

## Of Tubs and Toil: Kohler Workers in an Empire of Hygiene, 1920–2000\*

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**SUMMARY:** This paper examines contests over the intimate and global geographies of domestic hygiene advanced by the Kohler Company, a plumbing-ware manufacturer that promoted “American” standards living in its welfare-capitalist industrial village of Kohler, Wisconsin. Drawing from the approaches of labor history, cultural history, and critical geography, it demonstrates the value of combining these methodologies. The perspectives of Kohler workers on “American” living standards, it reveals, complicate cultural histories that cast such workers as uncritical audiences for imperializing claims about the superiority of American sanitation. The paper argues that workers who struggled to unionize the Kohler plant challenged company definitions of “American” standards and generated alternative, laborite maps of domestic hygiene and the labor associated with it among local immigrant workers and laborers elsewhere in the world. It considers the legacy of those maps in the context of the company’s changing global networks of production and consumption.

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Marveling at Americans’ obsession with cleanliness in the 1890s, Austrian architect Adolf Loos declared that “America is to Austria as Austria is to China” in supporting the plumber as the “billeting officer for civilization”.<sup>1</sup> US plumbing-ware manufacturers, plumbing industry organizations, and government agencies promoted the same sentiment throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In publicity that located American plumbing fixtures at an apex of sanitary modernity, they invoked a global geography of modern hygiene centered in individual homes. At its most intimate, this

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1. Adolf Loos, “Plumbers: Baths and Kitchen Ranges at the Jubilee Exhibition (1898)”, in *idem, Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, CA, 1998).

geography arranged spatial relations of domestic life around bathrooms and kitchens envisioned as central stages of housekeeping rituals. At its most expansive, it situated such domestic practices in national and global hierarchies of hygienic culture that compared modern “American” homes to alternative practices deemed exotic, onerous, and unsanitary.

In this article, I use networks of sanitary culture developed by the Kohler Company of Kohler, Wisconsin to elucidate diverse domestic engagements with these global geographies of hygiene. A leading manufacturer and advertiser of plumbing-ware, by the 1920s the company had established a growing model village for employees designed, like other components of welfare capitalism, to focus workers’ attention on homes and consumption, while also serving to showcase Kohler’s hygienic innovations.<sup>2</sup>

Kohler plumbing fixtures and Kohler homes were intertwined in company advertising that was widely disseminated through popular magazines and company publications. 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. Kohler marketing mapped domestic interiors around its products and the domestic toil these products “lightened”, and located these interiors in national and global webs of sanitary civilization featuring variations on American configurations of tubs and toil. Kohler Village residents and workers, in turn, often confounded these maps by arranging their domestic relations differently from the hygienic ideals pictured in company publicity. In the 1930s and 1950s, moreover, union organizations allowed some Kohler workers to elaborate their own networks of industrial and domestic labor that diverged from those defined by the company’s maps of local and global hygiene.

The contested maps of tubs and toil at Kohler have scholarly implications for a meeting of critical geography, cultural studies, and labor

2. For examples of such schemes outside Kohler see Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workingman’s Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns* (London, 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, MA, 1984); *idem* (ed.), *The Company Town: Architecture and Society in the Early Industrial Age* (New York [etc.], 1992); John W. Reys, “The Towns the Companies Built”, in *idem*, *The Making of Urban America* (Princeton, NJ, 1965); Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream* (New York, 1981); Arnold R. Alanen, *Morgan Park: Duluth US Steel, and the Forging of a Company Town* (Minneapolis, MN, 2007). On welfare-capitalist programs see Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920–1933* (Baltimore, MD, 1960), pp. 157–189; Stuart Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880–1940* (Chicago, IL, 1976); Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States, 1880–1920* (Madison, WI, 1975); Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890–1950* (Urbana, IL 1988); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), ch. 4.

history. Critical geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith, Doreen Massey, and Andrew Herod emphasize employers' and workers' competing constructions of the "home" and the "local" in relation to regional, national, or global scales. Harvey's early scholarship in this vein described the "spatial fixes" by means of which capital ensures access to materials, labor, and distribution markets, with projects like company towns being important examples. His approach helped to highlight the politics of "jumping scale", whereby workers might contest such fixes by expanding the scale of their affinities with other workers. As we shall see, Kohler workers jumped scale by looking beyond the Village to forge laborite solidarities as wide as the networks of hygienic improvement the company associated with its global markets.

However, to imagine "local", "national", or "global" scales in a static hierarchy of widening concentric circles that Kohler officials, Village residents and/or workers found ready-made to accommodate their scalar leaps and boundaries would be to oversimplify these politics of scale. Instead, confirming more recent geographical approaches that address the ways employers and workers construct geographic scales at multiple levels simultaneously, various Kohler residents repeatedly reconfigured "American" identities that were ostensibly cast at a "national" scale in relation to local boundaries of the "domestic" or "foreign". Local residents and workers also reshaped "domestic" spaces in ways that complicated national "American" attributes that company publicity associated with the home. Employers, residents, and workers never identified with one scale exclusively, but envisioned and revised them in diverse relations to one another.<sup>3</sup>

Such scalar politics take on additional complexity when set in relation to feminist scholarship on imperial domesticity. Here, Anne McClintock has demonstrated how images of bathrooms and cleanliness linked domestic and global spaces – and the light and dark bodies associated with imperial boundaries – in Victorian British culture. Highlighting the double meanings of "domestic" that link "the space of the familial household to that of the nation", Amy Kaplan has connected North American women's constructions of separate domestic spaces to imperial fears and fascinations regarding racially marked groups at home and abroad. Looking beyond Western metropolises to wider terrains where imperial visions of domesticity and hygiene were applied, Ruth Rogaski has analyzed how "hygienic modernity"

3. David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Oxford, 1982); *idem*, *The Urbanization of Capital* (Baltimore, MD, 1985); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis, MN, 1994); Andrew Herod and Melissa W. Wright, "Placing Scale, An Introduction", in *idem* (eds), *Geographies of Power: An Introduction* (Malden, MA [etc.], 2002), pp. 1–14; Andrew Herod, Al Rannie, and Susan McGrath-Champ, "Working Space: Why Incorporating the Geographical Is Central to Theorizing Work and Employment Practices", *Work, Employment and Society*, 21 (2007), pp. 247–264.

transformed Chinese concepts of “*weisheng*” from a philosophy of “guarding life” to one of public and private sanitation.<sup>4</sup>

Together, such studies connect nineteenth-century Anglo-American domestic spheres to global scales of hygienic and social distinction. Such connections anticipate the twentieth-century empire of hygiene that Kohler produced, and the various geographic scales, from local homes, to contested national identities, to global networks of toil from which worker/residents in Kohler village engaged that empire and its mapping of the domestic and the foreign. These perceptions, in turn, help to complicate scholarship on empire that picture US or European consumers as embracing unquestioningly hierarchical conceptions of culture, gender, and race associated with hygienic products.<sup>5</sup>

Kohler’s competing maps of sanitary civilization are also usefully engaged by several intersecting scholarly approaches which meet at a nexus of US labor and empire. Labor historians have 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.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, following the discursive turn of postcolonial studies, recent approaches to the study of empire propose alternative accounts of historical agency shaped by competing discourses of civilization, of racial distinction, of gender relations, and of citizenship and its boundaries. Such culturalist accounts illuminate the ways imperial imagery affected, and also misrepresented, colonial and postcolonial worlds. Other studies of labor in the context of US imperial ventures complicate this perspective by emphasizing how the lives and views of workers on the ground in Latin America, the Pacific, the Caribbean – and their counterparts in the US – have disrupted the comparisons and categories that composed imperial culture.<sup>7</sup>

4. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York, 1995); Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, CA, 2004); Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity”, in *idem*, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 23–50.

