The Laundromat as a Marker for Class in Tim Morris's "Suds" and Lucia Perillo's "For My Washer and Dryer"

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Abstract:

This essay examines how two American writers associate the use of public washers and dryers at the Laundromat with poverty and, by extension, almost unconsciously, with the bad behavior that is often associated with people who live in communities at risk where poverty rules their lives. Tim Morris clearly looks down on the people who use the Laundromat and considers himself lucky because he and his wife "were getting out of that burg" and would therefore be rid of the problem of using the Laundromat. In her poem, Lucia Perillo sees only the negative side of using the Laundromat, from dead flies by the window to a television that does not work right, and once she witnesses a case of extreme violence against a woman, she drives home calculating how to stop using the Laundromat. She considers buying her own washer and dryer her "retreat" from having to use the public machines and witness the "hard luck" of other people. For Morris and Perillo, using Laundromat is a class thing, a temporary inconvenience; they have economic options that other users do not have.

Keywords: class, poverty, hard luck story, the Other, behavior rituals, pulls/pushes, political poetry, public/private spaces

The laundromat is a public space where people avail themselves of equipment that they do not have at home in order to wash their clothes. Although this seems inocuous, many people have come to associate using the laundromat with being a member of America's lower class because only people who cannot afford to buy a washer and dryer use the laundromat. Whether or not one uses the laundromat is therefore associated with whether or not one has the means to move into the kind of housing arrangement that would allow the use of a washer and dryer on the premises. People who cannot afford such an arrangement are stuck with using the laundromat, a place where other people who also cannot afford better arrangements meet to use the public washer and dryer. Because of this connection with economic hard luck, with being a public space where people come and go, the laundromat figures in Tim Morris's "Suds" and Lucia Perillo's "For My Washer and Dryer" as a marker for class. In Morris's essay and Perillo's poem, the laundromat is a place where people go because they have no other choice. Both writers associate the space with poverty, and in Perillo's

poem, the laundromat even becomes a place where people lack sympathy, a place where nobody knows how to do the right thing when they witness the hard luck of others.

The advantage of the laundromats, of course, is that they allow people who cannot afford to buy their own washer and dryer to wear clean clothes, what most people consider a sign of status which, as Sharon O'Dair points out, "is linked closely to material conditions of life" and "requires a certain freedom from economic necessity" (338). Because the laundromat allows people to "represent," to wear clean clothes and appear to have a high social status, one can thus assume that the laundromat is a democratic institution where people from different walks of life meet to use the machines; however, as Krystal D'Costa states in a *Scientific American* blog on the subject, "if someone puts something particularly soiled into a machine, you might not want to be the next person to use that machine" because people "are far more aware of the possibility of contamination in this environment" ("Spin Cycle" np) than they would be if they were using their own machines. Thus, even though the laundromat provides an important service, people who use it are aware that the machines in the laundromat may not be as clean as they should be.

Machines in the laundromat provide a service, but the service is tainted by the very fact that anyone can use the machines at the laundromat. As Anne Tyler writes about the room in which Bet Blevins lives with her son Arnold in utmost poverty, "there was always that feeling of too many lives layered over other lives, like the layers of brownish wallpaper her child had peeled away in the corner by his bed" ("Average Waves" 32). At a laundromat, one can expect to use the machines, but one can also expect to drag home whatever was left of the last user's dirt, as if in fact the lives of others were left as debris in the often used machines. Because so many people use the machines at the laundromat, people also assume that unpleasant things can happen. Krystal D'Costa warns in her blog that, for people who use the laundromat, "contamination and exposure aren't the only concern" because "the public nature of the laundromat means that anyone can walk in off the street and wait for the right opportunity to claim unwatched clothing" ("Spin Cycle" np), and she provides examples when she witnesses such a thing happening. This public exposure to people who can "walk in off the street" speaks to the fear of the "Other" shared by far too many people in America. In Tim Morris's essay, his New Jersey neighbors represent the "Other" while, in Lucia Perillo's poem, the "Other" is a lower class woman who suffers from domestic violence.

