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Housework for Revolutionaries
Between Theory and Experience

by
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Submitted to DePauw University Honor Scholar Program

Sponsor: Meryl Altman

First Reader: Derek Ford

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Dedication

Everything for you, Maa.

Acknowledgements

Deepest gratitude to my sponsor, Meryl Altman, for pushing me to discover and manifest my gifts. And to Derek Ford, for being my first teacher and lifelong comrade.

Thanks also to Salma, who was in the back of my mind as I wrote so many of these passages. And to Austin, for reading every word before anyone else. To you both for always believing in me.

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INTRODUCTION

Housework buzzes ever so faintly in the background of our lives. It meets our most fundamental needs, and yet we hardly stop to look closely at it, or at the person who does it. This is necessary work – all the cooking, cleaning, clothes washing, child rearing, nursing – but we pay little attention to it. The powers of society assume housework to be inevitable but trivial: the simple obligation of every home's woman. But this work is far from trivial. Instead, it literally upholds the capitalist economy. It undergirds the entire political economy by (re)producing the world's workers. Only because the people are fed, clothed, and housed, are they able to rejuvenate their powers to go back out to work. And yet, housework and carework get no recognition from the formal economy as being productive and necessary forms of labor. Instead, this work is usually naturalized as a woman's duty. By making it the familial, cultural, and romantic obligation of a woman, the system is able to mystify and invisibilize the domestic as an apolitical and uneconomic space. But all this does is hide the economic exploitation that occurs daily in the homes of all working people; in the form of what I call women's unpaid domestic labor.

I approach the question of women's unpaid domestic labor (or what I often abbreviate as 'wx') from a marxist feminist perspective. Grounded in this theoretical tradition, I ask what can we learn about this topic not only from theory, but also from women's lived experiences. I am interested in how marxist feminist theory about domestic labor interacts with, learns from, and morphs with the experiences of real women. I want to see how theory and experience can interact to give us a deeper, more personal insight into housework. The four women who help me understand the experiential side of things are: Sammy, Beth, and Aviva, who all work with the Party for Socialism and Liberation and are friends, and then my mother, Neena. All four women are interested in revolutionary politics, and have reflected on housework as a political question before. They are submerged in marxist feminist perspectives to varying degrees, and they have all kindly agreed to sit down with me to share their experiences with housework and carework. I listen to their stories, and enter them into conversation with theory: not only to understand more deeply the reality of housework under capitalism, but also to learn how we may move forward in action. While I am trying to uncover theoretical and personal mysteries about domestic labor, I am also trying to find the best way to transform culture and society so

that we can finally put an end to this special exploitation of women at the hands of unpaid domestic labor (wx).

In the next section, 'Methods,' I discuss the procedures I took to interview my narrators. I also articulate some of my assumptions about the worth of a woman's words, along with an explanation of why I interviewed the women that I did. I also include some background information to contextualize the project, and a brief reflection on the mistakes I made throughout the process. After this, we get into the main content of our investigation.

Chapter 1 maps out what some marxist feminists have to say on the topic of unpaid domestic labor. It looks at varying perspectives about what role unpaid domestic labor plays in the larger political economy. I survey Angela Davis, Marx, Lenin, Simone de Beauvoir, Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Christina Delphy – organizing their writings around four central questions. This review grounds us in an ideological framework, and gives us valuable insights on how to think about wx. Yet, theory alone leaves many questions unanswered, and topics uncovered: which is why we now turn to the everyday woman for guidance.

In Chapters 2 through 4, I analyze the interviews according to themes of love, mental health, and solutions for the future. While I largely analyze the women's words on their own terms, the analysis is always in conversation with theory. To begin with Chapter 1, here I look closely at how ideas of 'love' mark women's experiences with domestic work. This theme naturally comes up in many of our conversations: either as an ideological tool that obligates women to perform labor for free; as a weapon for revolutionary politics; or as a cry for self-love.

In Chapter 3, we look at another theme central to the reality of unpaid domestic labor: mental health. I evaluate the psychic cost of housework in relation to the social and material conditions of the community. Under capitalism, being burdened with everyone's share of work and then not being recognized for it, can cause women to think less of themselves – as it did for my mother. So here I probe Maa's views on the connection between psychic wellbeing, self-image, spirituality, and housework.

Having now looked at what housework is like for everyday women, next I solicit their ideas for how we can bring change. How can we re-organise housework in order to eliminate women's exploitation? So in Chapter 4, we address the Wages for Housework movement, as well as the more traditional marxist goal of collectivizing housework. In doing this, we also look at the very process of imagining alternatives to capitalism, and the courage that it takes to do so.

In the Conclusion, I revisit some of the many lessons brought to us by our narrators; highlighting the way in which experience can inform and further theory. The chapter challenges the myth that theory drives action, allowing me to value women not only in the content of my project, but also in its process.

METHOD

I interviewed my mother and three comrades from the Party for Socialism and Liberation for this project. Their names are Neena, Beth, Sammy, and Aviva. Each sat down with me for an oral history interview about their experience with unpaid domestic labor. We met wherever was convenient: I met Beth at her apartment, Sammy at the party office, Aviva over the phone, and my mother in our kitchen. In our conversations I asked about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings on housework and carework. The interviews were unstructured, spontaneous, and conversational, following a typical oral history style. They lasted for as long as: two hours with Beth, one hour with Sammy, forty minutes with Aviva, and two hours with my mother, in addition to a thirty minute follow up interview. Let us now go over the general “structure” of the interviews, as well as the topics that they covered.

Interview “structure.”

The oral history interviews that I conducted were conversational, and did not follow a set structure. Sometimes the interview would veer off into personal conversation and then come back, ebbing and flowing depending on how chatty we were feeling: and that was okay. I would prepare a list of questions and topics that I wanted to address, and check them off as we went. I brought up topics as I saw fit, and went down paths that my narrators brought up: the priority always being their story.

I began each interview with the question “When did you first think about housework as a political issue,” and this would start our conversation. As it went along, I would bring up new questions and topics depending on that moment’s context. This allowed me to prioritize the narrator’s emergent story over my own analytical thinking. The goal was for me to facilitate the emergence of their oral history, and to not clog their thought process with my pre-existing assumptions or theoretical agenda. Sometimes I succeeded in this effort, and sometimes I didn’t so much. But when I did, I followed leads my narrators brought up in their own responses, and let them guide the interview’s course.

For instance, when Sammy answered my first question ‘When did you first think about housework as a political issue,’ she said that it was when Beth’s late partner, Bill (they all know each other through the PSL) referred to housework as “unpaid labor.” And something “clicked”

for her when he said that, it made her rethink her own experiences with housework. So my next move was to ask her if she could tell me more about what exactly “clicked” for her, in reference to her personal life. Sammy had a really interesting response, and this started us off on what was to be a wonderful interview. After exhausting this strategy of chasing after my narrator's own leads, I would refer back to my list of topics, and ask a new question.

The list of topics and questions that I prepared for each interview roughly included:

- What was their experience with housework in childhood, and how it affects their thinking now?
- What kinds of work is needed in their current homes, and who does most of it. How they feel about the distribution of labor in their homes?
- Who had influenced their thinking about housework, both personally and politically?
- Managing the demands of work, home, and the party.
- Their vision for housework in a world free of women's oppression.
- Whether they thought they should get paid for all the domestic labor they did.
- How they thought the party was doing with allocating gendered tasks?

We covered the questions to varying extents in each interview. And depending on what I knew about the narrator, I would adjust the questions accordingly, adding new questions, taking out others – all in an effort to get the most out of each narrator's unique story.

An assumption on women's words.

In this project, I assume that all women are theorists. When they recall, reflect on, and analyze their own lives, they are making theory. They do this when they converse with one another even casually, given that theory is the way in which we understand and explain the world around us. This is the spontaneous process my interviews were trying to capture. And in my analysis of the interviews, I give women's spoken accounts equal weight to the written theory – thus rejecting western academic notions about the spoken and the written. In this way, I am able to value women not only in the content of my project, but also in its process.

This is something I communicated to my narrators before we began our interviews. In a preliminary email I told them that I want theory to honor the experiences of those it is about; that I view them more as a ‘research collaborator’ rather than a ‘subject’; and that they may take the interview wherever it needs to go. Next, I want to explain why I interviewed the group of women that I did.

Why interview party women?

Given that housework is something all people have familiarity with, technically I could have interviewed just about anyone. However, different people are in different places in their thinking about housework. They have all kinds of backgrounds and assumptions about it. Most people haven't even thought consciously about housework, especially in a political way. Thus the interview process would have become very scattered and scrambled. This is why I needed to narrow my focus for the interviews, and speak with women who have some assumptions about housework in common. This would allow me to explore a smaller set of questions with greater depth and intimacy.

Given my marxist feminist grounding, I looked to the women I knew from the Party for Socialism and Liberation. I have so much admiration for Beth, Sammy, and Aviva, and knew that they could teach me a lot about this topic. They identify as marxists and feminists, and have thought critically and deeply about a wide set of women's political issues. I knew that it would be an honor to pick their brains, and to see what we can accomplish having begun with a revolutionary/socialist understanding of social reproduction.

Why interview my mother?

In addition to interviewing three comrades from the PSL, I also interviewed my mother. She is not in any party, and doesn't know any of the other narrators. But in a way hers was the most important interview. Her story of domestic labor is wrapped up with mine. Most of her efforts went into raising me, and I saw my whole life as she made the best possible life for me. Images of her making me breakfast, dressing me for school, and consoling me when I was crying, necessarily haunt this research. Our experience in the home will always be in the back of my mind as I write about this topic. So in a way, interviewing her is an acknowledgement of my own subjectivity in all this, as my mother is who inspired this research in the first place.

What is the party?

Along with Sammy, Beth, and Aviva, I am a member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation. I met all three women a few summers ago when I got involved with the Chicago branch of the organization. The PSL is a national political party with branches in all major cities across the country. It is comprised of leaders, activists, workers, and students of all backgrounds, and they believe that "the only solution to the deepening crisis of capitalism is the

socialist transformation of society.”¹ Driven by international, coalitional, intersectional, and revolutionary politics, the PSL organizes the working people of the world to take back their power. As we will see, the party has a crucial role to play in shaping my narrators and my own political consciousness.

Narrator biographies.

Lastly, I have included here brief biographies for my narrators. Their only purpose is to provide some facts about my narrators that are relevant to this project.

Neena is my mother’s name, here I refer to her as “Maa.” She is an Indian immigrant, and 50 years old. She has worked as a teacher most of her life, and moved to the United States with my family eight years ago from Mumbai, India. When we came to this country, she did not work for a few years, but began working in schools in Chicago three years ago. She now has two jobs as a teacher and an after school teacher in Chicago Public Schools.

Aviva is a 23 year old trans woman, secular Jew, and revolutionary socialist. She grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, and now lives in Chicago with her partner. She is a student, long-time care worker for people with disabilities, and an organizer with the Chicago branch of the PSL and the ANSWER Coalition.

Beth is in her 70s, and is a lifelong organizer with the PSL and the ANSWER Coalition. She is revered in the PSL for her years of activism and wisdom. Beth was married to her late partner, Bill, who was also a beloved revolutionary fighter with the PSL for almost 55 years. Beth nursed Bill in the last ten years of his life as his health debilitated. She worked all her life, mostly as an accountant, and is now living in Chicago.

Sammy is in her 20s, and is also an organizer with the PSL and the ANSWER Coalition. She is a student at Northern Illinois University, and lives with her partner, Brian, in Chicago.

¹ The Program of the PSL: *Socialism and Liberation in the United States: What we are fighting for*, (San Francisco, PSL Publications, 2010), 25.

Reflection on method: a critical look back.

What emerges and develops through dialogue are issues – the chaotic and problematic process of two humans thinking and communicating. It is this rich dialogue that holds ontological priority, not an impoverished list.

– Kristina Minister, *A Feminist Frame for Interviews*.²

I chose oral history as a form for a few reasons. As opposed to more structured forms of interlocution, oral histories allow for a familiar kind of interaction between two people. Casual conversation would allow my narrator to feel at ease, open up, and provide genuine insights. It would give the narrator's insights, intuitions, and thoughts space to unfold, giving them ontological priority in the interview and in the larger project. I took steps to move as close to this ideal as possible. For instance, I did not follow a predetermined set or order of questions; I moved with my narrator's thoughtflow, following threads as they brought them up; I asked open ended questions, I moved slowly to allow reflection and afterthought.

Yet, Kristina Minister reminds us that as much as I would like oral histories to be a natural and unmediated platform for my narrator to tell her story, the conversation inevitably involves two subjects. What follows, then, is "the chaotic and problematic process of two humans thinking and communicating".³ Entertaining no fantasy of unbiasedness or neutrality, feminist oral history must embrace the complexity and imperfection of two subjectivities communicating and influencing each other. My behaviors and words affect how my narrators answer questions, and how my narrators answer my questions, affects how I act and speak. Also, my social anxieties and insecurities affect them, and theirs mine. All these factors make for a complex and problematic interaction—producing a reality rich for both theoretical analysis and methodological self-reflection. While I have used my interviews for theoretical analysis earlier in this paper, here I reflect on my role in shaping the narrator's oral history. One instance in particular stands out to me, as an example of how a small turn in the conversation may lead the interview in a self-defeating direction.

One of my aims in conducting oral history interviews was to not let theory weigh down my narrators' exploration of their experience. Because of a discursive move I made during Sammy's interview, however, exactly that happened. Sammy was my first interview. We had

² Kristina Minister, *A Feminist Frame for Interviews*, (New York, Routledge, 1991), 36.

³ Ibid.

been having a very interesting conversation about unpaid labor in the context of her young marriage, her current partner, and her male comrades in the party. Around 45 minutes into our talk, after discussing whether women should get paid for housework, I decided to ask Sammy an explicitly theoretical question. I said "...so we're calling housework labor, right? But do we literally mean it? Is it the same kind of work as factory work, just made invisible, or are you thinking of it as just contributing to real capitalist production?" A pause and a blank look later, I knew I shouldn't have gone to theory in that way. But I kept on: "Like, is housework just like mystified factory work?" Another blank stare later, I asked if I should elaborate and Sammy said yes. I went on for a minute about the theoretical divide between Davis and Fedirici, knowing full well that I was losing her. After I was done, her responses grew shorter, more hesitant, and the interview naturally dwindled to an end within minutes.

This moment is significant given the larger purpose of my project: to have theory inform experience, and experience inform theory. I establish in my project that my narrators' experiences and thoughts are a form of truth, and that abstract theory is not a privileged form of knowledge over affect, experience, or materiality. In reflections of their own lives, my narrators are supposed to articulate facts, feelings, and theory itself. So to allow a historical debate weigh down my narrator's confidence to speak on the subject, only moves me further from my project's purpose.

CHAPTER 1

THEORY REVIEW

Introduction: sliver of an expansive debate.

A robust debate exists within marxist feminism about how we ought to theorize women's unpaid domestic labor. This debate goes to the heart of marxist theory, and calls into question many of its fundamental categories of analysis. Here, I organize a portion of that expansive debate, focusing on four essential questions. These include: what is labor power; what is the relationship between reproduction and production; what is the qualitative nature of housework; and what are our possible solutions? Though the theoretical geography is complicated, at the very outset, two perspectives emerge as we make our way through these four questions. The two perspectives or “camps” are organized as follows. Angela Davis leads the first camp, also featuring Lenin and Simone de Beauvoir. This group makes an effort to remain true to Marx’s original views. The second and more rebellious group includes Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Christina Delphy. These theorists find that “received Marxian categories prove inadequate” for a feminist analysis, and many of these were involved with the 1970s Wages for Housework movement.⁴

The two groups begin to disagree at the very first question that I pose: “what is labor power?” This initial split guides how each group thinks about the rest of the questions, leading us to two distinct proposed solutions: compensation and collectivization. While these solutions may seem diametrically opposed, they are deceptively congruent. But naturally let us start at the beginning, with our first question.

Ontology of labor power: what kind of commodity is labor power?

Labor is that act, that fundamental condition of all history, which today, just as thousands of years ago, sustains daily life.⁵ In our historical age, labor takes a specific form. It exists under capitalist relations that are defined by an antagonistic relationship between the two major economic classes. The working class is composed of all those who sell their labor power to earn a living; and the owner class sustains itself through the ownership of capital. The

⁴ Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, (Brooklyn, NY, Autonomedia, 2004), 8.

⁵ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, (Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia).

workers' and owner's interests are necessarily opposed. For the capitalist to make as much profit as possible, they need to pay their worker as little as possible. Connecting this understanding to labor power, Fortunati explains that under this system, "the individual has no value: only his or her labor power has value."⁶ Labor power is what the capitalist sees in any individual; their capacity to generate profit. Workers sell their labor power, the only commodity they own, to the capitalist who purchases it at the price of a wage. Marx says that the worker is "obliged to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power, which exists only in his living self."⁷ Marx uses gendered language here to describe our living capacity for work. This concept of labor power will go on to become the basis of a powerful and robust marxist political economic theory that has already contributed greatly to the theoretical, political, and historical development of the world.

