

# I Was a Retail Salesperson: An Examination of Two Memoirs About Working in Retail

**Brittany R. Clark**, Ph.D. candidate, Pennsylvania State University - Harrisburg

## Abstract

This article considers Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (originally published in 2001) and Caitlin Kelly's *Malled* (2011) as representational narratives of working-class retail workers. The display of working-class experience in each work is considered in the context of the authors' lives and experiences, considering use of language, events and broader expectations of the working life of retail salespeople. Using Stuart Hall's concept of the 'Other' (2013) as a theoretical key point, the article also considers, for an American perspective specifically, how these workers are constructed in the broader ideology of the nation state.

## Keywords:

Representation, Narrative, Other, Retail, Class Identity

## Introduction

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) the three most commonly held jobs in the United States in 2017 were Retail Salesperson with 4.5 million employees, Food Preparation and Serving Workers (including Fast Food), and Cashiers which both have 3.5 million workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.). By comparison, Office Clerks, which was the fourth most commonly held job, comprised under 3 million employees. Despite this, work in retail is often overlooked in discussions about the working-class. However, two books in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century sought to expose what the working conditions in the retail trade were really like. Barbara Ehrenreich's well-reviewed 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America* became a standard-bearer of working-class literature for the grittiness and honesty about the lives of the working-poor. Ten years later, journalist Caitlin Kelly released her memoir *Malled: My Unintentional Career in Retail* detailing her own two years working in retail after being laid off from her job at the *New York Daily News*. While in some ways these books are important in their bringing to light often-overlooked aspects of retail work, they are also deeply flawed. A close reading of the texts through the concept of class tourism, and Stuart Hall's ideas about Othering will provide a framework to demonstrate how each author keeps themselves at a distance from the work they are doing when they enter the retail trade. Likewise, Augusto Boal (1993) provides an additional framework for approaching these works as performance, making them voyeuristic portraits of the working-class. Instead of exposing the realities of retail work, both works represent a form of class tourism due to each author's inability to separate themselves from their former privileged lives, and the Othering they engage in as they are unable to find much value in the work itself.

### ***Nickel and Dimed and Malled***

There are several notable similarities between Barbara Ehrenreich and Caitlin Kelly. Both make their living as authors and journalists, both began working in retail in their mid-50s, and both used their experiences as fodder for a book whose secondary intention was to expose the truth of what that work is really like. The biggest difference between their two books comes with the primary intention of each work: Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America* was written as a piece of investigative journalism exploring the day-to-day lives of the working-poor, while Kelly's *Malled: My Unintentional Career in Retail* was intended as a memoir. Each received national attention as Ehrenreich's book became a *New York Times* bestseller and received several awards for its humanistic approach to the subject (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 224), while Kelly's book led to major interviews with the *CBS Early Show*, *The Washington Post*, and Diane Rehm of NPR.

Both Ehrenreich and Kelly currently enjoy status as members of the white upper-middle class. Ehrenreich was born in Montana, and by all accounts watched her father achieve the American dream working from coal miner to middle-class respectability. Even though she holds a Ph.D. in biology from Rockefeller University (Ehrenreich 2011, 193), she today works as a freelance writer/activist championing causes like 'health care, peace, women's rights, and economic justice' (Ehrenreich n.d., para. 5). When *Nickel and Dimed* was published, she lived near Key West in Florida. Unlike Ehrenreich, Kelly was born to an upper-class family in Toronto and who, by her own account, began working as a journalist right after graduating from the University of Toronto (Kelly 2011, pp. 3). Today she lives just outside of New York City (Kelly 2018, para. 4).

