

Of Tubs and Toil:
Workers in an Empire of Hygiene, 1920-2000

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Dear Seminar Participants:

Thanks in advance for your indulgence in attending to scholarship which, while it attempts to connect to South African history, is rooted in my own fields of US cultural and working-class history. As I've worked at those connections in the project from which this piece derives, I've developed ambitions for a comparative study of sanitation and housing among workers in KZN and the US, and recommendations on strategies for researching that future topic would be most welcome. But though, when I signed up in February, I thought I might take this contribution in that direction, it has proved imperative to focus on this current, US-centered project. It does speak to methodological and analytical agendas that some of you may share across our various geographic fields, among them an interest in the importance of hygiene as a vehicle of social distinction, an effort to combine analytical and methodological approaches drawn from cultural and social history rubrics that are sometimes epistemologically at odds, and, an interest in linking local, national and global spatial scales in ways that attend with some degree of rigor to the particularities of the multiple local contexts entailed. These combined ambitions are certainly incompletely accomplished while making the piece longer than it should be, for which I apologize, especially at such a busy time....I'm grateful for you reading what you can and look forward to your comments.

Best, Kathy

Throughout the early twentieth-century, US plumbing industry publicity and the commentary of international designers located American plumbing fixtures at an apex of sanitary modernity. As Vienna-based architect and designer Adolf Loos put it, "America is to Austria as Austria is to China," in supporting the plumber as "the billeting officer for civilization."¹ Such praise invoked a global geography of modern hygiene centered in maps of individual homes. At its most intimate, this geography redesigned the spatial relations of domestic life around bathroom and kitchen envisioned as central stages for rituals of housekeeping and entertaining. At its most expansive, it situated such domestic practices in national and global hierarchies of hygienic culture that compared modern "American" bathrooms and kitchens to alternative practices deemed exotic, onerous, and unsanitary.

In this article, I use networks of sanitary culture established and imagined by the Kohler Company of Kohler, Wisconsin to elucidate some of the global social dynamics entailed by such geographies of hygiene. A leading manufacturer and advertiser of plumbing ware, by the 1920s the company had established a growing model village for employees that served, among other purposes, as a showpiece for many of its plumbing innovations. Kohler plumbing fixtures and Kohler homes were closely intertwined in company advertising that was widely disseminated through national magazines and in a company paper that served as a news organ for Kohler Village as well as national and international publicity for the company. The company also showcased the village and its products as examples of the virtues of American hygienic culture at world's fairs. The geographies of hygiene imagined in this publicity help to illuminate global networks of tubs and toil, latrines and labor in which the Kohler Company, its village and its workers participated.

Like much of the material and social architecture of welfare capitalism, the houses and other accoutrements of Kohler Village were designed in part to elide labor conflicts emanating from the shopfloor by redirecting worker satisfaction to home and consumption. However, such tributes to home did not entirely suppress attention to toil. To market its household products, the company referred repeatedly to domestic drudgery--whether practiced by a housewife or purchased as hired help--that its plumbing products "lightened". This "lightening" of domestic labor marked Kohler products as symbols of civilization and modernization in a wider empire of hygiene mapped in the company's public references to its world markets. In hygienically inferior spaces in this empire, darkness associated with lack of light, with the "dark ages" of hygiene, and sometimes with the color of those who toiled there, were transformed by modern plumbing. Company publicity that detailed these transformations tended to highlight distinctions that had been muted in Kohler Village, where a common "American standard" of living was available to employees from a range of ethnic backgrounds. These global paradoxes of tubs and toil resonated with the campaigns for domestic hygiene in which the Kohler company implicated village residents and plumbing consumers, further entangling international and domestic labor relations. As residents in the village and workers in the plant, in turn, Kohler employees themselves confounded the company's map of tubs and toil. Some of their own households and community relations

¹ Adolf Loos, "Plumbers: Baths and Kitchen Ranges at the Jubilee Exhibition (1898)" in his *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998).

mapped incongruously onto the company's pictures of their place in its global hygienic mission. In the 1930s and 1950s striking workers at the Kohler plant engaged these issues directly by refiguring the ways in which village worker-residents inhabited international networks of industrial and domestic labor, providing opportunities for union members and their wives to engage the politics of tubs and toil in new ways.

These contested connections between tubs and toil at Kohler have scholarly implications for a meeting of critical geography, labor history, and cultural studies. A central literature is the scholarship on geographies of labor power. Inspired conceptually by geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith, Doreen Massey, and Andrew Herod, this varied work has focused on the social and political construction of the "local" in relation to the regional, national, or global, and the ways in which the boundaries and claim on such spatial scales are contested in the course of industrial conflict. Frustrated by a paradigm of globalization that seems to relegate all agency to transnational organizations, some scholars reflecting critically on significance of scale have reasserted the local as an intrinsically vital geographical affiliation. In this context the example of Kohler reminds us of the constructed and volatile character of both local and global identities, and, in addition, the maps of social distinction that they entail.²

Such social dimensions of scale take on additional layers of complexity in feminist scholarship on imperial domesticity. Anne McClintock's influential work focused on how images of bathrooms and cleanliness linked domestic and imperial spaces—and light and dark faces and bodies—in Victorian British culture. Amy Kaplan formulated "Manifest Domesticity" as a dimension of American empire that linked the ideology of women's "separate" domestic sphere to fears and fascinations regarding racially marked groups at home and abroad. More recently, Ruth Rogaski has analyzed the discourses "hygienic modernity" that transformed Chinese concepts "*weisheng*" from a philosophy of "guarding life" to one of public and private sanitation.³ Together, such studies demonstrate the multiple cultural vectors connecting the nineteenth century Anglo-American domestic sphere and its national and imperial others and provides an important background to the twentieth-century empire of hygiene that Kohler produced. However, in many of these works imperial culture is fairly univocal; resistance seems reserved for imperial subjects, and even they are not always as voluble as one might wish. Such voices are more effectively captured in work focusing on local voices of colonial subjects.⁴ The case of Kohler can help us unpack some

² Andrew Herod, *Labor Geographies: Workers and the Landscapes of Capitalism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homesless Vehicles and the Production of Geographic Scale," *Social Text* 33 (1992) 53-81; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); J.K. Gibson-Graham, "Beyond Global vs. Local: Economic Politics Outside the Binary Frame," in A. Herod and M.W. Wright, eds. *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 25-60.

³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002);

⁴ Jean and John L. Comaroff, "Home-Made Hegemony: Modernity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in South Africa," in K.T. Hansen, ed. *African Encounters with Domesticity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992), 37-74; Jean Allman, "Making Mothers: Missionaries, Medical Officers and Women's Work in Colonial Asante, 1924-1945," *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994): 23-47; Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Distant Companions: servants and employers in Zambia, 1900-1985* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

other dimensions of an empire of hygiene as it was experienced at the center, in particular the seemingly unquestioning participation in the imperial dynamics of "commodity kitsch" assigned to popular audiences often subsumed in wider cultural geographies. This article draws on labor geography to foreground the critical agency of working men and women who rethought Kohler's empire of hygiene even as they inhabited it.

To highlight the competing scales that Kohler managers, workers, and consumers engaged, I deploy two approaches which meet at a nexus of scholarship on US labor and empire. US labor history has long sought the interests and struggles of working people within their local workplaces, communities, and organizations—while also seeing struggles as effective at the scales of nation and globe.⁵ Meanwhile, many recent approaches to the study of empire propose not only a broader scale but often, following the discursive turn of post-colonial studies, an alternative accounting of “agency” shaped by discourses of civilization, of racial distinction, of gender relations, and of citizenship and its boundaries. Such “culturalist” accounts of agency illuminate the ways imperialist imagery affected both colonial and post-colonial worlds (while often profoundly misrepresenting them). Equally important, recent studies that foreground labor within the ambit of US empire complicate this perspective by emphasizing the views of workers on the ground in Latin American, Pacific, and Caribbean settings—and across the globe between them and the metropole.⁶

In this examination of welfare capitalist strategies as they related to global networks of hygiene, I ask how workers normally defined as “domestic” were implicated in and responded to wider cultures of empire that shaped their work and home lives. Making “domestic” products for the home in the employ of a company that sought to “domesticate” workers by inspiring immigrant and native-born alike to embrace a standard of “American” home life, Kohler workers had opportunities to reflect upon their engagement with varied geographic scales that surrounded American “domestic” ideals. As their employer’s markets ballooned globally, Kohler workers were implicated in wider imperial discourses of hierarchy, and thus illuminate how such images were received within the US across the lines of class, ethnicity and gender negotiated within many dimensions of “home.” To document both these images and their contested significance, I focus on Kohler’s empire of hygiene as it emerged out of the telescoping spaces of Kohler Village homes, the imagined homes of US consumers for which most Kohler products were marketed, the wider empire of hygiene within which company publicity and, eventually, working-class agitation located such American homes from the 1920s to the 1950s, with some attention to the transformation of these spaces in the decades that followed.

