leaders such as Ernest Dichter and James Webb Young used Cold War rhetoric to claim the American way of life was under attack. In a series of speeches given at Association of National Advertisers and American Association of Advertising Agencies meetings, Young aimed to protect the advertising industry—and consumer capitalism—

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<sup>49</sup> Jeff Cowie explains that the U.S. welfare state remained limited after the war since many of its services were tied to employment rather than citizenship, which differed from European models of welfare (154).

<sup>50</sup> Cowie's analysis of 1950s labor politics is much more optimistic, arguing: "given the very real obstacles that blocked the development of grander schemes, the war and postwar eras are best seen as periods of working-class achievement rather than compromise or sellout, a period in which the wartime emergency allowed unions to gain many of the advances they were unable to achieve during the 1930s" (159).

<sup>51</sup> See Alan Wald's *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* for an examination of the effects the Cold War had on American culture, particularly in regard to left literature. See Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* for a cultural history of the Cold War.

from these ideological threats. Young and his associates charted a new course for advertising in the wartime and postwar eras that helped secure the role of consumerism in American life for generations.<sup>52</sup> Part of this strategy involved a partnership to unite market forces and government power. To this end, Young established the War Advertising Council in 1941 (renamed the Ad Council after the war), which served as the foundation for an ongoing collaboration between national corporations, U.S. advertising firms, media outlets, and the federal government. Many of the Ad Council's creations were produced "in service of social good" and resulted in now classic campaigns such as Smokey the Bear and Rosie the Riveter; however, Young's speeches to the advertising industry revealed another goal. Here, he argued that their purpose was to win an "undeclared war" of "Free Enterprise and Democracy" against Communism (Young, 1946).<sup>53</sup> Young believed that U.S. advertising was "the greatest aggregate means of mass education and persuasion the world has ever seen" and used it to promote a new way of life in America centered around buying cultural commodities (Young, 1946).

Ernest Dichter shared Young's opinion about the power of advertising and described his efforts to direct that power in *The Strategy of Desire*. Through a series of case studies, this book provides insight into how the corporate branding of merchandise (from cars and refrigerators to soap and canned food) anticipated, responded to, and shaped consumer desires. While Americans were earning and spending in record numbers, corporations often needed help from marketing professionals like Dichter to

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<sup>52</sup> See Dawn Spring's *Advertising in the Age of Persuasion: Building Brand America 1941-1961* for an analysis of the U.S. approach to consumerism during the 1940s and 1950s, and its ongoing ramifications.

<sup>53</sup> The 1955 "People's capitalism" is a prime example of how the Ad Council used its influence to shape public opinion about capitalism, communism, freedom, and democracy (see Appendix A).

convince the public to purchase their products in more predictable patterns. Dichter's psychological approach to market research aimed to discover the often-hidden desires, associations, and anxieties of mid-century consumers. Advertisers could then use these insights to target distinct audiences and implement persuasive techniques accordingly. Sales often increased sharply for the brands Dichter studied, suggesting that many Americans adopted new habits and lifestyles as a result of strategic commercial messaging. This dramatic power to alter personal choice also implies that the advertising industry was part of an ideological system that taught Americans to *desire* U.S. consumer capitalism and to love their role as consumers. In the end, Dichter and his associates pressured Americans to believe that there was no alternative to a wage-driven, commodity-fueled consumer economy. While no such influence could ever be absolute, the dramatic change in American culture proves it was widespread and significant.

### **Residual Economics and Working-Class Resistance in *The Dollmaker***

As earlier scholars have pointed out, *The Dollmaker* is a story about adjustment.<sup>54</sup> In the opening chapter, for example, Arnow describes the dramatic changes rural working-class people experienced as the nation entered World War II. Millions of men enlisted in the Army and were sent overseas. Millions more (men and women) moved to industrial cities in the North to secure high-paying war production jobs. Together, these sudden shifts in the demographic composition of communities across the country impacted the lives of those who stayed behind in many ways. This was especially true for

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Walsh's "Free Will and Determinism in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*" and Kathleen Parker's "American Migration Tableau in Exaggerated Relief: *The Dollmaker*."

isolated regions like Appalachia where the loss of a single doctor could mean that the community must do without one, as is the case in *The Dollmaker*. In her most influential novel, Arnow describes the impact of this economic realignment by developing characters who love the land and life they have in Appalachia. My discussion of *The Dollmaker* builds on the work of Kathleen Parker and Stacy Morgan who have previously explored Arnow's critique of materialist consumption (Morgan 734) and “the effect of capitalism on individuals and the family” (Parker 210). In this article, I argue that Arnow moves beyond the critique of consumer capitalism to offer, through a detailed exploration of Appalachian economics and culture, an alternate social vision embodied in the residual lifeways of the working poor.

My reading also offers a corrective to the critical debates about Arnow's representation of rural migrants' adjustment to urban capitalism, which have focused on the novel's protagonist, Gertie Nevels. While some critics see Gertie's hesitancy during important decision-making moments as a sign of “passivity” (Mooney) or “self-doubt” (Walsh), I argue that Gertie's behavior can be more accurately seen as a form of working-class resistance that signals a contempt for postwar consumerism and the ideology that promoted it. In my view, Arnow's novel is neither a celebration nor indictment of Gertie's eventual (and partial) acquiescence to the material demands of postwar economics, but a statement on the harsh realities of a new economic system for rural-to-urban migrants like the Nevels. At the same time, we should not assume that Gertie's adjustment is a form of conformity or inaction, as Mooney and Walsh do. Rather, I argue that Gertie models a strategic mode of working-class resilience in which she responds to overwhelming material and ideological transformation by adjusting on her own terms.

While other migrant families develop a near total dependency on the urban labor market in Detroit, Gertie's dollmaking allows the family to carry forward a piece of their former self-sufficient productivity. By ending the novel with this act of strategic working-class adjustment, Arnow shows how rural working-class knowledge can penetrate the dominant ideology of the city and act as a practical alternative to the emerging postwar wage-labor system that tethers working people to the consumer economy.

While living in an isolated coal mining region of Kentucky, Gertie Nevels learns that self-sufficiency is key to her family's survival. Arnow introduces Gertie as a powerful and capable woman and emphasizes her capacity to overcome anything life throws her way.<sup>55</sup> Gertie takes care of her home and farm while raising five children. The war presents new challenges to maintaining this precarious life, but nevertheless she is able to save a few dollars here and there from selling eggs and other surplus goods in the hope of one day purchasing the Tipton Place, a nearby farm she has been eying for years. She accomplishes all of this work with little help from her husband, Clovis, who has been unable to find consistent work trucking coal since the federal government deemed the local mines too inefficient to operate during the war. Without viable employment, Clovis eventually leaves Kentucky to enlist in the army but finds a semi-skilled position at a factory in Detroit instead. While Clovis is away, Gertie receives the rest of the money she needs to purchase Tipton Place as a government payout when her brother is killed in the war. She negotiates a deal with the property owner, Riley, but—much to her dismay—Gertie's mother intervenes and prevents the purchase on the grounds that no respectable

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<sup>55</sup> Mooney observes that, in the country, Gertie is larger-than-life with her agency and ability to act, such as performing "an emergency tracheotomy with a pocketknife, hairpin, and poplar twig" (37).

woman would split up her family by remaining in Kentucky when her husband is working in Detroit. Devastated but dutiful, Gertie concedes to her mother's demands and follows Clovis to the city, holding on to the hope that one day she and the family will return to Kentucky and buy a place of their own.<sup>56</sup>

During the first nine chapters, Arnow celebrates rural life in Appalachia and the agency it affords Gertie. Yet, as Kathleen Parker observes, Arnow does not idealize rural life. Instead, she acknowledges the poverty, isolation, and harsh winters alongside the region's natural beauty and its people's independence. As Parker explains, *The Dollmaker* is both a feminist revision of the pastoral myth and an example of the "yeoman" pastoral tradition. Arnow's representation of rural life differs from more traditional pastoral narratives in two ways. First, by foregrounding Gertie's experiences, Arnow highlights the importance of women's work in enabling families to survive. In this way, these early chapters serve as an important contrast to Gertie's confrontation with the male-dominated industrial world once the family migrates to Detroit (Parker 207). Second, as part of the "yeoman tradition," Arnow "focuses on a personal working relationship with the land . . . rooted to a cooperative work ethic in the rural setting" (207). The rural chapters introduce a kind of work that is personal and cooperative at the same time. In these ways, Arnow provides an alternate—and more realistic—account of actual existing country life than what the idealizing mode of pastoral offers. Readers readily discover that Gertie works long, hard days to sustain her family. Moreover, as

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<sup>56</sup> See Gwendolyn Mink's "Wage Earning or Motherhood: Maternalist Labor Policy during World War II" in *The Wages of Motherhood* for a discussion of the gender dynamics impacting Gertie and her mother during the 1940s.

tenant farmers, the Nevels must give half of their harvest to the property owner. Despite these hardships, Gertie still feels connected to the natural world and experiences a sense of pride and accomplishment in her work. Meanwhile, the absence of this connection is one of the hardest adjustments Gertie grapples with in Detroit.

In the early chapters of *The Dollmaker*, Arnow's critical pastoral describes an alternate economy where money serves not only as a convenient means of exchange, but also as a record of human relationships. While the rural economy is structured by capitalist exchange and its associated values (such as the desire for property ownership),<sup>57</sup> it operates differently from postwar consumer capitalism. Money is much less central to the economy, as are the commercial desires that emerge in advertising- and commodity-laden cities. Since the Nevels produce most of what they need to sustain themselves on the farm, they experience their work—and their own productive capacities in a relatively non-alienated way, even though their tenant farming situation is exploitative. This alternate experience of money and work create a more intimate economic system. Gertie, for instance, can name the productive labor involved in every dollar she has earned and saved through her hard work on the farm:

She put her hand down through the torn pocket, and slowly, carefully twisting her hand as if the hole in her pocket were almost the exact size of her hand, she began to bring out worn and grimy bills. Some

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<sup>57</sup> Arnow (1976) passionately defends the idea that Gertie is a capitalist in a letter responding to a critic, Barbara Rigney, who argued that "'war and capitalism are Arnow's villains" (83). Arnow responds: "true, war is one of the villains, but as for capitalism, wasn't Gertie when in the hills something of a capitalist: she sold every egg she could spare and was saving money for the purpose of buying a farm of her own. The desire to own land, a place of her own was so strong it was almost an obsession--until her mother and community mores forced her to go live with Clovis" (147).

were folded alone into tiny squares, others were folded two and three together, and many, like the four new bills, were crumpled hastily into tiny balls. Each she unfolded and smoothed flat on the floor with the palm of her hand, looking at it an instant with first a searching, then a remembering glance. Sometimes after a moment of puzzlement she whispered, 'that was eggs at Samuel's two years ago last July,' and to a five, 'that was th walnut-kernel money winter before last,' and to another one, 'that was th big dominecker that wouldn't lay atall; she'd bring close to two dollars now,' Of one so old and thin it seemed ready to fall apart at the creases, she was doubtful, and she held it to the light until she saw the pinhole through Lincoln's eye. 'Molasses money.' She was hurrying now, eager to have it all in a pile, counting, pretending she was uncertain how much there would be. (Arnow 39)

Arnow's description of money in this scene is remarkable and represents a relationship between working people and money rarely described in literature. Gertie *knows* her money, intimately, and her handling it in this scene is a deeply moving experience involving memory and emotion. The bills have depth, texture, and history—which gives the money character and personality. Gertie's organizing and counting of money is a tour of past relationships, with other people (like Samuel), and with the environment, animals, and work itself, as we can see when Gertie recalls "th walnut-kernel," "th big dominecker that wouldn't lay atall," and the "Molasses" that made all of these earnings possible. At the end of the scene, Arnow reveals that Gertie isn't even really counting the money, as she already knows how much is there. For Gertie, handling her money is something other

than accounting; it is a ritual, a conjuring of emotions, memories, and desires. It helps her focus her mind on the thought of inching ever closer to the \$500 mark that would allow her to purchase Tipton Place and freedom from the family's current tenant farming situation. In the end, Arnow's representation of Gertie's relationship to money challenges the familiar but inadequate notion that all working-class labor exchange in a capitalist society is effectively the same. Instead, the scene reveals how earning money can be an unalienated experience even when only modestly remunerated as long as the exchange is connected to a network of meaningful social and material relations. Gertie finds this not only possible in rural Kentucky, but common.

Gertie's farm work is meaningful and fulfilling to her, despite the daily toil and systemic poverty it involves, largely because she remains in control of the things she produces and sells. Under these conditions of production, the tools that Gertie uses in her demanding but unalienated labor take on special characteristics, as Arnow makes visible in the following scene about an old cedar bucket:

Clovis quarreled often at the weight of the cedar bucket and the clumsiness of it, pointing out that a new one would cost only a quarter. The children seldom carried it to the spring, but filled it from the smaller buckets. But now, as Gertie broke the thin skim of ice on top and lifted dipperfulls of water from it to fill the coffeepot, she smiled on it, remembering the years she had had it, and was filled for a moment with a proud consciousness of ownership, something solid and old, known and proved long ago by hands other than her own. She smoothed the middle copper band, bright in the stove light from many

scrubbings with ashes. She decided that when she moved to the Tipton Place she would keep the bucket on the porch shelf and quit using it for water; instead, she should keep garden truck or meat in it, as her grandmother used to do. (76)

On the surface, this old, heavy bucket is far from ideal. It is too clumsy for Clovis and too heavy for the children use. The quarreling this bucket inspires hints at the growing ideological conflict between Gertie and Clovis regarding their relationship to the material world. For Clovis, the old cedar bucket is more trouble than it's worth. He finds fault with its design and believes the product to be an easily replaceable commodity. For just twenty-five cents, Clovis argues, the family could retire the heavy bucket and replace it with a newer, lighter, more efficient model. Yet, to Gertie, this bucket is a source of pride, a family heirloom to be honored and respected. She believes it is "something solid and old" that proves its worth not by its design and efficiency, but through its familiarity and history. The bucket holds memories as well as water and becomes irreplaceable to Gertie. She remembers the bucket's past, reflecting on how other hands have known the tool before her and feeling that this lineage is of great value. Rather than becoming dull with age (as planned obsolescence would have it), Gertie realizes "many scrubbings with ashes" actually brightens the copper band. Gertie can imagine the bucket's future and does so with pleasure as she settles on a use for it at Tipton Place, even as she anticipates the day when they can stop using the bucket for carrying water. Rejecting Clovis' utilitarian logic, Gertie's reverie neither signals the end of the bucket's meaningful existence in the household nor justifies spending money on a new tool. Instead, drawing on her grandmother's knowledge, Gertie recognizes that even though the value of an

object changes over time, it need not diminish. By repurposing rather than replacing, Gertie resists the consumer values held by Clovis and finds a more intimate alternative rooted in working-class values of thrift and family heritage.

Food is a material object that holds special significance for Gertie, as it carries a wealth of meaning derived from the labor that go into making it and the relationships it sustains. *The Dollmaker* has numerous scenes that involve preparing and eating food. Arnow provides the following description of a family meal, which shows Gertie's intimate relationship with the food she prepares for a Christmas dinner with her family in Kentucky:

The hominy making, the gathering of walnuts, and their other regular chores in the clear sharp weather had given them all good appetites. Gertie, sitting at the foot of the table with a lard bucket of sweet milk on one side of her, buttermilk on the other, a great platter of hot smoking cornbread in front, and other bowls and platters within easy reach, was kept busy filling glasses with milk, buttering bread, and dishing out the new hominy fried in lard and seasoned with sweet milk and black pepper. It was good with the shuck beans, baked sweet potatoes, cucumber pickles, and green tomato ketchup. Gertie served it up with pride, for everything, even the meal in the bread, was a product of her farming. (86)

Gertie takes pride here, in knowing that nearly everything she serves to her family comes directly from their own labor. Gertie makes the hominy from corn the family has planted, grown, and harvested themselves. This is true of the walnuts, milk, beans, potatoes,

cucumbers, and tomatoes that fill the table as well. The sheer abundance of food in this scene is cause for celebration, as this is not always the case for the Nevels, who have known many hard winters. More importantly, however, Arnow establishes a direct relationship between the family's labor, appetite, and the general sense of satisfaction. Arnow implies that the food tastes good here in large part because they all had a hand in producing it. Subsistence farming in Appalachia represents an economy not yet colonized by the alienating system of industrial wage-labor that they will encounter in Detroit. By contrast, what Arnow describes here is essentially a closed, self-sufficient economy functioning independently of a wider commercial marketplace. After the initial planting of the crops (with seeds from last year's harvest), Gertie and the rest of the family grow, harvest, process, and consume the products of their own labor with almost no need for external commercial activity. The absence of money in this self-sustaining, agrarian economy distinguishes it from other forms of exchange that prioritize capital investment, wage-labor, and profit. Arnow's agrarian economy prioritizes production for use over production for monetary exchange, which positions rural Kentucky life as a real structural alternative to Detroit's depersonalized consumer economy. The Nevels' homegrown food is a direct contrast to the low-quality, mass-produced food the family buys in Detroit. The scene reminds the reader not only of the possibility, but of the actual existence of a more intimate relationship to labor, money, and the goods that we use to sustain ourselves. Furthermore, as the family sits down together after a long day of hard work, Arnow reveals the deep sense of pride that working-class people feel when they reap the rewards of their own productive capacities, rather than exchanging that labor for a wage.

As seen above, Gertie views money as something more than a mere medium of exchange and material objects as something more than consumer goods. In both cases, more meaningful and intimate experiences of economic activity come from an unalienated relation to production. The objects that occupy the Nevels rural home contain memories of deep, personal significance. Many mid-century advertisers also recognized how powerful such emotional attachments could be and sought to exploit them by promoting brand loyalty, a concept just emerging during the 1940s. On one level, the capitalist market treats commodities as undifferentiated products. This was especially true in the industrial era when assembly lines, standardization, and Fordist principles demanded consistency in production. Every stove, car, or can of soup that came off the line was identical, no matter which specific laborers had produced them. This development presented a serious problem for advertisers, whose primary aim was to differentiate products in order to attract consumers. For industry professionals such as Ernest Dichter, the psychology of desire presented a solution. As one of the founders of psychological market research, Dichter spent much of his professional life theorizing the relationship between people and things, and then devising new ways to harness the power of that desire to establish a bond between consumers and commodities.

Dichter's 1960 book, *The Strategy of Desire*, is a summary of his most important theories and practical advice on how to establish these emotional bonds. In this text, Dichter explained that "the object, action, or thing-in-itself, which is a non-symbol-thing, can come to acquire other meanings and associations and thus symbolize other ideas and concepts" (Dichter 128). In other words, precisely what a particular "object" symbolized was quite malleable. For Dichter, there was no direct association between any given

“thing-in-itself” and the significance it held for the consumers of that product. Instead, as Dichter described it, “anything can come to represent almost anything else” (129). This inherent fluidity of meaning presented a great opportunity for advertisers, as they could use a manufactured power of association to differentiate products and increase consumer desire. In a case study commissioned by Ford Motor Company, for example, Dichter found that an automobile can symbolize “prestige” to one consumer and “prosperity” to another or be “part of one’s woman-hunting equipment” for a young bachelor while serving as a sign of “family togetherness” for newly married couples (129). According to Dichter, the role of the advertiser was to use their “knowledge of the emotional mechanism” to increase sales (136). In the Appalachian section of *The Dollmaker*, in contrast, no one tells Gertie how to feel about the money sewn into her jacket, her cedar bucket, or the food she produces for her family. In fact, her associations with these material objects appear inimical to consumer demand. The memories associated with the money, for instance, make it difficult for Gertie to spend her earnings on anything other than a truly fulfilling purchase. The oak bucket becomes an irreplaceable family heirloom, valued for its history as well as its utility. The meal evokes pride and family togetherness precisely because it is self-made, rather than bought. Rural life situates the Nevels largely (although not entirely) outside the growing power of commercial influence visible in wartime American cities. While Arnow does not ignore the challenges associated with isolated, rural Appalachian life, *The Dollmaker* celebrates the freedom it provides the Nevels to form their own meaningful associations with the material world. Over the course of the novel, Appalachian life serves as a moving alternative to the alienating consumerism of the city. In rural Kentucky in the 1940s,

arduous but meaningful work and economic exchange with neighbors still strengthen individuals and communities, even as working people in American cities were experiencing complete dependency on industrial wage-labor and the alienating consumption of mass-produced commodities.

None of the economic activity described above survives long once the Nevells relocate to Detroit. This is where the novel may begin to feel familiar for many readers, as it draws on the Left literary tradition of criticizing industrial capitalism that includes both well-known works like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* and less well-known working-class novels of the period like Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*. What makes this particular novel distinctive among the many twentieth-century American novels that reveal the horrors of industrial cities and factory labor is the way Arnow structures the urban experience in contrast to the mode of life that Gertie and her family had experienced in the mountains. Furthermore, like Olsen, Arnow describes urban life through a female protagonist's domestic routines. This focus draws attention to the consumer ideology that shapes the daily experience of working-class families rather than foregrounding the factory conditions under which Clovis toils. What little we do hear about factory labor emerges as dialogue within the home, rather than a journalistic gaze of the factory floor. This domestic approach to the narrative highlights the gender dynamics of consumer capitalism and explores how women experienced the coercive forces of mid-century consumer culture.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, Arnow's emphasis on the

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<sup>58</sup> Parker, for example, argues that "For Gertie, moving into a capitalist setting completely changes her role as a wife and as a mother. In the mountains, she had been strong, stable, self-reliant, able to get by on resources with which she was familiar . . . In Detroit, however, the family's dependency on Clovis's wage-earning role underscores her feeling of uselessness and of being out of place in the small house cluttered with confusing appliances" (211).

domestic shifts the focal point of the novel from production to commercial consumption, which was a fairly new experience for rural-to-urban migrant families like the Nevels.

From the moment Gertie sets foot in the city, she encounters structural impediments to the intimate and unalienated way of life described in the Appalachian section of the novel. Federally subsidized housing is one such barrier, as its predetermined arrangement of space makes it nearly impossible for the Nevels to engage in the self-sufficient, cost-reducing routines they have practiced back in Kentucky. The house is tiny, much smaller than Gertie could have imagined, and poorly designed for the domestic tasks she regularly performs on the farm (and expects to do in Detroit). To Gertie, “the place seemed all halls and walls and doors and windows,” which do not provide room for familiar activities like churning butter or preserving fresh produce (162). Of course, there is simply no space—and no land—for Gertie to grow the crops necessary for those rural practices either. As the children explore their new home, the eldest daughter, Clytie, discovers something distressing about the furnishings and remarks that ““they ain’t no dressers, an no looken glass, but I bet they’s twenty chairs, all alike. An jist one table fer all our cooken an eaten”” (163). This peculiar arrangement of space bothers Clytie for a few reasons. First, she does not like that their furnishings are all the same. As seen earlier, things—even utilitarian objects like a bucket or chair—can have an identity, if hand-made and handed down. But the identical, sterile, mass-produced chairs have no meaning for Clytie. Secondly, the number of chairs crowding the space also bothers her. As Clytie “grows closer and closer to sobs,” Gertie tries to comfort her daughter, explaining that ““I reckon th gover’ment thinks people won’t be a doen much in their houses but setten an sleepen”” (163). While this unsettling observation

does little to console the distressed daughter, the remark signals Arnow's awareness of how the arrangement of the material world can impact and limit working-class productivity. Gertie understands that this state-sponsored arrangement of space reflects a drastically different set of workplace and domestic priorities than those familiar to a farm family.

