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Marxist Ideology in Alice Chilress's Like One of the Family

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“Dear, throw back your shoulders and pop your fingers at the *world* because the way I see it there’s nobody with common sense that can look down on the domestic worker!” (Childress, 37). Alice Childress’s *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* is a collection of stories originally published as a column in Paul Robeson’s black socialist newspaper *Freedom*. It is composed of several dialogues delivered by the main character, Mildred, a bold and sprightly woman, and her silent friend Marge, both of whom are domestic workers in New York City. Childress uses the work to humanize the domestic worker, which in this time period was simultaneously a job and identity for anyone who performed it. Further than humanizing, though, Childress devoted much of her writing to advocating for respect and recognition of domestic workers, and by extension labor rights in general, primarily by engaging indirectly with Marx’s writings and ideology. Domestic workers were often largely excluded from labor movements—even those led by other black Americans, another point which Childress contests in her writing. Childress uses her work to advocate for social and political recognition for labor, and the most unnoticed labor of all, domestic labor; she does so both by creating a relatable narrator and by communicating complex ideologies with her audience in a way that was simple and easy to understand.

One example of Childress’s exaltation of the working class is in the chapter “Hands,” in which she scolds Marge for failing to see the beauty in the roughness working has caused her hands. She launches into a characteristic monologue on the value of hard labor; while never mentioning Marx specifically, she defends one of the greatest criticisms of his ideology—namely, that if labor were properly valued, productivity would cease. Instead, Mildred seeks to prove to Marge, who likely does not disagree, that the working classes ought to be celebrated for their contributions, since society could not continue without them. She shows Marge how a person can view an object and trace it back through all the stages of production and labor it took to produce it. This, she says, will show her “the power and beauty of laboring hands” (60). In the end, she convinces Marge to be proud of her hands the way they are since they showcase the labor she’s contributed to society, but simultaneously maintains that, while labor is immeasurably valuable, it is not properly appreciated.

Mildred oscillates throughout the work on whether or not she feels like a servant, but in this section she puts forth the bold statement that “when you come to think of it, everyone who works is a servant” (60). Childress aims to emphasize the fact that, while domestic labor is certainly tragically unregulated, as argued elsewhere, there is indeed a structural issue that poisons the view of all work and labor. While not overtly advocating for the upheaval of capitalist society, she does say that “you can see we are all servants and got a lot in common... and that’s why folks need unions” (61). While never addressing socialist ideology directly,

she enters into a simultaneously subtle and surprising overt dialogue with Marx and his critics in a way that her readers were more likely to understand. She also advocates a direct plan of nonviolent action: forming a union.

As the title of the work makes clear, Childress is interested not only in contesting the overall place and value of labor in society but also on the unique experience of domestic workers. The title and opening chapter, "Like One of the Family," emphasizes domestic workers' place as servants who must sell not only their labor but also, in many ways, their personhood as the world sees it. Mildred obviously disagrees with this view of domestic labor and argues stringently against it in several instances, but the fact remains that women were at this time largely expected to remain and exist in the home. By selling her labor as a domestic worker, Mildred and everyone in a similar situation is forced to sell what society maintains to be their most essential feature.

Claudia May, in her article "Airing Dirty Laundry: Representations of Domestic Laborers in the Works of African American Women Writers," writes that Mildred's refusal to be viewed as something other than a servant is her way of maintaining her agency and identity. May argues that society's efforts to emphasize the concept that domestic workers were "like one of the family" was their effort to ensure that their labor was seen as natural and easy. She writes that "By treating her skills as a commodity with market value Mildred dictates that she should receive adequate financial compensation for her labor and rejects the role of an unpaid 'surrogate [wife] and mothe[r]' who complies with an ethos that calls her to devalue her contribution to the home by seeing herself as a substitute housewife or low-paid mammy figure" (153). Mildred's efforts to ensure that she is not "one of the family" is her way of affirming the value of her labor.

