

Chapter IV

Work

Woman's biological "destiny" as mother becomes a cultural vocation in her role as socializer of children. In bringing up children, woman achieves her main social definition. Her suitability for socialization springs from her physiological condition: her ability to produce milk and occasional relative inability to undertake strenuous work loads (Mitchell, 309). Thus, women's childbearing capacities and their lesser physical strength explain how power has been seized and why women have been held up from work. Moreover, the "family wage" system gradually becomes the norm for stable working class families at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Several observers have declared the non-wage-working wife to be part of the standard of male workers. Instead of fighting for equal wages for men and women, male workers sought the family wage, wanting to retain their wives' services at home (Hartman, 324). It proves what de Beauvoir says that men would view their wives as "partners" staying at home rather than "equals" having the equivalent pay as they. Hartman considers that for most men, the development of family wages secures the material base of male domination in two ways:

First, men have the better jobs in the labor market and earn higher wages than women . . . encourages women to choose wifery as a career. Second, then, women do housework, childcare, and perform other services at home which benefit men directly. Women's home responsibilities in turn reinforce their inferior labor market position. (325)

On the premise that men earn enough money, women whether willingly or unwillingly, are to be involved in housekeeping. It should be clear, however, that the presence of a nonworking wife does not lower the value of male labor power, and therefore is not of inevitable benefit to the capitalist class. Quite the contrary: to have a wife not in the labor forces a male wage

large enough to cover the consumption of two adults (Vogel, 158). It may be a pie in the sky for those men in the lowest groups in the patriarchal hierarchy who are denied many of the patriarchal benefits. Once a male worker is unable to support two adults or his whole family, there will be a flexible and egoistic policy adopted instead even if he prefers to keep his wife at home as an upper servant.

After 1940, the Second World War has given an impetus to women's employment and even married women had come forward to take up gainful employment (Lal, 259). After World War II ended in the year of 1945, Beulah started to enter the world of work in 1946. Looking back at American public opinion polls of the 1940s, Staggenborg once noted:

Historian William Chafe concludes that after World War II, female employment was tolerated by men and women only to the extent that it did not challenge the man's role as provider or the woman's responsibility to raise her children. Men and women opposed the idea of women taking jobs away from men, but they tolerated work by women with grown children, and they viewed women's economic contributions to families as an asset. (24)

Thus, on the premise of not challenging male authority or violating female natural vocation, wives can be asked to help husbands economically if kids are grown up. This exception men made on women exemplifies Beulah's situation to a hair. Wives do not have a discrete workload which, once completed, leaves them free to do other things. Their marital obligation is to devote whatever time and energy is necessary to do what their husbands require of them. This might include wage labour if household income is low (Jackson, 64). In other words, for men, an exception can be made in certain circumstances; that is, men have the privilege of pushing women out to work if necessary. In that case, there is no absolute distinction between interior and exterior work, for wives have to stand by and act as back-up at any moment once their husbands are "too frail" to be the bread-and-butter. Obviously,

men have flexible dual standards for them to benefit the most. Women in immigrant, but not in native, households, or black, but not white, mothers of school-age children, may enter wage labor. Wives normally hold jobs until children are born, or after children enter school, or after they leave home (Vogel, 160). According to the chronology given by Rita Dove, it is unknown whether Beulah works during pregnancy or when kids come to school age, but it is clear that she starts to hold jobs after the eldest daughter gets married, three kids range from eleven to sixteen years old, and especially right after Thomas resigns his choir job.