Kohler Villagers and American Plumbing: “Shrines of Cleanliness”

Kohler Company President Walter J. Kohler first began planning Kohler Village in the 1910s and 1920s. According to the company's magazine, *Kohler of Kohler News*, and other advertising venues, the Village provided employees and their families low priced

⁵ See David Montgomery, “Empire, Race, and Working-class Mobilizations,” in P. Alexander and R. Halpern, eds. *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), pp. 1-31

⁶ Karen Tranberg Hansen, “Introduction: Domesticity in Africa,” in K.T. Hansen, ed. *African Encounters with Domesticity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 12; Julie Greene, “The Labor of Empire: Recent Scholarship on US History and Imperialism,” *Labor* 2004 1 (2): 113-129.

homes attractively arranged on winding, shaded streets, along with the comforts, cleanliness and hygiene of the "American Club" residence which lodged single immigrant men and provided recreation for the community. "Americanization" programs and women's clubs offered through the company and village assured that immigrants workers and their female kin would develop tastes and aspirations lending themselves to village life on streets whose diverse housing stock down-played the caste-like hierarchies between management and workers or different ethnic groups that prevailed in other company towns of the era.⁷ At the same time, the company took care to identify the village's "home interests" directly with its plumbing and electrical products. These were essential components of the "bathroom as we in America know it today" for which there was "no precedent in the lives and customs of other peoples."⁸ 1920s Advertisements for these products included small line drawings of Kohler Village homes and amenities with descriptions that implied that resident-workers in Kohler Village enacted a culture of hygienic domesticity purchased by consumers of every tub, sink and generator the company sold.⁹

Kohler advertisements simultaneously publicized the company's fixtures and village homes in terms of maps centered in domestic interiors newly configured with the advent of modern plumbing. American bathrooms that Kohler plumbing had perfected was, according to these ads, a "shrine of cleanliness" where mothers taught children lessons of health and sanitation which helped to anchor modern civilization. In nineteenth century works of domestic sentiment and advice, the parlor had figured centrally as the "heart" of women's sphere, though the skills of an adjacent kitchen were also prominently featured. By the early twentieth century, the growing sophistication of sewerage systems and increasingly complex indoor plumbing had reconfigured the intimate spaces many US homes. For a growing number of middle-class and even a few working-class homes, bathrooms and kitchens

⁷ On Kohler's history see Walter Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike: Thirty Years of Conflict* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); Arnold R. Alanen and Thomas J. Peltin, "Kohler Wisconsin: Planning and Paternalism in a Model Industrial Village," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 44:2 (April 1978): 145-145-59. For examples of such schemes outside Kohler see Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workingman's Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns* (London: Verso, 1995), Chs. 4-9. Sources that discuss this era of the company town, but without the emphasis on conflicts over the meaning of space described here, include John S. Garner, *The Model Company Town* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); John Garner, ed. *The Company Town: Architecture and Society in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John Reps, "The Towns the Companies Built," in *The Making of urban America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965); Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). For analysis of ethnicity, class and gender in the area of the former company town of Pullman in the era just before this article discusses, see Janice L. Reiff, "'His Statements...Will be Challenged': Ethnicity, Gender and Class in the Evolution of the Pullman/Roseland Area of Chicago, 1894-1917," *Mid-America* 74:3 (October 1992): 231-252. On welfare-capitalist programs see Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1960), 157-189; Stuart Brandes, *Welfare Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States, 1880-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975); Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 4.

⁸ Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike*, 3-4; "Kohler Village: A Town-planned Wisconsin Industrial Community, American in Spirit and Government," (Kohler, WI, 1928); "Kohler of Kohler: A Century of Progress, 1934," (Kohler, WI, 1934). On the link between welfare capitalism and "Americanization" see Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, ch. 4.

⁹ *Kohler of Kohler News*, November 1926. Competing plumbing manufacturers such as the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company, featured similar sorts of domestic scenes in their ads during the 1920s, but with less editorializing copy and no connection to a "village of homes" where the fixtures were produced.

centralized and augmented hygienic practices previously dispersed throughout and outside the house.¹⁰ The Kohler Company traded on these developments promote the necessity of its bathroom and kitchen fixtures. Thus, one 1917 Kohler ware advertisement expressly pictured a heart-shaped bathroom as the putative emotional and organic center of the home.¹¹ A 1926 ad featuring children brushing their teeth in a bathroom while a mother prepared their beds in the background elaborated the cultural significance of this theme:

When little children brush their teeth or scrub their faces shining pink, they are, unawares, living their lessons--those wordless lessons in the wholesome joy of cleanliness. A bathroom with beautiful fixtures of Kohler Ware is a *schoolroom*.

As another ad opined, bathroom fixtures offered lifelong lessons in the "pride of cleanliness," inspiring almost instinctive appreciation for the room's moral importance. Such advertisements championed domestic spatial arrangements that were vital to the inculcation of "American" standards of living and citizenship which Kohler Village shared with wider crusades for working-class hygiene.¹²

Indeed, well into the 1930s, investigations of working-class budgets and housing conditions took pains to emphasize the importance of improving sanitary facilities available to workers. Repeated surveys showed that over fifty percent of working-class families in Chicago in the 1920s lacked such facilities. With regard to toilet facilities, privy-vaults had been outlawed in the early twentieth century, and housing codes urged by reformers mandated indoor flush toilets, which had largely replaced privy vaults after World War I. But in many immigrant working-class neighborhoods the new toilets were in the yard or under the sidewalk. Reformers complained that this compromised privacy and cleanliness through indiscriminate use by passersby as well as the many families housed in a single building. In the absence of bathrooms or indoor toilets, a dedicated space for the bath itself was generally missing. Where it was provided, its location in a dark closet and lack of hot water often rendered it so unappealing for bathing that it was used to store dirty laundry instead. Reacting to condescending stereotypes of immigrant workers using baths to keep coal, however, housing reformers in Depression era New York insisted that "[p]erhaps the first statement that we should make is that investigators did not, in a single instance, find coal stored in the bath tub. This is true in spite of the fact that in many old law tenements the tubs are in the kitchen, and would have made a very convenient coal bin." These reformers found tenement-dwelling women so perfectly "in sync" with the "proper" use of a bath that they balked at accepting shower facilities in improved housing. Tenement dwellers associated showers with the lack of privacy the poor endured in public bath houses, and also noted that tubs were more efficient for bathing children and safer for the elderly. In short, though some

¹⁰ See Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948); Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *The Bathroom, The Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste* (Cambridge: MIT Visual Arts Center, 1992); Maureen Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences: American Household Plumbing, 1840-1890* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1996); Joel Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink* (Akron, OH: University of Akron, 1996); Marina Moskowitz, *Standard of Living* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), Chapter 4.

¹¹ Kohler Ware advertisement, *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 12, 1917, p. 98, Kohler Archives (hereafter KA) 2-100, 659.13 Kohler Co., Plumbing--Consumer Ads,

¹² Kohler Ware Advertisements, *Saturday Evening Post*, 1920s, KA 2-100, 659.13 Kohler Co. Plumbing Consumer Ads

reformers lamented that inadequate access to bathrooms denied working-class families the “encouragement toward cleanliness which good hot-water facilities offer,” many working-class women had their own specifications for desired plumbing fixtures they needed little encouragement to use.¹³

The New York reformers investigating working-class women's housing preferences in the 1930s also noted their emphasis on the kitchen as the most important room in the house. Many working-class women spent the bulk of their workdays in the kitchen, raising their children and overseeing family life and domestic labor there. This social significance of the kitchen was also reflected in the imaginary domestic geography of Kohler ads, but with a somewhat different spin. When a woman's kitchen measured up to modern plumbing standards, one 1923 ad declared “how proudly you throw open its door and present it for inspection” by friends. Women in Kohler ads opened their kitchens to public view with even greater flourishes over the course of the decade, especially as they exhibited the Kohler electric sink introduced in 1926. One of several sink-style electric dishwashers introduced (rather unsuccessfully) in the 1920s, the Kohler electric sink was touted in ads for the thrice-daily dishwashing chores it would save women. Reflecting a more middle-class aesthetic than the woman studied by New York housing reformers espoused, women in these ads proudly displayed their “electric servant” to older relatives and elegantly dressed guests. They emphasized the liberation from outmoded drudgeries endured by their housewifely forebears as well as from present-day servants that their new kitchen appliances provided.¹⁴

Women who lived in the Kohler Village homes the company publicized as embodying the essence of such modern liberations were not just rhetorically associated with hygienic, labor-saving plumbing fixtures. In the case of the Kohler electric sink, the company located them quite materially within the domestic geographies delineated in advertisements by having them serve as test cases for such products. As the *Kohler of Kohler News* extolled in 1926:

How satisfactory the new way [to ‘do the dishes’] is could quickly be learned by an Inquiring Reporter on a short house-to-house trip through Kohler Village; for in several Kohler homes the Kohler Electric Sink has been in daily use for more than a year.... Now...millions of American housewives are reading in the magazines what Kohler housewives could have told them any time--that today there is a new and better way to wash dishes than the old way that has been practiced ever since the earliest caveman husband went out to enjoy his after-dinner cigar...while his mate washed the stone plates!¹⁵

Both Kohler's own publicity and wider campaigns the company helped to develop for the plumbing industry elaborated on this Village-centered demonstration that women were especially favored beneficiaries of the civilizing influence of plumbing.

Electric sink advertising and promotion not only emphasized this household labor-saving dimension of Kohler products, but also tied it rhetorically to a wider empire of

¹³ Edith Abbott, *The Tenements of Chicago*, (Chicago: Univ of Chicago, 1936), pp 206-207; Women's City Club of New York, *Housing for the Family: A Study of Housing Essentials Compiled from Interviews with New York Housewives* (New York: Committee on Housing, Women's City Club of New York, 1936), pp. 1, 10, 13,

¹⁴ *Good Housekeeping*, April 1927; 2-100, 659.13 Kohler Co., Plumbing Consumer ads, 1915-29 (KA).

