# Moving dirt: Relationality and Complementarity of Domestic Work/ers

**Mastin Prinsloo**
University of Cape Town
Mastin.Prinsloo@uct.ac.za

## Abstract

The term *domestic worker* contributes to a range of borders and suppressions where certain bodies are marked in material-discursive practices as placed, classed, gendered and raced in relation to activities marked as reproductive labour. Drawing on ideas on relationality, performance and language, this paper examines instances of exploitation and hostility in domestic work and their sometimes co-existence with relations and discourses of hospitality and intimacy between domestic workers and those for whom they work. The foci of attention here include domestic work in the Middle East under the kafala system of employment; shifts in race- and gender-marking of domestic work in early decades of the 20th century in colonial South Africa; and, in conclusion, a contemporary case study, describing a conflictual encounter between a Black female domestic worker and her employer's White male partner that resulted in the woman leaving her career in domestic work and the man going to jail.

**Keywords:** domestic work(er), material-discursive practices, relationality, performativity, together/apart

## 1. Introduction

Interventions to assist domestic workers, as a category of 'disadvantaged' persons, draw on ideas of who and what domestic workers are. The most common model is that of under-educated, working class, ethnic minority women who speak in a discredited register that indexes their low status, and of whom the interveners often have first-hand knowledge, because members of this group work in the interveners' homes. These interventions addressed at such, or similar models of domestic workers have included organized provision of literacy and language classes, skills and performance training of various kinds, dress and comportment input, trade union recruitment and support efforts, national legislation, as well as transnational human rights advocacy and declarations. Regardless of the scale of intervention, however, they all struggle to make the differences they would like, as if they were aiming at indeterminate targets in an unpredictable environment.

I develop an account here, with regard to persons identifying as domestic workers, of the dynamics through which borders and boundaries between categories of persons and practices are produced, become stabilized and get destabilized. I pay particular attention to what gets left out or becomes hidden in such bordering practices but does not go away, and sometimes returns or erupts in these constructions and policings of categories and borders. Language has a role in all of this, but a contextualized one that needs a further revisiting to the idea of language and the place of language, where the attention is to languaging as material-discursive practices, and to bordering and performance. I work here with posthumanist and southern theoretical

resources, and most particularly with Karen Barad's new materialist and posthumanist orientation to socio-material practices (Barad 2003, 2007, 2010). I focus specifically on her attention to relationality, complementarity, boundaries and exclusions in socialnatural activity and what such attention means for a focus on discursive practices.

## 2.1. Relations are primary

Barad's distinctive contribution to new materialist theory reads social theory through and against quantum physics. She proposes that the study of sub-atomic particles provides a premise for the development of a relational ontology where not 'things' or relata but relations between relata are the primary entities of matter. The starting-point is quantum physicists' experiments where sub-atomic particles are shown as displaying as either waves or as particles, or having either position or momentum, or spin in one direction or the other, depending on the conflux of conditions under which they are observed. Which properties become determinate under observation is not governed by the desires or will of the researcher but rather by the specificity of these conditions of observation (Barad 2007: 19). From this premise (along with further elaborations on quantum physics research, for which there is no space here) Barad develops a relational onto-epistemology, which she calls 'agential realism', where what we are used to thinking of as people and things do not pre-exist their relationships with each other. The primary ontological unit, she says, is not independent objects with inherent properties but rather intra-acting agencies in their relations (Barad 2007: 139). In their relations they constitute phenomena and it is through such intra-actions that "boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful" (Barad 2007: 139–140). Phenomena are the ontologically smallest unit and are products of material-discursive practices that are iteratively (repeatedly) performed. Barad sees intra-action as the process whereby material-discursive practices give meaning to specific objects and entities to the exclusion of other meanings, thus effecting a cut which Barad calls an agential cut, or an appearance of separation, between people and things, between discourse and materiality, between different kinds of people, and between 'individual selves' across multiple phenomena. These cuts create an appearance of separation from within entanglements, where "to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence" (Barad 2007: ix). Because this separation is merely apparent, rather than actual or lasting, the entities that (momentarily) emerge from agential cuts are all, as Barad describes them, 'cut together/apart'.

## 2.2. Southern relational theories

Povinelli (2021: 16) welcomes Barad's contribution and notes that "(m)any scholars are trying to imagine a form of political solidarity grounded in the entangled nature of human and more-than-human existence". A noted example is Escobar's (2016: 14) discussion of the 'ontological dimension of the epistemologies of the South' where the concept of relationality and 'relational ontologies' is elaborated on with regard to a man and his daughter in a canoe in a Colombian rainforest which Escobar describes as a 'mangrove-world': a dense network of interrelations involving a complex of organic and inorganic materiality. Escobar (2016: 18) describes this world as "one in which *nothing preexists the relations that constitute it.* Said otherwise, things

and beings are their relations, they do not exist prior to them" (his italics). He sees a rhizome 'logic' to these entanglements, a "logic that is impossible to follow in any simple way, and very difficult to map and measure, if at all; it reveals an altogether different way of being and becoming in territory and place".

De Sousa Santos (2016: 21) also writing about 'southern epistemology' says that "whatever does not exist in our society is often actively produced as non-existent and we have to look into that reality" and echoes Escobar's (2016: 15) claim that "the world is made up of multiple worlds, multiple ontologies or reals". Law's (2015) critique of the One-World World (OWW) of Western epistemology presents it as strategies which naturalize mononaturalism. He makes the case that "we do not live in a single container universe, but partially participate in multiple realities or a fractiverse" (Law 2015: 126). He argues that there "are different realities being done in different practices. […] There is no 'overarching'. Instead there are contingent, more or less local and practical engagements" (Law 2015: 127).