A woman who needs both to work and to care for her children does not really have much of a choice about what to do: she must find a job which allows her to raise her children, and this will far too often be a poorly paid and insecure job with few benefits (Saul, 15). With three kids almost coming of age but not yet, as can be imagined the jobs Beulah holds later are in expectation. Susan Yeandle in "Women and Work" points out that "Some women found other forms of employment in their districts . . . while in the larger cities, laundering, garment-making, millinery, cleaning, shop-keeping, the assembly and manufacture of small and light goods . . . were common occupations" (17-18). Among these categories, the two items garment-making and millinery coincide with Beulah's later occupations. In the same year of 1946 after Thomas quits the gospel choir, Beulah takes a part-time job in a dress shop. Would that be a coincidence because Beulah is finally set free from parenting and nurturing, and thus it is time for her, like what de Beauvoir said, to pursue self-creation and achievement? Or virtually is she forced and reluctant to find a job in order to support the expense of family? "Coming from a working-class, African-American background where most women I [Bell Hooks] knew were in the workforce . . . which suggested that work would liberate women from male domination" (Hooks, 48). On the surface, as a working-class Afro-American, Beulah seems to be set free from Thomas' domination; however, in "The Great Palaces of Versailles," Beulah thinks of "swamp she born from,

swamp / she swallow, swamp she got to sink again” (7-8). How cynical it is when Beulah makes such remarks, which hint that Beulah does have a little complaint about Thomas’ inability to be a household breadwinner, especially when three daughters under age still need to be raised up.

While paid employment may seem to free a woman from the total appropriation of her labour-power by her husband, she is still expected to fulfill her “domestic responsibilities” and will usually enter employment only if she can combine both paid work and unpaid domestic work (Jackson, 62). This is the crux because a career woman such as Beulah has to manage to balance the hours of the interior work and the exterior work, which definitely burns the candle at both ends. Masses of women feel angry because they were encouraged to by feminist thinking to believe they would find liberation in the workforce. Mostly they have found that they work long hours at home and long hours at the job (Hooks, 49). According to Ehrenreich, she finds out that employed women do far less housework than those who are full-time housemakers, 26 hours per week as compared to 55 hours per week. Other family members may be compensating in part, but most studies she has seen show little increase in husbands’ contributions. Yeandle also found out the fact:

Housework was frequently combined with paid work outside the home, or with homeworking, tended to make its performance even more onerous, and throughout the post-war decades, housework and other forms of domestic work remained as tasks which women performed, with the help of their husbands if they were lucky, and under their husbands’ control if they were not. (25)

From beginning to end of the book Thomas and Beulah, there is not even a clue that Thomas has ever lifted a finger to help Beulah with housework. Meanwhile, housework and childcare are still primarily seen as women’s responsibility in the overwhelming majority of households—including dual-income families (Segal, 203). As can be sure once again is

Thomas nearly has no concern with childcare except “once” in Beulah’s “dream” that “Thomas has it [the baby] in a sling” (8) in the poem “Motherhood.” Statistics on who does housework, even in families with wage-earning wives, show little change in recent years; women still do most of it. The double day is a reality for wage-working women (Hartman, 329). Does not that portrayal accord with Beulah’s real situation?

Besides earning money to support the family, as in the same poem “The Great Palaces of Versailles,” it is not hard to see Beulah “cuts her coat according to her cloth”:

Against all rules

she had saved the lining from a botched coat
to face last year’s gray skirt. She knows
whenever she lifts a knee
she flashes crimson. (22-26)

In order to be economical, Beulah tightens her belts by recycling the used cloths. Gerda Lerner in Black Women in White America: A Documentary History writes, “Black women have been able to find work when their husbands could not and have often been the head of the family not because they wanted to be out of economic necessity” (589). For Beulah, it is not her to volunteer to find a job and accidentally turns out to be the breadwinner; after all she is one of the women internalizing the concept of public and private sphere. It is all for the sake of Thomas that altruistic Beulah takes on the dual roles in being a domestic worker and an exterior worker as well. “Most importantly I [Bell Hooks] knew firsthand that working for low wages did not liberate the poor and working-class women from male domination” (Hooks, 48). A low-paying job cannot assure women of liberation but make matters worse only. Actually, Thomas and Beulah have always been badly off even when Beulah takes up millinery in 1950. In the poem “Headdress,” Beulah still hangs on

stubbornly in being a breadwinner of the family:

(The customer will be
generous when satisfied
beyond belief.

Beulah
would have settled
for less. She doesn't
pray when she's
terrified, sometimes, in-
side her skin, like
today, humming
through a mouthful of pins. (10-12, 15-22)

While musing on how much she can earn later from the customer if in satisfaction, Beulah is sweating blood and worth her salt in manufacturing hats. Even if sometimes the consequence is not what she expects, Beulah accepts any price the customers offer because she knows she has to bring home the bacon.

