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“She Was a Member of the Family”: Ethel Phillips, Domestic Labor, and Employer Perceptions

Kellie Carter Jackson

Abstract: My maternal grandmother, Ethel Phillips, labored for over fifty-nine years as a domestic servant. She worked in her longest capacity as a housekeeper for three generations of the Clark family in Dearborn, Michigan from 1955 to 1998. By conducting interviews with Ethel’s daughters, family members, and past employers, I track the complicated relationships around what it means to live and love within the racial and social hierarchy of domestic service. I argue that the language used to describe affection for domestic servants by their employers obscures the labor conditions that accompany their work and worth in a world of unprotected labor. **Keywords:** Ethel Phillips, domestic labor, race, family history, Michigan

Ethel Phillips, my maternal grandmother, worked for over fifty-nine years as a domestic servant. She served in her longest capacity as a housekeeper for three generations of the Clark family in Dearborn, Michigan from 1955 to 1998. As a child I was told stories about the Clark family, stories portraying them as “good bosses.” All my life, photos of the Clark children and grandchildren sat prominently on my grandmother’s piano, right next to pictures of Ethel Phillips’s own children and grandchildren. I heard about the wonderful things the Clarks did for my grandmother, such as giving her a fur coat or offering her a trip to Florida. I never met them, and yet I was impressed by them and moved by their generosity. It was not until I was an adult that I learned that the fur coat was not purchased for her, but was a twenty-year-old hand-me-down, what someone might place in a garage sale. In addition, the trip to Florida was an opportunity for Ethel to work for the Clark family while they vacationed.



Fig. 1. Ethel pictured in front of the Clark home on her birthday, year unknown.

It more than likely did not occur to the Clarks that a week in Florida was time away from Ethel's husband and three daughters, one of whom had special needs. As a child, these gestures were examples of endearment, but as an adult I realized how complex and censored my grandmother's relationship was to the Clark family.

In the summer of 2014, my grandmother died of Alzheimer's disease at the age of ninety-five. She suffered from the debilitating disease for years, and it had been at least a decade since I had a lucid conversation with her. I never got to understand who she

was in her entirety. Ethel spent much of her life around a family I had never met, and it is fair to say they spent more time with her than I did. She passed away just two weeks after my first child was born.

As I prepared to go back to work, I began interviewing nannies that could watch my son while I was away from home. Because this process coincided with my grandmother's death, it compelled me to think and re-think the work and treatment she experienced. It caused me to question the role a nanny would play in my son's life, and the role I would play as an employer. Accordingly, I am fully aware that my work is both personal and political.

It is well known that during the Great Depression Southern Democrats blocked legislation that would have aided black Americans in receiving the federal benefits and protections developed during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, such as Social Security, unemployment, worker's compensation, and pensions. Scholars have estimated that close to 70 percent of black laborers were not working in sectors that would have included them under Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration (Palmer 1989, 118–20). There is also a wide literature available that speaks to the racism and racial hierarchy in U.S. domestic worker-employer rela-

tions.¹ The life of a domestic worker was neither a Southern phenomenon nor a unique story. Approximately one-third of all African American women who worked were employed as household workers during the 1960s (Nadasen 2015, 2). Ethel Phillips's story is but one small example of a field that is continually revealing a diversity of voices with increasing volume regarding the lives of domestics.

By trying to reimagine the social contracts that defined my grandmother's employment, I realized it is too easy to label the Clark family as either good or bad people. More difficult, but probably more accurate, is an accounting of how the collective relationships developed, given the social, economic, and political structures that cultivated these dynamic interactions. For the Clarks, Ethel was considered family both by the longevity of her service and the intimacy of her care. However, I argue that the language used to describe affection for domestic servants by their employers obscures the labor conditions that accompany their work and worth in a world of unprotected labor. Using a series of oral interviews from Ethel's daughters, family members, and past employers, my research tracks the complicated relationships around what it means to work, live, and love within the social hierarchy surrounding domestic service.

