

# In/visible Men: Hurston, “Sweat” and Laundry Icons

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Man, don't hang out that  
dirty washing in my back yard.

The tale of Delia the washwoman is one of Zora Neale Hurston's best known. It's also been judged “by far the best of [her] early writings” and “arguably [her] finest short story.” As a result, “Sweat” (1926) has incited wide-ranging discussion. Not fully appreciated, though, is how teasingly it dances at the dizzy edge of dangerous wit. So dizzy is that edge that critics are still falling into a trap set by the laughing-up-her-sleeve satirist who remains half-known, only, to the academy. That was the risk run by an artist whose aesthetic merged anti-racist initiatives with ironization of figurations circulated so energetically, over so many years, that they signified as icons. With the passage of time, those icons' disappearance has left even labor-alert readers likely to miss trenchant play in “Sweat.” I spotlight that play by tackling the misapprehension that the laundry Delia whitens laboriously symbolizes her “innate goodness.”<sup>21</sup> That interpretation is short-sighted for two reasons. One, *white laundry* puns on the means by which she bought and keeps the house in which she invests so much (too much?) love. Two, goodness doesn't mesh with her decision to say nothing when her unloved husband Sykes intrudes on a rattlesnake. The morality play enacted by her silence is honored by realization that “Sweat” blurs folkloric narrative methods

into allegory.<sup>2</sup> That's a vital insight. Vital too, though, are selections of the same narratology in representations of washwomen penned by Langston Hughes and Carter G. Woodson. Explaining shared topic, and tactics, is the prevalence in their day of laundry icons.

Visuals aren't common in Hurston scholarship. Nor are Hurston, Hughes and Woodson usually studied in converse with each other. True, the Hurston recognized as a race-alert feminist is often allied with the "Negro Poet Laureate." That makes sense, since she and Hughes were good friends. Both, moreover, spent time on the payroll of the journal Woodson edited. His efforts aren't often studied in conjunction with those of the younger writers because he was less radical on a left-right axis. Woodson was in several respects a populist, nonetheless; that, indeed, is why he worked hard to establish Black History Month. As a populist, Woodson had cause to keep a close eye on Hurston and Hughes as they found ways to draw readerships, sell politicized interventions, and explore new genres and subjects. Judging by Woodson's *oeuvre*, I would not expect him to have noticed, as Deborah Clarke did in 2001, that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1935), Hurston "examines the process of learning to see and be seen." Hughes could have noticed this, though, or realized what Hurston would reveal in her autobiography: "I am so visual minded," she attested in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), "that all the other senses induce pictures in me."<sup>3</sup> This essay tracks a visual genealogy—a heritage of icons—repudiated by plot and character decisions in "Sweat." I look more briefly at how Hughes and Woodson contributed to that genealogy to sketch a reception history which, for all its sketchiness, indicates what Hurston risked with high-wire wit.

My interest in reception was sparked by Vivyan Campbell Adair's observation that the story of a hymn-singer and her wastrel husband "alienated readers" who felt affronted by how that tale "threatened traditional literary and social conventions." But I learned, also, from Warren J. Carson's explanation of that reaction. "Many were put off by [Hurston's] portrayals of characters and situations they had just as soon forget," he explained in 2007, "in a time when they were trying to be recognized for their *American-ness* instead of their *blackness*." Carson's specification of Richard Wright and Alain Locke, in this context, suggests an elite attitude rather than a general consensus. When, however, we ask what Hurston intended, "Sweat"'s debut in the radical forum *FIRE!!* implies the purposefulness of any alienation experienced by conventional readers. Why would she want to alienate? Her visual gifts point up the salience of Paul Gilroy's charge that well-intentioned emphasis on a "relatively narrow understanding of freedom centered on political rights" has pulled attention from "vast areas of thinking about freedom and the desire to be seen as free."<sup>4</sup> To historicize *our* seeing, I make laundry icons part of informed understanding of "Sweat." This intervention urges readers to re-recognize a great satirist and feminist as a *dangerous* wit. Its motive force is imagery that once circulated widely in U.S. culture, courtesy of Whites with for-profit intent.



**Figure 1:** A woman toting laundry near Mebane, North Carolina in the 1940s. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, U.S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, [reproduction number, LC-USF33-030739-M3].

To recover as indicated, we need to know that from as early as the 1840s, African American washerwomen were lauded for shouldering cheerfully community-building responsibilities. Steady earnings made this possible. But so did a privilege afforded by the cottage industry conditions of manual scrubbing for pay: at-home laundry businesses helped tens of thousands of African American women earn wages outside Whites' supervision. This escape from live-in service, or work in distant fields, came at a high price insofar as words can't express the hot, dirty, grueling, damp and unending rigors of manual clothes-washing. Many Americans found opportunity nonetheless in this line of work.<sup>5</sup> A large number were African Americans, especially in the former slave states. A photo from the 1940s, in which a washwoman in North Carolina totes laundry, emblemizes the many Black women who washed others' clothes and linens to earn money in a way that felt freer. This photo offers a glimpse at how quotidian it once was to see laundry being transferred between poor and privileged neighborhoods. But it reveals only part of this woman's life, where she was most visible to Whites. In this respect, a photo that seems a reliable slice of reality tends to *hypervisibilize*. Wahneema Lubiano has explained hypervisibility as "the very publicness of black people as a social fact." This is helpful. But to see more in "Sweat," I submit that washerwomen's hypervisibility could (and can) *in/visibilize* men's laundry labor. I can't say whether the pictured toter had help of the kind recorded in the lament of a post-Emancipation southern White who was forced to wash her own clothes

because “John, Sarah and Rose have left.”<sup>6</sup> But I can classify this photo as an image that publicizes one aspect of truth while occluding others. To drive home that fracture, I speak of in/visibilization to mark showing that impedes vision, displaying that obscures.

This could take us to Ralph Ellison’s great novel of 1952. The “invisibility to which I refer,” explains the Invisible Man, “occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact.” Hurston would have agreed. Yet by *teasing* eye dispositions that made Black men invisible, she let readers mistake Sykes for a characterization “too close to stereotypical conceptions of black men as violent and/or lazy.” This reaction undervalues Hurston’s creativity. But detractors aren’t wrong to worry about how “Sweat” may be received; that’s why I call its wit dangerous. Amping up the danger is how little print history does to clear up confusion. To the contrary, if women like Delia “could increase their earnings by . . . seeking help from family members,” that makes Sykes the greater villain. Readers attentive to this will not miss Tera W. Hunter’s claim, in an excellent history of freedwomen’s labor, that: “Male relatives sometimes picked up dirty clothes in wheelbarrows or wagons.” If, however, this claim is thought to bespeak boys’ work, only, manhood is specified when “*To Joy My Freedom*” (1997) supplies evidence of a “cook & washer” so valued that she was able to negotiate a work contract that included her husband, “a general laborer.”<sup>7</sup> This archival gleaning measures spousal loyalty. Surely too though it confirms and, indeed, honors a man’s capacity to lighten a washwoman’s load. I am not forgetting the evidence that laundry was considered women’s work.<sup>8</sup> Yet with an eye to honor, historians won’t take for granted the heavy jobs of water-hauling, and wood-chopping and -stacking, mandated by laundry labor and, often, allotted Black men. If we have made that mistake, the importance of correcting it starts with this query: with for-pay laundry being one of the most degraded forms of manual labor, **and** highly feminized, **and** easily linked to racist figurations of “mammy,” whose interests were served by insisting Black men helped get others’ clothes clean?<sup>9</sup>