5. McClintock refers to this complex of products and their imperial cultural resonance as “commodity kitsch”. Resistance to this complex 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 such as 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, NJ, 1992), pp. 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, NY, 1989).

6. 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, 2000), pp. 1–31.

7. Karen Tranberg Hansen, “Introduction: Domesticity in Africa”, in *idem*, *African Encounters with Domesticity*, p. 12; Julie Greene, “The Labor of Empire: Recent Scholarship on US History and Imperialism”, *Labor*, 1 (2004), pp. 113–129.

Through lives that engaged global hygienic improvement while also experimenting with alternative productions of scale from the global down to the intimate space of the home, Kohler officials, residents, and workers help to chart connections between local community and global imagery emanating from the publicity and practice of welfare capitalism.

Combining these interdisciplinary perspectives, I ask how workers doubly defined as “domestic” were implicated in and responded to wider imperial cultures of hygiene 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 an “American standard of living”, Kohler workers had opportunities to reflect upon their engagement with varied geographic scales that surrounded American “domestic” ideals. As their employer’s markets ballooned nationally and globally, Kohler workers were implicated in wider maps of sanitary culture and the toil associated with it. In their reflections on and revisions of such maps, they help illuminate how such images were received or resisted within the US.

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 global networks of tubs and toil 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 AND AMERICAN PLUMBING

Kohler Company President, Walter J. Kohler, first began planning Kohler Village in the 1910s and 1920s. The Village provided low-priced homes attractively arranged on winding, shaded streets, on which diverse housing stock minimized caste-like hierarchies between management and workers or different ethnic groups that prevailed in other company towns of the era (see Figure 1 overleaf). The American Club residence lodged single immigrant men and provided recreation for the community. Company Americanization programs and Village women’s clubs aimed to inspire tastes and aspirations lending themselves to independent home ownership.<sup>8</sup> The company newspaper, *Kohler of Kohler News*, helped to

8. On Kohler’s history see Walter Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike: Thirty Years of Conflict* (Boston, MA, 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 (1978), pp. 145–159. The Kohler factory had moved from Sheboygan in 1899, just two years after a molders’ union struck its factory in that city. Like other employers who erected

publicize these local civic programs to villagers while also advertising the amenities of the village to plumbers, jobbers, and distributors who marketed the company's products to consumers. In the *News* and other publicity venues, 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".<sup>9</sup> During the 1920s, advertisements for these products included line drawings of Kohler Village homes and amenities with descriptions implying that workers residing in Kohler Village enacted a culture of hygienic domesticity purchased with every tub, sink, and generator that the company sold.<sup>10</sup>

Such advertisements reflected ongoing spatial changes within US homes. For a growing number of middle-class and even a few working-class homes of the early twentieth century, bathrooms and kitchens centralized and augmented hygienic practices that previously were dispersed throughout and outside the house. Formerly, outdoor latrines received human waste and kitchens served as bathrooms, but the growing sophistication of sewerage systems and indoor plumbing had reconfigured the intimate spaces of many US homes.<sup>11</sup>

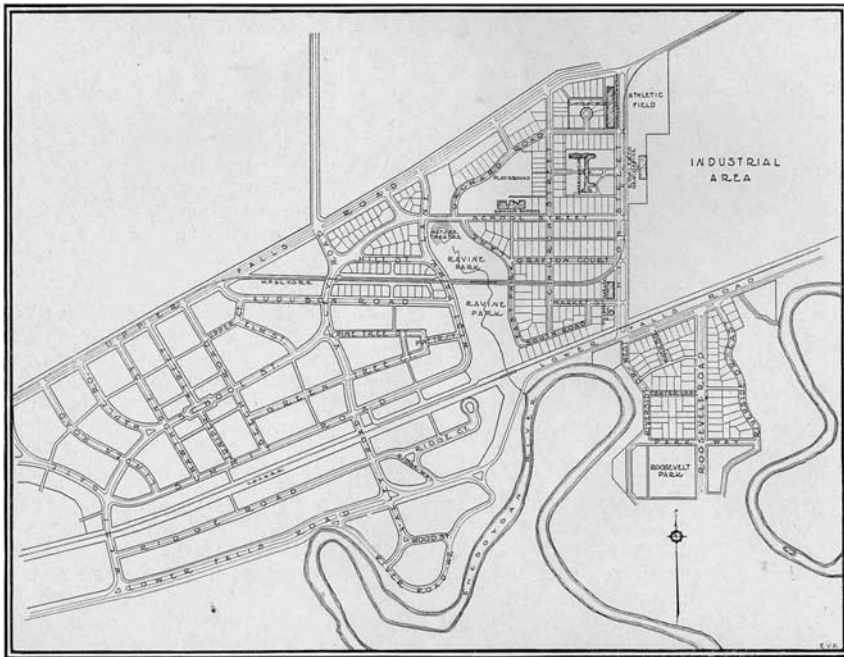
The Kohler Company traded on these developments to promote the necessity of its products. One 1917 Kohler-ware advertisement expressly pictured a heart-shaped bathroom as the putative emotional and organic

town-planned communities for their employees in this era, Walter Kohler tried to attract residents by distinguishing his model village from previous company-town failures, particularly George Pullman's late-nineteenth-century paternalistic experiment near Chicago. Kohler emphasized that his village offered workers home ownership and community control, features which made the town "American in spirit and government".

9. Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike*, pp. 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.

10. *Kohler of Kohler News*, November 1926. Competing plumbing manufacturers such as the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company and Crane featured similar sorts of domestic scenes as well as claims for the ways modern plumbing reduced domestic drudgery, but with less editorializing copy and no connection to a "village of homes" where the fixtures were produced. See for example Crane advertisement, *Life*, 18 June 1925, p. 85; "Standard" Kitchen Sinks advertisement, *Indiana Farmer's Guide*, 27 March 1920, p. 20.

11. See Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York [etc.], 1948); Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *The Bathroom, The Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Maureen Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences: American Household Plumbing, 1840–1890* (Baltimore, MD, 1996); Joel Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink* (Akron, OH, 1996); Marina Moskowitz, *Standard of Living* (Baltimore, MD, 2004), ch. 4; Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York [etc.], 1995); Sarah A. Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), pp. 28–35, 95–125.



### The Kohler Village Ground Plan

THE map above shows the streets, parks, and other prominent features of those portions of Kohler Village which have been built up or are at present being developed. The Kohler Co. factory and office are situated in the industrial area east of High Street, indicated in the upper right corner of the map. Influenced by the contours of the ground or the course of the river, many of the streets are winding. The area within the corporate limits of the Village is much larger than the section included in this map, embracing approximately 2100 acres.

Figure 1. Master Ground Plan for Kohler Village, c.1920s.

From *Kohler Village: A Town-Planned Wisconsin Industrial Community American in Spirit and Government* (Kohler, WI, 1928).

Courtesy Kohler Co.

center of the home.<sup>12</sup> A 1926 advertisement featuring children brushing their teeth in a bathroom while a mother prepared their beds in the background elaborated the 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*” (see Figure 2 overleaf). As another advertisement opined, bathroom fixtures inculcated “pride of cleanliness”, inspiring appreciation for the room’s

12. Kohler Ware advertisement, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 12 May 1917, p. 98, Kohler Archives [hereafter KA] 2–100, 659.13, Kohler Co., Plumbing – Consumer Ads, 1917.

