

Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature.

Ena Jansen. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019. 384 pp.
ISBN 978-1776143511.

South African poet Gabeba Baderoon (173–88) writes that, in South Africa, the house is a haunted place of silences, ghosts and secrets. It is a space made possible by the invisibilised labour of the black domestic worker (and before her, the slave) who leads a shadowy existence within, but on the margins of, white private life. These haunted intimacies between white and black loom large in the South African psyche and have given rise to a complicated archive of literature and art engaging with the institution and its history. It is this archive that Ena Jansen enters and lingers in with her book *Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature* (2018) (a translation of *Soos familie*, published in 2015), which reveals to the reader a rich and layered cartography of literary, historical, personal and artistic representations of the domestic worker. Taking particular note of the growing body of autobiographical works by black authors, Jansen pores over the contradictions, ambiguities, complexities and textures of the domestic worker narrative as it emerges

from the vexed South African archive, through and despite of its “silences and violences” (5).

As a way of countering the erasures effected by slave/colonial/apartheid history through which the black woman is referred to collectively and is rarely remembered by name, *Like Family* focuses on the stories of individual domestic worker characters, while expressly locating their personal narratives in the political. Jansen works to reveal the (often concealed) everyday oppressions and indignities suffered by domestic workers at the hands of the ‘white madam’ and her family, while also foregrounding the creative modes of resistance and negotiation, cunning gestures and transgressive desires through which domestic workers manage to tip the balance of power, advance their own interests and unsettle white authority. The book therefore functions as a “biography of domestic workers” (279), but also contains a strong autobiographical element. The author makes her own presence explicit in its pages, carefully situating her project in relation to her own experiences as a white South African woman from the “madam class” and her own complicated relationships to various black women who have worked for her. The book therefore becomes more than an intellectual exercise or scholarly exploration, it is also a beautifully written personal account that moves, confronts and engages the reader in ways that most academic texts are unable to do.

Like Family contributes to crucial memory work in the South African postcolony. The book provides a long history of the South African institution of domestic work, tracing its founding assumption (the assumption of white South Africans that tedious manual labour should be done by black hands), its racial dynamic and many of its practices (like the renaming of the ‘domestic worker’, and the ‘living-in’ arrangement), to South Africa’s slave history. In this way Jansen resists the amnesia that characterises the South African popular imagination, contributes to the slow undoing of the systematic repression of slave memory. *Like Family* also reveals and deconstructs the erasures of the white nostalgia that so often accompanies public discourse about domestic work in South Africa, where white people reflect sentimentally on individual black women who cared for them as children and use family descriptions to frame these relationships (for example ‘she is like family,’ or ‘she was like a mother to me’). *Like Family* does important corrective work in the hegemonic white imagination by assembling and interpreting texts that expose the distortions and violences of white paternalism, thereby enabling radically new re-memberings of these relationships. This troubling of

white memory opens up the possibility of confronting the inequalities of the 'post-'apartheid present: "Every black woman who carries a white child on her back or pushes a buggy is a reminder of the ongoing predicament of black women in South Africa" (267).

Perhaps the most interesting, ambitious and important aspect of the book is its commitment to think from within the borders. Where Mary Louise Pratt (4) uses the term "contact zones" to describe the threshold spaces where interactions between "maids and madams" generally occur (kitchens and backyards in white middle class neighbourhoods), Jansen prefers to think also in terms of "borders" and "frontiers", words that convey something of the negotiation, separation and power imbalances that these threshold spaces signify. *Like Family* is interested in domestic workers as go-between figures between white and black, rich and poor, coloniser and colonised, urban and rural; as connectors, intermediaries, pivotal points of contact, "outsiders within" operating "at the crossroads of everything that has to do with difference in South Africa" (267). *Like Family* therefore reads the domestic worker as occupying an inbetweenness, a space of complicated and tense entanglement, which also has its roots in seventeenth-century slavery when enslaved women moved in and out of settler homes (267). In her selection and exploration of texts, Jansen centres the issue of borders in its many senses (legal, spatial, cultural etcetera), and foregrounds tales about everyday contact situations and the resultant "stories dealing with uncomfortable choices, or experiences of exclusion and exploitation, where authors dare to engage with the full implications of entanglement" (272). *Like Family* can therefore be said to be committed to "border thinking" (a concept originating from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and developed by Walter D. Mignolo and many others), thinking that emerges from "fraught frontier areas," knowledges produced from the dichotomous locus of enunciation that the domestic worker inhabits. In this sense *Like Family* has the potential to contribute to the difficult process of destabilising colonial territorialities and hegemonic epistemologies, the importance of which cannot be overstated in contemporary South Africa where the ongoing and painful work of decolonisation feels more urgent than ever.

Works Cited

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Azille Coetzee

azille.coetzee@gmail.com

Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3948-1249>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v.57i1.7840>