Gertie notices here that space can dictate the horizon of available activities. Even if she were able to acquire fresh produce in the city, for example, there is no way that this small house would have the space necessary to shuck beans, pickle cucumbers, or make tomato ketchup—all of which are regular domestic work on the farm completed to ensure low-cost or no-cost access to high-quality food., Arnow demonstrates how government supported housing was designed to fill factories with workers while also foreclosing alternate working-class lifeways.<sup>59</sup> In the end, the Nevels' new house is good for two things: "setten an sleepen," reflecting the bifurcated work-leisure system that has accompanied industrial wage-labor economies.<sup>60</sup> In such a space, it is easy to come home from a long shift at the factory, spend wages on ready-made food, and relax by the television or radio for a few hours before going to bed. In this way, the domestic sphere serves the express purpose of reproducing labor power while also reinforcing the need for a wage in the first place. Providing space for sitting and sleeping only, Detroit factory

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<sup>59</sup> In an article celebrating the work of Harriette Arnow, William Schafer observes that "the housing tract is designed as starkly as a Skinner Box to condition workers to efficient production" (48).

<sup>60</sup> Arnow (1954) describes this bifurcation of work-leisure time elsewhere in the novel, as well. For example: "she heard the ticking of the clock, louder it seemed than any clock could ever be. She had never lived with a clock since leaving her mother's house, and even there the cuckoo clock had seemed more ornament than a god measuring time; for in her mother's house, as in her own, time had been shaped by the needs of the land and the animals swinging through the seasons" (199).

housing refreshes the workers' physical strength, while it limits the amount of informal and unauthorized productivity that can occur outside of the industrial wage-labor system.

Gertie's use of the word "people" in the passage above—rather than "we"—implies that she does not yet fully identify as part of the population defined by the urban consumer economy. However, Arnow does not permit Gertie to get away with such naiveté for long. Immediately following the scene above, the house seems to come alive and attack Gertie as she tries to make the most of their new home. Gertie is hurt, repeatedly, while attempting to move around the cramped living quarters. First, "she struck her shin bone against a chair as she closed the door. She bent to rub the pain, sharp in her half numb leg, and in bending her hips struck a corner of the low head of a cot-like bed" (162). Moments later, Gertie "bumped into the stove" (163). Finally, the violence crescendos as Gertie struggles to light the cooking stove, an ordinary task she has done every day in rural Kentucky without difficulty: "Flame leaped at her; the corner of the kitchen seemed a wall of flame. She, like the children, jumped away, but her head struck a corner of the row of open shelves across from the stove. She saw stars and whirling lights, smelled smoke, and heard the screams of the children" (164).

In Kentucky, Gertie's size and physical strength enable her to manage the arduous daily labor on the farm. In Detroit, there is no room for a woman of such size and strength. The consumer economy in 1940s Detroit assumes mothers and housewives like Gertie will purchase commodities that eliminate the need for strenuous and space-intensive domestic labor. The stove included in their federally-subsidized tract housing, for instance, replaces wood with natural gas as the standard kitchen fuel, thereby eliminating the need to chop, store, and burn lumber in the cooking process. Gas stoves

are more efficient than wood stoves and are commonly recognized as a quality-of-life improvement.<sup>61</sup> But this modern convenience forecloses the possibility of self-sufficient fuel production for ordinary working-class households. After all, while many members of the rural working class had access to their own lumber supply, this is not the case for city-dwellers who rely on natural gas. The convenience, in other words, comes with the hidden cost of dependence, transferring the means of production to a corporate supplier. The conventional 1940s kitchen reflects and, in turn, enforces a wage-labor economy, since life-sustaining practices such as cooking food now come with the additional price of a monthly gas bill. For many rural-to-urban migrants, natural gas was just one of many new expenses that needed to be covered by the increasingly important wages they earned in the city.<sup>62</sup>

The economic realignment toward wage-dependency is visible in food storage practices, as well. Caught up in the conveniences of modern urban life, Clovis believes the hype he hears about the widely advertised “Icy Heart” refrigerator. With more space and cooling power than other refrigerators, the ads promise, managing a domestic kitchen has never been easier.<sup>63</sup> Clovis recognizes that Gertie is having a difficult time adjusting to Detroit life. So, using his mechanical knowledge, he refurbishes a broken Icy Heart he

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<sup>61</sup> If anyone were to dispute the merits of modern stoves, it may very well be Arnow herself, as the joys of woodfire cooking remain a consistent theme in her writing. In her 1969 novel, *The Weedkiller's Daughter*, for instance, Arnow writes: “She particularly enjoyed the big, iron, wood-fired cookstove that as the fall weather sharpened The Primitive used more and more while the electric range sat cold and idle” (276).

<sup>62</sup> This is another example of where the urban M-C-M' exchange model replaces the closed C-C' exchange system seen in Kentucky where (labor → commodity (fuel/wood) → labor → commodity (prepared food)).

<sup>63</sup> Readers hear the advertisement through Mrs. Anderson's mocking recitation of a radio commercial: “Every woman dreams of a ten-cubic-foot Icy Heart in her kitchen—Icy Heart power—Icy Heart. We must hurry up and win the war so we can all go out and buy Icy Hearts” (Arnow, 1954, 268).

purchased cheap and gives her this appliance as an early Christmas present. Gertie does not share Clovis' excitement about the new refrigerator and doubts that the device will live up to its advertised promises. Nevertheless, Clovis' gift is so desirable (and the brand so recognizable) that people from all over the neighborhood come to see it in the Nevels' kitchen. The acquisition of the Icy Heart inspires a range of emotions in the crowd. Some offer warnings ("Don't let it freeze the eggs an frostbite te lettuce") while others speak with admiration ("Da biggest ice box ya ever seed") or contempt ("who'd want a old secondhand junk heap"); her possession of such a highly-valued product even gives rise to ethnic prejudices ("Dem hillbillies, dey come up here an get all da money in Detroit") (270-272). Gertie, however, keeps her impressions about the Icy Heart to herself. She has never expressed any interest in owning a refrigerator and believes that this sort of cooling technology is simply unnecessary, especially when she knows there is a natural hillside cellar at Tipton Place where "nothen never froze . . . an in th hottest summer weather that cellar was so cold it ud keep milk sweet from one mornen to th next" (53). Nevertheless, as Gertie finishes her preparations for Christmas dinner, the material impact the Icy Heart has on her ability to serve a meal is visible:

She kept her silence, but lost the warm-eyed look when, during the dinner that had cost so much, Clovis upbraided her ignorance of turkey cookery. Hemmed as it had been in the too small oven, the turkey had burned on the outside scorching the breast meat, but they all came near gagging when Clovis cut into a thigh joint and blood ran out.

The real butter, that was to have been a Christmas treat with hot biscuit, had got so hard and cold from its stay in the Icy Heart that it

refused to melt even on the hottest of biscuit, and butter and biscuit were chilled together. Clytie had the lettuce in the wrong place, and it was frozen. Reuben complained the milk was so cold it hurt his teeth. Clytie blamed it on Enoch, who'd turned down the cold controls; Enoch was angry; and Clovis turned sorrowful because the Icy Heart, like Cassie's new doll and the other things he'd bought, was unappreciated. (274-5)

Compared to the self-produced meal represented earlier in the novel, this dinner is a disaster. The high cost of food in Detroit has bothered Gertie from the moment the family moves and has been a point of contention in the Nevels household ever since.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, now that the money used to purchase Christmas dinner comes from Clovis' wage-labor rather than Gertie's farm work, the power dynamics in the Nevels household shifts. The sense of pride and fulfillment that Gertie has when preparing food on the farm is no longer present. Gertie's rural working-class knowledge of food betrays her in this new environment where she cannot accurately anticipate the impact these new cooking appliances will have on the cooking process. In one sense, the appliances cause this ruined meal more than gaps in cooking knowledge. The oven is too small and the refrigerator too cold, and yet the family refuses to assign any responsibility to these new material circumstances. Instead, Clytie blames her brother Enoch for tinkering with the refrigerator's control and Clovis feels that his efforts to hunt down consumer bargains for

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<sup>64</sup> Earlier in the novel, Gertie struggles to buy groceries, realizing that "the buying of potatoes was a part of the never-ending strangeness," because "back home, no matter what the season, she had always raised enough to carry her from one potato-digging time to the next" (172). This failure to be a good consumer has already led to multiple arguments where Clovis chastises Gertie for buying poor quality ingredients and tells her to spend more on food than Gertie is comfortable doing (257).

Christmas have gone unappreciated. The scene reveals how Detroit's wage-dependent consumer economy reshapes productive roles along gendered lines. As a man, Clovis becomes the primary provider, the wage-earner whose money gives Gertie and the family access to an expanded range of consumer products, which—in an urban industrial environment—also means access to food (as there is no space to farm). Gertie dislikes the increased dependence on wages and on Clovis' labor and feels this emergent gender dynamic creating a rift between them.

Without a farm or productive homespace, Gertie's primary role is that of a consumer. Her task is to stretch Clovis' wage as far as she can through thoughtful and savvy shopping practices. Gertie falls short of these expectations and is unable (or unwilling) to adopt the commercial skills necessary to navigate a developed market economy as Enoch and Clovis do. Gertie regularly buys rotten bananas, lunch meat that tastes "more like corn meal an taters mashed" than actual meat, and pork chops, hamburger, and sausage that "briled away into grease" (338). But Arnow's description of Gertie's poor consumer decisions speak not only to a new set of purchasing skills she has not yet mastered. It also hints at a new kind of market where, as Clovis complains, sellers are "allus a maken a fast buck on you" (338). Clovis ridicules Gertie frequently for these consumer failures and explains to Enoch that "'Yer mom ain't used to buyen. She's got to learn. It ain't easy'" (338). But this isn't entirely true. After all, Gertie had been the primary buyer and seller for her family in Kentucky, where she regularly proved to be highly skilled at arranging mutually beneficial exchanges with neighbors. But Gertie's agrarian market skills do not help her in Detroit because this market operates by a

different set of ideological principles. Clovis, however, is unable to articulate the nuances involved in these alternate economic arrangements and thus blames Gertie instead.

Magazine advertisements from the 1940s provide insight into how the emerging urban consumer economy expected women to run their household. In one telling ad that ran in the January 1944 edition of *Good Housekeeping*, Swift's Brands of Beef informed women readers that "her seven jobs all help win the war!" (see figure 1). These seven jobs include: wife, mother, purchasing agent, cook, salvage expert, war worker, and war bond buyer. Most of these "jobs" involve some aspect of consumer ideology and at least two (the purchasing agent and war bond buyer) identify women primarily as consumers. The ad referenced many of the consumer skills that Gertie lacks, including how to "make the most of meat" and negotiating with grocers to get the most value for her money.



1. **WIFE!** She knows that her husband can carry on the war pace of his job only if she keeps his home a peaceful, happy place. She's a loving and lovable person, doing a fine job of home-making. A salute for being that kind of wife.



2. **MOTHER!** She guards her youngsters' health, body and mind. She sees that they get foods from the "Basic 7" Nutrition Groups daily. Sensing their shock from wartime headlines, she calmly explains why American men go off to fight.



3. **PURCHASING AGENT!** She realizes rationing means fair sharing. She sympathizes with dealers—understands why she often cannot get just the cut she wants, or the Swift's brands of beef and other meats she'd prefer to have.

## Her SEVEN jobs all help win the war!



4. **COOK!** She cooks with care to save nutritive values. She makes the most of meat; reduces shrinkage by cooking at low temperature; prepares *attractive* dishes from leftovers; learns to cook every kind of cut so it will taste its very best.\*



5. **SALVAGE EXPERT!** She wastes nothing, for she knows that Food Fights for Freedom. She uses every bit of leftovers, even bones are saved for soup. She regularly takes to her dealer the drippings of fat that have no further cooking use.



6. **WAR WORKER!** She joins wholeheartedly in the community projects of civilian defense. She sends neat hand-ages on far errands of mercy. And (to her it is a matter of special pride) the honored list of blood donors includes her name.



7. **WAR BOND BUYER!** She does without things she wants so our men will have the things they need. Over 10% of her husband's pay goes for War Bonds, plus dollars she saves in her household budget. Swift salutes Mrs. America, Patriot.

\* FOR DELICIOUS POT ROAST . . . Start with good beef, a Swift's brand round-bone pot roast if available. Season; dredge with flour; brown well in hot fat. Browning intensifies flavor. Add a small amount of water. Don't "drown the meat". Cover; cook slowly on top of range or in oven, about 2½ hrs. for 4-5 lb. roast. Cook onions with roast, sprinkle with paprika; serve with noodles and pan gravy.



### SWIFT'S BRANDS OF BEEF

Swift's Premium • Swift's Select • Swift's Arrow



These brand names identify the finest beef. Under wartime conditions Swift's brands may not always be available. They remain, however, your best guides to quality. Ask for them.



Figure 1. "Swift & Company: Her seven jobs all help win the war!" (1944). Originally published in *Good Housekeeping*. Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © JBS USA



**Figure 2.** Left: “General Mills: How to serve a family of six.” (1944). Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © General Mills. Right: “Kraft Foods Company: Lots of protein! Small point cost!” (1944). Originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © Kraft.

Advertisements from other consumer brands, such as Kraft and General Mills, follow a similar educational script (see figure 2). In one ad, Betty Crocker—a model of wartime femininity—informs women “how to serve a family of six for 69¢” and ensures readers that they can “avoid costly baking failures” (such as Gertie’s) by using Gold Medal brand flour. Kraft, on the other hand, promises “lots of protein” for “small point cost” (referring to the WWII rationing system), going so far as to say that “food makes the work of our invading forces easier” and may even “shorten the war.” Advertisements like these imbued women’s consumer decisions with a symbolic value (pride, patriotism, and national responsibility) while also serving practical and economical purposes for working-class families (making the most of their wages). All of these advertisements contained consistent messages regarding women’s emerging role as consumers. This

concerted effort on behalf of commercial enterprises worked to reshape gender norms and promote a consumerist economy. On the farm, Gertie's "seven jobs" would have included productive ones—farmer, dairymaid, and canner—rather than the many consumer-oriented ones devised by the corporate brands funding these advertisements. Collectively, mid-century advertising normalized consumer culture by asserting (and often assuming) that consumer spending was at the center of working-class life, especially for women. In the 1940s, however, the role of consumer spending was an emerging phenomenon and true only in industrial cities like Detroit where new structural barriers foreclosed the possibility of acquiring life necessities through other, more self-sufficient, means.

Facing structural barriers and a wave of new gender norms and consumer expectations, Gertie reflects on the trapped feeling that she has seen in the eyes of other working-class women since arriving in Detroit. After a particularly bad fight regarding Reuben's misbehavior at school, Clovis orders Gertie around "as if she were a mule," leading her to reflect:

It wasn't the way it had used to be back home when she had done her share, maybe more than her share of feeding and fending for the family. Then, with egg money, chicken money, a calf sold here, a pig sold there, she's bought almost every bite of food they didn't raise.

Here everything, even to the kindling wood, came from Clovis. (327)

Gertie's independence and productivity on the farm makes her feel proud and accomplished. Her claims of self-sufficiency become harder to justify as life patterns shift in the city. In Detroit, the Nevels must purchase everything, including much that they had produced for themselves back in Kentucky, which is especially true regarding

food. In the city, the wage serves as the central measure of one's productive capacities, which magnifies Clovis' contributions while erasing the value of Gertie's domestic work. Vance Packard, author of the 1957 critique of the psychological marketing industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*, referred to this shift as a "reshaping [of] personal responsibility toward an other-oriented organization man for the modern Free Enterprise economy" (Packard 173). According to Packard, industry leaders and marketers in the 1940s and 50s were engaged in a systematic effort to redefine what personal responsibility looked like in the age of consumer capitalism. This shift is visible in *The Dollmaker*, as Detroit's economic system prioritizes Clovis' factory wage over other forms of productive labor. Agrarian strategies of self-sufficiency, such as supplying one's own cooking fuel and growing food, have no place in an industrial consumer economy. As a result, factory work not only streamlines the labor process but standardizes it as well, increasing the efficiency with which a household can sell its labor to a factory while simultaneously limiting the ways in which a family can produce value outside of the wage-labor market. Gertie often feels powerless in Detroit not because she is incapable of taking care of her family (she can), but because the forms of labor and agency she has practiced in Appalachia are invalidated by the emergent industrial structures of urban consumer capitalism.

In my analysis above, I have described two forms of capitalist exchange visible in *The Dollmaker*. In rural Appalachia, Gertie's economic activity produces meaningful relationships and provides her with a sense of purpose, even as sharecropping entails considerable hardship and exploitation. Detroit, by contrast, imposes an economic system that prioritizes wage-labor and consumerism. Here, Gertie encounters numerous

impediments to accomplishing productive work at home. Building on Parker's "critical pastoral" framework, I argue that Arnow's vision of rural economics should be recognized not as a sentimental longing for a nostalgic pre-industrial past, but as describing a real alternative to postwar consumer capitalism that remains viable to this day. The contrast between the rural and urban economic orders highlights the material and ideological differences between two modes of capitalist production.<sup>65</sup> Arnow does not conclude that the latter inevitably replaces the former, even though the city imposes limits on working-class productivity and self-sufficiency.<sup>66</sup> Instead, *The Dollmaker* gives readers the opportunity to assess the two contrasting modes of exchange side-by-side. In doing so, Arnow renders the merits of rural Appalachian life visible without discounting the difficulties associated with rural poverty. Then, after the Nevels migrate to Detroit, Arnow identifies the myriad ways in which city life pressures rural working-class families to abandon one way of life for another.

### **Strategic Working-Class Adjustment in the Age of Ditcher's "Dynamic Security"**

The material culture approach above only tells part of the adjustment story. The social pressure that Gertie, Reuben, and Cassie experience at school and in their community are equally important. In these moments, the compulsion to adjust does not come from the sort of structural barriers discussed earlier in this chapter, but rather from the psychological desire to fit in and get along in the new socio-cultural environment of

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<sup>65</sup> See Stacy Morgan's "Migration, Material Culture, and Identity in William Attaway's 'Blood on the Forge' and Harriette Arnow's 'The Dollmaker'" for a definition of material culture literary criticism.

<sup>66</sup> See Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* for a discussion of how country life represents alternatives to the capitalist modes of being associated with the city within the English literary tradition.

the city. Conformity was a major point of anxiety for many Americans throughout the 1940s and 1950s and a consistent theme in mid-century American literature.<sup>67</sup> Mid-century social critics such as Dwight Macdonald, Lionel Trilling, and Paul Goodman feared that "conformity and resignation without the possibility of any alternative" would become the defining feature of postwar American life (Horowitz 11). While historians find some of these concerns to be overstated, they nevertheless acknowledge that 1940-1960 was a time of rapid socioeconomic transformation and ideological realignment.<sup>68</sup> Arnow comments on these cultural anxieties in *The Dollmaker* through her treatment of schools and other social institutions. Here, she dramatizes the impact that urban social pressure has on the lives of rural-to-urban working-class migrants.

Arnow first broaches the subject of conformity in chapter 13 when Gertie enrolls her four oldest children in the local school. During her first visit, Gertie meets Cassie's teacher, Miss Vashinski, and the principal, Mr. Skyros, both of whom view education primarily as a process of "adjustment." For Miss Vashinski, this is a practical matter: she teaches the children to adjust so they can meet the expectations of life in the city. At school, this means following rules that helps the overcrowded school run efficiently. Miss Vashinski believes in the value of adjustment and uses the power of conformity as a guiding pedagogical principle. Mr. Skyros, on the other hand, has some doubts about the

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<sup>67</sup> *The Dollmaker* was originally published during a period of extensive criticism concerning the impact of consumerism on conformity, including David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), both of which "probed the validity of individualism in a society that defined success in terms of middle-class aspirations and conformity" (Parker 216).

<sup>68</sup> Despite widespread claims that modern capitalism was absorbing and commodifying the critical functions of culture, there are abundant examples of youth counterculture, ethnic subcultures, and regional differences that reveal a much more realistic picture of the diversity and heterogeneity of mid-century life.

merits of adjustment. After admiring a handwoven basket that Gertie brings with her (instead of the socially expected sack), the principal tries to reassure Gertie that her children are in good hands: “‘They’ll be all right,’ the man said. ‘They will’—now he didn’t seem himself at all but was like Miss Vashinski—’adjust. This school has many children from many different places, but in the end they all—most—adjust, and so will yours’” (196). In this passage, Mr. Skyros lacks confidence in the virtues of adjustment. He knows that the school expects him to celebrate this character trait and he even models it for a moment when he begins to talk “like Miss Vashinski,” but there is no conviction in his speech. His pauses, interruptions, and self-corrective caveats suggest considerable discomfort regarding the idea of conformity:

He looked quickly about him like one preparing to share a secret, then drew closer. “Maybe they won’t adjust at all.” His dark eyes looked up into her own and were somehow ashamed, sorrowful, like Judas giving back the silver. “Most of us do, but there’s always hope that one—” he jerked a shoulder toward the girl walking away with the Josiah basket, her head tilted, smiling a little as she studied it “My other talented one has adjusted—perfectly . . . He has adjusted—cartoons of the teacher—perfect adjustment, exactly what he is supposed to do—according to the comic books.” He patted his forearm. “Your children will be all right. They will, I fear, adjust better than their mother.” And he turned and went quickly. (196)

He wants—and is supposed—to believe that learning “to get along” is of great importance, but he remains secretly hopeful that some folks are strong enough to resist

this pressure. In the end, Mr. Skyros expresses ambivalence toward the ideology of adjustment despite being the father of a child who has adjusted perfectly and the principal of a school that teaches students “to want to be like the others.” Mr. Skyros feels both shame and sorrow as he tries to explain the value of adjustment to a mother whom he already admires for her unorthodox (i.e., agrarian) behavior.

Gertie receives Mr. Skyros’ advice with a similar feeling of unease. Her single word question, “Adjust?” implies that Gertie isn’t sure what adjustment means in this setting. The idea of a school as a place of conformity and adjustment is new to Gertie once she reaches Detroit. Upon hearing the principal’s explanation of the term and the school’s emphasis on learning to get along and be like the others, Gertie becomes even more skeptical. Like Mr. Skyros, she is torn between wanting her children to be happy and to be themselves. This conflict never appears in Kentucky. In Detroit, however, the decision presents itself as a mutually exclusive binary: one can either be comfortable and conform or miserable and independent. Gertie recognizes the social cost of holding outsider status in Detroit’s consumer society. Yet, Arnow does not provide a complete description of Gertie’s anxiety, leaving the reader to guess what unnamed concern completes the inarticulate phrase, “but I don’t know as I want em to—to—.” “Conform” works, but I think the more precise affect alluded to here is the *desire* to conform, especially given Mr. Skyros’ uncertainty. The principal’s effort to defend school’s dedication to teaching adjustment troubles Gertie, causing her to reflect on the value of conformity for the rest of the novel.

Several months later, at the end of the term, Gertie has a second opportunity to visit the school and meet with her children’s teachers during an open house event. This

time, Gertie talks with Reuben's homeroom teacher, Mrs. Whittle, to figure out why her twelve-year-old son has been so unhappy at school and performing worse than he had in Kentucky. Mrs. Whittle tells Gertie that the Nevells children recently came up for discussion in a faculty meeting. First, the teacher explains that "he has not adjusted . . . I'm giving him a *U* in conduct because he just won't get along with other children" (323). Then, Mrs. Whittle explains that Reuben "bragged he had a real gun" to a classmate and then "lost his temper" when the boy "called him a liar" (323). Mrs. Whittle frames Reuben as the wrongdoer in this scene because she believes no twelve-year-old would own a gun. Gertie defends her child and responds that Reuben has had a rifle since he was ten as was common in rural Kentucky. Mrs. Whittle is unmoved by Gertie's explanation and disappointed the parenting style it implies and resolutely declares that "he will simply have to adjust" if he is going to make it in the city (324).

