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# 92nd Harold Wolpe Dialogue

07 September 2010

Cape Town

Topic:

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

Speaker:

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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.

## **In Service of Racial Dystopia – Anxiety and Fantasy in the Figure of the ‘Maid’**

*Wolpe Dialogue, 7 September 2010, Cape Town*

Shireen Ally

Good evening, and thanks for giving up some of your evening to be part of this conversation. First, I'd like to thank Nosipho Mazisa for logistical support, and I'd like to thank the organizers, not only for inviting me to give this talk, but also for recognizing the need for a public discussion on the *politics* of paid domestic work. And in case you were concerned that the rather cryptic title failed to reference the question of politics explicitly (this is a Wolpe dialogue after all) it is because I want to experiment with locating politics at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics. And I want to suggest that it might offer us a more varied grammar of social justice than the ones we are used to.

Public political discourse on domestic work (from government to activists), for instance, invites an ethics of solidarity with the 'maid' - it implores us to empathise with the domestic workers' suffering. Domestic workers are seen as invisible and unacknowledged, and so a politics of recognition is prescribed. Yet, against this, we have an aesthetic field that is positively saturated by the figure of the maid. Eve Sisulu is a mischievous domestic, and also white South Africans' most popular fictional political commentator; the black madam makes frequent appearances in media as racially diverse as Drum magazine, Radio 702, and even South African sociology conferences - the latter branded publicly as 'racist' precisely for hosting the black madam. And last year the 'maid' Aibileen became the most popular character in fiction for white South African readers. So the problem is not that there is insufficient public discourse on the maid; it is that we have not yet come to terms with these juxtaposed renderings in our public political discourse, so let me start with:

### **A Tale of Two Maids**

#### *'Queen Sophie'*

On a bitterly cold morning in August this year, Joburgers awoke to a strangely quiet city. The World Cup was over, the post-Cup *babelaas* was setting in, and the familiar routines of the city were finding their rhythm again. But on that cold, quiet morning Joburgers also awoke to a dazzling sight. The city had been taken over by 'a maid.' Sophie, the creation of Jo'burg-based artist Mary Sibande, made an appearance across the city skyline - giant images from Sibande's exhibition of Sophie called 'Long Live the Dead Queen' all over the sides of buildings, on rooftops, along the highways. A public art project that curated the city as a gallery.

The images are visually arresting. Sibande's fiberglass likeness, doused in a shade of flat black, is transformed into Queen Sophie, dressed in the maid's uniform that has been re-imagined as a richly colourful and elaborately ornate Victorian costume. In morphing the servant's uniform into the master's dress, Sibande indexes a site of historical colonial subjugation in a new register. Alas, Sophie is recognizable as a maid but she does not statically remain there. She is in a movement beyond. Her

eyes are always closed, she is always in a daydream of aspiration – a flight of fantasy. As the Mail and Guardian observed, Sophie is “a black superwoman figure who escapes her subaltern condition through fantasy” (31 July 2009).

It is this repudiation of victimhood in the figure of the maid that is symbolically pregnant. “I did not want to present yet another image of a victimized maid,” Mary Sibande told me. If that summarizes one thread in the image of the domestic in public culture, a remarkably dissimilar image is mapped in public law.

### *The ‘Most Vulnerable’ Worker*

It’s a Sunday afternoon in a middle class suburb of Johannesburg, and the local town hall is packed with domestic workers. Only they’re not so recognizable because it’s their afternoon off, they’re not in uniform but in their Sunday best. It’s an event organized by the City and local labour department to ‘celebrate’ domestic workers as part of women’s month. A well-dressed official of the Labour department takes to the stage in a tone of seriousness. He rises to the platform and gets straight down to business. “Domestic workers are the most vulnerable of all workers,” he rehearses in a bland baritone. It’s a neat distillation of the state’s dominant logic of political inclusion for domestics. Membathisi Mdladlana, the minister of labour, invoked this in the most emotively personal of ways: “My mother was a domestic worker, too, so I know their plight and they are amongst the most vulnerable of all workers,” he lamented. This became the basis on which domestic workers were codified politically in law, and workers heard this repeatedly from the various city and state officials they encountered in the innumerable information workshops held around the city and the country, at the CCMA, even from state-sponsored training providers.