In the introduction to *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich lays out how her book came to be: In 1998, over a dinner with the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, she questioned 'how does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled?' After suggesting that it would make for a compelling piece of investigative journalism, her editor proposed she be the one to explore the subject further. (Ehrenreich 2011, pp.1-2). What initially began as an article quickly turned into a book project when she decided she would visit three different cities. She 'stripped-down' her resume and then tried to subsist for as long as possible on whatever low-wage work she could find. Over the course of her investigation she lived in Key West, Florida where she worked primarily as a waitress, Portland, Maine where she worked as a maid, and Minneapolis, Minnesota where she worked as a retail clerk. She also decided that if, in that time, she could not afford to pay her housing cost or food, she would end the experiment (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 2-5). While occasional references will be made to other parts of the book, this paper will largely focus on Ehrenreich's time spent in her last location, Minneapolis, working for Walmart. Ehrenreich's book has become so popular that at least two books were written in response: *Below the Breadline* by Fran Abrams, who attempted to replicate the experience in London, and Adam Shepard's *Scratch Beginnings* which attempted to imitate to refute the findings in *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 224).

While Ehrenreich started out intending to write an exposé on the life of the working-class, Kelly did not intend to write about her experiences when she began. After getting laid off from her job at the *New York Daily News* in 2006, she decided to apply for a job at the newly opened North Face store in a nearby mall (Kelly 2011, pp. 10-11). Over the course of two years, she worked one day a week at the mall in order to be able to continue her work as a freelance journalist. Two years after starting her new retail job she was able to quit to continue freelancing full-time, and published a book based on her experiences (Kelly 2011, pp.1).

*Malled* chronicles Kelly's first-time experience working in the retail industry and includes interviews with other former white-collar professionals who were hurt by the Recession and forced to take low-paying jobs in the service industry.

One of the reasons these projects became books, despite neither starting out that way, was because both authors seemed stunned that so little was written on the subject. The framing device of each book is their own experiences. Despite differences in genre, both include typical features of literary journalistic writing including interviews with experts, statistics, and analyses of larger social and economic trends. The language in each also suggests that both authors set out to expose what they felt was a largely underreported on, but surprisingly harsh, working conditions in the retail industry.

### **Class Tourism**

Narratives about the working class can highlight issues they face in theory, although not always in practice. Diana Kendall, in her book *Framing Class*, which discusses media narratives of class, argues that 'these narratives are organizations of experience that bring order to events. As such, these narratives wield power, because they influence how we make sense of the world' (Kendall 2005, pp. 5). However, when the storyteller is discussing issues from a place of privilege, and is unable to separate themselves from that privilege in relation to their connection to those they are representing, the results can be harmful. The results can overgeneralize the actual conditions of society's most vulnerable and can Other the people they are supposed to be representing.

In both Ehrenreich and Kelly's books, their own privileged status remains inseparable from the rest of the content. While it would be inaccurate to say their experiences were not real or informative, their methods for approaching these experiences demonstrate that they are participating in a form of class tourism in their attempts to understand the experiences of those who do this job every day. According to the BLS, the statistics regarding the position of Retail Salesperson demonstrate that the makeup regarding race mirrors almost exactly the country as a whole, while for the position of Cashier all racial minorities are overrepresented – with African-Americans at 40% overrepresented and Hispanics or Latinos 30% overrepresented (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). Both authors are from an upper-class, white background which affects the ways they approached their new locations and jobs. In choosing where to work and/or live, for example, they often use their privileged status to pick places that would make them feel the most comfortable rather than out of necessity as is the case for most members of the working-poor. Additionally, the knowledge that their situations are temporary allows them to perform being working-class without fully escaping their privileged position in society.

Their own knowledge of themselves as authors adds to this performative aspect in their narratives. Augusto Boal, in his book *Theater of the Oppressed* states that in American theater 'it is always good to show that there are people in worse situations than ours — this reassures the more sensible audience, whose members easily give thanks for the financial ability that made it possible for them to buy theater tickets, or who feel thankful for their little domestic happiness, in contrast with the characters tormented by vices, schizophrenia, neurosis and other illnesses' (Boal 1993, pp. 187). Once both authors set about writing a book based on their experiences and decided the aim would be to expose the working conditions in the retail industry, they, consciously or not, determined who the target audience would be – not their temporary working-class colleagues, but those in a position of privilege like themselves. Even as Ehrenreich ends her book by addressing many of the myths about the working-class in a

way that both abdicates responsibility of the middle and upper-classes to do more to help, and continues to create a melodramatic narrative about low-wage work by, for example, comparing it to a dictatorship (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 210). By treating this as entertainment both authors are simply reinforcing the status quo.