This introduction prepares us to think anew about fiction in which a washwoman is heavily burdened not only by her job, but also by a wastrel husband. “Sweat” is plain-spoken about Sykes’ irresponsibility. The question is, what can Delia do about it? Once the marriage sours, she sheds “habitual meekness” to confront him and, for a while, he is cowed by her righteous rage. But as she carries on her laundry business and church activities, he returns to the arms of the mistress whose curves excite him more than his wife’s spare strength. Townspeople disparage Sykes and mock big Bertha’s allure. Yet they judge Delia a good woman. Their judgment is cast in doubt when she stops hymn-singing to let Sykes intrude on a venomous snake. I agree with Cheryl A. Wall that, in committing this act of murder-by-omission, a seemingly good Christian “risk[s] her soul’s salvation.” Canted askew, though, is commentary that focuses on wife-battering or, worse, vaunts Delia as a proto-feminist. Exemplifying skew is the essay that shows how *Dust Tracks* links “Christianity not with overbear-

ing men but with weak women, or, more precisely, ‘girls’ who have no meat on their bones.”<sup>10</sup> That’s a good discovery. But Peter Kerry Powers didn’t extend it to hymn-singing skinny Delia. Fair to infer is that even this sharp-eyed critic was fooled by in/visibilization that makes it hard for African Americans in general, and washwomen’s husbands in particular, to be **seen as** free. Missed, as a consequence, is what may be a dig at any who define themselves as believers in the evidence of things unseen.

I’m not the first to say “Sweat” has been under-read. But the most insistent claim of this kind is the essay of 1991 that calls Sykes a cadger. I appreciate Kathryn Lee Seidel’s recognition that “Sweat” reflects high rates of Black male unemployment that pressured poor Black men’s self-belief—summatively, their manhood. Assumptive, though, is her certainty that Delia supports Sykes.<sup>11</sup> No question that he is a bad husband; clear-cut, too, is Hurston’s hope that readers will give his badness full weight. Consider, in this light, the significance of naming him after the Dickens villain who dies horribly after brutalizing a poor woman with a good heart. Hasty for all that is inferring that Delia is good because her husband is brutal; consider, in *this* light, that the victim of Dickens’s Sykes is not morally pure, even if social inequity did limit her options. This name choice stands on its own. But if we consider it, when comparing “Sweat” to a Hughes poem of a year earlier, it’s hard to miss that “Song to a Negro Wash-woman” hails a good and pious woman rather than one whose moral choices have been queried, subtly. As it happens, 1925 also found Oscar Micheaux asking questions about a washwoman too quick to think well of her handsome minister. Closer though to Delia, than the washwoman in *Body and Soul*, is the scrubber in a Carl Sandburg poem of 1918: “Rubbing underwear,” he sniped, she “sings of the Last Great Washday.”<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Sandburg didn’t race his singing washwoman suggests to me that attention to laundry images helps historians respond to Najia Aarim-Heriot’s call to “knit[] the fragmentary history of race relations in America” into something closer to complex realities. A full history would spend time with the uncounted hundreds of thousands of Americans who sent out laundry between the dawn of the republic and ca. 1950. But looking, now, at workers who took *in* laundry, they were of every race and ethnicity. They were also men, women and children of both sexes. In the historiography of for-pay laundry, Woodson was the first to discuss Black men’s contributions, whereas Tera Hunter was the second. Most recently, this topic intrigued Arwen Palmer Mohun. *Steam Laundries* (1999) alerted me to the wealth of laundry visuals that can be culled from the archives. Valuable in another way is the article in which Joan S. Wang tracked the race-ing of masculinity in industrial U.S. laundries in the early twentieth century. Her research sheds light on the laundry business established at the end of Maxine Clair’s fine novel, *Rattlebone* (1995). But Mohun’s findings more directly inform comparison of “Sweat” due to her discovery that early twentieth-century observers linked laundry labor to “women with bum husbands, sick, drunk, or

lazy.”<sup>13</sup> In “Sweat,” Hurston *satirized* that stereotype. Yet it lingers in criticism that heroizes Delia.

Make no mistake: before home washers and dryers became reliable, all laundry labor, manual **or** industrial, was so arduous and degraded that this job was indeed a last resort for many. Yet within that broad truth, Hunter has demonstrated that for some, laundry was the employment of choice, childcare being a major reason. The disposition of certain eyes helped occlude this preference. But that’s cause **not** to paste middle-class observers’ pity onto iconoclasm by a daring wit. It may certainly seem, then, that Sykes is a bum husband when he insults Delia’s work-worn frame: “Gawd!” he scathes, “how Ah hates skinny wimmen!”<sup>14</sup> But for a visual-minded satirist, this insult would have reflected the concerted effort made to defame Black men who loaf or preen while deep-bosomed Black women scrub, pin up, take down, fold and tote. Ignorance of figuration like this has blinded some to the **pictorial** ways in which “Sweat” flouted convention.<sup>15</sup> This has made it hard to relish satire that danced at the dizzying edge of dangerous wit.

We turn, with these thoughts as a guide, to the genealogy of laundry icons. If the thrust of my research was U.S. men in for-pay laundry, I could start with the illustration in the “Book of Trades” (1806) that portrayed White males operating an early form of clothes-washing machinery. If instead the focus were African American adults, I could look to a joke from the 1820s about a Black coat-thief who is mistaken for a coat-cleaner, or an 1846 vignette about a poor-but-happy Black washwoman.<sup>16</sup> The issue here being, however, in/visibilist conjugalities, we start with a Civil War-era envelope that shows a woman bending over a tub while a man lounges. Pompey’s exchange with Dinah twits slaveholders. But this amicable image makes it possible to infer he is taking a break after hauling water, or chopping wood, needed for her chore.<sup>17</sup> The more manifest visual, the plumpness of Dinah, could seem unimportant. Yet all who know that Sykes justifies his extra-marital spending by his revulsion toward Delia’s thinness, will heed this evidence that laundry was associated with “unfeminine” muscle mass. Insofar as plumpness also bespoke a steady diet that implied steady earnings, it’s not incidental that ne’er-do-well men were accused of favoring clothes-washing women they perceived as meal tickets.<sup>18</sup> That accusation can be laid against Sykes. Understood, though, as an index of toil not earnings, pictured washwomen’s plumpness bespeaks mystification of gruelling labor. Well into the twentieth century (i.e., after the invention of detergent made it easier to push soapy water through cloth) washing women of every race were figured as large-bodied. Instructive, though, is contrasting a stereopticon slide from the 1870s that features a brawny Black washwoman, of hostile *or/and* baffled mien, with a lithograph of 1869 in which slender White women iron with sweet, absorbed faces. Their relatively mechanized task informs this distinction. But because it was no light task to lug 8- and 12-pound flatirons from heat-source to ironing board and back, through long working days, the lithograph’s irreality speaks volumes.<sup>19</sup>