The labour official continued, “Domestic workers are the most vulnerable of all workers. This is why we have now included domestic workers in labour legislation. This is why we are celebrating domestic workers today.” There is a chorus of ‘hmm hmm’s amongst the crowd. I recounted this story a week later to Eunice Dhladhla, a leader in the domestic workers’ union, as we drove through the hectic streets of the inner city in my little purple car. She met the anecdote with silence. Then, she offered: ‘Hm? I’d prefer that he says we salute domestic workers, like comrades in struggle. I don’t think I like the idea of ‘celebrating’ women because they are exploited, and vulnerable.’”

Eunice exposed a faultline along which the ‘celebration’ of these two figures of ‘the maid’ pivot. I want to use this faultline - between the active, capacitated heroic figure of Sophie and the anonymous, ‘vulnerable’ ‘maid,’ passive in victimhood – as a way to open up a different kind of conversation about the politics of paid domestic work. To do that, I need you to come with me on a brief tour through the intellectual and political anxiety that has always underlined domestic work. I then want to suggest a different kind of entry point for prying open the problem in a different way – the idea of intimacy. Finally, I want to conclude by returning to Sophie and the vulnerable worker to decipher the psychic and affective *work* of ‘vulnerability’ and victimhood, as against strength and creativity, in

animating the anxieties of racial inequality and the fantasies of racial utopia that inhere in these figurings of 'the maid'.

### **The 'Maid' - Feminist Anxieties**

It is worth remembering that paid domestic work made its political debut as a source of intense anxiety for feminists. Recall that feminism's second wave insisted that women's relegation to the private sphere of the home, and in particular to the dependency on men through unpaid housework that this presumed, was emblematic of women's gendered subordination, and agitated for women's entry into paid employment outside the home as a resistance against patriarchy.

But, a vibrant scholarship soon emerged that showed how paid domestic work exposed the unfinished sexual revolution that this entailed. For, as it turns out, as some women went to work outside the home, other women - almost all poor women, women of color, and immigrant women - replaced them. After all, in paid domestic work, primarily middle-class white women use their race and class privilege to, literally, buy their way out of the gendered responsibility for domestic labor, which is in turn displaced onto poor black (increasingly immigrant) women whose work remains low status and poorly paid. Gender inequality is therefore not only unresolved, but further intensified, and splintered by race and class.

But it isn't just that domestic work reflects social inequalities, but that domestic work is crucial to the *production* of race and class distinction. Domestic workers make possible the paid work of the men and women they work for, subsidizing the full-time incomes of their employers, displacing them from the drudgery of household work and the demands of child care. As domestic workers do the "dirty work" of cleaning their employers' toilets, or entertaining their employers' children, they free their employers to engage in accumulating other forms of capital, including cultural, while they themselves are limited in being able to do the same.

No surprise then that the 'maid' became feminism's most intractable anxiety. Employing a domestic worker is, after all, not just a simple choice about how to get the beds made or the laundry done, it is a choice about whether to collude with an institution that is crucial to the production and reinforcement of intense social inequalities. This makes paid domestic work a difficult personal choice for many socially conscious working men and women, and an obstinate political predicament for feminists.

But, the problem *has* been partially resolved through a politics for the sector that settles on a consideration not of the fact of hiring a domestic worker, but the terms on which she is hired. The problem is not the fact of paying someone to clean one's house or care for one's children, the problem is that the work is often not considered employment, not protected as employment, and is therefore devalued. As one feminist put it, "paid domestic work is not distinctive in being the worst job of all, but because it is somehow regarded as something other than employment." Domestic work as the seeming extension of women's 'natural' roles, as the prerogative of kin rather than contract obligation, and sited in the domain of leisure not work, all conspire to render it outside its appropriate recognition as

employment like any other.

So the political claim is for a recognition of paid domestic work as no more and no less than employment like any other. If one can offer a modern, formal, depersonalized form of employment, the logic goes, with decent wages and decent working conditions, and you could treat a household worker as exactly that, a worker, paid domestic work need not be so problematic after all. Put another way, dispense with feudal attitudes of domestic servitude, replace them with a modern, formal, contractual, legally, regulated form of employment, just like any other, and domestic work need not produce such political anxiety.