¹⁵ *Kohler of Kohler News*, November 1926, p. 3.

hygiene that, as we shall see, Kohler publicity was also promoting in this period. An important vehicle for this linkage was a survey of household fixtures installed throughout the US undertaken in 1925 and 1926 by the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Walter Kohler reported to colleagues in the plumbing and heating industry that the clubwomen

were appalled by what they found. They found hundreds of thousands of homes where the living conditions are not markedly superior to those of the peasantry of Europe.....They found thousands of women still carrying millions of gallons of water every year. The slogan of the women's clubs is 'Running Water in Every Home.' We can't have cultural development in this country until we have leisure, and by leisure I mean freedom from soul-destroying labor.¹⁶

Commenting on the implications of the survey in *Woman's Home Companion*, Federation President Mary Sherman went further, borrowing the words of advertising wizard Bruce Barton to capture racial distinctions of transnational labor that bubbled just below the hygienic civilization associated with modern plumbing. Women who did not take advantage of modern conveniences like electric washing machines were "selling their labor at coolie wages" while neglecting the higher calling of motherhood.¹⁷ Here the dilemma of whether to endure personal drudgery or pay servants' wages invoked in ads for the Kohler electric sink was thrown into new relief: modern plumbing conveniences saved women from the labor surrounding water and hygiene in "uncivilized" lands, as well as reviled groups of labor exploited at home.¹⁸ Similarly, Women's auxiliaries of the National Association of Master Plumbers studied the history of sanitation and plumbing in 1929 under the Orientalist conviction that "certainly the subject of sanitation is woman's own--and its evolution is one of the symbols of her release from the harem-like seclusion in which she was engulfed for hundreds of years."¹⁹

In the imagined geography of domestic interiors transformed by modern plumbing and extolled by Kohler publicity, then, women managed domestic hygienic spaces where they promoted to their families and friends the virtues of sanitary civilization. In these spaces they enjoyed modern conveniences only recently reserved, as Kohler's ads pointed out, for stately homes and the guests of fine hotels--and up to the 1930s still absent from on average a third of urban homes and over half of rural homes in the US.²⁰ Women depicted in such spaces were liberated by modern conveniences from anachronistic drudgery and seclusion. Significantly, the children whose modern bathrooms were schools of cleanliness were

¹⁶ *Monthly Service Bulletin of the Plumbing and Heating Industries* (May 1928), p. 9

¹⁷ Mary Sherman, "After the Federation Survey—What?," *Woman's Home Companion*, July 1926, p. 26.

¹⁸ On wider discourses constructing the "coolie" in relation to racialized conceptions of labor in and outside the home in the nineteenth century US, see Moon-ho Chung, "Outlawing 'Coolies': Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 57:3 (2005): 667-701; Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ *Monthly Service Bulletin of the Plumbing and Heating Industries* (February 1929), p. 9

²⁰ Stanley Lebergott, *The American Economy: Income, Wealth, and Want* (Princeton: 1976) estimates 51% of all US households, 85% of urban homes and 8 percent of farm households had flush toilets in 1930, see also Price V. Fishback and Dieter Lauszus, "The Quality of Services in Company Towns: Sanitation in Coal Towns During the 1920s," *The Journal of Economic History* 49:1 (March 1989), 125-144. Drawing on statistics generated by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce in the mid-1930s, the Kohler Company, seeking to stimulate the market for indoor plumbing fixtures, estimated that a quarter of American homes lacked "modern plumbing facilities," by which they apparently meant a full bathroom including sink, toilet, and tub and/or shower. *Kohler of Kohler News*, January 1935, 4-5

invariably scrubbed "pink", while the electric sink helped lighten their load or solve their "servant problem" by working for years at a cost that would buy a servant's help for only months.²¹ Thus housewives were saved from the association with the toil of peasant women in the European villages many of them or their parents had left behind (in the case of Kohler Village, as we shall see) or with the toil of sweated paid labor at home and abroad.

Domestic interiors represented only the smallest scale on which the Kohler Company, its resident workers in Kohler Village, or its consumers mapped new social relations occasioned by modern plumbing. The same early editions of the *Kohler of Kohler News* that championed Kohler Village as a domestic testing ground for products like the electric sink also proclaimed the expanding reach of Kohler products, and their civilizing hygienic properties, across the nation and globe.²²

National and Global Markets: An Empire of Hygiene

From the 1910s through the 1930s, the Kohler Company had reached beyond the regional market to which they had first sold the plumbing supplies that became their main products in the late nineteenth century. By the 1917 they had a national sales structure with showrooms stretching from New York to Los Angeles, and soon after were boasting of installations beyond the nation's continental borders in Alaska and Cuba. With the addition of electrical generators and later ceramic plumbing ware to their product line in the 1920s, the company sought worldwide markets for their wares in global networks that also provided access to the myriad materials required for their manufacture. The cultures of hygiene that Kohler fixtures sought to improve or enhance as their marketing network reached across the nation and abroad provided a recurrent theme in the company's narrative of global expansion. Members of the company's growing network of foreign distributors often offered poignant illustrations of this theme.

From the 1920s through the 1950s much of Kohler's export business--outside European exports handled by a London office--was the province of a New York firm, Construction Supplies Company, that specialized in what they boasted to the Kohler company as a "continuous effort and expenditure of money sending men to all parts of the world to educate foreign consumers and dealers to the use of modern American sanitary fixtures." Though the firm's organizers, Leon Kahn and Max Nathan, admitted that limited buying power for plumbing fixtures often constricted the range of their markets, and that market expansion involved campaigning to change foreign laws to permit installation of American sanitary ware, Construction Supplies Company boasted a long list of distributors concentrated in Caribbean, Central American and South American countries where US economic dominance had opened markets in the early twentieth century, and in East Asia, where early twentieth century enthusiasm for American planning principles among

²¹ Kohler Advertisement, *Saturday Evening Post*, May 21, 1927.

²² Early on, the *Kohler of Kohler News* located this model of hygiene in a widening map of modern sanitation delineated through the growing markets for Kohler products. At first the *News*, which began publication in November 1916, offered regional examples of the spread of the company's most modern plumbing products but also attested to soon-to-be-realized broader ambitions. Subsequent months included noteworthy installations in "modern" buildings in Jacksonville, Florida, and Seattle, Washington. By July reports the *News* indicated that installations had jumped beyond the United States to its colonial interests with the installation of 12 Kohler lavatories in the new Masonic Temple at Anchorage, Alaska *Kohler of Kohler News*, November 1916, p. 4, 7; February 1917, 9; March 1917, p. 17; July 1917, p. 17.

modernizing elites incorporated sanitary technology. Other Kohler representatives in China included Anderson, Meyer, and Company, who by 1930 had offices in "Shanghai, Canton, Harbin, Hongkong, Mukden, Peking, Tientsin, Peiping and Tsinan."²³

In Africa, Kohler export business was handled by more regionally and locally based agents--such as R.C. Gilfillan of Nairobi, who approached the company to seek sole agency for Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika territory from 1924 to 1963, or Goodwin and Co., Ltd., headquartered in Durban, South Africa and distributing throughout South Africa and Rhodesia, possibly as an agent of Construction Supplies Company. Most African distributors focussed less on plumbing ware than on the "Kohler Automatic Power and Light," an electric generator offered as a boon to remote farmers, mission stations, trading posts, hospitals, moving picture crews and theaters (though it also had implications for the company's geography of hygiene and domestic drudgery). By 1930 Gilfillan boasted that "practically every hotel and large hospital in East Africa where public electrical supply is not available are using Kohler Electric Plants," and sent pictures of Kohler-powered theaters and schools as well.²⁴ Other areas of the world were served by independent export/import agents dealing directly with Kohler's export department.

Reports from these agents portrayed a global campaign of hygiene with undertones of domestic and industrial toil. In January 1921, the *News* included a photograph of "The Bath Room---Chinese Style" furnished to its Seattle office by the representative of a Shanghai company. The bathroom included an English pottery-ware lavatory that "does not differ materially from many lavatories that might be seen in this country." But it coexisted with a "much more remarkable" bathtub that was "round and made of clay and...of Chinese manufacture" and in which "apparently it would be necessary to stand while bathing." The commode, significantly, had no water flushing system. Here hygienic progress and sanitary inefficiency battled in the confines of a single room.²⁵ But by the end of the decade there were signs of progress. "Young Marshall" Chang Hseuh-Liang had ordered "the most modern sanitary equipment of Kohler manufacture" for "Forty-seven rooms in the buildings being built for Marshal Chang's families and intimate staff in the walled city of Mukden" (Shenyang). Here western influence had aided the march of hygiene, as the contract for supplying and installing the fixtures had been undertaken by a Chinese concern led by two graduates of American universities who "are representative of the best type of Chinese engineers" and deserved credit for "the continued increase in the use of modern sanitary ware and plumbing fixtures in North China."²⁶ The young men in question participated in a flowering of American city planning practice in Chinese cities during the period of the Republic, when Chinese planners and engineers drew on a variety of model garden city projects imbued with many of the same planning ideals as Kohler. Such engineers formed the Association of Chinese and American Engineers, whose journal announced in its premier

²³ Leon S. Kahn, Construction Supplies Co., to Herbert V. Kohler, February 16, 1928, KA 1-200, 651.5, Office Files—HVK, Construction Supplies Co.; *Kohler of Kohler News*, May 1930, 13.

²⁴ *Kohler of Kohler News*, April 1930, p. 13, November 1930, p. 15-16, September 1948, p. 7; see also KA 1-200, 651.5, Folder 186, Kohler Co., Office Files, HVK Sr., Gilfillan & Co., Ltd., *Braby's Natal Directory*, 1928-1938 (after 1935 Braby's show's Goodwin & Co. to have been taken over by or changed into Magna Importers) dealing in Kohler Lighting Plants, Philco Radios and Gibson Refrigerators.

