

# The Ghost in the House: Women, Race, and Domesticity in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

Gabeba Baderoon  
 Penn State University

*In South Africa, the house is a haunted place. Apartheid's separate publics also required separate private lives and separate leisures in which to practice ways of living apartheid's ideological partitions into reality. This essay analyzes the compulsive interest in black domesticity that has characterized South Africa since the colonial period and shows that domestic labor in white homes has historically shaped the entry of black women into public space in South Africa. In fact, so strong is the latter association that the Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles reveals that in South African English the word maid denotes both "black woman" and "servant." This conflation has generated fraught relations of domesticity, race, and subjectivity in South Africa. Contemporary art about domestic labor by Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande engages with this history. In their art, the house is a place of silences, ghosts, and secrets. Precursors to these recent works can be found in fiction, including Sindiwe Magona's short stories about domestic workers in her collection *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1994) and Zoë Wicomb's novel *Playing in the Light* (2006), in which a woman passing for white allows her mother into her house only under the pretense that she is a family servant. Muholi and Sibande have engaged the legacy of black women in white households by revisiting the ghosts of the house through performance, sculpture, and photography. Both were inspired by the intimate reality of their mothers' experiences as domestic servants, and in both cases the artist's body is central to the pieces, through installations based on body casts, performance, embodied memories, and the themes of haunted absences, abandonment, and longing.*

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Gabeba Baderoon is the author of *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-Apartheid* (Wits University Press, 2014) and the poetry collections *The Dream in the Next Body* and *A hundred silences*. She is an assistant professor of women's studies and African studies at Pennsylvania State University, as well as an extraordinary professor of English at Stellenbosch University.

### Fanon's Secret

The grape-picker holds out  
his hand full of fruit but turns  
his face, the slight, unavailable cast  
of his head his most precious possession.

The woman who cleans your house  
all day is in the places you cannot be,  
touches your sheets.

You hate  
what is held back,  
not known to you,  
kept, stolen, enchanted.

—Baderoon, *A hundred silences*, p. 63<sup>2</sup>

The white man had the anguished feeling that I was escaping from him and that I was taking something with me. He went through my pockets. He thrust probes into the least circumvolution of my brain. Everywhere he found only the obvious. So it was obvious that I had a secret.

—Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 128<sup>3</sup>

In the night of that first day, I did not know what I was.  
Prisoner?  
Guest?

—Karen Press, *Krotoa's Story*, p. 6<sup>4</sup>

The first time I saw a black woman on South African television was in an advertisement for dishwashing liquid in which a domestic worker was praised by her white female employer for buying a new but effective and cheap detergent. “Betsy, you’re so clever,” the white woman said with a tone of surprised gratification, to which the black woman responded shyly, “Oh, madam.” The memory of this minor yet charged exchange—it must have been in the late 1970s or early 1980s on the sole, government-controlled television channel—has stayed with me for more than thirty years, though I’ve long forgotten the name of the dishwashing liquid. The sixty-second visual narrative illustrated and somehow made more concrete the reality of how black and white people related to one another, how apartheid determined the profoundly unequal relations between women, and how words like *clever* and *madam* could hold painful meanings.

2 G. Baderoon, “Fanon’s Secret” in *A hundred silences* (Roggebaai: Kwela/Snailpress, 2006), 63.

3 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 1986 [1952]), 128.

4 Karen Press, *Krotoa’s Story* (Sea Point: Buchu Books, 1990), 6.

Even as a child, I knew that the advertisement wasn't just about cleaning dishes. Instead, by deploying the unprecedented sight of a black woman on television, it instructed the audience in the workings of race, gender, and power. The sly, faint praise from the white woman framed the black woman's intelligence solely in terms of servitude. The latter's equally performative and studiously submissive "oh, madam" signaled that she was being asked to demonstrate that she understood her place. The advertisement was therefore a drama of servility that used the radical development of a black presence on television to teach viewers that the private space of the house confirmed the public reality of racial separateness and hierarchy. Popular culture about domestic work thus rehearsed and made more real the racialized and gendered public sphere of apartheid.

This essay addresses the complex cultural meanings that have resulted from the central role of household labor in mediating black women's access to public space in South Africa. The very word *domestic* signals this freighted social role. In South African English, the word *domestic* serves not only as an adjective, for instance in the phrase *domestic flight*, but as a noun which means "servant," as in, "she is the domestic." The linguistic transformation of the malleability of an adjective into the unvarying solidity of a noun suggests the sharply bounded terrain of the private realm in South Africa. This terrain has enabled a sustained system of exploitation and violence over hundreds of years. Similarly, the word *maid* not only denotes "servant" but is also a demeaning way of saying "black woman."<sup>5</sup> The word *girl*<sup>6</sup> is a correspondingly offensive term that merges servant and black woman.<sup>7</sup> The conflation of the South African words for "black woman" and "servant" illustrates that black women's access to public space is inextricably connected to the long history of domestic work in the country.