Marxist political economy will falter many times, however, because its foundations do not always acknowledge how labor power itself is produced. Labor power is overwhelmingly nurtured by women. As mothers, wives, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and girlfriends, women birth, raise, and take care of the labor force. This gendered understanding of labor power is a basic fact that all the theorists in this paper agree upon. They agree that the family is where labor power is renewed, and choose to "build from Marx" by including women in their analyses.⁸ They are all dedicated to developing a more accurate understanding of the world through their own variations of marxist feminism. Under this umbrella of agreement – given that labor power is a commodity, and that women make it – disagreement stems over what kind of commodity labor power is exactly. This is a debate over the "ontology of labor power."⁹

Is labor power the same kind of commodity as that produced in the factory? Is it produced within capitalism just like all other commodities? Is it perhaps the most important commodity of all? These questions become an early splitting point for how the various theorists come to see women's unpaid domestic labor (wx). Their position on these questions will determine whether they think of wx as a productive or an unproductive activity – the topic of our next section. If they decide that labor power is a commodity just like any other, they most likely view wx as a productive activity. If they decide that it is a unique and different kind of

⁶ Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, (Brooklyn, NY, Autonomedia, 1981), 9.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, (Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia).

⁸ Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, (London, Pluto Press, 2017), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

commodity from all others, then they most likely view wx as an unproductive (though not unimportant) activity. Federici's camp falls into the former, while Davis's falls into the latter.

Part of Federici's argument is that women's unpaid domestic labor is productive because it produces a commodity; just as factory work is productive because it produces a commodity. This comparison to factory work must be made because it is the only kind of production that we recognize right now. All commodities are defined by having exchange value, more than just use value. A thing has exchange value if it can be traded on the market. Labor power, like steel, land, and data, gets traded on the market and has exchange value. Workers sell their labor for as high a price they can get, and capitalists buy it for as low a price they can get. Thus, to claim that wx is a productive activity, Federici's camp defines labor power as a capitalist commodity. Davis's camp would actually agree with this premise: that labor power is a commodity like any other. They would disagree, however, with Federici's conclusion that housework is an act of production.

Davis argues that labor power is not produced like other capitalist commodities, they say, even though it acts like one upon entering the market. Marx said that labor power is "'singular' in the sense that it is not produced capitalistically."¹⁰ It is produced in the home, and not the factory. This means that Davis's camp perceives a split between industry and home. They argue that this is not a figurative but a historical divide created by the conditions of industrial production.¹¹ The Federici camp, however, would assert that this divide is a discursive illusion created to exploit and disguise women's labor.

Dalla Costa, Federici's comrade, says that women make a commodity that is just as "valuable as the commodities their husbands produce on the job."¹² Labor power is a commodity just like any other. In fact, they claim that it is the most important one. Another comrade, Fortunati, explains:

[...] labor power is the most precious commodity for capital, not only because it is the only commodity capable of creating value during the process of production, but also because it reproduces itself as value within the process of reproduction.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 4-7.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 12-13.

By creating additional value and replenishing itself, labor becomes the most basic and important commodity to capitalism. Federici writes, “the exploitation of women has played a central function in the process of capitalist accumulation, insofar as women have been the producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist commodity: labor-power.”¹⁴ Far from being less than other factory products, labor power is an even more essential and necessary commodity, according to this group of theorists. They emphasize that this essential commodity is produced under capitalist relations by women in the home, based on a later retheorization of the family as a site of production. Summarizing this perspective, Davis writes, “the Wages for Housework Movement defines housewives as creators of the labour-power sold by their family members as commodities on the capitalist market.”¹⁵ They are the producer of a capitalist commodity. Dalla Costa elaborates on this herself:

(The woman) has been isolated in the home, forced to carry out work that is considered unskilled, the work of giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and servicing the worker for production. Her role in the cycle of production remained invisible because only the product of her labour, the labourer, was visible.¹⁶

Capitalism absorbs the product as if it was produced in thin air. The worker behind labor power is erased, and made “invisible.” Fortunati elaborates, “Reproduction work is posited as a natural force of social labor, which, while appearing as a personal service, is in fact *indirectly* waged labor engaged in the reproduction of labor power.”¹⁷ The production of labor power is naturalized as a given, rather than something performed by a human, that they can choose to not do. This is why a houseworker’s strike is central to this camp’s vision for a solution. A strike calls into focus the fact that workers are not a natural resource ripe for use, but a human force that can choose to not comply. They can choose whether or not to make capitalism’s labor force.

Drawing a clear equivalence between labor power and all other capitalist commodities, then, this camp operates on a different ontology of labor power than does Davis. This leads their camp to argue that women's unpaid domestic labor is productive, given that it is making products.

¹⁴ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 8.

¹⁵ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 10.

¹⁶ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1973), 28.

¹⁷ Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 8.

By looking at the different perspectives from Davis and Federici's camps regarding the ontology of labor power, we now arrive at a new question. The two sides disagree about whether labor power is the same as other commodities under capitalism because they are thinking about the home differently. One thinks that the home is disconnected from capitalist relations, while the other believes that it is an integral part. The question I will explore in the next section concerns whether the reproduction that takes place in the home is the same as the production that takes place in the factory. What is the difference between reproductive and productive labor? And what is the relationship between the two?

What is the relationship between reproduction and production?

Reproduction refers to all the activities involved in reproducing the worker so that they may report for work the next day. The worker has to be fed, clothed, be provided with a clean and habitable home, be given some emotional support, and sexual comfort. They must replenish their energies to sustain their labor power for the capitalists to appropriate. Sustaining this requires cooking and cleaning in addition to birthing and taking care of children. Most of this work is done by the worker's wife, whether or not she is also a worker. Production is, then, what picks up when the worker arrives at the factory doors. This is where the goods and services of society are produced.

While I have just described these two cycles as separate, this very separation is up for debate. While Marx describes a clear distinction as I have above, Davis's camp sees an important connection between the two, and Federici's virtually views them as one.

Marx not only views the two types of labors as separate, but he also made housework invisible in his central analysis of capitalism. By observing society only from the male factory worker's perspective, Marx gave little attention to who was reproducing that laborer. Thinking of the home as a sanctuary, Marx argues that the worker

... no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal.¹⁸

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), 30.

Here Marx is making a point about the abstracting impulse of wage labor.¹⁹ In doing so, however, he reveals a blind spot. He makes the home seem like a respite from work, a place to unwind. The worker, Marx says, is free in his “animal” functions at home. Marx naturalizes these activities by calling them animalistic, hiding their truly social nature. While the home may be a respite from alienation and exploitation to a man, we know that this is not the case for a woman. She is the one who cooks whatever her husband is “eating,” pours whatever he is “drinking,” washes whatever he is “dressing-up” in, and serves as what he is “procreating.” Her labor makes the home seem like a refuge for him. All of this work seems to be missing from Marx’s description of the home. He writes, “the worker [...] only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home.”²⁰ Women who do endless hours of labor in the house obviously do not relate to this claim. They serve capitalism both inside and outside the home. Women who work outside come home to piles of housework and hours of childcare. There exists, then, more of a connection between the home and the factory than what Marx has described. Bhattacharya, however, thinks that Marx saw more of a connection between reproduction and production than it may seem at first. Hers may constitute a more charitable and nuanced reading.

Bhattacharya reports that Marx saw housework as “saturated/overdetermined” by factory work.²¹ She explains, “even my concrete labor (gardening) is not performed during and for a time of my own choosing or in forms that I can determine, but has to ‘fit in’ with the temporal and objective necessities of other social relations.”²² Another way to put this: the hegemony of capitalist work shapes everything around it—even activities that are not directly within itself. It makes everything turn on its own axis. Capitalism is so powerful that it determines how much time people have for housework, what appliances they use for it, etc. On this view, Marx makes a clear distinction between the two labours, but acknowledges a relationship between them.

Much more aware of the connection between the two realms of labor, and of the crucial contribution of women, Angela Davis forms a slightly different opinion from Marx. Along with Lenin, Davis argues that housework is unproductive, but necessary for production to occur.²³ It

¹⁹ Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 11.

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, (Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia).

²¹ Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

is merely a “precondition” to the labor process.²⁴ Davis makes this claim on the grounds that “the industrial revolution resulted in the structural separation of the home economy from the public economy.”²⁵ Before, small-scale cottage industries took place inside the home. Upon their industrialization, the house was left only with reproductive work. This separation moved all productive activity outside of the household. Davis says that this is why “housework cannot be defined as an integral component of capitalist production.”²⁶ Rather, it is related to production as a “precondition.”²⁷ Wives and mothers do not participate in, but instead prepare for the labor process. They birth their children and raise their husbands to be ‘productive members of society.’ The children and husbands make up the labor force. They then go out into the world and produce goods and services for us all. The woman’s work was necessary for this to happen. In Davis’s perspective, reproduction is separate but intertwined with production. Delphy, a member of Federici’s camp, accuses this of being a ‘marxist’ pseudo-theory.

Delphy laments, “‘marxist’ pseudo-theories of the family [...] see the family as existing in order to sustain indirectly the only form of exploitation recognized under capitalism: that of the workers.”²⁸ More specifically, of the male workers. She believes that in order to recognize women’s exploitation, theory needs to be reevaluated on a fundamental level. There is a gap between the theory we have, and the experiences of women.²⁹ The work to close this gap has been started by Federici, Fortunati, and Dalla Costa. They embark on a theoretical enterprise that starts with calling reproduction what it is.

To Federici’s camp, production and reproduction are so deeply connected that they are essentially one. To them, capitalist production is carried out by wives and mothers, and the home is their work site. These economic relations are mystified by patriarchal and familial constructs of womanhood. Discourses of love, obligation, motherhood, and marriage mask over a site of production that deeply exploits women. Real labor is made invisible as it is seen as a natural resource rather than human labor. It becomes women’s natural duty to serve her family, as taken for granted as the rising and setting sun.

If we recall that Federici’s camp views labor power as a literal commodity, we see why they recognize women as producers. Rather than being outside of capitalist relations, mothers

²⁴ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 11.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Delphy, *Close to Home: A materialist analysis of women’s oppression*, 57.

²⁹ Ibid.

are literally engaging in capitalist production by creating their own, as well as their husbands' and children's labor powers. However, as producers they receive no compensation. While all workers are paid a wage under capitalism, these workers are not. This means they are exploited so deeply that they constitute a "special class of workers" doubly exploited both in the workplace and in the family. Elaborating this double exploitation, Fortunati writes,

There is thus a very clear difference between the fate of male and of female workers under capitalism. While for the former the ownership of his labor power brings with it a literal "liberation" from reproduction work, for the woman, ownership of her labor power as capacity for reproduction does not "free" her from production work.³⁰

Being able to work at the factory is not liberating for a woman. It simply means that she has picked up a second job, and a second exploitation to come with it. At home she is already working for the capitalist by producing his laborers. The entrance of women into the workforce simply doubled their work, and did not liberate them in any way.

Working off of Dalla Costa and Federici's reformulation, Delphy creates a class analysis of women. She agrees with the insights these women make, and offers alternative arguments in support. While they "constitute the embryo of a radical feminist analysis based on marxist principles, Delphy laments that they just "did not go far enough."³¹ To take it further, Delphy makes a radical metaphor between class and gender, but also clarifies some of the insights that Dalla Costa and Federici do not take to their logical conclusion.

Delphy begins at the premise that the two forms of labor we have been discussing are in fact one. "There is no essential difference between activities which are said to be 'productive' (like growing wheat and milling it) and domestic activities which are called 'non-productive' (like cooking the selfsame flour)."³² These are the same kind of activity because both exist on the market. This is a slightly different argument from the one Dalla Costa makes about labor power being a commodity. Rather than making an argument about producing laborers for capitalism, Delphy says that all domestic chores exist on the market. When these services are sold on the market, their productive nature is never questioned. It is just when the wife does them for free, that they suddenly become 'non-productive' chores. Delphy reminds us that

³⁰ Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 13.

³¹ Delphy, *Close to Home: A materialist analysis of women's oppression*, 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 65.

When women in families cannot provide certain goods and services, they are *bought*. And in fact *all* the unusual domestic services exist on the market. Delicatessens and restaurants offer prepared dishes, nurseries and babysitters offer child care, cleaning agencies and domestic servants offer housework, etc.³³

All motherly and wifely services are sold on the market. Middle class women often pay for nannies, and working class women often buy food outside. When these services are purchased, one pays for the “value added” in transforming raw material into finished product. This value is cost free when added by the housewoman. It is free not because the product is any different, but because of who makes it. It is done by the “wife” or “mother” for whom this is a familial duty, a ‘labor of love.’ Delphy explains that women’s labor is excluded from the zone of exchange not because of the nature of what they produce, but because of who they are.³⁴ They are excluded as economic agents via sexist discourses. But in truth they are workers. And in fact, Delphy argues provocatively, that in the home they constitute the proletariat.

This is what makes Delphy’s argument a class analysis of women. She asserts that women and men belong to two different classes. The women are the proletariat, and the men are the capitalists. The husband and the wife’s relationship in the home replicates that of the capitalist and the worker. While the capitalist owns the means of production (the house, the appliances) the workers do the productive work (they cook and clean). This relationship is explicit in all cultural images, scenes, and memories of a man sitting on the couch in front of the tv with a beer as his wife pitter-patters around him doing work. The proletariat works and the bourgeoisie benefits materially from that work.³⁵ Just as the proletariat can leave their employer and go work for another, the wife may divorce her husband.

But because it is much harder to leave one’s husband and children than it is to leave one’s job, wives are involved in some form of feudal relationship. This fact stems from “the impossibility of exchanging her labour, which stems in turn from the impossibility of changing her employers. (We only need to compare the number of divorced women who remarry with the number of workers who change jobs within a given year).”³⁶ Because she is tied through marriage to her husband, the wife, like a serf, is tied to her employer. Bound by social meanings of ‘woman,’ she is “destined by birth to become a member of this class,” the class of the

³³ Ibid., 65

³⁴ Ibid., 60.

³⁵ Ibid., 72.

³⁶ Ibid., 71.

proletariat.³⁷ This feudal relationship is imposed upon all women, making it the central economic exploitation of their class. ³⁸ Within the proletariat they become a super exploited caste. Delphy assures us that “Within the proletariat,] they constitute a super-exploited caste, as is well known, this super-exploitation is clearly connected to their specific familiar exploitation as women.”³⁹

It is clear, then, that Delphy views reproduction as a productive activity. Not only that, she views it as the woman’s primary productive work under capitalism. Directly working for the capitalist becomes her second service after her service to husband/father. Delphy says, “When they participate in capitalist production, women enter additionally into a second relation of production.”⁴⁰ This articulates fully what Federici’s camp means by “double exploitation.” Being exploited by patriarchy and capitalism means being exploited by two representatives of the bourgeoisie class. The ‘second shift’ becomes literal in Delphy’s analysis. The woman works for the capitalist in the factory, and for her capitalist husband in the home. It is important, however, to make a distinction between Fortunati and Delphy’s understanding of women's double exploitation through reproduction and production. While Fortunati thinks that the factory-owning capitalists are benefiting from the wife’s unpaid domestic labor (since she creates labor power), Delphy thinks that the husband – who literally is the capitalist – profits from his proletariat wife’s unpaid domestic labor.

Given this, Delphy’s view begs a lot of questions. What would the implications be of viewing all men and women as antagonistically opposed to each other in a full blown class war? What does this mean for children? What does this mean for the possibility of a united working class struggle? Despite the host of questions that Delphy’s analysis opens up, she enriches and challenges this wx debate in marxist feminist literature. At the least, she encourages us to question, on a fundamental level, the separation between reproduction and production that marxists often assume.

Thus far we have looked at different understandings of the relationship between the house and the factory. Progressively moving towards a more connected view, we surveyed Marx, Davis, Federici and Dalla Costa, and then Delphy. As we look ahead to forging a solution, a big question will be whether we want to continue to engage in housework or not. Is

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

this the kind of work that we want to keep doing? This becomes a question because one of the proposed solutions (largely Davis's) is to abolish housework. This proposal is based on the premise that the nature of housework is deadening – the kind of thing that nobody should ever have to engage in. We now turn to why Davis makes this claim. More generally, I ask what is the qualitative nature of housework?

What is the nature of housework?