This time, Gertie is more defiant than uncertain in her response to this call for her child's adjustment. Mrs. Whittle tries to explain that the most important point is "to learn to live with others, to get along, to adapt one's self to one's surroundings . . . especially [for] children like yours" (324). Gertie expresses concern about the implications of such a philosophy, arguing that if "youngens" can live with whatever comes along, then "they could—if they went to Germany —start gitten along with Hitler, er if they went to Russia, they'd git along there, they'd act like th Russians and be"—Mr. Daly's word was slow in coming—"communists—an if they went to Rome they'd start worshippen th pope?" (324). Mrs. Whittle responds with horror at the idea and says that "'You know perfectly well I mean no such thing'" (324). Gertie exposes weaknesses in the school's focus on adjustment. If the goal of education is really to "git along" no matter what

comes, then Gertie's concerns are logical and well-grounded. Adapting to circumstances requires a willingness to live with the dominant culture without asking the questions that could challenge social order. Gertie's recognition of this critical flaw in the ideology of adjustment is appalling to Mrs. Whittle, who denies the possibility that adjustment could be used toward such horrid ends. At the very least, this exchange begs the question of when adjustment is appropriate and when it is not. American schools in the 1940s certainly did not promote Nazism or Communism. Instead, Mrs. Whittle's "gitten along" implies that consumer capitalism is the dominant mode of living in the city and asks thus her students to adopt middle-class values and behaviors. Reuben's lack of adjustment implicitly challenges the American way of life.<sup>69</sup> Gertie's main point is that her son should be able to decide how he chooses to adjust, if at all, and celebrates her son's ability to resist conformity even when he is punished for his failure to comply.

Ernest Dichter theory of "dynamic security" was a popular approach to American life at the time Arnow wrote *The Dollmaker* and explains the school's focus on adjustment. Dichter describes dynamic security as similar to "swimming along with the stream" and as "constantly growing rather than holding on" (Dichter 20). This type of security differs from others by celebrating growth, adaptation, and constant movement rather than endurance or persistence. In other words, Dichter argued that it was easier to move with the dominant pressure of the age than it is to resist it. As a tireless advocate for change, Dichter believed that one of the most important jobs of the time was "to train

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Goodman criticizes mid-century definitions of appropriate conduct in his 1960 book, *Growing up Absurd*. At one point, Goodman explains that "what we call juvenile delinquency is often simply the unadjusted social behaviors of immigrants, and the working poor" (191).

the average citizen to accept growth of his country and its economy as his growth rather than as a strange and frightening event" (210). The school in *The Dollmaker* presents growth and adjustment in precisely these terms. Mrs. Whittle assumes that Gertie and Reuben view urban consumerism as a strange and frightening change. The Detroit school system pressures the Nevels to swim with the ideological current of the city, implying that holding on to the patterns, values, and routines of their former life in Kentucky would be too hard. For Dichter, dynamic security was both a moral philosophy uniquely fit to the structure of postwar capitalism and a universal human value:

A correct way of life, then, is constant adaptation to the world, a development and growing up without end . . . you should swim forcefully with the stream, go in the same direction it is going. You do not have to hold on to anything. You are a part of life; you progress with it. An entirely new, unknown form of security is derived from this attitude. It is dynamic security. It is the right way of life, in accord with the essential laws of human nature, those of constant maturing and growing. (225)

The logic of Dichter's argument for dynamic security draws on the ideology of a growth-oriented consumer capitalism. His desire to see individuals "growing up without end" reflects the popular belief that all growth was inherently good. He justified his claim that constant adaptation was the "correct" way to live by suggesting that adaptation is no different from maturing and growing: a natural process. From this perspective, adaptation is inevitable and refusing to adjust is to deny "essential laws of human nature." Many Americans in the 1940s treated dynamic security as an escape from the Depression-era

logic of frugal self-reliance. Ditcher and his allies understood that American culture's realignment toward growth and dynamic security presented opportunities in advertising and marketing, where this belief structure was widely used to sell more products. These same ideological principles were also strategically deployed by the federal government as U.S. officials increasingly felt the need to package this particular idea of America to its people.<sup>70</sup> Mrs. Whittle embodies and promotes this growing American faith in "progress." However, when Gertie encounters this entirely new form of security in Detroit, she discovers she doesn't want to change, and neither does Reuben or Cassie. She feels the social pressure pushing her in another direction yet refuses to change course, holding on to residual values even though that's difficult.

Eventually Reuben gets in trouble for bringing a knife to school, which would have been an unremarkable event in Kentucky where a knife is seen a tool rather than a weapon. In Detroit, however, this behavior prompts a letter from the school and instigates an argument at home. Clovis is upset that Reuben isn't adjusting to city life, although most of his anger is directed at Gertie who has "set him agin Detroit so he wouldn't like it now if you put him in a mansion" (327). Gertie knows this is at least partly true and admits as much when she attempts to comfort Reuben after this confrontation. Nevertheless, when she tries to encourage Reuben to adjust just enough to evade chastisement, Gertie is even less convincing than Mr. Skyros had been earlier. She says: "Honey, try harder to be like th rest—tu run with th rest—it's easier, an you'll be happier in th end—I guess" (329). This halfhearted attempt at convincing Reuben to be

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<sup>70</sup> See Laura Belmonte's *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* for an extended discussion of this topic.

like the rest fails to incite a change in behavior, even after Gertie describes a parable about how a creek back home eventually bangs rocks of all shapes and sizes together until “they was mighty nigh all alike an round an smooth” even though “nobody asked them rocks did they want to be smooth” (329). The next morning, Reuben asks his mother to pack him a lunch (which she thinks is for school), steals twenty dollars from Clovis, and boards a train back to Kentucky. Reuben’s departure marks one alternative to consumer culture: walk away and refuse to be a part of it. Yet, even in the 1940s, this was a difficult maneuver as very few regions could truly operate outside this dominant form of American economics.

Six-year-old Cassie’s connection to an alternate mode of living comes in the form of her imaginary friend, Callie Lou. Growing up on an isolated farm, miles from other children, Callie has been a faithful companion during a time when Cassie had no other means of socialization. In Detroit, however, a kindergartener with an imaginary friend is eccentric, since there are plenty of real children to play with in the neighborhood and at school. Still, Cassie has a strong attachment to Callie, and she prefers to spend time with her imaginary friend rather than with neighborhood kids. Eventually this unorthodox behavior draws the attention of a neighbor, Mrs. Anderson, who explains to Gertie that “Talking to herself so much is rather bad,” implying that if Gertie doesn’t do something about it, Cassie will end up like Reuben—unable to get along (365). Up until this point, Gertie has humored Cassie’s imagination and encouraged the behavior by playing along on several occasions. Finally, in a moment of frustration, Gertie acts on her neighbor’s advice and tells Cassie to give it up and start acting like everyone else. In doing so, Gertie suddenly recalls all she has given up moving to Detroit and finds herself torn between

helping Cassie adjust to city life and encouraging her to resist the growing pressure to conform to its logic:

“Don’t be a sassen me. You know well as I do you’re talken to yerself. There ain’t no Callie Lou.” Reuben was lost to her, the alley had the others, Henley was dead, his money gone, the land lost, even the doll was Homer’s. Giving up, giving up; now Cassie had to do it. “Didn’t ye hear me? Go on. Play with the other youngens. Git into yer snowsuit an stay out.” She was breathing hard, choking up inside, fighting down a great hunger to seize and hug and kiss the child, and cry; “Keep her, Cassie. Keep Callie Lou. A body’s got to have somethen all their own.” (366)

Gertie struggles to balance the demands of social pressure with her own believe in the value of having “somethen all their own.” Nevertheless, Gertie acts on the advice of her neighbor rather than her intuition, demanding that Cassie “play with the other youngens.” Even as Gertie shouts this command, she recognizes such adjustment signifies a loss of something valuable. Giving up Callie Lou cuts yet another tie to Kentucky and represents the loss of independence as well as a kind of self-ownership that doesn’t seem possible in Detroit. As a result, the ideological stakes of this decision are similar to those present when Gertie encourages Reuben to try a little harder to get along with the others. In this moment, Gertie begins to recognize the cost of her new life in Detroit and lists all of the things she has given up since the move: the loss of money, land, and doll are all the result of the family’s transition into Detroit’s consumer capitalist economy. Gertie spends money on food that she could have produced herself; the government regulates land use;

and the market commodifies Gertie's woodworking skills. When the time comes to ask Cassie to give up her most precious thing, Gertie faces an ideological crisis. The advice she gives Cassie causes discomfort to mother and daughter alike. In the end, however, Gertie demands that Cassie stop playing with Callie Lou in an effort to protect her daughter from the effects of being seen as an outsider in a conformist culture. After taking count of her own losses, Gertie recognizes the difficulty of moving against the cultural current and fears what such pressure might do to Cassie.

Gertie's attempt to protect Cassie backfires terribly. Rather than giving Callie Lou up, Cassie hides this behavior and continues to play with her imaginary friend away from the prying eyes of her mother and the other neighbors who would criticize her. One day, however, Cassie's imaginative play attracts the attention of the neighborhood kids, and they tease her about Callie Lou, calling Cassie "nuts" for talking to herself (386). Gertie observes this scene from afar and soon regrets sending Callie Lou away, especially if this is how the local kids treat her daughter. Gertie reverses her earlier decision, realizing that "we gotta have Callie Lou" (387). Tragically, however, Gertie never gets the chance to tell her daughter about this change of heart because Cassie is already escaping deeper into the trainyard where she can play uninterrupted by her tormentors. Gertie runs after her child and calls out in a panic, but an airplane drowns out her warnings that the trainyard isn't safe. Before anyone has time to react, a passing train cuts off Cassie's legs and she bleeds to death in her mother's arms, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers.

Cassie's death marks a turning point in Gertie's resistant behavior. Her reluctance to participate in the consumer-driven economy of the city and adopt its ideology of adjustment has cost her too much. Soon, she begins to practice some adjustments of her

own. First, she spends the rest of her cash reserve on Cassie's funeral arrangement, believing "for the first time . . . that money would bring Cassie out of this windowless place" where officials were keeping her body (396). This is the first time in the novel that Gertie views money as the solution to a problem, signifying a clear departure from her belief in working-class self-sufficiency. In her grief, Gertie imagines, briefly, that money may bring Cassie back to her, at least in some metaphorical sense. She quickly discovers that the local police and profit-driven undertakers have no problem taking advantage of a grieving mother, once again marking her as an inept urban consumer. Blindsided by the scale of capitalistic greed in Detroit, Gertie realizes too late that "through it all Cassie had never been her own again. All the money gone, and she had not held her in her arms" (397). The painful irony of this scene reveals that, despite its alleged power, money in a consumer society fails to satisfy the most basic emotional needs, such as helping her mourn the loss of loved ones.

Cassie's death and the subsequent loss of the Tipton Place savings breaks Gertie's spirit, at least temporarily. The women of the neighborhood support Gertie in her grief, but she never recovers the vitality seen in the earlier chapters of the novel. She endures, however, and when the end of the war results in widespread layoffs, including Clovis's, the family must depend on Gertie's skill as a woodworker and doll maker to earn money. For most of Gertie's life, doll making has been a hobby—"whittlen foolishness"—with no economic value (145). Ever since Gertie had stepped onto the train heading to Detroit, however, people had started expressing an interest in buying her handcrafted dolls. When Clovis sees the market potential of Gertie's dolls, he immediately begins concocting ways to scale up her production capacity. By the time the war is over, Clovis has

purchased and installed a jigsaw in the house (which goes against government housing regulations) and Gertie is making regular trips to the scrapyards to purchase cheap pieces of wood. As production increases, however, Gertie despises the artistry she gives up for the sake of speed, cost-reduction, and efficiency. For her, “the work of creating ugliness” is an offense to the human spirit (480). Prodded on by economic necessity, Gertie makes dolls for money, always spending just a little more time than required to add a hint of originality and beauty to the mass-produced dolls. The monotony of this work leads Gertie to reflect on her life. At one point, she wonders: “life and money: could a body separate the two?” (539). From her immediate position as a poor city-dweller in postwar Detroit doing piecework out of her home, the answer appears to be a resounding no. Yet, when considering Gertie’s earlier life in Kentucky, Arnow presents a far more nuanced discussion of this question. In rural Appalachia, life and money were separate and the Nevels could sustain life without money or a wage. Once the Nevels entered the wage-labor economy of the city, however, they are no longer able to do so. Buying and selling had become an essential part of their life as new social and economic structures forced many rural-to-urban migrants to treat consumerism as a core component of their identities. At the same time, Arnow acknowledges that this reduction of life into money isn’t inevitable and that viable alternatives exist in the present as well as the past, as long as the working class can hold on to their culture.

In the final pages of the novel, Arnow describes a series of adjusted expectations marked by the material realities of urban poverty. She reveals striking differences between rural and urban poverty during the postwar period. Gertie begins to buy groceries on credit; Clytie seeks work as a babysitter and housekeeper; Enoch peddles

dolls on the street; and the family eats “spaghetti covered with a can of tomato soup, and smeared on top with a little dab of cheese” without complaint (567). The Nevels are never reduced such an impoverished state in Kentucky, even in the harshest of winters. In Detroit, they are just one family among many willing to do anything to earn wages, since money is the only means to secure food and shelter in the city. One day, Mrs. Anderson approaches Gertie with a request to make several decorative wooden crosses to sell at an upcoming church bazaar. Mrs. Anderson provides partial payment upfront to cover the cost of materials. After witnessing an eviction, Gertie is terrified that this could happen to her own family, and she devises a plan to secure even more profit from the church sale. Rather than buying scrap wood, Gertie decides to repurpose a large block of cherrywood she has been using to carve her artistic masterpiece. Gertie believes that the face of Christ (or Judas) lives inside this beautiful piece of wood, and she has spent years carving that image, but she never quite finishes the project to her satisfaction. When Gertie arrives at the scrapyard, a man immediately recognizes the face of Christ in the carving. Yet, when he asks for Gertie’s confirmation about the image:

Gertie shook her head. Her eyes were wide and black under her tightly pulled-back hair, and they fondled the wood an instant, the hands, the head, the covered face. “Cherry wood,” she said at last slowly, loudly, as if he had been deaf. “I want him—it—sawed into boards fer whittling.”

(570)

For years, Gertie has seen the cherrywood as a spiritual object imbued with personal value and significance. The sculpture comforts her in moments of anger and frustration. Working on the figure helps her meditate on and envision her future life at Tipton Place.

The cherrywood is one of the few belongings Gertie had brought with her from Kentucky. Yet, when questioned about the symbolic value of her creation, Gertie refuses to acknowledge the cherrywood as anything other than a resource for making money. She declares the wood's material status loudly, as if to convince herself as well as the scrap-wood man that its value lies in its capacity to become a marketable commodity. As she denies the scrap-wood man's claim, however, Gertie slips up and refers to the half-finished carving as "him" before replacing the pronoun with "it". Something—or *someone*—remains alive in the wood, and Gertie knows it. She refuses to acknowledge that spiritual presence and insists that the figure must be "sawed into boards fer whittling." Gertie then quarters the masterpiece herself, driving an ax directly into the head of Christ/Judas. This act symbolizes Gertie's violent, if partial, adjustment to the logic of consumer economics. Like other mid-century social critics of consumerism, Arnow demonstrates that things of beauty are destroyed by the expanding market. Gertie reluctantly accepts the commercialization of her work in response to economic duress. It is worth noting that Gertie's decisions here do not fully align with Detroit's wage-labor economy. After all, by using her own wood, grown from the rich Kentucky soil, Gertie avoids buying her doll-making materials from the commercial marketplace as Mrs. Anderson assumes she will. Gertie is once again working directly with the land as she has done in Kentucky. Moreover, by putting her doll-making skills to work, Gertie becomes the only producer in a neighborhood filled with unemployed wage-laborers. Unlike the other women in the community, Gertie never works in a factory, even though dual-labor arrangements were common in working-class families. As a result, while other rural-to-urban migrants experience a complete loss of income during the postwar recession,

Gertie's productive capacity persists. Her labor power remains untethered to corporate modes of production and operates independently from the industrial wage-labor economy. Although many readers view this scene as a spiritual defeat, I argue that we should also recognize Gertie's capacity to adjust on her own terms despite the formidable material and ideological forces working against her.

Critics have discussed Gertie's destruction of her masterpiece as a sign of her inevitable, tragic adjustment to the urban regime of factory production and wage-labor consumption. Steve Mooney and Kathleen Walsh view this final scene in relation to the painful adjustments her two resistant children, Reuben and Cassie, experience earlier in the novel. Mooney and Walsh agree that, in each of these moments, Gertie displays signs of weakness and uncertainty, caving under the material and ideological pressure of urban consumer capitalism, adjusting to the expectations of city life and reluctantly encouraging her children to do the same. Mooney argues that the central subject of *The Dollmaker* is "the terrible cost of human acquiescence, the often horrible price we pay for not assuming responsibility for our actions, or for passively allowing others to control the course of our lives" (Mooney 38). Gertie's one redeeming quality, according to Mooney, is that she "comes to feel she is responsible for the consequences of her passivity, even if she is the victim of forces beyond her control" (39). Walsh expresses similar concerns about Gertie's behavior at these key moments of adjustment by arguing that "one carries away from *The Dollmaker* a sense of the awful cost of such passivity" (Walsh 199). In each of these readings, the scholar positions Gertie as a tragic character suffering from situations out of her control. But these readings overlook an important point: the "terrible cost" they each describe does not come from Gertie's "acquiescence" or "passivity," but

rather from a refusal to conform. After all, it is Reuben's unwillingness to follow Gertie's half-hearted advice about fitting in that convinces him to return to Kentucky, just as it is Cassie's refusal to give up her imaginary friend Callie Lou that results in her tragic death in the trainyard. In each of these cases, the act that bears punishment is noncompliance, *not* acquiescence.

Moreover, Gertie's role in these scenes is much more active than Mooney and Walsh imply with their language of "passivity." Gertie regularly challenges consumer culture, even as she feels the pressure to conform. As a mother, her desire to instill rural working-class values in her children collides with the equally powerful desire to keep them safe from harm in their new urban environment. In my view, Gertie's acquiescence and perfunctory efforts to get her children to do the same are not failures, but a strategic mode of working-class resilience responding to overwhelming material and ideological transformation. But, unlike Mooney and Walsh, I do not view this acquiescence as a defeat. Gertie displays a capacity to survive while still holding on to residual values, even after suffering great personal loss, including the sudden death of one of her children. By monetizing her doll-making, Gertie provides for her family without adopting the dominant mode of production in the city. In doing so, Gertie holds on to core aspects of her rural Appalachian identity, such as the ability to be an independent producer who works directly with the land. For this mode of production to work in the city, Gertie must strategically adjust to some aspects of the prevailing ideology, which she does by selling her dolls. At the same time, Gertie carves out a practical alternative to the emerging postwar wage-labor system that tethers workers to corporate employers, thereby resisting

the false promises of industrial working-class affluence despite the considerable social, economic, and material pressure pushing her in that direction.

At the same time, Arnow highlights a form of resistance to the alienating wage-labor economy found in the residual lifeways of rural Appalachia. She reveals how working-class people have created and maintained intimate, meaningful modes of work, economic exchange, and community, as Gertie does in Kentucky. Arnow looked beyond false promises of affluence structuring the lives of many urban working-class Americans who were stuck in a meaningless cycle of earning and spending. Yet, her most radical contribution to discussions of postwar life in America comes in the form of praise rather than critique. To this end, *The Dollmaker* records the countless merits of rural working-class knowledge at a time in which such ways of life were systematically discouraged. Arnow shows with clarity and compassion that Appalachian ways of life are not a detriment to the nation's economic wellbeing, but contain within them a residual mode of work, exchange, and community that can sustain a more intimate and humane world.

### **Hope and Resignation in Harvey Swados' *On the Line***

For many Americans, the transition to a postwar consumer society was not as tragic as it was for Reuben, Cassie, and Gertie in *The Dollmaker*. Millions of Americans embraced the mid-century economic reorganization with a mixture of excitement and anxiety and felt cautiously optimistic about the quality of life made possible by the rising wages and near full employment in the years following the Depression. Arnow documents this sentiment through the experiences of Clovis, Enoch, and Clytie; however, the novel's emphasis on Gertie's story leaves this more hopeful embrace of consumerism at the margins of the narrative. Harvey Swados puts consumer desire front and center in

his 1957 Ford factory novel, *On the Line*. Through a series of vignettes, Swados shows how working-class faith in upward mobility and commercial comforts served as a kind of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” where the objects of their desire are not only unattainable, but harmful fantasies that hasten their defeat. In some of the vignettes, members of the industrial working class associate their desire with a particular middle-class commodity, such as an automobile. For others, their desire is tied to education, financial security, or retirement. Each character believes, at least for a moment, that his wages will afford a better life for himself and his family. Mid-century optimism sustained the industrial working class even as workers engaged in monotonous and alienating Fordist labor in factories. As a lifelong socialist, Swados was critical of this postwar American belief in the widespread attainability of upward mobility. *On the Line* reveals how the interplay of hope and resignation structured American life for the more prosperous members of the working class who embraced the ideology of affluence as a means of achieving freedom only to discover that this mid-century promise was a deception.

When reading *On the Line*, it is important to remember that autoworkers were part of the rapidly expanding affluent working class in the 1940s and 50s. As Harvey Swados’ biographer and distinguished labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein explains: “autoworkers partook fully in this postwar sense of affluence. They were among the best paid of all American workers in the mid-1950s, and their union, the United Auto Workers (UAW), was without doubt the most powerful and imaginatively led of all labor institutions” (Lichtenstein 226). Advances in wages, pensions, health insurance, and unemployment benefits allowed many UAW members to buy a house and take regular vacations. Factory

workers celebrated these significant material gains and took pride in owning their first home and car (in addition to their first television, radio, and other commercial symbols of middle-class life). Swados's knowledge of automobile factory work and the working-class consumer comes from his experiences working in a Ford factory in Mahwah, New Jersey, where he was employed as a metal finisher. Like many social critics of the period, Swados never believed in the promises of postwar affluence. Instead, Swados spent much of his intellectual life worrying that the "politically charged character of the industrial working class seemed at an end," in large part due to an increased capacity to purchase consumer goods (225). Swados mourned the loss of proletarian solidarity that he attributed to the labor activism of the 20s and 30s. In his essay, "The Myth of the Happy Worker"—which is used as an afterword to *On the Line*—Swados observed that "for the immigrant laborer [of the 1930s], even the one who did not dream of socialism, his long hours were going to buy him freedom. For the factory worker of the Fifties, his long hours are going to buy him commodities . . . and maybe reduce a few of his debts" (Swados 117). *On the Line* is a meditation on this theme, demonstrating how a freedom-seeking class of laborers were deceived and misled by the allure of material affluence, only to discover in the aftermath of their failed pursuits that such a world lacks any real sense of freedom.

The characters in *On The Line* enter the postwar consumer economy with a sense of awe and possibility. The automobile factory, they believe, is their ticket to a better life. Two of the characters, Kevin and Pop, aspire to own the commodity they have a hand in manufacturing: a new Ford automobile. Kevin is an Irish immigrant who is proud to participate in the U.S. manufacturing industry. He believes that an automobile will make

him feel like a real American and explains his fascination with automobiles to nearby workers on the line, as follows:

“For me there is a beauty about it all that I'm finding it very hard to explain to anyone. Just look out there at those elegant shiny cars—a heap of metal parts when they come in here, and lovely limousines when they're driven off the final line. Splendid glittering vehicles even more fine than the way they show up in the magazines. I've been sayin' to myself, what would be more logical than for a man who works here to own one himself?” (32)

Kevin views factory work as something “splendid, endowing the blue-collar workplace with a mesmerizing force. Kevin describes the way in which industrial capitalism can inspire wonder and excite the imagination. After all, where else could “a heap of metal parts” become “elegant” and “splendid” vehicles with such efficiency? Kevin feels that he participates in creating a beautiful thing, and this appears to outweigh the difficulty and monotony of his labor, at least for the first half of the story. In the end, the creative power of the assembly line is a mantra to Kevin: he, too, can be splendid, if only he works hard enough to achieve the “richness of the American possibility” (31). Kevin continues believing in such a possibility even as he witnesses tragedies on the line. One day, for instance, Kevin watches in horror as a fellow factory worker, LeRoy, damages his throat in a workplace accident, which ruins this young singer’s voice and shatters his dreams of becoming a musician. Witnessing accidents like these force Kevin to undergo a “period of evaluation” concerning the limited and often fleeting promises of working-class prosperity. Yet, in the end, experiencing such misfortune second-hand simply

reinforces Kevin's urgency and inspires in him "an ambition going beyond what he had already achieved" (29).

