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92nd Harold Wolpe Dialogue

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Topic:

**IN SERVICE OF RACIAL DYSTOPIA:
ANXIETY AND FANTASY IN THE
FIGURE OF “THE MAID”**

Speaker:

Dr. Shireen Ally
Wits University

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

Harold Wolpe 92nd Lecture

'In Service of Racial Dystopia: Anxiety and Fantasy in the Figure of the "Maid"'

Dr Shireen Ally, Wits University

Questions

1. You have spoken about the racial distinction between black maids and white maids. What about black madams who employ black maids?

I am intrigued by the way in which the black madam tantalizes us. The racial definition and distinction is so crucial in a country like South Africa where there is a shared race between the employer and employee. There have been some studies done on the black madam. On the one hand it is interesting in that black madams are bearers of anxiety themselves. The overriding anxiety of black employers in one study was to make sure that they were not a 'white employer'. Domestic workers talk about black employers saying that they are the worst and no matter what, never work for a black madam. This is interesting because the number of black madams is actually miniscule.

What we do know is that even though the black madam is a new phenomenon, the black madam is a historic figure – Indian and Colored women employed domestics from the 1950s and beyond. There is emerging work being done by looking at the upper class in Soweto through Drum magazine, including the parents of Dr. *Felicia Mabuzza-Suttle*, had an army of servants in the 1970s and 1980s. So the idea of the black madam as a 'new' idea needs to be unpacked. And while she may 'new' at some level, the black madam is not really that important in a structural sense. Through three different statistical surveys, the black madam represents 0.001% of the employing population. What is far more interesting is the pervasive racial make-up of the employed class – that domestic workers are almost entirely black women. How are black women starting to represent the maid that diverges quite significantly from the public discourse? What is most interesting at the moment is what is happening in the realm of fiction. There is a young black woman called Zukiswa Wana. She wrote a novel called 'The Madams' that included a black madam who chose to employ a white Afrikaner woman as her maid. And I think that through this we can see that there is something about this relationship that exposes race in some significant way.

2. How did the domestic workers that you spoke to understand their rights in the new South Africa? Has the formal construction of rights assisted in giving them agency which they did not have under Apartheid?

I should say that domestic workers claimed their rights with frenetic energy. They are the largest group standing outside the CCMA trying to claim their rights. So it was not that they did not sign contracts and refused to be registered, but there is a contradiction between the refusal to sign these contracts and the packing of CCMA and UIF offices by domestic workers. Hence, domestic workers have a complicated relationship to their rights and the summary position is that liberal, bourgeois rights by themselves cannot secure the rights of workers. I don't want you to leave with that impression, but rather these rights needed to be introduced on terms that reflected the domestic worker's own capacities.

They did not want 'de-personalisation' which is interesting. In India, a new book claims that Indian domestic workers actually feel very uncomfortable with questioning the idea of loyalty and family trust and hence they are very uncomfortable about 'de-personalisation'. Latina domestic workers in the USA railed against new progressive employers who created a new sterility in the relationship with their domestic workers, often preferring never to see them. These 'progressives' gave their domestic workers a set of keys on a Tuesday, they come in, clean and leave. So, their labour is visible but they are not.

The most offensive thing that happened with South African domestic workers was receiving pay in an anonymous envelope left on the side-draw and not being handed over in person. Workers were deeply troubled by this – they (the employers) wanted 'our labour' but they did not want to see us which does not acknowledge the humanity of the person and the labour that they have put in. So, it is against this de-personalisation that domestic workers take offence. This is not something that middle class employers trying to do the right thing would normally see as problematic. South African workers did want de-personalisation, but they wanted it 'from below'. The form of de-personalisation extended by the state was one 'from above' which negated the historical forms and capacities, negotiations and power that they had cultivated, honed and masterfully employed and it was this that was problematic to them.

3. Could you talk a bit more about the relationship between the male employer and the female employer and employee?

Sarah Archer did a brilliant study by looking at domestic work through the perspective of food and the intimacy of the provision of food by employers in book clubs. Middle class women talking about how they give their domestics food but in book clubs, fascinating. The classic claim 'oh, I buy filter ground coffee for myself but I know that she prefers Ricoffy, so I buy that for her'. What Sarah exposes is that the domestic worker relationship is actually managed by the employee woman in the dyad. The male employers often have very little to do with this relationship, they often defer it to the woman employer, which is in and of itself interesting. The most pernicious vector of intimacy in domestic work is the sexual exploitation of domestic workers by their male employers. This is form of dehumanization that has yet to be exposed in much the same way as the American South's racism was exposed in the way in which slavery crossed the boundaries through non-consensual and consensual inter-race relationships. The same is true of South Africa but we have only just started to touch the surface. So we need to look at sexual exploitation and abuse.

4. You talk a lot about how the maids feel post 1994. Did you manage to speak to any madams in democratic South Africa about how they understand the changing relationship and the new legal complications that they have?