Some women like housework. They find it de-stressing, calming in its monotony. Some women enjoy taking care of their children and would trade nothing for it. They have a positive relationship to house and care work. Davis, however, forecloses this possibility in her analysis of women's unpaid domestic labor. A central focus of her argument is that wx is not only unproductive, but also uncreative. She says that "neither women nor men should waste precious hours of their lives on work that is neither stimulating nor productive."⁴¹ Not stimulating and not productive: the two accusations form separate lines of argumentation for Davis. Both lines however lead her to the conclusion that rather than compensating wx, it ought to be abolished.

Davis thinks that housework is pure drudgery. Davis calls housework "deadening" and "never-ending."⁴² She and Lenin share this opinion. Davis quotes Lenin as he proclaims,

[...] petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades (the woman), chains her to the kitchen and to the nursery, and wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.⁴³

These adjectives paint a clear picture: this is work that nobody should have to do. There is something especially dreadful about this compared to other forms of labor under capitalism. To understand why, we have to acknowledge the existential premises that Davis is pulling from.

Simplifying grossly, there are two types of tasks in existentialist philosophy: transcendent and immanent. Transcendent tasks push humanity beyond what is, and imminent tasks merely repeat and replicate it. The former kind is considered superior, and is tied to men. In prehistoric hunter gatherer times, men were assigned by biology to transcendent tasks. As

⁴¹ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 2.

⁴² Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 12.

⁴³ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 12-13.

hunters and warriors they felt the rush of death, and invented and forged new weapons to kill and conquer better. In this way they created value. On the other hand, biology destined women to the repetitive work of cooking, healing, and child rearing. Birthing children only repeats humanity, it does not transcend it. Simone de Beauvoir articulates this in *The Second Sex*. She says that the woman has been “doomed to imminence.”⁴⁴ And this damnation takes its modern form in housework. Still, women are “stagnating,” experiencing a “degradation of existence.”⁴⁵ Beauvoir laments that as men write, create, and produce, women cook, clean, and re-produce. Given that existentialism considers transcendence to be the only path to finding meaning in life,⁴⁶ the fact that women cannot reach it is a serious problem. The objective of a women's movement then ought to be to fight for access to transcendent tasks.

This is the background Davis relies on to make her argument about wx. Federici critiques this argument, however, on the basis that it essentially relies on a sexist outlook towards women's work. Beauvoir assigns disparate value to men and women's work simply because it is men's and women's work. Federici would say that it is hard to see how hunting, a primal task that humans share with animals, would be more transcendent than materializing new human beings into the world.

Beauvoir writes, “The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but in risking life that man raises himself above the animal.”⁴⁷ Animals, however, hunt and risk a lot. Being able to risk life in hunting is not exceptionally human, or male, and so is not a sound basis for existential superiority. Women routinely died during childbirth, risking their lives for the propagation of humanity. And if men are the ones who can transcend humanity, in Beauvoir's view, they were all birthed by a woman. The assignment of disparate normative value to prehistoric male and female tasks perhaps betrays a distaste for women, rather than their tasks. Applied to the modern instance, we may ask how housework is any less alienating and stultifying compared to factory work?

With these questions in mind, Federici's camp leaves it open as to whether they think housework is drudgery. Given that they view housework as equal to other professions under capitalism, they inevitably understand that it is alienating. Just as all work (as we know it) is eventually meant to be abolished after the socialist revolution, housework too (as we know it)

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

must end. In step with Davis, this camp also believes that housework should fade away at some point. Whereas Davis demands this abolition now, Federici's camp envisions a longer, more protracted struggle.

Solutions: two paths lead to one.

The Wages for Housework campaign demanded that the government pay a stipend to all women who work in the house. This was their solution to wx. This demand was meant to be part of a long term struggle to stake women's share in the socialist revolution. For capitalist housework to eventually be destroyed after the socialist revolution, it must first be recognized. As it stands, wx is entirely mystified and invisible in the United States. There are no houseworkers unions, no houseworkers labor rights, or any law that recognizes the economic relevance of housework. A movement must thus be built – one that demands recognition of housework as a productive activity from which capitalism grossly benefits. The only way to recognize labor under capitalism, of course, is to compensate it with a wage.

Dalla Costa argues that if women are to ever be relieved of housework, they must first get paid for it. Housework must follow the trajectory that all other forms of labor have. When the multitude nears the historical stage at which capitalist work may be replaced by a more democratic and just form of work, teamsters, window cleaners, waitresses, teachers, nurses, and houseworkers may all come together to determine what the socialization of their industries should look like. Dalla Costa explains,

[...] we are not interested in making our work more efficient or more productive for capital. We are interested in reducing our work, and ultimately refusing it altogether. But as long as we work in the home for nothing, no one really cares how long or how hard we work. For capital only introduces advanced technology to cut the costs of production after wage gains by the working class. Only if we make our work cost (i.e. only if we make it uneconomical) will capital "discover" the technology to reduce it. At present, we often have to go out for a second shift of work to afford the dishwasher that should cut down our housework.⁴⁸

Dalla Costa shares Davis's vision that one day women may "refuse" housework altogether. The issue is that capitalism will never create the technology that can make this possible, unless these workers unite, organize, and become a threat. One becomes a threat to a

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

capitalist by trying to take away their money. Federici's camp then argues that the solution to women's exploited domestic labor is fair compensation.

It must be noted that Federici's camp is not arguing for an equal division of labor between men and women. This solution is commonly proposed by those concerned about the outsized amount of work that women are subject to in the home. If we somehow ensured that the wife and husband did equal amounts of housework and childcare, this would certainly take away women's special exploitation. Then, men and women would both be exploited as houseworkers. Of course this is not a final solution, though it might bring some relief to women. Davis also does not make this argument.

Davis insists that even "if it were at all possible simultaneously to liquidate the idea that housework is women's work and to redistribute it equally to men and women alike," this would not be a satisfactory solution.⁴⁹ This redistribution would not take away the "oppressive nature of the work itself."⁵⁰ Ideally, neither men nor women should have to perform this labor. Instead, the industrial economy should take over all social reproduction. Davis illustrates,

A substantial portion of the housewife's domestic tasks can actually be incorporated into the industrial economy [...] Teams of trained and well-paid workers, moving from dwelling to dwelling, engineering technologically advanced cleaning machinery, could swiftly and efficiently accomplish what the present-day housewife does so arduously and primitively.⁵¹

Technology clearly plays an integral role in Davis's vision. While this applies well to chores such as cleaning and cooking, it applies less so to child rearing. For that, childcare would be industrialized in large child care service centers, perhaps.

Given Davis's and Lenin's concerns about housework's qualitative nature, they view the Wages for Housework movement as a step in the wrong direction. To pay women to do this work would only "further legitimate their domestic slavery."⁵² A government paycheck would only ensure women's bondage to a life of crushing immanence. Of course a paycheck cannot make this condition any better – it can only solidify it.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

Conclusion, onto experience.

If we have learned anything from this discussion, it is that marxist feminists are deeply divided. Starting at the level of ontology, we disagree about what labor power is, about what production is, about whether housework is a productive or meaningful activity, and if it should be abolished or paid for. Rather than fixating over these seemingly irreconcilable divides, we ought to look elsewhere for guidance. It only makes sense to ask everyday women who actually do this labor, for their perspectives.

At this point I remind myself that my larger question concerns women's experiences. We ought to be able to locate real women's experiences in the theory that purports to describe them. Thus, we now turn to the interviews that I conducted with my narrators, to see how their insights and stories can help complete the picture that theory started to make. In this next section, I look closely at the idea of 'love' to see how it plays into women's lived experience with housework and carework.

CHAPTER 2

LOVE: AN IDEOLOGICAL PLAYER IN WOMEN'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

Love is tangled up with labor on a very ontological level. The two go hand in hand in many ways. For example, we often call domestic chores “labor of love” when they must be done for free. Even when they are professionalized, we call it (care)work to pronounce its loving nature. ‘Love’ is baked into the definition of unpaid labor, as we often say that it is itself the “special ingredient” in grandma’s cooking. And as popularized by the book *The 5 Love Languages*, one of its most common manifestations is “acts of service.”⁵³ Culture generally links love and labor together, to the consequence of taking the political out of labor. Love can help masque the economic relationship between two people, leaving room only for romantic and familial attachments. Operating at the level of ideology, ‘love’ paints over relations of production in the home, invisibilizing the political and economic nature of this space.

Yet, though it may be a construct that invisibilizes unpaid labor, and exacerbates the exploitation of women, love is real. Even if it functions for a specific economic end, love is a powerful and important element of our social fabric. It holds together our most dear relationships, and is a primary way in which we find meaning and value in our lives. Despite the nefarious end to which it may be deployed by capitalism, love cannot be discarded so easily. And this fact – that we still need love in our lives, the very love that often oppresses us – probably weights especially heavy in the minds of the women who are aware of what is going on.

My narrators are aware of this conflictual, confusing, and contested role that love plays in the politics of women’s economy. And they grapple with it in their personal lives. Each responds to this conflictual love and its demands in unique ways. For instance, while Aviva reflects on care work for her disabled sister, to ultimately reveal a possible reunification between love and politics; Maa argues that when housework is individualized, love runs out, both for others and for herself.

⁵³ Gary Chapman’s book *The 5 Love Languages* names Acts of Service, Words of Affirmation, Gifts, Quality Time, and Physical Touch the five most common love languages.

Aviva, disability care work and reclaiming love for the struggle.

Growing up in California, Aviva and her mother did a lot of care work for her sister who has autism. At this point in our conversation, I had just asked Aviva to describe what kind of work went into caring for her sister. She responded:

Aviva: (05:58)

Yeah. So for my sister it was a lot of supervision, cause she needed constant supervision. It was a lot of meal prep, diaper changes, um, certain behavioral things because sometimes she would bite or she would hit, and we'd have to be able to diffuse those situations. She has seizures, so having to administer medication, and making sure that she was safe when she did have seizures. I think that's kind of the bulk of it—other than like, you know, having to go for a walk or whatever. Which, I dunno, I guess that is in a sense unpaid *labor*. Because when we had respite workers come in, who were just people who would come into our house to make sure that my mom was able to go out and go to work, or get groceries done, they would go for a walk with my sister. [Right]. So I guess, in a sense, doing things, just like going on a walk or hanging out outside, is to some extent an aspect of that labor.⁵⁴

Summer: (07:38)

Mhm. What makes you hesitant to call it labor?

Aviva: (07:42)

Uh, I think, sort of, probably, just... internalizing a lot of misogyny around it. [I laugh]. Like if we're being real. Just the idea that 'if I categorize this as labor then I'm saying that I don't want to spend time with my sister,' or some shit like that. [Right]. Yeah, I mean that's a big thing. Like you feel like you're selfish or something if you ... yeah.

Listing the kinds of labor that one does in the home is itself a political act. If one makes too broad a list, they risk defying the institution of love, seeming selfish and cold. Too narrow a list, and one disavows their own efforts and truth. For Aviva, this all emerged with the question of walks. Did taking her sister on walks count as carework? Here she unpacks that issue for herself. Upon first making her list, she includes meals, food, and medication, and wraps it up at that — “I think that's kind of the bulk of it.” But then she adds, “Other than, you know, having to go for a walk or whatever.” Though she recalls activities like walking, she still excludes them from her list of labors. In a few moments, however, Aviva reconsiders: “I dunno, I guess that is

⁵⁴ I edited out “um” “uh” and “like” unless they were made a pronounced or marked pause; unless they had meaning within the monologue’s progression and content.

in a sense unpaid *labor*.” The reasoning was that when professional care workers did the walking, they were paid for it.

When Aviva ultimately concludes that “just doing things,” like going on a walk, is also labor, she said them through words such as “I guess,” “in a sense,” and “to some extent.” Sensing this uncharacteristic hesitation in Aviva’s otherwise self-assured and confident ways of speaking, I asked her why the hesitation? A few pauses later she says a bit emphatically: “Probably just internalizing a lot of misogyny around it,” and we share a laugh. To call something so everyday and simple such as going for a walk “labor,” makes it sound like one cannot recognize the value in relationships and quality time. The fear of seeming this way, will ensure that most of us never articulate the words that Aviva had the courage to. Accusations of being cold, loveless, or “selfish” have always played a part in putting down feminist liberation, and they still do. It’s as if one cannot recognize love as real, and still critique the political and economic ways in which it must be manifested.

Can love be reimagined in such a way, that it no longer has to rest on the expenditure of women? May we disconnect love from women’s exploitation, and maybe even go so far as to reconnect it with our liberation? In the context of political economy, how can we reclaim love? Aviva points us in a helpful direction. As our conversation goes on, she helps us find resolution between love and labor.

Picking right back up from before, I ask:

Summer: (8:35)

Can you talk more about that ‘internalized misogyny’? – these constructs that emotionalize the whole situation? You know, ‘labor of love,’ ‘love is service’ and all of those kinds of logics that are working?

Aviva: (08:56)

Yeah, I think for me some of the biggest aspects around that were this sort of guilt and frustration where if I got fed up with my sister because I was with her for 12 hours straight and didn't get any breaks, I would feel bad. Like ‘Oh, I should be able to handle this.’ Like, ‘I'm an asshole for *not* being able to’. And like I said, I have worked in paid care work and a lot of that shit is like, ‘Oh, we're going to pay you unlivable wages and then we're going to tell you that you get a “second paycheck,” and that second paycheck is knowing that you helped someone.’ That's legit what they tell you. [They say that?] Yeah. They tell you, ‘Oh hey, all the workers here get two paychecks. One is your wage

and the other is knowing that you've made a difference in someone's life'. And it's like fuck off and give me a livable wage.

But yeah, that shit is sort of the justification for why we get paid so poorly and why we can't unionize. Because if we demand higher wages, if we demand better working conditions, if we demand the right to a union, then we're selfish. We're like depriving our clients of valuable care, even though we're demanding these conditions so that not just ourselves but the people we care for can have better care. We're fighting for these conditions cause all of us deserve better. But it doesn't matter. I mean like even with teachers, like when the teachers go on strike, everyone's like, 'Oh they're just greedy.' [Right]. It's the same shit.

Aviva begins by talking about the feelings of “guilt and frustration” that accompany having to perform hours of unpaid labor. To avoid feeling selfish, women compel themselves to do wx, and do it happily. If Aviva is tired from helping her sister, she feels like a “guilty...selfish...asshole.” These are incredibly hurtful feelings the love-filled discourse produces in order to keep the system running, to keep women working. Aware of its operation in the home, Aviva also makes the connection to how love operates in paid work environments. She encourages us to understand how love operates as an economic category not only in the home, but also in the workplace. Here too, love is deployed in the name of profit.

When she worked with disabled persons in the care work industry, Aviva recalls her supervisors talking on about a “second paycheck.” After an actual wage, this second paycheck is “knowing that you helped someone.” By calling on the selfless and love-driven character of “care”-work, Aviva’s employers justified paying her and her fellow workers an unlivable wage.

In this way, unpaid care work is intimately connected to paid care work for Aviva. Performing in both roles not only helped her begin to think about housework as a political issue, but it also helped her deconstruct love as an ideological player in the political economy.

Though it is usually used against feminists and workers, love is actually on their side, says Aviva. We’re not the selfish ones, they are. We are the ones who really care about our disabled loved ones and clients; willing to fight for radically better lives for both them and us. Political women like Aviva do this by pulling care work and unpaid labor into the political realm. They demand “higher wages,” “better working conditions,” and the “right to a union.” Rather than being selfish, these demands are deployed so that “not just ourselves, but the people we care for can have better care. We're fighting for these conditions cause all of us deserve better,” Aviva emphasizes. She makes a crucial connection here between working

conditions and the conditions of care. If domestic workers are compensated fairly, those who need their services will also receive better care. By doing this, Aviva situates the care worker on the side of the person who needs it, and not against them. Instead of a political demand coming in between caregiver and receiver, and destroying the possibility of love, politics can unite them all. The politicization of wx can actually help caregivers show love in a more real and sustainable way. Their demands for acknowledgement and compensation can be constructed as love for themselves, and those who need their help. In this way, Aviva points us to a reconciliation between love and labor in a way that does not require the continued exploitation of women.

Whereas previously a capitalist notion of love was used to coax free labor from women, now women's political demands themselves can be an act of love. To make this clearer, we may refer to Aviva's example of teachers on strike. She mentions that the "selfishness" accusation works the same way for both care workers and teachers-another gendered profession. Recently, in the winter of 2019, Chicago's Teachers Union completed their longest strike. They shut down public schools for 11 days. Many people in the city thought that the teachers were being selfish. Like Aviva said, "When the teachers go on strike, everyone's like, Oh they're just greedy." But the teachers were successful at proving that love and genuine care for students was their primary motive. They accomplished this through rhetorical moves on social media and in strike demands. Their demands forefronted smaller class sizes, more school nurses, more school counselors, and more special education teachers. These demands were an expression of love for their students, who deserve better. They showed that working conditions are the students' learning conditions, and this message rang well with Chicago's people. Not only did the entire city mobilize behind them, but Chicago Public School corporation had to meet most of their demands, spending 11 million on smaller class sizes, more school nurses, and school counselors. In this way, love can be deployed politically on the side of workers, feminists, and women. Political demands do not have to come in between caregiver and receiver. Instead demands for recognition and compensation can unite the two, pointing the way to a revolutionary politics of love.