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.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, well into the 1930s, investigations of working-class budgets and housing emphasized the importance of improving sanitary facilities available to workers. Repeated surveys showed that over 50 per cent of working-class families in Chicago in the 1920s lacked such facilities. Privy-vaults (outdoor pit-latrines) 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 passers-by 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 provided, it was usually in a dark closet and lacked hot water, rendering it so unappealing for bathing that it was used for storage. Reacting to condescending stereotypes of immigrant workers using baths to keep laundry or coal out of ignorance, however, housing reformers in Depression-era New York insisted that their investigations “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.” According to these reformers, working-class women had their own opinions about the virtues of bathtubs which led them to recoil from the shower facilities proposed for improved housing. Tenement dwellers associated showers with the lack of privacy they endured in public bath-houses, and also noted that tubs were more efficient for bathing children and safer for the elderly. Thus, while some reformers lamented that working-class families’ inadequate access to bathrooms denied them the “encouragement toward cleanliness which good hot-water facilities offer”, these families often had their own specifications for desired plumbing fixtures they needed little encouragement to use.<sup>14</sup>

The New York reformers investigating working-class women’s housing preferences in the 1930s also emphasized the centrality of the kitchen as a social site of domestic labor and family life. Working-class women preferred to eat, work, and supervise children’s play and schoolwork in the kitchen in order to centralize their diverse domestic tasks, to save

13. *Kohler of Kohler News*, November 1926; March 1923, p. 12; Oct 1925 p. 23.

14. Edith Abbott, *The Tenements of Chicago*, (Chicago, IL, 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, 1936), pp. 1, 10, 13.





**A Notable Community**  
 The modern conception of the "city plan  
 is shaping the growth—in orderly beauty  
 and civic purpose—of Kohler Village  
 where Kohler enameled plumbing ware  
 and private electric plants are made

**W**HEN 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*. . . . If you should need a more worthy bathroom, or an additional one, you will want to see those fine and graceful fixtures which bear the name "Kohler" faintly fused in immaculately white enamel. They cost no more. Write for Booklet E.

KOHLER CO., *Founded 1873*, KOHLER, WIS  
*Shipping Point, Sheboygan, Wis* Branches in Principal Cities

# KOHLER OF KOHLER

## *Plumbing Fixtures*

Figure 2. Kohler Plumbing Advertisement.  
 Kohler of Kohler News, October 1925, p. 23.  
 Courtesy Kohler Co.

steps in preparing, serving, and cleaning up after meals, and, where space allowed, to preserve other rooms for outside guests.<sup>15</sup> Kohler advertisements put a somewhat different spin on the social significance of the kitchen. 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 advertisements opened their kitchens with particular pride 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 different class-aesthetic than the woman studied by New York housing reformers espoused, women in these advertisements enthused to family and elegantly dressed guests about how their "electric servant" liberated them from drudgeries endured by their housewifely forebears as well as from present-day servants.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of the Kohler electric sink, company publicity drew an especially close connection between Kohler Village homes and the Kohler-equipped domestic spaces depicted in advertisements. The *Kohler of Kohler News* announced in 1926 that the electric sink just launched on national markets had been "in daily use for more than a year" in several Village homes. Kohler housewives had thereby learned "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!"<sup>17</sup> Broader, industry-wide campaigns supported by Kohler officials tied the labor savings which modern plumbing appliances offered to women into wider comparative scales of sanitary culture that, as we shall see, were also addressed in the company's publicity for its expanding markets. Thus, Walter Kohler reported to plumbing and heating industry colleagues that members off the General Federation of Women's Clubs who had conducted a 1925–1926 survey of household fixtures installed throughout the US:

[...] 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 [...] thousands of women still carrying millions of gallons of water every year [...]. We can't have cultural development in this country until we have leisure, and by leisure I mean freedom from soul-destroying labor.<sup>18</sup>

15. Women's City Club, *Housing for the Family*, p. 10.

16. *Good Housekeeping*, April 1927; KA 2–100, 659.13 Kohler Co., Plumbing Consumer ads, 1915–1929.

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

18. Plumbing industry organizations avidly catered to women's clubs; *Monthly Service Bulletin of the Plumbing and Heating Industries* (May 1928), p. 9.

Commenting on the implications of the survey in the *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.<sup>19</sup> Here the personal drudgery and “servant” problems invoked in advertisements for the Kohler electric sink were thrown into new relief: modern plumbing conveniences saved women from the labor surrounding water and hygiene in less civilized lands, as well as reviled groups of labor exploited at home.<sup>20</sup>

In the imagined domestic interiors transformed by modern plumbing and extolled by Kohler publicity, then, women were liberated from anachronistic drudgery by modern conveniences reserved, until recently, for stately homes and the guests of fine hotels. Company publications acknowledged that up to the 1930s such conveniences were still absent from at least one-quarter of US homes – an absence that invited their campaign for sanitary modernization.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, their publicity pictured children whose bathrooms were schools of cleanliness as invariably scrubbed “pink”, and an electric sink that helped lighten their mother’s domestic workload or solve her “servant problem” by working for years at a cost that would buy a servant’s help for only months.<sup>22</sup> Thus, properly equipped housewives were saved from the association with the toil endured by European peasants, from association with racialized sweated labor, and from the inferior facilities of ill-equipped homes that needed sanitary modernization. But domestic interiors represented only

19. Mary Sherman, “After the Federation Survey – What?”, *Woman's Home Companion*, July 1926, p. 26.

20. On wider discourses connecting the emerging image of the “coolie” to racialized conceptions of labour in and outside the home in the nineteenth century, see Moon-ho Chung, “Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation”, *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005): pp. 667–701; Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1998).

21. Drawing on statistics generated by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce in the mid-1930s, the Kohler Company referred to homes that lacked “modern plumbing facilities”, by which they apparently meant a bathroom including sink, toilet, and tub and/or shower; *Kohler of Kohler News*, January 1935, pp. 4–5. Other estimations for the 1930s estimate on average one-third of urban homes and over one-half of rural homes in the US lacked flush toilets; see Stanley Lebergott, *The American Economy: Income, Wealth, and Want* (Princeton, NJ, 1976) who estimates that 51 per cent of all US households, 85 per cent of urban homes and 8 per cent 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 (1989), pp. 125–144.

22. Kohler advertisement, *Saturday Evening Post*, 21 May 1927.

the smallest scale on which the Kohler Company, its resident workers in Kohler Village, or its consumers mapped social relations occasioned by modern plumbing.<sup>23</sup>

#### GLOBAL MARKETS OF TUBS AND TOIL

From the 1910s through the 1930s, the Kohler Company had reached beyond the regional market to which they had first sold the enameled iron plumbing-ware that became their main products in the late nineteenth century. By 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 vitreous china plumbing-ware to their product lines in the 1920s, the company sought markets for their wares in global networks that also provided access to the myriad materials required for their manufacture.<sup>24</sup> Company publicity emphasized that these networks allowed Kohler fixtures to enhance less advanced culture of hygiene worldwide. Members of the company's growing ranks 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, the Construction Supplies Company. The firm's directors, Leon Kahn and Max Nathan, specialized in what they described

23. 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. In its first, November 1916 issue, the *News* announced that 324 "Viceroy" tubs, touted for their ease of cleaning, had been installed in Chicago's new Edgewater Beach Hotel. This issue also sported a map of the company's fifteen sales branches spread from Boston to Los Angeles. The coming 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 twelve Kohler lavatories in the new Masonic Temple at Anchorage, Alaska; *Kohler of Kohler News*, November 1916, pp. 4, 7; February 1917, p. 9; March 1917, p. 17; July 1917, p. 17.