A key move that Barad makes (resonant with De Sousa's point, above) is the claim that any particular experimental research arrangement, theoretical analysis or socio-material practice always produces or implies its constitutive exclusion, that is, an equally necessary, 'complementary' concept which is thereby left outside of the domain of intelligibility, just as position and momentum are exclusionary foci in the study of electrons, and just as the entangled mangrove world is haunted by its potential disruption by way of organised human intervention for purposes of resource extraction on the assumption that 'nature' is one thing, is passive and can be exploited without consequences.

## 2.3. Language and performativity

As regards language, meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words, Barad points out, but is better thought of as part of "an ongoing performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility". In its causal intra-activity, part of the world becomes "determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another part of the world, while lively matterings, possibilities, and impossibilities are reconfigured" (Barad 2007: 149), while discursive practices are always already material. They are boundary-making practices that have no finality in the ongoing dynamics of agential intra-activity.

Performativity, in language studies and social theory, has a trajectory that runs from Austin's (1962) interest in speech acts, through Foucault's (1977, 1998) analyses of how systems of power discursively *produce* the people who are the subjects of their focus, who perform their subjection to power as subjectivity. Derrida's (1998, 2000) concepts of iterability and citation are also about performativity, where singularities (apparently unique instances) are shaped into generalities through the effect of language in activity where the repeatability of the sign diffuses the singularity. For example, in an influential focus on performativity influenced by Derrida's work, Butler (1990, 1993) made the case that sex/gender is not an essence but an iterated "doing", shaped by power: "gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity […] gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (Butler 1993: 112). For Butler (1993: 60), and for Barad who draws on Butler, performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability: "a regularised and constrained repetition of norms […] a ritualised

production". But for Butler, following Derrida, such discursive practices are not totalizing and are troubled by an absence or loss, "that which language does not capture, but, instead, that which impels language repeatedly to attempt that capture" – and to fail. This loss takes its place in language as "an insistent call or demand that, while *in* language, is never fully of language" (Butler 1993: 67). Butler draws on Derrida's (1993) idea of hauntology (referring to the excluded other of ontology), to invoke that which gets left out but 'doesn't quite go away' when we delineate subjects and objects in material-discursive practices and by so doing exclude some of their features, thus including an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know:

> "that which is excluded in the enactment of knowledge-discourse-power practices plays a *constitutive* role in the production of phenomena-exclusions matter both to bodies that come to matter and those excluded from mattering… these *entangled practices* are productive, and who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter" (Barad 2007: 57).

As regards boundaries and borders, Barad notes that "it is a well-recognised fact of physical optics that if one looks closely at an 'edge' what one sees is not a sharp boundary between light and dark but rather a series of light and dark bands – that is, a diffraction pattern". Physics tells us, she says, that edges or boundaries are not determinate either ontologically or visually, and that "seeing is an achievement that results from specific bodily engagements with the world, and is not merely the inevitable result of the integrity of the visual apparatus" (Barad 2007: 156). In my use of Barad and other sources in the discussion of domestic work and workers that follows, I read them diffractively through one another. Following Barad, I aim at illuminating the indefinite nature of boundaries – "displaying shadows in 'light' regions and bright spots in 'dark' regions" (Barad 2003: 803) where presence and absence co-exist. I pay attention to what gets excluded in specific encounters by and about domestic workers, in terminology around domestic work and workers, and in shifting material-discursive practices.

## 2.4. Production and reproduction: socio-nature and complementarity

The term *domestic worker* is part of, already preceded by, contributive to and resonant with a number of boundaries, borders, demarcations and suppressions. To illustrate this claim here I start with a wide frame and read my sources diffractively through Barad's agential realist orientation. Fraser (2014, 2021) provides a revision of the 'old materialism' (that is, Marxism, in contrast with the 'new materialism' of Barad and others) where she argues that in institutionalized capitalist organisation the ecological, the social and the political are variously cut away from, and thus constitute the economic order as a phenomenon that is about markets and production. But what has been left out of this particular 'agential cut' has come back to incite a broad range of contemporary social struggles; not just class struggles at the point of production, but also boundary struggles over ecology, social reproduction and political power. Marx's account of capitalist production only makes sense, Fraser argues, when we pay attention to what he mostly leaves out of his analyses, and what we might call the complementary phenomena to his discourse. Key among these, along with the treatment of 'nature' as a self-sustaining resource for production, is that of social reproduction. Fraser points out that everyone – young or old, sick or well-depends on care-work to maintain shelter, nutrition and