The Life of Ethel Phillips

Ethel Lea Price was born on May 26, 1919, to James and Rosa Price, in West Feliciana, Louisiana, in the parish seat of St. Francisville. She was the fifth of sixteen children. As a child, her family moved to Darlove, Mississippi, a move her father once anecdotally called "one of the worst decisions of his life." The opportunities throughout the South were bleak. Growing up, Ethel was quiet, shy, and smart. She was valedictorian of her eighth grade class; however, she could not attend high school. When my mother asked her why, she responded, "The school was too far away" (Interview by the author, March 9, 2015). What Ethel did not know was that at the time there were only four public high schools in the entire South that African American children could attend that would have provided a classical education (Anderson 1988). Racial discrimination, segregation, and violence kept even the most enterprising of black people from improving their lives in significant ways. Relocation from rural areas to urban settings or from the South to the North was all but required for those seeking better opportunities. Like many who lived during the Great Migration, Ethel worked on her family farm until the age of twenty-one, when she migrat-

ed to Inkster, Michigan, where her older brothers and sisters had settled and were supporting their numerous siblings who followed for better opportunities. The automotive industry helped secure some of the best jobs African Americans could find. Detroit promised many migrants better employment, a better wage, and a better life.

To this day, Inkster remains a majority African American suburb. During the 1920s and 1930s, as black people became employees of Henry Ford, they found homes in Inkster because they were barred from living in neighboring Dearborn, the home and headquarters of Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company. White residents mocked that Inkster was named after the color of ink and of the people that lived there, but Inkster was named after Robert Inkster, a Scotsman, who operated a steam sawmill on one of the main roads that went through the town (Michigan American Local History Network 2005). Nevertheless, Inkster became representative of the structural racism that restricted black workers from living close to their employment and obtaining a higher standard of living in Dearborn.

A suburb located just north of Detroit, Dearborn is an ideal site to study black domestics. During the 1950s, an overwhelming number of white Americans fled to Dearborn to escape the large and rapidly growing number of African Americans coming to work in Detroit during its industrial heyday (Sugrue 1996). Dearborn was a safe haven for segregationist white families that wanted affluent enclaves. Indeed, the mayor of Dearborn for thirty-six years, Orville L. Hubbard (1942–1978), proclaimed defiantly, “Keep the Negroes out of Dearborn.” Hubbard was a well-known segregationist and his campaign to “Keep Dearborn Clean” was widely understood as doublespeak for “keep black people out.” Upon Hubbard’s leaving office in 1978, it was reported that out of the ninety thousand people living in Dearborn, only twenty were African American (Good 1989). Employment in Dearborn as a black domestic worker created a complicated experience: one was simultaneously banned from living in the area and yet confined to laboring in the very homes one could never dream of occupying. Throughout Hubbard’s tenure and extending into the 1990s, Ethel continued to work for the Clark family in Dearborn.

Working for the Clarks

In 1940, when Ethel arrived in Michigan, she lived with family and obtained employment as a housekeeper working for several different

families before she met the Clarks. Around 1955, she met Nathalie and Harold Clark and began working for their family. She also knew Harold's parents, Marie and Clyde Clark Sr., and from time to time would work for them as needed. The Clarks were an upper-middle-class family and owned three successful businesses: a tool machine company, a bowling alley, and a drive-in movie theater. Clyde operated most of his businesses with his sons, brothers, and eventually his grandsons. Marie and Clyde also owned forty-four acres in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and seventy-five horses. Clyde loved horses and was quite the entrepreneur. He was also a gambler. In 1952, he bet on a horse race and won \$48,000. He donated half of the winnings to the University of Michigan Health System. The Clarks were not wealthy or ostentatious, but they did well for themselves. Because Clyde grew up in abject poverty, he understood what it meant to live in a time when basic resources were scarce. He worked hard to instill in his children and grandchildren Christian principles of modesty and the Golden Rule, particularly as they applied to people who worked for them.

