

## Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

## Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



# Jenny Carson, A Matter of Moral Justice: Black Women Laundry Workers and the Fight for Justice (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021)

Gabriel Winant

Volume 89, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090054ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0033>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Winant, G. (2022). Compte rendu de [Jenny Carson, A Matter of Moral Justice: Black Women Laundry Workers and the Fight for Justice (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 331–333.  
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0033>

**Jenny Carson, *A Matter of Moral Justice: Black Women Laundry Workers and the Fight for Justice* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021)**

LAUNDRY WORK occupies a distinctive place in labour history because of how it criss-crosses traditional divisions within the working-class historical experience. It is a quintessential form of reproductive labour – recycling commodities such as linens and clothing for reuse, rather than generating new commodities; at the same time, it is a kind of industrial labour, involving heat, water, chemicals, and machines. It may be done within the home (for household or commercial purposes) or in an industrial workplace, and laundry workers, therefore, become subject to many of the racialized and gendered pressures and constraints on forms of labour outside the home that resemble forms of labour inside of it. As Tera Hunter showed so powerfully in *To Joy My Freedom*, the question of who must wash for whom and under what circumstances can carry great political significance.

For this reason, Jenny Carson's new book, *A Matter of Moral Justice: Black Women Laundry Workers and the Fight for Justice*, makes a very welcome addition to the historiography of US labour. Published in the venerable "The Working Class in American History" series from the University of Illinois, *A Matter of Moral Justice* resembles classic studies like Annelise Orleck's *Commonsense and a Little Fire* and Kathryn Kish Sklar's *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work* – simultaneously a portrait of committed activists and organizers and a study of the movement they built. In the struggle of laundry workers in the first half of the 20th century, Carson reveals some of the greatest ambitions and achievements of the US labour movement – and in their

defeats, the limits that those ambitions encountered.

Driven to expand by urbanization, electrification, and mechanization, the power laundry business grew from 110,000 employees in 1910 to 233,000 in 1930. This is approximately the same number that worked in the US auto assembly industry (excluding fabrication of bodies and parts) at the outset of the Great Depression – an astonishing fact, given the different footprints of these industries in our narrative of US labour history. Yet the same industrial unionism whose triumph the autoworkers helped lead proved much more ambivalent for the laundry workers.

Carson undertakes a close study of the laundry industry in its most significant concentration, New York City, where immigration from the US South and the Caribbean brought workers into a racialized and gendered labour market. Black women tended to prefer laundry work to the indignities of domestic work, but this did not mean the work was light. Strict hierarchies of race and gender trapped them in the parts of the laundry that were the hottest, wettest, and hardest on their hands or backs. (In this regard, the power laundry storey resembles a familiar dynamic of internal segregation in industrial workplaces, transposed into a somewhat unfamiliar context.)

Laundry workers' organizing traced the classic arc of the 20th-century labour movement, but in the process revealed many of its limits and contradictions. Workers' activity in the Progressive Era, running alongside the needle trades – as it would throughout much of the subsequent decades – drew strength from the cross-class feminist alliance embodied in the Women's Trade Union League. In this period, however, "laundry workers lacked the resources to build a stable union," including a broad enough base among the

more privileged strata of the workforce, such as the drivers.

The arrival of thousands of black workers in New York's laundries from the US south and the Caribbean revitalized organizing in the 1920s, bringing new sources of grievance and new traditions of militancy into the industry and intersecting complexly with socialist and communist traditions that emerged from New York's white immigrant communities. By the mid-1920s, several locals of the Laundry Workers International Union had been chartered, although on the Jim Crow basis that was normal in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) – separating workers by craft, race, and gender. While these efforts largely failed to develop into stable collective bargaining, they laid the organizational basis for the militant take-off of the Depression years.

In the early 1930s, the communist-led organizing of black laundry workers inaugurated a new tradition of antiracist industrial radicalism. After joining a new left-led industrial union founded in 1931, thousands of workers staged highly confrontational strikes in 1933 and 1934 – fighting strikebreakers and the police, sabotaging struck facilities, and taking hundreds of charges of disorderly conduct and assault. As was so often true of the radicalism of the early 1930s, the strike did not win union recognition, but did, for the first time, bring together drivers and “inside workers” across lines of race and gender, presaging the industrial unionism to come.