Taken together this makes them disingenuous representatives of those who work in retail regularly, while allowing them to present themselves as having had a real working-class experience. In paraphrasing Marx, Boal suggests, ‘knowledge... is revealed according to the perspective of the artist or of the social sector in which he is rooted, or which sponsors him, pays him, or consumes his work — especially that sector of society which holds the economic power’ (Boal 1993, pp. 53). As both journalists and members of the privileged class, they are able to get away with this type of class tourism because they are supposedly exposing the harsh truths about working in the retail industry. Kendall additionally states that ‘framing is an important way in which the media emphasize some ideological perspectives over others and manipulate salience by directing people’s attention to some ideas while ignoring others’ (Kendall 2005, pp. 5). In framing the narratives around themselves, both authors diminish the emphasis on the real issues facing the working-class, instead evoking our sympathy toward them and what they have gone through.

Kelly more obviously highlights her privileged status by stating early on that she has never worked in retail before, ‘Moving to the other side of the cash wrap... felt as disorienting to me as Alice might have felt when she slipped through the mirror into Wonderland... By moving to the other side of the register, I, too, entered a new world, one I had only glimpsed in passing since I was little’ (Kelly 2011, pp. 2). Despite needing a part-time job to supplement her income as a freelance journalist, she is unwilling to take on many traditional low-income jobs such as working for a supermarket or becoming a telemarketer. Seeing an ad for a newly opened North Face store located in a mall in an affluent area of New York City, she thinks this would be a good fit for many of the skills she has learned in her years as a journalist and through her extensive world travel (10). Michael Zweig in his book *The Working Class Majority* argues that ‘Advertising is based on getting us to identify a product with some characteristic we would like to have: sexiness, power, smarts, happiness, status. The ever more relentless introduction of advertising into every nook and cranny of our daily lives constantly reinforces a sense of identity through possessions that tends to crowd out other identifiers, such as class’ (Zweig 2011, pp. 48). In choosing a part-time job, Kelly, uses the only thing she knows about the industry: the reputation of the brand based on advertising. She believes that working for an upscale brand at a high-end mall will allow her a feeling of status that she could not get by working at a supermarket or a gas station, despite the job itself being in the same industry. While she might be embarrassed to be seen working for the latter by someone from her previous life as a serious journalist, the feeling is lessened by working for the North Face.

Later, during orientation with the other new employees, she learns that this method for choosing a low-wage retail job is uncommon, as many of her co-workers are coming to the North Face looking for a small step up the economic ladder, having worked in retail before. They have not chosen the North Face because of a presumed status about the brand, but because it offers similar work to the jobs they have held in the past while also being slight improvements on their previous positions, such as being out of the cold that comes with the meat department in a supermarket (Kelly 2011, pp. 21). She is also surprised to note that, for the first time in her life, she is ‘the visible minority’ as ‘the only Caucasian in the room,’ although she quickly glosses over this fact (Kelly 2011, pp. 20). Having never considered that this might be a possibility when she joined this industry, however, demonstrates just how out of her element

she is. This clearly demonstrates both her upper-class status and the privilege that comes with being white. She is approaching the job from a prestige perspective, while her co-workers are choosing it out of necessity. She has agency here, while her co-workers do not.

Although she begins her new job working two days a week she soon cuts this down to one day (Kelly 2011, pp.13). She chooses to only work Wednesday afternoons because it will allow her to maintain her freelance work full-time while continuing to have weekends off. The idea of a flexible schedule is particularly appealing to her as it lets her keep the job at arms-length, allowing her to consider it a distraction from her real life. 'I was grateful for a break... I'd already achieved enough success in my chosen field that a part-time, low-status job I considered temporary wouldn't exclusively define me' (Kelly 2011, pp.50). Kelly's book gives no indication that working one day a week is a common occurrence at the North Face, nor does she mention any other employees who have such a schedule. This framing of the work, the distance in which she places the job from her other life and the ability to be so picky about where and how often she works, further demonstrate the performative nature of her supposed representation of the lives of these workers. It creates the impression that she is neither serious about the work or presenting to the audience a realistic picture of what working in the retail industry is like.