The history of black women being pressed into domestic service occurs from the very beginning of colonial settlement in South Africa. In fact, a tense and illuminating knot of meanings marks the point at which black women enter the world created by European colonialism. This is evident in the figure of Krotoa/Eva, the first indigenous woman to move from Khoisan society into the Dutch colony at the Cape, soon after its

5 *Meid*, the Afrikaans version of the word, intensifies its offensiveness when used in English, and the brutal term *kaffermeid* specifically licenses sexual violence. This can be seen in the testimony provided by a woman activist before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "When a woman refused to bow down,... then that unleashed the wrath of the torturers, because in their discourse, a woman, a black 'meid,' a 'kaffirmeid' (kaffer servant girl) had no right to have the strength to withstand their torture" (quoted in Ruth Rubio-Marín, ed. "The Gender of Reparations: Setting the Agenda," *What Happened to the Women? Gender and Reparations for Human Rights Violations* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2007), 48–91, 52). I am grateful to Rosemary Jolly for alerting me to this in her work in *Cultured Violence: Narrative, Social Suffering, and Engendering Human Rights in Contemporary South Africa*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

6 *Girl* and *boy* are terms of insult used for black women and men of any age. They both infantilize and make age uncertain, simultaneously removing authority and the protection of childhood. Krotoa/Eva is called "a girl" in Van Riebeeck's diaries, and this seems to refer both to her young age and to her role as a domestic servant. In J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the subject of the Magistrate's obsession is the "Barbarian girl," whom he "relieve[s] of the shame of begging and install[s] her in the barracks kitchen as a scullery-maid" (1990: 31). This, however, is such a familiar trope of sexual exploitation that the soldiers in the barracks quickly comment: "From the kitchen to the Magistrate's bed in sixteen easy steps" (1990: 31).

7 Penny Silva, W. Dore, D. Mantzel, C. Muller, and M. Wright, *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in Association with the Dictionary Unit for South African English, 1996), 255.

founding in 1652. Krotoa/Eva was brought into the settlement while she was still a child, and eventually she became an interpreter between the Khoisan and European settlers. In this role, she was “the first female cultural broker in the colonial contact zone and, indeed, ... one of the most significant go-betweens of the period.”<sup>8</sup>

Given her pivotal role in history, Krotoa/Eva is the subject of sharply contested memories—she is remembered as a gifted linguist, interpreter, wife to a Danish doctor and mother—to their children, and also as a traitor, failed convert, bad mother, and prisoner. In a well-known article published in 1996, the historian Yvette Abrahams contests the latter interpretations and reads the traces of Krotoa’s life in archival sources—which she terms “the memory of her enemies”<sup>9</sup>—as signs that she was a traumatized survivor of sexual violence. In the post-apartheid period, Krotoa/Eva has been reclaimed away from the “distasteful” memory of her “inbetweenness”<sup>10</sup> to become a mythical originary figure as “mother of the nation” for many white South Africans, an emphasis that “domesticates her as a mother figure, denies her agency, along with the violence she experienced as a subject ‘raced’ and gendered in the colonial power structure.”<sup>11</sup> Although Krotoa’s reclamation in the role of ur-mother is of interest, it is to another erasure I wish to draw attention.

Revealingly, although she was a child (Abrahams estimates her age as ten or eleven at the time she was brought, possibly by force, into the settlement), Krotoa’s first role among the Dutch was as a domestic servant. Jan van Riebeeck enters her in his diary as “taking service” in his household.<sup>12</sup> Natasha Distiller and Meg Samuelson confirm that Krotoa’s “initial function was to perform domestic labour and child-care under the supervision of van Riebeeck’s wife, Maria de la Quellerie.”<sup>13</sup> I propose that Krotoa’s position as a domestic worker is in fact intimately linked to her later work as a translator, and this connection has given a lasting ambiguity to household service by black women in white households. The role of domestic worker *translates* between public and private, inside and outside, and is therefore associated with the anxieties of ambiguity and betrayal that translation always generates.<sup>14</sup> These overlapping roles turned Krotoa into a public figure in private spaces. Her multiple functions as a servant, interpreter, and “go-between” constitute both a founding (and oppressive) avenue of access to public space and a fraught legacy for black women in South Africa.

The historian Elizabeth Elbourne points out that during the period of British control over the South African colonies, “ideas about domesticity were frequently used as a weapon in the colonial power struggles between and among Europeans and Africans.... Ways of talking about houses and domesticity were also, then, ways of talking about the

8 Natasha Distiller and Meg Samuelson, “‘Denying the Coloured Mother’: Race and Gender in South Africa,” *L’Homme: European Review of Feminist History*. 16.2 (2005): 28–46, 31.

9 Yvette Abrahams, “Was Eva Raped? An Exercise in Speculative History,” *Kronos: Journal of Cape History* XXIII (November 1996), 3–21, 4.

10 Distiller and Samuelson note that the governor of the Cape in 1674 described Krotoa in his obituary of her as “distasteful[ly]” “hovering between” two worlds, “like the dogs, always return[ing] to her own vomit” (quoted in Distiller and Samuelson 2005: 31).

11 Distiller and Samuelson, “Denying the Coloured Mother,” 31.

12 Abrahams, “Was Eva Raped?,” 11.

13 Distiller and Samuelson, “Denying the Coloured Mother,” 31.

14 Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 22.

justification for conquest.”<sup>15</sup> Elbourne notes the gendered implications of this discourse. The colonial focus on African domesticity sought “to remake African women as Christian wives and mothers, and, by extension, as effective servants.”<sup>16</sup> Domesticity was thus also the instrument through which colonial society sought to convert Africans into “civilized,” Christian masculine and feminine subjects. In other words, domesticity also served as a form of colonial “translation” of Africans into ideal colonial subjects, and servitude was integral to translating African women into exemplary colonial figures.

