When Getúlio Vargas signed the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho, in 1943, the Federal Constitution guaranteed a number of rights for all Brazilian workers. This was not the case for domestic workers. Domestic workers under this law are exceptional, they encompass those “who render services of a continuous nature for non-lucrative purposes to a person or family, within the latter’s residential sphere.” This definition underscores three essential characteristics of domestic labor as understood by the Brazilian state: the requirement that their work be continuous and their turn-over low; its non-lucrative nature which pertains to the economic sphere of reproduction rather than production; and the delimitation of their workplace as private and residential. This definitional difference which opposes them to public, productive, and more naturally steady workers has very concrete material consequences for the more than five million women who labor as domestic workers in Brazil.

On the one hand, the definition reflects the objective location of domestic work within the cycle of reproduction of capital as non-productive, in other words, as not resulting in the creation of surplus value. On the other hand, the definition is prescriptive rather than simply descriptive. It dictates the circumstances under which domestic labor

---

* All translations done by the author.
is recognized and sets down the rules that it must adapt to in order to be protected by the state as such. This seemingly descriptive manner of defining domestic work is actually the basis on which the legislation of domésticas’ protection as citizens is predicated. Within it are inscribed both the conditions under which this protection is granted—and consequently also withdrawn—as well as the rationale for the limitations of their rights.

Their nature as non-contributing to profit accrual is crucial to domésticas’ definition as substandard workers under Brazilian law. As “merely” reproductive workers, they are entitled to fewer prerogatives. Along with agricultural workers, they constitute the notable exception to the rule in many of the rights extended to all other Brazilian workers. Below is a brief overview of the labor protections that exist for all “ordinary” workers under Brazilian law. The Ministry of Labor and Employment requires that all Brazilian workers carry an employee’s card that their employer must sign within 48 hours of the initiation of a contract; this is called the Carteira de Trabalho e Previdência Social, CTPS. In addition to identifying them as workers, this card is intended for record-keeping of contributions and claims to social security benefits. These benefits include: eligibility to receive a retirement pension after 180 contributions, due to a disabling accident, or imprisonment; compensation in case of illness and/or injury; pension paid out dependents of diseased worker; unemployment insurance; and participation in a general matching savings fund which may be used in cases of economic hardship or to purchase a home, FGTS.

In addition to these social security benefits, the state supervises the time period of the work,—daily, weekly, and annually—as well as the health and safety conditions under which the work is done. The length of the working day is established at 8 hours,
and work thereafter must be paid as overtime; the length of rests and meals is legislated; paid vacations are fixed at 30 days with an option to sell a maximum of ten out of these thirty days; workers are entitled to paid absences in exceptional situations\(^b\); and weekly rests, preferably on Sundays are observed, as are national, state, and municipal holidays. Finally, the state legislates with respect to appropriate remuneration and valid deductions that an employer may make to the worker’s wages. The law establishes a monthly minimum wage of R$240\(^c\); an end-of-year gratification of 1/12 of the annual earnings; and transportation vouchers to cover all transportation needs to and from work.

In the introduction to the CLT, the law however, establishes the following: “the precepts stated in this document, except when in each case explicitly determined to the contrary, do not apply to domestic workers.\(^4\)” As a result of this adjustment to the professed protection of all human labor, domestic workers receive limited social security benefits which do not entitle them to participate in the FGTS or unemployment insurance. In addition, the length of their workday is not legislated and they are not entitled to overtime pay. The extraordinary circumstances under which they may take a paid leave of absence from work are limited only to maternity and paternity leaves, and they are not entitled to paid rest on holidays. Finally, the state does not make domestic workers eligible to receive the premium that employers of ordinary workers must pay for work done under unhealthy or dangerous conditions. Already the adjustments and corrections made specifically for domestic workers indicate that the state’s protection of labor is less universal than its official discourse of “human labor” cares to admit. If this cursory

\(^b\) These exceptional circumstances include: maternity leave for 120 days, military service, 2 days for death of a family member, 3 days for marriage, 5 day paternity leave, 1 day to donate blood, 2 days to enlist in the military, as needed to attend trial, and to take the vestibular, Brazil’ national university entrance exam.

\(^c\) Approximately US$81.49 at the time of writing.
evaluation of the disadvantaged labor protection under which domésticas work reveals a glaring disparity with other workers, the analysis that follows will disentangle the less obvious ways in which the state’s legislation of labor rights contained in the CLT discriminate in more subtle, highly particularistic ways.

Although this labor category is officially ungendered under Brazilian law and comprises all sorts of domestic employment including some traditionally male occupations such as chauffeur, butler, and foreman, the overwhelming majority of workers to which this legislation applies are female. More importantly, the specific location of domestic labor within the cycle of circulation and reproduction of capital inscribes it as a feminized category. In addition, the space in which the work is carried out, the “residential sphere” prescribed and guarded by the state as the proper workplace is also constituted as a feminized space. This gendering of what appears to be an “objective labor category” is achieved through the sexual division of labor which separates the material life structures of men and women. I echo Nancy Hartsock’s insistence on a sexual division of labor rather than only a gender division of labor in order to avoid the reduction of this difference exclusively to social dimensions. Understanding the division of labor as sexual highlights the ways in which women’s activities are defined and lived in both social and biological ways⁵. The concept therefore seeks to encompass both the gendered division of labor that results from historically situated social understandings of femininity and masculinity, as well as the “invariant and nearly unchangeable”⁶ features of women’s bodies. While attention to gender stresses the importance of the social dimension in which particular activities are historically constituted as female and alerts us to the constructed and situated nature of
this institutionalized division; a notion of a sexual division of labor is richer because in addition to this, it insists on the bodily aspect of existence as a particular kind of worker. In the case of domestic work as a feminized labor category, this plays out by assigning both social and biological tasks to women. Women’s work in the sphere of the home is institutionalized in two simultaneous ways, through their contribution to subsistence,—a socially constructed female activity—and through their contribution to childbearing—a biological, embodied female experience$^d$.