Kevin eventually acts on his desire to buy a new car and orders a custom job on credit. When he drives the car off the lot, he "felt that at last he had become an American," at least for a moment (37). But this feeling is fleeting and, after brief excitement from his friends and family, the car quickly loses its allure. The second time he drives home, nobody is waiting for him in his driveway and life continues as it has in the days prior to owning a car, save for the increased financial burden of monthly car payments. Kevin realizes he has been wrong about what makes someone a real American. It isn't owning a car, as he had originally imagined, but the feeling of bitter disappointment that follows. In a moment of disillusionment, Kevin reflects on his life:

What *is* this? Kevin asked himself suddenly. Is this the excitement and the adventure that I sought? He bumped his kneecap painfully against a steel dolly and to his astonishment felt a stream of foul words, meaningless factory curses that he would never have dreamed of using back home, rushing up into his throat as palpably as vomit. As soon as he had uttered them, he experienced a feeling of release so startling that he stopped work, shocked into immobility. Now that he had learned how to swear like the others, learned what it meant to have something to curse at, maybe *now* he was a proper American at last.

For he had gained what he so dearly wanted, and he saw with bitter clarity that he would be chained to the line for years, chained to the drudgery, the monotony, the grinding labor—all of which lost their

novelty and certainly their glamor when you had won your prize—  
literally until the prize itself had become valueless and demanded that  
you replace it with another, shinier one. (40)

In this scene, Swados offers an alternate account of what it means to be an American, rooted in disappointment and disillusionment. Kevin's automobile purchase provides a momentary feeling of fulfillment followed by a much longer period of regret, made more intolerable by the fact that he will be "chained to the drudgery" for years. With the promise of a shiny prize—something to believe in and work toward—Kevin can justify monotonous and alienating labor; yet, as soon as he discovers that prize to be "valueless," the work loses its value as well. This is a fundamental premise of the postwar consumer economy: as long as one's wages can buy something valuable, then the time is well spent. If the marketplace fails to offer anything of lasting value, however, then the time is essentially lost. Upon this discovery, Kevin can no longer find the motivation to work under such conditions any longer. Disillusioned, he puts the car up for sale and returns to the "dull and stagnant" Ireland, realizing that even stasis is preferable to the glamorous but false promises of working-class affluence and its associated middle-class quality of life (42).

The symbolic power of the automobile also plays a role in Pop's disillusionment. Pop is an aging factory worker and widower, raising his son Rudy, a high school senior, alone. Despite many years of experience, Pop has refused to become a union representative and turned down an offer to be a foreman, preferring to be just one of the boys instead. Like many members of the postwar industrial working class, Pop's wages were first "gobbled up" by a mortgage and then by medical bills. But when he pays off

these two expenses, Pop is finally able to save for Rudy's education (76). As these savings start to accumulate, Pop decides to purchase his son:

a graduation present so splendid that it would serve many purposes at once: it would remind Rudy that his father loved him and would do anything for him, it would be a symbol of what you could buy with hard work, and it would by its very presence and existence as *his* make it impossible for Rudy to cut short his education or close out his future on the excuse that he wanted to earn money at once to buy himself an automobile. (80)

This passage describes the symbolic power of the automobile. According to Pop, an automobile is a sign of love (when given as a gift), a reminder of what is possible (through the power of hard work), and the means of dissuading Rudy from pursuing a working-class job rather than going to college. The car, Pop believes, is the full package: an incentive, an investment, and a promise of a better future for his son. For a while, it appears that Pop's plan is going to work. Motivated by the graduation present, Rudy does well in school and graduates ready for college. As promised, Pop presents Rudy with a new Ford and the excited teenager drives off to show his friends. Pop grants his son leniency staying out late, believing that Rudy needs "a couple weeks to get it out of his system" (90). A few days later, however, Rudy crashes the car on the way home from a party and dies on impact. Not knowing what else to do, Pop returns to work the next day. Soon, "the question of blame" begins to torment him in the silence of his now-empty house (96). He wonders if he has been too hard on his child (or too lenient) and considers what could have been if he had raised Rudy differently. Eventually, Pop absolves himself

of “direct guilt,” concluding that “Rudy had been an unworthy son—unworthy of the automobile, unworthy of his father’s love and trust and admiration, unworthy of the innocent girl whom he had crippled” in the car accident (97). Pop’s bitterness begins to seep into his work life and soon he loses that feeling of easy camaraderie he had shared with his coworkers for decades and resents younger coworkers.

With retirement just two years away, Pop fears the silence of old age without any family. To stave off this loneliness, Pop buys “a small dog that was friendly and that had room to grow” (100). He names the dog Rudy and starts using incentives to encourage good behavior, just as he had done with his son. Unlike his son, however, the puppy refuses to listen to Pop’s commands. Finally, Pop decides to install screening on his porch as a means of giving the dog a safe place to run around. Pop is satisfied with his solution and says: “Got you where I want you now, Rudy. You won’t break loose from there, you’ll be waiting when I come home. And don’t forget, if you do like I say there’s going to be a juicy present for you . . .” (102). The feelings expressed in this statement make it difficult to discern whether Pop is addressing his dog or his deceased son. In either case, Pop clearly views the dog as a second chance to do right as a father and keep “Rudy” safe from harm. Yet, Pop can only imagine doing this through confinement, replacing his dream of upward mobility with a desire for safety. In the final scene, Pop accepts this arrangement and continues to work just as he has done for his entire life, neither hoping nor expecting anything of significance to change in the years ahead. The automobile fails to deliver Rudy to college and a life beyond the monotony of factory work. Pop lowers his expectations and resigns himself to the limited sense of security he has acquired for retirement.

Mid-century automobile advertisements actively encouraged the aspirational associations Swados represents in these two stories. One could be anything one wanted, if only one owned a new car, the ads suggested. The symbolic force of the car was so strong that the same product—a Ford—could be seen as the key to becoming an American for Kevin and essential for securing a better life for Pop. These associations were promoted by the millions of car ads circulating in the 1950s. “It pays to be a Ford owner,” one 1956 advertisement proclaimed (figure 3). The ad went on to assure its viewers not only of the beauty and utility of the vehicle, but boasted about its safety features as well, arguing that “its true value is above *any* price.” That same year, an ad for an “even dreamier” Ford Thunderbird promised “to take you places as you’ve never gone before, in new style that will draw admiring glances wherever you go” (figure 4). A year later, a third advertisement explained “how to feel rich—at the low Ford price!” while a fourth (from 1958) demonstrated “why Quality Control by Ford means MORE FOR YOUR MONEY!” (figures 5 and 6).



When you buy it . . . while you own it . . . when you sell it

## It pays to be a Ford owner!

Everything about the '56 Ford says fine car except the price—and that's low! For the '56 Ford brings you features you would normally expect to find *only* in cars that cost far more. For example . . .

You get the beauty of Thunderbird-inspired styling . . . the "GO" of Ford's new V-8 engine, when you buy a Ford eight. If ever a car had that "best-in-show" look, it's the new Ford. Its long, low, clean-lined beauty could only be inspired by the famous Thunderbird. And as for "GO," you'll revise all your old ideas of responsiveness once you take command of a new Ford V-8. You'll have the power to pass in instants when instants count. And this mighty V-8 engine has a rigid extra-deep block to make it run smoother, quieter, last longer.

You and your family get the added security of new exclusive Lifeguard Design. Its true value is above any price. It gives you extra protection against injuries in case of accident . . . with a Lifeguard deep-center steering wheel, Lifeguard double-grip door latches, Lifeguard rearview mirror, optional Ford seat belts and Lifeguard padding for instrument panel and sun visors.

The things that make Ford worth more when you buy it, make it worth more when you sell it. Because Ford is so far ahead today, it will *still* be ahead when you decide to sell it, too. For, year after year, Ford has returned *more* of its original cost at resale than any competitive car. That's why it will pay you to see your Ford Dealer soon!



THIS ADVERTISEMENT IS SCHEDULED TO APPEAR IN THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS:

Publication	Issue	Circulation
PROGRESSIVE FARMER	April, 1956	1,243,408
FARM JOURNAL	April, 1956	1,302,659
SUCCESSFUL FARMING	April, 1956	1,308,707
		TOTAL CIRCULATION: 3,854,774

ADVERTISEMENT NO. 7378A  
1 Page - 4 Color

Prepared by  
J. WALTER THOMPSON COMPANY  
PRINTED IN U. S. A.

**Figure 3.** "Ford Motor Company: It pays to be a Ford owner!" (1956). Originally published in *Progressive Farmer*; *Farm Journal*; and *Successful Farming*. Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © Ford Motor Company.

Even dreamier—even newer

## Ford THUNDERBIRD for '56

The newest version of America's most thrilling dream-car-come-true is here ...

... ready and waiting to take you places as you've never gone before, in new style that will draw admiring glances wherever you go

One trial spin in the new Thunderbird is enough to quicken the pulse of even the most seasoned driver. You feel you could drive all day ... just enjoying the enormous Thunderbird V-8 power as it responds to your slightest command! And you can have it with Fordomatic Drive, Overdrive or Conventional Drive.

You can choose power assists to help you steer, stop, control the windows and seat. Cornering never was flatter. The ride was never better. And, depending on your whim, you can have a convertible fabric top or a removable hardtop—or both. You feel extra safe, too. For you know Ford's exclusive Lifeguard Design rides with you. You feel just a little proud when you pull

up at a light. You know that your car's long, low lines are the most distinctive on the road. Interiors sparkle with new color. And that new rear-mounted spare tire adds

as much to the appearance of the car as it does to your luggage space. *These experiences are your everyday fare when you drive a Thunderbird. Why miss them another day?*

THIS ADVERTISEMENT IS SCHEDULED TO APPEAR IN THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS:

Publication	Issue	Circulation	Publication	Issue	Circulation
HOLIDAY	March, 1956	825,117	SUNSET	March, 1956	552,015
FORTUNE	April, 1956	225,119	<i>As a B &amp; W adaptation:</i>		
NEW YORKER	April 7, 1956	337,079	MOTOR TREND	March, 1956	428,000
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED	March 12, 1956	521,154	SPORTS CAR	March-April, 1956	4,500
DAC NEWS	March, 1956	5,037	ROAD AND TRACK	March, 1956	73,077

ADVERTISMENT NO. 7486  
One Page—Four Colors  
Prepared by  
J. WALTER THOMPSON COMPANY  
PRINTED IN U.S.A.

TOTAL CIRCULATION: 2,971,698

**Figure 4.** "'Even dreamier—even newer Ford Thunderbird for '56.'" (1956). Originally Published in *Holiday*; *Fortune*; *New Yorker*; *Sports Illustrated*; *DAC News*; *Sunset*; *Motor Trend*; *Sports Car*; and *Road and Track*. Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © Ford Motor Company.

**How to feel rich—at the low Ford price !**

The new kind of Ford is strawberries and cream; it's having a butler and a maid; it's the smell of coffee on a fresh morning.

It's also an automobile—the most for your money. The new kind of Ford has wonderful figures and facts. For example, you can have the Silver Anniversary V-8 with up to 245 horsepower . . . each a Thunderbird horse, its brute power controlled down to a whisper. Or, for super economy, try Ford's Mileage Maker Six.

Every nut and bolt is new in the new kind of Ford. Each inch is new engineering; each pound has been freshly designed to get more weight lower to the road, on a new deep-cradle frame.

It's the elegant quality in places you'll never see that makes the "Inner Ford" so very important to you. For example, bodies are heavily insulated to keep out cold and noise. Doors have a built-in "helping hand" to hold them open, or to close almost by themselves with the smooth precision of a bank vault.

Remember—even though millionaires buy three or four new Fords at a clip, they can only ride in one Ford at a time. No one can have any more fun in a Ford than you can.

*There's a new kind of fun in the new kind of Ford for '57  
...visit your local Ford Dealer and see!*

**Figure 5.** "How to feel rich-- at the low Ford price!" (1957). Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © Ford Motor Company.

**QUALITY CONTROL**

**Why Quality Control by Ford means MORE FOR YOUR MONEY!**

As many as 140 highly trained quality-control experts examine each Ford-built car or truck while it is being assembled on one of our main assembly lines.

Here lies the secret of quality that makes any Ford-built car or truck worth more to you.

At components of each vehicle are brought together—at Frame Assembly, Body Build-up, at Engine Installation and so on through a hundred operations—these experts swarm over the car, checking with delicate instruments each detail of Ford's precision production.

AND all this is on the final assembly line alone!

It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of quality checks are made on individual parts of the Ford-built car you eventually will drive.

And do you know what happens when Ford-built vehicles come off the assembly line? They are quality checked once again! Sample cars are selected and teams of inspectors examine each one in a three-to-four-hour visual or operational check of 1,500 different items.

This is Ford quality control—to give you more for your money in every Ford-built product.

This diagram identifies some of the evolutionary stages in the final assembly of Ford-built cars. At upper left are displayed interior trim and glass areas. At top right are radiator, drive shaft, steering wheel and rear-door assembly.

1-Frame; 2-frame with wheels; 3-frame with wheels, engine and transmission; 4-body in bare metal; 5-body trimmed; 6-body draped; 7-prior to seat installation; 8-finished product.

This picture represents a typical Ford assembly line. Because over 10,000 parts go into a Ford-built car, these men have only one job: Quality Control inspection of every vehicle.

THE WORLD-WIDE

**FORD**

CORPORATION

Wherever you live... you get more for your money in any Ford-built product.

Ford-built products include cars, trucks, motors, industrial engines, general maintenance parts. Models: Popular • Anglia • Prefect • Consul • Zephyr • Zephyr • Mustang • Falcon • Mustang and Dodge Super • Torino • F-100 • Continental Mark III • Mercury • Edsel • Lincoln • Ford • Thunderbolt • Ford Truck and Tractor.

This advertisement appears in  
*Life International*—August 18, 1958; *Life en Español*—August 25, 1958;  
*Time Atlantic*—August 25, 1958; *Time Latin America*—August 25, 1958; *Newsweek European*—August 25, 1958;  
*Reader's Digest* Argentine, Australian, Danish, German, Mexican, New Zealand, Norwegian, South African, Southern Hemisphere,  
 Swedish, French Swiss, German Swiss & Portuguese editions—September, 1958.

**Figure 6.** “Ford Motor Company: Quality control. Why Quality control by Ford means more for your money.” (1958). Originally published in *Life International*, *Time Atlantic*, *Newsweek*, and *Reader's Digest*. Reproduced with kind permission from Duke University © Ford Motor Company.

Each of these advertisements made explicit claims about what aspirational aims a new automobile could serve in the life of American consumers. The image in the 1956 ad (Figure 3) placed the car at the center of postwar life by picturing a middle-class family gathered around the vehicle to see their mother off. The second 1956 ad (Figure 4) inspired feelings of independence as the two young men dressed for college drive toward sporting events and other social outings stenciled in the background. Taken together, the advertisements also made an implicit argument about money and consumer culture. Buying, the advertisements implied, makes consumers feel rich. Yet, by claiming that “it

pays to be a Ford owner” the ad confuses the relationship between the buyer, seller, and commodity. In this way, Ford marketed its products as an investment rather than a commodity, something that would hold its value “when you buy it . . . while you own it . . . [and] when you sell it.” Swados critiques such claims in *On the Line* by demonstrating that cars could not live up to such claims. Kevin and Pop had believed that their automobiles would fulfill the promises made by advertisements like these. The family surrounding the car in the first ad could be Kevin’s family celebrating their all-American life, and the young men in the second ad could be Rudy enjoying college life. But in both of these stories, the automobile loses its material and symbolic value just days after its purchase. For Kevin and Pop, it most certainly does *not* pay to be a Ford owner. Much to the contrary, the cost of being a Ford owner is so high for these two men—financially and emotionally—that their purchases lead to a disillusionment regarding the false promises of working-class affluence. In both cases, the dissatisfaction marks the end of their hope for a better future and results in a lingering sense of defeat and resignation.

Many mid-century advertisers recognized the hollowness of these commercial promises, although this did not prevent them from making such claims. Dichter found Americans’ faith in commercial products amusing. He summarized key findings about the automobile industry in a section of *The Strategy of Desire* titled “\$3,000 for one-half hour of fun.” Such a title implies that the immediate sense of regret Swados describes in *On the Line* was a common occurrence for automobile buyers. Dichter wrote that \$3,000 “sounds fantastically expensive, and yet there are millions of people who do exactly that” when they buy a new car (170). He understood that the feelings of excitement, pride, and accomplishment that came with purchasing a new car were short-lived and that

automobiles rarely lived up to the owners' expectations. Nevertheless, as a practitioner of psychological marketing, Dichter also recognized that prosperous members of the working class felt a sense of insecurity regarding their shifting class identity. This caused many working-class Americans to seek affirmation about their uncertain social status. After all, by definitions of class that prioritize income and standard-of-living, mid-century factory workers could be seen as members of the middle class. However, a definition of class that accounts for a worker's relation to the means of production and the type of labor performed would suggest that the characters in *On the Line* remain members of the working class, despite rising wages and access to a middle-class quality of life. Dichter and other mid-century advertisers exploited this class confusion and insecurity as a marketing strategy and developed a definition of class identity that operated through the logic of "permanence" and perpetual growth rather than labor relations:

Whereas the permanent members of the middle class depends largely upon personal relationships in order to decide upon household goods that would be appropriate to her class membership, the recent member of the middle class turns to impersonal sources . . . thus, the recent middle-class member does not, and indeed cannot, depend upon the primary channel for the communication of traditional values, the instructions of parents, relatives, and friends, for acquiring the knowledge necessary to her new role . . . the new middle-class member must learn whole new sets of complex values, attitudes, and behaviors, and because her sources of information are often in

disagreement among themselves, she is frequently insecure regarding the 'right' thing, the 'right' symbol, the 'right' manner of behavior.

(Dichter 181-2)

Dichter explained how anxiety about class position could reinforce consumer desires, especially if advertisers actively promoted consumer purchases as status symbols.

Swados represents this dynamic frequently in *On the Line*, as his factory-worker characters purchase automobiles and other symbols of affluence in the hope of signifying their membership in the middle class. For Kevin, this anxiety emerges as the fear of not being seen as a real American. Pop imagines the automobile will signify the value of hard work, but it symbolizes something different for Rudy. This conflict arises because newly affluent members of the working class learn “whole new sets of complex values, attitudes, and behaviors” from differing sources. At the factory, Pop sees the hard work that goes into making automobiles and imbues these commodities with a value rooted in working-class toil and skill.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, Pops denigrates his life and work by believing in a vision of upward mobility for his son that excludes blue-collar work. Rudy on the other hand does not have that same direct experience with factory work. He learns about the symbolic value of automobiles through advertisements (like those discussed in this chapter) and by talking with his teenage peers. For this younger generation, automobiles represent a different vision of power and masculinity promoted by the automobile industry through its advertising campaigns. Having a new car makes him cool in the eyes of his peers, and his risky behavior matches his symbolic ideal rather than the

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<sup>71</sup> Dichter also describes this symbol: “To the factory worker in Detroit a car is (in addition to the things it is to other Americans) also a symbol of his toil, his living, his working week, his pride and skill” (129).

one his father has imagined for him. *On the Line* reveals how emerging class insecurity and the false promises of upward mobility influence working-class life. The novel also demonstrates how a generational conflict between competing symbolic associations creates new cultural challenges within a family. The characters in *One the Line* discover that the promise of mid-century affluence was a deceptive fantasy, even for the working-class people whose wages could temporarily afford a better quality-of-life. The process of attaining these fragile marks of affluence entailed profound forms of alienation and secured only a precarious relationship to middle-class lifeways rather than guaranteed, long-term security.

*On The Line* is a nearly forgotten text. To the best of my knowledge, there is not a single scholarly article or book chapter that focuses entirely on this remarkable working-class novel. The most thorough treatment of the novel appears in Frederick Karl's far-reaching 1983 study, *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation*. Karl describes the text as a "recycled" 1930s proletarian novel.<sup>72</sup> Karl observes that "Swados's book is rarely novelistic, nor does it owe anything to modernism" and argues that "with a few changes, it could be a nonfiction study, a companion to Paul Goodman's *Growing up Absurd* or David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*" (82). While Karl notes that the automobiles in the novel are "emblematic of the country: under the shine, as the men know, the rot has already begun," he does not give Swados enough credit for his presentation of conflicted working-class feelings regarding postwar affluence (82). *On the Line* effectively describes an emergent form of working-

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<sup>72</sup> Karl explains: "the tradition is working class, modeled on the proletarian novel of the 1930s, almost prototypical of Michael Gold's call for a committed fiction" (81).

class identity that was defined by both a particular relation to production and a particular relation to consumerism.

While some scholars, including Lichtenstein, fault Swados for describing his characters as powerless victims, I find the author's ability to document the social and material desires that produced such painful working-class resignation illuminating and valuable (227). Even though many mid-century U.S. laborers had more agency than Swados suggests in his novel, the feeling of being trapped—of working one's whole life and having nothing to show for it—was common among working people, especially for those who worked hard and still failed to achieve upward mobility. By imagining the postwar workplace as an ideological assembly line—a place that prepared workers for a life of disappointment and unfulfilled promises—Swados constructed a powerful vision of working-class disillusionment. Swados demonstrated the coercive power that fantasies of upward mobility had in dictating the horizon of possibility. Swados identified how hope, anxiety, and resignation served as the affective register that kept working-class families tethered to alienating labor. As a metal finisher himself, Swados realized that affluence operated by the same logic as his job: pounding out and filing down the blemishes. *On the Line* reveals how this process reshapes the working class just as it does on automobiles. Even though each of the many character in *On the Line* enters the factory with his own set of hopes and ambitions, the middle-class desires of mid-century America remade them all in the image of postwar affluence.

## **Conclusion**

In contrast to dominant narratives of mid-century affluence, I have argued that America's transition into postwar consumer capitalism was a painful experience for many

working-class people who had to navigate rapid and often alienating transformations. My analysis of Arnow's *The Dollmaker* shows how social, ideological, and material forces systematically pressured self-reliant rural workers to become wage-laborers and consumers. *On the Line* reminds us that this process isn't always as dramatic and confrontational as it appears in *The Dollmaker*. Instead, as Swados suggests, millions of working-class Americans initially celebrated the postwar economic shift toward consumerism and only later discovered its hollowness. Previous scholars have indicated that *The Dollmaker* and *On the Line* fit comfortably in the tradition of mid-century social criticism condemning the economic and moral drawbacks of middle-class conformity in the postwar era (Parker, Lichtenstein). What distinguishes the authors of these two novels from other mid-century critics is how they expose the ways in which the postwar economic regime foreclosed alternate ways of life, especially those rooted in residual working-class cultures and folk knowledge that were inimical to the dominant mid-century ideology of affluence. *The Dollmaker* demonstrates how wage-labor and consumption made it difficult to sustain and imagine alternate modes of working and living. *On the Line* reveals how disillusionment resulted in resignation and the fear that there was no alternative to the dominant socioeconomic order. By describing experiences of noncompliance and disillusionment, these novels show how the culture of consumer-oriented material affluence made it difficult to exist outside of the formal wage-labor market or even to imagine such alternatives. Together, these two radical mid-century novels offer powerful counterarguments to the fantasies promoted by the government and the advertising industry that promised upward mobility and affluence for all. Arnow and Swados recognized how middle-class culture had the potential to devalue alternate ways

of being while simultaneously tethering the postwar worker to the wage-labor economy in myriad ways, large and small. By giving voices to the betrayal that many working-class people felt regarding the hollow promises of consumer capitalist ideology, Arnow and Swados looked beyond the limited horizon of possibility that shaped the lives of many mid-century Americans stuck in a cycle of earning and spending, and gesture toward the possibility of something better.