As I have noted previously, translation carries severe penalties for those associated with the ambiguities and anxieties of “carrying across.” Abrahams asserts that the perception that Krotoa was “a woman between” exacerbates her continuing denigration and, instead, Abrahams prefers to call her the “first woman” to experience life inside the Dutch settlement and yet was “most certainly a Khoisan woman, whose life was inseparable from the fate of her people.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Distiller and Samuelson describe Krotoa’s “hither and thither... movements to and from the Fort, in and out of her Batavian attire and Khoikhoi skins, from one language to another,” and in their account she exemplifies a woman who was “[l]iving at the interface of cultures, with her translating tongue fashioning a new subjectivity between two worlds... [and] it is this aspect of her legacy that is perhaps most appropriate to post-apartheid predicaments.”<sup>18</sup> They feel that her very fluidity and ability to move between spaces renders her well-suited to the needs of her era as well as the contemporary period.

The anxieties inevitably unleashed by translation rebounded upon Krotoa as the first woman translator between the two cultures, who was denounced by both sides for not being a stable entity, however. Karen Press’s poetry collection *Krotoa’s Story* captures this cruel dilemma: “whose side are you on, Krotoa/I say I am where you put me.”<sup>19</sup> Following Krotoa’s founding example, domestic labor also carries this taint of instability—an oscillation between two functions, and a constant movement between public and private.

I explore these reverberating cultural meanings of domestic labor following. In the course of the eighteenth century, the Cape colony came to rely on slave labor, and enslaved people eventually formed the majority of the population in the Cape.<sup>20</sup> By the 1820s, two-thirds of Cape slaves performed domestic work.<sup>21</sup> This had a crucial impact on the relationships within households. During the colonial period, the term *domestic correction* was given to the practice of “violent coercion and physical punishment that slave owners at the Cape applied to their slaves.”<sup>22</sup>

Domestic labor has been the most sustained avenue for black women’s participation in the economy, and today remains one of the largest sources of employment

15 Elizabeth Elbourne, “Domesticity and Dispossession: British Ideologies of ‘Home’ and the Primitive at Work in the Early Nineteenth-Century Cape,” *Deep Histories: Gender and Colonialism in Southern Africa*, eds. Wendy Woodward, Patricia Hayes, and Gary Minkley (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 27–54, 27–28.

16 *Ibid.*, 28.

17 Abrahams, “Was Eva Raped?” 3.

18 Distiller and Samuelson, “Denying the Coloured Mother,” 40.

19 Press, *Krotoa’s Story*, 6.

20 Wayne Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa*, (Athens: Ohio University Press; Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2007), 7.

21 John Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 108.

22 Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection*, 73.

for black women. It is perhaps also the most constraining, with belated labor protections by the state and continuing exploitation. Under apartheid, as Jacklyn Cock noted in her revealing book *Maids and Madams* (1978), “the veiled and hidden abode of reproduction—the household”<sup>23</sup> made possible “the ultra-exploitability of domestic workers.”<sup>24</sup> In the post-apartheid period, progress has been made in the form of the passage of minimum wage legislation and the protection of domestic workers under labor laws, but Jennifer Fish’s 2006 study *Domestic Democracy: At Home in South Africa* nonetheless concludes that domestic service, which continues to employ about a million black women in South Africa today, remains “the last bastion of apartheid.”<sup>25</sup>

Apartheid exemplifies the political relation between the public and the private. The system’s separate publics also required separate private lives and separate leisures in which people could practice ways of living apartheid’s ideological stratifications into reality. Houses were places of juncture—highly regulated but also fragile and over-determined. Scenes of overlap between the public and the private such as the domestic labor provided by black women in white homes form hinge experiences. Shireen Ally shows that white children and families were inducted into codes of race and gender through the labor relations of the household, in which black women carried out the daily, intimate tasks of housecleaning, child care, and cooking.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, instead of being the obverse of apartheid’s rigidly controlled and divided public space, privacy in South Africa is itself a deeply structured space, marked by ritualized practices, stark boundaries, entrenched inequality, and the making of conflicted relations and subjectivities.

Because of this history, the South African household—both black and white—has been a shadowed one. Apartheid’s engineers sought the active destruction of black family structure through the creation of systems of migrant labor, depleting rural economies, and building single sex hostels and townships that served as “dormitory enclaves” designed “to export their energies”; such enclaves could not become self-sustaining areas.<sup>27</sup> Because of the scale of the challenges created by apartheid’s policies of space, Njabulo Ndebele notes, “we have yet to arrive home.”<sup>28</sup>

During apartheid, black domestic workers lived within but at the margins of white private life. In this capacity, black people could not have *private* lives, but could only service white domesticity. Even as such workers were exempted from the Group Areas Act exclusions and could live in white areas, the *private* lives of domestic workers were made structurally impossible. Employers would often limit access by visitors to their domestic workers’ living spaces, and so the latter would often meet with friends on the

23 Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: Domestic Workers under Apartheid*, (New York: Women’s Press, 1989), 4.

24 Cock, *Maids and Madams*, 14.

25 Jennifer Fish, *Domestic Democracy: At Home in South Africa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 81.

26 Shireen Ally, *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 2011.

27 Njabulo Ndebele, “Arriving Home? South Africa Beyond Transition and Reconciliation,” *In the Balance: South Africans Debate Reconciliation*, eds. Fanie du Toit and Erik Doxtader (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2010), 55–73, 58.