The terminology is also useful because it highlights the ease with which these two rationales for differentiating women’s and men’s work can be subsumed under a so-called “natural” division of labor. Keeping in mind that labor is sexually divided makes us aware of the dangerous discursive slippage that is employed when assigning women “naturally” to the domestic sphere. By pointing out the biological fact that women and not men bear children and stressing that this is not a social choice, a rationale for why women and not men do subsistence work in the home can too be easily weaved. Understanding the division of labor as sexual, therefore, is a continuous reminder of the perilous ways in which women’s embodied experience are used as fundamental building blocks for arguments that naturalize gender difference.

One could argue that the concept of gender as a social construction is sufficient to make us wary of naturalized notions of femininity and masculinity, and that the additional layer of sexual division of labor is therefore superfluous. However, the most important advantage of this latter concept is its ability to re-center attention on the bodily

---

$^d$ This is not to say that the experience of childbearing and mothering in general is not ripe with social meanings that women use, reproduce, and at times subvert to translate and make sense of their bodily experience. Rather, the emphasis here is on the purely biological rationale for making women’s work different from men’s.
aspect of existence. Harstock’s attention to this embodied experience in the division of labor can therefore be extended to analyze the racialization of domésticas’ work. What I wish to rescue here is evidently not a biological notion of racial difference that parallels the biological notion of sexual difference. Rather, I use this concept as a springboard from which to zoom in on race as an embodied manner of experiencing domestic work.

Zine told me that when she started working for Dona Ana’s at sixteen she lived at her workplace. Dona Ana, recently married, was pregnant and had a two year-old son who Zine looked after. After Zine married and became pregnant with her oldest daughter, Suzene, she worked at another Dona Ana’s house, but this time she went home every day to spend time with her husband and soon after with her newborn baby. A few years later, after working for Dona Teresinha, Dona Zezé, Dona Helena, and finally Dona Isabela... Zine had to go back to living at the workplace. Her other two children Suzana and João had already been born, but given the economic hardship that her family was going through she went back to being a live-in doméstica. From Monday to Saturday she slept at Dona Isabela’s house and every weekend she came home to see her husband and children. Zine didn’t talk much about how her children dealt with her extended absence, or what this did to her marriage. I decided not to push the subject but wondered what this situation might have been like for three young children with an unstably employed father, and an absent mother. Marinalva, although herself childless and unmarried, gave me a vivid picture of what her experience as president of Sindoméstico had taught her about situations such as Zine’s:

“[The children?] A neighbor takes them to day care, a neighbor picks them up, takes them in the morning, picks them up in the afternoon. Then maybe when the husband comes home after work, he sleeps with the child. It’s complicated. [Domésticas] don’t have a chance to accompany the growth and development of their child. While she’s taking care of the patrão’s kid, of other people’s children, her own is there, without proper food, without anything.”
While the work of both subsistence and childbearing has been undoubtedly constituted as “women’s work” through the sexual division of labor, a close analysis of the embodied experience with “women’s work” reveals that this category is not unitary or homogenous across races. The particularities of specific women’s work, although clearly tied to institutionalized sexism also reflect the dynamics of racialization and racism. In *Ain’t I a Woman?* bel hooks identifies institutionalized sexism as the most significant factor in shaping racial imperialism. She points to institutionalized sexism as an integral aspect of the European social and political order that ultimately had a “grave impact on the fate of enslaved black women.” Zine’s experience with mothering, childbearing, and the work of subsistence is exemplary of the racialized manner *domésticas* live “women’s work.” As a *doméstica* Zine’s work is to provide the service necessary to fulfill the subsistence needs of the white family she works for. While she is also socially understood as responsible for bearing and caring for her own children, doing subsistence work for others may take precedence over doing it for her own family, in fact the one may only occur at the expense of the other.

In her article *Outcast Mothers and Surrogates* Angela Davis reinforces the connection between institutionalized sexism and racism by stating that “the historical construction of women’s reproductive role […] has been informed by a peculiar constellation of racist and misogynist assumptions.” Davis differentiates between motherhood and breederhood as it unfolded in slave societies. Although her analysis focuses on the American experience, the manipulation of black women’s reproductive activities was also central to the maintenance of the Brazilian slaveocracy and is therefore useful in this analysis. Davis elaborates this difference by identifying motherhood as the
hegemonic presumed moral essence of womaness, from which black women were denied participation “on the basis of racist presumptions and economic necessity” (Davis, 1993: 356). After 1850, when the importation of new slaves was curtailed by British abolitionist pressures in Brazil but the economic compulsion to exploit slave labor mushroomed, the demand that slave women bear as many children as was biologically possible intensified. Black women were therefore encouraged or coerced to be birth mothers although they were seen as having a negligible role in the moral mothering of their children. In addition to this, slave women were expected to nurture and rear their masters’ children. The history of *babás*—(mammies) and *amas de leite* (wet nurses) exemplifies the role of surrogate motherhood that black women in Brazil were expected to fill. Although white children and their black *babás* had relationships that may have at times surpassed the emotional intensity that these children had with their white mothers, the employment of black women’s labor in the *casa grande* was not understood as a substitute for the moral mothering that could only be done by a white mother. While black women were constituted as apt breeders, they were constructed as inept moral mothers. The overall result for black women was the imposition of a reproductive role that bore no relationship to the Brazilian elite’s project of (moral) motherhood (Davis, 1993: 357).