24. The Kohler Company was founded by John Michael Kohler, an Austrian immigrant turned furniture salesman who married the daughter of Jacob J. Vollrath, a leading manufacturer of iron and steel agricultural implements and chair fittings in Sheboygan. Kohler purchased his father-in-law's foundry, in partnership with Charles Silberzahn, in 1873, continuing its manufacturer of its established lines of trade. Five years after forming a new partnership with two machinists in the plant in 1878, Kohler and his company shifted to the manufacture of enameled kitchen ware, sinks, and reservoirs. By the late 1890s, when most partners and shareholders in the company sold to members of the Kohler family, the firm had shifted production almost entirely to enameled iron plumbing supplies. The Kohler firm began the manufacture of vitreous china plumbing ware in the 1920s. It has remained a privately held family company. See Trudi Jennes Eblen, "A History of the Kohler Co. of Kohler, Wisconsin, 1871–1914" (MS, University of Wisconsin, 1965); Richard E. Blodgett, *A Sense of Higher Design: The Kohlers of Kohler* (Lyme, CT, 2003).

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 they admitted that limited buying power often constricted the range of their markets, and that market expansion involved campaigning to change foreign laws to permit installation of American plumbing-ware, the Construction Supplies Company boasted a long list of distributors concentrated in the Caribbean, Central American, and South American countries where US economic dominance had opened markets in the early twentieth century. They also traded in East Asia, where early twentieth-century enthusiasm for American planning principles among 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”.<sup>25</sup>

In Africa, Kohler export business was handled by more regionally and locally based agents. R.C. Gilfillan of Nairobi approached the company in 1924 to seek sole agency for the Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika territory, while Goodwin and Co., Ltd., headquartered in Durban, South Africa, distributed Kohler throughout South Africa and (then) Rhodesia. Most African distributors focused 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.<sup>26</sup> Other areas of the world were served by independent export/import agents dealing directly with Kohler’s export department.

Reports from these agents emphasized the ways in which Kohler products participated in a global campaign of hygiene that contended worldwide with variations of the anachronistic forms of hygiene, and the toil associated with them, from which Kohler products liberated consumers at home. In January 1921, the *News* included a photograph of “The Bath Room – Chinese Style” furnished for its Seattle office by the

25. 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, p. 13.

26. *Kohler of Kohler News*, April 1930, p. 13; November 1930, pp. 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 shows Goodwin & Co. to have been taken over by or changed into Magna Importers) dealing in Kohler Lighting Plants, Philco Radios, and Gibson Refrigerators.



Figure 3. “The Bath Room – Chinese Style”.  
 Kohler of Kohler News, *January 1921*, p. 15.  
 Courtesy Kohler Co.

representative of a Shanghai company (see Figure 3 above). 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.<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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".<sup>28</sup> 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 planning ideals visible in Kohler Village. Such engineers formed the Association of Chinese and American Engineers, whose journal announced in its premier issue a program that echoed Kohler's global conception of the 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.<sup>29</sup>

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* coverage of American-trained engineers aiding sanitary progress in China made little comment on the toil saved or expended in Chinese buildings fitted with Kohler Ware, the engineers it celebrated encountered intricate webs of water and work in their pursuit of hygienic modernity. While working with American architect Henry Murphy to modernize the Nationalist capital of Nanjing through such planning techniques as zoning and 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".<sup>30</sup>

28. *Kohler of Kohler News*, June 1929, pp. 3–7. *Kohler of Kohler News*, May 1930, p. 13.

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

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

As Ruth Rogaski observes, “Dark Drifter” guilds that organized such water (and night soil) carriers persisted in providing “clean” municipal water in the Treaty Port of Tianjin by manipulating a patchwork of water supply produced by the various imperial concessions who piped water to different constituents in the city.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, specters of such labor haunted plumbing-industry images of sanitary modernization projects in the US.

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 Zulu garb, standing with shield held before him (see Figure 4). It had been sent by George A. Berry, a South African dealer for the “Kohler Automatic”. Berry’s commentary on his photograph demonstrates 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?”<sup>32</sup> Here, the labor 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-World-War-I 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. But “suburb” would also eventually refer to the growing neighborhoods of shacks rented to Africans barred through increasingly vigorous “influx control” from land ownership in town. Here water-carrying represented a precious opportunity for small entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship 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”, often female, beer-sellers.

Such districts aroused white ratepayers’ and health officials’ fears of contagion because of their reputedly inadequate sanitation provisions.

31. Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, pp. 207–224.

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





Figure 4. “A Kohler Competitor”.  
Kohler of Kohler News, *July 1924*, p. 10.  
*Courtesy Kohler Co.*

As black activists regularly pointed out, however, dwellings deemed hygienically appropriate were 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 dwellings such trades could build. Insult was added to injury when the housing schemes provided for African labor boasted “modern” water-borne sewage only in public latrines. Ironically, African householders whom whites perceived as being among the most “civilized” shunned water-borne sewage offered

under such conditions for less sanitary bucket systems that had the virtue of providing privacy.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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 homesteads in African rural areas, which featured agricultural shows too. The relatively long-standing show at Inanda Mission, supported by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, focused on plows and harrows, rather than generators like Kohler’s. Alongside the plows, Inanda also offered civilizing training in household arts at the Inanda Seminary for girls, designed to uplift “native” Christian households as well as providers of domestic labor. 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. Berry’s photo thus referenced a range of “competitors” for the labor-saving attributes of Kohler’s global exports.<sup>35</sup>

In other cases, sanitary progress spread by Kohler products built on more direct US imperial maneuvers. Where US occupation had already hastened modernity, as in the case of the Dominican Republic in the 1910s and 1920s, the hygienic culture of Kohler plumbing was not far behind.

33. 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, 1952), pp. 299–304, 354–377; R.J. 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, 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, 1994).

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

35. Paul La Hausse, “‘The Cows of Nongoloza’: Youth, Crime and Amalaita Gangs in Durban, 1900–1936”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16 (1990), pp. 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* (Inanda, 1972).

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” that 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 such suitably Kohler-equipped buildings, among them the homes of the President, officials of electric light and realty firms, and the President of the Land Court which, organized under US occupation, had been a vehicle for transferring Dominican lands to large sugar companies organized by an expanding US sugar industry.<sup>36</sup>

This identification of Kohler products with an ever-wider empire of hygiene was given national and international publicity in the Kohler exhibit for the 1933–1934 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 the 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. [...] 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.<sup>37</sup>

Kohler achieved this broad reach for materials and markets in service of the production of bathrooms that promoted American standards of

36. *Kohler of Kohler News*, June 1929, pp. 3–7; see also Cesar Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), pp. 101–107.

37. *Kohler of Kohler: A Century of Progress, 1934* (Kohler, 1934).

hygiene: a purely modern conception that has become the symbol of America's emphasis on personal cleanliness.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

This mapping of Kohler Village as the apex of hygienic progress 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 exhibits focusing on processes of production and technological innovation related to the fair's central theme of modernity.<sup>40</sup> These exhibits urged modern home improvements on predominantly American visitors while extending the colonial themes of the 1931 Paris International Colonial and Overseas Exposition which had inspired the Century of Progress through its message that modern progress provided for "rapid social, educational, and sanitary development realized through the kindly tutorship of the United States".<sup>41</sup> In Chicago, this theme of the "colonial moderne" was simplified through Native American and African exhibits that depicted "progress"

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. See Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago, IL, 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, 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, 1968), pp. 346–356.