Ask anyone in the Clark family, and they will tell you that they adored Ethel. "She didn't work for us, she was a member of the family," said Diane Clark O'Brien, the eldest and only daughter of Nathalie and Harold (Interview by the author, November 15, 2015). Born in 1953, Diane grew up knowing Ethel as a child and into adulthood when Ethel would watch her children from time to time. The notion that Ethel was family was one of the first statements Diane recalled. However, the first question Diane asked during her interview was both perplexing and revealing: "What was Ethel's last name?"

This is a question that warrants context. Ethel was married twice, first to Cleavus Keeten and then to Edward Phillips. All the Clarks ever knew was the name "Ethel Keeten," and because they knew she was married to Edward, they continually referred to him as Mr. Keeten. Just about every evening Edward Phillips would come to the Clark home to pick Ethel up from work. The Clarks would greet him by saying, "Hello, Mr. Keeten!" He would simply nod his head and wave back, sometimes making small talk. There were a number of factors that prevented both Ethel and Edward from being forthright about their lives. The Clarks were employers, even "good employers," but they were not friends and they were not family. This was the barrier and double standard in working as a domestic servant: private matters and personal information were a one-way street. The politics of respectability would never allow for Edward to correct the Clarks.

The assumption and the appearance of propriety were always maintained. Thus, when some of the surviving Clarks attended Ethel’s funeral in 2014 to pay their respects, looking at her program they were puzzled to see that her last name was Phillips. After decades of service, they never knew her real last name, and she never shared it. The backstory involves a tangle of relationships, hardships, and money.

When Ethel was young, she married Cleavus Keeten. During their short marriage they had two daughters, first Betty, then just eleven months later, Irenner who was blinded shortly after her birth.² Cleavus was an alcoholic and abusive. Ethel and Cleavus fought constantly. Then one day, he told Ethel he was going to the store and never returned. Ethel was on her own, raising two young children, ages five and four. Life was particularly hard, and without the support of her large family, life might have been unbearable. She lived on government assistance to make ends meet. But being on welfare was shameful and humiliating.

Welfare officials would come to Ethel’s home in the middle of the night searching for men or any evidence that would reveal her receiving additional financial income outside of government assistance. Everything about poverty targeted black women severely. Scholars have argued that the New Deal created a hierarchy based on two tiers: Social Security, where men received pension and unemployment, and welfare, where black women, in particular, were relegated to ranks of social dependency. Scholar Bridgette Baldwin contends that the policies of welfare discriminated among households based on *how* they became headed by single women: “whether by death, divorce, abandonment, or single motherhood” (Baldwin 2010, 8). Images of women within the black family became the focus of public scrutiny. Baldwin argues that New Deal programs ultimately failed to protect black women in two ways: “as capable mothers and as capable workers” (Baldwin 2010, 4–14).³

Remarkably, mutual friends and members of Cleavus’s family introduced Ethel to Edward Phillip in 1948. They fell in love instantly. Just one year later, Ethel gave birth to their daughter Norvella, my mother. Despite Edward’s good job at Ford and later at General Motors, Ethel could not afford to divorce her ex-husband. It was not until 1959 that Ethel could finally afford to divorce Cleavus on the grounds of desertion. When Norvella asked her mother why it took her so long to get a divorce, she responded by saying it was too expensive. “How much did it cost?” asked Norvella, to which Ethel sighed, “Oh, about fifty dollars” (Interview with the author, March 9, 2015).

During the 1950s, the average salary for a white American family was about \$3,000 a year. If one was making roughly fifty dollars a week (an annual salary of \$2,600), a fifty dollar divorce was costly, particularly at a time when most African Americans lived from paycheck to paycheck and often on much less than their white counterparts. No one could tell me just how much Ethel made each week, but the Clarks mailed her a check every week to a PO Box.⁴

For more than ten years, Ethel and Edward lived together out of wedlock, and because the social stigma of divorce was so acute, Ethel continued to, in the face of white authority, go by her first married name of Keeten, not Phillips. While names may seem superficial, for Ethel and Edward they were symbolic of their larger economic struggles, where the social stigma of divorce was compounded by not being able to afford a legal divorce and then remarry.