Tim Morris, who defines himself as "forty-two years old, at the top of my profession, a full profesor and chair of the English department at a Ph. D.-granting university" bemoans the fact that, on that particular day, he was "doing my wash in a laundromat" called the Quick Wash in Arlington, Texas. He goes on to ponder the meaning of social status in the United States when he says that "people argue about what defines social class in the United States: money, family, education, occupation," but he quickly adds that the real marker of status "lies between people who wash their clothes in a laundromat and people who don't have to." He considers his place in society and explains: "I thought it was my Ivy League doctorate; I thought it was my vowels; but what really made me upper-middle-class was my Lady Kenmore washing machine. When that collapsed, so did

my social status" (55). Social class is thus provided by the ability to buy a washer and dryer, but Sharon O'Dair complicates Morris's choice of buying a new Lady Kenmore when she argues that, "compared to the poorly educated, the highly educated are more concerned with status and status consumption" (350) than people who do not have university degrees.

Morris is now back using a laundromat because the Lady Kenmore at home "suffered a long illness" (55) and died. As a younger man working on his doctorate and living in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Morris goes to what he considers a "rite of passage" (57) as he and his wife load "a wire grocery cart with our laundry bags and ease it down the steps of our four-family building, *thunk thunk thunk thunk thunk*, and out over the pitted Jersey sidewalks to the laundromat next to the Foodtown." Because he and his wife are college students, they must suffer the "rite of passage" of the working poor and use the laundromat where other people in similar circumstances congregate. Morris notes that "the Livingston laundromat was populated by people in some ways like us. None too fashionable, they would put on their last, least wearable clothes for wash day. Their cars were like ours. We had a two-door Civic with a cracked crankshaft; they had inert Novas, ancient Buick Electras with mistmatched fenders, and Yugos whose worn-out floorboards had fissures so big you could see the pavement below" (57); thus it is clear that, when he and his wife were students, they lacked the means to own their own washer and dryer, so they joined their neighbors at the laundromat to wash their clothes, but there is a difference between Morris and his wife and the people who frequented the laundromat in New Jersey. Morris quickly points out that "unlike us, though, the New Brunswick launderers were staying where they were. At fifty they were still chunking quarters into machines; at twentysomething we were in transit between homes with laundry equipment. They chain-smoked; we had quit. They read Fern Michaels's *Texas Heat*; we read Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. They put no *r* at the end of dryer; we put no dainties in the dryer. We were getting out of that burg, sooner or later" (57). The college students plan to move out, to finish their degrees and pursue their careers elsewhere. For them, using the laundromat was a temporary problem created by the meager stipends that they earned at the time. Their neighbors, however, would be stuck using the laundromat forever.

Morris understands that "taking your clothes in your car to wash them in deluxe Maytags is not exactly like having to beat them on a stone in the middle of a creek, but it's as close as our sheltered society gets" to being downtrodden because, as far as he is concerned, "the last step below this is going dirty" (62). The explanation provided by Morris serves two purposes. It clarifies the fact that he understands that he is not suffering. He does not have to go to the river with a basket of clothes to beat them on a stone. He is privileged enough to have a car that he can use to drive himself to the laundromat where he can wash his clothes in relative comfort; however, he also understands that doing the laundry at the laundromat is not what people of his class do. He is the chair of an English department, and this means that he makes enough money to provide himself a barrier between people like him and the people whom he knew in New Brunswick.

In "For My Washer and Dryer," Lucia Perillo focuses on the ugly side of spending a few hours at the laundromat. The speaker in the poem sees the hours spent "washed in light from the laundromat's flourescent fixture, / that cemetery of a thousand flies" as time wasted performing an ordinary task. Not only is the light unnatural, fluorescent, filled with dead flies, but

> An old black-and-white would be buzzing in the corner
> for an audience of molded plastic chairs
> where last year's magazines and a few men have been spacing
> out a talk show's drone,
> the picture slipping northward band by band, until someone
> summons the courage to slam
> a fist (*bam!*) on the console, restoring the vertical hold,
> at the same time routing us
> from the stupors we wear like a cowboy's chaps, so as not
> to get stuck
> in the brambles of an errant hard-luck story
> beside the change machine (72)

In this laundromat, nothing works right. The magazines are old, the television barely works, and the people who wait for their clothes to finish the cycle of washing or drying have fallen into a "stupor," one that they apparently wear in order to avoid getting involved in the lives of the other people who are, like them, waiting on their clothes. Not wanting to be drawn into the "hard-luck story / beside the change machine" means that no one in the room wants to extend someone the courtesy of giving her a few quarters. This unwillingness to offer assistance combines with the strange image that people at the laundromat "wear" their stupor "like a cowboy's chaps" to suggest that they are wearing protective clothing, a jarring image to suggest that these people do not want to feel anything.