While Ehrenreich dedicates more of her time to the project, there are a number of aspects to the way in which she conducts this research that indicate that she, likewise, is participating in a form class tourism. Unlike Kelly, she is not seeking work because she needed to supplement her income but taking on an investigative assignment to see what it is like to live as a member of the working-poor. Despite this, she is unwilling to completely dive into this assignment in the way many working-class people do every day, allowing herself both a buffer of cash up front and a car rented with a credit card in each new city because, 'I just figured that a story about waiting for busses would not be very interesting to read' (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 5). By acknowledging this upfront she is prioritizing her own personal comfort above an accurate representation, while admitting that such buffers may not be common with those she is trying to represent.

More subtly, however, are her choice of locations. The first city she works in is Key West, Florida, located close to where she lives, and which she chooses, 'Mostly out of laziness' (Ehrenreich 2011, pp.11). This location she takes the least seriously of all the places she goes to work as she allows herself, 'occasional breaks from this life, going home now and then to catch up on e-mail and for conjugal visits (though I am careful to 'pay' for everything I eat here, at \$5 a dinner, which I put in a jar), seeing *The Truman Show* with friends and letting them buy my ticket' (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 35). The choice of the word 'conjugal' here further suggests the lack of seriousness with which she is taking on her new role, as it evokes the image that her 'new life' is a prison sentence.

Her second location, Portland, Maine was chosen because she thought it would be easy for her to find work because the demographic was largely white (Ehrenreich 2011, pp.52). She chooses Minneapolis, her final location, because she assumed Minnesota was a liberal state, 'more merciful than many to its welfare poor' and only after discarding the idea of California (where she attended college) because of the heat in the summer. About this last location she states 'what I was looking for this time around was a comfortable correspondence between income and rent, and a few mild adventures, a soft landing' (Ehrenreich 2011, pp.121-122). This idea of a 'soft landing' and a 'mild adventure' is further demonstrated by her ability to house-sit for an acquaintance for a period of time while she looks for work, rather than immediately jumping

into the housing and job pools as she had in her other locations. This purposeful choice of locations is notable for a several reasons: it illustrates that she is using her privileged status as a member of the upper-class to pick locations that will make her experience easier or more pleasant (an ‘adventure’ even) and demonstrates that she is unaware that racial minorities are often overrepresented the types of low-wage positions she is searching for. Choosing places that will make her the most comfortable because they are the ‘whitest’ or most liberal therefore adds to the performative nature of her narrative and works against any authenticity she is purporting to represent.

### **Othering**

The questionable presentation of a supposedly realistic experience is seen much more starkly, however, in the ways in which the authors position themselves both in their narratives, and in relation to their co-workers. Neither is able to completely distance themselves from their privileged status, and constantly refer back to their real lives as a gauge from which to judge their new experiences. Their previous life experiences, likewise, lets each feel as if they are able to speak-up on matters in which their co-workers are remaining silent. Stuart Hall discusses this practice of holding yourself at a distance as ‘Othering.’ He states ‘binary oppositions have the great value of capturing the diversity of the world within their either/or extremes, they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning’ (Hall 2013, pp. 225). While Hall is specifically talking about issues of race, his ideas can also be applied here in terms of class status. Both authors view their positions in retail and among the working-class as temporary, which allows them to feel separate from their co-workers and the larger system, even though to their co-workers they appear to be a peer.