²⁵ *Kohler of Kohler News*, January 1921, p. 15

²⁶ *Kohler of Kohler News*, June 1929, pp. 3-7. *Kohler of Kohler News*, May 1930, p. 13

issue announced a program that echoed Kohler's conception of the worldwide promise of modern sanitation:

As a country China is similar in many respects to America and since each year sees more of her sons educated in the schools and colleges of America, and each year sees a larger number of these students returning to China, it is only natural that the engineers in China and the engineers in America should co-operate and work together in the development of this country along modern scientific lines.... In hundreds of cities throughout China engineers will be engaged in the building of electric light plants, water-works, sewerage systems, highways and many other civic works which mark the march of a nation along the paths of progress and material prosperity.²⁷

Due to such influence, apparently, the battle between modern and antiquated sanitation seen in the Chinese bathroom of 1921 was being won for the West with Kohler's help.

Though the *News*'s heroic coverage of American-trained engineers aiding sanitary progress in China made little comment on the toil saved or expended in the Chinese buildings fitted with Kohler ware, it hinted at a wider movement toward what Ruth Rogaski has recently termed "hygienic modernity" in China that intricately intertwined water and work. While working with American architect Henry Murphy on a plan modernize the Nationalist capital of Nanjing through such American planning techniques as zoning, the installation of modern sewage systems, water pumping stations, public office buildings, hospitals and schools, engineer Ernest P. Goodrich remarked on the "several thousand men" who continued to "peddle water on the streets in buckets carried over the shoulder and in water carts hauled by cooley-power."²⁸ As Rogaski observes, the persistence of contentious "Dark Drifter" guilds of water and night soil carriers as factors in the provision of "clean" municipal water in the Treaty Port of Tianjin had much to do with the power of such guilds themselves and their ability to manipulate a complicated patchwork of water provision produced by various imperial concessions piping water to different constituents in the city.²⁹ As we have seen, specters of such water-carrying labor haunted the project of modernization that American shared with Chinese planners in plumbing-industry imagery.

Some *Kohler News* reports on the company's global marketing campaigns addressed issues of toil much more straightforwardly, as in the example of the "Kohler Competitor" depicted in the July 1926 edition of the news. The picture portrayed an African "man of all work" dressed in traditional garb, standing with shield held before him. It had been sent by the George A. Berry, a South African dealer for the "Kohler Automatic." Berry's commentary on his photograph social distinctions implied in Kohler's bathroom and electric sink advertising. Berry described the "Kohler Competitor" as:

"The only machine that beats the 'Kohler'. This man of all work pumps 500 gallons of water daily with no upkeep charges--no gasoline--no cylinder oil--no attention--for twenty-five cents per day. Can you beat it?"³⁰

²⁷ Jeffrey W. Cody, "American Planning in Republican China, 1911-1937," *Planning Perspectives*, 11 (1996), 339-377; quote p. 350 from *Journal of the Association of Chinese and American Engineers* (1920), pp. 1-3.

²⁸ Cody, "American Planning in Republican China," p. 360 quote from E.P. Goodrich, "Some Experiences of an Engineer in China," *Michigan Engineer* 48 (1930), p. 15.

²⁹ Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 207-224

³⁰ *Kohler of Kohler News*, July 1924, p. 10.

Here, the labor power of the colonized world offered competition with the efficiency offered by "modern" conveniences manufactured by Kohler.

Berry's preoccupation with the water-carrying capacities of the Kohler competitor can be contextualized in the environment of Durban's mushrooming white and black settlements of the 1920s. Not only housing but also water—periodically restricted for whites with regard to the watering of gardens or washing of pavements and often unavailable to Africans—and electricity—municipal provision of which was a topic of hotly contested local politics—failed to keep pace with Durban's growing post-WWI population. White Durbanites benefited from both municipal housing schemes and, for the more affluent, the expansion of the city into privately-developed "garden suburbs" providing upscale Kohler-like amenities to the north. But "suburb" would also eventually refer to the growing neighborhoods shacks rented to Africans barred through increasingly vigorous "influx control" from land ownership in town. Here water carrying represented one avenue for the entrepreneurship that had been obstructed on other fronts through the infamous (and eventually national) "Durban system" of funding urban influx control and minimal housing for urban African workers through the erection of municipal beer halls to replace "native," and often female, beer-sellers. Such districts soon became the focus of white ratepayers' and health officials' fears of contagion for what was deemed their inadequate sanitation provisions. As black activists regularly pointed out, however, the erection of dwellings deemed hygienically appropriate was usually beyond the means of a population racially denied access to skilled construction trades—or any employment approaching the wages that dictated the prices of dwelling such trades could build. Insult was added to injury for some when the housing schemes provided for African labor boasted "modern" water-borne sewage only in public latrines. Such conditions produced the irony that African householders whom whites perceived as being among the most "civilized" shunned water-borne sewage for less sanitary bucket systems that had the virtue of providing the "privacy" associated in civilizing discourses with western practices of cleanliness "enshrined" in modern bathrooms.³¹

Meanwhile outlying farming districts, where products like the Kohler Automatic were regularly marketed in annual agricultural shows, were also blandished with advertisements for "native" labor from agencies located nearby Berry's dealership in Doonside.³² Many of the young men hired through such schemes began their urban working careers as "houseboys" servicing the domestic cooking and cleaning needs of white suburbs for meager wages, or joined the ranks of registered laundry workers as proletarianized "Kohler competitors." Some of their wages went to shore up hard pressed African homesteads in the rural areas, which featured agricultural shows too, like the relatively long-

³¹ Research Section of the Department of Economics, University of Natal, *Natal Regional Survey, No. 2, The Durban Housing Survey: A Study of Housing in a Multi-racial Community* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1952), 299-304, 354-377; RJ Randall, "Some Reflections on the Financial Policy of Certain Municipalities Toward the Natives Within Their Boundaries," *The South African Journal of Economics*, June 1939, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London; P.W. Leidler *Social Survey of an Urban Native Location: Being an extract from the Annual Health Report of the Medical Officer of Health, East London, 1st July, 1930 – 30th June 1931* (East London: The Standard Printing Co. LTD., 1931) Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London; Paul Maylam, "The Evolution of Urban Apartheid: Influx Control and Segregation in Durban, c. 1900-1951," in B. Guest and J.M. Sellers, eds. *Receded Tides of Empire: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Natal and Zululand Since 1910* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1994).

³² *Natal Mercury*, May 13, 1924, p. 13

standing show at Inanda mission, supported by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. This show focussed on plows and harrows, rather than generators like Kohler's, and offered alongside civilizing training in household arts—imagined as the source of uplifted “native” Christian households as well as providers of domestic labor--pursued at Inanda Seminary for girls. There a commercial laundry run by local women alongside young African converts also did the washing for white Durban households into the 1920s, though the Seminary struggled to find adequate water supplies for this industry in an area still racked by conflicts over water provision. The Kohler competitor and these sisters also figured fugitively in the labor-saving significance attached to Kohler domestic fixtures.³³

In other cases, Kohler products built on US imperial maneuvers to spread sanitary progress. Where progress and modernity had already entered through US occupation, as in the case of the Dominican Republic in the 1910s and 1920s, the hygienic culture of Kohler plumbing was not far behind. In a June 1929 article the *News* congratulated the Dominican Republic on its “hotels and dwellings with modern comforts; a modern code of sanitation; an excellent system of highways and a well developed system of public improvement.” Such progress was associated with the influence of European or American powers--the expulsion of France in the nineteenth century brought on a West Indies’ “Dark Ages” ended only with the advent of US interest. Earlier indigenous populations “left little evidence of their civilization,” while the Spaniards “built copiously and well,” as in the case of the main public and private buildings of Santo Domingo which “still serve modern purposes excellently,” albeit “with the installation of modern sanitary equipment.” The article illustrated many buildings where Kohler was contributing such fixtures, among them the home of the president, officials of electric light and realty firms, and the home of the President of the Land Court which, organized under US occupation had been a vehicle for transferring Dominican lands to large sugar companies.³⁴

This identification of Kohler products with an ever-wider empire of hygiene was given national and international publicity in the Kohler exhibit for the 1933-34 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago. In a modernist building graced with murals depicting far-flung nations that furnished materials and markets for Kohler ware, the company portrayed to fairgoers the centrality of Kohler village in a map of modern hygienic living. The mural outside the building, described in the company's exposition brochure and the *News*, built upon recent *News* articles in its delineation of Kohler's widespread reach, with images from Greenland, Mexico, China, Indochina, the Malay States, Africa and Turkey. As accompanying text for the mural described:

The tireless search for materials of a definitely high standard for Kohler products leads to strange places of the earth. From the hinterland of Greenland comes Kryolith--from the mines of Chile, salt-peter--from the open pits of the Malay States, tin oxide---from China, antimony oxide--from England, ball clay, China clay and Cornwall stone.

³³ Paul La Hausse, “‘The Cows of Nongoloza’: Youth, Crime and Amalaita Gangs in Durban, 1900-1936,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16:1 (March 1990), 79-111; Heather Hughes, “Promoting the Countryside: African Agricultural Shows in Natal, 1925-1935,” *Africana Seminar* 16, March, 1988, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, in Campbell Collections, Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban; Agnes A. Wood, *Shine Where you Are: A History of Inanda Seminary: 1869-1969* (Lovedale Press, 1972).

³⁴ *Kohler of Kohler News*, June 1929, pp. 3-7.

The United States, rich in iron, copper, feldspar, flourspar, zinc oxide, borax, quartz and many other materials used at Kohler, is likewise combed for the best.

