

Women Working: Domestic Roles (Not) Subverted

Female employment, by definition, subverts domestic roles because it forces women to prioritize their energies into their occupation, rather than their domesticity. However, in “Scrubbing in Maine” from Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dime, Ehrenreich experiences the complete opposite effect. Working both as a dietary aide and a maid only embraces these roles. Although they take on untraditional forms, the “Three C’s” – Childcare, Cooking, and Cleaning, are quintessential components of her jobs. She takes care of the retirees as if they are children, worries over the nutrition of her coworkers, and cleans homes of other people. Her jobs require her to simply transfer these “domestic roles” from her own home to other people’s homes. Because she has to perform the “Three C’s” in her professional life, Ehrenreich demonstrates that employment for the working poor is often a series of domestic roles, sometimes made more extreme rather than eliminated.

When working at the Woodcrest Residential Facility, Ehrenreich fills a motherly role to all the elderly retirees at the home. She even describes them as being juvenile: “Once you join the residents in forgetting about the functioning humans they once were, you can think of them as a band of wizened toddlers at a tea party.”¹ The fact that Ehrenreich refers to her seniors as “toddlers” reflects the fact that the work she has to do is very similar to that of a mother with young children. Her relationship with the residents supports the fact that she is fulfilling the first “C,” Childcare. One resident even throws a whole glass of milk at her, and onlookers laugh, saying, “She wet her pants!” (p.66). Ehrenreich’s work as a dietary aide is, in the end, to take care of the needs of the residents and for this reason she must exercise her patience. While mothers are patient due to the love they hold for their

¹ Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dime*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001. Print, p. 103

kids, Ehrenreich remains patient because of her paycheck. Although there are different motivations, the same behavior results.

In addition to worrying about the residents, Ehrenreich exercises her domestic instincts worrying over the health status of her coworkers. Because of the physically exhausting working conditions the maids at "The Maids" face, Ehrenreich exercises the second "C," Cooking, by providing much-needed nutrition to her peers. By monitoring the nutrition of her coworkers, specifically Holly, she acts as a mother. When she gives a "Pure Protein" sports bar to Holly, she provides comfort and good health through food. In holding herself responsible for Holly's health, she is becoming a caretaker, a domestic role. She reflects on this: "For the first time in my as a maid I have a purpose more compelling than trying to meet the aesthetic standards of New England bourgeoisie. (p. 97)" This "purpose" refers to helping other people like Holly. Because house cleaning is physically strenuous and Ehrenreich and her fellow employees are not duly compensated for such strain, they must band together to create a safer working environment. In Ehrenreich's case, this translates into the domestic role of nutrition.

In cleaning homes in Maine, Ehrenreich fulfills the third "C," Cleaning. Her primary responsibility is to make other people's home immaculate and clean. Traditionally speaking, this is a priority a female makes in her *own* home. In purifying other homes, her role as housekeeper is physically transplanted from her personal living space to that of someone else's. "The Maids" company requires its employees to literally scrub the floor on their hands and knees. Ehrenreich describes this degrading experience as "working [her] way around the room like some fanatical penitent crawling through the Stations of the Cross. (p.84)" Being a professional, although she is arguably not treated as one, removes the possibility for Ehrenreich to determine how she would have cleaned and the extent to which she would have done so in her own home. In a job in which she is supposed to be

recognized as a professional, she is only encouraged to fulfill a domestic role in an even more extreme way than she would have otherwise.

Working both as a dietary aide and maid, Ehrenreich discovers that domestic roles are still very prominent in her “professional” life. Both jobs force her to fulfill the three “C’s” of Childcare, Cooking, and Cleaning. In fact, they are all obligations she would have been responsible for in her own home, especially with a family. However, because she has little decision-making ability about how to go about her jobs, Ehrenreich is enslaved to these domestic obligations, more than she would be in her own home. She can make little decisions about her behavior. For this reason, her domestic roles are not subverted, but actually endorsed by her employment.

Works Cited:

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001. 51-119. Print.