Washwomen plump to the point of obesity remained iconic in popular prints for generations; so much so, that this “disposition of the eyes” would cause problems when reformers agitated to shorten industrial clothes-washers’ working day. Mohun tells this story in *Steam Laundries*. But she says little of the worker whose spindliness made up another part of popular impressions of for-pay laundry. In 1877, a popular illustrated paper showed how images of Chinese laundrymen could linger over hollow chests and wizened necks, slight builds and long-braided queues. Dramatizing the issue was a farce of 1879 that targeted working-class New York audiences. Not only, scorns the Irish woman, is her interlocutor “a nagur, you eat your dinner with drum sticks,” and “a monkey, you have a tail growing out of your head.” Most scorn-inducing is that her would-be seducer is “not half a man.”<sup>20</sup> It had long been said that “Chinese John” was effeminate because he was willing to wash other people’s clothes: “All Chinamen,” explained a wit of 1857, “are either carpenters, cooks, washerwomen or gamblers.”<sup>21</sup> Amplified, though, in the Gilded Age farce, is the charge that effeminacy makes and keeps Chinese men un-American: “The likes of ye coming to a free country and walking around in petticoats and calling yourself a man.” Visualizing this slur with color impact, an advertisement for a “Magic Washer” showed Uncle Sam banishing one of the “pigtails rats” rendered obsolete by technology. This ad of the late 1880s doesn’t say whether “rats” were found inadequate in comparison to American men, the U.S. government, White America or some amalgam of race and the machine age.<sup>22</sup> Pinpointed by it, though, for analysts sensitive to gender, race and their intersections, is how unlikely African Americans were to be banished from the United States as long as they could be forced to undertake a messy, irksome, exhausting and never-ending chore.

Prioritizing gender in a way that may encrypt race is a song that dismissed male scrubbers as clumsy: “Love is a laundryman;/Hearts, the poor things,/ Sometimes he scorches, and sometimes he wrings.”<sup>23</sup> Favorable, though, to male launderers is a picture captioned “war of races.” In this picture, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine* ranked African American washwomen below Chinese laundrymen by emphasizing the latter’s calm faces and sturdy postures. Telling, too, are indicia of the Chinese men’s literacy, their shop’s tidiness and its name: “Hap Lee.” White supremacist humor can be imputed to the decision to bless the Chinese men’s dominion with a heavenly beam that casts a glow on the rumpled stack they will clean and smooth. Significant, too, is how that beam lightens the faces of the upright, muscled men who are interrupted in their work by a squat Black washwoman threatening violence. An empty hamper explains her clenched fist—and wrath.<sup>24</sup> But it suggests, too, that *Frank Leslie’s* sided with the “Hap Lee” laundry rather than with U.S.-born “Amazons” imaged as brutishly low. If the New York farce of 1879 is compared to the *Frank Leslie’s* illustration of four years earlier, iconographic analysts will see how both repudiate intercourse between Asian laundrymen and not-Asian washwomen by imputing rivalry.<sup>25</sup> Rivalry was pictured again in 1881 in *Harper’s Weekly*. But this time, a snout-faced Irishman is shown clouting a spineless Chinese man in front of

the storefront of “Ching Hi Washerman.”<sup>26</sup> This clout implied that however able and willing an Irish washwoman might be to protect her job, “Mick” would be glad to take up cudgels on her behalf. In contrast, *Frank Leslie’s* showed a Black washwoman fending for herself, leaving unclear whether that is by preference or for want of a male protector. If asked to account for this, artists of the 1870s could have pointed to “uppish” ex-slaves, where artists of the 1880s adduced labor strikes led by freed washwomen. As historians, we must reckon also how these images proliferated as laundry industrialized. Backdropping them was the blur of for-pay and for-kin laundry in salon art that made linen-hanging lovely when the hang-ers were balletic White belles.<sup>27</sup>

Truer, in their way, to the realities of a very tough job were sentimental tales in which manly heroes help washwomen cross busy streets or lift weighty hampers. As prevalent, though, were ads for laundry products that caroled the pleasures of easing a tiresome, grubby chore. The substitution of laundry machines, for sentimental heroes, adds a layer to Marilyn Maness Mehaffy’s analysis of before-after humor used to market the Eclipse Clothes Wringer, ca. 1880. This image “demonstrates the conversion and improvement of the muscular, bare-armed and -chested, and mechanically inept Dinah,” she explains, “into a more domesticated, slender-faced, thin-lipped, and appropriately attired approximation of her ‘Mistis’ (who is noticeably unchanged, with the exception of her faint smile of approval).”<sup>28</sup> Glaring indeed is how this ad’s “before” image of Black womanhood was revived by the Currier & Ives print in which a rags-and-tatters fop offers a flower to a scrubber who responds: “What’s de matter wid de Nigga? Why Oscar yous gone wild.” In 1997, Curtis Marez compared this image of 1882 to parodies of Oscar Wilde in “Black, Red, and Yellow Face.” Yet when the issue is not artistic credos but the engriming job of getting cloth clean, it’s indicative that where the Asiatic parodies foreground opium, tea and ape-like overbite, those that depict Black Americans accuse Wilde of preaching languor. By the later nineteenth century, allegations of “loafing” were a racist standard. But insofar as this jab was affirmed by minstrel shows that featured black-faced males in ridiculous versions of fine attire—who had plenty of free time in which to sing, josh and boast—shabby finery in laundry art perpetuated the notion that Black men did not work if they were not seen laboring. In 1887, that notion was revived by a print that shows yet another Black man preening, again in tatters, before a Black woman who scrubs with her sleeves rolled high.<sup>29</sup> The many sheets hanging in her yard imply she launders for pay. Note here the lads whose pep predicts the Gold Dust Twins whose frolicsome image sold laundry soap well into the 20th century.

Powerfully advanced, by this welter of imagery, was the impression that if most washing women were burdened by bum husbands, African American women carried the most onerous load. My research turned up two irruptions in this pattern before “Sweat.” One, a photo taken ca. 1895, enjoys the glistening, half-naked bodies of janitors at work in the basement of a federal building; while the other, a photo of 1899, captures the all-Black staff in an industrial laundry





**Figure 2:** Sketch entitled “Illustrations of Negro Life in Washington, D.C.: Monday morning, or the tender passion.” Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division.

in Virginia.<sup>30</sup> No surprise that W. E. B. Du Bois considered the second image for the American Negro Exhibit in Paris. But *realia* shown in France could never have the impact back home of rib-tickling postcards in which henpecked White men scrub while their “New Woman” wives sally forth. The Library of Congress’s online digital collections include more pictorial cause to think, “real men don’t wash clothes”: memorable amongst them is one in which an Aleut kneels between a washtub with scrubboard and igloo. Thus humor; lofty in contrast were the efforts of white liberals who extolled washerwomen as paragons of hard-working contentment. The contentment of paragons pictured as Black, White and unracialized was emphasized by a poet who figured a singing scrubber to contrast her faith to his lack thereof.<sup>31</sup> This icon roused a retort from an African American writer who insisted that washerwomen’s piety was no laughing matter. The issue, for Mary Weston Fordham, was that these women sang to lighten a weary job. “With hands all reddened and sore,/With back and shoulders bent low,/Thou hast for thy comfort that rest, sweet rest,/Will be found on the other shore.”<sup>32</sup> This re-figuration of 1897 is assertive. But because it ignored Black men, its spirit could be co-opted by “Now I Wants Ma Pay” (1899).