It is likely the Clarks ignored last names because from the patriarch to the youngest grandchild, Ethel was just “Ethel.” The politics of formal address were never extended to domestic servants. Children referred to black elders only by their first names. Practically everywhere but the Clark home, Ethel was known as Mrs. Phillips. But at work, Ethel was on a first-name basis with adults and children. When the Clark children referred to her as Ethel, it was not out of conscious disrespect, but rather a manifestation of racism that had become established as a norm for most white Americans. Norvella, Ethel’s youngest daughter, resented her mother being called by her first name, and came to resent her own infantilization by the Clarks. The matriarch, Nathalie, would often ask about how Ethel’s “little girl” was doing, not realizing that her own grown daughter, Diane, was just a few years younger than Norvella. For all of her years of labor, Ethel’s children remained frozen in time, never aging or progressing in life. Taken together and fortified by racist restrictions, language and social norms kept Ethel’s personal relationships with employers at a distance despite their intentions to treat her well. Being called by your first name or entering one’s home through the garage or back door were all among the norms that were based on racial and economic subordination.

Ethel's Work Ethic

Ethel’s work schedule was considerably fair. She worked three days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. It was common for most black household workers to work part time. In 1979, rough-

ly seven out of ten black household workers' schedules were kept under thirty-five hours a week and only one of six worked all year and full time (Grossman 1980, 19–20). A good portion of the workforce represented women of advanced age where part-time work was feasible. Ethel was no exception; she finally retired at the age of seventy-nine.

Steven, Harold and Nathalie's youngest son, wrote an account of Ethel's daily routine. He recalled that she began her day by entering the Clark home through the garage; this was common practice. Workers never entered through the front door. "We always made sure that the garage door was up prior to 9:30 a.m. before Ethel would arrive," remembered Steven. "That the door was unlocked, too!" (Interview with the author, December 6, 2015). She would quietly come inside the house and hang up her belongings. In the early days of working for the Clarks, Ethel drove herself. She would normally park in front of the house on the street. As she got older, Ethel's husband, Edward would often drop her off and pick her up. On her eightieth birthday, Ethel actually turned in her driver's license. "No one needed to be on the road at eighty," she would say. On many days, Edward would sit in the car and wait for Ethel to finish, sometimes napping or reading the paper as he waited.

All throughout her work, Ethel never sat down to take a break. Steven claimed that the only exception was during lunch when Nathalie would prepare a meal for her or Ethel prepared her own lunch, usually a salad. She never turned on the television unless one of the Clark children wanted to watch while she ate. As a child, Steven would stay home from school when he was sick. "Mom would sometimes be getting her hair done and Ethel would take good care of me," he claimed. On rare occasions his mother would let him stay home from school if he was good to let him "help Ethel clean" (Interview with the author, December 6, 2015).

Ethel's goal was simple: to complete each and every task for the day to perfection. She refused to use a mop. She contended the only way to clean a floor was on your hands and knees. While the floors were spotless, the stains of servitude were implanted on Ethel's knees. As a fair-skinned woman, washing the floors in this manner caused her knees to temporarily turn black with calluses. She also had severe arthritis in her hands, which caused her fingers to deform and bend in sharp angles at the knuckle. "She never commented or complained about any physical condition," said Steven. "The one time I asked her about her fingers when I was young, she told me she had arthritis and that her fingers were getting more crooked over the years." She quickly reassured him with a smile, saying that it was



Fig. 2. Ethel pictured with Katie during the Fourth of July, year unknown.

