

Parasite's Ki-jung capitalizes upon her femininity in complex ways. Ki-jung's very existence in the Park household is instantiated with the imprint of child-rearing: Ki-woo tells Ms. Park before departing his first lesson while constructing the character 'Jessica': "Most of all, she knows how to handle kids." Ki-jung's role is not so much instructor as it is *mother*: that Ki-jung requests for Ms. Park to leave the room during the art lesson is symbolic of a certain displacement of motherhood. Ki-jung is left alone with Da-song in his room; when they exit, Da-song is somehow reformed and 'tamed', obediently bowing and departing upon command. When Ms. Park takes a seat next to Ki-jung, therefore, we see not just a manager and an employee but two mothers – in terms of relations, one in biology and the other in capital. Ki-jung transforms the original position on offer, the art instructor, into a much more intimate work ('art therapy') and correspondingly requests higher compensation for. In this moment, something very profound emerges: a mother agrees to exchange money-capital for the displacement of her motherhood. Ki-jung becomes a certain kind of surrogate, carrying out the social and emotional motherly duties which Ms. Park cannot, or believes she cannot, do herself. But this is not even itself really true, for it places Ki-jung in a passive position when she is the active. Rather, Ki-jung is a *surrogate-mime* who mimes motherhood – that is, she works to conjure and maintain the image of motherhood. Ki-jung is a performative mother, and Ms. Park pays for the performance.

However, as the film progresses, we must revisit this hypothesis again: we cannot even be quite sure that Ki-jung is just miming a mother. In a brief shot at 43:00, we see Da-song cheerfully sitting on Ki-jung's lap in Da-song's room, childishly drawing another messy arrangement of pastel on a colorful canvas. The room is filled with a warm light; toys hang from the ceiling and scatter across the floor; bright-colored spines neatly populate the bookshelves. Although the scene is no more than a few seconds, we see that Ki-jung really has become a mother to Da-song. Moreover, at the final birthday party, it is Ki-jung who holds and presents

the birthday cake to Da-song¹. Ms. Park tells Ki-jung that her presence at the birthday party will be recognized (compensated) as another lesson, but we understand that the relations between Ki-jung and Da-song have evolved far past the original instructor-student premise: to mime-mother-child, then mother-child. It is not as if the involvement of capital has receded as Ki-jung's miming transgresses into authenticity, either – it is a constant channel throughout this evolution, but one which has become naturalized. Near the end of the film, Ms. Park and Ki-jung very naturally speak about the exchange of capital without the explicit terms of capital.

In “Wages Against Housework”, Federici asserts that (unwaged) housework is already a relation of capital – albeit an unrecognized one. The wages-for-housework argument is ultimately epistemological: through the construction and propagation of abstraction-mechanisms (Federici gives two such examples, Love and Mother's Day), unwaged labor becomes naturalized to the female body. An entire system of capital stands contingent on a foundation of naturalized feminine reproductive work, which maintains the household, cares for the (masculine) worker, and births and raises new workers. To demand wages for housework, then, is to disrupt this dominant epistemological position by refusing the naturalization of such unwaged reproductive work to femininity. It is a demand principally concerned with sight – to bring into visibility the lens with which both masculine and feminine bodies have seen from birth through.

Ki-jung's character, therefore, engages in interesting ways with Federici's argument. It must be noted upfront that Ki-jung demands wages for a very complex kind of housework of a very different character from the housework Federici identifies. Yet, it points us towards

¹ ...and Ki-jung who is stabbed to death in the breast directly in front of Da-song while doing so.

thinking how waged labor, in reflection with unwaged labor, can be naturalized to the female body. Federici identifies the latter as the mechanism by which capitalist structures continually exploit ‘free’ labor. Waged labor, however, also becomes naturalized to Ki-jung’s body and character – a phenomenon codified by Ki-jung’s exploitation of the Parks’ preexistent predilection to relate to others, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of capital. This is the mechanism by which Ki-jung can be hailed after her home is flooded and she sleeps in a crowded gym to Da-song’s birthday party so she can perform her motherly duties. For Ms. Park, capital is such a natural mode of relating that the power of disrupting and seeing becomes subject to incorporation. While Federici points towards an important first step of disrupting the naturalization of unwaged labor, Ki-jung demonstrates how waged labor can also be naturalized as a mechanism for the exploitation of femininity.

A text which perhaps speaks more directly to Ki-jung’s performative motherhood is Elizabeth Bernstein’s “Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex”. Ki-jung engages in a certain type of ‘high-end sex work’, providing Ms. Park (the client) a ‘Mother Experience’ (in comparison with Bernstein’s ‘Girlfriend Experience’). By paying for the ‘Mother Experience’, Ms. Park is paying to feel as though she is satisfactorily performing her duties as a wife and mother. The question of bounded authenticity is quite complex here – Bernstein asserts that the exchange of capital channeling through the transaction imposes limitations on the realness of an interaction, and that such limitations are in fact desired by the (masculine) client. Ms. Park, however, is herself a ‘housewife’. When the client is gendered feminine, it seems that the bounds of authenticity recede. By this, I do not mean that what is receding is the involvement of capital, but rather the epistemological-emotional bounds of the interaction. Ms. Park is happily willing to pay Ki-jung to ‘take’ and ‘shoulder’ her motherhood, which itself forces us to recognize

motherhood, even bourgeois motherhood, as a burden of emotion and labor which – through systems of capital – can be exported to the working class woman.