

In the House and In the Cause: Union Organizing of Domestic Workers (Rio de Janeiro, 1961-1973)

Na casa e na causa: a organização sindical das trabalhadoras domésticas (Rio de Janeiro, 1961-1973)

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Book review: GETIRANA, Yasmin. **Na casa e na causa:** A organização sindical das trabalhadoras domésticas (Rio de Janeiro, 1961-1973). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Telha, 2023.

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IN BRAZIL it is common to refer to domestic workers as an “invisible” or “unseen” class of workers. For a foreign observer, the refrain of “invisibility” at first might appear strange. According to a 2018 estimate from the International Trade Organization, Brazil has more than 7.2 million people working in remunerated domestic service. This number is higher than in any other country in the world.¹ Over 90% of them are women and about 60% are non-white and of African descent. Brazil’s domestic workers frequently make appearances in soap operas, are occasional muses in music, and are so common in middle-class daily life that those who employ them often remark that they are “like one of the family”.

“Invisibility” or going “unseen,” however, might be short-hand for “undignified”. Or rather, Brazilian domestic workers, like their counterparts around the world, are often distorted, disrespected, and disregarded. For the foreigner observer, closer examination reveals this to be true. The domestic workers on soap operas are often secondary or tertiary characters with few, unremarkable lines. They are more often sources of ridicule, contempt, or pity on

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1 International Labor Organization, “Convention N°. 189 on domestic workers ratified by Brazil”. 1 February 2018: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/convention-no-189-domestic-workers-ratified-brazil>.

music tracks than as honorable women. For much of the twentieth century, writers rendered domestic workers in fiction and in film through the lens of subjugation rather than as intelligent women with agency.² In the 1970s *pornochanchadas* films like “Como é boa nossa empregada” inverted the very real threats of sexual harassment and assault. Infamously in remarks to assuage anxieties about the economy under the Bolsonaro administration, Minister Paulo Guedes made the unfounded claim that “even maids [were] going to Disney” in Miami, Florida, and that a weaker Brazilian real would stem the tide. Finally, being “like one of the family” thinly veils the reality of labor relations between employers and employees. In contemporary Brazil, it is not uncommon for a news story to break about a young girl or elderly woman from the rural interior tricked into decades of modern slavery on weak, vague promises of an education and a better life in the big city.³ In a country that was last in the Americas to abolish slavery, Brazilians often assert that domestic labor is the continuation of the institution and, given the overrepresentation of Afro-descendant women and similar tasks carried under slavery, the reason why the profession is held in such low regard. Thus, domestic labor in Brazil is a powerful symbol of Brazil’s racial, gender, and class inequalities, branding those who do the labor as “undignified”.

Within the past four decades, however, Brazilian domestic workers have demanded respect and complexity as agents of both their labor and their own lives. Domestic workers participated and worked to shape both the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, in which they were granted the right to unionize, and the 2013 *PEC das Domésticas*, which introduced over-time pay, holidays, access to severance and unemployment pay, workplace accident insurance, and forty-four-hour work weeks.⁴ Through the expansion of social media, domestic workers have increased their ability to reach audiences without the mediation of their employers. In other words, they are able to “talk back” to what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “controlling images”. For example, rapper Preta Rara debuted in 2016 a Facebook page entitled *Eu, Empregada Doméstica*, in which she detailed the stereotypes, denigrations, and abuses of employers and others who saw her as unworthy of dignity during her employment as a domestic worker. Yet, *Eu, Empregada Doméstica* was not solely an accounting of outrages. As Preta Rara’s narrative, she shaped her subjectivity, rejecting the traditional role of pitiful, agentless object for whom things passively happen to but to which cannot be responded beyond external factors. In fiction, there has also been a turn to agency-focused portrayals of domestic workers, as seen in the Covid-19 quarantine era webcomic turned graphic novel *Confinada* and the first episode of the 2023 Globo mini-series *Historias (Im)Possíveis*. Both works meditate on labor conflicts and behavior between domestic workers and their employers. Like *Eu, Empregada*

2 RANDALL, Rachel. **Paid to Care: Domestic Workers in Contemporary Latin American Culture**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024.