Domestic work as a whole is concerned with the reproduction of labor-power. As I have stressed throughout, this type of work is mystified as unproductive within the C-M-C cycle of the reproduction of capital. Its duty is “simply” to maintain (or if possible reduce) the value of labor-power so that the latter may be bought cheaply on the labor market. The role of black women as caretakers of white children in white homes is
critical to the maintenance of this process. In his analysis of the value of labor-power Marx quantifies it as the labor-time necessary for its reproduction. One the one hand he points to “a certain quantity of the means of subsistence” that must be “sufficient to maintain [the worker] in his normal state as a working individual” (emphasis mine). On the other hand, he specifies that “the determination of the value of labor-power contains a historical and moral element”9 which depends on the “habits and expectations with which the class of free workers has been formed” (emphasis mine). While in some societies the moral and subsistence aspects of reproducing labor-power may be done by the same person, this is certainly not the case in slave societies where these two types of reproductive work were differentially assigned to women depending on their race. The work of feeding, clothing, grooming, and looking after the health of future and current white workers was relegated to black women; black women working in white homes would be surrogate mothers. Simultaneously, the work of fulfilling the historically constituted moral needs of white Brazilian workers in order to reproduce them was deemed appropriate only for white women. In Dona Ana’s house, Zine was responsible for making Dona Ana’s son’s meals, giving him baths, dressing him, and perhaps playing with him and taking him to school. However, while her work undoubtedly had an impact on Dona Ana’s son socialization, Dona Ana herself, not Zine, was considered responsible for the moral upbringing the would make her son a functioning member of Brazilian society, a white worker.

What of Zine’s own three children? Doesn’t she fulfill the moral role of mothering in her own home? Davis analysis is also helpful in understanding why even Zine’s work in her own home is constituted as surrogated motherhood rather than moral
motherhood. If we understand the work of reproduction—in the Marxist sense of
reproducing labor-power—as the sum of the work of subsistence and that necessary to
fulfill the historically constituted expectations of a morally adequate worker, it becomes
clear that Zine (the black woman) was charged with the former, while Dona Ana (the
white woman) was responsible for the latter. While the hegemonic discourses of
motherhood tell Zine that she too should strive to fulfill both aspects of the work of
reproduction, she finds that the material constraints on her impede her from doing this.
In order to properly meet the subsistence needs of her three children, she must absent
herself from her home and therefore forgo the hope of fulfilling their moral needs. She
will not be there to look after their school work, to counsel them, or to supervise their
sexuality. All these functions of reproductive work are understood as crucial in
constituting Zine as a proper woman and her children as acceptable worker-citizens. The
result is that Zine’s reproductive work in her own home is reduced exclusively to the
work of subsistence; she adequately fulfills only the role of surrogate motherhood, that
which deals exclusively with the biological aspects of breederhood that Davis refers to.

Black women as reproductive workers are:

not only treated as surrogates with respect to the reproduction of slave labor, they also served as
surrogate mothers for the white children of the slave-owners (Davis, 1993: 358).

Whether in their own home where they do unpaid domestic work or in the space where
they become *domésticas*, black women are therefore restricted to surrogate motherhood.

In her article on the intersecting axes of race and gender in cases involving “The
punishing of drug addicts who have babies” Dorothy Roberts also refers to the slavery
experience to illustrate how childbearing, and I add reproductive work in general, has

---

* I use these as examples of historically constituted moral needs that must be made in modern Brazilian
society for workers to be adequately reproduced.
been a product of oppression for black women. The most striking historical example that she refers to is a punishment method that was commonplace in the American south whereby:

Slaveowners forced women to lie face down in a depression in the ground while they were whipped, thus allowing the masters to protect the fetus while abusing the mother.

Roberts employs this example as a metaphor for “the evils of a fetal protection policy that denies the humanity of the mother” (Roberts, 1995: 389). I wish to extend this metaphor to illustrate the mechanism whereby the biological or surrogate motherhood of black women is protected, even ensured; while their moral role as something other than a breeder is dispensed with.

Although Zine may have become a live-in *doméstica* in the hope of at least fulfilling this circumscribed role of surrogate motherhood adequately, she finds that her meager wages are not sufficient to meet her family’s subsistence needs. As a result of the racial assignation of the two functions of reproductive work, and the predetermined impossibility of meeting both if one is black and poor, Zine is socially constructed as a “bad” mother. Zine does not meet the requirements to satisfy the hegemonic notion of moral motherhood, according to this perverse logic, her children’s own crippled development is “proof” of her incapacity. The precarious circumstances under which her children grow and integrate into the Brazilian capitalist state—both biological and moral—are insufficient for their maintenance as “normal” citizens. On the one hand, this view of “insufficiency” pathologizes the black family and is helpful in maintaining the

---

The consequences of wages that are insufficient to meet the “minimum limit of the value- of labor-power” (i.e. wages that are insufficient to purchase the commodities that must be supplied everyday for workers to renew their life-processes) (Marx, 1976: 276) will be analyzed extensively elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is significant to mention here that the legislation of the minimum wage, along with the other labor rights discussed above, is an important aspect of the state’s role in establishing an “adequate” value for domestic work.
false notion that black mothers are not apt moral mothers. On the other hand, the material insufficiency with which black families provide for their children’s subsistence is all too real. The contrasting history of black and white women’s relation to work itself is another element which highlights the racial fractures within the category “women’s work.” This additional analytical dimension contributes to challenge the notion of cross-race uniformity of experience with respect to domestic work. Historically, white women’s designation to the domestic sphere has signified their concomitant exclusion from the public world of work. Given their racialized experience with work, white feminists have understood the family as “the primary site for conceptualizing and organizing women’s oppression.” They have deconstructed and resisted the bourgeois family’s structure of authority which normalizes the heterosexual nuclear family as consisting of a male breadwinner, a female homemaker, and children. While this approach has challenged the naturalization of the nuclear bourgeois family, it is effective only in facilitating the liberation of women whose subordination is organized through this white family structure. For poor black women, the separation of work and family that is presupposed by the hierarchy of the nuclear bourgeois family is not a reality. Although, like white women, they too occupy subordinate spaces within patriarchal hierarchies, their subordination has not been organized by restricting their participation in the labor force; but on the contrary, it is intimately tied to their exploitation as waged laborers.