The most clearly noticeable example of this is that neither Ehrenreich nor Kelly are able to completely let go of their other lives in devotion to their new positions. Hall claims that ‘stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories ‘pure,’ giving culture their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles culture is ‘matter out of place’ – breaking of our unwritten rules and codes’ (Hall 2013, pp. 226). That is, both authors see themselves primarily as a journalist first, temporary member of the working-class second. In his article ‘Sponsored and Contest Mobility in the School System,’ Ralph Turner states that ‘the elite aspirant must relate himself both to the established elite and to the masses, who follow different rules, and the elite itself is not sufficiently homogeneous to evolve consensual rules of intercourse’ (Turner 1960, pp. 864). Neither is able to acclimate to their new space, seeing it only as a temporary assignment. As such, they are still playing by the rules of the elites, unable to fully adapt themselves to the rules of their new jobs and temporary class status.

From the beginning, every new experience for Kelly is contrasted with her work as a serious journalist. Once she is hired at the North Face, she is shocked to learn that they are going to train her. ‘I’d never been *trained* before’ she states, before explaining that, in journalism, you are simply thrown into the job and expected to know how to do it (Kelly 2011, pp. 19). At first, many of her experiences in her new job are compared favorably to her previous work – she likes the fresh, clean layout of the brand-new store compared to the stingy offices of corporate journalism or lonely confinement of freelance work, for example (32). However, after a short while, it soon becomes apparent that she is in a whole new world, as when she receives her first name tag. ‘We were issued name tags... I’d never worn a name tag at work, only at conferences where I was an honored speaker whose words were taped and sold, sometimes even quoted back to me years later by a listener who found them helpful’ (33). Kelly is constantly bringing up her pedigreed past – from her success as a journalist, to her ability to

speak multiple languages fluently, to her frequent world travel. In this way she is unable to fully see herself in her new position as a retail clerk without elevating her previous, real, life. In many ways, she ultimately is unable to fully adapt to this new position where she must blend in instead of seeking the type of recognition she is used to.

For her part, Ehrenreich is often surprised that no one seems to sense that she is smarter than the typical applicant for low-skilled work (having earned a Ph.D.), and that people are rarely surprised when she reveals, before quitting each position, that she is really an undercover journalist. In her final chapter – ‘Evaluation’ – she states ‘You might think that unskilled jobs would be a snap for someone who holds a Ph.D. . . . Not so. . . . Every one of the six jobs I entered into in the course of this project required concentration, and most demanded that I master new terms, new tools, and new skills. . . . None of these things came as easily to me as I would have liked; no one ever said, ‘Wow, you’re fast!’ or ‘Can you believe she just started?’’ (Ehrenreich 2011, pp.194). Unlike Kelly who views all of her new experiences through the lens of her previous life, Ehrenreich wants someone to notice that she is different from her co-workers. In the middle of a shift at Walmart, bored by the tedious nature of doing the same thing over and over again, she thinks, ‘Yes, I know that any day now I’m going to return to the variety and drama of my real. . . life. But this fact sustains me only in the way that, say, the prospect of heaven cheers a terminally ill person; it’s nice to know, but isn’t much help from moment to moment’ (187). By simply mentioning the fact that she has a Ph.D., Ehrenreich is unconsciously distancing herself from her temporary co-workers. It is unclear why she believes that skills she learned earning her advanced degree in biology might help her in low-skill work, as she also doesn’t likely use those skills in her regular job as a journalist who focuses on economic issues. She brandishes the degree as a reminder to the audience that her situation is temporary, and that she will soon be back to her regular position among the elite, contradicting the idea that she is actually experiencing what it is like to be a retail worker and a member of the working-class.

