Fall 1979

Daughters and Housework

Laraine Burns

Louis Kampf

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/329

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Daughters and Housework
By Laraine Burns

Laraine Burns (a pseudonym, as are the other names in the essay below) took my course in Marxism while a senior premedical student at M.I.T. She was one of only two women in the class; the only Black person; the only student from anything other than a solidly middle-class family. It showed: in spite of M.I.T.’s insistent drive to make students forget who they are, she doggedly maintained her sense of social location; she was the only student in class who had a firm sense of what non-elite American life is about.

Sheila Rowbotham’s Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World was one of the books we read and discussed in the course. In chapter 5, “A Woman’s Work Is Never Done,” Rowbotham makes some remarks about the introduction of consumer goods into the home. I asked the students to think about the matter, and write a short essay describing the impact of consumer goods on the lives of their families. Some of what Laraine wrote follows.—Louis Kampf

The introduction of time-saving devices into the home has served to make my family’s life easier, but since housework is not my mother’s main source of gratification, it does not seem to have affected her concept of self. As far as my mother is concerned, “the satisfactions of women’s traditional sphere” have always seemed “intangible and fragmented.” I have very little concept of my mother as a full-time homemaker. I think that my family functions similarly to most Black lower-middle-class families in that my mother’s income has been indispensable to the welfare of the family. Most Black wives work, and always have, when small children were not underfoot. I have two older sisters and a younger brother, and my mother worked off and on between the oldest three children, and continuously after my brother was old enough to go into preschool. When my mother started working at that time, my oldest sister took over many of the household chores, and we siblings helped. As my sister got older, she took on more and more responsibilities: cooking every day, caring for us younger ones, washing dishes, etc. She became a substitute housewife. When she left for college, my other sister took over. When that sister took over, I helped a great deal, and when she graduated from high school and got married, the burden of running our house fell to me. I think that the experience of being pseudohousewives has profoundly affected us all. Rachel, the eldest, now hates to cook and refuses to do so for her husband. My parents talk about what a “bad wife” she is—it is implied that her husband is not getting what he paid for, as though he bought her, and now she won’t produce. What amazes me is the role that men play in all this, or, I should say, the role they do not play. Rachel and her husband both work full time. But since he makes twice as much as she does, and he is a man, she becomes the lazy wife who is negligent of her duties when she won’t cook. Interesting system.

Now Louise, my other sister, was affected differently. She basically ran away from home to get out of what she saw as a trap (which led her into the trap of marrying a bum and getting pregnant). I still haven’t figured out all the effects on her.

I was affected still another way because I had no one to help me with the housework. You see, men (even young ones) are exempt from such menial chores, so I could not get my younger brother to go beyond washing dishes and emptying trash. He was not indoctrinated into the system like the rest of us. Throughout high school I became increasingly bitter over my fate. I couldn’t figure out how I’d become a housewife at sixteen, cooking every day, cleaning, grocery shopping. I swore to myself that I’d never do it again for anybody.

Of course, throughout all of this my father did nothing. He worked hard all day at his drugstore, and when he came home, dinner was to be waiting on the table. I felt like a slave, and was told I should gladly do a few menial chores in exchange for a nice house in the suburbs, three cars, etc.

The addition of gadgets to our household at this time made very little difference, but my “presence” in the home (rather than my mother’s) helped to raise my consciousness as a young woman. Since my mother was only a housewife part time, additional commodities in our home did not serve to undermine her sense of identity; her personal identity was derived from her career of teaching preschool children.

Perhaps my family is an example of the ideal working unit under capitalist production. Rather than having the man working, and the woman running the home and thereby supporting the man, or the situation in which the man works and the woman works outside and runs the home, my family used the [female] children to support the working parents.

Laraine spent the summer of 1979 in her home town, a small city in Kansas, working in her father’s drugstore. She put in six days a week, since she needed the money to pay for medical school, which she entered this fall. I got a letter from her in July. “When I arrived here,” she wrote, “I started searching the bookstores for non-fiction works about women. No one here seems to carry that sort of stock. But I found a great book in the public library called Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women’s Health.”

Readers can draw their own conclusions about the importance of making the writings of the women’s movement available everywhere, as well as the need to bring women’s studies to all schools—especially such sandcastles of male supremacy as M.I.T.—Louis Kampf

(Speakout continued from page 4)