

James
ENGL 100: Tragedy of the Commons

Are My Hands Clean?

Lyrics and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Songtalk Publishing Co. 1985
Performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock. *Sweet Honey in the Rock, Live at Carnegie Hall*

I wear garments touched by hands from all over the world
35% cotton, 65% polyester, the journey begins in Central America
In the cotton fields of El Salvador
In a province soaked in blood,
Pesticide-sprayed workers toil in a broiling sun
Pulling cotton for two dollars a day.

Then we move on up to another rung – Cargill
A top-forty trading conglomerate, takes the cotton through the Panama Canal
Up the Eastern seaboard, coming to the US of A for the first time
In South Carolina
At the Burlington mills
Joins a shipment of polyester filament courtesy of the New Jersey petro-chemical mills of
Dupont

Dupont strands of filament begin in the South American country of Venezuela Where oil
riggers bring up oil from the earth for six dollars a day
Then Exxon, largest oil company in the world,
Upgrades the product in the country of Trinidad and Tobago
Then back into the Caribbean and Atlantic Seas
To the factories of Dupont
On the way to the Burlington mills
In South Carolina
To meet the cotton from the blood-soaked fields of El Salvador

In South Carolina
Burlington factories hum with the business of weaving oil and cotton into miles of fabric
for Sears
Who takes this bounty back into the Caribbean Sea
Headed for Haiti this time – May she be one day soon free –
Far from the Port-au-Prince palace
Third world women toil doing piece work to Sears specifications
For three dollars a day my sisters make my blouse

It leaves the third world for the last time
Coming back into the sea to be sealed in plastic for me
This third world sister
And I go to the Sears department store where I buy my blouse
On sale for 20% discount

Are my hands clean?