Additionally, neither is able to see themselves in their co-workers. Kelly seems unaware that she is thinking from a place of privilege when she remarks ‘I’d never spent time, socially or professionally, with anyone who had a visible tattoo. . . who traded the names of their favorite ink artists the way my friends mentioned that of a chic Kensington hotel or a great West Village colorist’ (Kelly 2011, pp. 57). Having initially applied for the position because of an assumed status of the brand and location of the store, she is frequently shocked to learn how vastly different her experiences are from those of her coworkers. Hall discusses this kind of stereotyping as ‘part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between. . . the ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable,’ what ‘belongs’ and what ‘does not’ or is ‘Other,’ between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ Us and Them’ (Hall 2013, pp. 248). By pointing out that many of her co-workers bear the distinguishing signifier of a tattoo, Kelly is setting up a distance between them. Hall continues ‘[stereotyping] facilitates the ‘binding’ or bonding together of all of Us who are ‘normal’ into one ‘imagined community;’ and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them – ‘the Others’ – who are in some way different – ‘beyond the pale’ . . . it classifies people according to a norm and constructs as the excluded as the ‘Other’ (Hall 2013, pp. 248). Kelly is highlighting the spectacle, or the features of her co-workers that, in her view, distinctly separate herself from her co-workers. However, in a long middle section of the book, she attempts to demonstrate that she is not alone in her plight by interviewing other former white-collar professionals who were forced to take work in the retail trade due to the Recession.

In contrast, in every location Ehrenreich works she finds she is frequently unable to understand the supposedly naïve dedication many of her coworkers have to their employers. At Walmart, when one of her coworkers confides that she was unhappy doing a task, not because it was tedious, but because she felt like she was wasting the company's money by not accomplishing anything productive, Ehrenreich remarks 'To me this anger seems badly mis-aimed. What does she think, the Walton family is living in some hidden room in the back of the store, in the utmost frugality, and likely to be ruined by \$21 worth of wasted labor?' (Ehrenreich 2011, pp.180). Through the implication that she knows something that her co-worker does not, she highlights both her privileged status and the temporariness of her situation, separating herself from those she is working with for only a short period of time. Turner argues 'By thinking of himself in the successful future the elite aspirant forms considerable identification with elitists, and evidence that they are merely ordinary human beings like himself helps to reinforce this identification as well as to keep alive the conviction that he himself may someday succeed in like manner' (Turner 1960, 859). This is not to argue in favor of blind corporate loyalty, but rather that, because she has no long-term investment in the job as her co-worker might, Ehrenreich is unable to see the value in the work, and to understand why her co-worker might take pride in her job.

As the authors view their place in the retail world from a distance, both feel as if they are able to speak-up about issues when their co-workers are largely silent. Kelly states 'I felt safe speaking up [in monthly meetings] because I worked only one night a week... So, while others examined their shoes or their manicures or giggled to one another during the meeting, I'd ask Joe about missing equipment or the lousy lighting in the stockroom. Most of my coworkers, it seemed, didn't care or didn't want to risk looking difficult' (Kelly 2011, pp. 172). Similarly, seeing that other service workers in Minneapolis have gone on strike, Ehrenreich goes out of her way to approach her co-workers on break to discuss the possibility of forming a union at Walmart. On doing this, she remarks 'The truth, which I can't avoid acknowledging... is that I'm just amusing myself, and in what seems like a pretty harmless way... someone needs to flush out the mysterious 'we' lurking in the 'our' in the 'Our people make the difference' statement we wear on our backs. It might as well be me because I have nothing to lose' (Ehrenreich 2011, pp. 185). With no real stake in the job, Ehrenreich is unable to see how something that amuses herself might cause backlash for her co-workers, particularly at a store as notoriously anti-union as Walmart. This inability to see themselves as a real part of the team at their stores, seems to give them permission to stir the pot in ways that they, from their place of privilege, see as being favorable to those they are working with. Neither is able to discern the importance or precariousness of the job for their co-workers, instead suggesting that the reason they are not standing up for themselves is out of disinterest.

In some ways, this distance which both authors keep from their co-workers and their temporary jobs taken in conjunction with the idea that each was attempting to write an exposé on working in the retail and service industries gives both works a voyeuristic feel. According to Turner 'While mass esteem is an effective brake upon over-exploitation of position, it rewards scrupulously ethical and altruistic behavior much less than evidence of fellow-feeling with the masses themselves' (Turner 1960, pp. 860). While on the job, both authors make attempts to relate to their new co-workers and their experiences. However, in writing about those experiences in the way they do, they demonstrate that they are class tourists, spying on the daily lives of the working-poor, while safely maintaining the 'insider'/'outsider' dichotomy. Their privileged status and the fact that each has a 'real' life to return to is inseparable from the authentic moments they experience on the jobs.

