"May Our Voice Echo"

Housemaids' Narratives in *Eu, Empregada Doméstica*

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Brazil's first Covid-19-related death occurred on 17 March 2020. The deceased person was a housemaid whose employers had traveled to Italy. During the coronavirus pandemic, this sector of the Brazilian labor market was greatly affected. In 2020, more than two million women lost their jobs (Pereira 2021), and others had their incomes reduced or risked their lives reporting to work so as not to be dismissed. The vulnerability of housemaids is not new, but has a long history of invisibility, stigmatization, wage devaluation, precarious working conditions, and deprivation of rights. In fact, domestic work is devalued because it constitutes a heritage of colonial relations and of slavery in the country.

Brazil has the world's largest contingent of housemaids. There are 6.2 million people performing this job, of which 92 per cent are women. It is the sector with the largest female workforce in the country, occupied by 14.6 per cent of all employed women (Pinheiro et al. 2019). In addition, 3.9 million of these women are Black and a total of 70.1 per cent still work informally, without guaranteed labor rights (Pinheiro et al. 2020). Their job encompasses a myriad of tasks, from cleaning the house and often also cooking, to taking care of children and the elderly.

The fight against overexploitation of these women intensified with union struggles in the last decades of the 20th century. Its main demand was the institutionalization of domestic work. In 1943, Brazil had its first Consolidation of Labor Laws, but this category of work was excluded from it. Only in 1972 did employees obtain the right to sign a work card, take paid leave, and have access to social security. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution also guaranteed nine labor rights (Teixeira 2021: 65), yet it was only in 2015, with the passage of the Housemaids Proposal for Constitutional Amendment (*PEC das Domésticas*), that domestic work was legally equated to other labor categories.

Despite legislative isonomy, housemaids are still in a vulnerable condition. Lélia Gonzalez states that "gender and ethnicity are manipulated so that, in the Brazilian case, the lowest levels of participation in the workforce, 'coincidentally' are occupied by women and the Black population" (2020: 27).[1] Housemaids suffer from the structural racism and sexism that are a legacy of Brazilian colonial and slave past. For Gonzalez, "the maid is not much different from yesterday's 'mucama'" (ibid: 217). *Mucama* was the enslaved Black woman responsible for the chores in the farmhouse, subjected to the landowners' brutalities that resemble the treatment received by housemaids.

By articulating the structures of class, race, and gender for the analysis of paid domestic work in the 1980s, Gonzalez adopts an intersectional perspective.[2] According to Carla Akotirene, intersectionality, as a methodological and analytical tool, is an ancestral and epistemological legacy of Black women, which "allows feminists political criticality to understand imposed subaltern identities" (2019: 37). This article employs an intersectional approach to analyze the book *Eu, empregada doméstica – a senzala moderna é o quartinho da empregada*[3] (2019), highlighting how structures of oppression operate in current housemaids' lives.

The book *Eu, empregada doméstica* is an anthology of 286 stories selected by historian, rapper, and former housemaid Joyce Fernandes, better known as Preta-Rara. In 2016, she launched a Facebook fan page[4] to expose abusive employment advertisements and stories lived by housemaids. The activist herself published the statements on the Internet, preserving the respondents' identities and form of expression. The narratives selected for the book were written mainly by housemaids – valuing, therefore, the "lugar de fala"[5] (Ribeiro 2017)

1 All the quotes in this article – including the long ones from *Eu, empregada doméstica* – were originally in Portuguese. All translations from Portuguese into English are my own.

2 Gonzalez pioneered the connections among race, class, and gender. According to Angela Davis, "[s]he was already talking about the links between Blacks and indigenous peoples in the struggle for rights. That's one of the lessons America can learn from Black feminism here" (Alves 2017).

3 The book's title can be translated as *I, housemaid – the modern slave quarter is the maid's little bedroom*. The *little bedroom* refers to a very common room in Brazilian employers' house where the maid sleeps.