Childress emphasizes this point rather explicitly in the chapter "We Need a Union Too." The chapter opens with Mildred lamenting to Marge that housework is some of the worst work in the world. This is obvious by the fact that it is the first thing a family will pay someone else to do upon making enough money to avoid it themselves. She uses this indisputable fact to advocate for the formation of a union for domestic workers, stating "Honey, I mean to tell you that we got a job that almost nobody wants! That is why we need a union! Why shouldn't we have set hours and set pay just like busdrivers and other folks, why shouldn't we have vacation pay and things like that?" (136). Childress emphasizes the fact that, not only is domestic workers' labor not seen as valuable by their employers, they do not even receive the same protections as many other low-paying or disenfranchised jobs. This very frequently led to things like wage theft, in which employers could skim off the top of their employees' wages and deprive them of fair pay. While this certainly happened in other industries, it was a significant problem in the unregulated arena of domestic work.

Childress discusses this very phenomenon in the chapter “I Hate Half Days Off.” In it, Mildred tells the story of an employer who attempted to scam her out of her wages with a strict and regulated work schedule. After delivering a lengthy explanation of the specific days and times Mildred is expected to work, Mildred discovers that her pay schedule has her losing wages. Childress writes, “Before I could get a work in on what I considered the deal of the year, she played her trump card, ‘I will pay you two weeks pay on the first and fifteenth of each month.’ ‘But that way,’ I says, ‘I lose a week’s pay every time the month has five weeks,’ Well, she repeats herself, ‘I pay on the first and the fifteenth’” (96). Mildred, of course, refuses the position, but proclaims that the woman’s scheme is “beautiful in a disgustin’ sort of way” (96). Through this anecdote, Childress gives a concrete example of the very specific disadvantage that domestic workers’ exclusion from labor movements has the potential to cost them. In an unregulated environment, employers are free to abuse their employees however they see fit—and it is particularly easy to do so when the employee is in your own home.

Childress again addresses the benefit of a union in “We Need a Union Too.” Mildred explains the specific way in which a union would aid domestic workers, telling her that when an employer would ask her to wax the floors, she could tell them that work is too difficult and to contact the union. They will then have to pay the proper value for the expected labor instead of forcing it onto the domestic worker. Premilla Nadasen, in her book *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* writes that being a household worker in the 1950s was, to many, more of an identity than a job, particularly in the political sphere (4). These women used this to their advantage in their early attempts to organize, but were still largely deterred by their effort by multiple factors. One was their status as individuals facing multiple forms of oppression—racism, sexism, and classism—all at once. Being forced to overcome many obstacles in efforts to improve their lives proved extremely difficult, particularly considering the fact that their suffering actively improved the lives of their oppressors. The second, as Nadasen writes, is because housework was invisible to those in the public sphere and was thus not recognized as “real” work. Those who existed mostly outside the home did not see the efforts that went into it, and therefore considered the labor of domestic workers to be less valuable (4). This is particularly interesting in the fact that those organizing labor movements professed to seek the equal valuation of labor yet refused to recognize the efforts of their sisters in the workforce. The third reason, closely related to this, is that by advocating for the recognition for domestic labor, these women were simultaneously attempting to redefine what people considered labor to be (Nadasen 4). Domestic labor, by definition, did not contribute to the capitalist notion of “progress,” and therefore was excluded from organization even by leftist organizers.

Unsurprisingly, Childress addresses this phenomenon as well in her work. In the chapter “All About My Job,” Mildred tells the story of meeting another domestic worker who is ashamed to tell people the truth about her line of work for fear of judgement from them. This occurs at a church bazaar where Mildred is volunteering among mostly middle-class African Americans. She says that in many ways she understands the woman fearing judgement because many people, even in the black community, looked down upon domestic workers. She tells Marge:

I know people do make nasty cracks about houseworkers. Sure, they say things like ‘pot-slingers’ or ‘the Thursday-night-off’ crowd... If I had a child, I would want that child to do something that paid better and had some opportunity to it, but on the other hand it would distress me no end to see that child get some arrogant attitude toward me because I do domestic work. (36)

Childress manages to both acknowledge the unpleasant nature of domestic work while simultaneously advocating for respect from the others in the African American community. Mildred never really claims to enjoy housework, and both recognizes and accepts the truth about her job—that is unpleasant and grueling. But this, she argues, is no different than other jobs that are well respected by the African American community, or even just more respected than hers.