**Chapter Three: The Limits of Property and a Yearning for Freedom in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun***

This chapter investigates the emergent postwar desire for homeownership, emphasizing how this state-sponsored American promise was simultaneously extended to and withheld from Black families. Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) each revolve around a Black family's efforts to buy a house during a key historical moment when Black people gained a higher level of access to homeownership despite continued racial segregation in the housing market. Contextualized by a historical analysis of postwar racial segregation, this chapter reveals how the pursuit of homeownership often became a toxic desire that ended in ruin for working-class families seeking security. These influential literary works identify the structural impediments that made homeownership difficult for many Black and working-class families and the texts are often read in this light. At the same time, however, these two narratives examine the limits of homeownership for Black Americans and gesture toward a broader plane of economic and political activity available to those who distanced themselves from the dominant postwar logic that exaggerated the power of property and possession.

Neither text unequivocally celebrates homeownership as the central solution to racial or economic injustice. While Black homeownership appears as an important goal to characters in both texts, the authors also highlight the false sense of security it implied, especially for Black families who did not receive the same protections or benefits from property as white families. While increased access to homeownership during the postwar period was a valuable political achievement for Black Americans, it was only a partial

and imperfect method of building real, long-term economic, political, and social power. As these tests revealed, buying property enabled some to occupy an existing domain of power rather than altering the fundamental relationships defined by that power.<sup>73</sup> In other words, while homeownership provided Black Americans with a degree of financial security, the act of purchasing it reinforced a conception of power in which rights were attributed to property and where the modern subject is understood in terms of what Negri and Hardt describe as “possessive individualism.” Under this system, Negri and Hardt explain, “you are what you have,” which limits social identity and power to the domain of property rights (105). Marshall and Hansberry are critical of this approach to power and question what it implied for Black people who were determined to live free and autonomous lives. This concern becomes apparent in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* when the two authors conclude their stories of homeownership with young Black women leaving the world of property and possession behind. Selina and Beneatha walk away from the false security of homeownership and invent new ways to live outside the confines of postwar property relations. In doing so, Marshall and Hansberry demonstrate two alternate modes of achieving what Saidiya Hartman describes as an “autonomous and beautiful” life, in which young Black, working-class women find creative and unpredictable ways “to escape new forms of servitude awaiting them” in postwar America and “live as if they were free” (xiii).

### **Race and the Rise of Government-Sponsored Homeownership, 1930-1960**

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<sup>73</sup> In *Empire*, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt describe such actions as a “productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction” (3).

Government involvement in the U.S. housing market dates back to the 1930s when the Roosevelt Administration helped stabilize real estate depreciation during the Depression. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), created by an Act of Congress in 1933, provided mortgage assistance to homeowners by offering loans and refinancing services. One year later, the federal government passed the National Housing Act of 1934 and established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which insured mortgages held by private lenders and protected them from financial losses.<sup>74</sup> These new government institutions provided many Americans with the confidence and financial instruments they needed to buy their own home.<sup>75</sup> By the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, higher wages and revolutions in the homebuilding industry made home owning more affordable than ever before.<sup>76</sup> Many Americans were excited by this prospect and the U.S. homeownership rate grew nearly 20% over twenty years, from 43.6% in 1940 to 62% in 1960 (Collins and Margo). Part of this boom in the housing market came from veterans returning home after the war, especially after the federal government passed the GI Bill of Rights in 1944 which instituted the Veterans Administration (VA) and encouraged lenders to offer mortgages to veterans without a single dollar down payment (Chambers et al).

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<sup>74</sup> Collins and Goldberg offer an overview of these government programs in *When Government Helped*.

<sup>75</sup> Jeff Cowie explains that "Federal agencies and private producers fostered growth by energetically encouraging people to spend their money. As in the late 1940s, the Federal Housing and Veterans administrations offered low-interest loans to facilitate home-buying and suburban expansion" (315).

<sup>76</sup> James Patterson discusses these various political and economic developments in *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*.

The growing affordability of homes was a cultural phenomenon, as well. Elaine Tyler May argues that American homeownership was a Cold War development that could satisfy the intense postwar desire to “feel liberated from the past and secure in the future” (May 10). May adds that the federal government actively encouraged “the suburban ideal of home ownership” because it would: “diffuse two potentially disruptive forces: women and workers,” encourage increasingly affluent families to “fulfill the new American work-to-consume ethic,” and “lessen class consciousness among workers, who would set their sights toward the middle-class ideal” (164). From at least 1940 to 1960, homeownership was seen by many Americans as the symbol of a good life and served as proof that they had “made it.” In a popular 1959 study of class behavior and American culture, *The Status Seekers*, Vance Packard argued that “the home during the late fifties began showing signs of supplanting the automobile as the status symbol most favored by Americans for staking their status claims” (Packard 61). Rick Perlstein explains further that “Americans ascribe both moral virtue and high citizenship to the purchase and upkeep of a single-family home [where] paying down a mortgage is taken as a sign of well-being and normalcy” (Perlstein 59). As social theorists explain, homeownership not only gave Americans a way to accumulate wealth, but also served important social and cultural functions that were central to living the perceived good life in the 40s and 50s. As a result, many working-class and middle-class Americans saw the home as a symbol of belonging and success that generated a particularly strong sense of pride among this generation of homeowners, which helped them justify great personal sacrifice to attain it.

The postwar desire for homeownership was so pervasive in America that it took on a sort of mythical quality. According to Arletrice Mechele Dickerson, the “Happy

Homeownership Narrative” emerged during this period. Under this increasingly dominant cultural logic, many Americans believed that:

homeownership brings out the best in people. It makes them more involved as citizens, and it strengthens the moral and economic fiber of the country. Homeowners are viewed as being noble, hardworking, responsible, and financially stable and secure. In stark contrast, renters are viewed as weak and financially vulnerable. In the Narrative, homeownership creates stronger neighborhoods and improves society overall. *Every* citizen should strive to become a homeowner. Renting, on the other hand, is a parasitic state that people should aspire to flee from as soon as they possibly can. (Dickerson 20)

Dickerson goes on to explain why this narrative is a myth rather than reality, although the cultural appeal of this narrative is clear. Millions of mid-century Americans obtained a home for exactly the reasons Dickerson lists above. Millions more felt the social pressure associated with the Happy Homeownership Narrative and tried to live up to its ideal only to discover that their propertied status failed to bring about the joy, comfort, and security they sought after two decades of global conflict and economic depression. Either way, the desire of homeownership was a persistent force in the daily lives of postwar Americans.<sup>77</sup>

This desire took on additional social and economic dimensions for African Americans. Black homeownership rates rose at a similarly (but not equally) fast pace

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<sup>77</sup> Mid-century Americans experienced a similar cultural pressure to embrace consumerism. See, for example, George Lipsitz’s work on how 1950s sitcoms promoted consumerism in “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs.”

throughout the 40s and 50s, from 23% in 1940 to 38% in 1960 (see Table 1, Chart 1, and Chart 2 below). This fifteen percent rise over twenty years is the fastest growth in African American homeownership in U.S. history, before or since. In *Race for Profit*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains that African Americans in particular felt an especially strong association between homeownership, citizenship, and belonging because “the very first civil rights bill to be enacted in 1866 tethered the right to purchase property to freedom and citizenship” (Taylor 2). She then attributes the African American postwar desire for homeownership to the following factors:

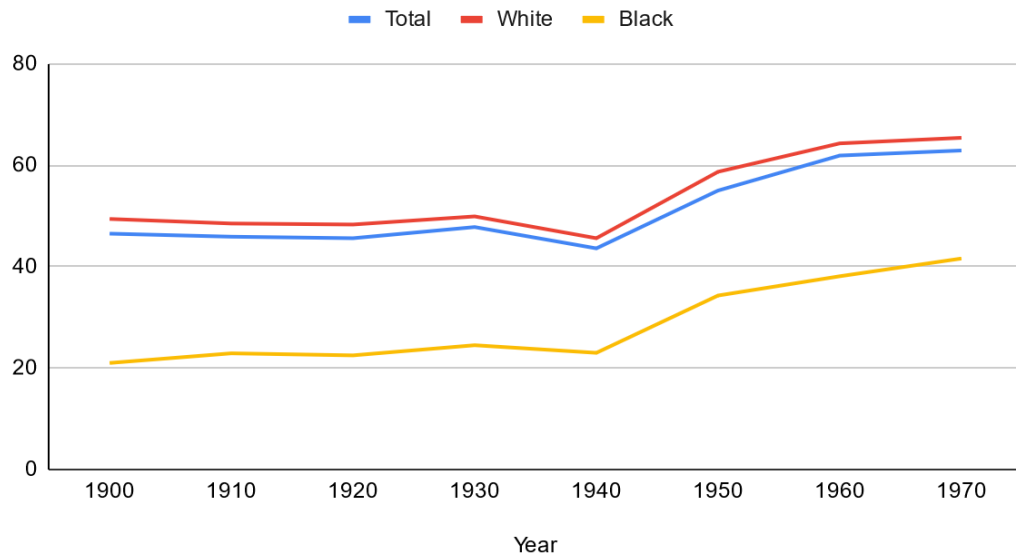
The momentum to open new housing opportunities for African Americans was not only created by the racial liberalism unleashed by the Cold War and the supposition that the unequal treatment of Black citizens imperiled the new role of the United States as a global superpower, but African Americans were in a stronger financial position because of the migration. These political cracks at the top and bottom of society coincided with the homebuilding boom of the postwar period that created an even greater opportunity for African Americans to partake in the real estate market. (Taylor 38)

There are several social, political, and economic factors that contributed to the rapid growth of African American homeownership during this period. Liberal public opinion began to challenge the longstanding prejudices that created severe overcrowding in the racialized housing market. With higher and more stable wages from Northern industrial jobs, many African Americans made it a priority to escape the exploitative rental market by purchasing a house, even when this involved entering the exploitative housing market.

Owner-Occupancy per 100 U.S. Households				
Year	Total	White	Black	Gap
1900	46.5	49.4	21	28.4
1910	45.9	48.5	22.9	25.6
1920	45.6	48.3	22.5	25.8
1930	47.8	49.9	24.5	25.4
<b>1940</b>	<b>43.6</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22.6</b>
<b>1950</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>58.7</b>	<b>34.3</b>	<b>24.4</b>
<b>1960</b>	<b>61.9</b>	<b>64.3</b>	<b>38.1</b>	<b>26.2</b>
1970	62.9	65.4	41.6	23.8

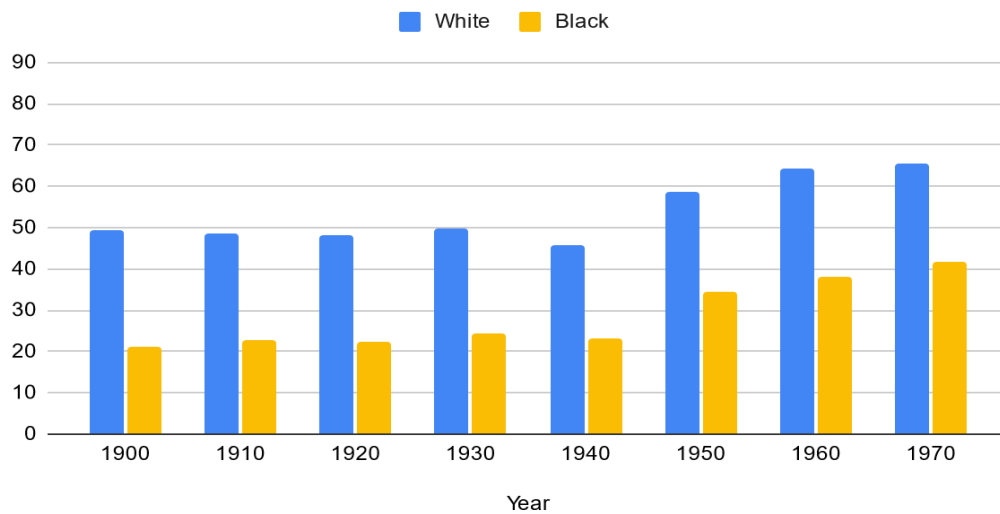
**Table 1:** Owner-Occupancy per 100 U.S. Households. Data from *U.S. Census*.

### Homeownership Percent by Race, 1900-1970



**Chart 1:** Homeownership Rates by Race (as a percentage). Data from *U.S. Census*.

## Homeownership Percent by Race, 1900-1970



**Chart 2:** Homeownership Rates by Race (as a percentage). Data from *U.S. Census*.

This rise in African American homeownership was hard won. During the 1940s and 1950s, racial housing policies made it especially difficult for Black people to secure a mortgage and buy a home.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, even when Black homebuyers successfully obtained a mortgage, they did so at a much greater risk than white homebuyers, as they were pressured into buying houses “on contract” or on an “installment plan” rather than using the standard 30-year mortgage loan.<sup>79</sup> These substandard loan practices prevented African Americans from earning equity on a property until the loan was paid in full and gave real estate agencies and financial institutions the legal right to evict and reclaim

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<sup>78</sup> See John Kimble’s “Insuring Inequality: The Role of the Federal Housing Administration in the Urban Ghettoization of African Americans” for a powerful analysis of mid-century FHA documents arguing that the organization “went far beyond merely approving racial discrimination [by calling] for the containment of African Americans in the older residential neighborhoods” and then “deflected blame onto the private market for policies that it had standardized and mandated” (399).

<sup>79</sup>In “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates defines contract buying as “a predatory agreement that combines all the responsibilities of homeownership with all the disadvantages of renting—while offering the benefits of neither.”

property purchased by Black families if they missed a single payment. The many risks associated with African American homebuying were compounded by the fact that Black families were restricted to purchasing property in depreciating urban neighborhoods where the investment would immediately begin to lose value, thereby making their home a liability rather than an asset.<sup>80</sup> If African Americans attempted to purchase and occupy a property in an all-white neighborhood, they would often be met with racial violence, from verbal threats and intimidation to arson and bombings. Opportunistic real estate agents sometimes even encouraged racial “block-busting” to turn a quick profit, first from closing the sale, and then by reclaiming the property (sometimes just weeks later) after racial violence resulted in a missed payment. As this overview of racial housing policies reveals, the federal government and private actors created and sustained a dual housing market that placed a disproportionate financial burden on Black Americans. Drawing on an extensive body of evidence—documented first in Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier* (1987) and more recently in Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law* (2017)—historians conclude that the federal government sacrificed African American comfort, security, and wealth to improve the quality of life for white Americans. John Kimble explains that “the FHA accepted the ghettoization of African Americans as the cost of insuring the American Dream for white citizens” (Kimble 431). More recently, in *From Slave Cabins to the White House* (2020), Koritha Mitchell argues that “national declarations about equal opportunity notwithstanding, while federal programs promoted home ownership, African Americans were opposed in their every effort to secure

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<sup>80</sup> See Arnold Hirsch’s *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*.

desirable (or even decent) housing” (Mitchell 124). Given the many state-sponsored barriers to minority homeownership, it is remarkable that African Americans were able to achieve the progress they did in the 40s and 50s.<sup>81</sup>

Despite—or perhaps because of—these barriers, the prospect of having a home of one’s own was mesmerizing to many Black women writers of the mid-twentieth century. Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are all examples of this tradition exploring the desire for a place to call home.<sup>82</sup> In the following pages, I look at two fictional texts published at the height of America’s housing boom—1959—to examine how Black women authors used homeownership plots to first describe the discriminatory practices described above and then imagine alternative modes of achieving economic, political, and social power. While many scholars have considered what these two texts say about the issue of racial discrimination in the housing market, I focus on what they reveal about the toxic logic of ownership that prevents many of the characters from imagining a form of autonomy that operates outside of the domain of property rights. My reading of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *A Raisin in the Sun* demonstrates the harm that occurs when cultural narratives of homeownership set the terms of what is possible for working-class people living in postwar America. Marshall

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<sup>81</sup> Amy Hillier May challenges the prevailing historical argument that HOLC was a primary initiator of redlining, arguing that the map simply didn’t have the level of readership and influence necessary to normalize such practices. See: “Redlining and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation” for full argument.

<sup>82</sup> bell hooks situates this preoccupation with finding a “homeplace” in a much longer African American tradition, which she argues is especially prevalent among women writers: “Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension” (hooks 384).

and Hansberry envision an alternate mode of autonomy and independence that appears in the evasive actions of two young Black women brave enough to imagine a world defined by freedom and movement rather than property and possession. In the final scenes of both texts, the young female protagonists question the value of homeownership and make plans to return to their ancestral homes. In these moments, Selina and Beneatha invent new ways to rebel against the logic of possessive individualism that defined postwar life in America. Both of these young women come to see homeownership as a burden rather than an asset and seize uncertain opportunities to discover a life freer and fuller than that which their inherited home would offer. In doing so, Selina and Beneatha each refuse the relative security of property ownership in search of a fundamentally different mode of being where they can begin to live freely beyond the horizon of possessive individualism.

### **The Desire for Nomadic Freedom in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones***

In 1991, Vanessa Dickerson wrote that "It is Paule Marshall . . . who, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, provides one of the most intriguing and sustained explorations of the relations of a Black woman to real estate" (Dickerson 2). Thirty years later, this statement remains just as true. Marshall's 1959 novel about the Barbados-American experience of living and buying property in Brooklyn during the thirties and forties has had an enduring impact on U.S. culture. The text has remained in print and regularly discussed by literary scholars for the last sixty years. To this day, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is a crucial record of the mid-century desire for homeownership with a particular attentiveness to its ethnic dimensions. Marshall makes it clear that the desire for homeownership operating in Black communities was not an act of assimilation (as it is sometimes mistakenly assumed), but

a social and political project with its own distinct history, goals, and culture.<sup>83</sup> The novel follows the lives of the Boyce family over a ten-year period, from just before the onset of WWII to a few years after its conclusion. Deighton and Silla Boyce are first-generation Bajan immigrants who left Barbados with the hope that the U.S. could provide better opportunities for their two children, Selina and Ina, than their impoverished homeland. Over the course of the novel, Selina—the central protagonist—grows up witnessing her mother and other Bajan immigrants secure social and economic success in America. During these same ten years, Selina’s father grows increasingly skeptical of this faith in American upward mobility. As Silla’s devotion to the normative postwar pursuit of homeownership becomes an obsession, the family begins to fall apart. Ultimately, by presenting homeownership as a toxic desire with destructive consequences for the family, Marshall questions the value of ownership, especially for the Black people who populate the novel.<sup>84</sup> As the novel reaches its conclusion, however, the story becomes increasingly about how Selina should respond to these broken postwar promises. After a brief foray into the world of possessive individualism, Selina eventually rebels against her mother’s wishes and makes plans to leave the U.S. and its restrictive logic of ownership behind.

Before we can appreciate Marshall’s critique of homeownership, we must explore what Silla hopes to accomplish from buying a house. Scholars offer considerable insight

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<sup>83</sup> Marshall’s representation of the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen is a prime example of this attention to the distinctive history of Black homeownership. For a discussion of assimilation versus ethnic homeownership, see: Martin Japtok’s “Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: Reconciling Ethnicity and Individualism.”

<sup>84</sup> For other discussions of the destructiveness of Silla’s homeownership, see Elda Maria Roman’s “Mortgaged Status: Literary Representations of Black Home Ownership and Social Mobility” and Vannessa Dickerson’s “The Property of Being in Paule Marshall’s ‘Brown Girl, Brownstones.’”

on this question. Kathlene McDonalds finds that “Silla Boyce equates homeownership with success in America” (McDonald 27). Martin Japtok adds that “the pressure to [buy a house] can thus be understood as a wish to protect and shelter the younger generation against an essentially hostile white world” (Japtok 311). This interpretation highlights the particularly racialized desire to own property for its protective capacities and is essential to understanding Silla’s desire to buy a house. Finally, Vannessa Dickerson argues that “for Silla . . . the brownstones are not merely a matter of capitalistic greed, but of the progression of the self, loved ones, and community” (Dickerson 10). Here, Dickerson describes an aspirational quality to Black homeownership that treats the home as more of a social and cultural asset than an economic one. Dickerson’s reading is most central to my own interpretation of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* even though Silla generally references the economic value as one of homeownership’s best features. At the same time, when other characters press Silla to justify her desire for homeownership, she often responds with anger and condemnation rather than with a clear financial rationale for all her hard work and determination, hinting at a sense of doubt that lurks just below the surface.

Marshall describes the Bajan desire for homeownership as misguided from the beginning. In one early passage, Marshall writes: “The West Indians, especially the Barbadians who had never owned anything perhaps but a few poor acres in a poor land, loved the houses with the same fierce idolatry as they had the land on their obscure islands” (4). By calling the Bajan love of houses “fierce idolatry,” Marshall equates it with a kind of an attachment to an illusory ideal. Nevertheless, the desire is not a new feeling for Bajan immigrants. Marshall explains how many Barbadians felt the same pressure to own land back in their home country. In both situations, the ferocity of the

desire is rooted in West Indian poverty where the desire to own property comes from a painful history of slavery, exclusion, and economic exploitation. More specifically, since the Barbados' economy of the 1930s was based on colonial sugarcane production, owning one's own land offered an alternative to low-paid field work and hinted at the possibility of a freer and fuller life. By framing homeownership as a form of idolatry, Marshall describes this desire as a kind of uncritical conviction and questions the value of Silla's faith in something unseen.

Silla's desire for homeownership is also misplaced because it alienates her from her family. This cost of homeownership is especially remarkable as it operates in direct opposition to the logic of the happy homeownership narrative to which Silla ascribes. Serious breakdowns in Boyce family relations first appear as a loss of intimacy between Deighton and Silla, who—as Marshall tells us—once had a loving and passionate marriage. Yet, even at the beginning of the novel, those days are a distant memory. In the novel's present, Silla prioritizes owning property over intimacy while Deighton pursues extramarital affairs. Most of the time, Silla can convince herself that her husband's infidelity doesn't really matter in the larger scheme of buying a house. But sometimes, in the quiet moments that sneak up on Silla alone in an empty house,

she could not stave off the thought of the women in the bars with their warm eyes and bright mouths and the men hovering over them. She gazed up at Suggie's darkened windows and the scene there rushed over her mind. Her thoughts reached out to Deighton and the faceless woman together somewhere. Suddenly she felt old and barren, deprived, outside the circle of life. But she only succumbed briefly to

this feeling, then her back was stiff again, her face resolute, and she sucked her teeth, dismissing them all. (42)

In these moments, Silla feels the emotional weight of her sacrifice intensely, if briefly. Marshall draws attention to the affective costs of idolizing homeownership. Silla hopes that once she buys a house, her marital issues will go away. Her faith in homeownership can steel Silla against these periods of loneliness where she feels “outside the circle of life.” On these nights, the empty home magnifies Silla’s loneliness and sorrow. Remarkably, however, such painful experiences do not dissuade Silla from pursuit of homeownership, but rather renews her resolve and reinforces her faith in homeownership as an escape from such painful reflections.<sup>85</sup>

Silla’s ethic of possessive individualism (where the individual subject is defined by what it owns) has an equally damaging effect on her relationship with her children, especially Selina, who cannot understand why her mother is so attached to the idea that money solves everything. The scale of this rift between mother and daughter becomes clear as the two walk home together one night after Silla’s shift at a factory. As the two pass by a row of stores, Silla tries to explain the value of money to her skeptical daughter, telling her that “it can buy anything you see there in those store windows” (103). Silla completes this remark with an expression of “awe” while glancing at “her oil-stained hands,” as though she is stunned that her hard work could produce such fine rewards. Silla has faith in the postwar American promise of working-class affluence and believes that the commodities sold in these stores could repair the issues that plague their family.

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<sup>85</sup> For an analysis of Silla’s relationship to homeownership, see Vanessa Dickerson’s “The Property of Being in Paule Marshall’s ‘Brown Girl, Brownstones.’”

As a result, Silla imagines that all she has to do to mend these broken relationships is work harder and earn more. Her oil-stained hands remind Silla of her determination and the awe-inspiring power of wage labor in the age of affluence, as it grants the ability to buy “anything.”