Indeed, this has become *the* politics for the sector. So, in South Africa, where domestic work was marked under apartheid precisely by the failure to recognize so-called 'servants' as workers, by 2004, the post-apartheid South African state had almost fully embraced exactly this modernizing solution as a political resolution to the problem of paid domestic work, crafting what is today, undoubtedly, one of the world's most extensive and expansive efforts to recognize paid domestic work as a form of employment like any other, to recognize the country's single largest category of employed women as workers! Existing labour legislation was redrafted to include them, then extended with a landmark national minimum wage, mandatory formal contracts of employment, state-legislated annual increases, compulsory payslips, extensive leave, severance pay, formal registration, a government-sponsored pension fund, access to unemployment insurance benefits (a world first), and a national certificate and qualification in domestic work through government-sponsored training (another world-first). It became, to date, one of the world's most comprehensive efforts to modernize, formalize, and professionalize domestic work.

But, of course, as we all know, this did NOT lead to the modern transformation of the sector political progressives imagined. A chorus of critique now chastises the state and blames the inspectorate division, in particular, for the slow pace of transformation. Rights-armed workers, it is assumed, confronted forms of social power that limited their capacity to wield those rights and so the state is needed to draft an army of inspectors to do this instead. This perplexes me because the domestic workers I spoke to did not look anything like these so-called 'vulnerable' workers.

I met Patricia Kubu in May 2004. Her employer had been trying for the better part of 6 months to get her to sign a formal contract, yet Patricia simply refused. "I will not sign that contract!" she told me with determination, the vein over her right temple throbbing. "But, if you have a contract, you will be legally protected." I try to convince her. "No, no, no. I don't want to sign that contract," she said, shaking her head with absolute resolve. On a Department of Labor "inspection blitz," on which I tagged along, a sincere employer told the inspector exasperatedly that her worker of many years refused to be registered for UIF. Later, I met Linda Mkhonto, who recollected how she "negotiated" Saturdays off when the new legislation came into effect:

First, when the legislation came out, we didn't talk about the laws . . . I know I should only work eight to five for Monday to Friday, because I know the laws from the union. So, I know I mustn't work Saturdays. So, on Saturday, I don't tell her anything, I just go to my room in the back and pull the blankets over my head. On Monday when I go to work, she says I must be better now, not sick. I don't say anything. Next week, Saturday, I pull the blankets over my head. Monday, she is wondering. But we don't say anything to one another. Next Saturday, I pull the blankets. Now, she tells me she called the CCMA, and I'm supposed to work on Saturday until twelve, one. But, I know my rights. I know I'm not supposed to work. So, next Saturday, I pull the blankets. That Monday, she says maybe I shouldn't work on Saturdays.

This was nothing short of remarkable. Apartheid-era domestic labor relations were marked by a toxic cocktail of informality, personalized dependence on employers, and the failure of recourse to state institutions. The post-apartheid state's efforts to institute contracts of employment, legislate rights, and provide access to state recourse targeted exactly domestics' so-called vulnerabilities. Yet, instead of signing a contract that would formalize the relationship with her employer and give her access to statutory protection, Patricia Kubu refused. Instead of contractually defining a forty-five-hour work week with her employer, or taking her case to the CCMA, Linda chose to "pull the blankets" over her head. And worker after worker told me that the legislation made things "worse than before." Workers were refusing to sign contracts, refusing to be registered with the state, and choosing to informally negotiate the conditions of their work. Workers were refusing exactly the modernizing formalization and contractual regulation that represented the politically progressive solution to the problem of domestic work. What on earth was going on?

### **The Labour of Intimacy**

Well, it turns out that while the stock politics for domestic workers is to formalize and depersonalize it like any other, domestic workers are actually *not simply* workers like any other. Homes are not impersonal organizations that can be easily regulated through a depersonalized industrial relations system. Instead, domestic workers' workplaces are the intimate spaces of family life, and their work there incorporates all the close, personal, contact, emotions, experiences, and intimacy that is the fabric of families and households.