During the 1950s, the meaning that had been implied by married women's working—lower-class status or a husband in dire financial straits—quietly faded away. Women were not only employed, but many were clearly finding self-fulfillment and enjoying the sense of accomplishment that came with work outside home (Staggenborg, 24). When Beulah starts to be a milliner, she may be one of the women finding and enjoying the achievement of work even though the pay is far from decent but merely adequate. Unlike Thomas, joining the gospel choir, Beulah does not have any religious belief; however, she shows a firmer and stronger working attitude than Thomas. Despite women's increased labor force

participation, particularly rapid since World War II, the family wage is still, we argue, the cornerstone of the present sexual division of labor—in which women are primarily responsible for housework and men primarily for wage work (Hartman, 327). Isolation of the units of domestic labor appears to be a natural separation of women from men as well. Because they were viewed as working for extra paychecks rather than careers, women were relegated to sex-segregated, low-paying jobs (Staggenborg, 24). No wonder both the jobs Beulah takes belong to womanly work. The sexual division of labor reappears in the labor market, where women work at women's jobs, often the very jobs they used to do only at home—food preparation and service, cleaning of all kinds, caring for people, and so on (Hartman, 328). In regard to Beulah's dress-making and hat-making career, both of them have something to do with sewing which housewives, like Beulah, are supposed to be familiar with. Not surprisingly, black women are to be found in greatest numbers in the unskilled and semiskilled occupations (Lerner, 220). Whether the jobs Beulah holds belong to unskilled or semiskilled occupations, in 1966 "it is also well to remember that 75.5 per cent of all black working women are in the unskilled-work categories" (Lerner, 225).

Compared to Beulah's painstaking and preoccupation with her work, Thomas shows his extremely different attitude toward work in "Straw Hat":

In the city, under the saw-toothed leaves of an oak
overlooking the tracks, he sits out
the last minutes before dawn, lucky
to sleep third shift.

To him, work is a narrow grief
and the music afterwards
is like a woman

reaching into his chest

to spread it around. (1-4, 19-23)

Thomas works on the graveyard shift but apparently he sleeps soundly when he is on duty without feeling guilty at all, which indicates that Thomas is definitely no workaholic because he thinks he is “lucky” to have this shift for him to sleep off. He also confesses that work makes him upset and only music makes him happy. When the Depression puts Thomas out of work, it is also during Beulah’s pregnancy. From Beulah’s perspective in “Weathering Out” discussed above, “she liked mornings the best – Thomas gone / to look for work” (1-2), but “when Thomas returned every evening nearly / in tears” (15-16), Beulah, as a wife, can only comfort her fragile husband again and again. Later, Thomas is employed at Goodyear Aircraft. In “The Zeppelin Factory,” when the 1931 airship disaster happened, “Thomas wanted to sit / right down and cry” (7-8) admitting “here I am, intact / and faint-hearted” (27-28). Therefore, compared with Beulah, Thomas is indeed more fragile and like a “mama’s boy.” Not until finding a part-time work cleaning offices in 1934 in “The Satisfaction Coal Company” did Thomas change his working attitude a bit:

Started to sweep
with terrible care, like a woman
brushing shine into her hair,
same motion, same lullaby. (18-21)

Unlike fishing in troubled waters in “Straw Hat,” after being unemployed for three years, it should be a great burden for Thomas himself because he, the household head, is supposed to be the breadwinner of the family, and no wonder he works diligently when able to bring home the bacon. In the same poem, it is also the only place where Thomas has poor interactions with his three daughters:

It was better on Sundays

when the children came along;
he mopped while they emptied
ashtrays, clang of glass on metal
then a dry scutter. (25-29)

Within the domestic mode of production, men as heads of households appropriate the unpaid labour of their dependants—wives and sometimes other family members (Jackson, 58).

What motivates Thomas to bring kids to work is they can be helpful to share his workload. Satirically, instead of passing on his knowledge to his daughters in “Under the Viaduct, 1932” Thomas just obtains their labors regarding them as child labor.