sanitation for both physical well-being and social connection, and that "social-reproductive work aims to sustain beings who are simultaneously natural and cultural. Confounding that distinction, it manages the interface of sociality and biology, community and habitat" (Fraser 2021: 104). Such activity produces new generations of humans and replenishes existing ones, as well as maintaining social bonds. It also 'sorts out' matter (waste and dirt) for purposes of human nurturing and health. Such 'housework' and 'care-work' is sometimes thought of as 'dirty work' (because it is about disposing of matter that is 'out of place'), or as not real work (because it is about caring). In illustration, dirt and caring come together in McGregor's (2007: 802) account of Zimbabweans' joking descriptions of their university-graduated compatriots doing care work in the UK, as 'joining the BBC' – 'British Bottom Cleaners', of care workers as 'bum technicians', and cleaners as 'ma.dot.com' ('dot' implying dirt). This joking also invokes the assumption that productive work alone is a locus of value. Along with this devaluing, 'domestic activity' has become gendered, with reproduction associated with women and production with men, even when actual arrangements vary. This agential cut between productive and reproductive work and categories of humans has mutated historically, taking different forms at different times and places and involving persons of different social status and gender. Some aspects of care-work were de-privatised as public services in the 20th century but not commodified, particularly in 'welfare state' provisions in developed capitalist economies, and some of this work has been reprivatized and commodified under neoliberal, globalised conditions, and again dramatically further privatised and decommodified under covid pandemic conditions during 2020/1, where many domestic workers have lost their jobs. The category of domestic worker relies on such agential cuts and entanglements for its apparent coherence, on historical practices which rely on nature/culture dualisms and which enact space via marking certain bodies as situated, classed, gendered and raced and materializing them in positions of material, social and cultural advantage and disadvantage in relation to activities marked as productive or reproductive activity. We can see the secondary but influential role of languaging in these bordering activities, as I discuss in closer detail in the discussion of the literature on domestic workers in the Gulf states, in the South African literature and in the case study that concludes this account. The study is part of a larger research programme that included interviews by myself and colleagues of domestic workers, employers, training and placement agencies and worker organisations, mostly carried out during 2019 and in early 2020, in Cape Town in particular and also in Durban.

### 3.1. Intimacy and distance: disjointure and domestic work

Barad (2010: 249) describes "a discontinuity at the heart of meaning itself" because of what gets left out when meaning is made. She sees a related attention in Derrida's work to "the irreducible excess of a disjointure" at the heart of things. Domestic work offers up plenty of such discontinuities and disjointures, where intra-relations of heightened inequalities and exploitation counter-exist with intra-relations of familiarity, attachment, conviviality and intimacy. In one example, Cock (1980) describes the highly discriminatory, racist and exploitative nature of domestic work in South Africa as a key site for the production of "White privilege", while Jansen points out that "family metaphors" were widely used by employers when interviewed about their domestic workers (Jansen's study is titled '*Like Family'*) and

employers remembered domestic workers from their youths as "a source of comfort and care" (Jansen 2019: 3). The South African artist William Kentridge put it this way: "For a White suburban house the journey through Africa began across the yard in the servant's room" (Jansen 2019: 4) and the journalist Mark Gevisser referred to "the frontier of the backyard" (Jansen 2019: 4). The authors J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Elsa Joubert feature domestic workers as central characters in some of their work, reflecting the fact that suburban White children mostly knew Black people as workers in the children's homes. Taking a somewhat different focus, Zakes Mda's (2002) *The Madonna of Excelsior* presents a fictionalized account of the moving and tragic events where a group of nineteen Black women domestic workers and Afrikaner men in the small rural town of Excelsior were charged in 1971 with transgressing the Immorality Act, which forbade sex between Black and White in South Africa. Their children, cut apart from the relations of intimacy of their families and simultaneously cut together with the racist laws of Apartheid South Africa, were to feature as evidence in the court case. The case was dropped in the face of negative international publicity for the apartheid state (*New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1971) and the suicide of one of the men charged, but not before the Minster of Justice and Prisons had said the case was a response to complaints about the numbers of 'half-caste' children in the small town (Mda 2002: 98). Pape (1990) similarly looks at the "perils of sex" around domestic workers and their employers in colonial Zimbabwe. Such instances of entanglement, of "lust and loathing" (Mda 2002: 85), provide dramatic examples of Barad's point about "the indefinite nature of boundaries, displaying "shadows in 'light' regions and bright spots in 'dark' regions" (Barad 2003: 803).

### 3.2. Hostipitality/Kafala

We see these discontinuities and disjointures again in the contrasting ideas and practices around *kafala* as described in the literature on domestic workers in the Middle East (where rapid economic growth and ageing populations have driven a large demand for domestic workers over recent decades). The kafala is a state-sanctioned system of sponsorship of migrants that is ubiquitous across countries of the Middle East. A 2019 UN report (quoted in ILO 2021: 1) estimated that there were 35 million international migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and Jordan and Lebanon, of whom 31 per cent were women. The report also claimed that foreign nationals make up the majority of the population in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and more than 80 per cent of the population in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (ibid). (Given the informalities and indeterminacies that characterise these labour processes, such numbers have to be treated as guesstimates. Nonetheless, they point to a major social dynamic in these settings that is not always highlighted.)

Foreign domestic workers in these countries, from Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya, in particular) and Asia (including the Indian sub-continent and the Philippines), require a *kafil/kefeel* or sponsor to facilitate their application for a work permit. The language of the kafala is our first interest here. Kuschminder (2016: 401) explains: "The kafala system is a Bedouin principle of hospitality that defines a sponsor's obligations for the treatment of foreign guests" and Fernandez (2013: 829) elaborates:

> "Essentially an unwritten, moral contract between an employer and a foreign worker, the kafala is the relationship between the kafil (sponsor) and the makful

(the sponsored immigrant). The etymological root k-f-l in Arabic indicates that the meanings derived from kafala/kafil are: 1) to feed and provide for someone; 2) to adopt, to espouse, or to protect a dependent; 3) to guarantee and be a legal guardian; 4) to pledge an alliance with someone; and 5) to appropriate or annex someone or something."