3 HORDGE-FREEMAN, Elizabeth. **Second-Class Daughters: Black Brazilian Women and Informal Adoption as Modern Slavery**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. p. 51.

4 HARRINGTON, Jaira. Between dreams, myths, and reality: domestic work, unions, and anti-Blackness in São Paulo. **Race & Class**, 67, 5, p. 3, 2025.

Doméstica, they center the domestic worker's complexity and agency, while bringing out in the open what Brazilian culture often gestures at but rarely makes plain: the plight of black women. All works engage and assert what U.S. based Black feminist theorist Moya Bailey has referred to as misogynoir: the ways anti-blackness and misogynistic representations shape broader ideas about black women.⁵

"Talking back" is not only occurring in the worlds of fiction or social media, but also in museums and other places of commemoration. In 2025, the Instituto Moreira Salles in Poços de Caldas, Minas Gerais unveiled an exhibit honoring the life, militancy, and legacy of Laudelina de Campos Melo, a black woman who in 1936 established Brazil's first advocacy association for domestic workers. Though this fact is often where discussions of Campos Melo's life begin and end, the exhibit extensively unveils her interests, from her military service in World War II to her patronage of Afro-Brazilian youth spaces and art, while zooming in on her life-long commitment to domestic work in the state of São Paulo. With the explosion of black women's civic groups, the fruits of affirmative education remaking Brazilian universities, the growing dialogue between Anglophone black feminist writing and Brazilian academia, and the "rediscovery" of black Brazilian feminist intellectual afoot, these conditions have facilitated the germination of the seeds planted by black domestic workers of the twentieth century. These women sowed these seeds in an environment that insisted they were doubly "invisible" and "undignified," even though Brazil's present clearly states otherwise.

It is partially from this contemporary moment that Yasmin Getirana's monograph, *Na casa e na causa: A organização sindical das trabalhadoras domésticas (Rio de Janeiro, 1961-1973)*, emerges. Based on research done for her master's thesis, which won the Ana Lugão Rios Award at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Getirana recreates the early history of the *Associação Profissional de Empregadas Domésticas do Rio de Janeiro* (APED-RJ), one of the most prominent domestic worker activist groups to emerge from the city of Rio de Janeiro. While APED-RJ had its beginnings in congresses organized by the *Juventude Operária Católica*, Getirana demonstrates that the women the Catholic movement meant to organize were not meek aloof individuals looking for a shepherd to guide them. Framed between the fragile last years of the Brazilian Fourth Republic (1946-1964) and the height of the country's infamous military dictatorship (1964-1985), *Na casa e na causa*, particularly its second chapter, shows us the creative, strategic, and dynamic ways domestic workers, many of them black, navigated a political atmosphere where both the law and the public were hostile to their assertion that they were indeed dignified workers. In the absence of the right to unionize, domestic workers in Rio de Janeiro took to the tradition established by their contemporary Laudelina de Campos Melo and formed an association. While outsiders assumed that associations like APED-RJ were mere charities, Getirana details how they functioned simultaneously as mutual aid support, schooling hubs, recreational centers, and of course spaces to organize their labor.