Another obstacle faced by domestic workers seeking fair labor practices is discussed in Vanessa May’s *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940*, in which she states that many employers of domestic workers objected to the idea of sharing what went on inside of their homes. Even if domestic workers were their employees and treated unfairly, they were part of their home and, in many employers’ eyes, one of the family—just poorly treated members. By sharing, or allowing domestic workers to share, what went on inside the homes of these women, many saw it as a massive invasion of privacy. Unlike a factory, where the way workers are treated is seen on an open floor, domestic workers leave their own homes to enter that of another individual who has little to no desire to force their space into the public eye. May writes of a historian named Lucy Maynard Salmon who was attempting to investigate the treatment of domestic workers. She sent out surveys to 5,000 people, both employers and domestics, to inquire about labor conditions they worked under. Many of the responses she received were women outraged that someone had dared to ask them about the inner workings of their private home. May writes that “Another employer, although she welcomed Salmon’s efforts to address household labor problems, declined ‘to give any detailed information as to my private affairs to those who have no business to be advised of them and

where the good to be accomplished is exceedingly dubious” (2). Even though the anonymous woman described supposedly welcomed efforts to improve labor issues, she did not make the connection that this improvement would require access to understanding of conditions within the home.

May also discusses the origins of the class disparity between domestic workers and employers; she writes that urbanization, particularly in the north, upset the standard for the relationship between the two. She writes

As ‘productive’ labor increasingly took place outside the home, domestics also stopped performing tasks that contributed tangibly to the family economy. Instead, they focused all their energies on housework. By the middle of the nineteenth century, domestic workers were no longer the social equals of their employers but rather waged workers, separated from their employers by a gulf of socioeconomic class. (6)

Prior to urbanization, much of the labor that contributed to the public sphere was still accomplished within the home, and often as a collaboration between domestic laborers and employers who were of a similar economic class. May writes that as income inequality increased, those able to contribute to public forms of labor created wider and wider gaps between them and their workers. Domestics began doing only housework as standards of cleanliness increased in middle-class and upper-class households (5-7).

The form in which Childress chooses to present her work is undoubtedly significant. The subtitle, *Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, designates the dialogues as conversations, though we never once hear Marge speak. Trudier Harris, in her article “‘I Wish I was a Poet’: The Character as Artist in Alice Childress’s *Like One of the Family*” writes that Childress’s style is a combination of Western written tradition and African oral tradition. Harris argues that Childress uses this for multiple reasons, but she argues most relevantly that grounding the work in oral tradition “serves to authenticate the narrative, to make it both spontaneous and sincere; and finally, it persuades” (29). Indeed, it is very difficult to read many of the chapters in the work and not side with Mildred entirely, despite the inevitable knowledge that the reader is only receiving half of the story. With this in mind, it can be argued that by writing in a casual form that was both easy for readers to understand and significantly more persuasive, Childress was able to convey her political ideology more effectively than if she had chosen to write in some other manner. There is also the undeniability of Mildred’s relatability as a character. She is in a similar situation to many of the women who may have been reading the stories at the original time of publication, thus making her all the more sympathetic and relatable—and therefore a better avenue for new ideas than a foreign form of communication.

Childress uses *Like One of the Family* to explore Marxist ideology in a way that is, while undeniably more comprehensible than Marx himself, is also deeply personal. She uses Mildred's experiences to highlight the negative consequences of both capitalism itself and of domestic workers' exclusion from labor movements that had the potential to benefit them. Domestic workers were excluded from these movements for a number of reasons, but all were rooted in the same sexist and racist ideology that had disadvantaged them in the first place. Childress contests the treatment of domestic workers while simultaneously rooting her work in the strong oral tradition of the African American community in a manner that both emphasized Mildred's persuasion and made her arguments more sympathetic to her audience. Harris writes that "[Mildred] is herself an example of the unexpected becoming important, of the politically powerless becoming politically potent" (29). Childress's intent was likely for this type of empowerment not only to rest with Mildred, however. Readers of *Like One of the Family* are meant to take Mildred's fire they have seen on the page and apply it to their own lives and advocacy, with or without men or white people's support.

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