I did not talk to employers as a part of the study, only colloquially, so I cannot comment on that. But I would direct anyone to Sarah Archer's work. The key point is that the employer is also concerned about intimacy with their domestic worker and the ambiguity of it. This is what dominates their consciousness and the forms of dehumanizing estrangement that they themselves confess to without being deeply away of it. It suggests that these covert games of power between an employer and employee are acknowledged and understood at some level without being explicit.

5. Given that there are these conflicting pros and cons about formalizing labour relations, are there any studies that try to quantify the net result. Has it been better from a salary/work perspective point of view?

I said it earlier this afternoon- we do know the statistics about formalization of contracts that is that it has actually made inroads and year and half go, 38% of domestic workers were covered by a formal contract of employment. That might seem like there is not a majority but just 5 years ago, only 5% were covered. Out of an approximate 997 000 domestic workers in South Africa, 840 000 are covered by UIF and employers have come to the party around UIF, often against the wishes of their domestic workers. So, formalizing works in terms of its statutory role but what that means in terms of the house is not captured. The contract might exist but how it is used is a whole other question and just because the contract exists, it does not mean that the domestic worker is actually protected. Wages and working conditions have improved. Tom Hertz did a seriously quantitative study and proves that the increases in wages and working conditions are a direct result of the introduction of legislation and while it is a marginal improvement, it is an improvement nonetheless. Workers did not talk about this as significant. Even when domestic workers spoke about wages improving, it was not a significant part of what democracy meant for them. What was significant, was the outlawing of the instant dismissal – it was the one thing that brought tears to domestic worker’s eyes. The number one claim of domestic workers before the CCMA is unfair dismissal. What domestic workers said was that what Apartheid meant more than anything in terms of degradation was the possibility for their instant disposability and they said that there was a dignity attached to the fact that they could not just be removed. The point here is that increased wages did not provide them with dignity, rather it was the outlawing of instant dismissal that provided that.

6. Do you think that the cartoon strip ‘Madam and Eve’ is a broad appreciation of the ironies of this relationship?

You should know that this is the number 1 cartoon strip in the country and has remained in this position for 10 years. It is the product of 3 white men and Eve is not the stereotypical representation of the maid – she is cheeky, sassy, entrepreneurial and ultimately very mischievous. So, why do white employers love Eve so much? I don’t think it is that Eve represents such an exciting alternative representation of the maid. So, Eve is not only cheeky, she is actually lazy. It is because she is so manipulative that it reproduces all of the stereotypes already present in white employer’s minds. It ends up justifying the presumption that all domestic workers are really lazy. This is actually what makes ‘Madam and Eve’ so problematic. The white imagination with Eve needs to be unpacked. If this cartoon about our public approximations about race, then Eve as a character is ‘lazy, manipulative’ always trying to make a fast buck at the expense of the white employer. It just feels too uncomfortable as it gets close to a rendition of white anxiety about blackness taking over in the new South Africa. So, ‘Madam & Eve’ is popular and it is precisely its popularity that is the reason why we should think about it in a way that suggests that there is something more going on than merely the heroic image of the maid that everyone wants to consume.

7. What was the general feedback from domestic workers about black males? Were there different expectations from black madams and white madams? Why do they think that black madams are the worst employers?

People can only speculate on that because domestic workers will not even engage you in a conversation about this by saying ‘they are the worst employers’ and then closing the conversation.

So we can only speculate. One version is that the black employer really is the worst employer. There is some version of the truth in that. Black employers tend to be less affluent than white employers which means that white employers do often pay a lower wage. But this is a surface level reading and some of the more interesting arguments are that Xoliswa Dilata said that black domestic workers that with a white employer, you know what you are getting yourself into. That does not mean that they know what kind of exploitation goes on, but they did mean that the kinds of negotiations on how to read the psychology of the employer had been worked out for generations with white employers. That work has yet to be done with black employers, making it an unknown quality. And workers do not have that collective resource. Xoliswa also wrote (although with limited evidence) that the deferential role that black domestic workers knew how to play with a white employer would not work with a black worker because it absolutely assumes the racial role-plays. The forms of deference that domestic workers cultivate with white employers to gain all sorts of benefits would not work with black employers. This scared them. Xoliswa had all sorts of examples of black domestic workers who complained endlessly that they would often stand and sulk and say 'yes Madam' and they would get a response back that would not be the affirmed white response that would say 'good, now that question is settled'. Because the black employer is also not used to that deferential role play in which deference is built into a racial interaction. So, we are not sure why the black domestic worker thinks that the black employer is the worst, but we do have some speculative ideas.