---

8 According to the National Research by Residential Samples, PNAD done by Brazil’s Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), non-whites continue to exhibit the highest mortality rates, as well as the lowest life expectancy at birth even when controlled for income and education levels. For example, in 1993, the infant mortality rate for blacks in Northeastern Brazil was 96.3 per 1000 births, as compared to 68 for whites.
The analysis above has intended to show how in defining domésticas as a class of workers, the state not only delimits a particular kind of labor in the abstract, but provides the necessary framework with which to exploit this labor through the specific manipulation of domésticas' black bodies. The sexual division of labor constructs domestic work as always already female, and its embodied nature makes it always already raced. Because in Brazil black and white women have a differential relation to both subsistence work and childbearing, this juridical labor category is replete with racial meanings. My purpose here has been to unveil the myth of the category doméstica as a neutral and descriptive type of labor, and to make explicit the connection between the domestic worker as a member of an “objective” labor category and this category’s embedded gender and racial meanings. Contrary to what minister Carlos Alberto Reis de Paula states in the quote above, the CLT is not (yet) obsolete, not because of its purported blanket protection of an abstract notion of human work; but rather, it has continued to function in extracting labor and exploiting workers precisely because it does not universalize the state’s protection of labor. The CLT has maintained a (seemingly) perennial meaning because it continues to be predicated on differential protection for specifically raced and gendered work.

II. Status

Many of the domésticas who participate in the activities of their workers’ union, the Sindoméstico, have been in the struggle since the very beginning. During the military regime, which lasted from 1964 to 1988, unions were gradually outlawed and it wasn’t until 1988 that they could form a sindicato. Creuza Maria, who was president of the
Sindoméstico for three periods and is currently president of the National Federation of Domestic Workers, narrated the local history of their union:

The one here in Salvador was created at the end of the 1970s. It was still only an association, a group, because it only became a union in 88, not before that. So we started in a school, Antônio Vieira which was a middle class school, but they had a scholarship program for workers. During the day middle class people studied there, at night they had scholarships for low-income workers, and the majority of the people who studied there were domésticas, construction workers, commercial workers, security guards, those sectors. And through that school we started perceiving that domésticas were ashamed of accepting their profession. […] When you asked those students what their profession was they’d say, ‘I’m a construction worker, a sales clerk, a [male] nurse’… When we’d get to the women, some would admit it, but the majority would say that they didn’t work, that they lived with their aunt… But we all knew that the majority of the workers who studied there at night were domestic workers, but they didn’t say, very few would admit it.

After speaking with several women who participated in the struggle for domestic workers’ rights in one way or another, the subject of denial became recurrent. The denial substantially weakened the movement because it prevented many women from joining groups that self-identified as domésticas out of pure shame of being associated with, or identified as such. Some of the women who had worked hard for the recognition of domestic work became very frustrated with their colleagues who were in denial. Teresa had been a student at Antônio Vieira at the time when Creuza joined and began speaking about workers’ rights, Teresa has continued to participate in the Sindoméstico since then. When I asked her what she thought the Sindoméstico could do to encourage women to proudly accept that they were domestic workers, she responded a bit irritated,

Listen Rose, I don’t think the sindicato has any means to do anything to change that, the sindicato doesn’t have the means to. The sindicato has done a lot to change domésticas’ heads. It’s society, it’s not the sindicato (emphasis mine).

Teresa’s comment is emphatic about the fact that although the sindicato is fighting to vindicate domésticas’ rights as workers there isn’t much it can do to improve the social status of domésticas in Brazilian society. In fact, although the fight is certainly uphill, the Sindoméstico has attained important victories in furthering the rights of domésticas.
Nonetheless, the social stigma of being a doméstica remains deep in the Brazilian psyche. The stigma, as most hegemonic discourses, doesn’t operate simply through domination, but also through consent. Its success depends as much on domésticas’ internalization of the negative image, as on the continued production and reproduction of demeaning representations of paid domestic work. My purpose in this section is to explore the instances of shame that domésticas themselves have narrated and to disentangle the ways in which, as Teresa categorically assured me, society as a whole, is responsible for perpetuating this shame. If in the previous section, the state was the most active agent in officially defining and delimiting domestic work as a labor, racial, and gender category, I presently shift the focus of the analysis to the unofficial, unlegislated, and often more subtle, though no less effective ways in which domestic work lays down the groundwork for the construction of a substandard category of citizenship.

Some of the women I met told me that they had slowly learned to be proud of their work. This, of course implies that they had gone through a process whereby they had shed their shame. Cristiane, a very outspoken woman who transpired confidence on everything that she did and spoke with fervent self-righteousness, told me that she herself had been ashamed of being a doméstica:

I was very ashamed, I thought that being a doméstica was a humiliation. I saw it as a humiliation. When I was in the 8th grade I took an instrumentation and percussion course with a group called Vida Nova. [...] So then, all that talent and working as a doméstica! Darn! That would lower my self-esteem, I thought, “shit, this job is pure humiliation then, it’s a job for useless people.”

Although domésticas certainly participate in the devaluation of their labor by internalizing and reproducing the discriminatory views that surround them, their denial—which unfortunately is seldom overcome—has its origins in a broad range of
demeaning stereotypes that circulate in Brazilian society. One of the most pervasive of these is the idea that domestic work is unqualified.