While Silla reflects on the power of capital, Selina has a fundamentally different view on her mother’s advice. As Selina listens to her mother explain the value of money in U.S. culture,

Selina also looked at those strong, square hands and could not remember how they felt or the last time they had touched her. All she knew about them was that they were always dark and determined, that the same deft way they shaped the dough for the coconut bread each Saturday they also scooped up the finished shell from the lathe. They offended her suddenly and she said with quiet venom, "Some people don't care about those things in the store windows." (103)

From Selina’s perspective, Silla’s oil-stained hands are an object of grief rather than admiration since they remind her of her mother’s absence. While Selina recognizes the productive power of her mother’s “strong, square hands,” she does not celebrate earning potential as her mother does. Instead, Selina weighs the economic value of her mother’s hands against the cost of lost intimacy at home and finds the exchange to be cruel and unfair.

Alarmed by the possibility that all of her work to buy happiness could be in vain, Silla demands to know what Selina means by some people not caring about consumer goods:

The mother folded in her hands. "What you saying?"

"I said some people don't care for things in the stores."

"But what you talking? What kind of people is they?"

"Ordinary people."

"What they does care 'bout then?"

"Other things."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. Things they don't get in stores. I dunno." (104)

This exchange highlights an ideological rift growing between Silla and her daughter. Silla cannot understand why some people, including Selina, do not value consumer goods.

Furthermore, the mother has a difficult time imagining anything that exists outside of the commercial marketplace. Selina struggles with this as well, although she does eventually name two things that ordinary people care about that cannot be found in stores: "love" and "breath" (104). These two things, Selina explains, are more valuable than any object on display in store windows but cannot be bought. Silla scoffs at her daughter's insights and dismisses the possibility that Selina could be right by responding: "'Love! Give me a dollar in my hand any day!'" (104). Once again, Silla's determination to earn money denies her intimacy with her family. Deighton and Selina explain the emotional impact that Silla's desire to own has on the family, but she cannot understand their concerns. Instead, Silla drowns out important criticisms of her attachment to property "in a voice that was too loud to be convincing" (104).

While family tensions appear throughout the novel, the central conflict in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* arises when Deighton inherits ten acres of land in Barbados. Silla

wants Deighton to sell the land and use the money for a down payment on a Brooklyn brownstone, but Deighton wants to keep the land and views it as a chance to return to home. After months of arguing, Silla devises a plan to sell her husband's land without his knowledge or consent. However, when the money arrives, Deighton sabotages Silla's plan by spending the proceeds from the property sale on gifts before Silla can use it as a down payment. These acts of deceit, betrayal, and malice grow into a domestic feud from which the couple never recovers, and which eventually leads to Deighton's abandonment of the family, followed shortly thereafter by his sudden deportation and death at sea in route to Barbados (set in motion by a Silla). One might think that Silla's faith in property and possession would be shaken after seeing such a devastating impact on the family, but she does not waver in her devotion to this postwar vision of success. Instead, hardship once again strengthens Silla's resolve to "buy house," explaining to Deighton after his spending spree:

Silla paused, her demented eyes on him, the battered trumpet raised to strike him, "I'll get the house despite you!" she cried against his loud laugh. 'I'll buy it yet.'

"Why not?" He shrugged. "There's plenty of loan sharks out there on Fulton Street waiting for you house-hungry Bajans. Why not? You's a woman with a good war job pulling down this good war money. They be only too glad to make you a loan at six percent and keep yuh in debt the rest of your life. You can buy it tomorrow-self. And Silla-gal, it will be yours. Only your name 'pon the paper, and you wun have to worry 'bout my selling it behind your back."

‘I’ll get it.’ Her words stung the air. “And as God is my witness I gon get you too,” she added quietly, edging toward him. “And I wun make mistakes this time. I wun let a Judas smile and Judas words in the night and thing so turn me foolish. You could touch me and it would be like touching stone . . . Nothing, nothing gon stop me. I gon steel my heart and bide my time and see you dead-dead at my feet!”

(131)

The fractures in Silla’s and Deighton’s relationship are increasingly irreparable. Through two spiteful economic decisions—Silla selling Deighton’s land and Deighton spending the money—they sabotage one another’s aspirations. Without land in Barbados, the prospect of returning home is much less appealing to Deighton, as they would return to a life of servitude rather than freedom. Without money for a down payment, on the other hand, buying a brownstone is much more costly and difficult, as a high-interest loan would nullify the financial benefits of owning property. Here and elsewhere, Deighton shows a clear understanding of the risks associated with Black homeownership in the 1930s and 40s. He knows that Black families such as his cannot access the low-interest mortgage loans that banks offer white Americans. Deighton also explains that these additional burdens of buying while Black are part of a predatory housing market used to keep Black families in debt for the rest of their lives, but Silla does not listen. By identifying Black homeownership as a debt trap, Deighton displays a high level of awareness regarding the socioeconomics of the segregated housing market. Throughout the novel, he acts as the voice of reason in a community overcome with the desire to acquire property.

Deighton's spending spree strengthens Silla's resolve to buy a house by transforming a financial decision into a matter of pride and marital spite. Marshall continues to describe Silla's desire to possess in religious terms with her references to "God as witness" and "Judas." The quasi-religious quality of Silla's desire places her impulse to own beyond the rational and imbues homeownership with a spiritual significance. Marshall concludes the scene with an inversion of the happy homeownership narrative: the home is not a place of familial togetherness or upward mobility, but a means through which Deighton and Silla exercise power over one another. Here, the pursuit of homeownership does not lead to a happy marriage or financial security. Instead, it distorts Silla's perceptions of value until she wishes her husband "dead-dead at [her] feet!" This representation of the marital tensions that emerge in the process of acquiring property reveal how cultural narratives celebrating the value of homeownership can have devastating implications for the family, especially when such powerful myths begin to obscure other values and priorities.

While Deighton is perceptive of the limits of U.S. homeownership, he is not immune to the desire to own. If the desire for land in Barbados comes from the same sort of fierce idolatry as the desire for homeownership in the U.S., then Deighton's desire to occupy his land back home may be similarly misplaced. If this is true, then what happens to Deighton as he lets go of ownership fantasy after Silla sells his land is revealing:

Suddenly he halted. His head dropped and he might have been inspecting his polished shoes, the crease in his trousers or the linoleum's gay pattern. But really he was watching the slow dissolution of his dream: the white house with Grecian columns and stained-glass

bathroom windows crumbling before it was even built, the flamboyant tree withering before it could take root. He moaned, breaking inside as the dream broke. Yet, as the moan tapered into a sigh, something else emerged. That sigh expressed a profound relief. It was as though Silla, by selling the land, had unwittingly spared him the terrible onus of wresting a place in life. The pretense was over. He was broken, stripped, but delivered. (115)

In this scene, Deighton undergoes a transformation that is simultaneously liberating and brutal. Once the dream of a “white house with Grecian columns” in Barbados dissolves, Deighton can begin to recognize it as an illusion. Accepting that this dream is no longer possible is so painful for Deighton that it breaks something inside him beyond repair. At the same time, however, “the slow dissolution of his dream” also inspires a feeling of “profound relief,” as it spares him from the pressure to achieve that dream. Since the dream itself was always already illusory, giving up also frees him from the “pretense” necessary to maintain these misguided beliefs. In the end, this revelation leaves Deighton in a conflicted state: “broken” and “stripped,” as one expects from such a blow to his aspirations, but “delivered” as well, experiencing “perverse gratification” and “terrifying exultation” in exchange for his imagined home (115). This scene marks the beginning of Deighton’s multi-year journey to untether himself from the logic of possession that structured reality and established aspirational priorities for many mid-century Americans.

Years later, as Selina turns fifteen, the dissolution of Deighton’s dream is compounded by a workplace accident that disables him for life. Until this incident, Deighton had dabbled in a series of professional ambitions from accounting work to

playing the trumpet. Unable to stick with any of these endeavors long enough to turn a profit, Deighton ends up working in a factory until the day his arm gets caught in “some new machine” (155). The doctors inform Deighton that he will never recover enough to play the trumpet or work at a machine again. He responds with a similar sense of ambivalence and perverse gratification experienced earlier:

Slowly he raised up and gazed down at the limp arm, his head quivering. Slowly the film dropped from his eyes and he half smiled. Bitterly at first. Then a certain joy crept into the smile and into the hollows of his lean face. His good hand groped out to the limp arm and he stroked it almost fondly, as if instead of defeat this was a strange kind of fulfillment—the one thing he had been truly seeking even as he sought the job in accounting and the return home. (159)

Here, Marshall describes the second stage of Deighton’s transformation in terms of “defeat” and “fulfillment,” which builds on the duality of “brokenness” and “relief” in the previous scene. The loss of his capacity to work in a factory or pursue a career in music frees him from another kind of pretense concerning the value of individual responsibility and the American work ethic. While the arm injury limits his earning potential and undoubtedly complicates his life, Deighton is only bitter about this accident momentarily. After this initial reaction, Deighton finds that he actually feels a “certain joy” emerging from this situation because it gives him an opportunity to evade a life of alienating labor and structured by the desire for upward mobility. An injured man is of no real value to capitalist production. While this sudden awareness of his uselessness could provoke feelings of “defeat,” Deighton experiences “a strange kind of fulfillment” instead, since

his “limp arm” effectively serves as his ticket out of exploited labor. Ultimately, Deighton believes that his injury will prove more effective at delivering “the one thing he had been truly seeking” than either his professional career ambitions, such as accounting, or returning home to Barbados.

The third and final part of Deighton’s ideological transformation occurs while recovering from his injury at the hospital. Confined to his room with little to do, Deighton begins reading a bedside religious text called *A New Light* and discovers a holy order led by a Black man known as “Father Peace.” As Deighton is now freed from his desire to own and unable to work, he is captivated by Father Peace’s teachings which advocate for a communal way of life, a monkish sense of self-denial, and the rejection of material ambitions. As Deighton becomes increasingly committed to Father Peace’s vision, he dissociates from his family and soon denies his identity as a father since, according to his religious teachings, ““there’s no marrying. No children . . . and we’s all children and brothers and sisters to one another” (172). When Deighton describes this newfound sense of peace, purpose, and belonging, Silla reacts with bitterness and resentment:

His certainty made Silla doubt. Perhaps he had found peace. An unreasonable envy seized her—for did she not yearn for peace lying alone in the wide bed each night? —peace with him sleeping beyond her locked door, peace from the ache in her loins . . .? And a new fear welled, for his bland peace might become a wall which she could never hope to penetrate. This dread suddenly swept aside her tenderness and twisted her love into wrath. She leaped up, the chair

tumbling behind her, and hurled at him across the table, ‘But be-damn you, don you know you’s flying in the face of God with this foolishness?’ (173)

In this final scene before Deighton moves out of the Boyce household permanently (relocating to a restaurant-and-apartment complex owned by the church), Marshall describes her now-spiritual husband as a threat to Silla’s own peace, comfort, and ambitions. Silla finds Deighton’s certainty troubling because it implies that the peace she is yearning for may be found through renouncing possessive individualism rather than embracing it, as she’s been doing for years. Thus, as Silla begins to realize that her ambitions may be misguided (as Marshall has suggested all along), “a new fear” wells up inside her. This fear comes from Deighton’s fulfillment—or what Silla calls his “bland peace”—which challenges her conception of the world and undermines the fantasy of being defined by what she owns. The dissonance between Deighton’s peace and Silla’s material ambitions proves irresolvable. The threat of disillusionment transforms Silla’s love into wrath, and she erupts with another quasi-religious declaration: that his devotion to the church is “flying in the face of God.” By the end of this argument, Deighton decides to leave Silla’s house and the family, having faith that ““Father will provide”” (177). And, to a certain extent, Father Peace does provide by offering Deighton a place to live in exchange for working at a “peace restaurant” that helps fund the church mission. While Deighton is happy with this arrangement and pleased that it allows him to continue seeing his children, Silla never accepts it. Her wrath grows and she eventually informs the police that her husband entered the country illegally. The police deport Deighton where he dies at sea, having “either jumped or fallen overboard and drowned” (185).

Scholars who write about the desire to own property in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* dismiss Deighton's significance to that narrative arc.<sup>86</sup> Yet, I believe that his character highlights some of Marshall's claims about U.S. fantasies of possession. First, Deighton is the only character in the novel who acknowledges that homeownership may simply be "more trouble than profit," which is quite accurate given the exploitative real estate strategies that were used throughout the 30s and 40s to create an unequal and racialized housing market (21). After all, many Black home buyers, such as the Bajan immigrants in Marshall's novel, were systematically excluded from the government-sponsored initiatives that made homeownership so rewarding for white Americans. Second, Deighton's character arc offers readers a complex account of what happens to someone when he realizes that the ideology of ownership fails to live up to its promises. For Deighton, this involves an ambivalent combination of pain and relief that eventually spares him from the terrible need of "wresting a place in life." While this does lead Deighton to spiritual fulfillment, Marshall is brutally honest about the costs of untethering oneself from the dominant social order. Marshall's description of these emotional tensions reveals the conflicted feelings many working-class immigrants have when they catch a glimpse of the illusion propping up U.S. promises of property and possession. Marshall uses Deighton's character to flesh out one alternative to the postwar pursuit for property. For Deighton, religion is a foil to Silla's belief in homeownership. After all, it is through this newfound faith in Father Peace that Deighton is able to secure

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<sup>86</sup> When scholars choose to write about Deighton, they typically do so from a gender studies perspective. For an example of this type of work see: Candice Pitts' "'You Ain No Real-Real Bajan Man': 'Brown Girl, Brownstones', and the Measure of Caribbean Manhood in the North American Terrain."

some sense of peace and fulfillment after the loss of his material dreams and professional ambitions. At the same time, however, Marshall represents Deighton's transformation ambivalently. By positioning Deighton as a tragic hero who discovers peace just in time to die, Marshall warns readers about the high social and emotional costs associated with pursuing an alternate vision of purpose, success, and fulfillment in the age of affluence and possessive individualism.

Once Deighton is out of the picture, Silla is free to pursue her homeownership ambitions without restraint and redoubles her efforts to convince Selina of its virtues. Eventually, Selina agrees to attend an Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen meeting and listen to their vision of Bajan-American community development. During this first encounter with the Association, Selina witnesses the Bajan businessmen singing the praises of American capitalism while discussing their progress on various economic and political ambitions (such as starting a community loan fund and seeking to establish a voice at City Hall to address housing projects). Association members speak with pride about the "spirit of self-help" and "opportunity" until it grows into a kind of "furor" that mirrors Silla's own commitment to postwar U.S. values (220-222). Rather than making Selina more amenable to the idea of productive power of property and possession, the Association's intense admiration of these values only confirm "how totally she disavowed their ways" (225). By the time Silla asks her daughter to join the "Young Associates" for a discussion of business affairs, Selina is already feeling hostile toward the Association and its mission. When the other young people ask Selina to share her impression of the Association, she expresses those doubts forcefully:

“I think it stinks . . . And why does it stink? Because it’s the result of living by the most shameful codes possible—dog eat dog, exploitation, the strong over the weak, the end justifies the means—the whole kit and caboodle. Your Association? It’s a band of small frightened people. Clannish. Narrow-minded. Selfish . . . Prejudiced. Pitiful—because who out there in that white world you’re so feverishly courting gives one damn whether you change the world *Barbadian* to *Negro*? Provincial! That’s your Association.” (227)

Selina’s critique of the Association here is as well informed as Deighton’s complaints earlier in the novel. Even though her speech contains emotive language, it is clear that eighteen-year-old Selina has learned much from her father before his death. This passage reveals that Selina not only listens to what the Association speakers believe about Bajan life in the U.S., but she also understands the Association’s social, economic, and political priorities. Even as Cecil Osborne and Claremont Sealy captivate the audience with their visions of upward mobility and financial independence, Selina finds their core values repulsive. Selina determines that the Association’s principles are “the most shameful codes possible”—as severely misguided as her mother’s desire to buy house. Selina recognizes that the type of economic uplift supported by the Association follows the same “selfish” patterns of capitalist exploitation practiced by the “white world.” To her, the Association is clannish and provincial. By becoming landlords and cutthroat businessmen, Association members are protecting themselves from economic exploitation by taking advantage of others, replicating the system of “dog eat dog” and “strong over the weak,” rather than replacing it with a freer and fuller alternative. After

seeing how the desire to own impacted her family, Selina understands just how “small” a vision the Association represents and demands something more for her own life. Selina also recognizes that Association members are driven by fear and willing to “feverishly court” dominant systems of exploitation in exchange for some fragile sense of economic security, which is a compromise she is unwilling to make.

Selina further develops her critique of the Association and its values with the help of an artist, Clive, whom she meets immediately after this outburst, as she runs out of the building. Clive notes her distress and confides that he would never be a member of the Association, thus inspiring an immediate feeling of camaraderie between the two outsiders. Meeting a fellow ideological dissenter intrigues Selina and she decides to join the twenty-nine-year-old veteran turned artist for a walk down Fulton Street. Over time, their shared contempt for the Association becomes the foundation for an intimate and sexual relationship that is the focal point of the final part of the novel. In the privacy of Clive’s Greenwich Village apartment, the two outsiders share the concerns about Bajan-American ambitions that they are unable to voice elsewhere without arousing fear, anger, and suspicion from their mothers and the other Association members. These conversations eventually grow into broad discussions regarding the relationship between art and capitalism. In one of these moments—just after Selina finds out that Clive’s mother once burned a number of his paintings in a fit of rage—Clive offers the following explanation of the artist’s position in postwar American society:

"To her, to your sainted mother, the whole damn country, as a matter of fact, people who paint pictures are criminals. We don't rob banks or commit murders but we do something worse. We get in the way, we

confuse things and we make them uncomfortable. Take the Barbadian Association. They've got plans, haven't they? Good, sound plans. They're going to have their own little credit system and bank. They're going to play the white man's game in their small way. Now tell me, what can they do with aesthetes with paintbrushes in this kind of plan? They simply cannot afford us." (263)

Here, Clive develops a theory of the artist as an ideological threat to the values of American capitalism as practiced by the Barbadian Association and millions of other modestly affluent working-class families during the postwar period. According to this theory, art is a criminal act because it robs material aspirations, like homeownership, of value. Artists “confuse things” for those pursuing commodified symbols of success. This confusion makes Association members feel “uncomfortable” about their plans and aspirations. When the Bajan businessmen speak about their banking and credit system, they do so with pride and a conviction that they are making life better for themselves and the Bajan-American community. Since “aesthetes with paintbrushes” operate largely outside the traditional channels of material wealth and capital accumulation, they do not fit into this broader plan of economic uplift. The kind of work an artist produces does not create the political and economic capital that the Barbadian Association is trying to accumulate.

Yet, if this is the only concern that people like Clive’s mother have about the artist’s way of life, then it doesn’t appear to be a threat as much as a waste of time and effort. When Selina pushes him on this point—asking “Why, then, don't they just leave you alone?”—Clive offers a more thorough description of the ideological critique found

in artists' lifeways. Hesitantly, Clive first tries to explain the threat in practical terms, suggesting that the road to economic prosperity is "a long haul and they need all of us" (263). Recognizing that this interpretation does little to explain the intensity of his mother's rage, he offers this supplement to his original claim:

"And then there's something else . . . something more frightening. When we snub their way they begin to ask themselves: 'Can we possibly be wrong and they right? —those fools with brushes?' Oh, it's never conscious, but they've still got to get rid of that hidden doubt. And the way they do it is to make you embrace their way. So they hound the frisky sheep back into the fold, and lure the foot-loose son back into his father's house with feasts." (263)

The terrifying power of the artist, Clive explains, is how their work can pressure individuals to question their faith in property ownership and the upward mobility it implies. In other words, an artist can transform certainty into doubt, which is a frightening prospect for many members of the affluent working class who have sacrificed much to achieve some access to middle-class comforts.<sup>87</sup> Clive's "Can we possibly be wrong and they right?" is precisely the question that Silla refuses to ask herself throughout the novel, turning to anger whenever this threat of critical self-reflection begins to surface in her moments of weakness. Clive's theory of the artistic threat also helps explain why Silla is so steadfast in her desire to convince her children of the value

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<sup>87</sup> Elda Maria Roman, for instance, writes that "By investing Selina with an outsider's perspective, Marshall can bring to the fore an alternative viewpoint that values the insights articulated through imaginative works" (748).

of property ownership and business success. Selina's criticism of her mother's desires situates the young woman as one of the "sheep" wandering away from the family's house and the ideology it represents. By pressuring Selina to attend an Association meeting, Silla hopes she can "lure" her daughter back into the fold and join the rest of the Bajan-American immigrants in their quest for economic security through business and property ownership.

Despite her mother's efforts, Selina refuses her mother's faith in property and possession, but she isn't optimistic about the alternatives represented by Deighton or Clive either. Instead, Selina uses what she learns from Deighton and Clive to develop a new way to rebel against the dominant social, economic, and cultural climate of postwar America. Like Deighton, Selina's disillusionment regarding the false promises of possessive individualism leads her on a quest for alternative modes of being. In the early stages of this transformation, Selina resolves to win an Association scholarship and then use the money to fund an escape from Brooklyn, her mother, and the Association. She views this plan as a kind of internal sabotage, where she can use the Association's values of self-help, uplift, and determination in direct opposition to the political and economic goals of the community. In doing so, Selina believes she can extract value from the homeowner and business world without committing to its ideology.<sup>88</sup> As she begins putting her plan into action, Selina discovers that Clive was right regarding how quickly and completely the Association would welcome her back into the fold. The community of

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<sup>88</sup> Such practices are sometimes referred to as "infrapolitics," which Robin Kelley describes as "the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements" in *Race Rebels: culture, politics, and the Black working class* (8).

Bajan businessmen and homeowners readily accept Selina's apology for how she had acted during her first visit, and they embrace Selina as a kind of prodigy who is rapidly developing into an ideal businesswoman poised for success. As she advances this plan, however, Selina struggles with feelings of guilt about this act of deception, which she fends off through her secret relationship with Clive. Nevertheless, as she continues down this path of self-discovery, a new Selina begins to emerge:

Those brief visits [with Clive] linked her days and gave them meaning. They kept her purpose clear—to free them both. The vitality hinted in her stride, in the cutting swing of her arms suddenly burst at the full to sustain her, and she was happy that for the first time she was living at a pitch and for a purpose. Alone at night she visualized her mind as a faceted crystal or gem mounted on a pivot. Each facet was a single aspect of herself, each one suited to a different role. Thus, for the Association, there was, surprisingly, a part of her that enjoyed the sense of importance and power, that could speak persuasively and subtly impose her will, that could dissemble . . . (274)

Selina discovers here a number of things about her maturing identity. By drawing on the rhetoric of "vitality," and "happiness," Marshall describes a freer and more beautiful life available to Selina through her growing sense of purpose and autonomy. Once Selina develops her own plan and acts on it, the young protagonist experiences a kind of freedom she had never felt as a child in the emotionally and ideologically restrictive environment of her family home. Soon, this emerging sense of self takes on the form of what Marshall refers to as a "faceted crystal or gem mounted on a pivot." This image of

the self is complex. Selina recognizes various facets of her identity as discrete entities and as fragments of a larger whole. During these nighttime reveries, Selina discovers that there is no one self. Instead, she finds that her identity is a composite social construction made up of different and contradictory elements. Selina learns that she is capable of more than she could have imagined earlier, even discovering that a part of her “enjoyed the sense of importance and power” that comes from her work with the Association. By imagining herself “mounted on a pivot,” Selina understands that much of her power comes from her ability to turn herself toward one particular end or another, revolving and refocusing energy as a given task demands. This gives Selina a heightened sense of freedom, power, and autonomy. Moreover, in a novel filled with characters with singular and obsessive identities (Silla the homeowner, Deighton the acolyte, and Clive the artist), the multifaceted crystal represents a responsive and flexible model of selfhood that serves as a meaningful alternative for Selina as she discovers the weaknesses of defining the individual subject by a narrow set of values and priorities.