This comic song’s cover art and lyrics show how the conjugal icon was evolving. Too, art and lyrics tease with the *double entendre* I see in “Sweat.”

That resemblance is hard to miss once you know “Ma Pay” relates how a male preener is confronted by a washerwoman unimpressed by his soft soap. Hinted too, though, is how a strong woman dupes a would-be layabout. Helping to sell ambiguous lyrics is the cover of this sheet music. Large, exuberant lettering emphasizes a demanding title. But against a cocoa-brown background, swirled with dark red tendrils, the brightest spots of color are her scarlet dress and the small space occupied by his necktie. An admonitory finger and jutting jaw show that Mrs. Johnson is the one demanding payment. Telling too, though, is the wiry—not plump—arm that holds back the parcel of clean shirts Bill Jones claims as his due. History is figured by a scrubboard that evokes manual toil and, by extension, slavery. But Mrs. Johnson is no relic considering her business’s large plateglass window and its location “down-town on Lom-bard street.” Vibrant moreover is the gleaming whiteness of her apron and collar, and the flowing folds of her vivid dress. Jones is well turned-out too. But his clothes are flashier, his stature lower, and his stance less assured than that of the woman who demands \$1.27 in return for the shirts she has cleaned. He does defend himself: ““think,”” he says, ““what I have done for you. I scrubbed your laun-dry and hung out your clothes, An’ I did all de cook-in’ ev-’ry one knows, When you threw de stove-lid at ‘liv-er-foot-ed’ Jim, Did-n’t I sit on de hole for to keep de smoke in’.” This is a long chore list for one who “nev-er seemed to work.” But without denying its length, or truth, Johnson demands payment. ““You must-n’t think,”” she warns, ““because I has to wash clothes, Dat you can do me out ob de bill you owes’.”<sup>33</sup>

Re-used here is opposition seen in the Currier & Ives print, and the image in which children gambol, in that Johnson’s rolled sleeves figure a worker while Jones’s suit bespeaks foppishness. Reading backwards, though—since that suit was never bought on a laundryman’s pay—the cover art of this song implies that ludicrous dandies tried to lure hardworking women not into earned rest or pleasant dalliance, but into leaving their suds to become prostitutes. The Currier & Ives print is edifying here because it includes dialogue that shows how that proposition is scorned by a buxom scrubber (though not, perhaps, the dreamy sylph who gazes at the dandy adoringly). As forthright is Mrs. Johnson. Yet insofar as “Ma Pay” never refutes Jones’s claim to have labored, its lyrics raise the possibility that Johnson is an exploitative employer and perhaps faithless lover too. Had children been mentioned, or kin, her demands could be thought womanly. But because none are named, no character in this song upholds bourgeois gender roles.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, Johnson’s superior body is pictured in cover art while her mental force is borne out by townspeople’s consensus: she is “well-known a-mong de col-ored peo-ple As a wench who’s hard to beat.” Both indications are musicalized, moreover, by turning Jones’s last remark (““I aint gwine to hang a-round your place no more””) into a whine with half notes that ripple between G and F, after a phrase in a minor key. If we compare this musical indication to the manner in which Hurston characterized Sykes, it’s of interest that when he dies by snake bite, his last utterance is no whine. But if any suppose his death bespeaks self-assertion on Delia’s part that compares to Mrs. Johnson’s show of

righteousness, inability to ensure whether the latter is, in fact, in the right urges analysts to delve Hurston's story for less-than-obvious wit.

Hurston may never have heard of "Ma Pay." But the icon whose life it extended was tweaked, in 1903, by another song. Cover art for "Just Hang-ing Round" features a buxom Black woman standing over a washtub while a Black man loafs nearby. Yet this time, since the female character never speaks, attention is directed to a "lazy" man who "doesn't seem to care." Carelessness befits an idler. Yet in truth, this idler cares a lot about preserving his do-nothing lifestyle: "Don't want to work, Just wants to shirk Just hang-ing round that's all." That's why, after dreaming of himself so hard at work that he "woke up all tir - - ed out," this song represents him as relieved to find himself, as ever, unemployed. The cover for this song could have been illustrated in varied ways. But by picturing a ragged man lounging near a woman who labors, it recalls "Ma Pay" to silence her. A song of 1918 let a Black washwoman speak again; there, though, in place of a man, coos an infant too young to do anything but delight in the bubbles that float off her washtub. This cover art implies a father. Any who bothered to think about it could infer he worked elsewhere while the singer earns by "hang-ing out the white folks' clothes." Inferrable too, though, with a prod from prevalent icons, is that she launders for pay because the baby's father is absent or inadequate.<sup>35</sup> Prodding in the same direction, more acerbically, are the lyrics of Bessie Smith's "Washwoman Blues" (1920s).

This overview of laundry icons and responses thereto can be extended; of interest, for instance, to Smith could have been the nightmare-washwoman silenced, by a picture circulated in 1913, by the artist's decision to fill her mouth with clothespins. Enough has been shown, though, to outline how U.S. artists ridiculed African American adults whose pre-, post- and non-conjugal interactions were serrated by restrictions on employment, grinding economic concerns, and defenses of personal dignity. By focusing on women's rolled sleeves in relation to men's preening, I've charted a sequence relevant to things seen and unseen in "Sweat" that would have been noticed by thoughtful foes of anti-Black racism. Summing up my findings is this: though Dinah launders while Pompey stands at ease, his work-clothes and robust body bespeak toil. Labor puts these two on a par as they chat amicably. Over the next half-century, equality and amicability gave way to a song that figured a washwoman's male companion as a sucking dependant. Du Bois's interest in the photo of a steam laundry bespeaks hope that visual indicia of industrialized Black men could stem this tide or expose its bias. But who would supply the funds needed to circulate such indicia while the spectre of pigtailed rats and squatty Amazons hovered over clothes-washing, for pay? *The Crisis* did in 1934, when reporting a laundry workers' strike. Four years earlier, *New Masses* had chosen instead to publish a drawing in which a roughly dressed African American man reads against a background of smaller African American figures such as a porter, laborers hefting pick-axes, and the victim of a lynching. The drawing includes women, the most prominent of which bends over a washtub, clothes hamper at her side. That her labor is pre-industrial

is indicated by her not wearing a uniform. This depiction is very much like the one Woodson described, in words, that same year. But he laced sentimentality through his iconization when he said the “vanishing washerwoman” was a remnant of the past “whose name every one should mention with veneration.”<sup>36</sup> Opposed to such sentimentality is the “Song to a Negro Wash-woman” that flouts bourgeois values in its title: like Hurston’s “washwoman,” then, Hughes chose a term Woodson replaced by the more refined *washerwoman*.<sup>37</sup> Even if Hurston and Hughes hadn’t been friends, she would have seen his “Song” before writing “Sweat” since the *Crisis* gave it a full-page spread. If Woodson saw it too, his word choice is a hint that he didn’t appreciate its iconoclasm. Like “Sweat,” therefore, “Song” may have impelled the essay in which Woodson saluted a race-heroine he in/visibilized as vanishing.