Zine, who at the time of the interview had dedicated nearly 16 years of her life to domestic work had recently decided to give it up altogether. Although when she spoke of her decision, as “the decision of her life,” and stressed its importance by repeating this four times, the fact that her job was consistently perceived as unqualified by others had no bearing on her decision. Instead, Zine agreed that domestic work required no skill, and having completed high school, she was ready to move to bigger and better things. Zine told me simply that “[a] domestic worker is [a] domestic worker; let’s just say that being a doméstica is something that everyone can do.” Antônia Cássia too told me that she had once been ashamed of being a doméstica and she linked her shame directly to her perception of domestic work as unqualified:

I was ashamed, because it’s discriminated against. People see domestic work as if…if we were thieves, if we stole or were marginal…I’m not saying it’s exactly the same, but it’s similar […] It’s a less appreciated job because you only need to know very little, if you knew a lot, no one would discriminate against it. The things that you have to do are things that practically everyone knows how to do.

An interesting aspect of the hegemonic stigma of being a doméstica is the interplay between it being regarded as unqualified and the simultaneous requirement that domésticas be qualified. Both patroas and domésticas are categorical about the fact that being a good doméstica takes learning; contrary to what Cássia stated above, the processes that most women narrated having gone through in becoming a doméstica indicate that they went from “knowing very little” to “knowing a lot.” Marinalva’s story is perhaps the most articulate example of this myth of lack of qualification:

At first I had a lot of difficulty because I didn’t know much. In our case, when we come from the interior we don’t know how to do things like in the big cities, we don’t know how to clean the way the employer wants, don’t know how to cook, don’t know how to iron right, how to do laundry.
So, we do things differently, country things, and when we get here they ask for professionalization, things that don’t exist back there.

I didn’t know all the vegetables yet, like green beans that look like beans but aren’t. […] So she sent me to make cozido and get some green beans but I thought they were beans so I started taking the little beans out […] I also didn’t know how to use the floor waxer, they had wooden floors, so we would put a product on the floor and then plug the floor waxer in the outlet to shine the floor, but I didn’t know how it worked, so I turned it on and it started going on its own!

Cooking is an art, a transformation. Being able to take a meat and transforming it into a beautiful dish, decorate a salad, make a desert, it’s a transformation, it’s art. And today I know how to cook. I cook very well, I am a great cook, I am a great professional.

Even Dona Selma, the Director of the state of Bahia’s Housewife’s and Consumer’s Movement, (MDCCB), whose interest is unequivocally to undermine the value of domestic work and discourage domésticas from fighting to attain the same rights as other workers in order to protect the interests of bourgeois, white housewives, agreed that domestic work required extensive and sophisticated training:

Domestic work seems easy, but it’s not, because you have to have an organization of daily tasks, weekly, biweekly, monthly, and even yearly. You must know how to use a machine, how to use appliances. […] Qualification [requires] etiquette, knowing their rights and responsibilities as a domestic worker, how to care for the sick, how to keep a house, take care of children, take care of post-partum women…

Where she differed from Marinalva was in her continuous stress on domesticas’ ineptitude in fulfilling these numerous requirements. In fact, when I asked her what she thought was the most important problem that patroas and empregadas faced, she immediately pointed to domésticas’ lack of qualification and their stubborn denial of their incompetence. The issue of qualification and lack thereof plays itself out in simultaneous and contradicting ways to reinforce the notion that this is “something that everyone can do.” Although this devaluing appraisal is repeated even as patroas demand that their employees become qualified, the sense of shame that derives from this interplay of discourses that dubs them as either unskilled or incompetent, is patent. The self-valorization process that Marinalva’s narrative reveals is more the exception than the
norm. As the president of the Sindoméstico, she has worked hard to undo both the myth of lack of qualification and the myth of incompetence. She has been successful in reappraising and valorizing her work in spite of, not in accordance with, what society says of her work.

Despite the hard work that the Sindoméstico does to dignify domestic work both materially,—through the struggle to expand domésticas labor rights—and symbolically—through the repeated emphasis on the social value of this work—the specifics of this kind of work contribute to perpetuate notions of inferiority as compared to other kinds of work. Its portrayal as unqualified is only one element in a long list of “common sense” perceptions that constitute it as a labor category with a lamentable reputation. The women engaged in the struggle for domésticas’ rights continuously echo Creuza in her conviction that:

Domestic Work is dignified, it has a social value, but it is not yet seen as the social value that it has, it is seen in a disreputable way, as if anyone could do it.

Unfortunately, the fight in this respect has been uphill, as both domésticas and patroas alike repeat the myth of lack of qualification.

When describing the attributes that make a good, professional doméstica Selma Magnavita described in detail the thorny issue of inter-personal relations within the workplace. This aspect of domésticas’ qualification was of such great concern for patroas, Selma explained, that the MDCCB had pulled together the necessary funds to undertake a training workshop for domésticas. As Selma described this workshop and as I leafed through the manual produced from the workshop, it became clear that work ethic

---

I use the Gramscian notion of common sense here. The notion that “every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of ‘common sense’. […] Common sense is the folklore of philosophy” (Gramsci, Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, 1971).
was a fundamental component of the qualification deemed necessary by patroas. This work ethic dealt with issues of communication, respect, and intimacy. Selma explained that the course paid careful attention to:

Observe the household’s habits, everyone’s behavior. We also gave lessons on respect and responsibility, on the attitudes of a professional who knows her limits; with the patroa there participating in the empregada’s intimacy, and the empregada in the family’s intimacy. There we’re dealing with human relations, with professional ethics. To listen and not respond, not to meddle in conversations. If you enter a room to ask for permission, ethics, etiquette, dialogue. Making yourself understood, and when you do something wrong and there is a complaint, not to respond insolently, or with disrespect. We also spoke about house secrets, and about respectful dialogue.

While Selma presented some of these qualities such as mutual respect and responsibility as laudable goals that could help smooth out the rocky relationship between patroas and empregadas, it is clear from the passage above that appropriate qualification as expressed by the women of the MDCCB includes an element of domésticas’ invisibility. A professional doméstica is one that makes herself unnoticed, one who minimizes her personality traits, listens and doesn’t respond. It is also plain from Selma’s description, that appropriate work ethics are defined by a clear and rigid hierarchization of roles that place patroas morally and materially above their empregadas. While this hierarchical labor structure contributes to the conflict generated between patroas and empregadas, and echoes the racial and gendered hierarchization of reproductive work outlined above, I wish to focus on the element of invisibility as an additional source of shame for domésticas.