Moreover, when Goodyear Aircraft rehires Thomas in 1942, in the poem “Aircraft” he even shows his great concern about what others think of him; meanwhile, he also expresses his discontent with the womanly job he takes leading him to be despised:

Too frail for combat, he stands
before an interrupted wing,
playing with an idea, nothing serious.

.....
and the bolt waiting for his riveter’s
five second blast.

Why frail? Why not simply
family man? Why wings, when
women with fingers no smaller than his
dabble in the gnarled intelligence of an engine?

And if he gave just a four second blast,

or three? (1-3, 9-10, 18-23)

This poem explores a complicated gender insult and the racist division of labor to a Black man who is hired as a wartime worker in an aircraft factory. “The things here that make Thomas unhappy are not blackness and white oppression at all. He is unhappy because he has been refused induction into the army . . . and he is unhappy because women outclass him at work . . .” (Vendler, 8). We can sense Thomas’ frustrated feeling accompanying his three why’s successive indignant questions. Thomas has a bit too over self-esteem caring too much about what people think whether it is true or not. Upon seeing other women doing a better and manlier job than he, Thomas’ sour grapes mindset demonstrates right away. When it’s the time that everyone should be involved in their own job, Thomas imagines brushing the boss off and seeing what the consequence would be. Once again, it is easy to see that Thomas is not an industrious worker for his working attitude is far from satisfactory.

In “Contradictory Positions, Ambivalent Perceptions: A Case Study of a Black Woman Entrepreneur” Philomena Essed does a research on a black woman whose background is totally different from that of Beulah because “She [A case study: Carol L., a 39-year-old real estate broker] is an entrepreneur, a real estate broker, a profession which is rare among black women” (101). One of the similarities is both of them are black females, to say the least of it. Determined to have their own children [Carol L. and her siblings] attend college the parents planned years in advance. They [Carol L.’s parents] decided that it was better to move to a state where you [Carol L. and her siblings] could go to the state universities “for free” if you were a resident (Essed, 104). Unlike Beulah, Carol L. is lucky enough to go to college in her times, which enables her to be well-educated. Since black families could expect that their girls would have to work all or most of their lives and since there were few semiskilled or middle-range jobs available to them, the only hope for a girl to escape the unskilled, service job trap was in getting a professional education (Lerner, 220). That

explains why Carol L.'s parents are so eager to send their children to enter college. Soon after their [Carol L. and her husband's] marriage she gets pregnant with their first child. The next five years are a challenge to their marriage . . . she herself feels hampered by the heavy load of children, mothering and a husband who "does not want" her "to work" (Essed, 104). This is exactly the same situation and also the second similarity with Beulah since both of them experience the full-time domesticity and their husband's bossism. Nevertheless, Carol L. is not blind to the gender oppression she had to overcome in her own marriage. She and her husband went through the classical struggle about taking care of household and children, in the end resulting in role switching with her husband (Essed, 110). While Carol L. aggressively claims for the right to hold a job, Beulah is later enforced on getting a job passively. Moreover, Carol L. is lucky again to have such a considerate husband willing to take over the domestic work and to be able to devote her attention to work, while Beulah has to take on the dual roles of a housewife and a wage earner due to her good-for-nothing husband. Economically, she [Carol L.] has a privileged position compared to the majority of blacks but her career history illustrates that even blacks with high education experience discrimination in the labor market (Essed, 102). Due to their gender and race, it is conceivable that both Carol L. and Beulah undergo both sexual and racial discrimination to a certain extent. Carol L. breaks through sex role constraints by pursuing, for a woman, the unusual career of real estate broker, after all she is qualified thanks to her good and higher education. Nevertheless, Beulah is confined to, according to the sexual division of labor, the low-paying jobs of dressmaking and millinery forever because she is incapable of making her life better.