41. "Some General Remarks on the International Colonial and Overseas Exposition at Paris", quoted in Rydell, *World of Fairs*, p. 76.

through stark contrasts between “primitive” and “modern”. Kohler’s exhibit helped to bolster the colonial moderne theme by insisting on the unrivaled hygiene of American bathrooms, and their spread throughout the globe.<sup>42</sup>

As the company’s commentary on global patterns in plumbing suggested, high standards of American hygienic culture were measured through distinctions with labor and hygiene elsewhere on the globe. Hygienic households in the US enjoyed the civilizing and labor-saving benefits of modern Kohler plumbing. Meanwhile, rural and non-Western populations caught up by sending sanitary engineers to the US for training. Where advanced plumbing, heating, and electrical systems were unavailable to save homemakers’ labor, racialized labor competed with the efficiency of Kohler products by working for wages inadequate to supply the hygienic amenities associated with the American bathroom.

#### AMERICAN WORKERS, GLOBAL TOIL

In the 1930s and 1950s, labor disputes at the Kohler plant began to spawn alternate maps of the networks of global tubs and toil in which company publicity implicated Kohler workers and Village residents. Though these conflicts were about many issues unrelated to geography or hygiene, their participants engaged the maps of hygienic civilization in which the company had located the Village. Locally, Kohler workers and their families participated in the toil of hygiene in ways that rearranged the company’s images of “American” homes, in the process re-conceiving relations between the intimate scale of the domestic and the national scale of the “American”. More broadly, their efforts to publicize their cause refigured transnational relations of toil imagined in company publicity.

Some of the frustrations that sparked Kohler’s 1930s labor unrest – the first the company had experienced since strikes at its Sheboygan plant in the 1890s – emanated from the company’s very efforts to promote “American” standards of living among its employees. The Kohler Company had long committed itself to “continuity of employment”, which Walter J. Kohler saw as integral to his efforts to cultivate the Village as an attractive place 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

42. Rydell, *World of Fairs*, pp. 83, 104, 167–168. Relatedly, an issue of the *Kohler of Kohler News* appearing in the wake of *Kohler of Kohler: A Century of Progress* linked Kohler products to progress among Native Americans whose new reservation schools boasted modern toilet facilities supporting a curriculum that included “education in sanitation and dietetics, in order to improve health and living conditions on the reservations”; *Kohler of Kohler News*, October 1935, p. 9.

national trade and even borrowed money in order to sustain his workforce. As company warehouses across the continent filled in the early 1930s, however, reduced hours and layoffs began. These measures generated resentments, both among workers with homes in the Village who were granted extra work hours but required to assign some income to their mortgages, and workers living elsewhere who were cut back further.<sup>43</sup>

An additional spur to labor organization 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. The enthusiasm with which unionists 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 voluntary 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 as a staunch proponent of the "American open shop", he also balked at the labor provisions of the act, which linked the industry codes he helped author to new, federal support for unionization.<sup>44</sup>

These measures quickly generated rival company and union conceptions of the way "American" living standards were achieved. For Kohler, such standards derived from "happy", "friendly" relations sustained locally between employers and workers. Kohler officials saw these relations as best facilitated through a common but voluntary commitment to the production and civilizing purposes of the company. In contrast, in the context of diminishing hours and shrinking paychecks which exacerbated frustrations some workers nurtured regarding relations of power and control in the plant, union members began to associate "American" standards with independent union representation. "Jumping scale" beyond the local loyalties cultivated in the plant and Village, such representation connected workers to solidarities forged at wider, regional, and national scales that would obligate the company to more formal contractual terms.

43. NLRB Testimony, 1934, Walter J. Kohler, Reuther Archives, UAW Local 833 Collection (hereafter UAW Local 833), Box 97, F.25; Walter Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike: Thirty Years of Conflict* (Boston, MA, 1966).

44. Walter J. Kohler, NLRB Testimony, 1934, UAW Local 833, Box 97, F.25.

Unionists also questioned company representations of the intimate scale of the home. One organizer pictured a mother hunched over a wash tub amidst hungry children as the result of open-shop labor policies like Kohler's, an image that confounded the company's visions of its workers' homes as local models of the sanitary civilization it offered to the world.<sup>45</sup> Not only did unionizing workers set their sights beyond the domestic and local scales at which the company tried to focus their loyalty, in short, they also redefined the sanitary domestic life that company publicity depicted their products producing across local, national and global scales.

Emboldened by these organizing efforts and the national legislation that inspired it, 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. While the company countered by forming a company union (the Kohler Workers' Association, or KWA) among workers who agreed with management that worker grievances should be handled internally, 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, a thirty-hour work week, and reinstatement of laid-off workers, a strike was called, effective from 16 July 1934.<sup>46</sup>

Company and union statements about the strike highlighted competing geographic scales upon which the company and unionized workers mapped networks of toil that commanded their allegiance. These spatial alternatives were contested especially sharply 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 27 July 1934. In company publicity, strikers represented "outsiders" threatening the home-centered lives of villagers. According to the union, however, such representations of the town 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.

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 his product

45. Notes, 14 October 1933 Organizational Meeting, Local 18545, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Charles Heymanns Collection [hereafter WSHS Heymanns] Box 2, F. A.

46. For more on the strike see Kathryn Oberdeck, "Class, Place, and Gender: Contested Domestic and Industrial Space in Kohler, Wisconsin, 1920–1960", *Gender and History*, 13 (2001), pp. 97–137, and Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike*.

[...] 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”.<sup>47</sup> It was also intended to restrict workers to relating to the rest of the world only through the tubs they produced for Kohler. 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. To the new unionists, his defense of the Kohler factory and village from union-affiliated “outsiders” obscured 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. [...] 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.<sup>48</sup>

These workers challenged the way the company associated them spatially with Kohler Village homes that modeled modern hygiene to national and global consumers. They claimed their own global network of allegiances that connected them to worksites where Kohler materials were extracted and Kohler products were installed. From this perspective, the “Kohler competitor”, water carriers in China, and the workers for sugar barons who installed Kohler Ware in the Dominican Republic were fellows in a global labor solidarity.

Of course, “domestic” identities imagined for Kohler workers in company publicity had been not just house-bound or local, but national in scale, inasmuch as worker/residents in Kohler Village modeled “American” standards of household hygiene to wider markets. But “Americanism” itself constituted another important fault-line along which striking workers remapped their affiliations. With regard to both the “domestic” scale of household relations and the scale at which “American” identity was acquired, at least some immigrant workers offered alternatives to employer maps of the “domestic” and the “national”.

Kohler Village aided the company’s association with the spread of hygienic civilization in part because it was intended to promote Americanization

47. *The New Deal*, 20 July 1934, p. 1.

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



among immigrants, particularly those from central and southern European regions that provided unfavorable models for domestic drudgery endured by women in the US who did not enjoy American sanitary standards. Two-thirds of the Village's 1930 households had individuals who were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and 16.4 per cent of the population was foreign born. In the American Club, which was designed explicitly to "domesticate" single immigrant workers with regard both to nationality and home habits, twenty-six of forty-four residents were immigrants, and another fourteen were the children of immigrants. Many of these residents had embraced American citizenship and identity even before the company began vigorous Americanization programs in the 1910s and 1920s, and most of them were naturalized citizens. The company acknowledged these immigrant origins with occasional *News* features on Christmas traditions they had brought from their places of origin – while also rendering such traditions nostalgic by noting that they were difficult to maintain in new surroundings. This nostalgic tone reinforced the company's focus on integrating immigrants into Kohler Village's "American" standards of domestic life and hygiene.<sup>49</sup>

For members of Local 18545, section 7 (a) itself represented new American standards. The *New Deal* declared that issues of "American standards of living – American treatment for American workers – and enforcement of American labor legislation are the issues of the strike [...] against the Kohler." Contrary to the what *The New Deal* called "company propaganda" picturing Walter J. Kohler as a "benevolent industrial father" presiding over a "happy family", the paper insisted that 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 lay-offs at the Kohler plant. They regarded themselves as "the real Americans of this section of the country", carrying the American flag at the head of their picket line as they proclaimed to the world their support of the new-found rights as workers they found expressed at the national scale of New-Deal-era labor relations.<sup>50</sup>

These appeals to laborite "Americanism" appeared especially important to the organization's most recently immigrated members, particularly 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, though 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

49. 1930 Census, Kohler; *Kohler of Kohler News*, April 1926, p. 6.