That’s interesting as an indication of reception by an intended reader who was himself a writer, whose outlook was not unusual, and who had access to print. Offering another indication of reception is Laura Hapke’s idea that Hughes’s “Song” voiced “a cry for justice.” I agree, generally; obscured by her brevity, though, is jabbing sarcasm at oppressed laborers who look Heavenward. Less coherent is Anthony Dawahare’s idea that this poem hails “a black woman caught in racist domestic servitude” since Hughes evoked an array of workers: “For you,” he wrote, “singing little brown woman,/Singing strong black woman./Singing tall yellow woman.”<sup>38</sup> I think this array attempts a re-thinking of allegorization designed to rebut an icon. Quiet indication that “Song” makes so visual an intervention is that, having promised a lyric, Hughes presents himself as speechless. “Oh, wash-woman,” he admits, “I have many songs to sing you/Could I but find the words.” The snag could seem to be the difficulty of figuring, in a short poem, scrubbers encountered “in Miss White Lady’s kitchen,” “on Vermont Street,” “in a New York subway train” and “[o]ut in the backyard garden under the apple trees, hanging white clothes on long lines in the sun-shine.” Hinted, though, by this list is that not all washwomen scrub in bucolic scenes because for-pay laundry is as modern as a subway, and cantankerously Yankee as a state famed for its defense of freedom.

Here’s the key finding: Hughes evokes in/visibilization by referencing sight where aurality would be expected: “I’ve seen you singing.” This could record what he knew by experience: industrial laundries were deafening work sites. But the surprise effect of pitting sight against aurality harks back to popular icons that, being visual, *show* singing only. Implied is scorn for blithe belief in singing washwomen that bespoke a delusion fostered by images. This implication makes it significant that Hughes insists three times on sight (“I’ve seen you singing”) and six times on knowledge: “I know you, wash-woman.” Most germane amongst these six, for our purposes, is one that specifies assistance to a conjugal partner: “I know how you work and help your man when times are hard.” Hurston is more caustic about conjugal partnering in “Sweat.” But Hughes could be caustic, too, about a hymn-singing laundress. “I’ve seen you in church on Sunday morning singing,” reveals a line in “Song” near the end, “praising your Jesus, because

some day you're going to sit on the right hand of the Son of God and forget you ever were a wash-woman." My sense is that "your Jesus" was supposed to be tough, unsentimental. But Hughes doesn't underrate women who, if misinformed or deluded, could be generous and heroic: "I know how you build your house up from the wash-tub and call it home./And how you raise your churches from white suds for the service of the Holy God." Hurston showed less tenderness in a story, not song, that casts a lurid glow on washwomen who scrub without a man in sight. She also ran bigger risks.

It's time to expose that lurid glow. But in doing so, I strive to uphold the "tragic dimensions" of a tale whose artistry lies in creating irresolvable tension between wit and tragedy, farce and outrage. Meaning so equipoised has above-average potential to be misunderstood, even by the well-intentioned. For this reason, analysts must ask whether any safe strategy would have let Hurston hit so hard at icons that meshed ideas about faith, race, and gender. If not, it's as revealing that Delia is thin, as that hymns don't shield her from "spiritual loss." Here's the linchpin: "Sweat" does not say Delia launders for pay because she has a bum husband; instead, it indicates that Sykes is so improvident that he trifles away his earnings. This is where Hurston ran her gravest risk in that it has proved easy to miss the in/visibilizing aspects of her portrait of a Black man who labors gainfully, but does so off-stage. That this risk was calculated can be inferred from how simple it would have been to include a sentence that shows or mentions Sykes working; insightful, in this context, is Sharon Lynette Jones's recognition that he does earn.<sup>39</sup> Here's my point: by in/visibilizing Sykes's labor, Hurston all but solicits a misreading grounded in racist icons.

I'll come back to this contention. But let's look first at what several critics have pointed out: Delia doesn't meet Sykes's taste for "portly" women. This preference is stressed in his disparagement of feminine leanness, in general ("Ah sho' 'bominates uh skinny woman"), and her wasted form, in particular. "Ah don't want yuh," he shouts, in a fight. "Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo' rawbony laigs an' arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death."<sup>40</sup> Repetitions of this complaint suggest the truth of a townsman's charge that Sykes has "allus been crazy 'bout fat women."<sup>41</sup> But it adds poignancy to the rue with which Delia acknowledges that a body once "young and soft" has become a spectre of "knotty, muscled limbs," "harsh knuckly hands" and "work-worn knees."<sup>42</sup> This is a sad comedown for one who used to be "a right pretty li'l trick" with the youthful charm of "a speckled pup."<sup>43</sup> Visualists will recognize in this description, however, forceful rejection of images of plump, buxom or obese women who launder while their men enjoy lives of ease. This charge may seem at odds with a passage in this story all critics quote, for in it, a townsman explains Delia's thinness as the product of Sykes's selfishness. His explanation is ironized, however, by laundry icons and the realities of this form of labor. Sykes is the sort, he analogizes, who "takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gets it," he adds.

“But dey squeeze an’ grind, squeeze an’ grind an’ wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat’s in ’em out. When dey’s satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats ’em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey thows ’em away. Dey knows what dey is doin’ while dey is at it, an’ hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin’ after huh tell she’s empty.”<sup>44</sup>

A life of grinding, that produces hatred, must be taken into account by all who interrogate “Sweat.” But even as this disquisition targets images of washwomen that emphasized *fat and happy* over *strong though burdened*, it says something powerful has ground and squeezed Delia. Hurston supplies cause to blame Sykes. Hinted, though, is how much other aspects of Delia’s world must carry blame, too, among them clients invisibilized by “Sweat.” What you see, this interpretation submits, isn’t all that’s going on. Hinted most cuttingly is reluctance or refusal—even on the part of townspeople who respect Delia—to dispose one’s eyes so that one doesn’t see what one thinks one can never change.

In their way, sentimentalists acknowledged washwomen’s burdens. But they ameliorated that load by making hymn-singing an integral part of what a journalist of 1851 called “the pious work of washing.” This amelioration is recalled by Hurston’s decision to make Delia an avid churchwoman—then queried by Sykes’s charge that she is a “hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout, then come home and wash white folks’ clothes on the Sabbath.”<sup>45</sup> Easily assumed is that an abusive wastrel accuses falsely. Offering reason to think otherwise, though, is a vignette Hurston published the year after “Sweat.” Sister Cal’line Potts is not the main character in “The Eatonville Anthology” (1926), nor is she described as a washwoman. Yet insofar as she is roused to action while ironing, her characterization draws attention to overlap between “wife and mother” and “washwoman” among poor Black Americans. Woodson would do the same in “The Negro Washerwoman: A Vanishing Figure” (1930). Soon thereafter, William Cooper drew attention to the same thing in a painting called “Vanishing Washerwoman” (1931).<sup>46</sup> Hurston’s vignette of Cal’line Potts doesn’t linger over this; instead, it shows how Delia might have handled Sykes without resorting to murder by omission. Like Johnson in “Ma Pay,” Potts is confrontational with a working-class directness that can be played for laughs. Significant, though, is how her decisive action points up the panic with which Delia shifts from hymn-singing to running for her life from the prowling snake on which she will let Sykes intrude.

