

Grita. Erga-se¹: Colonial Cycles of Violence in Domestic Labour in Salvador, Bahia



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¹ “Shout. Stand up” (can also suggest, “Raise your voice”)

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“Imperialism, which today is fighting against a true liberation of mankind, leaves in its wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must search out and mercilessly expel from our land and our spirits.”

–Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of The Earth

Abstract

This research analyses the multiple forms of violence that Afro-Brazilian domestic workers in Salvador, Bahia face in their profession, and how the origin of this aggression is rooted in slavery, a colonial tool of oppression. This study also serves to highlight how domestic workers are empowering themselves to change this unjust situation. In order to research this dynamic, I worked with Sindoméstico, a domestic workers union in Salvador.

Through my research, I concluded that the disturbing mentalities of superiority and the false hierarchical binaries that came forth from slavery still exist in modern-day Salvador in the relationship between employer and domestic worker. Employers exploit the labour of domestic workers while subjecting them to physical, sexual, moral, and social violence. In this research paper I will demonstrate how Sindoméstico clearly serves as a manifestation of empowerment. The union was established by domestic workers and continues to be managed by domestic workers. It not only empowers domestic workers by providing them with information about their worker and human rights and assisting them in numerous legal services – such as establishing a work contract and taking cases to court – but the union battles the negative conceptions of domestic work in Brazilian society. Thus, in this study I assert that the oppressive tactics of slavery have carried over into the present day field of domestic work, and the movement for domestic workers rights is changing this reality.

Personal Motivations

“Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder.” – Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

The consequences of colonialism still affect almost every aspect of society, ranging from body image to international trade policies. Despite your personal background, colonialism will affect some aspect of your being and everyday life. Though my native country of Nepal was never historically colonized, the repercussions of colonialism reached our communities and thus our social conceptions of identity. As a result, I was raised in a country where fairness creams are considered normal, and where my fairer skin was complimented but my multi-racial identity was looked down upon. Where western culture is desperately appropriated as means of accessing “modernity.”

When I began my pursuit of post-colonial studies I started to identify the ways in which I have been colonized. Realising the ways in which my mind has been colonized was ineffably disturbing, however this process has been crucial to my development as an individual dedicated to social justice. Thus, one of my life goals is to decolonize my own mind, and to deconstruct the colonial power structures in place which inhibit us from breaking away from this perverse cycle of oppression. Meanwhile, I believe decolonization must take place amongst all people, amongst those who have historically been “colonizers” and those who have been the “colonized.”

As Fanon states, decolonization is “clearly an agenda for total disorder,” and true decolonization may not even be possible. However the process must begin. And though it seems unattainable, I will keep in mind what the powerful women of Sindoméstico always reminded me, “*a luta nunca terminou,*” the fight is never over.

Definition of Terms

Bairro: Neighborhood

Carteira de trabalho assinada: Worker's card

Criada: Housemaids during the times of slavery whose primary responsibility was to take care of children and to accompany their mistresses

Descanso nos feriados civis e religiosos: Breaks on civil and religious holidays

Doméstica: Domestic, term used to refer to domestic workers

Dona: Mrs., also technically means owner

Fazenda: Large farm

Férias: Holidays

Licença maternidade: Maternity leave

Patrão: Male employer, technically means master

Patroa: Female employer, technically means mistress

Previdência social: Social Security

Quilombo: A rural community of black Brazilians with a connection to African ancestry

Salário mínimo: Minimum wage

Senzala: Slaves' quarters

Sindicato: Union

Introduction

I chose to do my Independent Study Project on the violence that domestic workers are subjected to in Salvador, Bahia, and the movement for domestic workers rights which came forth from this struggle. In order to complete this research I conducted a three-week study in Salvador, Bahia with Sindoméstico, a domestic workers union located in the *bairro*² *Vasco da Gama*.