Maa, love runs out: collective labor and self-love.

My mother thinks about the topic of love, obligation, and labor with a whole new set of assumptions and values from Aviva. While Aviva's words helped us understand how love can work as an ideology that can either oppress or liberate us, Maa's words illuminate whole new lessons about the relationship between love and unpaid labor.

To her, love is a real motive for housework. She reports that her work is driven not by ideological preconditioning, but by a genuine love for family. She chooses to do this work, not out of a feeling of obligation, but because she loves me and my father, and wants us to have a good life. However, this sentiment is followed with a big but." *"But it's annoying if I have to do it all the time, along with all the other stuff,"* she says. Though Maa is inspired to do a lot of the domestic work in the house out of love, that feeling runs out if it becomes an everyday and thankless chore.

Turning to our conversation, we first approach the topic of love by talking about what it does not look like. While reflecting on how a more equitable household could be run, Maa makes the argument that maybe white people have "figured it out." Mid point, however, she and I stop to ask whether they are in fact sadder because how (Maa perceives) they run their homes.

Neena: (18:29)

I'm thinking that this is a situation which a lot of whites have understood – a lot of *goras*⁵⁵ have understood. And that's the reason why you see the way they are. Because the wife is not cooking for everyone, it's like you said [in highschool], the kids make their own lunch and they bring to school. So everyone is doing their own thing, you know? No one is really having a big square meal together. In so many houses, people actually cook their own meal and then eat it ... which I feel is not okay. I just feel that way. Some of the meals are fine.

Summer: (19:16)

Is there something sad about that? Everybody cooking their own meals on their own?

Neena: (19:28)

Yeah. That's taking it – that goes to the level of being indifferent towards each other, you know? So I'm thinking eating and cooking together is a great thing. We have a lot of fun when we cook together, or even you've done that with your friends. [Yeah. Right].

Right? But it only becomes a problem when the burden falls on one person. [Yeah].

⁵⁵ Translation: "white people."

Something about a family in which “people actually cook their own meal and then eat,” seems foreign and wrong to her. Something about it is “not okay.” The individualization of house work to that extent makes family members “indifferent” to each other. When there is no exchange of services, there is less love and togetherness in the environment. It’s better when everyone cooks together, works in the house together. There is something uplifting about that collectivity. Love exists not in individuality, but in collectivity to Maa. Though this collectivity remains within the family – and not in some grand socialization project of housework – this is a collectivity nonetheless. Mutual love could be manifested through mutual service. Perhaps this is another way in which love can be shown more healthfully. Rather than ‘love as service’ being the language of a mother alone, it could be how everyone in the family shows love to one another. There is a feeling of love and good vibrations created “when we cook together.”

When it is done together, domestic labor can put less strain on the fragile affects that hold the family together. When done individually, love simply runs out. This individuality can manifest in two ways: either the mother does all the work, or each person does their own work. From my mother’s perspective, both can lead to the erosion of love. While we have discussed the lovelessness in a family where “people actually cook their own meal and then eat it,” let us now look more closely at what it feels like for a mother’s love to be overburdened by the caseless and ungrateful demands of housework. Stumbling around my point, I ask:

Summer: (19:51)

One thing, I have a question. So there's this idea, you know ... you show your love through service, is what I'm trying to get at. [There is this idea that] you show your love by slaving away in the kitchen. So how has that idea affected your decisions about this stuff?

Somehow Maa understood what I was trying to ask, and responds:

Neena; (20:35)

Okay, so the reason *why* I still do stuff for you guys. Now you see that I do it for dad, and you get really mad, but you don't see that I do the same thing for you. [Yeah]. I do actually more for you than I do for dad. I will follow you wherever the shit you are and feed you and give you food in your hand and then keep circling around you to see that you actually ate it, you know? [Yeah, laughs]. That's not me slogging away or my duty. It's because I love you, and that's the same thing that I extend towards dad because ‘I love you, I'm gonna give you-’ I mean, I know how to prepare a meal. I have better

knowledge about it, and I'm going to give you a perfect meal. If I can, if I can handle it. But it becomes a pain in my ass if I have to do it every single day and if I have to clean up after myself, and have to do every other thing. But the thing is, I am one of those *kutte ki dum which is tedha*.⁵⁶ [I laugh]. So *khana*⁵⁷ is something I cannot leave you guys to your devices. I could totally do that. Just *khana pada hai kha lo jakey*,⁵⁸ dad can go and do that. He's actually done that a few times now that we were fighting. I don't feel good about it, you know? Because I feel that at the bottom of it all, we all love each other. We are a very small, close knit family. And I feel that food is a very, very important part of your being, and that should never be taken away from someone. That's what I feel. You know, no matter how much you're fighting, how much you're angry with each other, you shouldn't take it out on food. You understand? It's not that I think it's my job that I have to do it, or it's my duty that I have to do it.

But it's annoying if I have to do it all the time along with all the other stuff. So I, every single day, you won't believe: I actually start with a good mood and then my mood starts going down as I am still in the kitchen, and I'm still working and he's still sitting and watching TV. And I started getting angry. [Right]. Every single day. But I won't say anything still because I'm too proud, or I am thinking 'this is not rocket science that you can't figure out.' Figure out that if you are tired after a whole day, I'm tired too. You understand? That's where the problem is. [Right].

Here Maa makes a number of important points. She re-establishes that, to her, housework is not an obligation or duty, but an act of love and care. This is something that she wants to be able to do, "if she can handle it." Since all the burden is placed on her shoulders, she is unable to practice helping her family members in a loving way all the time. She wants to be able to maintain food as an "important part of one's being," something that "should never be taken away from someone." This is an ontological principle to her that should never be violated. But the conditions of work under which she is placed erodes her ability to live up to that principle, creating a lot of anger and frustration. This is the very reason that her mood "goes down" as the day goes by, as the same issue repeats everyday.

In a way, this is quite a complex argument. That's because Maa wants to preserve love in the family, it is important to her. She is not interested in demystifying love as an ideological weapon of capitalism, as Aviva and I might be. She knows that this is a precious affect, that

⁵⁶ Translation: "the dog's tail will remain bent." The proverb loosely refers to somebody who is hellbent on continuing bad habits.

⁵⁷ Translation: "food."

⁵⁸ Translation: "the food is sitting there, go and eat it."

needs to be protected from the burdens of capitalism. She would like to show love through service, “if she can manage it,” that is. Thus she points to how capitalist housework not only exhausts women of their energies, but also of their capacity to feel genuine love for their family. It is hard to feel love for those who benefit from your exploitation.

My mother’s lamentation, that in many ways is directed at me, is not a complaining vent. It is instead a detailed critique. It is a critique about the penetrative effects of housework on women. While our theorists explore how this work drains women of their energies and creative capacities, Maa illuminates another aspect of the exploitation: that it also drains one’s ability to show love in any sustainable way.

The argument moves in an even more interesting direction when we turn it onto the self. What is the effect of housework on a woman’s ability to show love to herself? While we often talk about love as something one shows another, it must also be directed at ourselves. Acts of self-care are needed in order to reproduce oneself under capitalism. These labors, however, come into conflict with the demand to reproduce others. One begins to sacrifice their own needs in order to meet those of others. Maa describes what this is like as a wife and mother. A couple minutes out from where we left off last, I ask Maa to expand on something she had just mentioned. I ask:

Me: (23:46)

Tell me more about that. [About what?]. That experience you were saying of working in the kitchen, your day starting better, and you just keep working and working, and by the end of the day you're angry and bitter, and feeling like ...

Neena: (24:05)

Yeah, because I'm running out of time. I don't have any time left for myself. I need to chill, but I also need to go to sleep because it's getting late. [Yeah]. And I still have to clean, and the house still looks like a sty because nothing has moved, and cooking and kitchen work takes a lot of time ... And during the week, when I am running around – and that includes the weekend also, because during the weekend I'm thinking this is my earned time to relax myself. I need to relax too. I'm not going to slog my day out just by cleaning and scrubbing again, trying to fix the house. Because the days are so short, it's gonna go by so fast, right? [Yeah]. Again, where am I resting? So on the weekends also I don't do it a lot of times because I'm the only one doing it ... It seems sometimes that dad doesn't understand what amount of work goes in just doing your daily chores. You know, the kind of work that goes into doing daily chores – it takes a lot of time.

And I have my own work. Like, before I go to sleep, after I've done everything, I remember 'oh shit, I have to wash my face with soap, and I have to scrub it nicely. Then I have to put that medicine on my forehead, I shouldn't forget that. Then I have to put that medicine over there or whatever. And then I need to put that eye mask on myself for 10 minutes! And then wash my eyes and then put the-' That itself is a routine that takes time. [Yeah]. I don't have time for that! [Yeah]. A lot of days, like the last three days, I haven't used the mask on my face because I'm so tired that I want to go to sleep. I don't want to get up and then wash my eyes again, and then – I'm like 'fuck it! I'm going to go to sleep just like that.' These are the things.

Me: (27:52)

So you, like, sacrifice your own self care.

Neena: (27:56)

Yeah, sure! So, all those things are there. And then yesterday, after everything, I had to even take a bath because I had to wake up in the morning seven o'clock again. I knew I won't have time to take a shower. So after everything I was thinking, 'should I eat my dinner right now or should I take a shower first?' I could not decide that, I was asking dad about it. And then I take my food upstairs and then I eat it and then I go to sleep. I don't even bring the plate down, I put it on the stairs. So, you see? If dad was also up and about doing stuff with me after he came back from school – uh, work – the house would look spic and span, right? [Yeah]. So there.

Here, Maa talks about the many small decisions she has to make at the end of a long day: the choice between sleeping and applying medicine; between dinner and a shower. Because she spends so much time cooking and cleaning, she is left with little time to take care of herself. Simple things like washing her face, showering, eating, and taking the plate down after, are left undone. She draws a clear line as to why this happens. It's because she is "the only one doing it" – all of the housework is left to her and it exhausts her time, let alone her energy. This is what reproduction of the self looks like for Maa.

Self-reproduction is an aspect of social reproduction, which is all about the labor that goes into re-producing a person's labor power, or their ability to work. It includes all of the tasks that need to be accomplished, so that the worker may show up at work the next day, and produce the same amount of output for their employer. However much effort is put into a worker's reproduction, that determines their quality of life. Many of us live off of very little. We eat less and rest less, so that we may continue to meet the demands of our employment. Our lives then follow the same model as all processes in capitalist society: maximum output for minimum input.

Women who work both in and out of the home know the true meaning of that “minimum input.” Maa reduces the amount of effort she puts into her own reproduction as a worker in order to reproduce my father and myself. She might “choose” to not eat properly, take that shower she needs to, or apply her eye mask, if it will allow her to just go to sleep and show up to work the next day. She reduces the input that goes into creating her own labor power; and ultimately lives a life of less quality at home. Demands of housework on a woman then do not really conflict with demands of the workplace; in fact they conflict with a woman’s own needs. That is because she sacrifices her own care over both housework and professional work.

This is the real reason that any of us were interested in the issue of women's unpaid domestic labor in the first place – because it harms women, and reduces their quality of life. As theorists, we are often so focused on the unfairness of how much work women have to do for others, that we forget why this was a problem in the first place. It is a problem because women forget themselves in the midst of it all. Doing the work to reproduce our dependents takes time away from our own reproduction as workers. We are unable to show ourselves the love and care that we deserve; the very care we are constantly directing at others. This is the greatest injustice of all – and it manifests in the smallest decisions we made in our bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens.

Sammy, take me or leave me: hesitantly unapologetic.

As we have seen, love emerges as a significant part of the question ‘What does grasping theory do for our personal lives?’ While it can be reimaged to align with aims of the left’s struggle, the reality is that we are not there right now. Even though it could be otherwise, for most of us, love stands in the way of practicing liberatory theory. Its current configuration does not allow us to live the lives we want to; the kind of lives we know we deserve. This contradiction between reality and theory weighs especially heavy on the consciousnesses of political women.

Political women have to balance living out their liberation, along with keeping the peace in the home. If for no other reason, then just to have some peace for themselves. I asked Sammy about how she experiences this. How does she manage, or not, the various demands of being a good comrade, a good student, and a loving partner? Her response revealed an oscillating internal monologue: one that went back and forth from being unapologetic about not doing

housework, to still feeling guilty for putting up boundaries. She reveals what is probably a common experience for women trying to balance their politics with the fact that they have to do housework, and still be present in romantic relationships.

Summer: (25:12)

So you had mentioned the idea of being a good wife [in an earlier marriage] and how housework comes with it. How do you see your role now? Cause there's a lot of titles that party women have to balance: like being a good comrade and a good worker or student, but like a good girlfriend. So how do you balance the different – um, or not – [We laugh] – or struggle with, or negotiate the different needs of these titles? Because we want to be good comrades, but we also want to be better in our relationships. Do those come together? Do they always flow?

Sammy: (25:56)

Yeah I mean, definitely, since joining the party, my idea just entirely about my relationship to my romantic partner has been changed a lot. Before I started dating my partner now, Brian, there was more conflict in other relationships. It just became pretty apparent quickly that for me party work really comes first. And you know, a romantic partner doesn't want to hear that they come second, or they don't want to feel like they come second. So I do think that's a big struggle that I don't know that men in the party, who are in relationships with women, necessarily have. [They do not have] that same dynamic to deal with because I feel men do have expectations of 'this is how a girlfriend or a wife or a female partner behaves.' And you know, 'what they're supposed to do for me' or whatever. I think now, luckily I'm with someone who understands that this is central to my life. I'm always going to be doing it. I'm sorry, I can't go out for a date on Saturday night – I always have party work.

And there are definitely times where it's sort of like, I feel a little bit of guilt about the way that I delegate time because, you know, he's my partner and I do love him and care about him and I want to make sure that he feels loved and cared for. But then also, you know, I have all this other stuff going on. So it's like I take care of the party work, and then I take care of my schoolwork, and then I take care of myself, and then I take care of my partner. [We laugh]. And like I pretty much don't have friends anymore. [We laugh]. There are people that are there, we text, but like I don't really have that type of social life.

So there are times that I feel like, 'Oh, you know, I shouldn't be complaining so much about doing the housework.' You know, 'I should just do it.' Or 'I should make more time for him,' or this or that. But then usually those kinds of thoughts don't last very long because I do feel very grounded in the political work that I do. I've always been

such a political person, that this is just who I am. So you just have to take me or leave me! [Nice]. He has an understanding of who I am.

But yeah I think that occasionally there will be some amount of conflict just with, like, me being annoyed that things are falling to me. We haven't really resolved it. Like it comes up sometimes, and sometimes I just have to let it go.

There is an unapologetic tone to Sammy's voice that is so empowering. Her political work is a priority, and there are no two ways around it. It is work that she dedicates herself to, and everything comes second – including her partner. A lot of this confidence for Sammy comes from being political. She opens her response with how the party has changed her attitude towards romantic relationships – “since joining the party, my idea just entirely about my relationship to my romantic partner has been changed a lot.” While in a previous marriage she had let herself prioritize housework and being a ‘wife’ over all else, now her priorities are her own. And political understandings have helped her make that change.

In the party we read, discuss, and analyze feminism from a working class perspective, and Sammy has developed a consciousness around that. She draws identity through this consciousness – empowering her to demand respect and equality in her current relationship, and to demand it unashamed. Nonchalantly, she concludes: “This is just who I am, so you just have to take me or leave me!”

But we do not always live up to this ideal – of being that woman who demands respect and equality from their partner on all accounts. Because interspersed with this confidence comes a sort of guilt. It is a guilt that surfaces in Sammy's words, just as it did with Aviva over not wanting to do unpaid labor for her disabled sister. From time to time Sammy feels “guilt” about the way she “delegates time” because she loves her partner and wants to make him “feel loved and cared for.” And often times that love must be expressed through time and labor. While sometimes these “kinds of thoughts don't last very long,” given that Sammy is very “grounded” in her political work; other times this guilt leads to frustration and conflict that never truly gets resolved. Instead of having another difficult conversation, it can just be easier to “let it go.”

Just because we know that housework is not a woman's duty, this awareness alone does little to change personal life. The contradiction between principal and the personal persists, and it is left to individual women to deal with it in our own lives. Talking more about how she navigates these difficult conversations, and about how love is shown through labor:

Summer: (29:18)

Do you ever feel like – and this is just knowing how I sometimes have to think about it ... that to show love is to do work? ... Like 'I love you and so I'm just going to do the work?'