The range of contrasting meanings here is notable, where 1, 2 and 3 are about protection and care while 4 and 5 are about relations of power and appropriation. These are complementary meanings in the Baradian sense, where they can only come to exist as agential cuts, or exclusions of one another. This brings to the fore Derrida's (2000) extended thoughts on what he refers to (in translation from French) as *hostipitality* (sic). Derrida points out that for the invited guest as much as for the visitor, the crossing of the threshold when hospitality is offered and taken always remains a transgressive step, because one is entering a space that is 'not one's own'. Yet the idea of hospitality implies as its absolute, unconditional model, a hospitality where there is no cost to the visitor or guest and no limit on them, where one gives the new arrival "all of one's home and oneself", without condition and question. Such an unconditional hospitality is never available in practice, however, and certainly not in the contexts of social inequality that we are dealing with here. There are only traces here, and there are always only traces, of the ideal model. Indeed, our ability to grasp a meaning around hospitality depends on this trace of something that was never quite there. Hospitality is effectively always accompanied by "rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional" (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 81). Without these limits, the host might well lose control of their domain. But, without an underlying (or hauntological) sense of unconditional hospitality, Derrida says that there would be no concept of a hospitality with conditions: "they both imply and exclude each other, simultaneously. They incorporate one another at the moment of excluding one another, they are dissociated at the moment of enveloping one another" (ibid). In Barad's terms, they are "cut together/apart" because the agential cut between resident and immigrant is a product of the material-discursive practices around territory, power and control. In its apparent generality, hospitality is always singular. Barely noticeable but nonetheless an underlying presence, the threat of violence, or the violence of threat, haunts the benignity of hospitality, and again this shows in the etymology: Fotou (2016: 66) traces the root of hospitality and related words to the Proto-Indo-European *ghos-ti*, which, she says, means stranger, guest or host; and that *ghos-ti* evolved into the Latin root *hostis*, meaning enemy army, where the adjective "hostile" finds its origin, as does the word "host", both with the meaning of multitude but also with the meaning of someone who provides hospitality. From ghos-ti also comes the Greek word xenos, which has the interchangeable meaning of guest, host, or stranger, always denoting the outsider, the visitor of the city. Thus Derrida describes hospitality (in its various permutations across European languages) as "a word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, *hostility*" (Derrida 2000: 3).

The *kafala* system takes these discontinuities and envelopments to extremes with regard to domestic workers in Middle East or Gulf countries. The *kafeel* (Arabic for sponsor) controls and regulates the movement of the migrant and has the absolute state-sanctioned discretion over the migrants' legal and mobility status in the country, thus producing yet another blurring

of borders, between public and private, to the great disadvantage of the domestic workers who face risks of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. They lack labour law protections and become part of a highly dispersed and largely invisible workforce. They also face significant obstacles to complaining about abusive treatment. Domestic workers who leave their employers/sponsors are regarded as having violated their contract and are rendered 'illegal' and women who flee their employers' houses and go to the police for help are placed in prison because they have become 'illegal' migrants. Domestic workers are also known to 'run-away' from their employers and become 'freelancers,' that is, "living illegally in the country and doing live-out domestic work or other jobs" but putting themselves in very vulnerable positions by doing so (Kuschminder 2016: 410). Kassamali (2017) describes how many women in Beirut who have fled domestic confinement under the kafala system and who enter Lebanon's informal labour market are joined by hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing war across the country's eastern border to forge an urban belonging '*inside the city*' but '*outside the nation-state*'.

Jones (2015) describes how Bangladeshi women moving to the Arabian Gulf as migrant domestic workers commonly migrate to jobs with little to no knowledge of who all of the subagents and recruiters are who facilitated their migration and charged them, what is for them, an extraordinary sum of money to finance their immigration, nor where they are being sent, nor who their employer/sponsor will be. In Lebanon, agencies play a major role in matching families with domestic workers that meet budgets, cultural preferences, or job requirements. These agencies "are widely known for creating catalogues of women, such that 'catalogue shopping' has become an image widely associated with domestic worker procurement in the country" (Kassamali 2017: 24).

Non-government organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Free the Slaves describe the kafala system as a form of "modern-day slavery" where domestic workers are kept in "positions of indentured servitude, bound labour, and permanent exclusion from citizenship rights abroad" (Parreñas & Silvey 2016: 37). But besides the 'human rights' cut, there is the cut made by the domestic workers. Parreñas and Silvey (2016) interviewed domestic workers from mostly poor, rural areas of the Philippines and Indonesia, who expressed and acted upon their own definitions of desirable and intolerable conditions, and gave most weight to the quality of the interpersonal relations they had with their employers, no doubt, because of the close proximity in which they worked and lived with employers, and how that material relationship of intimacy/distance constituted a particular kind of phenomenon. One woman, sleeping in a hallway, preferred her situation to another who had her own bedroom and a higher salary because the lower-middle class family the woman worked for regularly invited her to eat with them, called her by her name and spoke to her in a conversational tone rather than shouting at her (Parreñas & Silvey 2016: 40). Hostipitality and its effects can be seen here in these diffracted relationships of intimacy/servitude. Parreñas and Silvey see the story of human rights abuse as incomplete in that it erases the responses of domestic workers to their vulnerabilities: "Every day, migrant workers enact far more complex responses to their marginalized positions than could ever be captured by the concept of slavery." (Parreñas & Silvey 2016: 41). They see the domestic workers as using creative tactics to actively negotiate the terms of their employment where they can, requesting a "release" to search for a new employer or running away when dissatisfied, or refusing to stay back in their rural origin sites.