"I make their beds every day. I wash their sheets every day. I wash their underwear every day. I answer their phone and take messages. I am there before they leave for work and argue. I am there when they come home and argue. I know everything about what's going on in their lives," explained Patricia Kubu. She confessed that she often knew more about each of the family members than they knew about each other. Joyce Nhlapo, a worker with razor-sharp wit, summarized the inextricability of domestic workers from the intimate lives of their employers. "I

work in a family, not for a family,” she said. Margaret Manamela’s married employer had forgotten she came in on Tuesdays to do laundry, and Margaret walked in on him and his mistress. The management of the secret was a source of emotional strain. “I used to get tired from having to hold that secret. Even at night, he was coming into my thoughts. Their problem became my problem,” she complained. In every possible way, domestic workers’ work within the emotion-laden spaces of family life made their work intimate. They washed underwear, cleaned bed sheets, overheard family arguments, became part of family conflicts, and were often the first ones to discover intimate family secrets.

But, while domestic workers share an intimacy with their employers, it is a deeply uncomfortable one, and employers manage the unavoidable intimacy through various attempts to create and maintain social and physical distance, often through dehumanizing practices. This produces a ‘dialectic of intimacy and distance’ in domestic service - a unique species of relations in which closeness, familiarity, and intimacy coexist with distancing, estrangement, and dehumanization. These ambiguities of intimacy are among the more potent sources of the peculiar exploitations of paid domestic work, structuring its unique architecture of dependence and exploitation. Which is why the most common ideological deployment of employers is the myth that the domestic is “like one of the family.” This myth actively manipulates the ambiguities of familial intimacy to delegitimize workers – it extracts more work by invoking tropes of familial obligation and bonding the worker exclusively to the employing family by erasing the workers’ own familial ties.

As it turns out, though, in the historical context of the failure of state oversight, South African domestic workers *also* used the exact same ambiguities of intimacy to navigate a path through the institution’s tense mixture of beneficence and degradation. Josephine Kekana, a full-time live-in worker offered an interesting story.

I got her interested in the Lotto [national lottery]. . . . She was not interested in it. She said, how you going to win? I told her, no, you see, if you do not play, how you going to win? It’s so nice, because we walk to the garage together on Friday, we buy a little bit of something sweet, then we always sit that night, we watch together for the numbers. . . . That time, when she won with her numbers, you must see how we were jumping together. We even hugged each other. She was so happy . . . . It’s very important to have that kind of relationship with them. Otherwise, they exploit you even more.

Cultivating intimacy was a clear tactic for Josephine, she manipulated the possibilities for personal and intimate relations with her employer, ‘otherwise, they exploit you even more.’ In the absence of labor rights defining leave provision, sitting down every morning with tea and talking to one’s employer about her problems became a way for another worker to ensure an extended Christmas vacation. Over and over again, workers related the most remarkable tales of the manipulation of affect and intimacy as a means to restructure class relations, a technique of class combat, a practice of power. “I tell her how much I need her and

the job,” said Kedibone Maake. That way, “she feels responsible for me. She won’t just tell me to go.” In this careful cultivation of dependence as part of the tenuous relations of intimacy in the domestic workplace, Kedibone turned a potent practice of employers’ power on to itself, extracting from it an obligation for reciprocity and mutual obligation.

Workers also managed intimacy and distancing by carefully negotiating forms of communication and in so doing socially regulating their work in the absence of state regulation. Workers rehearsed compelling strategies of negotiating their working conditions through informal games of power and what one worker called silently talking back. Esther Dhlamini, for example, described how she ‘negotiated’ the limits of her work.

When I first started working for that woman, she went to work and I was busy cleaning. When I got to the bathroom, I see that she left the panties in the bath, because she was thinking that it was my job to wash her panties. That was how little they thought of us, to just leave the panties in the bath like that, not even to ask you. So, I decided I am not going to tell her I don’t do this kind of dirty job. That day, I just lifted the panties, just on the tip like this, and I put it around the tap. Then I cleaned the bath. When she came home, she saw what I did with the panties. The next day, she leaves them in the bath again. So, I do the same thing also. I just put them on the, what you say, on the bath, and I clean the bath. Then next day she does the same thing, and I also do the same thing. She can see I’m not going to clean them, so she doesn’t leave them any more in the bath then after that.