Revived here is Hughes’s jab at “your Jesus.” It being well known, however, that Modernists denigrated Christianity, let’s turn to Hurston’s most in/visibilizing refusal of then-current laundry icons: “Sweat”’s intimation that Sykes labors for pay rather than wasting Delia’s income. That this refusal has been missed is apparent from criticism that waxes wroth about his cadging.<sup>47</sup> Often forgotten, though, is that he buys things for Bertha after paying her room rent. “You kin git *anything* you wants,” he instructs her, in front of an audience that includes his

hard-working wife. “Dis is *mah* town an’ you sho’ kin have it.”<sup>48</sup> This preening is unwise. But so is supposing Delia gives him money to spend on the woman who eases his “longing after the flesh.”<sup>49</sup> More coherent is her understanding that though willing to work and able to find jobs, Sykes is a spendthrift. Evidence that she is the steadier earner, and he knows it, includes his silence when she claims: “Mah tub of suds is filled yo’ belly with vittles more times than yo’ hands is filled it.”<sup>50</sup> Yet even those who hold that the sister in black works hardest, must admit the brother in black can work, too. Perfectly possible, under that dispensation, is that Sykes’s absences and eagerness to show off spending power afterwards reflect his training as a chauffeur. If, moreover, as is equally possible, he leaves each day after readying wood and water for Delia’s business, then Hurston in/visibilized—surely with witting purpose—how a washwoman’s savings could be enhanced by spousal labor she recompenses with room and board.

Opinions may differ whether this aspect of “Sweat” risked too much, with too little reck. Yet if Hurston in/visibilized as she did to alert readers to the ease with which Black washwomen’s men can be misperceived by eyes tutored by racist icons, “Sweat” solicited misunderstanding to offer a dual-audience experience. Story lovers will savor such high-wire wit. But politically, analysts will recognize its relationship to the Wolof word we use when we call a person “hip”: the quality of seeing clearly. I mention this because it doesn’t seem clear-sighted of Woodson to have lauded an iconized Negro washerwoman as her family’s only support (“often the sole wage earner”), though just “a” breadwinner who carried “her share of the burden” by earning a “supplement” (four references) that made a “valuable contribution” to household finances. Genre restrictions matter insofar as see-sawing of this kind from a historian betokens uncertainty where the see-saw I identified in “Sweat,” between wit and tragedy, bespeaks hip art. This consideration makes it noteworthy that two times, in eight pages, Woodson called his impressionistic essay a “story.” Noteworthy, too, is that this essay allegorizes “the man” in relation to “The wife and mother” whom Woodson memorialized as “the Negro washerwoman.” Here’s the key passage: “In many of the Northern states” he taught in “Vanishing,” before the 1860s,

Negro men and children were fed and clothed with the earnings of the wife or mother who held her own in competition with others. In most of these cases the man felt that his task was done when he drew the water, cut the wood, built the fires, went after the clothes, and returned them.<sup>51</sup>

Earlier, I mentioned bourgeois gender norms; in this passage, Woodson affirms men’s authority to decide when they’d done enough to help out at home. Upholding, a bit differently, a bourgeois value, “Vanishing” disparaged laundresses of the present day: “Only the most unfortunate and the most inefficient” still did that kind of work, Woodson explained. I think these hard words, in an essay that

is genial otherwise, betoken conviction that “race” intellectuals should shield rather than mock, risk or dare.

If analysts consider, in this light, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie’s charge that Woodson had more in common with his amateur female colleagues than with his trained male colleagues, that may explicate his decision to “visibilize” Black men who lent their strength to women’s labor, without sacrificing male authority. As pertinent, though, to what “Vanishing” says of Black men’s contributions to labor that had uplifted the race, would have been Woodson’s search for funds from Americans taught to scorn Black men who cadged from Black women who were at least as burdened.<sup>52</sup> That Americans hip to Woodson’s hard work supported the journal he edited, in the name of racial uplift, shows that they saw more in “Vanishing” than that psychodrama. Some, we can be sure, appreciated how he visibilized what “Sweat” occluded—that “Vanishing” taught, in a straightforward manner, *what* to see rather than how to see and be seen. I spare a few lines for this thought because if, as I contend, “Sweat” created a dual audience experience that pitted the hip against the square, “Vanishing” ran risks of its own in the name of accessibility. Among these, the biggest was to the academic stature Woodson had won over time, arduously, for the *Journal of Negro History*. Here again we see community building; this time, though, the workload is closer to that of a griot. Support for this proposition lies in Woodson’s decision to insist on what “Song” acknowledged but “Sweat” hid from view: a typologized Black man working with a typologized Black woman to sustain a Black family.

The evidence that this essay was part of a successful fundraising effort bears out, obliquely, Vivyan Campbell Adair’s reminder that reception of Hurston’s satires wasn’t always positive. My main finding in this essay is nevertheless that the tragicomedy of Delia and Sykes retorted to laundry icons. I’ve supplied four reasons to think so. One: emphasis on Delia’s thin, wiry frame is of limited interest unless readers bring to it knowledge of iconic insistence on plump wash-women. Two: that emphasis dovetails with another, scenes of Delia looking to God for support—sometimes, by hymn-singing—only to take matters into her own hands when another person would have called out a warning to Sykes. Three: re-use of the name of a famed literary villain is a hint to keep one’s eye peeled for storytelling that is bravura. Four: in the remark I excerpted from Hurston’s autobiography, she asked thoughtful readers to make visual-mindedness part of their picture of her. My findings help analysts see more in “Sweat” as a stand-alone. But they also put “Sweat” into conversation with “Song” and “Vanishing.” The eye-opener is, as so often, greater knowledge of historical context. However, the history that matters is unfamiliar among researchers trained to pore over type only. By looking to visuals, and learning from them on their visual terms, we equip ourselves to detect and combat—or, in other cases, to detect and savor—in/visibilization that can be a force for oppression **or** liberation at the dizzy edge of dangerous wit.