"They migrate repeatedly, risking the unknown abroad over and over rather than resign themselves to the constraints of the familiar" (ibid). Bélanger and Rahman (2013) similarly recognised the complexities, indeterminacies and inversions where the Bangladeshi women that they studied had to overcome numerous sociocultural, religious and political barriers before they could leave home. Many of them suffered stigma in the pre-departure and return stages of temporary labour migration, because of the local patriarchal gender order in Bangladesh, and the intra-household gendered power relationships that were in play. While there is stigma attached to breaking the rules of *purdah* which require women to be secluded and controlled by the men in their family, on the basis that a family's honour resides in the bodies of its women, their migration status challenged the traditional concept of the woman as being the 'inside person' who is only responsible for activities in the home. Most women interviewed by the authors described the experience of migration and paid work as transformative for them. Despite difficulties around re-entering their communities after they returned home, in most cases, they experienced an increase in status among their families and relatives. Their experiences at work included, for most, being locked inside a private house, under the total control of their female employer in a country where strict *purdah* rules prevailed. Despite often extremely difficult experiences abroad, however, the fact that they decided to go, caught a plane and were able to send money home meant much to them. Bélanger and Rahman (2013: 369) conclude that such transnational migration "unsettles patriarchal gender orders, but at the same time may also contribute to strengthening them", once again emphasising the complexities and blurrings of borders involved in these processes of hospitality and hostility, 'cutting together/apart' and the hauntological entanglements that result (Barad 2010: 341). We see here intersections and overlapping phenomena and agential cuts which produce complexity, indeterminacy and unpredictability in social-material relations and material-discursive practices.

For the International Labour Organisation, the solution to these exploitative phenomena is the ending of the kafala system. Romero (2018), however, compares the kafala system in the United Arab Emirates with the immigrant visa system in the USA and finds strong parallels between the two systems. Both tie migrant domestic workers to their employers. Both countries have excluded domestic workers from labour laws or provided less coverage for them. The status of unregistered migrant leaves domestic workers at risk of violence and exploitation in both cases.

### 3.3. Gender, ethnicity, social class and education in material-discursive entanglements

None of the apparently defining characteristics of domestic workers are definitive or determinative in practice. Across different cuts, entanglements and intersecting phenomena, none of gender, ethnicity, education level, social class nor anything else are universal characteristics. As regards gender, men more than women were typically employed as domestic workers across colonial Africa, ubiquitously known as 'houseboys' (Van Onselen 1979; Gaitskell et al. 1983; Pape 1990; Pariser 2013: 33) and this is still the case in parts of Africa and Asia. Bartolomei (2010) offers accounts of men working as domestic workers in towns in Italy, India, Côte d'Ivoire and the Congo, showing the complex and varied entanglements of practices of class, masculinity and discourses around patriarchy, ethnicity and the contradictory

identification of domestic work as feminised labour. In the case of the town of Macerata in Italy, well-educated men from the South-west Indian state of Kerala were doing elderly care work at wage rates in Italy that are almost ten times higher than in Kerala, for employers who are often considerably less educated than their domestic employees. Qayum and Ray (2010: 111) discuss male servants in Kolkata, India in terms of "a failure of patriarchy" where male servants "think of themselves as failed patriarchs", dependent on stigmatized work to make a living, "and feel doubly diminished", for the work they do and what it says about them as men. Women who work as servants similarly see it as the failure of their fathers, husbands, and brothers to perform their prescribed familial duties to provide for their families that has forced the women to take on "patriarchal" responsibilities of supporting their households. Because the 'domestic' is so often thought of as a distinctively female realm, Qayum and Ray find that "the presence of men servants is a complicated and fraught phenomenon, where domestic service is considered especially demeaning for men, notwithstanding the historical preference for male servants". One woman employer of 72 years old explained: "A servant is not really a man" and because of this status as not-man, a male servant may, as Qayum and Ray (2010: 112) put it, "make beds, handle women's clothing, and otherwise occupy the intimate spaces of the home without provoking gender shame". As a result, male servants, "enmeshed in a discursive web not of their making, struggle to make sense of their positionality in spaces that are demarcated as both feminine and inferior" (Qayum & Ray 2010: 115).

## 3.4. Shifting categories of domestic worker in South Africa

Both in Johannesburg and Durban around the beginning of the 20th century, domestic work in White middle-class houses and suburbs was done, by, firstly, young Zulu men mostly in both cases, and then by young Pedi men and teenage youths in Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand when there were not enough Zulu men available after the gold mines and secondary industries had employed most of them (Van Onselen 1979; Eales 1988). These teenaged young men brought discourses around masculinity and patriarchy from their homesteads and congregated after work in age cohort groups which adapted a repertoire of Zulu rural cultural practices and forms of self-organisation to cope with new conditions of life in town, in the wake of the massive social dislocation experienced by African societies in Natal and Zululand in the late nineteenth century. "New problems of sexuality, adolescence, and resistance to the colonizing mentality now started to reflect itself in the *amalaita* houseboy gangs" (Van Onselen 1979: 300) composed predominantly of teenaged male domestic workers. La Hausse (1990) described a similar dynamic in Durban. He records the lament of Durban's Superintendent of Police in 1900 regarding the activities of the *amalaita* houseboys: "daring young thieves […] have started their games in Durban in broad daylight. I sincerely hope the community will be more careful whom they employ as domestic servants" (La Hausse 1990: 83).