Despite the elaboration of an extensive state machinery for managing labor relations, for codifying the limits of a domestics’ work, and contractually regulating depersonalized relations between ‘maids’ and ‘madams’, workers continued to manage their work through informal covert communication, continued to extend beneficence through the grooming of personalized affect, and limit excessive degradation through silently talking back.

In this was a piece of the puzzle of why the state’s efforts have only been partially successful; imagining that an abstract depersonalizing political technology could intervene in relations so deeply saturated by personalizing intimacy was naïve, at best. But, more importantly, it forces into contradiction the state’s rendering of the worker as ‘vulnerable’ –incapacitated, passive, victimized, requiring the protection of a more capacitated actor with workers’ own rendering of themselves as capable, creative and assertive. And so here we find ourselves back at Queen Sophie versus the vulnerable worker, and specifically the politics engendered in each of these figures of ‘the maid.’ Where the politics of employment like any other ends, is where the politics of Sophie and the vulnerable worker begins – and it’s a politics I want to argue drafted at the edge of that most volatile species of the intimate – race.



## **The Anxieties of Racialized Intimacy**

### *The 'Maid' as Melancholic Figure of our Racially Dystopic Present*

Intimacy and estrangement in a relationship delineated across the combustible boundary of race is potent. The kitchen is not only a place of the intimacy of labour, or the labour of intimacy. It also marks a zone of racialized contact, the racial frontier. Ann Stoler (2002) stunningly dissects the intimacies of domestic service in the Dutch East Indies to expose the constitutive relationships between race and the intimate in colonial rule. For what inheres in domesticity and domestic service, as both Stoler and Ann McClintock suggest, is a particularly powerful equation of race and intimacy.

Imperial power was founded on the crafting of a simultaneity between race as difference, and the anxiety of intimacy. And few other institutions disrupt and concretize the tensions of racialized intimacy as much as domestic service. The most brutal and incongruous expression of this was apartheid South Africa, where domestic work represented the site arguably of the most sustained and affectively loaded interracial encounters between blacks and whites. The racial requisite of whiteness under apartheid was a fanatical separation of races as much as it was a servicing of whiteness by black bodies within the sites of intimate domesticity. Recovering intimacy with white employers under apartheid's manic forms of racist separation was thus more than mere management of work – it represented a refiguration of the raced relations of colonial rule by black women inside white homes. The ambiguities of intimacy in paid domestic work are therefore crucially connected to the manufacture, contestations, and anxieties of race.

Which is why the tensions of intimacy that frame South African domestic workers' recalcitrant entry into a post-apartheid political status render legible the making of an alternate public racial order out of the private spaces of familial domesticity.

The state's passive, victimized, 'vulnerable,' maid is not only iconic of poor black women statically stalled in subjection but precisely the agent of the state's aspiration to a race-corrected future. Mary Sibande's active, capacitated, heroic figure of Sophie recognizes the forging of black womanhood in the furnace of racial subjection, yet her imagination becomes the flight of fantasy to a future beyond race. One invokes a politics of empathy, the other a politics of hope. Yet, for all that is radically dissimilar between Sophie and the 'vulnerable worker', they share a similar psychic field, one dominated by a particular anxiety – the anxiety of race as intractable.

And both work out their anxiety through fantasy – the fantasy of a racially utopian future, iconically embodied in the alternative rendering of the maid-servant. So for however different Sophie is from the vulnerable worker, in both cases, the figure of the maid literally services the fears and anxieties about our racially dystopic present, and becomes the means through we fantasize the racially utopian future. No wonder the maid is such a melancholic figure. She is the instantaneous icon of the racial dystopia we are so unwillingly incarcerated by, and yet are so desperate to imagine a way out of. She manifests the tense, intense, and unresolvable racialized intimacies that mark the millions of middle-class kitchens

across the country as a quotidian, but unrelenting, colonial frontier. In that, the so-called 'maid' labours in service not only of homes and families, but nothing less than the racially dystopic reality that *is* the social order of our times.