50. *The New Deal*, clipping 1934, n.d., Wisconsin State Historical Society, Walter Uphoff Collection, [hereafter WSHS Uphoff] Box 9, f. 28.

had fled to the US 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. Those who arrived in Sheboygan between the 1890s and the 1920s settled down to industrial work at Kohler and other local factories or, in the case of women, to domestic service in households not yet equipped with “electric servants”. They only gradually assimilated into the older German-American immigrant culture that dominated the area. For a while they sustained their own Lutheran church, St Stephen’s, and they established their own benefit societies, such as the Volga Aid, whose baseball teams competed with the Kohler company teams. They spoke German dialects unfamiliar to more established local German-American communities, who regarded them with some disdain.<sup>51</sup>

Volga Germans who joined Local 18545 demonstrate some of the alternative geographies of household and national “American” identity that union affiliation came to represent. In Kohler Village, Volga Germans stand out as having contributed the largest number and most loyal and militant immigrant AFL unionists living in the village. Many Kohler Village residents who had signed Local 18545 membership applications later renounced the AFL union in favor of the KWA, but Kohler Village’s Russian Germans were not among these. Indeed, at least one affidavit signed by a worker who claimed to have submitted an AFL application blank under pressure from fellow workers reveals that Russian-German immigrants living in Kohler were among the ardent unionists applying such pressure. Two of these early Russian-German union organizers, Jacob Herman and Martin Battauer, were married to women who worked as cleaners in the Kohler offices, and one Russian-German union member housed a second-generation Russian-German maid in his Kohler 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 the census record. In either case, her presence and the work of the Volga-German office cleaners signaled a variation from the domestic vision of Kohler advertisements. Company

51. *A Time For Reflection, The First One Hundred Years: Hundredth Anniversary of the Germans from Russia in Sheboygan, Wisconsin* (Sheboygan, WI, 1992); Kathleen Anne Mapes, *Defining the Boundaries: Family Farmers, Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture and the State in the Rural Midwest, 1898–1938* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2000). Earlier waves of Russian Germans took advantage of the Homestead Act to purchase land and carry on their agricultural way of life in Nebraska, Kansas, the Dakotas, and Colorado, but those arriving in Sheboygan county in the 1890s did not find such land available. During slack seasons at factories, however, Sheboygan County’s Volga Germans did join other Russian Germans in an annual migratory journey through the beet fields of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, where entire families were employed as contract labor.

publicity featured “modern” housewives freed from drudgery and servants to oversee the hygienic needs of a nuclear family, not wage-earning wives possibly engaging paid domestic help to manage a household that mixed family and boarders. Providing rather than avoiding the hygienic toil associated with “coolie” and European peasant labor in Kohler publicity for modern plumbing, at least some Volga-German households in the Village understandably looked beyond the boundaries of its model “American” homes for liberation from toil.<sup>52</sup>

Such departures from the hygienic household geography Kohler advertised may have contributed to the reputation for truculence that militantly unionist Russian-German factory workers acquired during the strike. Commentator Gareth 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”. A “low grade of labor” known “to be difficult, easily moved to a sense of injury, and, on the whole, a little troublesome”, he claimed, they were “[f]or the agitator, perfect material”. Testimony before the NLRB confirms that Christ Gorde, a Russian-German immigrant who served as secretary and bargaining committee member for Local 18545, was certainly 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”. Gorde thus unsurprisingly embraced a union that celebrated him instead for 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. When Gorde sought American citizenship in the midst of the Kohler strike, moreover, national union circles rather than local, Kohler-sponsored Americanization classes proved decisive. AFL investigations into Gorde’s irregular naturalization examination revealed that his examiner had ventured into “irrelevant” issues, prompting a favorable resolution dictated by US Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins. For Gorde, as for the Volga-German households that supplied some of Kohler Village’s most ardent unionists, “American” standards were represented by networks reaching from local union circles through federal agencies to a world of toilers, rather than by sanitary households situated at the heart of the company’s culture of hygiene.<sup>53</sup>

52. 1930 US Manuscript Census, Kohler Village; Local 18545 Membership lists, WSHS, Heymanns, Box 2, F. 1; John Chiminatti statement, Affidavits, Local 833, Box 96, f. 9.

53. “Strike Committee Members have Long Service Records with Kohler”, *The New Deal*, 3 August 1934, WSHS Uphoff, Box 9, f. 28; Henry Ohl to Charles Heymanns, 26 March 1937, and Frances Perkins to Henry Ohl, 22 March 1937, WSHS Heymanns, Box 2, Folder 7.

Home-making womenfolk of Kohler strikers in the 1930s also rearranged the associations of tubs, hygiene, and toil articulated in the company's global championship of American hygienic standards modeled in Kohler homes. Their enthusiasm for many of ideals the company promoted found poignant expression in the "Hints for Mothers" column submitted almost weekly by Eva Katherine Burbey, one-time Kohler Village resident, wife of a union leader, Guy Burbey, and eventually the secretary of the Women's Auxiliary of Sheboygan's Central Labor Union. Mrs Burbey's hints echoed the enthusiasm for home improvement that the company associated with Kohler Village in the popular press. Indeed, she repeatedly referred readers to the *Women's Home Companion* and other popular magazines where Kohler fixtures and the company's advocacy of "American" hygienic modernity were publicized. Her "hints" further elaborated working-class women's complicated relation to the networks of toil associated with "domestic" hygiene as modeled and practiced at Kohler.

The wider home-improvement culture woven around Kohler Village experimentation with products like electric sinks provides an important context for the perspectives Burbey and other *New Deal* columnists offered on "domestic" hygiene. In addition to their introduction to new Kohler-manufactured labor-saving products, Village housewives had opportunities for a variety of Kohler-sponsored programs centered on home improvement, especially through its annual "Better Homes Week" celebration conducted in association with the Better Homes in America movement. The national movement promoted many contemporary themes of "domestic" culture that made the 1920s ripe for the very sort of welfare capitalist programs Kohler Village offered.<sup>54</sup> 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 a demonstration home featuring the latest in Kohler products. By the 1930s demonstration-home designs revolved around the 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,

54. The national movement was overseen by an advisory board originally headed by Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who favored such local incentives to home ownership fostered by private enterprise. See Regina Lee Blasczyk, "No Place Like Home: Herbert Hoover and the American Standard of Living", in T. Walch (ed.), *Uncommon Americans: The Lives and Legacies of Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover* (Westport, CT, 2003); Janet Hutchison, "Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal", *Journal of Policy History*, 1997 (9), pp. 184–210.

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.<sup>55</sup>

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 she sometimes strayed from methods for achieving such homes recommended in company advertising, echoing broader reassessments of relations among the scales of home, nation, and globe reflected throughout the *New Deal*. Burbey wondered, for example, about the wisdom of replacing all the manual arts of the home with labor-saving equipment, on the argument that abolishing domestic handiwork robbed children of opportunities to learn the dexterity and honesty of manual labor. No less appreciative of women's "calling" to "motherhood" than Women's Federation president Mary Sherman, Burbey was less convinced that automated gadgets or the hired domestic labor they replaced always facilitated that calling, even while she agreed with Kohler company publicity that it saved women the worst sorts of drudgery. She observed that, neither maids nor "electric robots" – "inventions that will ultimately make hands more ornamental than useful" – promoted the experience with dexterous movements of the hands that taught children vital distinctions between "precision" and "vagueness".<sup>56</sup> Here the association that union workers felt with toilers around the world came home to the "domestic" spaces that Kohler advertising promised to rid of toil.