Salvador was founded in 1549 and was the capital of colonized Brasil until 1763. The city was a key export centre for sugar, and later for tobacco. Therefore due to a high demand for plantation labour, African slaves, most of which were from Angola, were transported to Salvador from the 1570s through the transatlantic slave trade. While the majority of imported slaves were males, during the nineteenth century the ratio between male and female slaves in the city balanced out due to the “need” for female domestic servants. “Among all the slaves registered in their owners’ inventories for the period 1811-1888, 19.5 percent of males and 74.1 percent of females were domestic servants”(Nishida 367). While slaveholding was not as widespread in the city due to the lack of plantations, “every middle-class urban family *owned* [my emphasis] at least one live-in female slave, who performed all the house keeping”(Nishida 367). Therefore, domestic work in Bahia is historically rooted in the enslavement of African women.

According to a PNAD, [Pesquisa Nacional por Amostras de Domicílios] in 2004 there were 6.5 million individuals who identified as domestic workers in Brasil, 6 million of which were women (Rocha 17). As of January 2009, there are 458 thousand domestic workers in Bahia, 93 percent are women, and 85 percent are black (Secretaria do

² Neighborhood

Trabalho, Emprego, Renda e Esporte - Setre 7). Thus since the days of slavery, domestic workers in Brasil have been predominately Afro-Brazilian women.

Today domestic workers are often subjected to insufficient wages, unreasonable working conditions, as well as multiple forms of assault. Meanwhile, only 15 percent of domestic workers in Bahia have a *carteira de trabalho assinada*.³ The *carteira de trabalho assinada* legally guarantees domestic workers numerous rights, such as a *salário mínimo*⁴ of R\$465,00 per month, *previdência social*⁵, *licença maternidade*⁶, *férias*⁷, and *descanso nos feriados civis e religiosos*⁸. Therefore the majority of domestic workers' professional rights are not legally protected. At the same time, domestic workers – the majority of whom are black, uneducated females who migrate from the interior to the city at a young age to support their families – are socially discriminated against. Since many do not consider domestic work an actual profession, it is not valued or respected by society.

After years of struggle a group of domestic workers founded Sindoméstico, a union for domestic workers in Salvador, on 13 May 1990. Sindoméstico provides domestic workers with information regarding both their professional and human rights, as well as legal services such as prosecuting previous employers and establishing work contracts. The union also supports the social, emotional, and mental identities of domestic workers, as they actively battle the detrimental societal conceptions of domestic work.

³ Worker's card

⁴ Minimum wage

⁵ Social security

⁶ Maternity leave

⁷ Holidays

⁸ Breaks on civil and religious holidays

My research question therefore, is how does the dynamic between employers and domestic workers in Salvador perpetuate colonial domination; and how are domestic workers empowering themselves as a means of changing this oppressive relationship. In order to answer this question, I spent time with the directors, lawyers, staff and domestic workers at the union, and participated in the services they offer to familiarize myself with the political, social, physical and mental forms of oppression that domestic workers endure.

Statement of Social Relevance

Domestic workers in Salvador are politically and socially marginalized as they are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, gender, class and profession. These workers face countless injustices because their occupation is not deemed valuable by their employers and by society at large; thus, they do not receive the worker and human rights to which they are entitled. Because of the prejudice they face and the structure of their work, the struggles they endure are hidden from the public eye and as a result, difficult to prosecute. Therefore, domestic workers are subjected to multi-faceted violence and are often times in a position which impedes them from taking legal action. The forms of oppression these workers face are rooted in slavery and thus, in a colonial tactic of domination. More than an awareness of the violence domestic workers face is needed to end it, it is necessary to understand the origins of this violence, and how and why it is perpetuated. Understanding the source of this brutality enables the movement to dismantle this hierarchy.

At the same time, it is crucial to identify the ways in which marginalized groups overcome their positions through self-empowerment. The presence of Sindoméstico and the movement of domestic workers is one of resistance, strength, and change. While it is necessary to ameliorate the injustices which have come from colonialism it is also important to recognise and sustain the movements that have risen from this struggle.

Methodology

My position as a foreign college student and researcher, and my identity in general, definitely played a role in how I was perceived by interviewees. Because I am a woman of colour, I believe that the women felt a basic level of comfort with my presence at the union. However, not being fluent in Portuguese did make conversation more difficult, as they seemed hesitant to explain important information to someone who they assumed would not understand. The language barrier therefore made conversation difficult at times, especially during informal interviews. However my formal interviews were with individuals who had worked with foreign students before and were more willing to work through the communication gaps.