5 BAILEY, Moya. **Misogynoir Transformed**: Black Women's Digital Resistance. New York: NYU Press, 2021.

APED-RJ's primary agenda included securing recognition within the *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho*, gaining access to the *Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social* (INPS) and replacing the *carteira de doméstica*, organized by the police, with proper identification cards (p. 173-174). However, these actions functioned within the broader framework of *associativismo*, intentional undertaking of community organizing and formation. In that sense, APED-RJ also outlined the need for members to institute class consciousness raising among Rio de Janeiro's domestic workers to strengthen a sense of community and solidarity and facilitate a national movement (p. 174). Getirana's research is easily in conversation with recent English-language publications on paid domestic work in Latin America.⁶

As historian Anasa Hicks has noted, those who work on black women's history in Latin America are often told that such work, if beyond the timeline of slavery and the early years of post-abolition, is impossible because of a perceived lack of primary sources.⁷ US scholars in the innovative field of the Black women's history have put this assertion to shame for over four decades. Getirana helps elevate how Brazilian scholars have begun to develop a parallel methodology for Afro-Brazilian women in the post-abolition era. She gives names and faces to the APED's leadership: Maria da Conceição Caetano, Efigênia Caetano, Odete Maria da Conceição, and Maria da Hora. Culling from both newspaper sources and the private archives of both APED-RJ and past participants, Getirana demonstrates the changes in the tone of the organization over time. For example, communications to the press under the leadership of Maria da Conceição were more rhetorically focused on unifying the divides between domestic workers and their employers, and somewhat couched in the language of "gratitude" towards government interventions. In contrast, APED-RJ under the presidency of Maria da Hora more openly emphasized mistreatment, exploitation, and abuse by way of employers. In addition, da Hora made critiques of government interventions, such as the 1971 decree permitting domestic workers to enroll in the INPS and the right to holidays; though she acknowledged this was good step, da Hora noted that "we are not going to say that we are very satisfied."⁸ Getirana's analysis provides readers with an appreciation for the reality that black domestic workers were adept strategists and theorists of their own experiences. They navigated a terrain building a labor movement brick by brick, as well as a public relations campaign spoke back against employer biases among mass media, the police, and government officials.

Scholarly interest in domestic work has traditionally, around the globe, been the domain of sociologists, economists, and anthropologists. However, *Na casa e na causa* also stems

6 These include HUTCHINSON, Elizabeth Quay. **Workers Like All the Rest of Them: Domestic Service and the Rights of Labor in Twentieth-Century Chile**. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. HICKS, Anasa. **Hierarchies at Home: Domestic Service in Cuba from Abolition to Revolution**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. FLORES-VILLALOBOS, Joan. **The Silver Women: How Black Women's Labor Made the Panama Canal**. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. AMADOR, Emma. **The Politics of Care Work: Puerto Rican Women Organizing for Social Justice**. Durham: Duke University Press, 2025.

7 HICKS, Anasa. **Hierarchies at Home: Domestic Service in Cuba from Abolition to Revolution**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. p. 14-15.

8 PATROAS e empregadas na forma da lei. **O Cruzeiro**. Rio de Janeiro, p. 32, 23 April 1973.

from the recent interest of Brazilian labor historians in domestic labor while adopting the multidisciplinary approach common in gender history, particularly the history of Black women in the Americas (p.43-44). Brazilian labor historiography, greatly influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson, has historically been concerned with male workers in urban industrial centers or in rural agricultural areas. In the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first, it became deeply influenced by pivotal social histories of slavery and post-abolition. While the field slowly incorporated the critiques of Joan Scott and Silvia Federici to Thompson, scholars also drew from diasporic Black feminist theoretical frameworks on labor from Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento, Sueli Carneiro, Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins. Since the 2010s, Brazilian history graduate programs have produced an explosion of undergraduate theses, master's dissertations, and doctoral theses on domestic work, penetrating the worlds of labor domestic workers inhabited at the intersections of race, class, and gender, in addition to region, age, and type of labor. Though Sandra Lauderdale Graham's *House and Street: the Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth Century Rio de Janeiro* (1991) have long been standard bearers for Brazilian domestic work history, since then new scholars have contributed to what is now a dynamic, fast-growing historiography.⁹