Discrimination among the various echelons of established hierarchies is common in numerous labor structures. Myriad indicators are employed on a daily basis to distinguish between boss and worker and to treat each accordingly. In the case of domestic work, the use of uniforms is perhaps the most obvious strategy used to discriminate between patroa and empregada. As insidious as this differentiation may be,
when Teresa and I spoke about the use of uniforms in domestic work, she expressed her rage towards this social practice not so much in terms of differentiation and hierarchization, but rather, in terms of invisibility. Teresa explained that while uniforms clearly serve to separate the empregada from the family, they serve an additional purpose that they don’t in other labor categories: to render invisible.

In a firm, in a school, in a hospital, any firm where I work [...] I’m seen, I’m respected as a worker, not as an object. In a patrão’s house, we are not seen as workers. [...] Whoever works in a firm [and wears a uniform] is an employee, in a home she is ah! an empregada. That there is a way of demeaning, of belittling (emphasis mine).

As she understood it, while uniforms are commonly used in other types of work, their primary purpose elsewhere is to reinforce hierarchical structures and ultimately to draw attention to the person wearing it, to signal her as a worker. Ironically, in the case of domestic work, despite the conspicuous nature of uniforms, their ultimate function is to fade the person wearing it into the background, to turn the empregada into a non-person, into an object.

The invisibility of domestic work is closely tied to its position within the circulation of capital as reproductive rather than productive. If women’s work as defined by the sexual division of labor has historically been rendered invisible, the issue of invisibility is compounded in the case of domésticas who in order to be regarded as professionals are required to listen and not speak, be discrete, modest in their ways, and quickly fade into the background when anyone else is present. Unfortunately, as bourgeois women have drawn attention to the importance of non-remunerated work in the home, domésticas have not benefited from their efforts and continue to labor unrecognized. Moreover, even as the Sindoméstico slowly reverses this trend and
gradually draws attention to the arduous and quiet labor of *domésticas*, the actual women who labor, their stories, their fears, and desires continue to go unnoticed. As Selma explained, a good, professional *doméstica* is one who has gone through a thorough process of self-effacement. Through this perverse logic then, an incompetent *empregada* is that which we notice, and a well-qualified one is invisible.

This phenomenon is attested by the latest issue of *Maria, Maria*, the quarterly publication of UNIFEM in Brazil which was dedicated to *domésticas* and their work, but mostly to the women themselves. In her editorial note to *Maria, Maria*, Branca Moreira Alves, UNIFEM’s Regional Program Director for the Southern Cone explained that the magazine was dedicated to *domésticas* “in an effort to combat these women’s great enemy: social invisibility. *[Domésticas]* are everywhere and at the same time they are nowhere.” In Brazil there have been a few additional efforts to undo *domésticas’* social invisibility and bring them to the forefront as protagonists of their own lives rather than as inconspicuous but ever-present characters in white bourgeois lives. The fact that widely distributed public representations of *domésticas* that seek to rescue them from anonymity can be so easily enumerated confirms that the hegemonic common sense tends to erase *domésticas’* lives from Brazil’s social memory. If their work is gradually being publicly acknowledged thanks to the arduous work of organizations like Sindoméstico,

---

1 The Sindoméstico’s struggle to conquer rights and public visibility for *domésticas’* work has attained a number of important victories. These include their right to minimum wage, weekly rest, and end-of-year gratification, as well as establishing April 27th as a public national day to commemorate *domésticas’* work.  

11 Among these are the documentary film “A Negação do Brasil” (Brazil’s Denial) which traces the history of Afro-Brazilians’ appearances on public television and film. The film establishes a close link between the under-representation of blacks in Brazilian TV and their repeated portrayal as voiceless domestic workers in uniforms. The recent interview-based fictional film “Domésticas” also attempts to reverse their history of invisibility by placing the *doméstica* on the foreground, completely erasing the presence of *patroas* in order to zoom in on *domésticas* as protagonists. Finally, as an annex to this chapter, I have included a photo-essay by documentary photographer Pamela Duffy entitled Invisible Women.
—as albeit painfully underpaid and underprotected—their embodied experience as black women remains a striking silence.

The list of social stigmas that are commonly attached to the labor category doméstica in Brazilian society is quite long. Although thus far I have sought to merely point out and describe a few them, what follows is an analysis of how they operate as a cluster of cultural notions that constitute a hegemonic discourse. The bottom line with respect to domésticas’ social status in Brazilian society is clear and simple; nobody wants to be a doméstica, not even domésticas themselves. This is confirmed by the numerous instances of denial that were reported by the activists at Sindoméstico. Like Marinalva had learned to present herself as a qualified professional in spite of what her patroas and society told her, most of the activist women that I spoke to had undergone a long and difficult process in order to proudly present themselves as domésticas and assert that theirs was a dignified and important kind of work.

Still, the social stigma attached to the words doméstica and empregada often arose in conversation both with activists and non-activists. Sometimes, as in the telling description of Eva’s neighborhood hang-out, these self-deprecating views were intimately connected to being black:

Where I hang out, at the Quintal do Acarajé, there’s only domestic workers, it’s all only morenas, it’s all only negras.

In other cases the racial content of the category was more subtle, but nonetheless, the women narrated instances in which a public identification as a domestic worker immediately resulted in shame and humiliation.