Just as Kohler of Kohler finds raw materials in many parts of the earth, so likewise are the finished products sent everywhere. There is scarcely a country in the world where Kohler plumbing fixtures, electric plants or heating equipment have not been installed.³⁵

Kohler achieved this broad reach for materials and markets in service of the production of bathrooms that promoted American standards of hygiene: a purely modern conception that has become the symbol of America's emphasis on personal cleanliness.³⁶

At the company's Century of Progress exhibit, Kohler Village was featured in detail as a community that "contributes to healthful living" in the opening pages of the company's exposition brochure, which also featured several photographs of Village homes and amenities. The text for this display emphasized both the "American" home-ownership encouraged at Kohler and the modern standards of domestic hygiene that the Village observed and helped to spread. "The Village of Kohler," the brochure explained:

is modern in the more usual sense of having adequate service of those utilities which contribute to living comfort and protection of property, health and life. Electricity, water, gas and telephone services are maintained. It has a complete sewerage system; with a modern disposal plant...

In a community where "industrial workers own substantial homes, with modern conveniences" such sanitation amenities helped to make the village the hub of a widening network of modern hygiene carried outward by Kohler products through "an intangible, improving quality passing into every product which bears the Kohler mark." This identification between the Village and its modern products was given further emphasis in the inclusion of a diorama of the village in Kohler's Century of Progress Building.

This mapping of Kohler Village as the axis of hygienic progress uniquely and nationalistically available through Kohler products went along with the spirit of the exposition as a whole. In the midst of the Great Depression, the exposition successfully recruited twenty corporations to build separate exhibits focussing on processes of production and technological innovation through which they contributed to the fair's stylistic and idealistic theme of modernity.³⁷ These exhibits urged up-to-date improvements, mainly in the form of household consumption items, on its predominantly American visitors while also extending the colonial themes of the 1931 Paris International Colonial and Overseas Exposition which had inspired the Century of Progress through its message that such modern progress provided for "rapid social, educational, and sanitary development realized through the kindly tutorship of the United States."³⁸ In Chicago, this theme of the colonial "moderne" was simplified to virtual caricature through Native American and African exhibits that depicted "progress" through a contrast between the "primitive" and the "modern".

³⁵ *Kohler of Kohler: A century of progress, 1934.* (Kohler: Kohler Co., 1934), pp. 7-8.

³⁶ *Kohler of Kohler: A century of progress, 1934*, p. 9.

³⁷ See Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Roland Marchand, "Corporate Imagery and Popular Education: World's Fair and Expositions in the United States, 1893-1940," in David E. Nye and Carl Pedersen, eds. *Consumption and American Culture* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1991); John G. Cawelti, "America on Display: The Worlds Fairs of 1876, 1893, 1933," in Frederic Cople Jaher, ed. *The Age of Industrialism in America; essays in social structure and cultural values* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 346-356.

³⁸ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, p. 76

(Relatedly, an issue of the *Kohler of Kohler News* appearing in the wake of the Century of Progress linked Kohler products to progress among Native Americans whose new reservation schools featured modern toilet facilities supporting a curriculum that featured “education in sanitation and dietetics, in order to improve health and living conditions on the reservations.”) At the Exposition, Kohler’s exhibit helped to bolster this theme by promoting the unrivaled hygiene of American bathrooms, and their spread throughout the globe.³⁹

As the company's commentary on global labor relations in plumbing suggested, the achievement of civilizing culture through plumbing in the US was measured through distinctions with less-civilized labor and hygiene elsewhere. White households in the US, sometimes recently transplanted from European peasantry, enjoyed the civilizing and female-labor saving benefits of modern Kohler plumbing while the non-white, non-Western world slowly caught up by training their sanitary engineers in the US. Where there were, presumably, no hygienic bathtubs to produce pink-scrubbed children, slower progress was made. Where advanced plumbing, heating and electrical systems were unavailable to save labor for white homemakers, non-white laborers competed with the efficiency of Kohler products through low-wage work—but found the wages from such work inadequate to supply them with the hygienic amenities.

In these delineations of an international hierarchy of plumbing, through which Kohler products competed with varied forms of sweated non-white labor worldwide, the company offered a modernizing gloss on the geography of what Amy Kaplan has termed the “Manifest Domesticity”. Kaplan uses this turn on “Manifest Destiny” to probe the national and transnational scope of the “separate spheres” charted for men and women in the domestic ideology of the first half of the nineteenth century. In particular, she addresses the ways in which women’s domestic sphere participated in the ethnic and racial dynamics of migration and empire. Predicated on anxiety about the “foreign” or “savage” elements in its midst—namely, children and immigrant and African American servants—white women’s special “empire” of the heart and home, also served as the foundation for civilizing discourses aimed at non-white and colonized populations on the North American continent and beyond.⁴⁰ Through advertising, participation in projects aimed at using plumbing to enhance the “civilization” of the American home, and publicity for the expanding network of materials and markets in which it traded, the Kohler company reconfigured Manifest Domesticity into a modern empire of domestic hygiene with new lines of challenge and fracture. In this reconfiguration, white American women had to cleave to the hygienic heights of their modern plumbing--the best in tubs-- to avoid comparison with the most exploited of the global workforce--the worst of toil: or the specter of the “Kohler Competitor” transported to the heart of the American home.

As became apparent in the 1930s and 1950s, battles over the toil that produced Kohler tubs could also generate challenges to the global map of hygiene in which company publicity implicated Kohler workers and village residents. Kohler workers and their families inhabited varied maps of domestic toil and hygiene that sometimes rearranged the imagined geographies of Kohler’s hygienic empire.

³⁹ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, pp. 83, 104, 167-68, *Kohler of Kohler News*, October 1935, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” in Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 111-134.

American workers, Global Toil

Though the labor conflicts that erupted at Kohler in the 1930s and 1950s were about many local issues unrelated to geography or hygiene, their participants engaged the map of hygienic civilization in which the company had located the village. Indeed, some of the frustrations that sparked labor unrest in the 1930s emanated from the company's very efforts to promote and sustain high "American" standards of living among its employees. The company had a long-held commitment to "continuity of employment," which Walter J. Kohler represented as being of a piece with its efforts to cultivate the village as an attractive lace for employees to live. Rather than laying workers off at the outset of the Great Depression—which started earliest in the home construction industry where the company sold its goods—Kohler had built up stocks in the numerous warehouses that serviced its widespread national trade and even borrowed in order to sustain his workforce. Thus, President Kohler and his management associates insisted that their initial response to the housing slump had demonstrated their concern for employees, especially in comparison to competitors who had been quicker to shed employees as conditions in the construction industry. As company warehouses across the continent became full, however, reduced hours and layoffs began in the early 1930s. These measures generated resentments, both among workers in the Village who were allowed extra hours but required to assign some of their wages to pay for their mortgages, and workers living elsewhere who were cut back further. Such frustrations combined with shop-floor grievances to spark union organization.

A further spur to unionization was the passage of the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act, and especially its union-friendly Section 7(a), which guaranteed the right to collective bargaining through workers' freely chosen representatives. Indeed, the enthusiasm with which unionists embraced and brandished Section 7 (a) exacerbated the bitterness of the ensuing strike. In the spirit of intra-industry cooperation which he had embraced as a central mover in the national organization of Plumbing and Heating Industries in the 1920s, and more general support of President Herbert Hoover's efforts to temper laissez-faire capitalism through voluntarist industry agreements and public-service activities, Walter Kohler had taken a leading role in drawing up the codes on wages and prices for the durable goods sectors in which he manufactured as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration. Insisting to National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) investigators during the strike that his company had complied with voluntary codes raising wages in his plants when other competitors did not, he found unionists' demands for higher remuneration particularly galling. But President Kohler, a staunch proponent of the "American open shop," also struggled with the labor provisions of the act, which linked the industry codes he helped to author to new, federal support for unionization.⁴¹

These measures themselves quickly generated rival company and union conceptions of the way "American" living standards were achieved. For Kohler, such standards were achieved through "happy," "friendly" relations between employer and workers, facilitated through a common but voluntarily undertaken commitment to the production and civilizing purposes of the organization. In the context of diminishing Depression-era work hours and shrinking paychecks, in some cases exacerbating older frustrations with relations of power and control in the plant, union members began to associate "American" standards with rights

⁴¹ Kohler testimony to NLRB, UAW Local 833 Collection, Walter Reuther Archives

to representation independent of company relations. Emboldened by Section 7(a), by August 1933 Kohler's union activists had gained enough support to receive a charter from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) designating their organization as Federal Labor Union No. 18545. Interestingly, the nascent local's organizing meetings invoked imagery that challenged the company's vision of its workers homes as models of the sanitary civilization it offered to the world. In his notes on one meeting, future local president Charles Heymanns referred to the organizer's recourse to pictures of a mother hunched over a wash tub amidst hungry children as the results of America's open shop labor policies.⁴² While the company countered such organizing efforts by forming a company union, the Kohler Workers' Association (KWA), Local 18545's leadership continued to try to negotiate a contract. With little progress on the union's main demands for collective bargaining, seniority rights, protection against preemptory discharge, thirty-hour work week, and reinstatement of laid-off workers, a strike was called effective July 16, 1934.⁴³

Company and union statements about the strike soon invoked geography as they tried to make sense of the meaning of domestic culture cultivated in the town. This was especially the case as the two sides made conflicting sense of the violent exchange that took place between rock-wielding strike supporters and gun-toting village deputies on July 27, 1934. In company publicity, strikers represented "outsiders" threatening the home-centered lives of villagers. Such representations of the town, however, contradicted the extensive web of materials and markets that the ongoing Century-of-Progress Exposition and, before it, decades of reporting in the *Kohler of Kohler News* about the company and village's spreading geographical interests had established. Union spokespeople picked up on this contradiction and turned it to their own alternative geography of Kohler worker interests.