Sammy: (29:39)

Totally. Yeah. Yeah, I totally relate to that. Especially like if ... so he has depression. So sometimes he has periods of time that he's pretty much ... in bed. You know, it's difficult for him. And especially during those times I'm like 'Okay, I'm going to make the house nice.' I want to try and lift his spirit. And I'm happy to do that. But yeah. I would say that even in my family that's definitely a way that I tried to communicate love or caring. And *actually*, thinking about it within party work, sometimes that's how I communicate to my comrades that I care about them. Like 'I see you've got a lot going on here, give me some of that work.' Even if I'm kind of stressed out and have a lot too, I want to alleviate the burden of that work, you know? Yeah. [Pause]. Yeah, that's funny. I haven't really thought about it in that way before, but yeah.

Summer (30:40)

I mean how do you feel about that? Do you think that's a good way to show love or are you like 'Oh, that's kinda unfortunate?' Or do you like it, you know?

Sammy: (30:49)

Um, I think that it's probably not the most healthy way to show love. Yeah, I mean people communicate that kind of stuff differently, and there's people talking about love languages and stuff. [Yeah]. So I know there's differences there. I think that it's an easy way to burn yourself out, especially if you have a lot of people in your life that you love. That's something I struggle with a lot – understanding when to say 'no' or 'I can't take this on.' Because I feel like 'Oh, that's like a failing if I can't do it,' especially if it's my partner or my comrades or something. If it's work, I'm like whatever fuck you. Even school sometimes I kind of shrug off. But if it's people I really care about, then that kind of weighs on me.

I mean, I don't know, like, what the alternative is or how I would be able to reconcile that in my brain. Like 'yeah you love this person, you want to help them, but you should say no.' [I laugh. Right]. I think other people have that skill. Maybe it's something I'll learn someday, but yeah, I think it's something to be careful about I guess.

Summer: (32:02)

I've been hearing a lot in my circles talk about boundaries. Like, 'you need to draw boundaries, even for people who you love.' And I'm like 'I don't know how to do that!' [We laugh].

Sammy: (32:14)

Yeah, I think you have to go to therapy to learn that. Seriously. I don't know. And it's funny because other people will say to me 'Oh, you know, I'm just too tired, I'm not able to do this' and my reaction is never like, 'What an asshole.' [Yeah]. My reaction was always like, 'Totally! take care of yourself. I want you to be healthy and okay.' Like that's fine. That's, um, yeah – that's complicated [We laugh].

To learn how to say 'no' isn't easy, it in itself becomes a task. Sammy says "other people have that skill" and she might have to go to "therapy" to learn it. This points to the seriousness of the work that goes into managing conversations about labor – in a way that protects one's partner's feelings. The woman must facilitate the conversation in such a way that love is never questioned or threatened.

We can take two lessons away from this. First, the assumption that it is the woman's job to manage her partner's emotions. On top of the domestic labor, this additional labor falls on the woman, instead of the other person feeling the need to change themselves.

Second, we can see that having such discussions and saying 'no' is so difficult because it calls out the economic relations of a relationship. We like to maintain the illusion that a romantic relationship is just that – all love. However, dynamics of exchange and necessity exists between two people when they live together; and one person has more to gain from the exposure of this economic reality than does the other. That is because a lot of hard work goes unnoticed under the guise of romantic love.

To conclude, in this section we have analyzed an important theme that recurs in our interviews. We look at the experiences of Aviva, Maa, and Sammy to understand how love operates at the level of ideology to explain, distort, and even call out the existence of economic activity in the home. Let us now turn to another aspect of wx: mental health.

CHAPTER 3

MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Because of its repetitive, monotonous, and thankless nature, housework can often depress women. It can drain them of all their mental and physical energies, exhausts and frustrate them, estrange them from their creative and intellectual potentials, and lower their self esteem.

Thus it was important for me to investigate this crucial aspect of women's lived experience with housework. I wanted to know how housework affects their minds and how it makes them feel about themselves. Part of the reason I ever departed on this project was because of my mother's journey with this. Having to become a housewife in America after living and working in India all her life brought her a deep depression, and I realized it a few years too late. It had affected her sense of self, her self image. It made her feel that she wasn't growing or doing anything meaningful with her life. And so here I focus on Maa and her words; her comments on housework, mental health, self image, and mental peace.

In this chapter Maa reflects on how she first realized that housework had a dark, degrading side. When she saw her cousins get married off and become *bahus*⁵⁹, she saw the disrespectful state they had to embody, and avowed to never end up like that. While we discussed this dark side of housework, we also talked about its potential light. In a follow up conversation, Maa talks about how housework can be a spiritual experience, given that the conditions are right. And this sparks a theoretical investigation for me. Inspired by the contrasting accounts of housework that Maa provides, I ask what is the nature of housework? Is it necessarily a degrading and exploitative task? Or can it make someone happy – even bring them closer spirituality and peace? And if it can be a positive part of women's lives, under what conditions? What social, political, economic, and cultural conditions are needed to decouple housework from drudgery and depression?

⁵⁹ Translation: “daughter-in-law” especially one who lives with her husband's family when married.

Neena and *the bahu*.

Let us begin by looking at the darker side of housework: the way in which it can harm women's self image and sense of worth. At this point in our interview, Maa had been talking about her childhood experiences with housework, and she naturally flows into:

Neena: (09:40)

My awareness about housework and how shitty it is came when I was grown, when I saw my family – my extended family. Sanita Didi and Sanju Bhaiya's family was one major family we used to visit every time, and they were the first cousins who started getting married. And I would see how the *bahus* were treated when they would come home. '*O tumhe khana banana aata hai ki nahi?*'⁶⁰ What is that? You just got married and have come home on the first day, and what you're doing is you're cooking a meal for everyone.⁶¹ Or as the days go by, the *bahu*, like Raju Bhaiya's wife, Joshna. You remember Raju and Josna, right? [Yeah] So she was really skinny and dark. I mean, she's dark but she was very skinny. And initially when she – [reflecting] I just remember the whole marriage and everything. When she had come home like a *bahu*, everyone was scrutinizing her, and she would wash their clothes and everything. [Wow, like a maid]. Yeah, wash their clothes and all, and cook food and all that stuff. You know? The *bahu* has to get up first thing in the morning and be in the kitchen and do stuff like that. So I would just see that. And that kind of was appalling for me. And that was another reason I was like, 'I'm never going to get married.' That was in my head. I'm, no, there was never my family. My family was always different from the rest of the crowd.

Summer: (11:16)

Why was it appalling?

Neena: (11:17)

It was appalling because I couldn't see myself in *that* situation. You know? *Ki tum sari pehen ke tum khana bana rahe ho.*⁶² I can't. That's not me, I'll never do it.

Summer: (11:30)

What about it bothered you?

Neena: (11:31)

The fact that I have to work and please other people. Like I can't even get my own shit together and you want me to do stuff for everyone else? I'm not your servant. You know? I'm not here to please you. And I always would think like that, 'Why does a

⁶⁰ Translation: "do you know how to cook food or not?" This is what the in-laws would say to the *bahu*.

⁶¹ "Come home" i.e. to your husband and in-laws.

⁶² Translation: "that you are wearing a sari and making food for everyone."

woman have to leave her parents and go to a guy's house?' You know that's the first thing I told dad ... 'I'm not gonna live in a joint family.'

There is a particular domestic degradation that women experience in India, and Maa saw it all around her as she grew up. Right after marriage, the *bahu* moves into her husband's home with his parents. She is "scrutinized" and criticized, and must take over all the duties as a maid would. She cooks for them, "washes their clothes," and serves them well. Maa saw this happen to the women in her extended family and she was "appalled." She couldn't get how after leaving one's family and entering a new home, a person had to take care of not only themselves but also of everyone else. This was a role she could not see herself in, the role of the pleasing *bahu*. "I'm not your servant," she said, "I'm not here to please you." The role of *bahu* seemed like disguised servitude, and it would rob her of any sense of self-worth and dignity. As a young woman Maa immediately got how degrading that must have been for her cousins, and avowed that it never happen to her. "That's not me, I'll never do it."

And she never did. Though she married, she had a conversation early on to ensure that she didn't live with her in-laws. And though she was responsible for the housework, she always worked. She has been a teacher for most of her life, and takes great pride in her job. It was when we came to America, though, that she got stuck in a role that she had fervently avoided – that of the stay at home wife. In 2012 we moved from Mumbai to Chicago, and Maa lost her ability to work as a teacher. Institutional racism made it so that schools in America do not recognize Maa's Indian bachelor's degree, or her teaching certificate. She would have had to go back to school to recertify – something she never had the emotional or financial support to do. And so Maa ended up staying at home for six years. As a "housewife" she did all of the cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and raised me through high school. As the years went by she became depressed. In a way I had never seen in her before, she dullened. So when she started working in schools again a couple of years ago, she bloomed once again. She has a great passion for teaching, and getting out of the house was crucial in helping her return to her bright self. I tried asking Maa about this:

Summer: [\(16:33\)](#)

What was the effect of working inside the house versus outside – when it comes to your mental health, state of mind, and your wellbeing?

Neena: (16:43)

So for my mental health, working outside and having a career is important ... Having a career is really important for your mental health. But housework is something that you cannot ignore because having a well and functional home – a home that is comforting to you when you come back home after a long day, is also equally important for your mental health. So to be able to manage it is a skill that everyone should have to learn. [Yeah]. You know? So I think the only way do to be able to do that is by being disciplined and being organized, if you don't have outside help.

Staying in the house was not good for Maa's mental health. She has often described that time of being a housewife as stagnation: an endless routine of no stimulation, feeling like you are not doing anything worthy with your life (also given the lack of importance that society gives to housework). So it was important for Maa's psychic wellbeing that she begin to work outside the home. After making that clear, she also talks about the importance of homework. She reminds us that even though housework can be depressing, it can also be connected to a healthy state of mind. She says that "having a well functional home – a home that is comforting to you when you come back home after a long day, is also equally important for your mental health." Thus the relationship between homework and mental health is not only negative.

A spiritual labor.

There can be a positive relationship between mental health and housework. For one, as Maa often exclaims when the house is clean for once: "cleanliness is close to godliness!" The result of housework (a clean house, a home cooked meal, getting your emotional needs cared for) helps build the kind of life that can bring us mental peace and health. Two, the labor and act of housework/care work can in itself be rewarding.

In a follow up interview with Maa, she describes an *ashram*⁶³ she visited once in Bangalore, India. An *ashram* is a place to rest and recoup. People can come and stay here, but there is no charge. It is a spiritual community that operates by certain ancient principles, and the one she is talking about is run by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. We may look to this *ashram* as an example of how spirituality and housework may come together in harmony. The question for us, though, is under what conditions have housework and spirituality been able to come together?

⁶³ Translation: "a spiritual monastic community."

Neena: (6:13)

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's ashram, if you go, you see such a different community. He has this community where there is no differentiation between the work that men and women do. [Really?] It's his thing that everybody needs to do their own shit: do your own chores. And that's exactly what happens. People come to stay in the ashram, and they do everything. They have the basic living and there are no workers, no servants. Everyone is doing – it's like a communal living. Everyone is helping out in the kitchen to cook, everyone is washing, everybody is doing everything, the bathrooms included. Everything they do themselves. So that's a perfect example of communal living. [Right]. And they grow their own vegetables. [Really?] And his *ashram* is really beautiful, in the sense that it is very open, lots of greenery.

When people come and stay at this *ashram*, they have to contribute to its upkeep. They have to do a lot of labor to keep it looking beautiful, including cleaning the bathrooms. This may seem demeaning to the visitors, but that is part of the point: to rid yourself of the idea that some work is “beneath” you, ridding yourself of the ego. Thus there are “no workers, no servants” – something which would have been the norm in India. Instead, “Everyone is helping out in the kitchen to cook, everyone is washing, everybody is doing everything.” Work is not distributed on the basis of class status, pointing to the classless nature of the *ashram*. Cooking and cleaning is not allocated on the basis of class status, where the servant class cleans and the rich meditate. And it is not allocated on the basis of gender either. Maa reports that “there is no differentiation between the work that men and women do.” All the people cook in the communal kitchens together, and serve free meals to the community. In a way, it is “a perfect example of communal living.”

Of course, as long as the outside world is dominated by aspiritual capitalism, there can be no place within the superstructure that is immune to its pressures. But the *ashram* operates by principles that challenge these pressures, pointing forward to the possibility of alternate ways of living and being. While capitalism views domestic labor as an invisible and worthless activity, the *ashram* recommits to housework as an act of love and peace. In fact, the word “ashram” itself means “to toil,” from the Sanskrit root “sharm” (शर्म).⁶⁴ The idea is that by toiling after the most basic needs of life, a person reconnects to the essence of what it means to live. To labor for oneself and one's fellows, is to become intimate with yourself and your community. There is spirituality in rubbing down the ancient brick walls of the *ashram*, or in watering the

⁶⁴ “Ashram (n.)” in *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ashram>

plants that line its *bags*,⁶⁵ or in feeding the tired who come there for rest and shelter. In this way, the *ashram* embodies a close relationship between domestic labor and psychic wellness.

But we ought not to romanticize how good housework can be for us, if we are to not focus on the social conditions of it all. The conditions under which housework is organized will determine if it is beneficial or destructive to women's mental health. Currently, women are isolated into family units, burdened with everyone's share of work, and then demeaned for it. They contribute to the wealth the capitalists are generating, and then get nothing in return for it. These are not the conditions in which we should purport housework as something spiritual. Here, it is just economic exploitation.

The conditions under which housework is currently experienced by women, necessitates that it become an exhausting and possibly depressing part of life. But in the *ashram*, rather than the burden being put on one person, everybody does all the work together. Rather than just the women or the poor slaving away, everybody works to meet the needs for everyone. There are no class or gender divides, as principles of spirituality and communalism reign. Thus, to rid housework of the mental strain and depression that it brings women, we need to change the conditions under which it is organized.

It is not the work itself (the act of cooking a meal, or dusting a shelf), that is in itself demeaning. As my narrators have said many times, this is necessary work that needs to just get done like all other work. It is no more or less exciting than shelving books at the library or packing groceries. Instead it is the conditions of disguised servitude under which housework operates that makes it so harmful for women's psyches. It is the social conditions of gender and class discrimination that make it so unfair. Thus we need to transform the conditions under which we live, if we are to ever reclaim the positive potentials of housework. We need to build a classless society that breaks free of patriarchal ideologies, if we are to ever experience housework as calming and spiritual.

⁶⁵ Translation: "garden."

CHAPTER 4

SOLUTIONS: THEORY AS RADICAL IMAGINATION

Domestic work putters so constantly in the background of the everyday that it becomes an unquestionable part of our reality. We treat it like the ground under our feet, the roof over our heads: necessary, but never looked at for too long. Because housework is so mundanely and intricately connected to the rest of the political economy, a change in housework implies a change in the entire superstructure. To imagine a different kind of housework, then, is to imagine and build a world radically different from ours.

This mundane and everyday regularity forms the foundation of our reality and economy. We would have to overhaul a lot of values, norms, and practices in order to redefine these terms. Housework helps constitute our social reality through the family, the house, and all the constructs that come with it: love, romance, morality. Thus, its deconstruction will require a powerful kind of imagination: a practice that bell hooks helps point us toward.

In *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, hooks writes about coming to theory at a very young age. Trying desperately to understand the world around her, a young hooks challenged her family and the patriarchy she saw in it, and she got abundantly punished for it. She writes, “Whenever I tried in childhood to compel folks around me to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo, I was punished” (1). As hooks looked at the world differently, and tried to get others to do the same, she was deploying theory as her tool of intervention. This young spirit spun her own theory, and it was linked immediately to her reality.

Formulating theory from lived experience is a feminist practice. To “challenge the status quo” by imagining how things could be done differently, is an act of theory. This childish practice of asking “why” and proposing the unheard of, is what makes for good feminist theory. hooks turns to Terry Eagleton’s words in *The Significance of Theory* for explanation. Eagleton writes:

Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as “natural”, and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet

grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently.⁶⁶

Because children pose “embarrassingly” fundamental questions, they call into question practices that we long assumed as “inevitable.” They imagine alternatives to the way things are, questioning and overturning the most fundamental aspects of reality in their search. “They do not see why we might not do things differently,” as Eagleton puts it. It will take this kind of childish radicality to overturn the current order of housework. Because patriarchal, capitalist housework is a fundamental aspect of our reality, continuously operating in the background of our lives, my narrators must engage in radical imagination to overcome it.