In Johannesburg, in the early 20th century, the British Colonial administration, with the assistance of the Randlords responded to the growing labour shortage on the gold mines and in the private homes of the well-off by organising the migration of thousands of White, female, domestic servants from England, allowing the release of similar numbers of 'houseboys' to labour in the mines. As Dillenburg (2018) describes it, these young working class or rurally-based women in England were recruited for migration to the colonies in response to the rise of juvenile delinquency, poverty, and working-class unrest in England and their migration was

viewed as a way to temper growing working-class militancy and relieve some of the strain of the crowded labor market at home, and also to help "build up the Empire, physically and morally",

> "to become the mothers of a race, not dwarfed by poverty; or cramped by pressure as in the Nest and Nursery of the Mother-Land; but free, contented, God-fearing women in the Great Garden of the British Empire" (Ellen Joyce who led the Department for Girls Emigrating, quoted in Dillenburg 2018: 460).

This didn't turn out well either, because "most of the White female domestic servants soon learnt that in a colonial situation manual labour was the province of Black workers at low wages" and in an environment where there were not many women around at all, "marriage became the socioeconomic escape hatch from physical labor to social mobility" for immigrant White English women (Van Onselen 1979: 300). Material-discursive cuts around gender and race result in the entangled phenomena that we see here.

With the decline in availability of both young Black male domestic workers and White female English immigrant domestic workers, increasing efforts were made to recruit and train Black women and to make them more attractive to potential employers through a combination of formal training in domestic skills and accommodation in 'homes' whereas the majority of Black women had been rurally-based and subject to rural patriarchal authority structures up to this point. Eales (1988) noticed the irony in this emphasis on domestic training for women: Black mothers usually trained their daughters, not their sons, from childhood in the basics of household work and child-care, yet very few of the estimated 70 000 black men at work in white Transvaal kitchens had ever had any such training (Eales 1988: 13). Eales suggests that neither training nor language were the real issue around recruiting Black women domestic workers. More pivotal was that they did not have to carry 'passes', because they had not been part of the mobile labour force until then, unlike their male counterparts. Passes were identity documents that Black men alone, at that time, were forced to carry, identifying the site and duration of their employment. If women left their work, in contrast, there was little chance of finding them as there were few legislative constraints on their mobility. Despite this mobility, Black women who entered domestic service in the earlier decades of the 20th century did so at a disadvantage. They had to contend with their employers' prejudices, poor accommodation, sexual harassment and constant assumptions about their immorality (Eales 1988). They were paid far less than male domestic workers and employers used the lack of a work contract to change conditions of work and to pay unfairly.

Contemporary domestic workers in South Africa are predominantly Black woman but also include men, both local and migrant from Anglophone African countries, particularly Zimbabwe and Malawi. Black male domestic workers are symbols of status in upper-middle class homes in Cape Town and Johannesburg, with a particular regard for men from Malawi according to some employers I spoke to in the course of this research project.

## 4. Violence and caring: a case study
In the following case study account, we can see aspects of complementary disjointures and entangled phenomena (phenomena, in the Baradian sense of entities made up of intra-acting

relata rather than discrete entities in interaction with one other). These are produced by the various agential cuts that are evident in the narratives around an angry encounter between a domestic worker and the male partner of her employer in the employer's home in Cape Town, South Africa, followed by court action on the part of the domestic worker and her allies, and concluding with the man going to jail and the woman ending her long career as a domestic worker. This account is sourced from my recorded interview with Gloria Kente (in the company of Dr Cecile Vigouroux, a research colleague and friend). The interview happened at the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) offices in Salt River, Cape Town, on 18 April 2019. I also draw on published newspaper accounts of the court case and the persons involved, from *The Citizen, The Argus, Independent Online, News24, ENCA, Cape Argus* and the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union, (SADSAWU) *Newsletter*. (With her approval, and because her name appears in media accounts of the court-case discussed here, I use Kente's real names.)

**4.1. 'I can't breathe': host as hostage**
Kente had been employed as a child-carer (or 'nanny') and cleaner by a Table View, Cape Town, northern suburbs family for nine years and had resided in a room in her employer's modest lower-middle-class house for six years, caring for the two children of the house while their mother worked. The children's mother separated from their father while Kente was resident in the house and he had left the household. The mother, who worked in an administrative position at a hotel then formed a new relationship with Van Deventer, a man in his 40s who worked as a salesman. They had a child together and he moved into the house. Kente says that from the beginning, Van Deventer complained about her living in the house, using racist terms and asking his partner "why she employed a Kaffir in the house, he cannot breathe with a Kaffir in the same roof". ('Kaffir' is a pejorative Southern African term referring to a Black African. The term is Arabic in origin and originally referred to someone who was not a Muslim but has come to be used as a racist insult, from which there is legal protection in post-apartheid South Africa.)

The particular clash between Kente and Van Deventer that resulted in court action occurred when Kente asked Van Deventer to keep an eye on his six-month old infant child while she took a shower at the end of the workday. She put pillows around the child to protect it and left it with toys on the bed. While in the bathroom, after she had turned off the shower, she heard Van Deventer shouting that she "throw him with the baby, she wants to shower," "she forget that she's employed", that they were "paying this Kaffir R2400 (around US$ 380 as a monthly salary, adjusted for currency inflation) to look after the child". ('*throw him with*' is a common direct South African English translation from the Afrikaans phrase '*gooi my met*', meaning here, *she <u>makes him</u> take care of the baby*).