In 1951, Adrienne Rich, before becoming radicalized, writes in "Storm Warnings" about a woman who apparently knows "better than the instrument / What winds are walking overhead, what zone / Of gray unrest is moving across the land" (3), so she protects herself from what is happening by staying home, behind closed doors. The storm raging outside was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that Rich would later join, but in 1951 the speaker in "Storm Warnings" can only think about protecting herself from the unrest outside. Rich concludes the poem by stressing that this woman has sealed herself off from the elements.

> I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
> And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
> Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
> Of weather through the unsealed aperture.
> This is our sole defense against the seasons;

> These are the things that we have learned to do
> Who live in troubled regions. ("Storm Warning" 3)

In an essay written years later, in 1971, Rich refers to the restrain that characterized her early work as "asbestos gloves" (40), the kind of gloves that people used then because thay "allowed [her] to handle materials I could not pick up barehanded" ("When We Dead Awaken" 40-41). In 1951, Rich was not yet ready to plunge into political activism, which is why she writes "Storm Warning." A poem from the 1950s in which the speaker hides inside her house to avoid whatever storm is brewing in America supports Robert Lowell's statement in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" that he lived in "the tranquilized *Fifties*" (*Life Studies* 90), a time when people chose to "draw the curtains" so that they would not have to see that terrible things were happening to other people in America. The choice to protect herself from any connection with the pain of others made by the speaker in a poem published in 1996, however, proves a little disturbing, almost against the grain of the contemporary practice of empathy and involvement.

Regina Kenen, a sociologist who studies the behavior of people in laundromats, believes that "laundromat behaviors appear to display general properties of a subculture" wherein "some of the behavior rituals are locale-specific while others seem to be transpersonal" (179). She argues in "Soapsuds, Space, and Sociability" that "individuals are not open to superficial social contacts" at the laundromat where "even simple 'sociability' appears to be limited to those already known" (170). According to Kenen, "interaction between strangers in the laundromat can be viewed from two perspectives, pulls—perceived reward or penalties resulting from the interaction—and pushes—conditions conducive to, or acting as barriers against, interaction" (179). Kenen believes that "one such 'pull' is the premium most middle-class laundromat users place on privacy and the attempt to prevent intrusion into their territory by developing a ritual of avoidance signs, a grammar of protective armor" (179). Wearing their stupor "like a cowboy's chaps" ("For My Washer and Dryer" 72) suggests that the people in Lucia Perillo's poem do protect themselves from interaction with others by slipping into a stupor while they wait for their clothes to be done.

The speaker in "For My Washer and Dryer," a middle-class woman doing her laundry at the laundromat, values the distance that she has cultivated from other people. She is forced to use the facility because she does not have her own equipment at home. The way she looks at the people at the laundromat, however, creates a clear picture of how separate she perceives herself to be from the other laundromat users, especially the woman whose hard luck story will put a dent in the carefully cultivated stupor that the people at the laundromat have created. She notes that

> This would be the moment she enters, into this crushed lull
> of a resurrected Geraldo:
> young woman wrestling six black garbage bags through
> the laundromat door.
> Two children stripped to their underwear trail behind her

like caged birds chirping.
For almost an hour she hauls the dirty sheets and pj's
from washer to dryer,
the fabric worn thin as the frail threads of her patience,
barking, *Get over here*. ("For My Washer and Dryer" 72)

The woman who arrives with garbage bags full of dirty laundry and two children in tow is described, not by her looks but by her reaction to her own children. When she "barks" at the kids to "*Get over here*," she elicits the comparison made by the speaker between the fabric of the children's pajamas, "worn thin," and the woman's patience, which is also apparently worn thin. The woman is therefore defined by her impatience, her anger at the children who are themselves described as "caged birds chirping."