“all okay,” and that “the reason she had such good health and that her arthritis in her hands wasn’t more severe and more painful was the fact that she kept working for our family doing housework!” Steven was astonished. “I remember that like it was yesterday!” (Interview with the author, December 6, 2015). She thanked “the Good Lord, too,” he recalled. He never forgot their moments together in the kitchen.

As Steven grew older, it might have become easier for him to take for granted the work that Ethel did around his home.

As a young man, he recalled

working late at their family’s drive-in theater or staying out late for fun. His mother would chide him about sleeping in, “Can you please get up so Ethel can clean your room?” He confessed, “It was usually around noon or 1 p.m.” (Interview with the author, December 6, 2015). Nevertheless, Steven always made a point to say “thank you” before she left for the day.

Now in his late fifties, Steven has a picture of Ethel posing with his mother, aunt, and uncle. He keeps a small picture in his bedroom and, interestingly, one taped to the inside cabinet of his laundry room. “When I had late nights raising my daughters on my own,” he recalled, “it would be a late night such as a Sunday night. I would be doing laundry and [I] would be so tired.” He claimed around midnight he would see the picture of Ethel taped to the inside of his cabinet and “know that every time I reached for the Tide detergent that I knew that I could do it all too!” (Interview with the author, December 6, 2015). He could not escape the memory of Ethel’s work ethic.

Steven’s recollections also suggest that he could not separate Ethel’s work or personhood from commodity. In the same way that Americans conjure up warm or nostalgic feelings for products advertised with black bodies, such as Aunt Jemima’s Syrup or Uncle Ben’s Rice, an element of

black humanity is lost in this practice. Furthermore, the placement of Ethel’s picture inside his laundry cabinet relegates his memory of her to another cleaning product, as a proverbial “Mrs. Clean,” who comes to life and befriends him during childhood. While the image of Ethel posed with his mother, aunt, and uncle may have suggested that “Ethel was family,” the image kept in the cabinet is perhaps a more accurate summation of her relationship to them, as a laborer.

Uncovering Family Histories

We feel connected to the past when we delve into family history, but it is a history covered in shadows. My older family members come from a generation where “you don’t talk about those things.” One’s health, wealth, and marriage were kept personal, buried in the grave, and most certainly were not relayed to children. In fact, few family members and friends knew Ethel was a domestic. Employment was a precarious subject for many African Americans. Many chose not to discuss where they worked or what they did for income because often systemic racism forced black labor underground to informal, unregulated, or illegal markets. For my grandfather, there was also a level of shame in the work that Ethel did because her work implied that his job was not sufficient to cover their livelihood.

There are so many things I never knew and will never fully know about my grandmother. For instance, I did not know that around the age of forty, Ethel was hospitalized in a mental institution for almost four months. My great aunts all claimed that she had a mental breakdown due to what they called “the change,” referring to a hormonal imbalance brought on by menopause. “She always had bad nerves. Everything scared her,” claimed my Aunt Betty (Interview with the author, March 9, 2015). Of course, my Aunt Olivia, who was particularly forthcoming about sharing information, said that her hospitalization went much deeper than suspected. While in the hospital my grandmother refused to take or touch anything white. Allegedly, she even refused to take white pills. What would bring my grandmother to refuse all things white?

After my grandmother died, my parents traveled to Michigan to prepare to sell her home. While rummaging through drawers and sorting through what would be marked as trash and what would be sent to Goodwill, my mother stumbled upon a picture of Ethel. In the photograph, Ethel is looking straight into the camera sans her characteristic smile. Just

above the image were three words that stump my mother to this day: “Probation One Year.” We have no way of knowing when this photo was taken, if it relates to her hospitalization, or a welfare violation, or something more sinister. The myths and incomplete stories surrounding employees’ lives are just as troubling and obscuring as the perception surrounding domestic workers as members of the family. Secrecy and discretion became tools for survival in a world of fraught relationships and systemic racism. Thus, Ethel’s life reveals the precarity of one’s mental health at the crossroads of poverty and institutionalized racism.

Conclusion: “How Did That Happen?”