28 *Ibid.*, 67.

pavements and in the parks of white neighborhoods, where their leisure and private time had to be lived in the interstices of white public spaces.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to its gendered and racialized meanings, domesticity in South Africa also has a geography, architecture, and language. Property advertisements in newspapers reveal that South African middle-class homes are conventionally built with separate “maid’s quarters” to house “live-in servants,” showing how the built environment reflects the relations of labor in the intimate space of the house. Their location (in a tradition lingering from the placement of slave quarters on colonial farms) allows the maximum degree of surveillance and access by employers. The historian John Mason confirms that slaves at the Cape were subjected to “almost constant surveillance”<sup>30</sup> and kept “within the reach of their masters’ and mistresses’ eyes, tongues, and hands.”<sup>31</sup> He points out that the kitchen was not only the space of labor, but that “it was common for slaves... to sleep in hallways and kitchens.”<sup>32</sup> Yet the subjection of enslaved people to constant regulation was matched by the capacity of the dominant culture to *overlook* spaces such as slave quarters. It took years for tourism brochures of well-known colonial-era farms (which produce world-renowned wines) to admit that their picturesque Cape Dutch houses had been built with slave labor and to acknowledge the function of slave bells in regulating time on farms. Thus the history of domesticity reveals the dangers that the household has held for black South Africans since the days of slavery and colonialism.

In South Africa, the house is therefore a haunted place. Belinda Dodson describes apartheid as “fundamentally a geographical project,”<sup>33</sup> yet the “intimate geography” of the house remains fully to be explored. It is in literature and recently in visual art that some of the complexities of the house and its strange currencies have become visible. Divided private spaces and the selves crafted within them are the subject of fascinating recent art and critical writing in South Africa. In these works, the house is a place of silences, ghosts, and secrets, and the most ordinary acts and spaces seem “secretly familiar.”<sup>34</sup> The memories, objects, and rooms of the household become the site of ambiguous and unsettling intimacies. Following, I explore the impact of these fractured spaces of domesticity and the relations of domestic work on the themes of the child/servant, family relations, and on black and white subjectivity.

In a special issue of *Cultural Studies* on public and private lives in South Africa, Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall assert in their introduction that “private and domestic life [in South Africa is] often understood as white life.”<sup>35</sup> Given the intimate and often unremarked presence of black domestic servants in white households, however, I propose, in contrast, that *domesticity* in South Africa is in a complex way in fact black. Bearing in mind this history, how can one think about the fraught relationship of domesticity, privacy, and subjectivity in South Africa? How do we engage

29 Cock, *Maids and Madams*, 16.

30 Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection*, 110.

31 *Ibid.*, 108.

32 *Ibid.*, 76.

33 Belinda Dodson, “Reconfiguring Space, Reimagining Place: Post-Apartheid Geographies of South Africa and Its Region,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 47.1 (2013): 1–8, 1.

34 Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Vol 17, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1919 [1955]), 217–56, 245.

35 Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall, “Introduction: Private Lives and Public Cultures in South Africa,” *Cultural Studies* 27.3 (2013): 307–32, 307.

with the history of violent intimacy of the South African household and the temporality, architecture, and subjectivities it has shaped?

Because domestic work marks a crucial entry point for black women into the world made by the colonial encounter, I argue that household labor and its ambiguities continue to haunt black women's presence in public space in South Africa. This ambiguity has turned black women servants into inherently unsettling figures within dominant representations of the house. It therefore makes sense that the first sight of a black woman on television would be in the exemplary public/private role of the domestic worker.

Seeming to reflect this history, the opacities of domestic space and domestic work have come to constitute an important trope of South African literature. The theme of the black child who shifts between the role of daughter and servant is a recurring feature of South African literature, famously appearing in Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004).<sup>36</sup> The black girl who, because of her race, cannot be a child, reveals and unsettles the boundaries of childhood and intimacy, and illustrates the unequal social reality within the private space of the household. The long history of domestic service thus circles around a node of crucial social and historical meanings. Relations of servitude and sexual violence, intimacy and abandonment haunt representations of the house in the South African imagination.

Because of the discursive and political pressure put on black households and on black servants in white households, the house can be a place of uncanny intimacies, desire, madness, disguise, envy, contempt, and gossip. Behind the phrase of "oh, madam" in the opening paragraph of this essay, lay less innocuous perceptions by domestic workers. Sindiwe Magona's collection of short stories, *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* portrays the experiences of domestic workers in South Africa, including the grinding repetitiveness of daily chores, their deferred dreams of escape, and their tense relationships with their employers, revealed in insider stories about the people for whom they worked.<sup>37</sup> Pieter Dirk Uys's theatrical satire *Farce about Uys* (first performed in 1983) created unexpected alliances, such as between a gay Afrikaner son and the maid.<sup>38</sup> White women are differently subjected to forms of servitude under patriarchy, and black and white women could sometimes collude against patriarchal constraints. Such themes of fantasy, denial, and suppressed memory are taken up by Magona, Zoë Wicomb, Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande.

Wicomb's novel *Playing in the Light* narrates the story of a young woman named Marion who eventually discovers through dreams, coincidences, and suppressed

36 Like *Agaat*, Anne Landsman's *The Devil's Chimney* (1997) engages the troubled relation of land and household in the *plaasroman* (farm novel), explored, for instance, in J. M. Coetzee's exemplary *In the Heart of the Country* (1977); the long-running *Mail and Guardian* comic strip "Madam and Eve" depicts the relationship between a white female employer and her black domestic worker, characterized by intimate enmity between the women and also brief moments of empathy and alliance; Zukiswa Wanner's comic novel *The Madams* (Oshun, 2006) revisits the fraught meanings of domestic work from the perspective of black women who employ white maids. In the United States, popular books and films such as *The Help* and Lee Daniel's *The Butler* have used the often-overlooked presence of domestic servants as a lens on the workings of power.

