Cassandra Galentine Content Piece

Cassandra Galentine, a Doctoral Candidate in the English Department, was recently awarded a 2021-2022 CSWS Research Grant for her intersectional work on the material conditions of poverty and the resulting racial discourses of hygiene in U.S. women’s working-class literature. Galentine’s project argues that the reading of dirty materials like dirt, dust, and garbage and the resulting discourses of hygiene are an environmental justice issue wherein the responsibility and burden of environmental harm is shifted to its victims through racial capitalism. Her analysis of works by Anizia Yezierska, Sanora Babb, Ann Petry, and Alice Childress explores how women within these texts resist “gendered imperatives of hygiene” by embracing dirty material. Galentine’s analysis further insists that such resistances reveal the “limits of liberal individualism,” in turn “refocus[ing] blame on the structures of injustice.” Ultimately, her work argues that dirt “becomes a central material through which these women defy the constructed borders of gender, the body, the private sphere, and the nation.”

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As both a scholar and labor organizer, Galentine credits her personal experiences as a guiding force in her research. She notes her familial struggles for workers’ rights in the United States were “formative to [her] own class consciousness.” In addition to labor, Galentine is also drawn to what she calls “U.S. obsessions with cleanliness and the role of hygiene in establishing a façade of order.” For her, the links between racial discourses of hygiene and “various ways to disease” render her work particularly salient in light of the COVID-19 pandemic that has also seen a drastic raise in hate crimes world-wide. These intersecting interests lead Galentine to conclude that, “While I still love a good strike novel, the more proletarian literature I read, the more I realized how I was most drawn in by texts that focus on everyday working-class women’s labor (both in the domestic sphere and public sphere) as a site of radical resistance to state violence.”

Galentine would like to thank CSWS for their generous grant in support of her work. Additionally, she offers thanks to her best friend, comrade, and all-around brilliant scholar, Molly Hatay-Ferens. She also offers her thanks to her mentor and dissertation director,
Professor Sarah Wald for her tireless advocacy for social justice and inspiring example. Finally, Galentine offers her thanks to Professor Sharon Luk whose graduate student advocacy has been instrumental to her degree and whose course, “Theoretical Foundations in Ethnic Studies” transformed her understanding of racial capitalism.