Like Clive, Selina has a strong desire to express herself as an artist. As the lead performer of the school dance team, Selina imagines that she can make a living from this talent, especially if she uses the scholarship money to launch her career. As this desire takes shape, Selina tells her friend Rachel about her plans to swindle the Association of its scholarship money and run away with Clive. The rebellious prospect excites Rachel, and she suggests the following possibility:

“You could go to the Caribbean,” she said, and Selina, still depressed, hardly heard her. “Especially since your family’s from there. Besides, it’s very cheap living on some of the islands, and if you really intend

to dance you could learn a lot down there. I know because my aunt is a wheel in this cruise agency. She arranges the entertainment. Look, maybe I could swing jobs for both of you. You could skip out at one of the islands on the ship's return run . . . They might not even miss you, and so what if they did." (279)

This is the first time Marshall mentions Barbados after Deighton's death, and—at first—Selina rejects this offer out of hand, feeling that Clive wouldn't agree to it (which later proves true), but the proposition lingers in Selina's mind for the rest of the novel. It eventually sounds like a more viable option after a painful encounter that forces Selina to acknowledge the full magnitude of U.S. racism and its capacity to limit the freedom and beauty of Black life in America. The racial conflict occurs just after Selina performs a solo in the school dance recital. Margaret, one of the fellow dancers, invites the team over to her place after the performance to celebrate their success. Here, Selina has an encounter with Margaret's mother—a middle-class white woman—that unsettles her “all down the long years to her death” (285). After separating Selina from the rest of the dancers, Margaret's mother explains that Selina reminds her of a West Indies “girl” who she had hired to do their cleaning, and then describes how “Negroes from the West Indies” are different from other Black Americans (287). Selina listens to the woman's racist declarations in stunned silence, discovering “for the first time in her life . . . [and] with a sharp and shattering clarity—the full meaning of her black skin” (288). In this moment of sudden racial awareness, Selina realizes that no matter how hard she tries to excel at dance, many white Americans will never see beyond her Black skin. Margaret's mother singles Selina out at the party not because she is the star of the show, but because

her racial identity summons memories of Black servitude. Selina then realizes that to remain in the U.S. would result in a life where she would be seen by white Americans as an object of property in a culture where possession meant everything.

While Selina reacts with stunned silence, Marshall's rendering of the scene gives readers an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between race and American homeownership. If we consider Selina's age at the time of this incident—eighteen—in relation to other similar moments in African American literature, we realize that Selina's defining encounter with racism happens much later in her life than many other young protagonists in Black *bildungsromane*, including the narrator in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Claudia MacTeer in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In each of these novels, the moment of "sharp and shattering clarity" comes in elementary school, when the protagonist is just nine or ten years old, not on the cusp of adulthood. Why does it take Selina so long to experience a similar moment of identity-confounding racism? One likely answer has to do with hooks' theory of "homeplace" where the Black home becomes a refuge from U.S. racism. In other words, because Silla invests time and energy into creating a protective Black home, she is able to shelter her daughters from the most brutal aspects of white society, at least for a little while. Furthermore, since the family's brownstone is in a predominately Black neighborhood surrounded by other Bajan immigrants and homeowners, Selina rarely encounters white people in their own homes and domestic spaces. When she steps outside this racial barrier, however—which she does when entering Margaret's house—the protective capacity of a Black neighborhood no longer insulates Selina from the harsh

realities of U.S. racism. This delay in Selina's moment of racial awareness adds nuance to the discussion of value regarding Black ownership. On the one hand, the Boyce house does offer some degree of protection to the young Selina, who benefits from growing up in a space that affirms her as a subject rather than an object. On the other hand, Marshall demonstrates just how quickly and completely that tenuous sense of protection can be undone as the Black subject enters parts of U.S. society where Black people like Selina are almost certain to encounter the condescension of white racism. From this perspective, then, it appears that the primary limitation of minority homeownership shares a common feature with the identities seen throughout the novel: rigidity. In other words, because property is rooted in place while Selina is not, the house fails to protect her as she ventures forth into maturity.

Shortly after this unsettling encounter with white racism, Selina realizes that she cannot accept the Association scholarship, even though she earns it. Instead, feeling more certain about her rebellious desires, Selina stands in front of the crowd of Bajan businessmen and homeowners and apologizes for her deception, explaining that: "I can't accept the award . . . not only because I don't deserve it, but because it also means something I don't want for myself" (303). Selina's shifting awareness of race relations, identity, and freedom redefines her relationship with the Bajan community and U.S. society more broadly. She confirms her belief that the Association's vision is too small and recognizes the wisdom found in both Deighton's and Clive's efforts to distance themselves from the logic of property and possession that shapes the priorities of many Bajan-Americans throughout the novel. She knows that Deighton and Clive were right to critique such desires and finds that this Bajan desire is rooted to the same exploitative

relations devised and practiced by many white capitalists. At this moment, the scholarship signifies for Selina not only the cruelty of postwar economics, but also her skill at deception and making false promises appear real. What Selina once imagined to be a clever act of sabotage now actually reinforces the structure of possessive individualism as much as if she had earned the scholarship honestly. By deliberately misleading the Association, Selina performs the same act of deliberate and strategic deception that the U.S. government, real estate agents, and financial institutions used to persuade Bajan immigrants about the value property and possession. In a final assessment, Selina realizes she cannot live with the knowledge that she helped legitimize the Bajan community's faith in a harmful fantasy.

In refusing this scholarship, Selina commits herself to finding an alternate escape from her particular ideologically-restrictive circumstances. As the novel draws to a conclusion, Selina asks Rachel to arrange passage on a cruise ship to the Caribbean. Immediately afterwards, Selina walks through Fulton Park to reflect on her decision to leave the U.S. As she wanders the park, she finds "an area where blocks of brownstones had been blasted to make way for a city project" (309). While Marshall fills the novel with architectural imagery, this last image is especially significant, as it is the only one in which the brownstones appear in ruins.<sup>89</sup> This final image symbolizes the failures of the happy homeownership narrative. Despite all of the material and emotional sacrifice Silla has made in the name of property and possession, these ruined houses remind Selina of the threat of dispossession that haunts most Black homeownership in the U.S. Even

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<sup>89</sup> See Kimberly Benston's "Architectural Imagery and Unity in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*" for a thorough examination of architectural imagery visible throughout the novel.

though buying a house offers some degree of security for the Boyce family, it is not enough to ensure permanent protection. Instead, the rubble hints at the futility of Silla's desire to buy a house in a society where property rights exist to reinforce the current system of domination. The "blasted" brownstones show that the social and economic benefits derived from owning property are not only geographically bound, but temporary as well. The value of intergenerational assets such as property vary considerably by the race and class of the owners. This is especially true for the characters in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, since many of the Black homeowners are restricted to buying property in depreciating neighborhoods where they encountered a higher risk of losing their homes to government redevelopment initiatives such as that seen in the final pages of the novel. By ending with an image of ruined brownstones, Marshall calls the entire postwar logic of property and possession into question, giving Selina the opportunity to pursue something greater.

Selina's decision to travel to Barbados aboard a cruise ship has not been a major point of critical discussion. Mary Helen Washington describes this final act in an afterword to the 1981 edition of *Brown Girl, Brownstone*, remarking that "Selina makes the conscious, political choice to return to Barbados, to search out the lost meaning of her homeland, to discover what went wrong for her people in 'this man country'" (323). Other scholars leave the ending more open-ended. Japtok argues that "ambiguity prevails at the end," as Selina takes on a hybrid identity that "accepts ethnic communalism while pursuing an individualist agenda" (Japtok 311, 314). As such, when scholars discuss

Selina's journey to Barbados, they do so through the lens of ethnic identity formation.<sup>90</sup> Washington is the outlier to this trend, arguing that "in making the choice to return to Barbados, to begin again, Selina symbolizes the community's need to reorder itself, to recognize the destruction of human values in a community devoted to money, ownership and power" (Washington 322). I find Washington's point that Selina's choice is a "conscious" and "political" one to be illuminating, and I wish to build on this idea more in relation to Marshall's critical engagement with postwar economics and the failures of possessive individualism.

While Selina's voyage is a symbolic effort to finish what her father never could (return to Barbados), it is important to recognize that Selina's imagined homeland differs from Deighton's fantasy considerably. For instance, when Deighton inherits his land, he imagines a return to the Barbados of his childhood, a place of sugarcane production, colonial architecture, and a poor but dignified rural way of life. Selina, having been born in the U.S., has no such impressions of her ancestral homeland. Instead, when Selina thinks about the Caribbean, she envisions the Barbados of the future: one that is part of a Transatlantic cruise route and a popular vacation destination for many U.S. and European tourists. Marshall's recognition of Barbados' transition into a service economy is revelatory for a novel published in 1959, when Barbados was just beginning to make that transition. For the first half of the twentieth century, agriculture accounted for over one third of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It wasn't until the 1980s that "the

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<sup>90</sup> Timothy Chin, for example, writes: "it is significant that Selina is about to embark on a trip to the Caribbean when *BGBS* closes. Instead of a turn away from ethnicity, Marshall's text signals an immanent retracing of Caribbean roots and routes in a continuing search for more inclusive and expansive forms of cultural identification" (75).

economy had diversified, with agriculture accounting for 9% of GDP, wholesale and retail trade 17%, general services 14%, manufacturing to 12%, and government services and tourism to 11% each” (Kemp-Benedict 3). By the twenty-first century, the Barbados economy was “heavily reliant on the tourism sector,” which directly accounted “for 13% of GDP and indirectly for 40%” (3). The final scene in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* anticipates this transformation and considers what kind of economic opportunities this emergent industry might offer a young Black women in rebelling against a mode of life she finds unbearable.

By positioning a cruise ship as Selina’s means of escaping her mother’s desire to own, Marshall treats Caribbean tourism as a means to achieve a different kind of freedom. While multiple scholars have described the novel’s anti-capitalist ethos, this hopeful portrayal of the rapidly growing tourism industry calls for a more nuanced approach to Selina’s departure and a reconsideration of Marshall’s critique of capitalism. After all, Selina’s decision to work aboard a cruise ship to earn her passage to Barbados is as much an embrace of capitalism as anything the Association endorses. The distinction lies in Selina’s orientation toward property and possession. While Silla’s desire to own ties her success and fulfillment to the postwar ideology of ownership and a geographically-bound house, Selina’s desire to roam grants her the ability to cross national boundaries uninhibited. This act gives rise to a new kind of Black working-class autonomy rooted in mobility rather than stability.<sup>91</sup> McDonald explains that “the resistant

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<sup>91</sup> This distinction is reminiscent of Stuart Hall's differentiation between roots and routes. As Hall explains in “A Conversation with Stuart Hall” (1999): “Instead of asking what are people’s roots, we ought to think about what are their routes, the different points by which they have come to be now.” By pivoting the focus in this way, we can see that “routes hold us in places, but what they don’t do is hold us in the same place.”

value of Marshall's text, then, comes from her ability to locate working-class consciousness outside of the traditional realm, thus providing new possibilities for working-class resistance to capitalism in the US" (33). Selina does this by inventing a new way to rebel located within her own circumstances. Robin Kelley explains these "ordinary" acts of resistance are especially common among young Black people, who use the subtle power of infrapolitics as a means of survival (to make already existing capitalism livable) and to fundamentally alter existing power relations (8).<sup>92</sup> Selina has already seen and experienced the damage that a life dedicated to property and possession can inflict on a family. She has no desire to inherit such a way of life, even if it offers some degree of security. Instead, like one of the many young Black women in Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments*, Selina seizes a chance to live as though she were free and strikes out on a journey to "transform the terms of the possible" (349). In a world defined by property and possession, Selina embraces a form of labor and a mode of life that is mobile, dynamic, and borderless. In doing so, Selina becomes one node in what Hardt and Negri call "the multitude," a kind of unmediated and revolutionary social and political subjectivity particularly adept at resisting sovereign power when "there is no longer an outside to capital" (*Multitude* 102). Rather than assuming that a resistant figure such as Selina must escape capitalism entirely to live a free and meaningful life, Marshall locates the possibility of alternative social and economic arrangements within the domain of capitalism but outside the reach of the

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<sup>92</sup> Kelley explains: "by including a section on black youth culture, I wanted to make a case for placing young people's experiences squarely within the context of working-class history . . . unlike more mature adults, young people are in the process of discovering the world as they negotiate it. They are creating new cultures, strategies of resistance, identities, sexualities, and in the process generating a wider range of problems for authorities whose job it is to keep them in check" (11).

United States' dominant values of property and possession. Thus, in the end, Selina's decision to dance aboard a cruise ship is both an act of resistance that defies what her mother believes in, and a strategic act of participation in the capitalist economy that helps her achieve a level of freedom and autonomy that neither Clive nor Deighton obtain in their more radical departure from capitalist ideology. Reflecting on these two failed attempts to escape the deleterious effects of postwar capitalism, Selina finds a middle ground: embracing a capitalism that grants mobility while eschewing one that binds her in place.

### **Beneath and the Beautiful Experiment in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun***

Discriminatory practices in the housing market were especially visible in Chicago during the 1940s and 50s. Arnold R. Hirsch makes this regional development the focal point of his 1983 study *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. In this text, Hirsch explains that "the most distinguishing feature of post-World War II ghetto expansion is that it was carried out with government sanction and support" (9). When Hirsch addresses race and housing in Chicago, specifically, he offers the following details about the housing market:

The high degree of residential segregation in Chicago produced a dual housing market: one for whites, another for blacks. The restricted black housing supply and the overwhelming demand for new homes combined to inflate the cost of black housing. Rents in black areas ranged from 15% to 50% higher than that paid by whites for similar accommodations, the Illinois Inter-Racial Commission wrote in 1944.

The difference was especially great, they added, in areas just

beginning the process of racial succession. . . Not only were rents higher, but the cost of purchasing housing was greater for blacks. Despite this fact, however, the limits on the black rental market forced many into homeownership—even at the cost of overextending family finances. (29)

For at least two decades following WWII, African Americans in Chicago were forced to choose between two undesirable housing situations by either renting substandard apartment units in the overcrowded and overpriced South Side or taking the inflated risk of buying a house with limited access to suitable financing. Neither of these choices fit with the aspirations held by the tens of thousands of African Americans migrating to Northern cities during and after WWII, when the Black population of Chicago nearly tripled in just twenty years (Hirsch 17).<sup>93</sup> Yet as newly-arrived Black Chicago citizens fled Southern violence and sought economic opportunities, they had to live somewhere, and herein lies the central drama of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), one of the most well-known plays about racial discrimination in the housing market in American literature.<sup>94</sup>

Inspired by Hansberry's experience of Chicago's restrictive covenants, this painful story of housing segregation is both a personal account of the effects of racial prejudice on a Black family's domestic life and an intimate portrayal of a working-class

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<sup>93</sup> Chicago's African-American population rose from 278,000 in 1940 to 813,000 in 1960 (Hirsch).

<sup>94</sup> The success of Hansberry's play is well documented. After some initial difficulty funding its original performance, the play eventually ran for 538 shows on Broadway and went on to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the Year. Shortly after this successful run on Broadway, *Raisin in the Sun* was adapted for film in 1961 and followed by a posthumous musical adaptation in 1973. See Lisbeth Lipari's "Lorraine Hansberry (May 19, 1930–January 12, 1965)" for a full publication history.

family's attempt to secure a better life for themselves in the relative affluence of postwar America. For decades, *A Raisin in the Sun* has been studied and appreciated for its clarity and precision in describing the social, emotional, and material costs of racial discrimination in the housing market. I push back against a common reading of *A Raisin in the Sun* that views it as a celebration of Black homeownership in which the Younger family achieves personal fulfillment and racial justice by standing up to the structural racism in the housing market. In its place, I present a reading that disrupts the desire for homeownership, just as I did with Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Then, as with Marshall, I argue that Hansberry offers a glimpse of an alternate life that operates outside a logic of possessive individualism that defines subjects primarily by what they own.

Hansberry's influential work exposing the discriminatory practices of Chicago's housing market are well documented. Koritha Mitchell, for example, has written the following summary of the play's political legacy:

Hansberry's groundbreaking drama engages the fact that—via laws, public policy, and employment discrimination—the United States has inflicted violence on people of color by denying them access to the basic building blocks of home. While the federal government encouraged 'all' Americans to pursue home ownership, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) enacted bloodless violence by ensuring that whiteness determined access to basic resources, to say nothing of those that might yield the American Dream. (Mitchell 125)

Mitchell describes the intentionality of the U.S. government's housing policies that denied many Black people the same level of access to housing as it offered white

Americans. She emphasizes how the government's deceptive rhetoric of inclusion enacted a kind of violence on Black people by stoking a desire to buy a house while simultaneously restricting access to the "basic building blocks" that could yield those results, such as FHA insured mortgages, equity-building loans, and fair housing valuations.<sup>95</sup> Yet, as the substantial rise in Black homeownership rates demonstrates, exploitative policies did not prevent many African Americans from successfully buying a house. In this way, Hansberry's play gives voice to a familiar story for many working-class African American families seeking to live a life of dignity during and after WWII.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time, as *A Raisin in the Sun* gained popularity and secured a firm place in the canon of twentieth-century American literature, it underwent a kind of conservative drift in the popular imagination.<sup>97</sup> For the purposes of my discussion, the political declawing of Hansberry's play occurs in two key interpretive domains. First, there is considerable confusion around the Younger family's class position. While Hansberry herself grew up as a member of the Black middle class because of her father's success in the real estate industry, she describes the Younger family as working-class, which is visible through both their occupations and the overcrowded, multigenerational

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<sup>95</sup> Michelle Gordon refers to this attention to detail, asserting that Hansberry's "forthright engagement with Chicago segregation at the grass roots exposes and denaturalizes the workings of mid-century urban segregation and massive white resistance to Black self-determination" (122).

<sup>96</sup> Candice Pitts describes the African Americans pursuit of homeownership as a "search of belonging [that] was eventualized and materialized with the access to physical space and property, instantiated in the purchase of a house or brownstone, which the Younger family in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* illuminates" (166).

<sup>97</sup> This interpretive draft resembles the way in which conservatives have invented a particular, nonthreatening version of Martin Luther King Jr. and claimed him as a hero. See, for example: Christopher Rounds' "'Dead Men Make Such Convenient Heroes': The Use and Misuse of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Legacy as Political Propaganda."

living situation. Robert Nemiroff (Hansberry's husband and literary executor) addresses this issue in the introduction to the 1995 Modern Library Edition of *A Raisin in the Sun*, saying that "in many reviews (and later academic studies), the Younger family—maintained by two female domestics and a chauffeur, son of a laborer dead of a lifetime of hard labor—was transformed into an acceptably 'middle class' family. The desire to move became a desire to 'integrate'" (xix). This, Nemiroff argues, is a terrible misidentification of the Younger family that can lead to errors interpreting the play's political context. Robin Bernstein builds on this theme in his 1999 analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun*, arguing that "the erasure of Hansberry's class analysis suggests white critics' unwillingness to engage with a black writer's intellect" (19). I agree with both of these critical evaluations. When readers obscure the Younger family's class position, they lose sight of the fact that the family faces an intersectional problem in the housing market informed by both race and class.

Throughout the play, Mama maintains a fierce belief—similar to Silla's—that buying a home will solve the family's problems, from restoring Walter's "manhood" to convincing Ruth to keep her unborn child. At the end of Act II, Scene I, for instance, Mama defends her down payment on a house in Clybourne Park to Walter using the follow logic:

Mama: (*The mother and son are left alone now and the mother waits a long time, considering deeply, before she speaks*) Son—you—you understand what I done, don't you? (*WALTER is silent and sullen*) I—I just seen my family falling apart today . . . just falling to pieces in front of my eyes . . . We couldn't of

gone on like we was today. We was going backwards ‘stead of forwards—talking ‘bout killing babies and wishing each other was dead . . . When it gets like that in life—you just got to do something different, push on out and do something bigger . . .  
*(She waits)* I wish you say something, son . . . I wish you’d say how deep inside you you think I done the right thing—

Mama believes that buying a home is the best path to healing the family. The house, in Mama’s imagination, is a solid investment in the future, “something bigger” that will push them toward a happier and healthier family life, one capable of bringing life into the world and nurturing it. The house represents progress, “forward” motion, family togetherness, and virtuous living. In doing so, Mama reinforces government-sponsored values that suggest owning a home is noble, moral, and will bring out the best in people.

Hansberry is critical of Mama’s belief in the nobility of homeownership and complicates this desire by having Lena’s children, Walter and Beneatha, consider alternative approaches to improving the family’s situation. Walter, for instance, believes that a business investment will secure his family’s financial future more effectively than owning a house. Acting on this belief, Walter spends the first half of the play trying to convince his family, and especially his mother that “colored people ain’t never going to start getting ahead till they start gambling on some different kinds of things in the world” (27). Lena doesn’t accept this line of reasoning, however, because, first, they “ain’t no business people,” and, second, she doesn’t want anything to do with selling liquor, which goes against her sense of morality (27). Despite this inability to convince Mama of the value of business, Walter continues to strategize how he can make the leap from a life of

menial labor (as a chauffeur) to being his own boss (as a successful businessman). Finally, in Act II, Scene II, after Mama spends a third of her late husband's \$10,000 life insurance policy on a house, she entrusts the rest of the money to her son, although she earmarks \$3,000 of it for Beneatha's medical school training. With cash in hand, Walter rushes off to secure his liquor store investment and hands over the remaining insurance money (including Beneatha's college fund) to Willy, one of his two business partners. Unfortunately, Mama's intuition about the risk involved in this business venture proves true, albeit differently than she had imagined, which the reader discovers when Willy steals the investment money and swindles Bobo and Walter out of thousands of dollars. This development breaks Walter's spirit and bitterly confirms something that he has often suspected: that the world is all divided up "between the takers and the taken," (125). In the wake of financial ruin, he fears that he must be one of the latter.

In a moment of despair, Walter decides to accept Clybourne Park Improvement Society's proposition to purchase the Younger's recently acquired home to prevent this Black family from moving into their all-white neighborhood. While the transaction is clearly demeaning and racist, it is also a financial gain for a family that is now on the brink of destitution because of Walter's poor judgement. Walter invites Mr. Linder back to their apartment to finalize the deal. At the last moment, Walter has a change of heart and rejects the offer, deciding with a rush of racial pride and working-class dignity that nothing will stop the Youngers from occupying their new home. Scholars have

thoroughly explored the racial<sup>98</sup> and gender<sup>99</sup> dynamics of Walter's character arc. By positioning Walter as a defender of the African American right to buy, own, and occupy a home, Hansberry describes the stakes of an essential political battle emerging during this period. At the same time, while there is an undeniable sense of justice that emerges in Walter's final speech standing up against racial segregation, his shift from believing in American enterprise to defending their right to own a house does not require him to step outside the dominant postwar logic of property and possession. From this point of view, Walter's speech is more progressive or reformist than radical in nature, as he simply substitutes one version of postwar success (being one's own boss) with another: homeownership.<sup>100</sup> Neither of these economic goals fundamentally alter the relationships that designate power in postwar America, suggesting that most members of the Younger family are satisfied with seeking a better life through occupying an existing domain of power and privilege in the form of a family house.

Hansberry, however, is critical of this mode of political entitlement and fears that there are stark limits to the rights property can bestow on a race of people who had once been owned.<sup>101</sup> To this end, Hansberry uses her young Black protagonist, Beneatha, to

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<sup>98</sup> See, for example, Koritha Mitchell's "Home as Human Right and Black Power." In *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture*.

<sup>99</sup> See Anne Cheney's *Lorraine Hansberry* for additional information and historical insight into this point.

<sup>100</sup> The 1961 film adaptation gives even more power to the fantasy of the happy homeownership narrative by situating a portion of Act II, Scene III in the Clybourne Park home (a location never actually seen in the original play). When the family arrives, they are wearing their Sunday best as they excitedly hop out of a cab. The entire family swoons over the space and openness their new home provides and, despite spending a considerable amount of time in plain view, the Youngers encounter no signs of racial prejudice in this all-white neighborhood.