---

k Common associations that my informants pointed to were: dirty, ignorant, and undesirable sexual partner.

l The question of choice and the degree of agency exercised by these women as they became domestic workers will be explored elsewhere in greater detail. What I wish to capture here is a generalized notion of social undesirability with regard to this labor category.
'Even if you go, say, if you want to get a credit card and the person who works there says, ‘what do you do?’ and you say ‘I’m a doméstica’ […] right there you’re already lower than even the floor you’re stepping on, because you have no value.’” -Zine

“When we go to a place, to a restaurant, the Top House, a fancy restaurant here in Salvador, everyone knows I’m a maid because when she sees everyone looking at me, her son goes ‘take the baby Cristiane, put him on your lap’ even if the baby wants to walk around. What for? So that everyone knows that I’m the babá, to humiliate me that I’m a babá.

No matter how much we fix ourselves up, comb our hair, we’ll always be empregadas.” -Cristiane

The internalization and reproduction of these self-deprecating views by domésticas themselves—at times even after they have worked to undo them—suggests that there exists a hegemonic discourse that has left its imprint in the form of common sense.

I utilize Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to explain the pervasiveness of a dominating white, bourgeois view with regard to domestic work. This hegemony operates at both an economic and ethical-political level. The economic domination is achieved through the perpetration of inadequate remuneration and other substandard economic benefits in the form of curtailed labor rights. Its ethical-political component is achieved through the propagation of denigrating stereotypes of domestic workers. The economically dominant group in Brazil—white, bourgeois, urban males—maintain this ever-negotiated hegemony through the engagement of conflict and the sporadic concession of small political and ethical victories to its subordinates, through a series of calculated compromises that don’t threaten the economic foundation of the status quo.12

In accordance with the Gramscian notion, I understand the maintenance of white Brazilian hegemony through a dual process of coercion and consent. The internalization and concomitant diffusion of self-deprecating views by domésticas is a clear example of
consent at work. The effectiveness of white Brazilian hegemony\textsuperscript{m} as a successful philosophical current is manifest in its sedimentation of common sense.\textsuperscript{13} The dominant philosophy which is an offspring of the cultural and historical particularities of Brazilian society has left behind a trace, a folklore which is widely accepted. This philosophic folklore includes the notions that female work is inferior to male, private to public, black to white, and unskilled to skilled. Moreover, this common sense has an additional dimension which does not refer to the work of domésticas, but to their persons. In addition to being a labor category, doméstica refers to a category of women,—black, poor, rural and illiterate—all undesirable attributes in a profoundly patriarchal, racist, and progress-oriented society.

Though pervasive, common sense is unsystematic. Rather than being a rigid and unified conception of the world, it is continually transforming itself. Brazilian common sense with respect to domestic work is not an exception in its ability to be transformed. The philosophical folklore surrounding this labor category consists of an undervaluation of both the kind of work done and the kind of people doing this work. As history has ushered in events that seek to revolutionize people’s consciousness with respect to domestic labor, consensus surrounding the importance of domestic work in Brazilian society has become destabilized. However, while the Sindoméstico and its allied organizations have begun to unravel and debunk the idea that domestic work is unproductive, the counterpart of this hegemonic discourse that refers to the status of the

\textsuperscript{m} I wish to include under this rubric Michael Hanchard’s elaboration of a racial hegemony which is a legacy of Brazilian racial exceptionalism and its successor, racial democracy (Hanchard, Orpheus and Power, 1994).
women themselves who labor as domestic workers has not advanced concomitantly in favor of domésticas. While calculated concessions have been made with regard to domestic work, and even as the conditions and visibility of domestic labor improve, doméstica continues to represent an undesirable category of being.

These pervasive ideas have been identified by activists as intractable obstacles to their struggle. In making sense of the resilience of these social stigmas, some of them established a probable causality in the way that the obstacle operates. According to the activist domésticas that I spoke with, the advance of their work was hindered by the recalcitrant social stigmas that prevent domésticas themselves to self-identify as such. Teresa explained that after twenty years of intense work to draw attention to their cause, many domésticas continue in denial:

The majority doesn’t want to be domésticas, they don’t accept themselves. […] In the neighborhood where I live, where Creuza and I live, the majority of the women are domestic workers. Many of them say they don’t know, that they never heard anyone speak of the sindicato, not once in their lives.

For her, the work to attain full recognition as workers on par with other Brazilian workers will only be achieved when the social stigma has been eradicated. In this view, the public valorization and corresponding extension of labor rights is contingent on the private self-valorization that domésticas do of themselves and their black, female bodies. An alternative understanding of this inter-relationship would reverse the causality and assert that only when domésticas rights as workers are conquered will their social status be transformed. What I suggest is that the intimate interconnection between the two is not a linear causal one, but rather, dialectical. State and status operate in a mutually

---

Due to continuing and intersecting hegemonic discourses of white supremacy, patriarchy, and Eurocentric education models. In fact, the concept of hegemony that I’m proposing here is one that has foundations in all of these dominant discourses, therefore it is one that cannot be dismantled without making inroads into all of these seemingly separate discourses.
influencing manner. Although it may appear as if the state is solely the public arbiter between labor and capital, and cultural ideas pervade only the private and symbolic spheres of Brazilian society, the former makes profound inroads into the Brazilian psyche and the latter has substantial material consequences for domésticas’ work and lives. Moreover, their relationship is not superficial or fortuitous but rather, each fulfills a complementary function in the maintenance of white Brazilian hegemony.

III. Dialectics

“As regarding those who already want rights like any other worker, […] they can’t make that demand, because they don’t contribute an economic production to their patroa, to their workplace.” – Selma Magnavita, Director, Bahia’s Housewives’ and Consumers’ Movement

As the quote above exemplifies, domestic labor is understood as non-contributing to the employer’s wealth, that of society, and by extension the country as a whole. It is not coincidentally that the language utilized by the Brazilian state in assigning responsibilities and distributing rights hinges on the notion of economic contribution. A taxpayer is a contribuinte, a contributor to national wealth; a worker is entitled to retirement payments after 180 contribuições, or contributions. Although it preserves value, domestic work does not immediately result in the production of surplus value, it does not contribute to the creation of new value. Through this logic, the domestic worker is constituted as an inferior type of contributor who consequently is legally—and “justly so”—entitled to inferior retributions. The definition utilized by the state does not only sanction the substandard labor privileges of domestic work, but it masks the ways in which domestic work is actually a crucial contributor to the production of new value. This mystification allows the state to couch its differential distribution of rights and responsibilities within a discourse of fairness and proportionality.