Kente described in court how she left the bathroom and asked him whether he was speaking about her, which he confirmed. "André (Van Deventer) came to me whilst I was standing in my room door. He grabbed my pajamas in front of my chest and said he hated a Kaffir. Then he said "I hate you as well, Gloria. Then he spitted in my face," she said, in the witness stand. "He further mentioned that these Kaffirs stole their land, and he wishes that Mandela died in hospital" (reports in *The Citizen:* 11 June 2014). (Mandela here refers to the globally known anti-apartheid leader, who had recently been ill and has since died.)

## 4.2. 'I must be Gloria'

Kente described, in our interview, the discussion with her lawyer over language in preparation for the court case:

> "even my lawyer, he was saying to me, 'I was worried when I took your case, I said that (the) first thing (she) is a domestic worker', and he look at my age, and said 'Okay I know those domestic worker, are those who didn't even finish school or didn't go to school, so it's gonna be not easy to communicate, and I don't want somebody to tell me what Gloria, is saying, I want something that is coming from Gloria's mouth… so I can understand, and I need this anger, I need this strongness from you, so it can build me as your lawyer', when I'm standing there, I must be Gloria, you see? […] then I said 'Can I speak Xhosa, Xhosa is my language, because the problem is, you people, you are lawyer, they are magistrate, they are what-what, then they gonna come with big bombastic words, then they ask me question I answer like this, then the other one will ask, or this one ask me the same question, in the other way, then me I will answer the wrong way because I don't understand, he said, 'I'm begging you, Gloria, I'm a lawyer, I'm educated, but I understand you, please, in the court don't speak your language, because I'm gonna be confused, as I said I want you to be Gloria, to show the people that are sitting there that something went wrong, ja, it's eating you, and ...you are not happy'[…]".

> Researcher: – So he wanted you to speak in English in court?

> "Yes, ja…"

> Researcher: – And how did that go?

> "They said they cried, ... all the people were supporting me there, 'but there was a moment we were crying Gloria, when you were talking there' (i.e., Kente's performative account in court in English was a vivid and moving one that made her supporters cry in sympathy)."

In his reported pre-court exchange with her, Kente's lawyer seemed to understand that there were different versions of Kente available and one of them was better for purpose than the other(s): "I want you to be Gloria", to which Gloria responded, "Can I speak Xhosa, Xhosa is my language" and he replied, no please speak English. This sounds contradictory and unsympathetic, if not unjust, but while this seems to be an argument about language medium, it is more about agential cuts and performativity. Kente's lawyer, appointed by the domestic workers' union, was a well-regarded lawyer with substantial experience in human rights cases and would certainly know that a person's right to speak in court in a South African language that they identify as their 'mother tongue' is a human rights' touchstone in post-apartheid South African law. But he also seemed to know what would win this case and that was for Kente to perform Gloria, domestic worker, whose English language repertoire was fully up to the performative requirements of 'doing being a domestic worker' because that's what she was, or at least that is the version of her that was relevant here and that he had come to know in speaking

to her. He made clear that he wanted her to "show the people that are sitting there that something went wrong, ja, it's eating you".

Speaking in Xhosa to a court appointed interpreter would not have the same effect in a courtroom where English was dominant. From his own courtroom experience, the lawyer apparently knew something about languaging: Court interpreters focus on denotation, on meaning. They distill, often badly, what they think is the meaning in what the witness says and then denote it in the courtroom language. But the connotative, affective or performative dimensions of languaging are vital if we see language as something people do (Silverstein 1985; Pennycook 2018). In acting, speaking and writing, we realise a version of self in the world (Butler 1993) through all of our iterations and improvisations which are not explicitly learnt or taught but acquired in practice and show us as kinds of people doing certain kinds of things, where agential cuts and intersecting and overlapping phenomena unsettle our indeterminacies and give us shape in particular moments. Kente does Gloria (and languages her) based on years of being her and that's who her lawyer wanted on the stand, not the ghost of her performativities via a court interpreter. Kente, in her anxiety during pre-court preparation, says that "Xhosa is my language". The turn to 'mother tongue' in moments of uncertainty is not unexpected. Derrida (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000: 89) refers to "the so-called mother tongue, the language you carry with you", "a sort of second skin you wear on yourself", "the home that never leaves you", "the ipseity of the self, set up as a force of resistance, as a counterforce against these dislocations". Through the 'mother tongue' you can seemingly 'hear-your-self-speaking-yourself' but this is a fantasy, even if it is "the most unbreakable of fantasies", because language is always already "the other's language", because that is from whom you get language, not from yourself. Tan (2017) argues for a rhizomatic view of 'heritage language' where so-called heritage language is dynamic, constantly undergoing transformation even while appearing constant. For Barad, Butler and Derrida, in language (in material-discursive practices) the self is cut, but it is also cut apart from itself (together/apart), just as the 'mother tongue' is already a product of and party to a number of overlapping and intersecting agential cuts, including those of the colonial missionary linguists, in the case of isiXhosa and related South African languages, who glossed over their own evidence of considerable linguistic and cultural differences amongst people whom they coded as homogenous groups (Harries 1981) and 'read back' into speech "a stability of meaning" which actually existed "only in their descriptions" (Errington 2008: 9), while the contemporary Standard Language, enscribed in colonial times, is haunted by contemporary speakers' actual languaging practices in situated contexts in contemporary times. While Kente might feel that she would be at less of a disadvantage in court speaking Xhosa, her advantage lay in her well-rounded persona as a Black, female, domestic worker, speaking articulately and with affect in a low status English register, in contrast to her White Afrikaans male, lower-middle class opponent, speaking his Afrikaans-accented version of not-his-mother-tongue either, and also in contrast with the legal language idiom of the lawyers. By way of the particular agential cuts that shape this court case as a phenomenon about racist insult and assault as a hate crime in post-apartheid South Africa, Kente's otherwise low status put her at an advantage over Van Deventer. It also gave her access to a good lawyer through the Union, while Van Deventer had a court-appointed lawyer.