The woman's impatience manifests itself in anger against her children when she screams at them in order to control them. She does this in public, where other people not only hear her but also witness her children's discomfort. This public display of anger not only breaks unwritten rules of proper behavior at the laundromat but it also crosses the line between the political and the private. Barbara Ozieblo explains in “The Political and the Personal in American Drama” that "the conceit of the political and the personal is intrinsic to the study of American Literature" because "the 'personal,' as related to the value of the individual, has always been of paramount importance in the American conception of self" (13). Ozieblo also points out that "radical feminists of the twentieth century [. . .] rediscovered the value of the personal in identifying oppression and adopted the personal as a measure in the contemplation of new organizational structures" (14). These theorists understood that “myths and taboos affect the lives of both men and women when the private is acknowledged as a significant component of the public sphere” (Ozieblo 15). When the woman at the laundromat "barks" at her children in anger, the reader witnesses the connection between the political and the personal, her public anger born of frustration created, ostensibly, by the children's behavior but more likely by her own dependence on someone who abuses her and her own impotence against his violence.

In an essay on the meaning of "public" and "private" spaces, Mimi Sheller and John Urry point to "the complex and fluid hybridizing of public-and-private life" and argue that there are "multiple mobile relationships between" what people consider "the problem or 'erosion' of the public sphere or 'blurring of boundaries' between the public and the private" (108). Sheller and Urry reference the work of sociologist Richard Sennett as they situate the personal in what they label a "third approach" that "understands the private as more fundamentally rooted in private life and delineated by private space, in which the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion revolve around social relations and physical and symbolic demarcations between different spaces" (112). In this context, Sheller and Urry then use Jeff Weintraub's theories of the public and private spheres to argue that "privacy is viewed as much as a spatial arrangement as a social one, and is something marked off from the 'public spaces' of streets, parks and plazas" (112). Sociologists thus understand that there is a differentce

between the behavior expected of people in public and private spaces, and many are concerned with the ways in which boundaries are being blurred between the two because "the power of civil society crucially depends on the 'space' between these public and private 'spheres'" (114).

In Perillo's poem, the public display of inappropriate behavior in the public sphere of the laundromat crosses the line of what is appropiate when the woman's "ride," her boyfriend or husband, the man in her life, appears to pick her up in his car. The speaker notes that "Finally her ride shows up, a short guy whose pants / straddle his ass low" ("For My Washer and Dryer" 73). The man is recognized only for the role he plays in the woman's life, as her "ride" home from the laundromat, and this description dehumanizes him. He performs a service that she apparently requires. The lack of humanity implied when he is defined by the service that he performs does not improve when the speaker notes how his pants "straddle his ass low" (73). The clothes that he wears suggest his lack of respect for the people around him. He is in fact showing them his derriere as if he does not care, a fact that also defines him as a young and, more often than not, poor inner city dweller. As the woman's ride, he has come to pick her up, but the speaker notes that

> the last quarter on her dryer hasn't cycled through,
> and he's got to kill time staggering
> the aisles, suffering the accusation of women's underthings
> and soiled oven mitts,
> the sputum and rheum that his own kids cough up
> from God knows what recess.
> Until this laundry overcomes him: he yanks the magazine
> out of her hands so she'll have to
>
> *Look at him, goddamnit!* before he ups and hauls the boy
> outside, to their dented sedan. (73)

Impatient at having to wait for her, he demonstrates his displeasure through obvious signs of anger. Whatever has happened between these two before his arrival at the laundromat becomes part of the performance that this man's anger provides for the audience witnessing his antics at the laundromat.

> When she runs after, he makes a fleshy chrysanthemum
> with his right fist
> and slams it into her face, dumping her backward while
> he peels out,
> leaving her saddle-legged, stunned, with the baby girl
> crawling circles on the curb. (73)

The man's appearance at the laundromat brings violence. From the moment he appears with his pants straddling "his ass low" as he staggers "the aisles, suffering the accusation of women's underthings and soiled oven mitts" (73), he is presented as a man out of his element in a place where soiled oven mitts and women's underthings are washed.