In referring to books like *Grady’s Gift*, Pulitzer Prize writer Howell Raines claimed there was no subject more complicated than a Southern writer illustrating the affection between white and black Americans in the unequal world of Jim Crow segregation (1991). He contended, “The dishonesty upon which a society is founded makes every emotion suspect, makes it impossible to know whether what flowed between two people was honest feeling or pity or pragmatism. Indeed, for the black person, the feigning of an expected emotion could be the very coinage of survival” (Raines 1991). The same argument could be posed for relationships outside of the South.

I do not deny the claim that the Clarks loved my grandmother or that they valued her service and dedication to them after so many decades. However, their relationship was created and cultivated by racist and oppressive principles and institutions. To negate this is to dilute the concept of racism as nothing more than poor manners and individual acts of meanness (Association of Black Women Historians 2011). It is completely possible for racism and affection to coexist within a relationship and be unselfconscious—a common infraction among white liberals. While the term *family* has become one of endearment, it is not language typically associated with employment. It was not affection that kept Ethel working until the age of seventy-nine, but lack of savings for retirement and an inability to build sustained economic wealth. In this sense, research on domestic servants requires reimagining the language we use to discuss employment. The language “she was family” ought to describe conditions of love, not labor.

Regarding Ethel’s legacy, the perplexing question may very well be the one posed by Diane Clark during her interview. As we began to talk she asked about my family. She wanted to know where we all lived and

what we had become professionally. I explained to her that almost all of my mother's six daughters followed in her footsteps of higher education. My mother is a professor and the first in her family to earn her PhD. I was the first of Norvella's six daughters to obtain my PhD, and then two more sisters followed, along with my youngest sister, who is beginning her doctoral program. My other two sisters teach high school and kindergarten. We all have at least a master's degree. We are all educators. My mother's first grandchild is currently enrolled at MIT on a full scholarship from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He will represent the third generation of PhDs in my family. To which Diane responded, "How did that happen?" Indeed, how did a woman with an eighth-grade education, who labored for fifty-nine years without protected labor or retirement, cultivate generations of educational excellence?

The better question is what could Ethel, as valedictorian of her eighth grade, have become had racism and sexism not prevented her from achieving her own dreams? Few, if anyone, dreams of being a housekeeper, but even if she did, what might her life have looked like had this form of employment been protected? While the educational achievements of her descendants are valuable, they do not always translate into wealth, which is often more inherited than earned. What wealth could her career have passed down? Her life also points to what fails to happen when educational and occupational opportunities are restricted. Without question Ethel could look at her own family and descendants with pride, but even this overlooks her own ability to find pride, power, and possession within herself. Her work should have been worthy of this, but too often we know how and why this happens.

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Notes

1. For more see Parreñas 2001, Clark-Lewis 1994, Chang 2000, Bapat 2014, Nadasen 2015, and Sharon Harley 2002.
2. Irenner was named after her paternal grandmother, Irenner Heagman, who lived to be 110 years old. During the 1940s and at the time of Irenner's birth, doctors believed that babies born prematurely suffered from retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) and struggled to get enough oxygen. Doctors falsely believed that increased oxygen in preemie incubators would address their breathing issues. In turn, the increased oxygen led to retrolental fibroplasia (RLF), an abnormal buildup of blood vessels that can scar the retina and irreversibly destroy eyesight. Because of this, tens of thousands of children suffered blindness, deafness, and brain damage. See Millesen 2015.
3. Baldwin argues that "because black women were deemed inherently underserving, they were subjected to benign neglect by state and national governments" (2010, 8). See also Brown 2003, 47–49.
4. In 1979, the median income for black women workers was \$3.60 an hour. However, about seven out of ten black domestic workers earned the minimum wage of \$2.90 or less. Black private household workers could expect to earn about \$110 a week, which would amount to about one-third less than full-time black women workers earning a salary or who were paid by the hour (Grossman 1980, 20).

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