Women must enter productive work, but the work must be equal. Education, then, must be radically changed, for it is the precondition for that. . . . Mitchell's idea here is, it seems clear, that rather than carry hypothetical banners saying "Abolish the family," we

create the conditions under which it implodes (Evans, 74). Mitchell emphasizes that the importance of education constitutes the precondition of women's liberation, that is to say, the reason why Carol L. becomes a wholehearted career woman with the understanding of her husband in the end is because of her education. With education, women have the possibility to overturn the stereotype people impose on women; without education, women do not even stand a dog's chance to fight for a revolution. Not only does Bell Hooks support the concept of being economically sufficient, but Hartman also agrees with her and with Mitchell on the following consequence:

The arguments proceeds logically that capitalist social relations (of which the family is not an example) tend to become universalized, that women will become increasingly able to earn money and will increasingly refuse to submit to subordination in the family, and that since the family is oppressive particularly to women and children, it will collapse as soon as people can support themselves outside it. (328)

Education seems to be the fundamental way to liberate women out of the constraint of family and prevent women from being predominated by their husbands or walking into marriage as long as they can support themselves. However, here comes another question. They [Black women] share in race discrimination patterns imposed on all Blacks. But race discrimination is enforced more strictly than sex discrimination. Black women rank lowest in any measurement of economic and social status when compared with Blacks and with white men and women (Lerner, 221). At home Beulah is inferior to Thomas because of sexism, while at the workplace she is despised again due to racism.

In an age of wash-and-wear, ironing, when needed, is often a task left to paid employees. No wonder in "The Great Palaces of Versailles," Beulah expresses a dislike for the whites:

Nothing nastier than a white person!

She mutters as she irons alterations
in the back room of Charlotte's Dress Shoppe.

Beyond
the curtain, the white girls are all
wearing shoulders pads to make their faces
delicate. (1-3, 11-14)

Beulah, a black woman, contrasts the offensive personal habits of white women (the smell of perspiration and stale perfume rising from a wool dress she is ironing) with the tricks of delicacy that often hide grossness ("the white girls are all / wearing shoulder pads to make their faces / delicate") (Nower, 2). The alterations of the new dress may be made several times at the request of a picky white customer, which makes a bad impression on Beulah because she herself has no choice but settle for the recycling of a used cloth to be the lining of her old skirt. Unlike those white girls dressing themselves up, Beulah has no qualification to chase after beauty. Ekaterini Georgoudaki also writes:

When Beulah gets a humble job in Charlotte's Dress Shoppe to contribute to the family income she is again engaged in her small work space behind a curtain. This curtain symbolizes her double exclusion from the white female world of the shop and American society in general, both as a black and as a woman who is judged by white standards of femininity and beauty. (11)

The fortunes and fates of working-class women differ in important ways from those of middle-class women, just as those of black working-class women differ from those of white working-class women. Since black women, compared with white women and black men, are the most oppressed and the lowest ranking of all, Beulah also shows her fear in "Wingfoot Lake":

Last August she stood alone for hours
in front of the T.V. set
as a crow's wing moved slowly through
the white streets of government.
That brave swimming

scared her, like Joanna saying

Mother, we're Afro-Americans now! (19-25)

This poem presents Beulah's thoughts on Independence Day 1964, just over one year after the death of her husband Thomas. Because of "four daughters['] / dragging her to their husbands' company picnic, / white families on one side and them / on the other" (8-11), for Beulah, becoming an Afro-American does her, including her daughters, no good except verifying once again her lowest ranking, as a black woman, in the racial caste system, which makes her panic because she can never act as naively as her youngest daughter Joanna and as deliberately as the crow flying fearlessly. The literal image of the crow is black but the profound symbol reminds me of "Jim Crow," namely the racial segregation into the whites and the colored until 1964 Civil Rights Acts annulled Jim Crow Laws. Whether Dove's use of the crow here implicates it or not, Beulah, as an eyewitness, strongly senses and lives through the inequality for most of her life. However one interprets the casual factors, one thing is clear: the vast majority of black women are at the bottom of the earning-prestige-opportunity-status ladder in United States society (Lerner, 226). Beulah occupies different positions according to her roles as woman, as black woman, as wife, as mother, and as income provider; however, her multiple roles never endow her with a respectable status, but instead, she has to adjust herself to the oppressive white and black society.