## Notes

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1. The epigraph is culled from the George C. Wolfe play based on short stories by Zora Neale Hurston; see *Spunk: Three Tales* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991), 121. For warm praise of "Sweat," see Cheryl Wall's Introduction to "*Sweat*": Zora Neale Hurston, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 7; and Warren J. Carson, "Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)," *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*, ed. Yolanda Williams Page (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 285. Kathryn Lee Seidel spoke of "innate goodness" in "The Artist in the Kitchen: The Economics of Creativity in Hurston's 'Sweat'" (1991), see Wall, ed., "*Sweat*," 177.
2. See Cheryl A. Wall, "*Mules and Men* and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment," *Black American Literature Forum* 23 (Winter 1989), 671; and the section of Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977) that Wall quotes in "*Sweat*," 149.
3. Thus *Dust Tracks On A Road: An Autobiography* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 107; and Clarke, "'The porch couldn't talk for looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *African American Review* 35 (Winter 2001), 611n3.
4. See Adair, *From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 135; Carson, "Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)," 290; and Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Routledge, 2004), 193.
5. Arwen Palmer Mohun observes, "It is very difficult to ascertain how many women actually did" take in laundry, for pay, over the generations I examine. This is true. But it's flat-out impossible to work out numbers for all who took on chores as necessary as chopping and hauling, not least because children must often have performed these tasks in or outside their homes. Calculations of the number of men employed in industrial laundries may seem more straightforward. They aren't, because men could be managers, tub-tenders, drivers, pressers, boiler operators and a host of other jobs split among census categories and split again amongst unions. See Mohun, *Steam Laundries: Gender, Technology and Work in the United States and Great Britain, 1880-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 68.
6. See Lubiano, "Don't Talk With Your Eyes Closed: Caught in the Hollywood Gun Sights," *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies*, ed. Mae G. Henderson (London: Routledge, 1995), 187; and Tera W. Hunter, "*To 'Joy My Freedom'*": *Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 17.
7. Thus Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 3; M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 29; and Hunter, "*Freedoms*," 53, 57 and 30-1.
8. See e.g., the oral history Jacqueline Jones quotes in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Family, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 30; and the sketches from 1858 that Sarah Burns described in "Images of Slavery: George Fuller's Depictions of the Antebellum South," *American Art Journal* 15 (Summer 1983), 42-3.
9. For industrialized Black laundrymen, see St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), 251; and Ronald Palmer, "Memories of Sterling Brown," *African American Review* 31 (Autumn 1997), 433. Cf. the story of Palmer Hayden recycling a canvas laundry bag, which he acquired as a Pullman porter, for use in a work of art: Wendy Greenhouse recounts it in "An Early Portrait by Archibald J. Motley, Jr.," *American Art Journal* 29:1/2 (1998), 101n5.
10. See "Sweat" as reprinted in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglind Lemke (New York: Harper, 1995), 75. For "salvation," see Wall, "*Mules and Men* and Women," 671; while for Powers's work, see "Gods of Physical Violence, Stopping at Nothing: Masculinity, Religion, and Art in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston," *Religion and American Culture* 12 (Summer 2002), 233. Note that Powers recaps "Sweat" as follows: "an abusive husband elicits our sympathy for the victimized wife" (235).
11. Seidel, "Artist," asserts, "Delia's work is their only source of income" (171) before claiming that Sykes "has not shared in the labor that results in the purchase" of the house they share (172) and adding that he "has been transformed during his marriage . . . from contributor to the family economy to the chief recipient of its benefits" (173). Later, she finds him "irrational" when he maltreats customers' laundry since "these clothes are their only source of money" (179).
12. The moral question recurs in the interpretation that this singer represents a prostitute turned penitent. But it's germane, also, to the charge that she has professed remorse just to put a roof over her head. Sandburg was, of course, a poet Hughes admired. For "Washerwoman," see [http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/carl\\_sandburg/poems/3204](http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/carl_sandburg/poems/3204).

13. For the charge of 1896 (by a Briton), see Mohun, *Steam Laundries*, 99; noting her sense that this charge was commonplace on both sides of the Atlantic. For Wang's fascinating study, see "Gender, Race and Civilization: The Competition between American Power Laundries and Chinese Steam Laundries, 1870s-1920," *American Studies International* 40 (February 2002), 57. Aarim-Heriot issued her call in *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-82* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 10.

14. "Sweat," *The Complete Stories*, 75.

15. On Delia's scrawny body and Sykes's insults, see Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* as quoted in Wall, "Sweat": *Zora Neale Hurston*, 150; Seidel, "Artist," 173; and John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 184.

16. The "Book of Trades" illustration can be viewed online at the Library of Congress (LOC) website. For the joke about the coat-thief, see Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 116-8; while for the vignette, see Margaret Fuller, "The Old Washerwoman," *Living Age* 9 (18 April 1846), 147-8. This vignette debuted in the *New York Tribune*.

17. The envelope archived at the New York Historical Society is part of the (LOC) "American Memory" site. From <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query>, use "gwing fite" as a search term. Dinah asks Pompey: "What is you gwing to fite' for?" He replies: "Dat's what dis chile can't find out, Massa says he don't know."

18. See Mohun, *Steam Laundries*, 98; cf. "Jennie June," "Women's Views of Divorce," *North American Review* 150 (January 1898), 134.

19. The stereopticon slide can be viewed at the Schomburg Library's digital website. Use "wash camp" as a search term. This pulls up several images; the one to which I refer features a brawny, and roughly dressed, Black washwoman in a rural setting. For the etching of a few years earlier, see Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 106-7. Brown's description of the white ironers as near-goddesses—"Their complexions unblemished and profiles immaculately vertical, their eyes large and mouths diminutive"—has informed my analysis.

20. See *Steam Laundries*, 139-43; and for a wizened Chinese laundryman, Ronald M. James, Richard D. Adkins and Rachel J. Hartigan, "Competition and Coexistence in the Laundry: A View of the Comstock," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (Summer 1994), 169-73. John Kuo Wei Tchen discusses the 1879 farce in *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 157, 233, 250 and 219-20.

21. See the unsigned "The Chinaman—Domestic, Scholastic, Iconoclastic, and Imperial," *Putnam's* 9 (April 1857), 339; but cf. a joke of 1904 unearthed by Joan S. Wang. When the teacher asks, "what's the masculine of laundress?", Willie Wiseguy replies: "Chinaman." Wang ponders male-male jousting in "Gender, Race and Civilization," 57; cf. Fred H. Hart, *The Sazerac Lying Club: A Nevada Book* (ca. 1878), 235.

22. The Library of Congress makes this advertisement available online. At the catalogue site, choose "Prints and Photographs" then enter the search term "magic washer." Many thanks to Mark Steiner for introducing me to this extraordinary image. For "pigtailed rats," see Thomas J. Vivian, "John Chinaman in San Francisco," *Scribner's* 12 (October 1876), 865.

23. See *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 61 (June 1880), 158.

24. Juxtaposition of a laundryman's iron and laundress's hamper is not trivial; cf. n19. Space limits prevent me from explicating conceptual interlacings of machinery, modernism and ironers' digital skills. Suffice it to say here that a Southern white who managed an industrial laundry told a trade journal in 1902 that her teenaged son was a "pretty fair" ironer. She is unlikely to have broadcast her pride if she thought ironing on a par with the scrubbing of her African American employees. See Mohun, *Steam Laundries*, 64-5. N.B.: the search term "Pennsylvania war of races" pulls up this image from "Prints and Photographs" in the LOC's online catalogue.