These new directions are reflective throughout the monograph, but shine in its first chapter, which combines these approaches to outline the history of domestic workers within Brazilian law and labor legislation. Contrary to the popular assertion that Brazilian legal frameworks simply had little to say about domestic workers, Getirana's careful and dutiful timeline of Brazil's various (and at times, dizzying) legal codes, decrees, and aborted legislation attempts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries show that the law did make domestic work its business. Municipal and federal decrees in the Republican era (1889-1930) São Paulo, for example, were influenced by the preceding attempts during the wane days of slavery to surveil wet nurses. Getirana's analysis makes clear to readers the CLT's infamous exclusion of domestic workers from its protected labor class was neither inevitable or some

9 For specific works from this body of scholarship, see SANCHES, Maria Aparecida Prazeres. **Fogões, pratos e panelas: poderes, práticas e relações de trabalho doméstico**. Salvador 1900/1950. Master's thesis – Universidade Federal da Bahia, 1998. BERNANINDO-COSTA, Joaze. **Sindicatos das Trabalhadoras Domésticas no Brasil: teorias da descolonização e saberes subalternos**. Doctoral thesis – Universidade de Brasília, 2007. DAMASCENO, Caetana. **Segredos da boa aparência: da "cor" à "boa aparência" no mundo do trabalho carioca (1930-1950)**. Seropédica: UFFRJ, 2010. TELLES, Lorena Feres da Silva. **Libertas entre sobrados: contratos de trabalho doméstico em São Paulo na derrocada da escravidão**. São Paulo, Alameda, 2014. PINTO, Elisabete Aparecida. **Etnicidade, gênero e educação: a trajetória de vida de D. Laudelina de Campos Mello (1904-1991)**. São Paulo: Anita Garibaldi, 2015. SILVA, Maciel Henrique. **Nem mãe preta, nem negra fulô: histórias de trabalhadoras domésticas em Recife e Salvador (1870-1910)**. Jundiaí: Paco, 2016. CRUZ, Aline Torres Dias da. **De madureira à Dona Clara: suburbanização e racismo no Rio de Janeiro no context pós-emancipação (1901-1920)**. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2020. MACHADO, Taís de Sant'Anna. **Um pé na cozinha: um olhar sócio-histórico para o trabalho de cozinheiras negras do Brasil**. São Paulo: Editora Fósforo, 2021. SANTOS, Maurício Reali. **Nas fronteiras da domesticidade: experiências e lutas de trabalhadoras domésticas por direitos em Porto Alegre (1941-1956)**. Jundiaí: Paco, 2021. SANTOS, Taina Aparecida Silva. **Mulheres negras, mercado do trabalho, racismo e sexismo (Campinas, 1876-1892)**. Master's thesis – Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2023. LOPES, Juliana Araujo. **Constitucionalismo brasileiro em Pretuguês: trabalhadoras domésticas e lutas por direitos**. Curitiba, Appris, 2025. Many of the books cited here are doctoral theses and masters dissertations published years earlier.

inheritance of slavocratic thinking. Instead, as both Getirana and the state of the scholarship argue, Brazilian labor legislation's exclusion of domestic workers was a tool on the basis of the employing classes to further marginalize, weaken, and control masses of working-class and poor women. Legislators' routine interest in recategorizing and narrowing the types of domestic labor practiced strikes a blow to the assertion that domestic workers were invisible in Brazilian society until the twenty-first century; they were anything but invisible.

The last chapter (chapter 3), whose method relies on oral history, is rich and layered. Conducted with APED-RJ members who had an institutional memory of the organization, Getirana is able to portray the daily operations of the outfit and its interventions experienced by its constituents. It features prominently Nair Jane de Castro Lima, a longtime leader in Brazil's contemporary domestic workers' labor movement. Threading together the links between the black women's movement, trade union movements, and international non-governmental organizations, the oral histories render a more intimate lens of the inroads activists made in winning labor rights for domestic workers. *Na casa e na causa* plays a welcome role not only in historicizing domestic workers' agency and activism beyond cursory acknowledgment, but also making legible and visible the movement's past within the movement's present.

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