The man's anger against the woman who washes his laundry requires no explanation. Perillo presents this as a given, the sort of thing that happens in laundromats where the lower classes gather, but this man's performance has not gone unnoticed. Psychologists, sociologists, and many other scholars have written about violent men and the violence that they perpetrate against women and children; however, this subject lies beyond the scope of this essay. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Lewis Herman compares the lives of impoverished women who live with angry men to political captivity. She argues that "political captivity is generally recognized, whereas the domestic captivity of women and children is often unseen" (74). Lewis Herman continues by stating that "children are rendered captive by their condition of dependency" (74), a dependency that is made clear in this poem when the man "ups and hauls the boy outside, to their dented sedan" ("For My Washer and Dryer" 73) without giving him a choice. The boy may or may not be his son, but this man feels entitled to subject him to his anger when he drags him outside without an explanation or even good manners. The woman in the poem appears to do nothing to protect her son from the man's anger, but she actually follows the two of them outside and speaks to the man, which suggests that she may have followed them to ask him or tell him to leave the child alone and wait patiently for their clothes to be done. This is the point when the man "makes a fleshy chrysanthemum with his right fist and slams it into her face" ("For My Washer and Dryer" 73), a peculiar image in which a man's fist is compared to a flower as an act of violence is perpetrated against the woman who is presumably the mother of his children. Violence at home against women and children is exactly the subject of Lewis Herman book where she points out that "women are rendered captive by economic, social, psychological, and legal subordination, as well as by physical force" (74).

After the man hits the woman in front of the laundromat, the people who witness the act simply "stare out the window," but the speaker states that, at that moment, "I imagine what she sees from outside looking in" ("For My Washer and Dryer" 73). According to the speaker, "our mouths are open, our faces green in this light," but she adds the puzzling statement that

> we are crueler than he is,
> our good intentions have always drawn interest
> on someone else's hard luck.
> She raises a hand to shield her face, her head wagging
> sideways as if to signal
> that our most welcome kindness would be turning away now,
> resuming our stupor:
> folding clothes in our baskets and hurrying them home
> while the wicker is warm. (73)

Regina Kenen points out that some traditional laundromat behaviors suggest that "users wall off an active social world from the world of laundromat users-as-strangers" (181) so that they do not have to get involved in the lives of others. In any other situation, people who witness as a man hits a woman could react by defending her or even threatening to call the police. The people in this poem, however, simply watch what happens. The speaker recognizes that the people who witness the violence perpetrated against the woman do nothing to help her; they are in fact too stunned to react, but the poet states that watching what happens makes them "crueler than he is," a questionable statement.

With this scene of random public violence against a very specific woman from the lower class, Lucia Perillo makes a subtle political statement about the lot of poor women who have limited choices or simply women who have chosen the wrong men. The scene itself makes the statement; however, what the poet writes about the people who witness the embarrassing moment being "crueler than he is" seems to undercut the statement made by that scene. Suggesting that the people who witness the violence are as cruel as the man who perpetates the violence creates a very uneven comparison, one that raises serious ethical questions for the reader. Alicia Ostriker argues in "Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness" that "without a consciousness that desires, suffers, and chooses, there is no ethical or political model for the reader" (319). The speaker in Lucia Perillo's poem does not exhibit a consciousness that desires to help the woman or suffers on behalf of the woman. What she does is choose to escape the connection with this woman and her very publicly lived life, but this is hardly a moral choice.

The speaker in Lucia Perillo's poem chooses to skirt the moral statement made by the poet in "For My Washer and Dryer." When the poet writes about a man hitting a woman, she invites the reader to question what is happening; she invites the reader to think about public displays of violence against women because, as Joan C. Tronto points out in "Beyond Gender and Difference to a Theory of Care," "the morally mature person understands the balance between caring for the self and caring for others" (658), but the speaker in Lucia Perillo's poem shows no sign that she understands this difference. She chooses to protect herself, an act that effectively requires that she ignore what she has just witnessed. She does not feel compelled to help the woman or even call the police, and she even tells herself that the woman would prefer it if she did not get involved.