However, Burbey was careful to distinguish her position on domestic work from one of "sanctioning child labor or anything pertaining to the complete servitude of the child". In this respect she echoed concerns reflected repeatedly in other columns of the *New Deal* women's page about the exploitation of women and children who labored as home-based industrial workers in the US and abroad. These columns reflected the wider efforts of women reformers who served in the Women's Bureau of the Labor Department and on NRA advisory boards – and whose nationwide speeches the women's page regularly covered – to use the NRA to restrict or abolish industrial homework. This crusade targeted homework as exploitative and underpaid toil that brought down factory wages while also interfering with women's domestic duties as mothers to ensure their children's access to hygiene and education. It thus joined the national and global affiliations with other toilers that Burbey's husband and his union brothers expressed with her own working-class take on mother's domestic responsibilities. And it projected these problems of women's toil worldwide. Women's page articles decrying the evils of

55. Kohler of *Kohler News*, July 1935, pp. 4–5.

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

homework focused not only on instances within the continental US but also repeatedly decried the display and purchase of needlecrafts produced by Puerto Rican homeworkers, many of whom labored in their homes to supplement the intermittent plantation work many of their male kin shared with the employees of the Dominican Republic sugar plantations that fueled the hygienic modernity celebrated in the *Kohler of Kohler News*. Burbey and her Wisconsin compatriots perhaps grasped less clearly that, as Eileen Boris has pointed out, Puerto Rican needleworkers struggled to improve their conditions as wage-workers while also valuing the way homework allowed them to maintain their duties as mothers. In addressing the dilemmas of “domestic” toil within widening circles of the US empire, though, the commentary offered by Burbey and her women’s page compatriots rearranged the configuration of homes, sanitation, and toil that appeared in the company’s empire of hygiene.<sup>57</sup>

Complexities of “hygienic” domesticity were also highlighted in columns in the women’s page and throughout the *New Deal* that emphasized working people’s struggle to find decent housing characterized by access to sanitation and electricity. From early on in the strike, *The New Deal* noted the inability of American workers nationwide to afford housing with bathtubs, toilets, or electricity “as a result of the depression due to the crazy economic system under which we are operating and which the Kohler strikers are battling in their fight to get a greater share in wages of the wealth they produce”. Through such outrage at “American” workers not having access to “American” living standards, workers shared in some of the imperial social distinctions entailed in the company’s empire of hygiene. But they also mirrored the frustration of workers throughout that empire, such as the “Kohler competitor” and his fellow African laborers, whose degree of hygienic domesticity was measured by standards their wages could not afford. Moreover, 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, Burbey and other writers for the paper’s women’s page sought public provision of electricity and water that also stretched the scope of “domestic” issues of sanitation beyond the “home”.<sup>58</sup>

These revisions of the scales of “domestic” toil elaborated at Kohler languished for over a decade after Local 18545 lost its battle and officially

57. *New Deal*, 15 February 1935, p. 4; 7 June 1935, p. 4; Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge [etc.], 1994), pp. 201–239; Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom*.

58. *The New Deal*, 27 July 1934, p. 3; 12 October 1934, p. 6; 28 June 1935, p. 4; 1 May 1936, p. 4; 15 May 1936, p. 4.

ended the strike in 1940. New alternative geographies among Kohler workers or Village residents awaited the longer, fiercer and ultimately successful 1950s strike undertaken by UAW-CIO Local 833. The national bureaucracy the CIO had achieved by the 1950s expanded the scale of labor connections that Kohler unionists could make. Whereas Kohler's 1930s unionists had elaborated mainly rhetorical connections to the networks of toil they counterpoised to the company's trade in tubs, for example, UAW Local 833 staged more direct challenges to the company's international networks.

An example was the notorious clay-boat 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*. The incident is best known for a melee that took place at the dock when company officials and contractors showed up to unload cargo after the 4 July holiday. Several days earlier, however, 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 strike-bound 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". Here, union affiliation provided an alternate filter for the global representation of "American" standards of life and labor, directly addressing international "toilers" that, as 1930s unionists had pointed out, were the logical global network for Kohler workers to engage.<sup>59</sup>

In the wake of World War II, however, the mapping of immigrant traditions and "American identities" relative to borders distinguishing community "outsiders" and "insiders" took on new associations shaped by the Cold War.<sup>60</sup> Company claims were relatively constant: in the 1950s, as in the 1930s, unionization campaigns were undertaken by "outsiders" to the community who, often nurtured by foreign radical ideologies, assaulted "American" rights to jobs and homes upheld in the Village. Whereas the AFL union of the 1930s had competed with the company as a conduit for immigrant workers' American identities, however, the union of the 1950s tended to pick on the Austrian origins of the Kohler family to paint the then-current head of

59. McClellan Committee Hearings, Part 23, 12–18 March 1958, pp. 9156–9158; Uphoff, *Kohler on Strike*. Ultimately the *Fossum* went to Milwaukee to unload, only to be turned back by union labor there as well (for the remainder of the strike Kohler-bound clay was unloaded in Montreal and shipped by rail).

60. During World War II many immigrant sons and grandsons had solidified their commitment to a polyglot America through military service, as is amply demonstrated by union members' descriptions of their life stories in legal affidavits taken for the many NLRB hearings related to the strike; UAW Local 833, 1950s CIO Affidavits, Box 99, F. 11–16.

the company, Herbert V. Kohler Sr (Walter's half-brother), as un-American. Dubbed a "bathtub baron" who mired his employees in old-world traditions of paternalism, he was also charged with promoting "Kohlerism", which union pamphlets identified as a threat to American freedoms equal to Nazism and communism. Local 833 also redirected the company's rhetoric of hygiene to represent Kohlerism as a "disease" that could spread to other employers.<sup>61</sup>

Workers' immigrant backgrounds also took on new meanings. In some cases the UAW local celebrated these roots, as when it attributed to the Germanic ancestry of many Kohler workers traditions of craftsmanship "handed down from father to son" and unavailable to inexperienced "scab" labor brought into the community by the company – "many of whom never worked in a factory before".<sup>62</sup> In their responses to company claims that the strike was fomented by "thugs" from Detroit, however, union members began to include immigrants in the class of "undesirable outsiders" they claimed the company drew to the community through its recruitment of replacement workers. No longer recognized as community-kin in an era when the local foreign-born population had dropped by half compared to 1930, arrivals "fresh from Holland", 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 interlopers ripe for Kohler's "feudal" system. Even an established local resident like Danish immigrant Paul Jacobi – a former American Club tenant who in the 1930s had expressed passing interest in the AFL union – could become an object of the union's increasingly nationalist prejudices. By the 1950s he was a Kohler Village homeowner and hated time-study man whom striker Gustave Leibest admitted calling a "foreigner" a couple of times.<sup>63</sup> As opposed to Local 18545, which had embraced immigrants who seemed "foreign", Local 833 narrowed the range of immigrant pasts acceptable within the boundaries of its local affinities.

What Local 833 offered instead were new connections to the national and global markets for sanitary-ware that the company had been expanding since the 1920s. This was especially the case in the course of the national boycott that the union undertook to try to garner consumer support and diminish company profits enough to force the company officials into a settlement. At local boycott headquarters, national networks were reproduced on a map that charted the destinations of trucks that union members would follow out of the plant to ascertain the destination of Kohler fixtures. These efforts

61. Undated leaflet, WSHS Uphoff, Box 11, Folder 3.

62. "Watch Out for PBR" leaflet, WSHSHeymanns Box 10, File 1.