## Conclusion

Representational narratives are important because in many ways it is how we filter our own experiences and the experiences of others. Kendall notes that ‘understanding how the media portray the different social classes in our society is important, because studies have shown that the attitudes and judgements of media audiences may be affected by how the media frame certain issues’ (Kendall 2011, pp. 4). When those narratives are guided by the process of Othering or a version of class tourism, however, it can lead to over-generalizing the experiences of groups like the working-poor. While Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* and Caitlin Kelly’s *Malled* may come from a place of good intentions, their inability to truly see themselves in the lives of their co-workers, and the performative nature with which they approach these experiences means that their books present a voyeuristic view of the working-poor rather than a deep exposé on the difficulty of retail work. In a society that highly values the idea that anyone can achieve upward mobility like the United States, the perpetuation of such disingenuous portrayals of the working-class experience only furthers the problems these authors claim to address because they are maintaining the invisible barriers between the classes.

## Author Bio

**Brittany R. Clark** is a Ph.D. candidate at Pennsylvania State University – Harrisburg. She received her MA in Humanities (with a focus in creative writing and writing pedagogy) from Pennsylvania State University – Harrisburg in 2015, and a BA in English from Western Michigan University in 2008. Currently, she is working on her dissertation which examines how representations of retail workers in popular culture shape cultural perceptions about the job and who does it. She has previously published a creative non-fiction essay online at *Work Literary Magazine*.

## Bibliography

- Abrams, F. 2002, *Below the breadline: Living on the minimum wage*, Profile Books, London.
- Boal, A 1993, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Theatre Communications Group, New York.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. n.d. *Charts of the Largest Occupations in Each Area, May 2017*, United States. viewed 7 June 2018, <[https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/area\\_emp\\_chart/area\\_emp\\_chart.htm#](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/area_emp_chart/area_emp_chart.htm#)>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018, *Labor force statistics from the current population survey: employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity*, viewed 7 June 2018 < <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>>
- Ehrenreich, B. n.d., *About Barbara*, personal website, viewed 27 March 2018, < <http://barbaraehrenreich.com/barbara-ehrenreich-bio/>>
- Ehrenreich, B. 2011, *Nickel and dimed: On not getting by in America*, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed., Picador, New York.
- Glor, J. 2011, ‘Malled: My unintentional career in retail, by Caitlin Kelly’, *CBS News*, 15 April, viewed 22 March 2018, <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/malled-my-unintentional-career-in-retail-by-caitlin-kelly/>>
- Hall, S. 2013, ‘The spectacle of the ‘other’’, in S. Hall, J. Evans, & S. Nixon (eds.), *Representation*,

- 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Sage Los Angeles, pp. 215-287.
- Kelly, C. 2018, *About*, personal website, viewed 27 March 2018, <<https://www.lib.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/attachments/page/InteractiveHarvardUTSGuide.pdf>>
- Kelly, C. 2011, *Malled: My unintentional rareer in Retail*, electronic book, Penguin, New York.
- Kendall, D. 2011, *Framing class: Media representations of wealth and poverty in America*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD.
- Luberecki, B. 2011, 'Wise words from a retail renegade: Caitlin Kelly, 'Malled: My Unintentional career in retail'', 10 April, viewed 20 March 2018, <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2011/04/11/wise-words-from-a-retail-renegade/?utm\\_term=.26f10ff4d45f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2011/04/11/wise-words-from-a-retail-renegade/?utm_term=.26f10ff4d45f)>
- Shepard, A. 2009. *Scratch Beginnings: Me, \$25, and the Search for the American Dream*, Harper Perennial, New York.
- Turner, R.H. 1960, 'Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp. 855-867.
- Zweig, M. 2011, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.