When I asked my narrators “What could domestic life look like without women's exploitation?,” I was genuinely asking them to propose the ridiculous. I might as well have asked them: “What would it look like to abolish the mother? The wife? How can we destroy and rebuild the family?” Answering this question would necessarily involve fantasy: imagining how the fabric of life as we know it could be entirely different.

Some of my narrators were more comfortable with this task than others. The party women were used to it because they have practiced radical imagination before, and they are used to doing it in a collective setting. The party facilitates this sort of thinking through programming and political education classes. One could say that encouraging radical imagination amongst the masses is part of the party's very mission. Thus, there is a marked confidence in the party women's voices as they talk about their shared vision for collectivizing housework. This includes communal kitchens, food delivery systems, cleaning crews, and child care. As they paint this picture of an alternative future, the party women confidently reauthor the domestic sphere.

Maa, on the other hand, demonstrates more hesitance when articulating her ideas for an alternative future. While she believes in the idea of wages for housework, she thinks it might be an unfeasible project. At the same time, she finds it more realistic than any long term aspirations that the party women have of socialization. She simply cannot see that far ahead, none of us can, and so she reigns her dreams in for the short term. The only tool we have to see that far ahead is radical imagination—something I would say Maa is learning to do.

⁶⁶ bell hooks, *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, (1991), 1.
<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=yjlf>.

But we need to learn how to picture what we are fighting for, and do it with hope and clarity. We need to become like the children who make the best theories, who reimagine the most fundamental and unquestioned aspects of our everyday. Toward the end of our section, I wonder what role the party must play in cultivating this skill in its comrades, and how a collective can encourage us to re-capture our childlike imaginations.

On collectivizing housework: Beth, Sammy, and Aviva.

First I will look at party women's proposed solutions to capitalist housework. We will survey Beth, Sammy, Aviva, and Candice as they argue for the collectivization of domestic work, food deliveries, and community kitchens. Overall, their aim is to have women no longer be isolated to individual kitchens. If each wife/mother is cooking dinner and doing laundry everyday, clearly these are universal tasks and could be done more efficiently in a collective. Instead of each woman bearing the burden and cost of these tasks alone, communities should come together to fulfill them more efficiently.

Further, on the question of whether women should get paid or not, in accordance with the demands of the Wages for Housework movement, the party women view this proposition as more of a reform than an ultimate solution. The ultimate solution of course is the socialist revolution—or at least it begins with it. While some party women are suspicious of giving housewives wages, in accordance with Angela Davis, some like Aviva see it as a stepping stone on the way to total revolution.

Beth: just like the garbage man.

Beth helps us understand better what the term "collectivization" means in the context of housework. Essentially, it is a move away from the individualization that capitalist society pushes upon its subjects so aggressively. Socialization means that cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc would be taken out of the home, and become the responsibility of organizations and associations of workers. I now turn to Beth to expand on this.

At this point in our conversation, Beth had just finished talking about how important it is for women to be financially independent. She says "okay, you're in the struggle, you're fighting to make a revolution to free women," but in the meantime, "women need to be financially independent." Her own life taught her this lesson, and it is the advice she gives to all

young women. I then steer us to the topic of finding alternatives that could replace capitalist housework:

Summer: (32:59)

So you said that we're in the struggle now, right? And we're aiming for this kind of society where there's less exploitation of women and all workers. And in the meantime, women need to be financially independent. [Right]. And so what is that vision—what are we working towards? What kind of world do you want for women when it comes to domestic labor? What's the ideal?

Beth: (33:35)

What's the ideal? Well I would say—if you look at Cuba, and then you add the fact that, really, the world has plenty of riches for everybody, and Cuba is impoverished by the blockade—basically you'd be back to men and women equal. Their role in society is equal. You know, Cuba's legislature is actually slightly more women than men, but pretty much equal. When it comes to the work that needs to be done: if we've got wealth, I could think of hundreds of ways that we could take that labor away from individuals. For example, with food preparation there would be ways to collectivize that. We could be able to have deliveries that come, somebody's job is to make food that can be delivered to homes.

Or cleaning, for example. Now that's something that, okay, could be onerous. But at the same time, it *is* labor. I mean, there's other things that are onerous too, but I don't see why—plus there's all sorts of robotics that could be developed. Like for example when I was growing up, people would say 'it's terrible to be a garbage man.' Well, okay, but it's a job that needs to be done. If it's paid, it's valued. You know what I'm saying? It's something that needs to be done. And you could find ways to make it not as horrible. That's what I would want that. In other words, food preparation, cleaning of houses, the laundry. For example, somebody could come pick up your laundry, do it, bring it back to you. I mean, I don't see any labor that is necessary for human beings to be 'the meaning' as long as it's paid appropriately, and looked at as *something*.

I'm sorry, taking care of both babies, children, and the elderly—I think that is extremely significant labor and should be totally valued. There's nothing that I can think of that is more important to the society as a whole than taking care of both the very young and the very old. [Totally]. Or those who are disabled. You know what I mean? It's extremely important labor. [Right]. So, I guess that's my vision. [Yeah].

What stands out to me in Beth's response is the vitality she sees in all forms of labor, especially in taking care of others. "There's nothing that I can think of that is more important to the society as a whole," she says, than taking care of the young, old, and disabled. And it

“should be totally valued.” Just like the garbage man, if a task is compensated, recognized, and “looked at as *something*,” it is valued by society. And this is what should happen with housework.

Valuing a kind of work does not involve relegating it to the invisible domains of the house, shrugging it onto the women of the house and acting as if it never happened in the first place. To value a function of society is to recognize it, and create organizations and services that meet its ends. The garbage needs to be hauled away, so we have waste management organizations that pay workers to do that task. People must have nutritious, home cooked meals, so we should create organizations that pay workers to take care of this need. “Collectivize that,” as Beth puts it. It could be “somebody’s job to make food that can be delivered to homes.”

And Beth’s reference to robotics in this context is not an irrelevant point. In reference to collectivizing cleaning, she says, “there’s all sorts of robotics that could developed.” That is because socialists believe in mobilizing technology in the favor of the people: to use robotics, AI, machine learning, and big data to meet the needs of the people. Marxist revolutionary Angela Davis writes in *Women, Race, and Class*, on the topic of technology and housework:

What is needed, of course, are new social institutions to assume a good portion of the housewife’s old duties ... Teams of trained and well-paid workers, moving from dwelling to dwelling, engineering technologically advanced cleaning machinery, could swiftly and efficiently accomplish what the present-day housewife does so arduously and primitively.

This is similar to Beth, and other party women’s, descriptions of futuristic housework, where technology has a significant place in the socialization of housework. Technology becomes a friend in the overall effort to make housework a public issue—helping us to visualize the future. In the effort to visualize what housework could like when taken out of the home, Beth turns not only to technology, but also to Cuba. She says, “Well, look to Cuba.” And even though she doesn’t go into it too much, Cuba’s effort to create a state-run daycare system, and to legislate on the equitable distribution of housework between men and women through the Family Code, is a model to look up to. This is a state that made the effort to, as Beth says, “to take that labor away from individuals.”

Sammy: building on Beth.

Now let us look at Sammy's perspective on the question of what should housework ideally be like. As I have said, Sammy, Beth, and Aviva all have similar solutions in mind. They hope to collectivize the chores that are usually relegated to the domestic realm. Sammy's response helps us better understand this idea of collectivization. She illuminates two aspects of collectivization that we examine here. Not only does she call the topic of help, class, and access into view, she also helps us reconceptualize the family as the social.

At this point in our conversation, Sammy had been telling me about how she first realized that housework was being distributed unfairly. It was when she was in her first marriage at the age of seventeen. I asked her what exactly about the work she found unfair. She answers the question, and suggests her idea for a solution.

Summer: ([11:28](#))

So you mentioned having the realization of 'Oh wait, this is unfair' – if one person just is doing all of this work. Can you explain more what you mean by "unfair"?

Sammy : ([12:10](#))

The work itself has never really bothered me. There's some "chore" type work that I like to do more than others. But in general, I mean it's work that has to be done and someone has to do it. Personally, it's mostly the division of sharing the amount of work.

When I think about it as a Marxist, I remember we had a women's class once and someone brought up the idea that a family lives in a house, and the family is responsible for doing the cleaning of the house, the cooking, and all that stuff – how that's not really an effective way to do things. But as an alternative, having community kitchens where you can go and eat together, or even having a specific division of labor being that there are people who go to other people's houses [to do housework]. Sort of like what we have now, except instead of it being like 'Oh, if you can afford it, you can hire someone to come and help you' and instead, having it just be a normal job that anyone has access to.

Also the fact that everyone is responsible for their own housework [does not work because] there are people with disabilities, there are older people, you know, there's always going to be some people that are just too busy. Like if there are kids and the older parents are working outside the home. That was my other experience growing up on my dad's side: is that everything is just wild in the house because no one really has the time to do it. But yeah, I mean the work, the work itself I've never really had a problem with, but just, um, sharing the workload I think is more... [Yeah].

Personally, Sammy would be fine with a fairer division of labor between her and her partner. That would help with her immediate life. But thinking about it on a more social level – “as a Marxist” – like Beth, Sammy turns to collectivization. She believes that the current system in which “the family is responsible for doing the cleaning of the house and the cooking,” is not only unfair but also ineffective. Instead, she says that housework needs to become the responsibility of society. Later on she adds: “there needs to be a lot more support coming from the state or your neighborhood or local communities.” In addition to emphasizing the need for professionalizing house chores, Sammy makes a further point about class and access.

She brings our attention to the fact that, as it stands, rich people are able to access cooking, cleaning, and daycare services. If one can “afford it,” one can reap the benefits of the current semi-professionalization of housework. Accessing help with chores is a luxury reserved for those who can pay for it, performed by people who are grossly underpaid for it. But in the world that Sammy is interested in building, workers who would do society’s housework would be treated as “just a normal job that anyone has access to.” Destroying the class barriers that make it so that only the rich can access help in the home is a priority for Sammy. That is because anyone who has the need for such a service should have access to it. As the communist saying goes, “From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.” Sammy names older people, people with disabilities, people who are just too busy, and older parents who are both working, as needing help in the home with daily chores. She experienced this herself when she stayed at her dad’s place. There, “everything is just wild in the house because no one really has the time to do it” – a reality for many households in America, that no one ever properly acknowledges. Instead of shaming families for not being able to fastidiously accomplish the mountains of housework that await them every evening and expecting the women to bear most of this burden, Sammy is looking for alternatives. This search, however, will necessarily include rethinking the family in fundamental ways.

Some may find it offensive to collectivize household chores because this may mean increasing intervention from the state, the community, or the neighborhood – into the home. It brings the outside inside in uncomfortable ways. The home is meant to be a private realm, away from the public and its interference. In this project, however, we have assumed the inherently public and political nature of the home. This is for a few reasons. One, because we need to be able to acknowledge the ways in which institutions that were formed in the public (such as capitalism, gender, race) determine interpersonal relations within the home. If we ignore the

already public nature of the home, we allow injustices that are perpetuated because of these systems in the home. And further, I make this assumption in the text because designating the private as separate from the public relies on sexist binaries of men's and women's domains that have long been abandoned by progressive theory.

Sammy brings this point into conversation with our search for solutions. In order to social-ize housework, we will need to think of the house *as* social. Instead of mystifying the family as the master of the home, we should recognize the presence of political, societal, and economic factors within the home. This also means that there is positive potential in acknowledging society's responsibility within the family. What benefits may come from society taking workload off the shoulders of the family – how could that help women, and the family itself? Sammy helps point us in this direction. Picking right back up from where we last stopped, I ask:

Me: ([14:08](#))

So how do marxists envision the house past capitalism? From what I understand, there isn't an 'answer,' but what is the ballpark? ...

Sammy : ([14:33](#))

Yeah. I mean, it's always hard to imagine 'what is it going to look like after capitalism' because who knows about the exact conditions and everything. But when I think about it, like personally from that perspective, I think a lot more things would be public or organized in the interest of the public, instead of so much falling to individual families. So more communal-minded. That comes to childcare and stuff. That it's not like 'you're the family unit, you're the nuclear family,' and 'you have all these things you're responsible for so make sure the household runs,' but that there be a lot more support coming from the state or your neighborhood or local communities. Making sure that everyone has cooked meals every day. I mean, maybe it's kind of extreme but I think that why even have a kitchen in every house? Like why not? [We laugh] That's one thing I personally like the idea of, is having communal kitchens. Of course not everyone would be down for that. And I do like cooking in my own house as well. But just having options that 'sure you could do it on your own if you like it,' but a more effective way would be if we had people do it together.

Sammy is calling for a more "communal-minded" culture, where the nuclear family is not seen as sovereign. She says it should not be that "you're the family unit, you're the nuclear family," so you alone must "make sure the household runs." Instead, we need to extend that sense of responsibility to our state, neighborhood, and local community. To do this we will have

to understand the important connection between society and the family – between the public and the private. We need to blur the lines between the private and public, and understand the public as private, in that it should be a societal issue if some of us do not have a “cooked meal every day.” And we ought to make the private public, in that the family should be able to rely on the collective for services such as “child care” and “communal kitchens” as Sammy proposes. Rethinking the family is in fact a fundamental part of what it means to collective housework. The very point of this solution is to pull economic tasks that have long been relegated to the domestic realm, into the public.

Thus, our narrator has helped us better understand what it means to “socialize” housework. Far from the picture of a cleaning lady working in the big mansion, socializing housework will mean granting these services to all those who need it, not to just to those who can afford it. It will mean professionalizing this labor, and valuing it equal to all other kinds of work. Furthermore, socializing housework is not about intruding into the home, but about recognizing that the home is always already intruded. The economy, politics, and power are always at play in the home – thus it would be appropriate that those elements take some responsibility in this realm, and help out. Getting help from the outside, thus, means taking advantage of already existing realities.

Aviva: toward reconciliation.

Having understood a little better how party women are thinking about housework, let us now turn to the insights that Aviva brings us. In our interview, she helps us to understand how collectivization comes into conversation with the Wages for Housework campaign. This campaign, started in 1970s Italy, demanded that those who do household chores get paid by their governments for creating economic value. Compensating housewives, mothers, girlfriends – people who already do the bulk of housework – then makes up another option for those looking for alternatives to unpaid domestic labor.

These two solutions: compensating housework versus collectivizing, may seem conflictual. But are they? Is it that we must pick one over the other? This question will be central to our inquiry, and Aviva offers us an interesting and complex way to look at their relationship. Her outlook takes into account the historical place of the Wages for Housework campaign while still aiming for socialization.

Let us turn to Aviva's interview. At this point in our conversation, Aviva and I had been talking about how exhausting it is to balance schoolwork, office work, party work, and housework all at the same time. Aviva reflects:

Aviva: (26:51)

There's definitely points where you're doing all this political work, and then you're like, 'shit, I've got a bunch of dishes piled up.' Or yesterday, I mentioned earlier that I forgot to take my meds. Like that was cause I was out, cause I had to do some political stuff, and I just forgot. There is sort of this drain where, you know, I have school, I have housework, I have political work, I'm starting a new job this week. [Wow]. There's just a lot that goes on.

Summer: (27:44)

Yeah, shit. Do you think it's worth it? [We laugh].

Aviva: (27:54)

Yeah! Yeah, for me I'm thinking of it as I'm doing this political work so that we can build a society where housework is communal, it's socialized. So that none of us are just isolated in our apartments, in our houses doing this work. Like we could all be doing it, and that would free everyone to go out and actually engage in meaningful, productive labor. But also be able to pursue hobbies and art and personal interests.

Summer: (28:34)

Cool. And is that your vision for hopefully what housework is like – that it's socialized, rather than being paid? [Yes]. I know you know that theoretical debate ...

Aviva: (29:01)

Yeah, the idea of Wages for Housework is sort of like on the one hand it's a reform and you think 'okay, maybe that can be valuable.' And on the other hand, it sort of calls out the nature of housework as being labor. It puts that into the spotlight. So from a political ideological perspective, it is valuable. But in the long term, in a revolutionary sense, paying a wage for women to stay in the home is absurd. Like we need to have housework socialized, we need to have childcare socialized, we need to have communal kitchens. We need to have all of that shit. So that we're not stuck having to work eight hours a day and then come home and cook and clean and everything else. [Right].

Aviva makes a distinction here between long and short term goals. In "the long term, in a revolutionary sense," she aims to build "a society where housework is communal." Just like Sammy and Beth, she envisions socialized childcare and communal kitchens. If tasks like

childcare, cooking, cleaning, and laundry were completed by the collective, people would be free to engage in creative pursuits and “meaningful, productive labor.”