25. Regarding intercourse, note the curtain that could be presumed to lead off to living quarters. Tchen explains that Chinese launderers often "lived in the back of the shop" in New York because "[e]ven when they made enough money to rent a separate apartment, prejudice was such that they could rarely find a place to rent" (*New York Before Chinatown*, 252). The curtain in this image indicates that the Hap Lee laundrymen had adapted to this circumstance. Tchen charts how acceptance of interracial unions in which the man was Chinese and the woman Irish crumbled after the Civil War; cf. Paul C. P. Siu's evidence of a Chinese laundryman with an African American wife in Chicago in the 1940s: *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 286.

26. This sinuous image is available online in the American Memory collection at the LOC; go to <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query> with the search term "decorating china." Note too that *Harper's* offered different images of Chinese launderers; e.g., a cartoon that contrasted a puny white male journalist with a brawny Chinese laundryman. "Melican Lepottee Man Want Gabbee" is posted in "The Chinese American Experience: 1857-1892," a subset of Harpweek at: <http://immigrants.harpweek.com/Default.htm>.

27. The best codex source of information on U.S. paintings of washerwomen is Elizabeth L. O'Leary's *At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Paintings* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 199-203. For a look at more commercial images of laundering white women, the LOC's digital collection of images is helpful. Search, e.g., for "Queen of the Laundry" or the "Jolly Washing Girls."

28. For manly heroes who act in the manner described, use "washwoman" as a search term on the Making of America database, or ponder a tale about President McKinley that Richard A. Posner recapped in "Blackmail, Privacy & Freedom of Contract," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 141 (May 1993), 1993. For Mehaffy's discussion of the Eclipse trade card, see "Advertising Race/Raceing Advertising: The Feminine Consumer(-Nation), 1876-1900," *Signs* 23 (Autumn, 1997), 151; cf. Jo-Ann Morgan, "Mummy the Huckster: Selling the Old South for the New Century," *American Art* 9 (Spring 1995), 103.

29. See Marez, "The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde's Opium Smoke Screen," *English Literary History* 64 (Spring, 1997), 272.

30. Not clear, from the LOC designation affixed to this photograph, is who classified these men as "doing laundry" in the nether regions of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. But it can't be incidental that the white woman who took this photo had a penchant for images of white men, and non-white boys, washing cloth. For analysis of how Frances Benjamin Johnson "played" her white femininity to build a career, see Chapter 3 of Laura Wexler's *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). N.B.: in the LOC's online collection, I found one more image of Black men working in a laundry; they labor alongside the white men with whom they are imprisoned in what I take to be a federal facility in the 1950s.

31. For paragons, see e.g., Louisa May Alcott, *Work* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), 203; Phoebe Cary, "The Washerwoman" in *Ballads, Lyrics, and Hymns* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1866), 22-4; and Eugene Ware Fitch, "The Washerwoman's Song" as posted at [www.kancoll.org/kh/1959/59\\_3\\_malin.htm](http://www.kancoll.org/kh/1959/59_3_malin.htm).

32. Fordham's *Magnolia Leaves* (1897), republished in the Schomburg series, can be read online at [http://diglib.nyp.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwm979/@Generic\\_BookTextView/516;pt=466](http://diglib.nyp.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwm979/@Generic_BookTextView/516;pt=466). Cf. the poem in which Otto Leland Bohanan seemed to disagree: "Fool! Thou hast toiled for fifty years/ And what hast thou now but thy dusty tears?" But he continued: "In silence she rubbed . . . But her face I had seen./Where the light of her soul fell shining and clean." After being selected for *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1922), Bohanan's "The Washer-Woman" was posted online at <http://www.bartelby.com/269/110.html>.

33. The term "liver-footed," referencing a pedal ailment caused by digestive troubles, connoted slow or clumsy movement. For the lyrics quoted search the Historic American Sheet Music collection (Duke University) on-line for "Now I Wants Ma Pay," noting similarities between Jones's list of chores and the blues classic, by Andy Razak and Eubie Blake, "My Handy Man."

34. Mrs. Johnson's demand for payment shows she is tough. But it may hint, too, that her business is run on a tight margin. Compare a joke published three decades earlier since the punch line of "Ode to My Washerwoman" is the one-line gag "\$2.50." This joke appeared as an unsigned squib in the humor magazine *Punchinello* 1 (9 April 1870), 30.

35. The moral of this song is non-dogmatically theist. Thus, when her baby cries at the bursting of a soap bubble, a headwrapped Black laundress advises him that though "life's gold-en dreams will float a-way," he should "[j]es' keep on a-blowin' you' bubbles," leaving God to sort things out. Archived in the Historic American Sheet Music collection at Duke University, this lyric is posted online. This outstanding collection is searchable by a song's title or publication date; it is also where I found "Just Hanging Round."

36. See "The Negro Washerwoman: A Vanishing Figure," *Journal of Negro History* 15 (July 1930), 269. For the contrasting images, see Mohun, *Steam Laundries*, 226; Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5; and W. M. Goode's sketch "Bass Jones, artistic white washen done here." Archived at the LOC, this sketch can be viewed online at: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/acd1996003650/PP/>.

37. Walton Burgess judged "washerwoman" more genteel than "washwoman" in *Five hundred mistakes of daily occurrence in speaking, writing and pronouncing the English language, corrected* (New York: J. Miller, 1873), 43. Among the authors quoted in this article, only Hughes and Hurston chose not to use "washerwoman."

38. Hapke categorized "Song" as a "cry" in *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 210; after which Dawahare spoke of "a black woman" in *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box* (Jacksonville: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 59. I excerpt "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman" from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage, 1994), 41-2.

39. For "tragic," see Carson, "Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)," 285; while for "spiritual loss," see Cheryl A. Wall, "Zora N. Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, eds. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Malden, MA:

Blackwell, 2006), 379. For Delia as “principal breadwinner,” see Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 81.

40. See “Sweat,” *The Complete Stories*, 82.

41. *Ibid.*, 77.

42. *Ibid.*, 76, 79.

43. *Ibid.*, 77.

44. *Ibid.*, 77-78.

45. *Ibid.*, 74 and, for “pious work,” Rudolph Lapp’s excerpt from the *Daily Alta* (1851) in “The Negro in Gold Rush California,” *Journal of Negro History* 49 (April 1964), 889.

46. For Potts, see “The Eatonville Anthology,” *The Complete Stories*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke (New York: Harper, 1995), 69-70. Cooper’s remarks are available online in the American Memory database. See also his book, *A Portrayal of Negro Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936) and a review of it, a year later, in vol. 22 of the *Journal of Negro History*, 118.

47. West says Delia “takes in white folks’ laundry to support herself, and her manipulative husband,” in *Hurston and American Literary Culture*, 28; cf. Wall’s charge that Sykes “has grown dependent on the money Delia earns,” in “Zora N. Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” 379.

48. “Sweat,” *The Complete Stories*, 79.

49. *Ibid.*, 75.

50. *Ibid.*, 75.

51. Thus “Vanishing,” 270-4.

52. Dagbovie initiated this comparison in “Black Women, Carter G. Woodson, and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1915-1950,” *Journal of African American History* 88 (Winter 2003), 37, before expanding it in *The Black History Movement* (2007). For Woodson’s success raising funds from African Americans, see Darlene Clark Hine, “Carter G. Woodson, White Philanthropy and Negro Historiography,” *History Teacher* 19 (May 1986), 419.