8. Do you have any responses from domestic workers about 'Sophie'?

I love Sophie, it is one of the most interesting things about a different configuration of the maid and what is important about her is that she is a representation by a black worker herself who is the daughter of a domestic worker. And Mary Simande's vision is actually very different from Zanele Mahole's. Mahole is a photographer of black lesbian women (the women who got the Minister into a whole big stink about her photographs). So she is a really interesting. Mary Simande is doing something different. It is interesting that domestic workers respond to both. Sophie captures the image of domestic workers much more wholly than Mahole's pictures. And why that is the case is too complicated. Sophie is an unfinished project while Mahole's wants the viewer to clearly understand the problems and solutions to domestic work. Sophie is more enigmatic and for her to take over the city in the way that she did was remarkable. While taking photos of all of these billboards, I waited around for a long time to catch people and see what they thought. Because it is not only what domestic workers think but also about construction workers and commuters and the business men who were accosted to be asked about 'Queen Sophie'. The responses are varied. The *Mail & Guardian* wrote an article about the exhibition on the public responses to the exhibition. The article was called 'look up up up up' and the reason for this is that because the journalist had tried to do the same experiment that I had but found that no one noticed Sophie. When the journalists finally accosted people to ask them what they thought about 'what was going on here', the response was 'what are you talking about'. So the journalists said 'look up', and the response was 'what, what', so the journalist had to say 'look up, up, up!' and then finally the accosted person looked at it for a few seconds, went 'humph' and then walked off. The *Mail & Guardian* said that public art tries to reclaim something away from advertising that is trying to sell us something but in the end, viewers have become so cynical is that 'it is just another image' and hence this image means that they 'no longer see'. They look at an image and if they cannot find the logo that tells them what it is that is being sold, they simply 'humph' and move on. I often had to direct people to this massive visual image that had taken over their lives but they could not see. But in some cases, I found especially construction workers and domestic workers were irritated by my interruption to their daily routine. Almost fascinated in a 'fantastical' way because she is so visually stunning. And what people told me is that they did not understand what the image was but that it was beautiful and that what counted.

Domestic workers told me that her beauty was the most important thing about Sophie. They commented on her elaborate costumes and they thought about what it would mean if they could one day be able to just model a dress so elaborate and colorful. They loved that the background was white. I could not understand why and then some of the respondents said that the figure of the maid had not been implanted into a reality that had already been pre-decided, that she existed in a world that had yet to be created, so she could determine her own future. So Sophie is very interesting in that workers have a need more than just what they want which is to tell another story of the suffering black maid so that her story can be exposed and that we can empathise with the maid and move on. What they want is something which they can control their own fantasies and anxieties of hope and suffering in ways in which the background is still white and has yet to be filled in.

9. Your comment about the black man made me think about the white woman who went to work in the UK as a care-giver and her letter to the paper about her epiphany about how she treated her domestic worker when she was here. Is there something we can learn from the UK in this regard?

The relationship between the madam and the maid is only made possible by a similar structural vulnerability in terms of childcare. The madam has a problem – she needs to work outside of the home but who is going to take care of the kids or clean the dishes without her taking on a fulltime job after hours. That is not to say that the white madam is in the same position – she can hire someone to do that work for her, while the maid is fundamentally more financially vulnerable. But, in some ways, the madam is able to understand the position of the maid better than anyone else. What is fascinating is often it is the white madam who imposes on the domestic the kind of incarceration that ensures that while the black maid looks after the madam’s children, she is not able to take care of her own. The cruelest irony of domestic work is that because domestic workers have to take care of other people’s children, they are often denied the ability to take care of their own family. So one would expect that a similar situation would create a situation of empathy from the employer who appreciates the position of the domestic worker and result in the production of a more humane relationship. Yet it is the white madam that often imposes the strictures that does not allow the domestic to look after her family.

A part of the reason for this is the expectation is that middle class whiteness expects that there are certain kinds of family life that are a privilege of this position (being middle class and white) that do not apply to those who are not. That an employed woman knows that they would not be able to work without the maid yet often does not spare a thought for the impact that this has on the maid’s family is utterly baffling. So, similarity does not create a space where there is a recognition of the same predicament, and this is often the most scary part of understanding this relationship.

That the South African government thought that through the passing of a law it can restructure our social relations suggests a weakness of the imagination of our politics. When the legislation was being considered, the dominant voice was that ‘employers would never go for this’ and that they would dismiss their employees left, right and center. So, rather than working under exploitation, they would not be working at all. The legislation got introduced and while there were some dismissals, the numbers of domestic workers went up (2005 Labour Survey).

What does this mean? Even under conditions where employers increasingly have to negotiate codes of law and no longer have impunity to hire and fire, the indispensability of domestic work means that there was not a whole-scale firing of people. Which working woman today who does not have

access to subsidized childcare has the facility to leave home and earn a second income if the domestic worker does not pitch up? Eddie Webster, the grand labour theorist, said that of South Africa, 'what power do domestic workers have?'. I replied that if they go on strike, women who work in the workforce will not be able to go on strike. Domestic work is still cheap, incredibly cheap. The minimum wage is still a highly unlivable wage which is highly affordable for a middle-class family. So even though it is true that a lot of employers are put off, domestic workers are still a cheap indispensable labour force and until that changes, there will not be massive layoffs anytime soon.

10. I have a traumatized sister who was taken to court over what was called an unfair dismissal when she had gone to endless lengths to ensure that she obeyed all laws and more. She was so traumatized by this (even though the magistrate threw it out) and my sister said that she will never again employ anyone again.