In "Power and Danger," Adrienne Rich, writing about the work of Judy Grahn, defines a political poem as a poem "concerned with powerlessness and power," and she adds that such political poetry "can come only from the poet's need to identify her relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of her pain, fear, and anger" (251). Perillo identifies the atrocity of a woman's powerlessness but chooses not to comment on it any further, which is apparently something that people who study domestic violence claim happens often. Diane Shoos, in "Representing Domestic Violence," points out that, "as private individuals who witness or suspect battering, we may still succumb to the temptation to remain silent out of embarrassment or respect for privacy" (59). The

problem is that the reader cannot make the choice because, in "For My Washer and Dryer," the poet chooses to skirt the ethical quandary that she creates.

The speaker in Lucia Perillo's poem chooses no statement other than the strange assertion that the woman who is hit "raises a hand to shield her face, her head wagging / sideways as if to signal / that our most welcome kindness would be turning away now, / resuming our stupor" ("For My Washer and Dryer" 73). She claims that the woman's raised hand suggests that she wants to be left alone, that she effectively wants the people who witnessed her being battered to just stop looking at her and stop thinking about it. This assumption justifies her doing nothing to help the battered woman, but the fact remains that the woman's raised hand has little to do with what the speaker interprets the raised hand to mean. It could have meant any number of things, but the speaker tells herself what she needs to hear in order to avoid getting involved in the woman's hard luck story. Diane Shoos argues that "awareness" of domestic violence "is not always the same as understanding: the ubiquity and visibility of battering has [sic] not fundamentally changed our attitudes or altered our denial about certain aspects of abuse" because "having heard the voices of battered women and seen their photos, many people [. . .] still have only a superficial knowledge of the emotional labyrinth of the lived experience of domestic violence" (58).

Instead of making a political statement about domestic violence, Lucia Perillo concludes her poem by making it possible for her speaker to escape any further connection to the lower-class world of laundromats where she is exposed to the behavior of men who hit women simply because the laundry is not yet done. The speaker points out that, "the next day I calculated my retreat: the Sears revolving / charge card, the finance plan." She admits that "in this way I let him win, making his fist the fat root / of my own gain" (74). She asks the appropriate questions about the connection between what she calls "the cruelties of men" and the things that people desire, like "the Nazi Volkswagen, the origin of lipstick / in a bloodied mouth?" and she states that "sometimes these relics of the man-made world make me ashamed / about the circuits of my desires." However, the poem culminates with

> Like the day those two guys in greasy coveralls showed up
> and lifted the appliances
> over their heads, high over the fence because the boxes
> wouldn't fit through the gate.
> When they entered my yard, I understood how the women felt
> when Allied troops rolled into France:
> I wanted to pelt them with roses, bring them baskets full
> of linens and exotic fruits.
> I was ready to get on my needs, kiss the scuffed leather
> of their steel-toed, Red Wing boots. (74)

Once again, Perillo creates an unusual comparison between delivery men carrying a washer and dryer into her home and the liberation of France from Nazi tyranny. However grateful the

speaker may have been not to ever have to witness gratuitous violence at the laundromat, the delivery of a washer and dryer to her home cannot compare to the delivery of freedom from Nazi oppresion in France. The speaker in this poem exaggerates the importance of her own liberation from having to do her laundry at the laundromat. Having the means to purchase her own washer and dryer simply means that she will no longer have to associate with people from a class lower than her own, people who do not have access to a Sears credit card.

In Tim Morris's "Suds" and Lucia Perillo's "For My Washer and Dryer," the laundromat appears as a marker for class. The people who use the laundromat are forced to do so by economic necessity, but the two writers admit that they would prefer not to use the laundromat. Morris states that his Lady Kenmore had "suffered a long illness" and died ("Suds" 55), which is what forces him to use the machines at the laundromat. The speaker in Lucia Perillo's poem exposes herself to the chaotic world of lower class lives lived publicly at the laundromat, but a Sears' credit card buys her freedom from exposure to the lives of people from a lower class and removes her from the laundromat forever. For Morris and Perillo, the laundromat is a marker for class.

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