4 The page can be accessed at the address https://www.facebook.com/euempregadadomestica.

5 "Lugar de fala" is an expression that is related to the positionality of the speaker. According to Djamila Ribeiro (2017), "lugar de fala" is a category of analysis that consid-

of poor and mostly Black women – but also by family members, friends, and conscious employers. By grouping these narratives, Rara engages in a feminist practice, since her book helps composing the history and testimony of a collectivity[6] that has historically been silenced.

It is not only Rara who adopts an important feminist posture by creating the Facebook page and publishing *Eu, empregada doméstica*. According to Ribeiro, "speaking is not restricted to the act of uttering words, but of being able to exist" (2017: 37). Therefore, the speaking subjects of the book are vocalizing their feminist point of view about being a housemaid. In doing so, they are affirming their right to exist as human beings whose positionality enables them to question official Brazilian history and challenges the hierarchy of discursive power.

In the book, housemaids show awareness of the historical roots of their jobs. The connections between domestic and slave labor appear in many workers' narratives. There are references to the women employer as *sinhá* [7], to the mistreatment as *whipping*, to the workplace as *master's house* and countless allusions to the times of *slavery*. Such slave logic and the dehumanization that mark domestic work can also be inferred from three recurring topics in the narratives selected for this analysis: the disregard of maids' autonomy; restrictions related to food, and the psychological impact caused by the treatment they receive.

1. "She Fired Me, Calling Me a Little Black Slum Girl"

One of the narratives by a maid's daughter shows that her mother's employer seemed to want to have "sovereignty over her body and will" (Rara 2019: 94). In another one, a daughter states that the employer thought she had "power over my mother, controlling the free time that, by law (and as a matter of humanity, empathy), is the right of any worker" (ibid: 46). These aspects – regarding

ers the position that the speaking subject occupies in a socially determined hierarchy of power. This position enables the subject to talk about experiences historically shared by the specific group to which they belong.

6 Books of testimonial content by four maids – Lenira Carvalho, Francisca Souza da Silva, Rosalina Ferreira Basseti, and Zeli de Oliveira Barbosa – , written between the 1980s and 1990s, are analyzed by Sonia Roncador, in *A doméstica imaginária* (2008).

7 "Sinhá" was the noun used by enslaved Black people in reference to the landowner's wife.

the control of workers' bodies, desires, and time – refer to servitude conditions according to which the maid is treated not as a subject, but as an object considered to be the employers' private property.

For Sonia Roncador, the disrespect for workers' autonomy is linked to a "bourgeois ideal of servitude" (2008: 213) that leads to their "affective and social alienation" (ibid: 217). In the book, there are examples of employers discouraging their maids from studying, having partners, and forming a family. In one of the cases, the maid had a high-risk pregnancy and needed to be careful and take it slow. According to a friend's statement:

> One day, the employer came arguing a lot, asking why she was not cleaning on top of the wardrobe or the windows. She said that she had already talked about it and that the doctor recommended it due to the risk of falling and losing the baby.
> The employer's answer: "*Who cares? It will be just one less poor person in the world!*" She got sick and had the baby prematurely (Rara 2019: 74, my emphasis).

The employer's answer disregards the maid's pregnancy and her desire to have a child. The statement also devalues the life of this woman. There are other examples in which employers think the maid's life is worth less. One worker cut herself badly with a broken bathroom box and the employer seemed more concerned about the repair costs than with the employee's injury. In another narrative, a maid was threatened by her employer with a firearm because she refused to redo a chore.

The contempt for the maids' lives falls under class and racial motivations. In some reports, the employers feel "disgusted" by the workers, forcing them to do degrading activities, such as washing feces-soiled towels and menstruation-stained panties, while throwing away objects the maids touched. For one of the employers, "[a]fter Benedita da Silva,[8] that 'colored' Congresswoman (rubbing her finger on her arm), entered Congress, we could no longer find anyone in 'decent conditions'" (ibid: 51), lamenting that the guarantee of legal rights was getting in the way of her ability to abuse her power.