Again, mirroring the larger arc of American labour but with a difference, the laundry workers finally entered the promised land of industrial unionism during the second New Deal, becoming affiliates of one of the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) charter members, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). White leaders and historians of needle-trade unionism have

told the storey of this affiliation in terms of the benign antiracism of the union and its desire to keep laundry out of communist hands (leading communist critics of the union to describe the affiliation as a coup); but Carson points out the different account arising from black rank-and-file leaders, which stresses that activist Dollie Robertson had actively sought out and weighed possible affiliations. “A militant Black nationalist and trade unionist led a mostly Black workforce into the Amalgamated.”

The heroic construction of the union up to the point of affiliation occupies the first half of Carson's book. The second half is something of a tragedy: trapped within the ACWA, laundry workers found themselves deprived of organizational autonomy and forced to accept contracts that did little to erase the inequalities of the industry, much less the broader labour market, along lines of race and gender. Nonetheless, they formed the core industrial basis of the early, left-led civil rights struggle in New York City – a struggle which they also carried out inside their union.

The courageous and dogged activists at the centre of Carson's narrative – Charlotte Adelson and Dollie Robertson – paid the price for their union's subordination, as did many of their former coworkers: they were ultimately driven from the union they had built or relegated to its margins by the end of the 1940s. But the history they lived, under Carson's examination, reveals the profound contradictions at work at the height of the New Deal, in its geographical and organizational core – industrial unionism in working-class New York.

Whether there existed an alternative for the labour movement to alliance with political liberalism is unknowable. What Carson's book shows us, however, is what that alliance cost: the hierarchies of American society were not only passed

down like dead weight into the 1930s and 1940s, a burden too heavy for even the vigorous New Dealers to overcome. Rather, even progressive organizations like the ACWA actively participated in the reproduction of racial and gender hierarchies within labour markets and within their own organizations. It is a sobering finding, albeit one tempered in Carson's account by the extraordinary heroism of the laundry workers themselves.

GABRIEL WINANT

University of Chicago

**Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)**

*TRANSGENDER MARXISM*, an edited collection of work from radical trans scholars, professionals, and community organizers, is a timely response to debates among Marxist scholars, the labour movement, and leftist community organizers. Contributors draw upon historical and current transgender Marxist praxis to advance historical materialism and radical politics in the context of neoliberal austerity, the resurgence of conservative right-wing family values, and the galvanization of fascism. This anthology taps into radical hope for systemic change, witnessed via recent demonstrations and resistance movements occurring globally. *Transgender Marxism* challenges class reductionism, as well as binary thinking concerning the unionized workers and unorganized labour in wider communities, the labour economy, and the household, as well as political economy and private or intimate aspects of everyday life.

Editors Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke's aim to "collect theoretical perspectives by transgender writers" (1) from 'zines, blogs, and social media posts to emphasize the invaluable contributions

transgender Marxists are making to advancing revolutionary thought and class struggle. Transgender Marxism, a theoretical intervention informed by gender transition and the lived experiences of trans people, is introduced to recognize the complexity of sex, gender, and sexual relations within the capitalist mode of production and to understand transitions to communism as viable.

Transgender Marxism intervenes in mainstream LGBTQ+ politics (i.e., trans human rights) and strains of feminist activism (i.e., trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF)) to challenge identity politics and emphasize the necessity of materialist analysis and class struggle for gender liberation. Transgender Marxism refutes the "vulgar Marxist" (3) claim that trans oppression is peripheral to working-class politics because it is rooted in the culture, not economics.

Transgender Marxism invites a deeper analysis of why specific knowledge concerning bodies, gender, and sexuality emerged and whose interests such knowledge serves. Many contributors render explicit how sex, gender, and sexuality are integral to capitalism as a mode of production. Gender transition highlights the ways that "class struggle also passes through the body" (124) and how capital and the state turn gender-based norms into material forces (e.g., gender as "bounded by property relations" (26)). Contributors emphasize that trans oppression stems from a refusal of sexed embodiment, gender performance, and biologically determinist approaches to the heteronormative nuclear family. Drawing from Marxist and socialist feminism, they underline the primacy of the household as a central space for unpaid socially reproductive labour that buttresses exploitative wage relations and legitimizes neoliberal attacks on social programming and services.