注脚① explanation of mystification in C-M-C
Additionally, the definition of domestic work as an “objective” labor category enables the state to assert a “neutral” position with regard to gender and race. While the state does not legislate differential economic benefits on the basis of race or gender, the differential distribution of economic benefits as defined by the logic of capital reproduction and the sexual division of labor is already raced and gendered in particular ways. At first glance the state is simply describing the characteristics of a particular form of labor, and responding by assigning proportional rights that correspond to these observed characteristics. Upon closer analysis, the state is in fact defining (not just describing) this type of work. It defines it as reproductive—as opposed to productive—and legislates on this mystified appraisal of its value.

Throughout the course of my interviews at CEAFRO and the Sindoméstico, the women repeatedly alluded to the low valorização of domestic work. The Portuguese word is helpful here because it carries with it two connotations. The first reflects pecuniary worth and is usually used to refer to an increase in price as in the phrase, a valorização da moeda, meaning the appreciation, or increase in price, of the currency. The second usage refers to social recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation in a non-pecuniary manner, as in the phrase, ele valoriza o que eu faço, which would be loosely translated as “he recognizes that what I do is important.” I want to suggest that the semantic slippage of the term points to an intimate relationship between the social status of domestic work and its pecuniary value as legislated by the state. As I have shown above, the state’s proscription of domestic workers’ economic protection is justified through a tacit calculation of their “proportional” contribution to society. In addition to reflecting what the state deems are benefits “proportional and adequate” to
their economic contribution, the *valorização*—first meaning—that the state calculates in economic terms constitutes and is constituted by the *valorização*—second meaning—of domésticas’ work within Brazilian society at large.

When I asked Cleusa what she thought would have to change in order for domestic labor to be better valorizado, I was referring to its social recognition as an important and dignified type of work. She, however, replied, “First, we should have all the rights that all workers have, that we don’t.” When I clarified that I wanted to know what in her opinion would have to change in order for the social stigma of domestic work to disappear, she reiterated her answer, “like I already said, having all those rights.” What this example illustrates is that domésticas’ conflation of social and official recognition is far more than a verbal confusion or a lack of semantic nuisance in the word *valorização*. This conflation is a conscious linking of the role of the state and their social status in doméstica’s struggle to valorize their work.

The ambiguous usage of the term *valorização* as a fundamental objective of domésticas’ work suggests that they infer and recognize a dialectical relationship between the state’s official extension of economic rights and circulating popular beliefs regarding domésticas’ social status. Moreover, by pointing out that their work to valorize domestic work cannot and will not be done until society’s perceptions change alongside their economic prerogatives, domésticas acknowledge the important role of common sense in maintaining hegemony as well as the Gramscian notion that ideas are material forces (Bennett, 1981: 200).

More than for its theoretical value, this insight is fundamental in order to tailor appropriate responses with liberating potential. However, a sound theoretical
understanding of this process is a helpful tool that can enable better oriented struggles with the ability to create a more profound crisis of authority at both the ideological and economic levels. For this reason, the Gramscian concept of hegemony is appropriate here. On the one hand it avoids the overemphasis that orthodox Marxism has given the economic base of society while steering clear of liberal philosophy’s narrow stress on the role of ideas (Bennett, 1981: 199). In order to expand the understanding of oppressive phenomena Gramsci insists on bringing both the economic base and the role of ideas together as well as the complex connection between the mass of the people and the leading groups of society which lead and dominate through consensus and coercion. Without this wealth of theoretical tools however, domésticas have understood this dual mechanism; they have read and articulated a complex process whereby public consciousness identifies them as social, racial, gender, and economic inferiors, domésticas internalize this sense inferiority, and the state gives the official stamp which sanctions their inferior treatment both in the private and public sphere.

The first step towards elaborating an effective strategy of resistance has therefore been taken by the leadership of domésticas’ movement. The theoretical understanding of the manner in which white Brazilian hegemony negotiates crisis, seeks consent, and exercises force is embedded in their counter-discourse aimed at both gaining labor rights and undoing negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, this counter-discourse is still incipient and poorly disseminated across Brazilian society, the leadership’s understanding of the strategies that their struggle must employ must circulate in order to construct an alternative common sense and with it, and alternative economic order. In the words of the Bahian leader for domésticas’ valorização:
The main objective is the struggle for everything. For citizenship. Citizenship is included in labor rights, rights as women, rights as blacks, rights as citizens.
-Creuza Maria Oliveira, President National Federation of Domestic Workers

2 Título I, Articulo 7, a. Consolidaçã das Leis do Trabalho.
   www.mte.gov.br/Menu/legislaca/CLT/Default.asp
3 Cartilha do Empregado Doméstico. Secretaria do Trabalho e Ação Social, Governo do Estado da Bahia.
4 CLT Título 1, Artigo 7º www.mte.gov.br
5 Nancy Harstock, The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism p. 163
6 Sara Ruddick, Maternal Thinking 6, 2 (Summer, 1980) p. 364.
7 bel hooks, Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism p. 115
8 Angela Y. Davis. Outcast Mothers and Surrogates: Racism and Reproductive Politics in the Nineties p. 355
10 Patricia Hill Collins, Fighting Worlds p. 220.
11 Maria, Maria. Unifem ano 4, no 7
13 Hanchard, Michael George. Orpheus and Power.