### 4.3. Cut together-apart

Van Deventer's lawyer tried to make the case that his client's attitude to Kente was better than she was claiming and questioned her about the times she and Van Deventer would sit together on a couch and watch cricket, getting excited together over what they were watching. As Kente reported in our interview:

> "and then when you see that South Africa is doing well, we clap together, we jump together, you see he was trying to put me in a corner I said yes, he's right about that, you see we are two people, ah yes, I understand, my eyes are looking there, I don't take his eyes to look there, I use my eyes to look what is going on, on the TV, so when I see something that makes me excited, I am excited for myself, not for himself! If he jump the time I jump, that's up to him" (laughter).

It is precisely because the intimacy of the household blurs the dividing lines between employers and workers that Van Deventer's lawyer frames the cricket episode as a moment of unity of the two parties ("we clap together, we jump together") and Kente acknowledges this but stresses the limits of this intimacy ("I don't take his eyes to look there"). The lawyer tries to cut the two protagonists together, while Kente aims to cut them apart. But, in practice, in both the phenomena of the household and the courtroom, they are, in Barad's terms, "cut together/apart", "more than one, no more than one" (Barad 2010: 251).

While Van Deventer is apparently a good fit as perpetrator, being White, male, Afrikaans and angry, Kente tells us about another side to him that never came out in court, not raised by him nor by Kente, for their differing reasons. His prior long-term relationship was with a 'Cape Coloured' woman and he had two children by her. In one heated exchange, as she described it in the interview, Kente asked Van Deventer why he insulted her by calling her a 'Kaffir', while his own children were Black. In a different agential cut, it seems, he might appear as less of a racist than he appears here. His anger at Kente might well have been over who was more 'at home' in their common residence and in their relations with others in the household. Indeed, Kente described the children of the house and her caring relationship with them as pivotal in her conflict with Van Deventer:

> "I think my big sin from this guy is to protect the children, because he didn't like the children of this lady, so the children they were always with me, all the time, and I was protecting them, really, if he shout, and then I go, just come out of my room and call them, and put in my bed and sleep together, so he said: me, now I'm not acting as a domestic worker anymore in that house, it was not domestic work … now you act like a White but you Black, you fucking Black woman, and stuff like that"

Kente's ambivalent status as domestic worker and proxy parent clearly enraged Van Deventer whose own relationship with the children was worse than hers, while he wanted to assert the space as his own and designate her as the foreigner, the outsider and the inferior.

In conclusion of the case, the magistrate said the State had proven the charge of assault beyond a reasonable doubt. She said it was clear Van Deventer had a short temper and felt nothing of showing how he felt in a physical way. He was found guilty of assault, sentenced to two years of house arrest and seventy hours of community work in the service of Black women (*News24*: 22 June 2015). Kente was awarded R50,000 damages (approximately 7,750 USD, allowing for currency inflation) by the Equality Court in a linked but separate court action against Van Deventer. Around a year later, he was found to be in breach of his conditions of sentence, both of house arrest and of community service and sent to jail for two years, to Pollsmoor Prison, a notorious gang-dominated, crowded, under-staffed and violent prison outside Cape Town. Before this second sentencing he was arrested and had spent the weekend detained at Pollsmoor. Newspaper reports describe him as "unshaven and twitchy" (*News24*: 22 June, 2015) and "shaking in the dock" (*Independent*: 23 June, 2015) after his first weekend in Pollsmoor.

While the court proceedings and the media coverage all emphasised the racist behaviour of Van Deventer, the conflict between the two parties highlighted the uneasy interplay between familiarity and attempts at assertion of control, with Kente holding her ground, resisting the cuts that Van Deventer was trying to make. I asked an experienced trauma psychologist for his views and he thought it was unfortunate that Van Deventer had been sent to prison rather than helped with his 'anger management' problems, a suggestion of an alternative cut that would have shaped a divergent phenomenon that included Van Deventer as a psychological patient, but probably only likely if he had more money and a well-paid lawyer.

For Kente, the court case was also life-changing and she was happy with the latest agential cut determining her as a union organiser:

> "I feel empowered, I feel strong, and I told myself, now SADSAWU is putting me on this now, so what must I do now, is to stand up, I must be the voice, of the domestic of us, because I knew how difficult, I knew how you feel isolated when you in that, behind that, that gate, that walls, don't no one is standing next to you, you are alone, you must face this, ja, so that is why I told myself, now, it's about time for me to work with the domestic workers."

## 5. Conclusion

The intersecting and overlapping cuts and entanglements we see in the case study above are resonant of the various and diverse domestic worker-employer-relationships that were evident in the literature examined earlier. They all involve unstable relations of intimacy and exploitation that are complementary to each other in the Baradian sense and take place within uneven gendered, raced, and kinship relations. Barad and Derrida's attention to that which gets left out but "doesn't quite go away" proves to be a rich resource when we study domestic work as involving bodies that come to matter and those that get excluded from mattering, or get left out but don't quite go away, as agential cuts with long historic trajectories shape concepts of work, family and nurturing into particular material articulations of the world, with consequences.

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