Interviews

I conducted two different forms of interviews, formal and informal. Formal interviews were scheduled with Marinalva de Deus Barbosa, the director of the judicial centre of Sindoméstico, Maria do Carmo de Jesus Santos, a director at the union, Cleusa Maria de Jesus Santos, the president of Sindoméstico, Creuza Maria Oliveira the president of FENATRAD [Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas] and a director at Sindoméstico, and Vilma Reis a sociologist from CEAFFRO [Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais]. The informal interviews were conducted with domestic workers while they were waiting for legal services, and during consultations and meetings. I would also like to point out that all of my interviews were with women, the majority of whom are Afro-Brazilian. I had intended to interview the one male director at the union, Francisco, and/or the male accountant Jair, but was not able to due to time constraints and

scheduling difficulties. During my time at the union no male domestic workers came in for assistance either. The only men that came to visit the union were employers.

Formal Interviews

The reason I conducted these formal interviews was that I was interviewing representatives of social movements, such as directors or presidents, and thus they had to be scheduled in advanced. During all of my formal interviews I used a recording device while taking notes as well. I employed a device because at times I did not comprehend the details of some of the statements interviewees made due to my limited Portuguese. Thus I recorded these interviews so that I could later go back and listen to them again. At the same time these women are accustomed to being interviewed, and agreed to my taping of the interview.

These interviews were scheduled either by myself, my advisor, or by Valéria. I had a set of questions ready to discuss, but I would let the conversation go in other directions as well. At times the interviewee would make a statement that would lead the discussion into a new direction. Or the interviewee wanted to provide me with information that I had not necessarily asked for, but was still pertinent to my research. My interview with Vilma Reis however was different, in that it was both a lecture and a conversation. I did not begin by directly asking her questions, we began by discussing CEAFFRO and the past programs it did with child domestic workers, and this led to a discussion of domestic work in Salvador as a whole.

Informal Interviews

I had originally planned on conducting formal interviews with domestic workers who I had hoped to get to know during my time at Sindoméstico. However, the year is

divided into two semesters at the union – the first includes workshops regarding self-esteem and valorization of identity, while the second semester is more focused on judicial assistance (though the union provides legal support throughout the year). Therefore the majority of domestic workers that came to the union would only come in once, and the time in which I could speak with them was while they were waiting for a director. Thus, the amount of time they had available depended on how busy the union was on that particular day. I also did not think it was appropriate to ask personal questions to an individual I had not gotten to know, as this would be insensitive and intrusive as a researcher. It is difficult enough for domestic workers to find the time and courage to come to Sindoméstico, and thus I did not want to make the workers feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed. As a result these informal interviews were very much like informal conversations. My interviewing process was as follows: I first introduced myself and asked the visitor if I could ask her some questions for my research, if she agreed I began by asking why she was at Sindoméstico that day. From there, the conversation would begin and I let the interviewee direct the discussion. If there was a statement that I did not understand, even upon asking for further clarification, I did not record it in my journal because I did not want to make assumptions of what the interviewee was saying and to avoid misrepresenting her thoughts. Also, during these interviews I wrote down the workers' responses, I did not use a recording device. My reasoning behind this is that since the conversation was informal and most likely intimidating enough, I felt a recording device would have been too intrusive.

Participation

During my time at Sindoméstico I participated in numerous activities, which is where I made the majority of my observations. I would talk with the women waiting for legal service and sat in on consultations between domestic workers and directors, and domestic workers and lawyers. I also attended a directors meeting and a conference that was held for National Domestic Workers Day. During my time at the union and through my conversations with domestic workers, directors, lawyers and staff at Sindoméstico I became familiar with the legal and societal struggles that domestic workers face.

Elaboration of Theoretical Framework

My research is based in the post-colonial theory framework, and thus, analyses how despite the technical end of colonialism, colonial oppression and politics have not been eradicated. In his article “Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, ‘psychopolitics’ and critical psychology,” Derek Hook describes Van Zyl’s definition of the post-colonial within a South African perspective: “She views post-colonialism as a *critical perspective* that aims to understand the relationships of *domination* and/or *resistance* that manifest when one culture (typically Western) ‘owns’ or controls another (typically Eastern of African) culture, *even after the era of formalized Colonialism has ended*” (Hook 88). This framework is crucial to understanding the situation of domestic workers in Salvador Bahia, a Brazilian state in which 85 percent of the population is black⁹; but the majority of political and financial power lies in the hands of the white minority. I will now analyse the works of post-colonial theorists Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire to discuss the identities of the colonizer¹⁰ and the colonized, how this colonial hierarchy was sustained, and the trauma that both groups have suffered as a result.