These laborite spatial politics found especially clear expression in *The New Deal*, a labor weekly launched in May 1934 on the eve of the Kohler strike in the nearby city of Sheboygan. Here workers asserted the claims to networks of influence and common interest as far-reaching as the sources of materials and markets Kohler claimed for its products. "For Mr. Kohler, who goes to the far corners of the earth to sell hi product...to cry out against active 'outside' interest in the strike," the paper complained, "is to ask for rights for himself that he would deny to his employees."⁴⁴ It was also to restrict workers to relating to the rest of the world only through the white and lavender tubs the company produced. Through the advances of Section 7 (a), Kohler workers had established a different kind of identification with the producers of the materials Walter Kohler and his company reached across the world to procure. For Walter Kohler to deny such identification in his defense of the Kohler factory and village from "outsiders" was to forget the labor that went into the worldwide resources upon which his manufacture relied:

He forgets that workers, brothers in the working class of his employees, have slaved to produce these materials. He forgets that the coal that fires the furnaces that burn the faces of his employees and the sand that eats their lungs were dug out of the earth in the world outside of Kohler.

...

⁴² Notes, 10-14-33 Organizational Meeting, Local 18545, Box 2, Folder As, Charles Heymanns Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society

⁴³ For more on strike see Kathryn Oberdeck, "Class, Place, and Gender: Contested Domestic and Industrial Space in Kohler, Wisconsin, 1920-1960," *Gender and History* 13 (April 2001): 97-137 and Walter Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike: Thirty Years of Conflict* (Boston: Beacon, 1966).

⁴⁴ *The New Deal* July 20, 1934, p. 1

Of all the 'outsiders' who have a right to be concerned in the welfare of the Kohler workers, the members of the organized labor movement the world over are in the foreground. Others are interested chiefly in the shininess of the tubs; the color schemes of the plumbing works of art produced by this company, in the prices charged for them.

The organized labor movement is interested chiefly in the human elements involved in the business. Through the gloss of the tubs it sees the misery of workers frustrated in their efforts to be free men.⁴⁵

From this perspective, the rigors of the Kohler competitor or took on potentially different significance to the production of plumbing and electrical ware at Kohler. For these workers, the map of modern hygiene had to be charted through far-flung worksites as well as the homes, bathrooms, missions, and municipal buildings where Kohler ware was installed.

An important faultline along which striking Kohler workers of the 1930s and 1950s would re-envision networks of tubs and toil connecting them to other regions was that of "Americanism". Kohler Village fit well into the missionary zeal with which the company represented itself as spreading hygienic civilization globally in part because it stood out as an engine of Americanization among immigrants. Two-thirds of the village's 1930 households had individuals who were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and 16.4% of the population was foreign born. In the American Club, intended as a "domesticating" influence for single immigrant workers, 26 of 44 residents were immigrants, and another 14 were the children of immigrants. Many of these residents had embraced American citizenship and identity even before the company began its vigorous Americanization programs of the 1910s and 1920s, and most of them were naturalized citizens. The company acknowledged these immigrant origins with occasional *News* features on subjects like quaint traditions for observing Christmas they had brought from their places of origin—while also rendering such traditions nostalgic by noting the difficulty with which they were maintained overseas. This tone reinforced the more general focus on immigrant participation in citizenship classes aimed at integrating them into the "American" standards of domestic life and hygiene inculcated in the town. As labor tensions increased in the 1930s and after, however, "American standards," immigrant traditions," and the cultural distinctions that underlay them became contested concepts..⁴⁶

In both strikes, unions reinterpreted the global trading networks the company claimed for themselves while also revising what "American" standards represented. For striking workers of the 1930s, section 7 (a) itself proscribed new American standards that applied to the world of toil. The *New Deal* declared issues of "American standards of living—American treatment for American workers-- and enforcement of American labor legislation are the issues of the strike of Federal Union no. 18545 against the Kohler." Contrary to the what the paper regarded as company propaganda about Walter J. Kohler as a "benevolent industrial father" presiding over a "happy family," the *New Deal* insisted, workers had endured years of illegitimate pay deductions for defective products and more recent termination on the company's group insurance plan when they took temporary jobs to weather the lay-offs that had interrupted the company's "continuity of employment" traditions. They regarded themselves as "the real Americans of this section of the country,"

⁴⁵ *The New Deal*, August 3, 1934, p. 8.

⁴⁶ 1930 Census, Kohler; *Kohler of Kohler News*, April 1926, 6;

carrying the American flag at the head of their picket line as they proclaimed to the world their support of their new-found rights as workers.⁴⁷

Representation of the union and its claim on newly minted rights as a claim on “Americanism” could prove especially important to the organization’s most recently immigrated members. This appears to have been especially the case for Sheboygan County’s Volga Germans. These German speaking “Russians” (as they were styled in the US Census and the American communities to which they emigrated, even while they thought of themselves as German) were descendents of German farmers whom Catherine the Great had recruited to settle along the Volga river in the 1760s. They or their parents had fled to the U.S. between the 1870s and the 1920s in the wake of new land pressure, the termination of their exemption from Russian military service, and demands that their schools be conducted in Russian rather than German. While some of the earliest to arrive from Russia took advantage of the Homestead act to purchase land and carry on their agricultural way of life in Nebraska, Kansas, the Dakotas and Colorado, those who began to arrive in Sheboygan in the 1890s found no such land available and settled for industrial work in local factories, including Kohler’s or, in the case of women, domestic service in well-to-do households not yet equipped with Kohler-made “electric servants.. They only gradually assimilated into the older German-American immigrant culture that dominated the area. For awhile they sustained their own Lutheran church, St. Stephens, and they established their own benefit societies, such as the Volga Aid, whose baseball teams competed with the Kohler company teams. They spoke a dialect of German unfamiliar to more established residents, who regarded them with some disdain.⁴⁸

Volga Germans who joined Local 18545 suggest something of the alternative geographies of household labor and “American” identity that union affiliation came to represent. In Kohler Village, where many of whose residents had embraced the company’s “American” standards of living and working and found unpalatable the union’s tendency to disparage Walter J. Kohler’s reputation for benevolence (a widespread sentiment that led to the eventual victory of the KWA in NLRB elections), Volga Germans stand out as having contributed the largest number of immigrant AFL unionists living in the village, among them some of the most loyal and militant. While many workers listed in Local 18545 president Charles Heymann’s files as having signed membership applications later renounced their interest in the AFL union in favor of the KWA, Kohler Village’s Russian Germans were not among these. Moreover, the affidavits signed by workers who claimed they had only signed AFL application blanks under pressure from fellow workers reveal that Russian German immigrants or descendents living in Kohler were among the most ardent early champions of the union applying such pressure. Interestingly, from the point of view of the social geography of hygienic labor imagined in Kohler advertising, two of these early union organizers were married to women who worked as chars in the Kohler offices, and one early Russian German member housed a second-generation Russian German maid in his Kohler

⁴⁷ The New Deal, clipping 1934, n.d., Walter Uphoff Collection, Box 9, Folder 28, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

⁴⁸ *A Time For Reflection, The First One Hundred Years: Hundredth Anniversary of the Germans from Russia in Sheboygan, Wisconsin* (Sheboygan: Greater Sheboygan Chapter, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1992); Kathleen Anne Mapes, *Defining the Boundaries: family farmers, migrant labor, industrial agriculture and the state in the rural midwest, 1898-1938*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2000.

Village home. Whether Wilma Maertz was a maid for striker Ernst Reichardt's household--which included two small children and a boarder as well as his factory-employed wife, Bettie--or roomed there while working for a more wealthy employer is unclear from census record. In either case her presence and the work of the Volga German office chars signaled a variation from the normative vision of Kohler advertisements, which featured servantless households overseen by a wife and mother devoted to hygienic work in the home.⁴⁹

Perhaps these departures from the hygienic household geography Kohler advertised, along with the militancy of some of the Russian German household heads, helped contribute to the reputation for truculence that Russian Germans acquired within the context of the strike. Conservative commentator Garet Garrett publicized this perspective nationally in his October 1934 article, "Section Seven-A in Sheboygan," published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. He described local Russian Germans as "a sultry element, temperamentally instable, with a low ignition point" who had never been recognized as kin by "Sheboygan Germans." They were known, he claimed, "to be difficult, easily moved to a sense of injury, and, on the whole, a little troublesome," and represented "a rather low grade of labor." Testimony before the NLRB confirms that Christ Gorde a Russian German immigrant who served as secretary and bargaining committee member was regarded this way in the plant. John Raml, the German immigrant who supervised the enamel shop where Gorde worked, described him as a troublesome and inefficient worker who blamed others for the faulty work deducted from his pay, created "noise in the department," and had to be told "to shut his mouth." In this context, Gorde understandably embraced a union whose publications described him instead as having a "heart and a love for his fellow man...as big as his 250 pound body" as well as a reputation for skilled workmanship. Additionally, when Gorde sought American citizenship in the midst of the Kohler strike, union circles rather than Kohler company Americanization classes proved decisive to his goal. AFL investigations into Gorde's irregular naturalization exam revealed that his examiner had ventured into "irrelevant" issues, and prompted a resolution in his favor dictated by U.S. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins. For Gorde as for the Volga German households that supplied Kohler Village's unionists, "American" standards were represented by the networks reaching from local union circles through federal agencies to a world of toilers, rather than from "American" standards represented in the normative households situated at the heart of the company's hygienic empire.⁵⁰

Homemaking womenfolk of Kohler strikers in the 1930s also rearranged the associations of tubs, hygiene and toil articulated in the championship of American hygienic standards standards. Their enthusiasm for many of ideals the company promoted is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the "Hints for Mothers" column submitted almost weekly by Eva Katherine Burbey, one-time Kohler Village resident, wife of one of the union leaders, Guy Burbey, and eventually the secretary of the Women's Auxiliary of the Central Labor Union. Mrs. Burbey's hints echoed many of the strategies advanced by the women's groups that proliferated in Kohler Village. In addition to experiments with the Kohler electric sink, Village housewives had opportunities for a variety of Kohler-sponsored programs centered on home improvement, especially through its annual "Better Homes Week" celebration

⁴⁹ Membership Lists, Local 18545, Charles Heymanns Collection; KWA Affidavits, Local 833 Collection, Reuther Archives, 1930 Census, Village of Kohler.