37 Sindiwe Magona, *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991).

38 Pieter Dirk Uys, 1983. *Farce about Uys*. <http://pdu.co.za/FARCE%20%20ABOUT%20%20UYS.pdf>. Accessed May 14, 2014.



memories that her parents had “played white” by denying their black families.<sup>39</sup> On discovering the extent of her parents’ denial and sacrifice, Marion realizes that her memory of a family servant who was allowed to visit her every week was actually that of her grandmother. She contemplates her loss: “How am I to bear the fact that my Tokkie, my own grandmother, sat in the backyard drinking coffee from a servant’s mug, and that my mother, her own daughter, put that mug in her hands?” To reinforce the deception that her dark-skinned mother was actually her servant, Marion’s mother Helen had even used a separate “servant’s mug,” illustrating the obsessive boundaries of the racially divided household.

Revealingly, Marion’s description of her physical longing for Tokkie is strikingly similar to the memory recounted by the French feminist writer Hélène Cixous of her Arab nanny Aïcha, who had looked after her during her childhood in Algeria. In a childhood marked by emptiness and inexplicable silences, Marion recalls “the smiling, doting woman who holds her tightly against a breast” and who was the only person who could deal with “the child’s loneliness and loss and unease.” In similar tones, Cixous recollects the impossible yet tender symbolism that Aïcha held for her. Cixous remembers wistfully, “I snuggled up to Aïcha’s body and laughing she let me hug her country for a fraction of a second and that was all” (2006: 6). Like Marion, Cixous’s childhood was marked by unassuaged and inexplicable longing. “The whole time I was living in Algeria I would dream of one day arriving in Algeria.”<sup>40</sup> As with Marion, to be held by her nanny provided her with infinite solace. For white children cared for by African women like Aïcha and Tokkie, the body of the nanny holds an answer to an impossible desire.

This aspect of the South African household is reimagined in works by Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande, in which the experience of black women as maids becomes central, rather than an illuminating contrast or margin. Their visual art engages with the long, uneven contest of the household and explores the notion of black women servants in white households as objects of fantasy, erasure, curiosity, anxiety, comfort, memory, origin, and ambiguity. They draw on the charged history of images of the house to evoke the reality of continuing poverty and exploitation, but also convey an unprecedented intimacy with the lives of domestic workers. In both cases, the body of the artist is the instrument of incarnation, through sculpture based on body casts, ghostly performance, echo, embodied memories, haunted absences, longing, revisiting and abandonment.

Muholi’s “intimate archive”<sup>41</sup> of the private spaces of the home and Sibande’s sculptures of an imperially scaled domestic worker in her series *Sophie-Ntombikayise* show how domestic space, clothing, and the language of domestic labor embody “the bad infinity of work for white families.”<sup>42</sup> A certain hauntedness is at work in both works, in the expressive register of Muholi’s performance piece, *Massa and Mina(h)*

39 Zoë Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* (Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2006).

40 Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 3.

41 Kylie Thomas, “Zanele Muholi’s Intimate Archive: Photography and Post-Apartheid Lesbian Lives,” *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 11.4 (2010): 421–36.

42 Anne McClintock, “‘The Very House of Difference’: Race, Gender and the Politics of South African Women’s Narrative in *Poppie Nongena*,” *Social Text* 25/26, (1990): 196–226, 197.

(2008), in which she draws on the stories of her mother's life as a domestic worker, and in the "fictional" figure of "Sophie," based on casts made of Sibande's own body.<sup>43</sup>

Both series allude to fantasy and play, both invoke ghosts, both draw on autobiography and embodiment as an artistic practice, and yet the two take markedly different approaches. In her installation and performance piece *Massa & Mina(h)* (2008), Muholi drew on memories of her mother, Bester Ziqubu Muholi, who worked for forty-two years from the age of twenty-six as a domestic worker for a white family named the Hardings, until long after reaching pensionable age and who only stopped working when ill-health forced her retirement. Bester Muholi passed away on September 27, 2009, and *Massa and Mina(h)* is a personal tribute that emerges from mourning and longing, yet Muholi also gives it a larger scale. She wishes to encompass all domestic workers around the globe and to highlight the history and practices that render their marginalization invisible. Muholi contests several forms of neglect that domestic workers face, revealing that they are underpaid, overworked, and exposed to hidden dangers.

Domestic workers are often centrally involved in raising the children of the privileged, coming close to power in its formative stages and "in essence they raised these families' children at the expense of their own."<sup>44</sup> As the child of a domestic worker, Muholi remembers that she "did not have a mother really."<sup>45</sup> Hers was a childhood emptied by the needs of other children. The white children like the ones whom her mother looked after are shadowed by the absent children of the women who care for them.

The latter's absence haunts the unappeasable longing felt by white children for their black nannies, evident in Marion's memories of Tokkie and Cixous's recollections of Aïcha. Reflecting on the curious and unequal intimacy of domestic work, Muholi remembers the intensity of the relationship between her mother and Mrs. Harding. "It was always curious to me that two women would share parts of their personal lives and struggles despite the years of apartheid that kept one woman in the perpetual role of servant and the other in the life-long role of Madam." Muholi pursues the inexplicable yet undeniable intimacy between the domestic worker and the madam in *Massa and Mina(h)*.

Indeed, the absence of an intimate archive of her own and the framing of her mother's life in the terms of the powerful drives Muholi's work in the *Massa and Mina(h)* series. In a riveting article on *Massa and Mina(h)*, the curator Gabi Ngcobo points to the antecedents of Muholi's project, noting that a newspaper article about her mother titled "Work as usual for Bester," published in a local newspaper on December 13, 2002, forms "a vital archive for her project."<sup>46</sup> Ngcobo notes that the

43 Thembinkosi Goniwe, "Exhibition Preview: Desire: Ideal Narratives in Contemporary South African Art, South Africa's Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, 4 June–27 November 2011," *African Identities* 9.2 (May 2011): 247–48, 247.