Becoming the colonizer and the colonized

The colonizer implements intimidation and tools of oppression, such as slavery, as a means of assuming his position of dominance. However, the hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized, and therefore the colonizer’s superiority, is technically a

⁹ Garantia De Direitos: Cartilha para Adolescentes, Trabalhadoras Domésticas, Mulheres Negras. Salvador, Bahia: November 2002.

¹⁰ I use the terms “colonizer” and “colonized” in this research paper to refer to the *historical positions* of these two groups. *This is solely for the purpose of clarity*. Meanwhile, I am not suggesting that the “colonized’s” identity is to be equated with the colonial violence that they have experienced.

fallacy. While he clearly has political and social authority over the colonized subject, the concept that the colonizer is intrinsically superior to the colonized has no scientific substantiation. There is no biological factor that makes him greater than the colonized subject. Therefore, this false hierarchical binary has been maintained by a disturbingly high degree of domination and violence. To implement oppression to the extent where erroneous belief establishes itself as “fact” clearly results in the transformation of the two groups involved in this dynamic. As Albert Memmi argues in The Colonizer and the Colonized:

The bond between colonizer and colonized is thus destructive and creative. It destroys and recreated the two partners of colonization into colonizer and colonized. One is disfigured into an oppressor, a partial, unpatriotic and treacherous being, worrying only about his privileges and their defense; the other, into an oppressed creature, whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat (Memmi 89).

Due to colonization, both subjects have undergone identity changes which have transformed their previous senses of self. Neither the colonizer nor the colonized escapes colonization unharmed or unchanged. Here I will discuss how both groups have been traumatized by colonization, beginning with how the colonizer maintained his superiority and the inevitable psychological trauma that arose from this position.

How the colonizer sustained his “superiority”

The colonizer believes he is entitled to a position of dominance. He enforces his ideology as law, and dominates others as a means of sustaining his position of superiority. He is so intently determined to maintain his position of power that he resorts to ineffable measures of brutality. Albert Memmi argues that in the mind of the colonizer, the colonized, “should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e., be transformed into a pure colonized. The extraordinary efficiency of this operation is

obvious. One does not have a serious obligation toward an animal or an object” (Memmi 86). Memmi identifies this dehumanization of the colonized in domestic labour as well, as he argues:

If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract. (Seven days a week; colonized domestics rarely enjoy the one day off a week granted to others.) He will say, ‘You can’t count on them.’ It is not just a grammatical expression. He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid’s life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him and his maid does not exist as an individual (Memmi 85).

The colonizer strips the colonized subject of his humanity in order to define him as solely a means for gain. In order for colonialism to function as a capitalistic operation, the colonizer objectified human beings to an implausible degree. Therefore as a result of this oppression, the colonizer sacrificed his humanity.

The consequences of the colonizer’s “superiority”

While analysing the affects of colonialism on mental well being, it is crucial to analyse both the colonizer and the colonized, and the dehumanization of both subjects. It is often assumed that solely the colonized suffers from the oppressive tactics of colonialism; and while colonized individuals clearly endured much more brutal forms of suffering, it is dangerous to not acknowledge the self-inflicted trauma of the colonizer. As Aimé Césaire argues in Discourse on Colonialism, “No one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization, a civilization that is morally diseased” (Césaire 40). While the colonial project was often times employed under the guise of the “white man’s ethical obligation” to “enlighten” the

“backwards natives,” Césaire points out the clear lack of morality that is required in order to implement colonial oppression. As Césaire further states:

[Colonization] dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal (Césaire 41).

As the colonizer dehumanizes the colonized, he himself undergoes the process of dehumanization. While the human ability to oppress did not originate from colonialism and has arguably always been an aspect of human interaction, the colonizer clearly forgoes his morality when he enslaves another. Therefore, as the colonizer inflicts psychological trauma on the colonized by incessant domination, the colonizer too suffers psychological damage with the loss of his humanity.