⁵⁰ "Strike Committee Members have Long Service Records with Kohler," *The New Deal*, August 3, 1934, Clippin, Uphoff Papers; Henry Ohl to Charles Heymann, March 26, 1937, and Francis Perkins to Henry Ohl, March 22, 1937, Box 2, Folder 7, Charles Heymanns Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

conducted in association with the "Better Homes in America" movement. Overseen by an advisory board originally headed by Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the national movement echoed many contemporary themes of domestic improvement that made the 1920s ripe for the very sort of welfare capitalist programs Kohler Village embodied.⁵¹ The Village, and specifically its women's club, headed by Walter Kohler's sister Marie C. Kohler, staged elaborate Better Homes Week programs complete with an often newly built demonstration home featuring the latest in Kohler hygiene products. By the 1930s the Demonstration Home design revolved around the specific needs of an "imaginary family" which sometimes took on interests reflecting women's engagement with the wider global networks in which the company traded in materials and products. In 1935, for example, according to descriptions of Better Homes Week activities in the *Kohler of Kohler News*

the imaginary occupants of the Demonstration house are interested in Mexico, its history, arts, and crafts, and there are examples of a hand woven, cross-stitched wall hanging in the living room, bits of glass, tile, pottery, and baskets, which not only reveal an interest in handicrafts but also promote a more friendly attitude toward this fascinating land south of the Rio Grande.⁵²

Like the Village's Better Homes' Week programs, Mrs. Burbey's *New Deal* column was full of suggestions on how to run a happy, comfortable, family-centered home on a budget. But sometimes she strayed from the methods for achieving such homes recommended in company advertising, in ways that echoed broader reassessments of the relation between home, nation, and globe reflected elsewhere in the paper. Burbey wondered, for example, about the wisdom of replacing all the manual arts of the home with laborsaving equipment, on the argument that abolishing domestic handiwork robbed children of opportunities to learn the dexterity and skill of manual labor.⁵³ Other columns in the Woman's Page and throughout the *New Deal* regularly emphasized the struggle of working people to find decent housing, but rather than address that problem in terms of the particular consumer products that would improve individual houses, the *New Deal's* writers tended to look to government or union programs to rationalize housing markets and provide low-cost housing opportunities. Linking up with Farmer-Labor politics later in the decade, the paper's Woman's Page addressed the extra drudgery of farm life not by recommending water piped into better plumbing fixtures and electricity provided by generators manufactured by Kohler, but public provision of electricity and water.⁵⁴

Some entries in the women's page even suggested that working-class women engaged in such redefinitions of the domestic politics of tubs and toil might also extend their concerns about the rigors of domestic labor into the imperial theater where the company staged its hygienic empire. For example, a 1935 article complained that a socialite display of Puerto Rican needle-crafts in Washington DC obscured the low wages and sweated labor endured by female needleworkers, often engaged in piece-labor in their homes.⁵⁵ Such commentary linked homes, sanitation, and toil in a very different configuration than that proposed in the company's empire of hygiene. It also hinted of variations on company-sponsored

⁵¹ See Janet Hutchison, "Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal," *Journal of Policy History* 1997 9(2): 184-210.

⁵² *Kohler of Kohler News*, July 1935, pp. 4-5.

⁵³ *The New Deal*, October 19, 1934, p. 4; June 28, 1935, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *New Deal*

⁵⁵ *New Deal* ? 1935—check reference

connections--fostered in the Better Homes program-- between the domestic toil of Kohler Village and that of the Latin American/Caribbean arenas where the company found its most extensive export markets.

Such alternatives languished for over a decade after Kohler strikers of the 1930s lost their battle and officially ended their strike in 1940. But this defeat did not extinguish alternative geographies among Kohler workers or Village residents. A longer, fiercer and ultimately successful 1950s strike produced substantial links between Kohler workers and plumbing ware producers elsewhere in the country through the UAW-CIO. As I have described elsewhere, the national bureaucracy the CIO had achieved by the 1950s both expanded the scale of labor connections that Kohler unionists could make and diminished some of the more creative local innovations in labor geography, particularly among women.⁵⁶ What is especially significant here are the new variations on Kohler worker's national and global connections that Kohler's UAW Local 833 produced, as well as the international reverberations that UAW affiliation provoked.

Whereas Kohler's 1930s unionists had elaborated mainly rhetorical connections to the networks of toil they counterpoised to the company's trade in tubs, UAW Local 833 staged more direct engagements with other workers caught up in the labor supporting the company's international networks. An example was the notorious the "clayboat incident" of July, 1954, when unionists and union supporters blocked the delivery of English clay bound for the Kohler Company on the Norwegian steamship *SS Fossum*. Union radio announcements heralding the ship's approach helped to incite a melee at the dock when company officials and contractors showed up to unload the ship after the July 4 Independence Day holiday. Initially, however, the Local 833's engagement with the ship enacted the connection with international toilers that Local 18545 had only described. To publicize these connections, the union sent out a "Kohler strikers' navy" to greet the ship, complete with pamphlets in Norwegian, German and English explaining to the sailors on board that the clay was headed for a strikebound plant. The leaflets urged the sailors not to judge the US by the example set by Kohler, while reports of the armada's activities on the radio encouraged strikers to invite the sailors to their homes to "get them to understand what our country is really like." Once again, union affiliation provided a filter for the global representation of "American" standards of life and labor that, according to the union, the company had betrayed.⁵⁷

But in the wake of World War II, during which many immigrant sons and grandsons had solidified their commitment to a polyglot America through military service, the interplay of immigrant traditions and "American" identities took on new associations shaped by the Cold War. Company claims were relatively constant: in the 1950s as in the 1930s unionization campaigns were undertaken by "outsiders" to the community who assaulted "American" freedoms to jobs and homes upheld in the village. Whereas the AFL union of the 1930s had competed with the company as a conduit for the "American" identities and aspirations, however, the union of the 1950s tended to pick on the Austrian origins of the Kohler family to paint the then-current head of the company, Herbert V. Kohler (Walter's half brother), as "un-American." Dubbed a "Bathtub Baron" who mired his employees in old-world traditions of paternalism, Herbert Kohler Sr. was also charged with promoting

⁵⁶ Oberdeck, "Class, Place and Gender"

⁵⁷ McClellan Committee Hearings, Part 23, March 12-18, 1958, pp. 9156-9158; Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike* pp. The *Fossum* was also turned away from Milwaukee docks by union labor and for the remainder of the strike Kohler-bound clay was unloaded in Montreal and shipped by rail.

“Kohlerism,” which union pamphlets equated with Naziism and Communism as threats to American freedoms. Local 833 also borrowed from the rhetoric of hygiene to represent Kohlerism as a “disease” that could spread to other employers.⁵⁸

Workers’ immigrant backgrounds also took on new meanings. UAW unionists referred to the Germanic roots of many Kohler workers, attributing to these the fine craftsmanship for which the region’s German and Dutch forebears were famous, traditions “handed down from father to son” on which inexperienced “scab” labor brought into the community by the company—“many of whom never worked in a factory before”—could not rely. Union members’ determination to counter company claims that the strike was fomented by “thugs” from Detroit with claims that it was the company’s recruitment of replacement workers that flooded the community with undesirable outsiders even extended to immigrant laborers, no longer recognized as community-kin in an era when the local foreign-born population had dropped by half compared to the 1930s.⁵⁹ Now immigrants “fresh from Holland” or a newcomer betraying “a heavy German accent” of “a recent immigrant” or a “light blonde stranger” revealed to be “from one of the Dutch colonies in Africa” represented inexperienced newcomers ripe for Kohler’s “feudal” system. Even an established local resident like as Danish immigrant Paul Jacobi, a one-time American Club resident turned hated time-study man who aided the company against the union by photographing pickets, was also branded a “damned foreigner” by angry striker.⁶⁰ This anti-immigrant tinge to Local 833’s mapping of glob-trotting toil within the still-salient geography of “Americans” and “foreigners” presaged the new global flows of production of labor that would transform Kohler’s circuits of tubs and toil in the wake of the strike.

The local’s UAW affiliations linked it to some emerging global terrains of labor solidarity. The company’s African distributor, RC Gilfillan, for example, watched what became a showdown between Herbert Kohler and UAW president Walter Reuther with an eye toward the battle’s broader relevance in an era of decolonization. Gilfillan pointed out to Herbert Kohler, with whom he had carried on a long correspondence sustained in part by their shared Yale University pasts, that in the early 1960s figures like Reuther played simultaneous havoc at local and global scales. He sent Kohler an article on a conference opening of Solidarity House, headquarters of the Kenyan Federation of Labor led by Thomas Mboya (who, fittingly for this story, got his start in the labor movement as a sanitary inspector). Gilfillan highlighted quotes from a letter of support Reuther had sent to Kenya attacking the “evils of colonialism” as well as “the temptations offered by the Communist Countries” and invited Kohler to “Imagine the effect of these remarks on an African mob!” Friends whom Kohler had advised to look up Gilfillan in Nairobi in 1963 reported that the discomfitted agent of Kohler Company products had by then fled to apartheid-era South Africa, missing the opportunity to witness Reuther acting as part of the American delegation to independence ceremonies in Nairobi that year.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Undated leaflet, “Union Memos,” Box 11, Folder 3, Uphoff Collection; UAW Local 833 Strike Bulletin, August, 25, 1955, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Undated leaflet, Uphoff Collection, Box 11, Folder 3, Wisconsin State Historical Society; “Watch Out for PBR” leaflet, Heymanns Collection, Box 10, File 1, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

⁶⁰ UAW Local 833 Strike Bulletin, Oct 6 1954 p 2, Jan 28, 1955, p. 2; Feb 7, 1955, p. 1;

⁶¹ Clipping and letter from R.C. Gilfillan to Herbert V. Kohler, July 16, 1960, KA 1-200, 651.5 Kohler Co. Office Files HVK Sr., Gilfillan & Co., LTD; Lichtenstein, p. 389.