44 Zanele Muholi, telephonic interview with author, United States, March 25, 2014.

45 Ibid.

46 Gabi Ngcobo, "It's Work as Usual: Framing Race, Class and Gender Through a South African Lens," *AfricAvenir International* (2010). <http://www.africavenir.org/publications/e-dossiers/revisions/gabi-ngcobo.html>. Accessed February 14, 2014.



**Figure 1: Massa and Mina(h) I. Source: Zanele Muholi**

article sentimentalizes the severe inequality of domestic labor and marginalizes the senior Muholi's actual experience. In the article, "many facts are revealed by what is omitted, what is outside the 'frame'."<sup>47</sup> Through her performances and photographs in *Massa and Mina(h)*, the younger Muholi "attempts to put these histories in perspective, to work them out, rearrange them within and beyond the photographic frame" (Ngcobo 2010: online).

To Muholi, that newspaper clipping is a route to the past she now cannot recover in any other way. The article referred to both her mother and her father, who died when she was an infant. "It spoke about her dedication to her work in order to fend for her children. My father's name is mentioned, too, though I never met him. He died a few months after my birth.... I always wanted to know more about him from my mother, but it is too late now. What is left behind for me is a photo of him, a memory for us and our children. All I know is my mother loved him."<sup>48</sup> In light of this sparse set of artifacts, the impetus behind Muholi's attachment to photographs becomes clearer. "You know, for me, photographs are evidence of existence. They are part of the process of how I am able to understand life. Taking photographs and looking at life in likeness is healing."<sup>49</sup>

The photographic elements of *Massa and Mina(h)* rely on the mutual presence of other bodies, both performers and photographers, and their staged relation to one another, as a core element of the work. In the photograph *Massa and Mina(h) I*, Muholi is dressed in a blue and white maid's uniform and white cap, and tenderly holds her hands over the eyes of a white woman who plays her employer. The latter's mouth is slightly open, as though in surprise or pleasure. She is wearing pink hooped earrings that match the color and slight openness of her lips. Such details of costume and the contrast of black skin against white skin provides much of the tension and contrast of the image, which is taken in close-up. Muholi's eyes also appear closed as

47 Ibid.

48 Zanele Muholi, "I Have Truly Lost a Woman I Loved," *Reclaiming the L-word: Sappho's Daughters Out in Africa*, ed. Alleyn Diesel (Cape Town: Modjaji, 2011), 11–21, 21.

49 Ibid., "I Have Truly Lost a Woman I Loved," 21.



**Figure 2: Massa and Mina(h) II. Source: Zanele Muholi**

she leans close to her employer, and her hands over the eyes of the other woman suggests a brief equality of desire and fantasy amid their more general relationship.

The intimacy of their bodies in this photograph contrasts with the distance between them, both physically and symbolically, in *Massa and Mina(h) II*, in which Muholi is visible through the posed legs of the “madam.” Muholi is engaged in polishing the wooden floor. She is kneeling in the background behind the madam at the level of the latter’s feet, and a broom is leaning against the doorpost between them. The blue of Muholi’s uniform echoes the color of the wall behind her and the shoes worn by her employer, suggesting the instrumentality of Muholi’s position, who seems as functional as the wall and the madam’s shoes. Muholi’s gaze is ambiguous. She appears to be watching the other woman while she is working, but also seems to be aware that she is being watched, so continues to polish and keep her head down, even as her eyes sweep upward.

In *Massa and Mina(h) I*, Muholi broaches a “taboo” topic about domestic work—its relation to sexuality. She notes that “we hear the stories of the female black domestic worker being raped or having an intimate relationship with the white male ‘massa.’ Let’s queer it, however, and imagine that those white madams may have loved their black maids, been intimate with them. Maybe because they shared something simply as two women in love, or maybe it was a purely carnal relationship based either on mutual erotic desire or on the unequal power and labor relations that exist(ed) between black women and white women, that the white madams, like the white massa, took advantage of the situation.” Thus among the fantasies that Muholi explores is the possibility of sexual intimacy and desire in the unequal space of the house shaped by servitude.

*Massa and Mina(h)* is a painful work for Muholi. It is incomplete, a series that she says she “abandoned.” The reason lies in the achingly powerful meanings of the work. In an interview I conducted with her, she reveals that the conflicted emotions surrounding the project caused her to end it abruptly. Even to return to these memories is discomforting for her. While doing the work, she confronted the difficulty of her memory of her mother’s relationship with her employers, the Hardings. “I was frustrated. Should I be thankful or ungrateful? It was a Catch-22. Thanks, but... we did not have a mother, really.” In the figure of the disciplined body of the domestic worker, always at service and always available to the white family who “adored” her,

was her absence from her own family. The photographs and performances carry the memory of forty-two years of presence and absence. The decades are a ghostly negative in the images. Because it is an interrupted work, part of the task of understanding *Massa and Mina(h)* is to view both the pieces Muholi produced and to recall their incompleteness, the works that were not made, the archive that is drawn from a newspaper clipping, the family album that did not exist.

Muholi's memories of her mother's intimate yet profoundly unequal relationship with the Hardings are intensely ambivalent and are characterized by a combination of shocking desire, frustrated longing, regret, sorrow, fantasy, impossibility, and a body that does not forget. She recalls that "there was a period when I so wanted my mum's boss to adopt me." She knew that this happened occasionally to the children of domestic workers and would mean access to better education and more life opportunities. Such children, who lived in the interstices of white life, learned to distance themselves from their real mothers. Muholi remembers, "It wasn't their intention. It was just my fantasy." The white home was thus the space of fantasy, barely acknowledged desire, and frustration.