63. Local 833 Strike Bulletin, 6 Oct 1954, p. 2; 28 January 1955, p. 2; 7 February 1955, p. 1; Statement of Gustave Leibelt, UAW Local 833, Box 94, f. 14.



extended transnationally as well. Responding to UAW international representative Edward Gray's report on boycott developments in November 1955, Donald Rand, the UAW official who oversaw UAW 833 strike efforts, both lamented Gray's impending departure from the Kohler project for Europe and seized upon Gray's travel plans as an opportunity to follow up on the company's network of imports from and exports. He promised information on Fowey, Cornwall in the UK, where the company obtained the china clay shipped on vessels like the *Fossum*. He also recommended investigating the export work performed by Leon S. Kahn & Co., in hopes of applying the "hot-cargo" clause allowing shipping employees to refuse to handle such goods. Through such extensive networks, Local 833 tried to limit the scale across which the company marketed the toilets and tubs strikebreaking workers were making for Kohler.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, UAW affiliations also linked Local 833 to emerging global terrains of labor solidarity. The company's African distributor, R.C. Gilfillan, for example, watched what became a showdown between Herbert Kohler and UAW president Walter Reuther with an eye toward the battle's relevance in an era of decolonization. Gilfillan pointed out to Herbert Kohler Sr, with whom he had carried on a long correspondence, 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 Kenya 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 quotations 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 "[i]magine the effect of these remarks on an African mob!". Friends whom Kohler had advised to look up Gilfillan in Nairobi in 1963 reported that he had by then fled to South Africa, missing the opportunity to witness Reuther acting as part of the American delegation to independence ceremonies in Nairobi that year.<sup>65</sup>

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 US strike to date came to a protracted close as drawn-out court decisions established UAW Local 833 as the collective bargaining agent for Kohler

64. UAW Local 833, "The Kohler Boycott", (n.d.), UAW Local 833, Box 30, folder 12; Donald Rand to Edward Gray, 23 November 1955, UAW Local 833, Box 5, folder 11; Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

65. Clipping and letter from R.C. Gilfillan to Herbert V. Kohler, 16 July 1960, KA 1–200, 651.5 Kohler Co. Office Files HVK Sr., Gilfillan & Co., LTD; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York, 1995), p. 389.

production workers and dictated which workers were covered by the terms of the strike's settlement. Later in the decade, as routine collective bargaining gradually took hold, local union leaders sought to implement in Kohler some of the national and international commitments to racial equality that the UAW embraced. Thus, when Local 833's first post-strike president, Charles Conrardy, spoke at a 1968 UAW Women's Auxiliaries conference hosted by Local 833 wives, 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, expansion did diversify Kohler's US employees, though mainly by opening new plants in the South and Southwest. Meanwhile the main transformation of the company's workforce occurred through the global expansion of Kohler production.<sup>66</sup>

#### GLOBALIZATION, TUBS, AND TOIL

Even as UAW Local 833 pursued its 1960s victory in Kohler, the juxtaposition of tubs and toil within national and global networks radiating from the village shifted dramatically. In the midst of the 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 jettisoned the imagery of a unified empire of hygiene emanating from the Village and focused instead on what global business specialist Andrew Mair has termed “strategic localization”: the centralized tailoring of products managed by a transnational entity but produced in and for particular diverse markets.<sup>67</sup> 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. Kohler has since 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.<sup>68</sup>

66. “Summary: UAW Women's Auxiliaries Region 10 Conference, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, May 25, 1968”, Walter Reuther Archive, UAW Women's Auxiliary Collection, Box 12, Fr 8.

67. Andrew Maier, “Strategic Localization: The Myth of Postnational Enterprise”, in Kevin R. Cox (ed.), *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local* (New York, 1997), pp. 64–88.

68. “Kohler Opens Store in Bangalore”, Business Line, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2007/09/27/stories/2007092751390500.htm>, 16 October 2007

With these new geographies of production, Kohler's map of domestic hygiene has altered significantly. Rather than modeling a universal standard of modern sanitation for local and distant markets, Kohler Village has become the corporate and hospitality headquarters for a 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 involved engagement with unique color preferences and bathing customs.<sup>69</sup> Of the more recent expansion of Kohler production and marketing in China, the president of the company's kitchen and bath group noted that "China is a unique market. It is dynamic and huge. We must understand local needs and respond to them quickly."<sup>70</sup> 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 fifty-year plan for Kohler Village was conceived under the leadership of current company head 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, championship golf courses, a sports club, and a private wildlife preserve. The block of store-fronts that once served as the commercial center of the original town now houses a spa and the Kohler Design Center. The Design Center features three floors of bathroom and kitchen designs that highlight the company's new emphasis on high-end fixtures and "gracious living" as cultivated at the American Club. These displays offer sinks, tubs, and toilets as art objects as much as 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. Meanwhile, regional labor unions advertise Kohler Village as a recreation spot for union members,

69. History of Kohler, timeline, available at <http://www.kohler.com/corp/about/timeline/index.htm>, "Milestones 1986"; last accessed 17 September 2010.

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

where they can tour one of the declining numbers of US factories where workers still enjoy the benefits of union representation.<sup>71</sup>

These lesser-known unionist visitors delineate important axes on the map of Kohler's shifting geography of hygiene with its changing circuits of tubs and toil. They trace connections through which workers at Kohler inhabited the company's empire of hygiene while also remapping it through alternate labor geographies. Their alternatives 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. 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 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 USA". This would help "Montoya" meet expenses for the "modern" conveniences that cost roughly the same in Monterrey as they do in Wisconsin.<sup>72</sup>

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 that informed such standards, in Chinatown streets and households perceived as diseased and obscurely gendered by San Francisco reformers or within the public excretory practices targeted by colonizing US public health officials in the Philippines.<sup>73</sup> But, while they shrewdly interrogate imperial hygienic regimes and examine how practices were negotiated

71. [http://www.hindunet.org/anti\\_defamation/kohler/](http://www.hindunet.org/anti_defamation/kohler/), last accessed 16 October 2007; AFSCME WORKS MAGAZINE, May/June 1997, "Union Fun in The Summer Sun", <http://www.afscme.org/publications/8466.cfm>, last accessed 17 September 2010; The Wisconsin Laborer, "Odds and Ends: Local #1086 Retirees Find Ways to Stay Active", <http://www.solidarity.com/oddsn.htm>, last accessed 6 November 2004.

72. "Luis Montoya, Meet Dick Klabachek: Kohler Workers in Mexico, U.S. Face Separate Realities", *Sheboygan Press*, 26 February 1993, pp. 1, 4, Sheboygan County Historical Research Center, "Kohler Business and Industry: Kohler Co., Mexico", Clipping File.

73. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Warwick Anderson, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the

and resisted by the objects of colonial hygienic management, this literature leaves obscure other, particularly domestic, audiences for the global standards of hygiene. The Kohler Company, its publicity, and its workers provide some purchase on these audiences and the maps according to which they charted routes along intertwined domestic and international vectors of tubs and toil. They thereby serve to elaborate recent cultural histories of more exclusively middle-class “cosmopolitan domesticity” and of the way American photographers visually composed the domestic relations of imperial subjects. Populating its empire of hygiene with imagined and actual homes, the Kohler Company, its model village, residents, and workers left traces of the work entailed in casting and recasting the domestic, the local, the national and the global at that empire’s domestic core.<sup>74</sup>

Poetics of Pollution”, *Critical Inquiry*, 95:21 (1995), pp. 640–671; *idem*, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, NC, 2006).

74. Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumer’s Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of US Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).