If we look back to theory, underlying Aviva’s point here about “meaningful, productive labor,” is an assumption she shares with Angela Davis. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis calls for the socialization of housework as well as “the abolition of housework as the private responsibility of individual women.”⁶⁷ She writes that housework is both an uncreative and unproductive activity, and that no woman should have to be relegated to it.⁶⁸ Housework is uncreative because it is “deadening and never-ending.” Quoting Lenin, she calls it a “nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.”⁶⁹ In addition to being uncreative, Davis says that housework is also unproductive. By this she does not imply that it is unimportant, but that, in an economic sense, it is not part of the cycle of production – that it is instead a precondition to production.⁷⁰

This is the theoretical background that Aviva calls on to argue that if we socialized housework, we would be able to “free everyone to go out and actually engage in meaningful, productive labor.” For her, productive or meaningful work does not happen in the kitchen. One must “go out” to do that.

Given their assumption about the nature of housework, Aviva and Davis conclude that compensation would be an inadequate solution. Paying the wife or mother of the home to do chores simply does not challenge the patriarchy and degradation embedded in the capitalist form of housework. This would simply relegate women to the same “unproductive and uncreative” drudgery as before, just now they would be paid for it. Aviva says that “In the long term...paying a wage for women to stay in the home is absurd.” It is absurd because the effort may become antithetical to its intended purpose. While its purpose was to bring justice to women, and address their exploitation in the home, compensation risks only enslaving them further. Davis writes: “It would seem that government paychecks for housewives would further legitimize this domestic slavery.”⁷¹ Paying wives and mothers to complete the home’s chores would only codify their condition, and completely attach them to it. It would now literally be the woman’s “job” to do the housework. On this perspective, Wages for Housework cannot

⁶⁷ Angela Davis, In *Women, Race and Class*, (Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia), 18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁰ More on this in Chapter 1: Theory Review.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

liberate women, because “Wages cannot compensate for her slavlike situation,” as Davis insists.⁷²

How then can we reconcile with the Wages for Housework movement, if it only further legitimizes women’s domestic slavery? A route for reconciliation may be in the reminder that all work under capitalism is bondage.

Reconciling compensation and collectivization.

Socialists like Davis critique housework for being exploitative in nature, but they must agree that all other work is also exploitative. This is why many socialists often call all work under capitalism “wage-slavery” – not because its trauma matches the experience of American slavery, but because it retains familiarity to this economic structure in that workers are unwillingly bound to a system that harms them, that they never chose, that they do not benefit from.

So we must remind ourselves that all work under capitalism is unideal, exploitative. When the socialist revolution comes, all work ought to be transformed. Work will go from being privatized under for-profit corporations, to being collectivized in the name of all workers. The theory says that profit will be abolished, and so workplaces will need a new motive to organize themselves around: such as meeting the needs of the people.

But whilst corporations are being transformed into collectives, and workers are bearing the fruits of socialist reforms, housework might just get left behind. Without a Wages for housework movement, this form of labor will remain invisible, naturalized, unrecognized. The revolution might risk treating housework just as the capitalists did: as an invisible task that goes on in the home, done by women, that is of no business to the state.

To avoid this very real possibility, we need a movement that can “call out the nature of housework as being labor” – that puts housework “into the spotlight,” as Aviva argues. We need a movement that does the “ideological” work of recognizing housework, thus pulling it into the group of existing work recognized by capital. We need a precedent of treating housework as if it were economically valuable, before the revolution comes. We need to pay wives and mothers who already do the bulk of society’s housework; we need unions that defend their right to a wage, and their right to decent working conditions. We need organizations that can ask the critical questions that will come up, about what it means to be a

⁷² Ibid., 13.

houseworking woman? We need a movement such as Wages for Housework to lay these foundations, to elevate domestic work to the same status as all other recognized jobs in society, so that when the socialist revolution comes, housework can be uninhibitedly included in the wave of changes that are to come.

This may be the short term purpose of the Wages for Housework movement; a movement that can and should act in harmony with the longer term aim to collectivize all domestic tasks. When Aviva makes the distinction between long and short term goals for the future of housework, this is what she was alluding to. She says: “So, from a political ideological perspective, [paying women] is valuable. But in the long term, in a revolutionary sense, paying a wage for women to stay in the home is absurd.” While in the long term, paying women for the domestic labor they already do may prove to be problematic for all the reasons that Davis articulates, in the short term it may play a crucial ideological purpose.

Let me turn to Maa, actually, to explain better what this ideological purpose is. We were having a discussion in the home at some point about my argument in this section, and I had her read over all that has been written up to this point. She agreed with the argument, and summarized it as follows. Speaking on the ideological role of the Wages for Housework movement, Maa summarizes:

Neena: (00:01)

You’re saying they should start paying for housework. So now that housework is paid for, it becomes like any other job. But we don’t want it to stay there because payment can be in the most minimal form. And again, your argument is that will also brand women as “houseworkers” just because they are getting paid. ‘So the problem is solved! We are paying the money so now you work!’ [I laugh]. So it seems that women would just be resigned to their fate just because there is some form of payment. But that is not your goal, that is not where you are ending it. That is just your stepping stone so that housework gets recognized as a job – as any other job. Now once that happens, when the revolution happens, when the big change comes, and when all the work is not looked upon from the point of view of profiting, then all work falls under the same category. [Exactly]. Whether a person is a chef, or a person is a doctor, or a person is a *housewife*. So that becomes recognized as a legit work, as any other work. So all you are trying to do is elevate housework from nothing, from no work, to paid work. [Right!] Okay. So this is how you should say.

With the help of the party women and Maa, I have come to this conclusion: that we first need to “elevate housework from nothing” to the same as “any other work.” This way, when

the “big change comes,” housework can begin the process of collectivization along with all other forms of recognized labor.

Maa on solutions.

Using Aviva’s words, I have just formulated the possibility of a short and long term solution to unpaid domestic labor. In the short term, the Wages for Housework movement could do the ideological work of calling out the nature of housework as labor, and in the long term, we would collectivize all domestic tasks. But Maa’s ideas on the subject are different.

When I asked Maa how she would situate her view in relation to the one I have just suggested, she said: “The focus of my point of view is short. I’m not looking at it from the point of view of it being the first step onto something else. I am looking at it as this being the solution. I am looking from the perspective of making realistic changes in the current situation. Make sense?”⁷³ It is not that she levies criticism against the goals of socialization, but that the long term is just not her focus. She is more interested in what we can do in the now, under the system that currently exists. In this way, she says she is being “more conservative and more realistic.” Her solution does not involve a socialist revolution or any schemes of collectivization, and because of this it is probably more relatable.

She likes the idea of the Wages for Housework movement, though she does not expand on it here. Through our conversations I know of this opinion of hers, but all Maa says in our interview on the topic is the following. After lending enthusiastic support for paid maternity leave, she comes to the topic of paying housewives herself. In a hesitant and resigned tone, she says:

Neena: (06:42)

And paying the housewives – well, it's something that is never going to happen. I just feel it's something – and even if they are going to get paid, it's going to be bare minimum. You know? Because I don't think any government can afford that.

Summer: (07:06)

I mean. Okay. Do you think that that's something that a government should try to make possible?

Neena: (07:13)

Sure, they should of course try to make it possible. But they can't afford it. Because those women who are sitting at home, being housewives or being moms for several years, are

⁷³ In a follow up conversation

not earning any money – pumping in any money. That basically means half the population of the country gets money without having to work. Right? [Yeah]. So I—I can't even imagine what kind of world that would be. It would be basically ... Eh! You know what it should be? [Laughs. What?] For example, in a family the guy is working, the woman is a housewife, right? So the company should be making two checks: one for the husband who's working, and one for the housewife. [Yeah]. Half and half, half and half. Yeah. [That's a good point.] *Hai na?*⁷⁴

Maa began with a tone of cynicism, lacking hope. “It's something that is never going to happen,” she says, even though this is a cause she believes in. She “can't even imagine what kind of world that would be” – one where women get paid for housework. But interspersed amidst these signs of abject resignation, she is still thinking about how she could make this all work. She switches back and forth between seeing no hope, identifying legitimate issues, and then suggesting new possibilities – as she does at the end. It is the unavoidable struggle of critically thinking through an issue.

After stating that it is probably impossible to secure pay for housework, Maa flirts with that very idea. She says that even if it were possible, the government would most likely allocate some small stipend to give the appearance of compensation. “Even if they are going to get paid, it's going to be bare minimum” – an amount pitiful compared to the hours of hard work that go into upkeeping the home and the family. If they were to really compensate women for all the unpaid labor they did, they couldn't afford it. Maa says, “ I don't think any government can afford that.” Rather than seeing her point as regressive, this is actually her knowing just how much work women do in the home, how important it is, and how undervalued it is – that if a government were to pay for it, they would go broke because women do *that* much work. In this, she has expressed a genuine worry about the Wages for Housework movement.

If the wage that is settled on is too small, this might harm women further. They would be resigned to the role of houseworker, and still receive pitiful wages. This is a similar to Davis's critique that the effort might end up further legitimating women's “domestic slavery.”⁷⁵

Maa suggests a creative way out of this dilemma. With a quick switch in tone she goes from resigned to excited, and suggests that employers should compensate housewives. She says, “You know what it should be? ... the company should be making two checks: one for the husband who's working and one for the housewife. Half and half.” In the scenario of a

⁷⁴ Translation: “isn't it?”

⁷⁵ Davis, *Women Race and Class*, 13.

heterosexual married couple, where man works, and the woman is a housewife, Maa suggests that the man's paycheck be split with his wife.

This would solve a couple issues for Maa. It would increase the amount Maa presumes she'd get from the government, to at least half of the husband's income. It would also ensure that ideologically housework is not taken for granted, because now the family gets the second half of the husband's income because of the mother. This is important because it makes visible the wife's role in her husband's productivity. Her contribution would be acknowledged through her husband's paycheck. Maa suggests this as a different way to go about wages for housework.

Maa and the risk of radical imagination.

The idea of the company making two checks, one for the husband and one for the wife, helps Maa visualize how all this can work out, making it less abstract and more real. Throughout her response, we can hear her working out how one can seriously suggest that which has never been done before. If one strays too far from what housework already looks like, one risks seeming like they've lost touch with reality. This is the troubled process of radical imagination. How creatively can one dream before they lose touch with the capitalist real? How many details or possible missteps must we account for, before we can commit to a dream? These are the difficult questions that arise when one practices theory as a child.

Children have the special power of looking upon the world with a "wondering estrangement;" to look upon everything as if it could be made anew, as if it didn't have to be this way. Eagleton reminds us that since children "do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently."⁷⁶ And this is why children make the best theory – because they are not afraid of the process of radical imagination.

Beth, Sammy, and Aviva are well-versed in practicing radical imagination. They are members of a party that encourages us to propose new ways to build a more just world for all. In party classes or conferences, regular people from all walks of life – teachers, nurses, officeworkers, students – all gather to discuss how to restructure society in the interest of the working class. We do this work regularly. But not being in any party, Maa doesn't do this too often, and so she expresses more hesitancy in her interview. Most of the time she makes political dreams alone, or with me when we have our kitchentable discussions.

⁷⁶ bell hooks, *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, 1.

But even though it was hesitant, Maa made theory in this section. She used her lived experience to question and critique the current order, and to suggest new possibilities in her own right. In the midst of our interview, she had made the most hopeless statement. But right as she did, she caught a spark of excitement. Right as she said “I can't even imagine what kind of world that would be,” she exclaims, “Eh! You know what it should be?” and goes on to propose a new way we should compensate for housework. Despite thinking that it's probably never going to happen, Maa decided to propose her idea regardless. It is these moments that we need to celebrate – when our mothers switch from resignation to excitement, from hopelessness to possibility. For none of us know whether the political plans we spend so much time fighting for will ever come true. Yet, we must find the excitement to live to fight another day: to imagine despite it all.

CHAPTER 5: THEORY LEARNS: A CONCLUSION

We began our investigation in Chapter 1 with four questions. These questions were: what is labor power; what is the relationship between reproduction and production; what is the qualitative nature of housework; and what are the possible solutions to capitalist housework? I had decided these were the four central topics to women's unpaid labor: these were the questions that would help me understand. I zeroed in on these questions after reading marxist feminist theory by thinkers such as Angela Davis, Leopoldina Fortunati, and Christina Delphy.

But after interviewing my four narrators, my questions changed. Speaking with Beth, Sammy, Aviva, and Maa helped me see new questions that now became central to understanding women's unpaid domestic labor. Questions of love, imagination, and mental health emerged as new focal points. These were the issues that women who actually perform this labor care about. This is what bothers them, what they are thinking about. Their narratives helped us capture the lived experience of unpaid labor and thus its full reality, rather than just its theoretical abstraction.

Additionally, my narrators were able to enrich and further the theory we started with: manifesting the dialectic between theory and experience I had once imagined. In some instances my narrators answered questions brought up by theory – such as what is the qualitative nature of housework: is it a depressing or a spiritual activity? In other instances, the narrators introduced me to new categories of analysis, such as ‘love.’ They helped us see how love can actually play a rhetorical role in liberating women from capitalist notions of the family, rather than binding them to it. In other instances still, our narrators offered new ways to look at old contradictions. For instance, they helped us look at the Wages for Housework movement as a necessary precursor to socialization: making two solutions that once seemed oppositional, now not only compatible but also codependent.

Let me now expand on some of these ways in which our narrators have aided, extended, diversified, and challenged the existing theory. One of the theoretical questions I foregrounded was ‘what is the qualitative nature of housework.’ Given that some women like housework, and find it to be calming in its monotony, some of our theorists argue that this is an especially

“stultifying and crushing”⁷⁷ labor. In the midst of this difference, I concluded that this was an open question in the theory of women's unpaid domestic labor. However, when we consulted my mother as a narrator on the subject in Chapter 3, we were presented with a possible resolution. She helped us see that under the current conditions of capitalism and the patriarchy, housework will certainly feel stultifying and crushing to the working woman. But housework could be transformed into a calming and even spiritual experience – if the conditions under which it existed were changed. Domestic tasks could become a positive and rewarding part of life if we lived in a more communal society where housework was valued on the same level as all other work; and where labor was not allocated on the basis of gender or class. We were able to visualize such a community in the form of an *ashram* that Maa recalls visiting in Bangalore, India. Thus we can answer the theoretical question of ‘what is the qualitative nature of housework’ with the answer: ‘well, it depends on the social, political, and economic conditions of the society.’ The conditions under which housework is organized will determine whether it is beneficial or destructive to women's psyches.

So while sometimes my narrators were able to answer theoretical questions, at other times they helped introduce entirely new categories of analysis. For instance, ‘Love’ was a chapter I never expected to write when I started this project. That's because our theorists hardly focus on it within their analyses. But to the women I interviewed, love came up as a recurring theme. Because domestic work usually involves taking care of loved ones, if a woman points to any issue or injustice here, she may seem selfish or heartless. If a person calls out the economic nature of caring for a disabled sister, for instance, it seems like they do not understand the value of relationships and love. But Aviva helps us see that this isn't the case, and that ‘love’ can be reclaimed as an ideological and rhetorical tool for women's liberation. She says that love is actually what drives political women's demands to stop exploitation – because they are working to build a better world for all women, and thus all people. As Aviva said, these demands are made so that “not just ourselves, but also the people we care for can have better care. We're fighting for these conditions cause all of us deserve better.” Thus, ‘love’ can be used to understand and praise the efforts of women who fight for a more just and equal world for all. And a theme that I never would have predicted, has now given us a much deeper and personal look at the politics of unpaid labor.

⁷⁷ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 12-13.

Lastly, let us revisit how one of our narrators was able to resolve a seeming conflict that came up in theory. In Chapter 1, I grouped my theorists into two camps: Davis and Federici. A defining feature of this disagreement was that they had different ideas for a solution. While the Davis camp wanted to collectivize household duties and destroy their private demeanor, the Federici camp wanted immediate compensation for all wives and mothers. While these two solutions seemed antagonistic, in Chapter 4 Aviva and I suggested that they could be reconciled – that we can recognize both their benefits and purpose. If we understand that history must progress through certain stages of development, we see that collectivization cannot happen without compensation. Further, we understand that we cannot simply stop at compensation because it will create problematic consequences for women that are articulated by Davis. Thus, we come to the conclusion that we should view compensation as a precursor to the long-term goal of socializing all housework, ultimately pulling housework out of the private realm all together.

In this way, our four narrators entered into a conversation with theory. Yet, sometimes they were silent on the questions that theory was really interested in. One debate I was initially very interested in Chapter 1 was ‘what is the difference between reproduction and production, and which one is housework?’ Is housework basically production, same as what happens in the factory, as Federici and Delphy argue; or is it a precondition to production, as Davis suggests? This interesting but difficult question went largely untouched by our interviews. That’s because neither I nor my narrators cared about it too much in the moment. We were more interested in talking about what life really looked like. And so we pondered on other issues – like love and spirituality, guilt and rebellion, troublesome boyfriends, and late partners. In this dynamic process of evolving conversation, an abstract question like ‘is housework reproduction or production’ got left unanswered. The question remains unresolved, but maybe it was never the right question to begin with.