Meanwhile, the UAW's commitment to union contracts, decolonization abroad and civil rights at home had other implications for the company's local labor relations. During the first half of the 1960s, the longest U.S. strike to date came to a protracted close as drawn out court decisions brought about a settlement establishing UAW Local 833 as the collective bargaining agent for Kohler production workers and dictated which workers the settlement covered. Later in the decade, as routine collective bargaining was gradually established, local union leaders sought to implement in Kohler some of the national and international commitments to civil rights and racial equality that embraced by the UAW. Thus, when Local 833's post-strike president, Charles Conrardy, spoke at a 1968 UAW Women's Auxiliaries regional conference hosted in Sheboygan by Local 833's women's auxiliary, he emphasized improved relations between Kohler management and labor along with the international union's emphasis on social justice and related Local 833 efforts to diversify Kohler's historically white workforce by urging the employment of African American workers. In the coming decades, however, the main transformation of the company's workforce occurred through the global expansion of Kohler production.⁶²

Kohler Globalization, Tubs, and Toil

Even as UAW Local 833 pursued its 1960s victory in Kohler, the juxtaposition of tubs and toil within the local, national and global scales radiating from the village was shifting dramatically. In the midst 1950s strike Kohler established its first plant outside of Wisconsin--a facility for producing vitreous china and fiberglass reinforced plastic tubs and showers in Spartanburg, South Carolina. By the 1970s the company had opened another china and fiberglass plastic facility in Brownwood, Texas. Dispensing with fitful international agents like Gilfillan, they also established a subsidiary to control international marketing. The newsletter for this organization refashioned the imagery of an empire of hygiene emanating from the village and focused instead on post-Fordist "strategic localization": the centralized tailoring of products managed by a global, transnational entity but produced in and for particular, diverse markets. By the 1990s Kohler had a string of plumbing, furniture, and engine plants across the American South in addition to a maquiladora in Monterrey, Mexico. They have since have opened a second factory in Reynosa, Mexico, five factories in China and, more recently, a plumbing products factory in Gujarat, along with a chain of plumbing products stores across India.⁶³

With these new geographies of production, Kohler's map of domestic hygiene has altered significantly. Rather than modeling a universal standard of modern hygiene produced for distant markets, Kohler Village is the corporate and hospitality headquarters for a diverse multinational corporation that tailors multitudinous product lines to varied concepts of hygiene around the world. As the company's corporate time line describes, its forays into foreign markets such as Japan's in the late twentieth century involve engagement with unique color preferences and bathing customs.⁶⁴ Of the more recent expansion of Kohler production and marketing in China, the president of the company's kitchen and bath group noted that

⁶² "Summary: UAW Women's Auxiliaries Region 10 Conference, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, May 25, 1968," UAW Women's Auxiliary Collection, Box 12, Folder 8, Walter Reuther Archives, Detroit

⁶³ "Kohler Opens Store in Bangalore," Business Line,"

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2007/09/27/stories/2007092751390500.htm>, October 16, 2007; Kohler International Newsletter,

⁶⁴ Kohler History Time Line, http://www.kohler.com/corp/timeline/time_frame.html Nov. 6, 2004.

"China is a unique market. It is dynamic and huge. We must understand local needs and respond to them quickly."⁶⁵ This twenty-first century concern for cultural differences in bathing styles has not entirely displaced the more universalistic standards of hygiene of earlier in the century: customers in many Chinese cities are, according to Kohler, catching up to global trends. But standards have changed--with the bathroom transformed from its previous status as a shrine of cleanliness into a space to relax and be pampered.

This new ethic of relaxation has become, in turn, the main appeal of Kohler Village since the 1980s. Beginning in 1977, roughly contemporaneous with the launching of the company's international subsidiary, a new 50-year plan for Kohler Village was conceived under the leadership of Herbert V. Kohler Jr. in consultation with the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. The plan transformed the American Club into a luxury resort hotel and convention center complete with high priced restaurants, a tony shopping mall nearby, a championship golf course built on the company's waste land fill, a sports club, and a private wildlife preserve. The block of storefronts that once served as the commercial center of the original town now houses a spa and the Kohler Design Center-- three floors of bathroom, kitchen, and spa designs that stress the company's new emphasis on high-end fixtures and "gracious living" as cultivated at the American Club. These displays, like the company's glossy ads, offer sinks, tubs, and toilets as art objects rather than functional necessities for domestic life. Kohler Village now operates as a magnet for regional and global vacationers who can integrate the "gracious living" of the company's hospitality industries into their homes through Kohler fixtures. The imagery developed out of this geography of luxury is not without its own tensions. While Kohler aims for wider markets in India, an American Hindu website protests a Kohler ad featuring goddess-like shower facilities because it desecrates the image of a form of Shiva. Less dramatically but just as intriguingly, labor unions advertise Kohler Village as a recreation spot for union members, where they can tour one of the declining numbers of US factories that still enjoy the benefits of union representation.⁶⁶

These lesser-known unionist visitors delineate important axes on the map of Kohler's shifting geography of hygiene, and its changing circuits of tubs and toil. They trace connections through which workers at Kohler inhabited the company's empire of hygiene and in some cases challenged it in favor of an alternate labor geography. That alternate geography imagined local workers as allies of "Kohler competitors" around the world and reassessed "domestic" standards of hygiene in terms of a network of labor dignity. But, like company-drawn global maps of modern hygiene that they inhabited and sometimes questioned, working-class maps of global hygiene contained fissures and ambiguities. This remains true as workers navigate their transnational relationships in the new map of global sanitary-ware production and local luxury hospitality currently ascendant at Kohler. There is the irony of union tourism celebrating the persistence of unionized industrial jobs even as the construction of "Destination Kohler" cultivates a new workforce of hotel and restaurant workers. And then there is "Luis Montoya," a pseudonymous Kohler worker in Monterrey

⁶⁵ "Kohler Sets up 5th Factory in China," China Org, business, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/BAT/101240.htm>, Nov. 6, 2004

⁶⁶ http://www.hindunet.org/anti_defamation/kohler/, October 16, 2007; AFSCME, "May/June 1997 Union Fun in the Summer Sun," http://www.afscme.org/publications/public_employee/1997/pemj9713.htm, Nov. 6, 2004; The Wisconsin Laborer, "Odds and Ends: Local #1086 retirees find ways to stay active," <http://www.solidarity.com/oddsn.htm>, Nov. 6, 2004.

interviewed in 1993 by a Wisconsin newspaper, and compared to the immigrant-descended Wisconsin Kohler employee Dick Klabachek. Of the differential between his \$1.25 an hour wage and the \$14.50 an hour one available to Klabachek, Montoya noted that "it would be very good if they would pay me the same money they would pay in the U.S.A." This would help "Montoya" meet expenses for the "modern" conveniences that cost roughly the same in Monterrey as they did in Wisconsin.⁶⁷

To conclude, the geographies of tubs and toil in which Kohler the company located its products and model village can help us to map otherwise elusive social fault lines in an empire of domestic hygiene. Social distinctions that were the building blocks of hygienic discourses both within the United States and in its global spheres of interest have been the focus of much recent scholarship on the elaboration of modern hygienic standards. This scholarship has provocatively interrogated the geographies of distinction that informed such standards, whether elaborated through the management of the diseased and obscurely gendered streets and households of San Francisco's Chinatown, as in Nayan Shah's work, or the disordered excretory practices that Warwick Anderson finds addressed by colonizing public health officials in the Philippines.⁶⁸ But, while they shrewdly interrogate imperial hygienic regimes and examine how practices were negotiated and resisted by communities that were the special objects of colonial hygienic management, such literature gestures at the emergence of global standards of hygiene whose more diffuse audiences remain obscure.⁶⁹ As a welfare capitalist enterprise whose marketing strategies located its workers, village residents and consumers within this global geography, the Kohler Company, its publicity and its workers provide some purchase on these audiences and the maps according to which they charted routes along the intertwined domestic and international vectors of tubs and toil.

As the Kohler Company populated such maps with imagined and actual homes, it also left traces of how domestic spaces and the toil connected to them throughout the empire of hygiene were seen from diverse perspectives within that empire's "domestic" core. Such traces elaborate and amplify global discourses of domesticity recently explored in such work as Kristin Hoganson's on the "cosmopolitan domesticity" of global consumption and Laura Wexler's on the fracturing domestic vision of women photographers focusing on racially diverse imperial others at the turn of the twentieth century. As women and men included in Kohler's empire of hygiene explored the limits and possibilities of the geographies of distinction that empire implied, they help us to formulate questions about an expanded landscape of labor entailed in the global production and consumption of sanitary homes.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ "Luis Montoya, Meet Dick Klabachek: Kohler workers in Mexico, U.S. face separate realities," *Sheboygan Press*, February 26, 1993, pp. 1, 4, "Kohler Business and Industry: Kohler Co., Mexico," Clipping File, Sheboygan County Historical Research Center.

⁶⁸ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Warwick Anderson, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," *Critical Inquiry* 95:21 (1995): 640-71 and *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical medicine, Race and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

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⁷⁰ Kristin Hoganson *Consumes' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of US Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).