This unforgotten space of the house and its forbidden intimacies, its tastes, and its memories are at the core of *Massa and Mina(h)*. For Muholi, to visit the actual house in which her mother worked for forty-two years, as she did while making her documentary *Difficult Love*, was to visit "a personal heritage site" created not by the state but by her own memories of the role that took her mother away from her children. For her, this revisiting and its delicate memories demand sensitivity and care and going beyond trauma. "I took an intimate approach through photographs. I created a photo album that my mum never had." She traces her own life and its possibilities directly to the results of her mother's four decades of domestic labor. "Look at me. Everything I do, it comes from my mum's sweat and blood. It's directly connected with my history, what I cannot forget no matter how hard I try." Muholi's body remembers. She cannot forget "no matter how hard she tries." For her, the performativity and queering of the domestic space and its relations are not imaginary. "I'm not fiction, or fictional."

Eventually, however, even performance and collaborative work could not contain the troubled meanings of domestic space and its memories for Muholi. "It was too painful. I abandoned this project. For me, domestic work is beyond words."

### Language, Home, and Private Space

Domestic work requires black people to become recognizable, reassuring, and compliant figures. Because they work in the intimate space of the house, servants are always under suspicion, and they have to rehearse their compliancy repeatedly. The reason for this is historical, according to Wendy Woodward, who describes the legacy of a strong anxiety about the threatening corporeality of both male and female slaves lingering from the colonial period in South Africa. She writes that "slave bodies constituted a particularly threatening group in their symbolic figuring because... they lived in the same domestic space as the slaveholders." In the space of the house, "slaves' corporeality, especially their sexuality, was perceived as both powerful and dangerous."<sup>50</sup>

50 Wendy Woodward, "Contradictory Tongues: Torture and the Testimony of Two Slave Women in the Eastern Cape Courts in 1833 and 1834," *Deep hiStories: Gender and Colonialism in Southern Africa*,

What are lost are the lives of the domestic workers and also the solipsism of the white madam, who must acknowledge her reliance on the maid. Here, the maid again acts as the ambiguous lynchpin between public and private. Thoko Ntshinga, who played the role of “Sophie” the maid in *Farce about Uys*, delivered a line that threatens to reveal the hidden vulnerabilities of the master and, by extension, the mistress: “After you’ve washed a white man’s underwear, what secrets are left?” (Uys 1983: 34).

Such insistent corporeality has to be controlled. This is achieved through the performance of appropriate servility and through the adoption of generic personae and dress. In the context of domestic labor, as the scholar Zethu Matebeni notes, “Black bodies remain in the background and almost invisible until needed.”<sup>51</sup> People had to answer to new names, easier names their employers could pronounce. This is reflected in Hlonipha Mokoena’s assertion that “all maids are called Sheila. It’s the job description: to have a name that is directed at you but has nothing to do with you” (2010: online). One also sees this in Muholi’s “Massa and Mina(h)” in which both names in the title are functional: “Master” and “Mina(h),” which Muholi translates as “me,” but which is a name as a “job description.” Sibande’s title *Sophie-Ntombikayise* also articulates the renamed identities that were given to black women who worked in white and middle-class homes. Both Muholi and Sibande respond to the inventions and rituals of domesticity with expansive and fantastic visions—in Muholi’s case, the performance of queer desire, and for both Muholi and Sibande, the impossible fantasies that lay behind the invisibility, functional titles, and draining workloads of domestic workers.

Mary Sibande’s imperially scaled sculptures of a woman named “Sophie” allude directly to the visual tropes through which domestic workers have entered South African popular culture—for instance, the blue uniform, white apron, and headscarf—yet also to her biography as the daughter and granddaughter of domestic workers. Drawing on this intimate relationship, Sibande’s works also refer expressively to what has been excluded from the popular image of domestic workers: imagination, creativity, and power. To represent these possibilities is an overt gesture of resistance and subversion, in opposition to silencing and erasure, but it also touches on other languages entirely.

The figures in Sibande’s pieces were made from plaster casts of her own body, giving a ghostly presence to the artist in these works. Her bodily presence also alludes to the lineage of women in her family who had been domestic workers, including her mother and grandmother. Sophie’s closed eyes give her multiple meanings—contemplative, unknowable, ecstatic, dreaming, imagining, inaccessible. Sibande’s art has not only brought Sophie into the museum, but large-scale images of the works were exhibited on the sides of buildings during the 2010 Soccer World Cup. By leaping from invisibility to the particular visibility of the museum and public art, on billboards and the sides of buildings, the works play with oppositions of inside and outside—and against the marginalization of domestic workers in public space. Placed on billboards, these images in public space invite us to pay attention to people who are always behind the scenes, invisible, and who don’t matter. They deliberately play with the opposition of inside and outside, by envisioning the fantasy life of Sophie, whose interiority has been suppressed.

eds. Wendy Woodward, Patricia Hayes, Gary Minkley (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), 55–84, 55.