Maybe this question matters little in the grand scheme of things. Of course it might matter to the internal logical coherency of marxist theory, but it matters less to the everyday woman – the woman who this question was about in the first place. While some of our narrators had a view about whether homework was ‘productive’ or not, most of them had no opinion at all. But they all did agree that housework and carework are economic activities; that women are being exploited because of it; and that we need radical change to right this wrong. As long as we can agree on these bases, we can move forward in collective action. We should

mobilize marxist feminist theory in the interest of action and social transformation: as was always its goal. Returning to bell hooks' hope for us, "Our search leads us back to where it all began, to that moment when an individual woman or child, who may have thought she was all alone, began feminist uprising, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ bell hooks, *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, 11.

AFTERWORD ON CUBA

In the beginning there was the deed. Leaders were those who led. “Learning in the morning and teaching in the afternoon” became a popular revolutionary slogan, reflecting a fact of life.

– Vilma Espín⁷⁹

We are seriously carrying out the demand in our program to transfer the economic and educational functions of separate households to society. That will mean freedom for women from old household drudgery and dependence on a man. That will enable her to exercise to the full her talents and her inclinations. The children will be brought up under more favorable conditions than at home.

– V.I. Lenin⁸⁰

To the United States government, housework is entirely invisible. There are no laws that recognize its existence, no organizations that oversee its functions, or unions that regulate its conditions. So for those of us interested in the topic of housework as a political issue, we must look elsewhere for example. In this paper, I look to Cuba as an example of a state that takes the question of domestic labor seriously. Through state organizations, laws, and programs, Cuba has attempted to implement solutions that address housework however they understood best. Namely, they have a Family Code that mandates an equitable distribution of household labor; and they have an impressive national daycare system that begins the process of collectivizing carework. Here I will look at two texts about these initiatives: *Sex and Revolution: Women in Cuba* (1996) by Lois Smith and Alfred Padula; and *Women in Cuba: The making of a revolution within the revolution* by Vilma Espín, Asela de los Santos, and Yolanda Ferrer (2012). While the former book is written by American academics, the latter is written by Cuban women who themselves fought in the 1959 Cuban revolution. Through a synthesis of their contrasting perspectives, I will suggest how we should approach evaluating the “success” of Cuban policies and programs aimed at housework. I ask, what should we keep in mind as we look at the steps that Cuba took? How can we respect their history, perspective, and journey to independence within our evaluation? By asking these questions, we will extend understanding towards their country and

⁷⁹ Vilma Espín, Asela de los Santos, and Yolanda Ferrer, *Women in Cuba: The making of a revolution within the revolution. From Santiago de Cuba and the Rebel Army, to the birth of the Federation of Cuban Women* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2012), 29.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

people. We will not perpetuate intellectual imperialism by evaluating Cuba according to standards that did not come from its people – from within its particular history.

The Cuban Revolution began in 1952, when a vanguard of men and women came together to oppose the Batista regime and its American overlords at all costs.⁸¹ Revolutionary fighter and close hand to Castro, Vilma Espín, says that the revolution began with the people's early wish to reject "a political system marked by decades of rampant corruption and subordination to the dictates of the Yankee colossus to the north. It begins with a determination to reknit the community of Cuba's long history of struggle for national sovereignty, independence, and deep-going social reform."⁸² The rebels had to wage a bitter guerrilla war against Batista's dictatorship that went on for years. And in January of 1959, they won this war, "propelled by popular insurrections and a mass general strike that swept the country."⁸³ But this is when the real work began. Batista having fled the country, it was time that the revolutionaries stayed and built a new Cuba. They had to build anew a state and culture that could defy the hegemonic powers of the world, with American imperialism waiting patiently at their shores.

One of the promises of the revolution was women's betterment – it was in fact a central focus, as the guerrillas could not have triumphed without their fighting and support. Fidel Castro calls the state's efforts to rid the country of sexism "a revolution within the revolution."⁸⁴ But at the time, they did not use the vocabulary of "sexism" or "gender equality." All they knew in regards to women's empowerment was "participation."⁸⁵ They knew that women wanted to participate in the changes that were happening in the country, and so their sole focus was getting women involved in all levels of society. They established the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) to meet this goal, and Vilma Espín became its president. She now reflects: "I always emphasize that at the time [of founding the federation] we didn't talk about women's liberation. We didn't talk about women's emancipation, or the struggle for equality. We didn't use those terms then. What we did talk about was participation. Women wanted to participate."⁸⁶ She further notes, "We had no preconceived structure or agenda." There was "just a desire by women ... to participate in a revolutionary process, whose aim was to

⁸¹ Ibid., 24.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 29.

transform the lives of those who had been exploited and discriminated against and create a better society for all.”⁸⁷ Participation was the primary focus at the time because before, Cuba had a very conservative and traditionalist culture in which a woman’s place was in the home. So overcoming this culture in itself was revolutionary – to say that a woman’s place is in building the nation.

In his light, one of the initiatives the FMC took on was training women to make their own clothes. The state would pay rural women to come to Havana and learn these skills. But Cuba got criticized “by women who came out of some of the feminist organizations of the 1960s and 70s” for this effort.⁸⁸ The western feminists’ charge was that “teaching women how to make clothes for themselves and their families reinforced traditional female stereotypes. It bolstered women’s oppression rather than advancing women’s liberation.” Yes, it is true that teaching women how to make clothes advances the idea that this is a women’s task. However, the FMC stands by what they did. They knew that culture changes slowly and that they had to meet Cuban women where they were. Thus, lofty ideals of abolishing gender roles took a back seat. In 1990, Espín was asked if she still thought they had done the right thing. Her immediate answer was “Yes” because:

at that time it was what made it possible for young women from the Escambray mountains and the Baraco region, where the counterrevolution was working intensively on peasant families, to come to the capital, learn what the revolution was really about, and become the first cadres of the revolution in those areas ... “This was important not only in combating the counterrevolution, but in terms of the development of women as cadres ... We started from where women were at to raise them to a new level.”⁸⁹

They had to start from where women already were in order to connect with them. And while western feminists were creating important literature and theory in the 60s and 70s, their governments were hardly following their lead. At least the Cuban government was taking concrete steps in the direction of abolishing women’s oppression, whether they were perfect steps, is up for evaluation.

But we must remember that by the time Betty Friedan even wrote the *The Feminine Mystique* in 1962, the Cuban Revolution (1959) and its plan for women's emancipation was already in effect. To give some context, Friedan’s book began a new wave in feminist theory,

⁸⁷ Ibid., 23-24.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 31.

from which academics have built off for decades. And it is the root of the theory we use to critique Cuba's policies today. But that theory wasn't around when Cuba needed it. As Smith and Padula report, "By the time Betty Friedan had published her famous attack on the traditional family in *The Feminine Mystique* (1962), Cuba's own social policies were being implemented.⁹⁰ Thus, the Cubans had to operate by their own ideas of what was best for their people and women. They had to theorize and act within the same moment. "Learning in the morning and teaching in the afternoon" became a popular revolutionary slogan, and it reflected a fact of life.⁹¹ There was no time to think, only to do, so thought and action stepped together. "In the beginning there was the deed," Mary-Alice says about the days of the Cuban Revolution, and so "Leaders were those who led."⁹² So when it came to the woman question, Cuban leaders used their own perspectives about what was best. In the vacuum of ideas such as "sex equality" or "womens liberation" which had genuinely not yet been formulated, Cuba forged its own feminist theory and policy.

And so we need to understand Cuban women's perspective about what they thought was best for themselves, at that time. Before we critique how feminist the revolution was, we need to hear what their women have to say about what they did and why they did it. We must do this if we want to avoid being feminist imperialists. And so we come back to the essential point of "participation." This is what Cuban women wanted, it was what would make them feel respected and proud. Asela de los Santos reminds us that "When a deepgoing revolution takes place, women, who have been oppressed for millenia, want to take part."⁹³ And so women who had fought in the war would be approached by women who wanted to be like them. They would ask, "What can we do? How can we show our support for the revolution? What's needed most?"⁹⁴ They saw that the revolution had the potential to bring real change in their lives, after all the false promises of regimes before. So they wanted to be part of it—"to *do* something. The more revolutionary laws strengthened this conviction, the more they saw how necessary their contribution was."⁹⁵ These revolutionary laws addressed many areas such as: women's literacy

⁹⁰ Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 145.

⁹¹ Espín, *Women in Cuba: The making of a revolution within a revolution*, 29.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

and training, employment, anti-discrimination in the workplace, reproductive rights, property rights, and divorce laws – and amongst them was mission to reform house and carework.

The Cuban state has created programs and laws designed to reduce women's burden in the home. Here I will focus on only two of these initiatives: namely the Family Code and the national daycare system. In 1975, they enacted the Family Code whose purpose was establishing gender equality within the family. Amongst other rules about divorce and child support, the law mandates that men help with household chores and childcare. As Smith and Padula report: "Article 26 requires both partners to contribute to the care, guidance, and education of their children and to cooperate in the smooth running of the home," and that "Article 27 suggests that even if one parent was not working outside the home, the other must still share domestic responsibilities."⁹⁶ Thus, the Family Code aims to reduce women's burden in the home, and recognize child care as both parent's burden. Most importantly, it recognizes that housework is a part of life in which the state should take interest. It treats the personal as the political, and takes responsibility for making the family a more equitable and just unit of society.

The Code has not escaped criticism from western feminists though. Smith and Padula, who take it upon themselves to reveal the "limitations of state policies aimed at promoting and managing social and cultural reservations ... in relations between the sexes," say that the Family Code never translated well into Cuban life.⁹⁷ This is because while the state focuses on empowering women, they do little to change the men. They put the onus of reaching 'women's equality' on women rather than on men. Smith and Padula write, "The revolution placed a great deal of emphasis on changing women's role but gave little attention to changing men's."⁹⁸ So while the women are empowered, the men still want to hold on to their privilege. This causes more disagreements and divorce within the family than it does peace. For instance, "A 1973 study of seventy-seven divorced couples found a 'lack of adjustment' between the revolutionary change in public life and the deep conservatism of family culture."⁹⁹ The men largely remain conservative in their minds, so it hinders women from feeling the effects of the Code. Rather than reforming themselves, people just get divorced. These internal dynamics of romantic and family relations make the Family Code less effective. And that is because the

⁹⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, 154.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

revolution has put the burden of transforming a sexist culture on the victims of that culture, rather than on its perpetrators.

Smith and Padula place the blame of this on the Cuban state's chauvinist nature. They say that while programs and laws were enacted to better women's lives, they were there to "defend a revolution whose interests were defined by a male elite."¹⁰⁰ The FMC and other women's programs had accepted a formula in which the final decision would always be made by "the great patriarch. Everything was to be gained through and owed to the great chief" (i.e. Fidel Castro.)¹⁰¹ Because he was ultimately the one who spearheaded thought and policy, he overlooked changing men's natures in addition to women's. In addition to training women on how to do work outside the home, they should have perhaps trained men to cook, sew, clean, and raise children within the home. Now while this is a valid analysis and criticism of the Family Code, I question if it comes from a productive place.

The revolution had placed so much importance on increasing women's participation, that perhaps they overlooked reforming their men. Yet, Smith and Padula's critique does not foreground the perspective of Cuban women within the revolution. They do not preface that they saw participation as the key to their own empowerment – even if it did cause unintended consequences that nobody could have foreseen, such as increasing divorce rates. Secondly, Smith and Padula call Fidel Castro Cuban women's "great patriarch." When they do this, they have just given these women a patriarch they never had. They have enforced upon them a great patriarch when they never saw it that way. Instead, they were proud that their revolutionary leader was taking such a great interest in women's issues. They were proud that he would, in 1959, take housework and domestic responsibilities to be a serious issue, rather than ignoring them as do leaders of most nations. Castro was an inspiring leader who is celebrated in the eyes of Espín, de los Santos, and the other millions of FMC women, yet they did not consider him to be their "great patriarch." These are not the words of Cuban women, but an imposition by Smith and Padula. This is an example of western feminists coming into Cuba, failing to listen to the words of Cuban women, and then making accusations of backwardness. Taking this into consideration, let us still center the fact that the Family Code is one of its kind in the world, in that it mandates men to help out in the home.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 57.

Another example of Cuba addressing social reproduction as a women's issue is their daycare system. Before we study this system, let us understand the motivation behind it. Officially, the government views housework as a necessary form of labor, but condemns its private nature. They follow Friedrich Engels in believing that “True equality between men and women can become a reality only when the exploitation of both by capital has been abolished, and private work in the home has been transformed into a public industry.”¹⁰² This later part, about transforming private work into public, is relevant for us. They believe that women are burdened with housework because this labor is relegated to the family. If all domestic chores were to become the responsibility of the state, women would be able to go out and participate in “some form of collective task: factory or agricultural labor, volunteer work or service in mass organizations.”¹⁰³ Collectivizing domestic tasks would make it so that women are no longer tied up in the home, so they could become productive members of society. Now if we look back at the varying marxist feminist perspectives on this subject, we can see that Cuba’s outlook matches that of Angela Davis, and that the Italian autonomists would take issue with Cuba’s particular stance. They would say that housework is in fact an invisible form of production, and that women should be compensated for it immediately.

But given that the Cuban government’s goal is to convert housework into a “public industry,” they have taken steps in this direction. One example is the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) which took a lead in developing the nation’s day care system.¹⁰⁴ The FMC is an independently funded, governmental women's organization that serves the purpose of incorporating women into the “construction of socialism.”¹⁰⁵ Formed within months of the Cuban Revolution’s triumph in 1960, all of the FMC’s activities are aimed at mobilizing women, and improving their conditions.¹⁰⁶ They are a widely popular organization, and by 1990, “80 percent of all Cuban women between fourteen and sixty-five years of age” were members.¹⁰⁷

Part of FMC’s many efforts was creating a national daycare system. FMC President at the time, Vilma Espín, said that this was the effort “closest to their hearts.”¹⁰⁸ The purpose of the program was to provide children of all backgrounds with affordable and quality day care so

¹⁰² Espín, *Women in Cuba: The making of a revolution within a revolution*, 23.

¹⁰³ Smith, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, 150.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

that their mothers could enter the workforce. This program would take a major domestic responsibility into the hands of the state, lightening the load of working women. It was part of a larger move to raise Cuban children in the collective, bringing them “up under more favorable conditions than at home.”¹⁰⁹

By 1961 – less than a year after the revolution – the FMC had already inaugurated its first three day care centers.¹¹⁰ By 1967, it had 332, and by the 1990s, the system was able to provide one slot for every ten working women in the entire country.¹¹¹ In addition to their rapidly growing scope, the quality of these day care centers was high. Smith and Padula report:

The new day care centers were handsome two-story buildings with ample playrooms, baths, kitchens, and offices. The ratio of childcare workers to children was high ... According to Fidel Castro, these centers were likely more important than universities because “there they [the children] learn to integrate into society, to collaborate with others.” In a first-hand study of Cuban daycare in the early 1980s, anthropologist Sandra Malmquest found the centers to be clean, the children well supervised, and the workers affectionate and professional.¹¹²

For a small and impoverished country, this has been quite a feat. Cuba has been able to professionalize childcare at quite a large scale, and at a very high quality. Since the 90s, these centers have also expanded into universal preschool centers called Infant Circles – all provided free of charge. But of course, these centers are not without their problems. For instance, their pick up policy became an issue. Smith and Padula report that “Only mothers, not fathers, could be called at work to take their sick children home ellipses but mothers who left work to attend to ill children were viewed as delinquent by their employers, and would be docked unjustified absences.”¹¹³ This generated quite a lot of complaints amongst women, especially around the 1980s. The authors say that this points to the state’s latent sexist ideas about a father’s lack of childcare responsibility. Thus, there are issues that yet need to be ironed out when it comes to Cuba’s efforts in collectivizing housework, but they are trying.

Cuba is a small and impoverished country, but is proud of the steps it has taken to realize women's equality and liberation. But when the Cubans dedicated themselves to building an anti-sexist country, they were operating off of entirely self-forged ideas of what women

¹⁰⁹ Espín, *Women in Cuba: The making of a revolution within a revolution*, 224.

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, 37.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

wanted and needed; trying to build a society of justice and equality before the literature of the 1960s and 70s was even written. So for Cuba, theory really is based in action. They were learning while doing, defying the idea that 'theory leads to action' So while we acknowledge the flaws that are now apparent in Cuban household policy, we need to do it from a standpoint of understanding. Otherwise, our feminism simply takes on the task of intellectual imperialism. Instead we must understand how the Cuban Revolution viewed what was good for women, in absence of western theory, and start from there.

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