<sup>101</sup> In *Wayward Lives*, Hartman argues that "*To be white was to own the earth forever and ever*. It defined who they were and what they valued; it shaped their vision of the future. But black folks had been owned, and *being an object of property*, they were radically disenchanted with the idea of property. If their past

challenge and ultimately rupture the happy homeownership narrative that takes shape in the final scene of *A Raisin in the Sun*. While the rest of the family argues about what to do with the insurance money, Beneatha is preoccupied with her own desire to become a doctor. She believes that education is the path out of their current Black working-class predicament and dedicates herself to her studies. Along the way, she meets Joseph Asagai, a scholar of African history who regularly challenges Beneatha's inherited culture, critiquing her adherence to white American gender norms with regards to her hair, clothing, and dating preferences. These critiques prove productive, and Beneatha develops a more critically self-aware hybrid identity that honors her African heritage (so much so that her family teases her when she tries on a Nigerian robe in Act II Scene I). As a result, Beneatha and Asagai foreground the anxiety many Black people feel about the performance of race in the U.S. and introduce difficult questions about the aspirations and desires held by many Black working-class people, including the rest of Beneatha's family.

Hansberry develops her critique of property and possession beginning in Act III, Scene I. Here, shortly after Willy swindles Walter of the insurance money, Asagai stops by the apartment to speak with Beneatha and finds her sitting at the table "*full of the empty sound of profound disappointment*" (115). Like the rest of her family, Beneatha is mourning the loss of the money and the opportunities it represented. For her, the insurance payout was not the means to financial security, but a chance to "fix up the sick . . . and make them whole again" (117). In other words, she believes that the money could

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taught them anything, it was that the attempt to own life destroyed it, brutalized the earth, and ran roughshod over everything on God's creation for a dollar" (270-271).

help her heal the sick and fix a broken world by affording her a degree in medicine. Yet, in this time of despair, Beneatha has a crisis of character and fears for a moment that she has stopped caring about healing the sick because it “doesn’t seem deep enough, close enough to what ails mankind” (117). This crisis gives rise to a bitter critique of her family’s efforts to secure a better life through upward mobility, as she argues: “don’t you see there isn’t any real progress, Asagai, there is only one large circle that we march in, around and around, each of us with our own little picture in front of us—our own little mirage that we think is the future” (118). The liquor store is one such mirage, as is Lena’s desire to own a home, as each of these political projects represent just one “little” aspect of a much longer history of colonialism and Empire that neither entrepreneurship nor homeownership can even begin to confront. As a result, the “realist” approach to gaining political power and African independence appears to lead nowhere to Beneatha who discovers that acquiring property and possessions does more to sustain existing postwar power relations than it does to dismantle them. In other words, Lena’s desire to own property is politically powerful only as long as American society upholds the sovereignty of property rights, under which logic ownership bestows social, political, and economic power.

For Asagai, the struggle to achieve a freer and fuller life for Africans requires idealism taking precedence over the politics of realism as practiced by the Younger family. Asagai argues that in order to break free from a struggle that leads nowhere, Beneatha must reimagine her “large circle” of progress as “a long line . . . that reaches into infinity” (118). Asagai elaborates:

“because we cannot see the end—we also cannot see how it changes. And it is very odd but those who see the changes—who dream, who will not give up—are called idealists . . . and those who see only the circle we call *them* the ‘realists!’” (118)

Here, Asagai asserts that it is not the futility of African progress that frightens Beneatha, but its expansiveness. The struggle for independence is so long that one “cannot see the end” or “how it changes.” This is a terrifying prospect, especially for a family who just lost what they had seen as a viable solution to their problems. The challenge of Asagai’s politics of idealism lies in its scope. To imagine the struggle for justice as “infinite” is as demoralizing as it is inspiring, since it entails perpetual conflict alongside endless possibilities. When faced with such a challenge, it is no wonder that Walter and Lena Younger find comfort in the pursuit of realist political goals, even if they ultimately prove to be a mirage.

Many readers of *A Raisin in the Sun*’s mistakenly view the ending as a happy one, full of hope as the Youngers move into their new home. This conservative understanding of the play renders Hansberry’s radical politics invisible. Nemiroff chronicles this development:

And perhaps most ironical of all to the playwright, who had herself as a child been almost killed in such a real-life story, the climax of the play became, pure and simple, a “happy ending”—despite the fact that it leaves the Youngers on the brink of what will surely be, in their new home, at best a nightmare of uncertainty. (xx-xxi)

It is almost impossible to overestimate the violence African Americans who attempted to buy a house had experienced in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, as Nemiroff explains, it would be a mistake to overlook Hansberry's emphasis on white terrorism in favor of a reading that supports a straightforward narrative of racial progress. The play opens with a scene in which Walter and his wife Ruth read a *Chicago Tribune* article reporting on "another bomb" recently being set off to deter African Americans from moving into an all-white neighborhood (10). When Nemiroff mentions how his wife was "almost killed in such a real-life story," he refers to Hansberry's own experiences with situations similar to that described in the opening scene. The Hansberry family engaged in a three-year legal battle to occupy a house they bought in an all-white neighborhood when Lorraine was just eight years old. While the Illinois State Supreme Court eventually ruled in the Hansberry's' favor in 1940, the real-life story is not "happy" one. In a letter written to the editor of *The New York Times*, dated April 23, 1964, Lorraine Hansberry describes the emotional trauma of this housing battle and what it felt like to be a Black child living "in a hellishly hostile 'white' neighborhood" (Nemiroff 20). In the letter, she recalled how "howling mobs surrounded our house," throwing bricks and curses at the family as her mother spent many sleepless nights "patrolling our house . . . with a loaded German luger, doggedly guarding her four children" (20-21). Hansberry attributed her father's early death to the emotional turmoil of these painful years and bitterly concluded the

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<sup>102</sup> In *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis*, Bennett and Schaefer describe the violence in Chicago's housing market as follows: "Bombings were the penalty levied on black families who slipped through the restrictive covenant barriers erected to deter them from buying homes in white areas. By 1930, 75 percent of Chicago's residential property was in areas of restrictive covenants where white owners agreed not to sell or rent to blacks," which remained legal until the *Shelley v. Kramer* U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1948 (83).

letter declaring that, after all their struggle, “the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever” (21).

To prevent egregious misreadings of the play’s ending that celebrate the family’s triumph, Nemiroff suggests that readers take this historical violence into account when reading *A Raisin in the Sun*. Yet, many readers—including several white reviewers immediately following the play’s Broadway debut in 1959—have insisted that Walter’s final encounter with Mr. Linder signifies an unambiguous victory for the Youngers earned through property and possession.<sup>103</sup> To hold this perspective, however, readers must overlook how Mr. Linder gets the last word on the matter:

LINDER (folding up his materials) Well—if you are that final about it

. . . there is nothing left for me to say. (*He finishes, almost ignored by the family, who are concentrating on WALTER LEE. At the door*

LINDER *halts and looks around*) I sure hope you people know what you’re getting into.

(*He shakes his head and exits*)

The threat of violence in this act is thinly veiled. The only thing Mr. Linder gives up here is his original plan to deal with the Younger family through a verbal appeal to “reason” and financial incentives. While “there is nothing left” for Mr. Linder “to say,” there is plenty more he and the Clybourne Park Improvement Society are willing to *do*. Then, as if this point isn’t clear enough in his first warning, he pauses to warn them a second time, in no uncertain terms, that they better “know what [they’re] getting into,” further evoking

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<sup>103</sup> Judith Smith explains that: “mainstream white audiences understood the play as a celebration of the family’s triumphant achievement of upward mobility, masculine authority, and postwar affluence” (283).

the specter of violence with the intention to intimidate the Youngers into relinquishing their legal claim to the house. Drawing attention to this tone, Charles Washington explains that the decision to move into the house "does not resolve the family's economic plight," and argues that "Walter and his family are as poor and powerless as they were before" (Washington 121-3). By including the specter of violence and doubt in this final scene, Hansberry questions the working-class desire for property. Between the failure of Walter's business investment and the threat of violence associated with occupying their new house, Hansberry demonstrates that the economic and political potential of "*le petit bourgeois noir*" is far less secure than imagined, rooted as it is to the postwar logic of earning social and political power through possession. Indeed, Walter and Lena's normative postwar approach to obtaining power and autonomy cannot not fundamentally challenge existing power relationships because it depends on them, sustaining the sovereign domain of property rights for their benefit.

Hansberry does not conclude the play on this note of critique, however. Instead, she ends with Beneatha's surprise declaration that she has decided to travel to Africa to become a doctor. In this act of rebellion, disruption, and escape, Hansberry gestures toward a mode of living that operates outside the postwar logic the property and possession practiced by the rest of her family. Even though Walter, Ruth, and Lena attempt to dissuade Beneatha of this decision, she remains determined to follow through with her plan. In doing so, Beneatha transforms into what Asagai calls "Alaiyo," or "One for Whom Bread . . . Is Not Enough" (49). Beneatha's idealistic pursuit of becoming a doctor and travelling to Africa places her at odds with the family's realist political

priorities.<sup>104</sup> In doing so, Beneatha distances herself from her family's adherence to "race progress through free enterprise and democratic inclusion," just as Lorraine Hansberry distanced herself from similar political assumptions in her own life (Smith 285). As a result, *A Raisin in the Sun* draws attention to the conservative edge of a political project dependent on the power of property and possession.<sup>105</sup> Beneatha desires an escape from this dominant power dynamic and challenges the aspirational priorities of *le petit bourgeois noir* with a political project of her own, rooted in a desire to live a free and autonomous life. Like Selina, Beneatha engages in what Hartman would call a "beautiful experiment . . . to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting them (xiii). While the path before her remains uncertain, Beneatha's wayward journey holds the capacity to shake the existing domains of power to their core by denying the foundational logic that property and possession are essential components of postwar political, social, and economic power.

## Conclusion

The desire to own comes at a steep cost for the families in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. In both narratives, the families achieve

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<sup>104</sup> Judith Smith explains that, when Hansberry left for college in 1948, she questioned her family's assumption that "race progress" depended on respectability and class mobility and helped turn her perceptions of painful class difference into an appreciation of working-class racial resistance (290).

<sup>105</sup> In "The Conservative Politics of Homeownership" (2007), Rick Perlstein argues that "a social democracy that depended on homeownership was always a social democracy poised to swallow itself. And the right-wing attempt to sustain and expand the conservative empire of homeowners through a fever of deregulated financial speculation became one more data point for an ideological tendency that, just as it did in Iraq, has counted on buying just one more lottery ticket, presuming the payoff that would finally cover all the previous bad bets" (64).

homeownership only after the death of Black men (Deighton<sup>106</sup> and Big Walter<sup>107</sup>). As postwar capitalism developed labor structures that were increasingly flexible, mobile, and precarious, Marshall and Hansberry discovered that the power of property and possession could act as an impediment to achieving a freer and fuller life rather than a strategy for securing it. They demonstrate the hollowness of the state-sponsored happy homeownership narrative for Black Americans and describe the postwar desire to own in terms of what Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor calls “predatory inclusion” in which a growing segment of the population gains access to the housing market but “on more expensive and comparatively unequal terms” (Taylor 5).<sup>108</sup> As my discussion of housing policies in this chapter suggests, Black homeownership was as likely to extract Black wealth as create it during the postwar era. Taylor’s work shows how that remains true for many low-income and minority homebuyers today. Selina and Beneatha recognize the limits of property and seek an alternative to the desire to own in the final pages of these two mid-century narratives. In doing so, the two young Black rebels replace the common working-class desire for economic security through property and possession with a desire for mobility

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<sup>106</sup> See Candice Pitts’ “‘You Ain No Real-Real Bajan Man’: ‘Brown Girl, Brownstones’, and the Measure of Caribbean Manhood in the North American Terrain.” for a discussion of what Deighton’s death signifies regarding “the state of Black men on American soil.”

<sup>107</sup> See Koritha Mitchell’s *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture* for a discussion of Big Walter’s “legacy of working himself to death.”

<sup>108</sup> Taylor argues that “the regular promotion of homeownership as a means to overcome poverty or as a method of building wealth in our society has been built on a mistaken assumption that all people enter the housing market on an equal basis or that the housing market itself is a neutral arbiter of value. The promotion of homeownership by the state is not only an acceptance of these market dynamics; it is also an abdication of responsibility for the equitable provision of resources that attend to the racial deficit created by the inequality embedded in homeownership. This may seem like a political impossibility in an ongoing atmosphere where public services and institutions are undermined, but it is no more impossible than the magical belief that homeownership will ever be a cornerstone of political, social, and economic freedom for African Americans” (261).

and self-determination unbounded by these dominant postwar values. They want to be free to travel the long line that reaches to infinity, even if that means disinherit the political gains of an older generation. This is not to say that the goals of homeownership are inherently flawed. The impulses behind these acts of ownership—a desire to ensure economic security, autonomy, and freedom—are essential aims for working-class Americans living in a capitalist society. At the same time, these two narratives demonstrate the importance of political projects that imagine radical alternatives, as well, as it is these projects that stand a chance of destabilizing the sovereign power of property and possession and reimagine what is possible.<sup>109</sup>

Hartman describes the resistant activity of young Black women in open rebellion as the work of the “chorus” because these women are able to “dance within an enclosure” without the need to take center stage (347). She goes on to explain this concept in further detail:

What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming

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<sup>109</sup> The desire for transnational mobility, for example, suggests that the U.S. is too small a frame for global, postwar power-relations.

nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise. (347-348)

I argue that Selina and Beneatha model this kind of strategic political rebellion with their distinct ability to seize opportunities that contain a possibility of a freer and fuller life.

The endings of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *A Raisin in the Sun* gesture toward another kind of story in which young Black women invent new ways to escape the circumstance of their birth. In leaving the fragile promises of property and possession behind in search of something not yet fully realized or articulated, Selina and Beneatha pursue the dreams of the otherwise, and—in doing so—catch “a glimpse of the earth not owned by anyone” (349).<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Hartman draws on the theory of “the multitude” in her representation of the chorus. As a result, these acts of improvisation and rebellion that conclude these two narrative can also be understood in relation to Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization, in which “The autonomy of the multitude and its capacities for economic, political, and social self-organization take away any role for sovereignty” (*Multitude* 340).

## **Conclusion: To Tipton Place, by Any Means Necessary**

In the mid-century literary works discussed in this dissertation, working-class characters yearn for a place where they can be free. For Gertie Nevels in *The Dollmaker*, this place is real and specific: an idyllic farmstead in Kentucky called Tipton Place. This, Gertie believes, is a “safe and sheltered place” where she could be “all her own” (72). The land at Tipton Place is lush, fertile, and productive. The hillside naturally keeps milk cool in the summer and prevents the fall harvest from freezing in winter. Life, land, and labor operate in unison to ensure that those living on it are free and beholden to no one save themselves. Tipton Place embodies working-class autonomy and freedom in its most concrete and material form. While Arnow situates the possibility for a freer future on a pre-industrial homestead, each author in my dissertation represents the idea of working-class people striving to secure a place that makes their yearning for freedom a reality in his or her own way. In chapter one, I trace this desire through the Great Depression, as the promise of New Deal introduced new threats to working-class autonomy. In chapter two, I follow this working-class desire into World War II and the postwar era where I examine the socioeconomic forces that pressured working-class people to give up one way of life for another, often through a combination of financial incentives and a dark undercurrent of disciplinary regulation. In chapter three, I extend this study into the 1950s, a time when more working-class families than ever before could purchase a home. Yet, even amidst this prosperity, working-class people discovered new constraints on their freedom, as the modern welfare state partnered with private industry to create a society structured around the values of property and possession.

Despite these numerous threats to freedom and autonomy, I have argued throughout this project that working-class people have never stopped seeking a freer and fuller life, even when facing immense social, political, and economic pressure to do so. This impulse to find, make, invent, buy, or secure freedom animates this dissertation and remains a vital part of working-class culture to this day. I know this because, as I completed my dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the same old scripts that have been used to coerce, control, and shape working-class behavior since the 1930s reappeared with renewed vigor in the context of a global health crisis. Over the past year and a half, the government's many promises to protect the most heavily impacted communities from the medical and financial problems stemming from the spread of Coronavirus once again proved to be more than it could achieve, leaving vulnerable populations unprotected and mistrustful of government interventions. Workers whose jobs required physical labor underwent a particularly stark disillusionment, as industry leaders and government officials worked together to rebrand retail employees, warehouse workers, and service sector laborers as "essential," without providing any additional protection. While this social recognition is long overdue, this rebranding of service workers mainly functioned to encourage underpaid, overworked, and precarious workers to hold the line despite the increased risk to their wellbeing and the inadequate reward for their labor.

In light of the pandemic's shifting labor relations, the working-class spirit of resistance, rebellion, and escape explored in this dissertation continues to flourish and evolve in relation to our current socioeconomic situation. As I wrote these pages, I

watched the r/antiwork subreddit<sup>111</sup> community grow from just under 100,000 subscribers in March 2020 to well over 800,000 as of October 2021, making it one of the fastest growing digital communities on this social platform. With over 1,000 posts per day, this public forum is now one of the most active communities on the Internet where “those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, [and] want to get the most out of a work-free life” offer their advice on a variety of worker-related struggles. Many of these posts feel painfully familiar after writing this dissertation, especially when their demands for financial security, healthcare coverage, and basic sustenance conflict with a deeper desire to live a free and autonomous life. However, what excites me most about this community is that their experiences of being trapped, exploited, and pressured to conform to unfulfilling modes of life and labor very rarely result in resignation or defeat, as was too often the case in *On the Line*. Instead, this community is home to a new generation of working-class rebels, resisters, and escape artists inventing new ways to leave that world behind in an effort to seek out bold, experimental solutions to their circumstances. Many r/antiwork stories are written from the moment of rupture, describing the last painful encounter with a boss before walking out on a job. These experiences share the narrative structure of texts like *The Girl*, *The Dollmaker*, *Brown Girl*, *Brownstone*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*, where the coercive pressure of working-class life leads to a political awakening and a growing determination to take the first fertile steps of a wayward journey into the unknown. Where they go from there is as varied and emergent as the community itself, but the whispers of possibility can be heard all around us.

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<sup>111</sup> A subreddit is a specific online community on the social media website Reddit. Subreddits are dedicated to a particular topic that people write and discuss in the associated forums.

I sense the spirit of Tipton Place living on in the LeanFIRE<sup>112</sup> and VanLife<sup>113</sup> movements. Here, those who have felt the failures of consumerism and homeownership first hand are carving out alternate modes of life and labor, and then sharing strategies to escape the toxic effects of contemporary working-class life with others who are searching for a way out. The LeanFIRE community, for instance, is filled with folks devising new ways to hack capitalism, exploiting the exploiters by extracting considerable wealth from the system without a desire to participate in the consumer lifestyle that would bind them to work for life. Instead, like Gertie, they use their earnings to buy their way out of a life of meaningless labor well before the government-sanctioned age of retirement, which is currently set at 66. Life is too precious to sacrifice to unfulfilling work and consumption, and the working class knows this all too well. Van dwelling, recently popularized by the award-winning film *Nomadland* (2020), offers another radical solution to the problems associated with stationary housing. Like the impulse I examined in Beneatha and Selina, van dwellers choose a form of autonomy rooted in mobility rather than seeking it in the conventional, yet fragile stability provided by property.

I even see bold new experiments in working-class autonomy emerging from the rapidly expanding U.S. warehouse industry, a sector of the economy well-recognized for its harsh working conditions and labor exploitation. Living in a region of Pennsylvania capitalizing on this labor trend, I have met many warehouse workers over the past few

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<sup>112</sup> An approach to the problem of financial independence from a minimalist, frugal, or anti-consumerist trajectory.

<sup>113</sup> A lifestyle of living in a vehicle full or part-time, often with the aim of seeking a fuller experience of freedom, self-sufficiency, and mobility without paying for conventional stationary housing. Others engage in van dwelling by necessity and may be just one step from living on the street or in a shelter.

years. Many of them, unsurprisingly, express concern over the unsafe and unfair practices commonly described by the many liberal-leaning media outlets covering the topic. At the same time, I am shocked by how frequently I meet warehouse workers who view their well-paid but precarious jobs as a means of achieving a kind of nomadic freedom, staying with a position just long enough to collect the sign-on bonus and then moving to another region they are interested in exploring. With nearly no barriers to entry and a network of warehouses popping up across the country, there is an opportunity for clever working-class emergent strategists to take advantage of a situation designed to exploit them and embody the same sort of resistance Selina practices by dancing aboard a cruise ship.

Make no mistake: the rebellions and escapes I describe in this epilogue are marked by a heightened level of precarity and are, in many cases, risky endeavors to undertake. I admire the creative energy and emergent possibilities contained in these gestures toward another way of being, but I also fear for the loss of income, the lack of healthcare, and the uncertainty that these alternate modes of life require. In many cases, these attempts to escape fall into the same trap I explore in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where working people too frustrated and mistrusting of the government strike out on their own, reinforcing their commitment to a form of self-reliance and independence in a way that is ultimately counterproductive. After all, these alternate modes of life do not need to be so risky. With appropriate, expansive, and well-legislated welfare policies in place, these alternate modes of life and labor could be easily protected. Nobody should have to make the impossible decision between having access to healthcare and housing or the right to live a life free from exploitation. Yet so many workers today find themselves in precisely this predicament. Authors like Marshall and Hansberry sidestep the precarity associated

with their characters' bold and experimental wayward journeys by placing these moments of possibility at the end of the story. We do not know what will happen to Selina once she reaches Barbados or to Beneatha once she reaches Nigeria, just as we do not know what will happen to the temporarily autonomous warehouse worker when the jobs dry up and she has no savings or safety net to fall back on, or to the vandweller when he is arrested for trespassing, loitering, or some other crime targeting nonnormative modes of living.

Not all of these escape attempts will succeed. The activist and emergent strategist adrienne marie brown writes that “nothing is wasted, or a failure. Emergence is a system that makes use of everything in the iterative process. It’s all data” (14). This is especially valuable in relation to the working-class resistance and rebellion I describe here and have explored throughout my dissertation. Emergence explains how the frequently divergent and seemingly disconnected rebellious actions of the many individuals pushed too far are actually part of a much more complex pattern of behavior. The crises we face today are massive, and we appear so small by comparison. But, as adrienne marie brown explains:

Emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (3)

And so we go on experimenting, searching, and emerging because—as capitalists today are so fond of asserting—there is no alternative. The liberated worlds we long for are already here in the hearts and minds of the working class, just where they have always been. Gertie recognizes this in the final lines of *The Dollmaker* as she discovers with a

mixture of “wonder” and “pain” that ““they’s millions an millions a faces plenty fine enough”” to serve as the inspiration for her lifework (571). I see that capacity again today in the actions of many, often anonymous, working people struggling to attain a more free and autonomous life in countless ways, both large and small. New patterns are emerging, connections are forming, and change is occurring everywhere we look.

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## Vita

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As a dedicated public humanities scholar, Adam frequently works in the community, facilitating discussions about economic justice. He is a proud father of a curious child and a mischievous cat.

### EDUCATION

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Dissertation: Working-Class Literature and the Promise of Affluence in Postwar America

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Thesis: Radical Subjects and the Culture of Late Capitalism in Popular American Science Fiction

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#### **A.A.S., Advertising & Design, St. Cloud Technical and Community College, 2008**

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### GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND AWARDS

Digel/Jones Memorial Award for Graduate Student Writing at the Ph.D. level	Spring 2021
Dissertation Fellowship, Lehigh University	Spring 2021
Data for Impact Summer Fellowship	Summer 2020
Mountaintop Project Grant, Lehigh University	Summer 2018-2019
SWPACA Science Fiction & Fantasy Graduate Student Paper Award	Spring 2018
English Department Teaching Fellowship, Lehigh University	2008-2012