51 Zethu Matebeni, “Intimacy, Queerness, Race,” *Cultural Studies* 27:3 (2013): 404–17, 404.

The uniform is key to turning women into domestic workers, the way Clark Kent's costume turns him into Superman, as Sibande reminds us in her allusion to the comic book hero in her sculpture *They don't make them like they used to*. A uniform does two kinds of work—it signals that the woman is capable of and ready to do domestic labor, but also that she has fully entered the *persona* of a domestic worker, as though there is nothing other than this surface. The maid's uniform simultaneously erases and heightens visibility—it allows women to disappear into a subservient identity. Portia Malatjie describes this process as “becom[ing] standardized and mechanical cleaners who occupy people's private spaces.”<sup>52</sup> To enter this persona, a woman has to remove signs of her interiority and the individual dimensions of her identity. As the anthropologist Hlonipha Mokoena notes, “for the maid to do her work she has to strip herself of all accessories and clothes that make her unique. She has to become nondescript, inconspicuous, non-threatening.”<sup>53</sup> Even more importantly, “[f]or her to perform her duties, she has to be seen to be submitting to the discipline of sameness.”<sup>54</sup> I think this is the reason Sibande's works feature an *impossible* uniform. As Malatjie notes, “[t]he oversized, Victorian era-like clothes prohibit Sophie from doing any form of domestic labour.”

In addition to Sophie's “impossible” uniform, Sibande's pieces all show her body engaged in action, even when her eyes are closed. In fact, her closed eyes suggest a dreaming, even ecstatic state that contradicts the unvarying sameness of household chores. This is why so many commentators have noted the fantastic elements of the works, which pull against this sameness while incorporating their mechanisms, such as Sophie's uniform and the apparently submissive connotation of her closed eyes. To Thembinkosi Goniwe, the curator who first drew attention to Sibande's work by selecting her for the South African pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2010, *Sophie* is a work of “desire” and “yearning” whose “fictional character... embodies a set of fantasies and imagined tales that... presents the possibility of change.”<sup>55</sup> Malatjie observes that the installation evokes “Sophie's fantasies and desires, and transgresses stereotypes associated with being a maid in South Africa.” This emphasis on fantasy, fiction, and desire crafts an expansive reimagining of the interior life of the women inside the uniform. This is not so much a restorative vision, as a completely reinvented one. To Alexandra Dodd, Sibande honors her mother and grandmother in a nonrealist manner by “giving free reign to their imagined desires, liberating their spirits from the ordained strictures of remembrance.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, emphasizing this expressive register, Joyce Bidouzo-Coudray calls the works “a gateway to uncharted elsewhere.”<sup>57</sup>

Sibande's titles are full of acts and processes, and refer to making, putting a spell, catching (“caught”), and refusing. Her works are strongly composed, drawing

52 Portia Malatjie, “Questioning Gender: The Artwork of Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi and Nandipha Mntambo,” *Jag Ed 2011* (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery Education, 2011), 24–27, 24.

53 Hlonipha Mokoena, “Anyone Can Be a Maid,” *Africa Is a Country* (blog), December 6, 2010. <http://africasacountry.com/anybody-can-be-a-maid/>. Accessed February 13, 2014.

54 Ibid.

55 Goniwe, “Exhibition Preview,” 247.

56 Alexandra Dodd, “Dressed to Thrill: the Victorian Postmodern and Counter-Archival Imaginings in the Work of Mary Sibande,” *Critical Arts* 24.3 (2010): 467–74, 467.

57 Joyce Bidouzo-Coudray, “Mary Sibande—Poking at Power Relations in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *The Guardian*, January 7, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/07/mary-sibande-south-africa-art>. Accessed January 7, 2014.

attention to the comportment of the body and its actions, which include knitting, conjuring, conducting, and wielding a regal staff. Our eyes are drawn to the orientation of Sophie's body. In one piece, she rises to an imposing stature, her arms outstretched in a gesture of powerful refusal, and in another she is leaning forward and turning, yet held from behind in a web. Her gestures play with stasis and movement.

The change in scale from invisibility to arresting visibility in Sibande's work—from the neglected to the regal—contrasts with the intimacy of Muholi's approach. In *Sophie*, Sibande creates monumental, imperial, epic public art, at a scale that fits in a museum and in public space such as billboards and the sides of buildings, not the home. The imperial blue, purple, turquoise, and emphatic white and red in Sibande's sculptures draw on prototypically heroic iconography to create an imperial sovereign on horseback in *The Reign of the Queen* and a maestra conducting a "silent symphony" in the title of another. This is accompanied by a rapturous figure holding a parasol in *I am a lady*. The ecstatic silence in these installations is not the silence of erasure and stiflement but of unbounded invention.

The voluminous arrangement of skeins of fabric, unspooling beadwork, the flounces of trailing raiment spilling from beneath the hem of the dress, the juxtaposition of the white of the apron and headscarf and the intense blues and purples of the uniform, the textures of frills, lace, and body casts—these abundant materials and compositions bring our attention again and again to the question of making, process, and craft. The pieces insist on attending to "labor" as well as fantasy and persona. The material aspects of these works insistently allude to the materiality of the continuing struggles of domestic workers, whose conditions in post-apartheid South Africa remain immensely challenging and their struggles largely invisible.

In South Africa, the domestic space has long carried a history of constricted possibilities, particularly for black women. Artists and writers have revisited this space in autobiographical works that have unlocked the previously hidden space of the home through memory, fantasy, and performance.

Zanele Muholi's performances and photographs in her series *Massa and Mina(h)* create visions that buoyed her during the loss of her mother to the "bad infinity of work for white families" that lasted for forty-two years. In this series, Muholi created an imagined family "photo album," broke "taboos" about sexuality, and spoke not only of pain but also desire and the simultaneity of pain and desire.

In her series of "Sophie" installations and images, Mary Sibande fashions an interior space outside of the "strictures of remembrance." The figures in her reimagined domestic space shift from the invisibility of domestic work to a larger than life reclamation that cannot be accommodated in the home. In both series, the ghost in the house does not speak solely to clarify and confirm, but emerges in an uncanny revisiting - intimate, majestic, unsettling, parodic, consoling, desiring, fantasizing, and questioning.