8 Benedicta da Silva (PT-RJ) is a Black politician who was Governor of Rio de Janeiro (2002–2003) and, as a Federal Deputy, served as rapporteur of the Housemaids Proposal for Constitutional Amendment in 2012.

The contemporary objectification of workers is connected not only to the treatment received by enslaved Black women, but also by Black women in the post-abolition era, when, according to Teixeira, they "were not treated as *subjects*, but as servants available to satisfy all their employers' wills" (2021: 32, original emphasis). There are other, subtler ways in which class, race, and gender oppressions are manifested in the employers' houses, such as disputes over meals and food consumption.

2. "I Used to Feel Almost Like an Animal Eating the Remains of the 'Royal' Table"

Many narratives denounce restrictions on food consumption in the workplace. In Brazil, it is common for a housemaid to eat only after serving the meal to the employer's family. But the book shows a more cruel and complex reality. In addition to eating at separate times and places, some housemaids reveal that they must eat with inappropriate kitchen utensils or use separate tableware.

Such separation is also evident in relation to types of food. Employers consider certain foods inadequate for employees' consumption. For instance, housemaids are not allowed to eat meat, fish, and special types of sausage and are offered cheaper products of lower nutritional quality, such as nuggets, hotdogs, and rice. Some workers list quality foods or delicacies that are off limits to them, such as olive oil; black pepper; chocolate; cheese; juice; Coke; "sweets, milk, soda, everything light, chestnuts, salads, fruits" (Rara 2019: 130), and bottled water.

Maids are often accused of stealing groceries. The notion of ownership extends all the way to the employers' garbage: A worker was accused of theft for picking "cookies" out of the trash at her workplace. There are also employers who offer spoiled food and give the maids expired food products. The most shocking cases of food-related humiliation occur when workers must eat the leftovers from their employers' meals, as in the following report:

> I was 14. I had to have lunch after them, because I had to serve everyone, and by the time they finished, I sat at the table, but the employer told me to go wash my hands. I told her I'd already washed them. She insisted a lot and I went to wash. When I got back, my dish was already done, but it looked like the food was scrambled. I was surprised, but because I was very hungry, I ate it. I saw it wasn't hot. It went on like this for 1, 2, 3 days. On the

> fourth day, I pretended to go wash my hands and came back right away. *And I saw the employer putting the leftover food from the other dishes in mine.* Son, I ran away and *cried a lot* (ibid: 155, my emphasis).

Eating leftovers is cruel and demeaning, especially for a child. As shocking as it may sound, it is common for employees to eat leftovers rejected by their employers. A worker reports eating scraps left by a tuberculous man. There are also countless stories of maids going hungry during working hours. Many housemaids claim that if there was nothing left of the employers' meals, they simply would not eat all day. Some of them had just water to drink and the employers did not bother to guarantee them a meal, especially when they were not at home.

Dehumanization reaches an extreme when employers prioritize the quality and quantity of their pets' food. Dogs eat expensive snacks, which the maids cannot afford, and maids must share leftovers with the animal, or even serve the pet first and eat after them. In one narrative, the housemaid and the family dog are served the same meal, "cooked corn meal and guts," while employers "eat rice, beans, and meat" (ibid: 43). Certainly, these workers "had no right to food worthy of a human being" (ibid: 97).

Finally, in the quoted passage, the maid reveals how much the oppressive situation upset her. Many maids who experience humiliation and contempt cry as they report their abuses. Dehumanized treatment has devastating effects on housemaids' mental health, which deserves attention and reflection.

3. "I Just Felt the Chills, Wanted to Throw Up and Cry"

Eu, empregada doméstica enables contact with maids' feelings and afflictions. They express sadness, anger, and embarrassment, which leave them traumatized, "marked forever" (ibid: 106), with negative effects on their mental health. The book also reveals crises of anxiety and depression that have persisted throughout the workers' lives.

In one case, a former maid's daughter discovered that her mother "never liked Christmas, New Year's, or Easter" (ibid: 169) because these festivities aroused memories of the meals she served her employers and did not get to eat herself. In another situation, a daughter states that her "mother is terrified of celebrating her birthday" (ibid: 143) because, at the age of 12, she worked in the house of a family whose daughter's birthday was on the same day as hers,

so she was forced to serve the employers at the girl's party and then was locked in a room while they were celebrating.

Another consequence of workers' mistreatment is low self-esteem. Invisibility of paid reproductive work and dehumanization affect the way housemaids build their self-image. This problem is evident in the following passages:

> *She has an inferiority complex.* She doesn't eat with guests. She doesn't like to leave the house. She doesn't like to get dressed. She's depressive. She takes controlled medicine. It is the result of a very unsuccessful maid-employer relationship (ibid: 36, my emphasis).
>
> The trauma was so bad that it took years of therapy for her to get over it. She once said that it was the psychologist who made her *realize she was a person, that her feelings mattered, too, and that no one could treat her like someone inferior* (ibid: 85, my emphasis).

These excerpts are paradigmatic of Gonzalez' statement that "Black women have undergone a process of reinforcement regarding the internalization of difference, 'inferiority', subordination" (2020: 42). The maids quoted had psychological and psychiatric support to elaborate on situations of violence and affirm their subjectivity. This opportunity, however, is unusual in Brazil, because there are no effective public policies aimed at ensuring mental health for low-income people.

Anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem are mental health conditions that can have serious consequences if left untreated. One worker states that humiliation made her think about suicide. Another former employee claims that if she had to work as a housemaid again, she would kill herself. According to Carneiro, there is a lack of "study in the country on one of the most perverse aspects of racism and racial discrimination: psychological harm and, above all, the blow to self-esteem that discriminatory mechanisms produce in victims of racism" (2011: 79). Thus, although distressing, knowledge of the houseworker's plight is important for raising awareness on this invisible problem.

Despite the pain caused by remembering traumatic experiences, employees affirm the need to speak, so that their perspectives are documented and published. Their narratives enable an elaboration of these oppressive experiences and a denunciation of the perpetuated slave logic. When housemaids name their pain and suffering, they engage in a collective healing process once they make the system of oppression and exploitation visible, which is an important step for social and cultural changes. Moreover, the reports not only

expose violence: They also present resistance and confrontation, highlighting these workers' agency. Housemaids question their employers' conduct; they quit their jobs; they are proud that their daughters go to university, disrupting the "matriarchy of misery" (Carneiro 2011: 127); they view their work with dignity; they support Preta-Rara's Facebook page.

Consciousness and insubordination are part of the workers' daily political struggle, and the publication of narratives confronts housemaids' stigmatizations – as "potentially criminal, unfaithful, incompetent, and morally corrupt" (Roncador 2008:190) – which still subsist throughout Brazilian hegemonic cultural imaginary. In fact, the book's narratives shock and give rise to reflection. Knowing the maids' perspectives is important for cultural changes and for the collective fight against class, race, and gender oppressions. Intersectional Black feminism teaches us that women's emancipation depends on the emancipation of the most vulnerable sector among us, which reaffirms the centrality of the struggle for better paid domestic work conditions in the country.

Brazil's pandemic and governmental situation in 2022 is not favorable to housemaids. Preta-Rara reminds us that "[t]he current President of Brazil[9] was the only one who did not sign the Housemaids Proposal for Constitutional Amendment" (Rara 2019: 8). This adverse context emphasizes the importance of Rara's feminist action. The publication of *Eu, empregada doméstica* is a successful collective effort to make the production of knowledge of Black poor women evident. It exposes the epistemology of women with dissident voices, disputing the narrative about housemaids and Brazilian History. Therefore, Rara's work is part of a broader social and cultural fight for better working conditions, and against racism and sexism in Brazil. In conclusion, Rara's book is a huge feminist contribution to spread Brazilian housemaids' words, supporting their shared desire: "May our voice echo" (ibid: 89).

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9 During the Housemaids Proposal for Constitutional Amendment voting period, Jair Bolsonaro was a Federal Deputy.

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