The colonized's psychological damage

Colonized subjects often times internalize the consistent maltreatment they endure, which Fanon argues results in the alienation of identity and the acceptance of one's dehumanization. Fanon describes this position in his essay “The Fact of Blackness”: “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of non-existence. Sin is Negro as virtue is white. All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good”(Fanon 147). This conception of inadequacy, often times seen in domestic workers, is a clear result of colonial oppression. Post-colonial theory analyses the internalised oppression of the colonized; which I think is a vital aspect of this framework. However at the same time, I would also like to institute in my research how the “colonized” is still powerful. Despite the colonized's internalization of inferiority, I feel it is important to highlight that the

colonized is not actually intrinsically inadequate in comparison to the colonizer. As Memmi states, “The colonial situation, by its own internal inevitability, brings on revolt. For the colonial condition cannot be adjusted to; like an iron collar, it can only be broken” (Memmi 128). While the colonized endures oppressive treatment and often internalizes these feelings of inferiority, he is always capable of resistance. Though colonization has proven to be a powerful form of domination, it cannot eliminate one’s inherent ability to fight back. While it can mask this strength through incessant psychological damage, it can never eradicate it from the human spirit.

Findings Analysis

Domestic workers are subjected to multiple forms of violence and difficult working conditions which reflect those of slavery. The types of domination that black female slaves endured during slavery have transferred over to domestic workers today. Here I will discuss the forms of violence that domestic workers endure that I learned of during my research.

Physical Violence

While physical violence has decreased since the movement for domestic workers rights began in Brasil, it is still a reality for many women. According to Marinalva de Deus Barbosa, when domestic workers suffer physical violence they rarely have a witness or proof, and thus, cannot take legal action against their employer even if they were in a position to do so (Interview 2). Barbosa also stated that while there are laws that protect domestic workers from physical violence, they are rarely implemented. While it is not a story of direct physical violence, she recounted a story regarding an employer's neglect for her employee's physical well being.

One woman who came to this union slipped while cleaning her *dona's*¹¹ home and broke her arm. No one was in the house when this happened and so no one was able to help her. When her *dona* returned home she refused to take her to the hospital, and forced her to work for three more days with a broken arm before she would take her to a doctor. No one in the household noticed that she was in pain, or upset. Slavery may be technically over, but it is still very present today. There is still much to do (Interview 1).

This clear disregard for physical security is also, a form of physical violence. In that it conveys the dehumanization of the domestic worker, as her suffering is not even worth acknowledging. As Vilma Reis states, domestic workers “are in the house, [and are] like

¹¹ “Mrs.”, also means owner

the objects of the house...She is not like a person anymore, she is more like an object” (Interview 4). The domestic worker is not recognised as a human being who feels and can be injured; in the eyes of the *patroa* she is just another broken object in her home.

Sexual Violence

Like physical violence, sexual violence against domestic workers has declined since the start of the movement, however many workers are still subjected to this form of oppression. Child domestic workers, who are marginalized on the basis of age, are very vulnerable to sexual assault. In 2003, CEAFFRO conducted a study with 360 female domestic workers in Salvador, whose ages ranged from 16 to 18. 33 percent of these young girls had suffered some form of violence while working, and 24 percent of this group suffered sexual violence¹² (Interview 4). When discussing her life as a child domestic worker, Maria do Carmo de Jesus Santos, a director at Sindoméstico, stated that the males in the family she worked for: “*eles querem me cantar*”¹³. She explained how there is an expectation for young domestic workers to “*beijar*,” to “*dançar*,” to kiss and dance (Interview 6). Cleusa Maria de Jesus Santos, the president of Sindoméstico, also described a practice of sexual assault against domestic workers that originated from slavery. Some employers will encourage their sons to have their first sexual relations with the family’s domestic worker. Thus, domestic workers are sexually assaulted in order to initiate their employer’s son’s sexuality (Interview 5). This is a clear example of one of the foundations of slavery, the exploitation of the black female body – the

¹² Other statistics from this research: 47 percent of the girls had left school to find work. None of them had a *carteira de trabalho assinada*, and only one was being paid the minimum wage.

¹³ “They wanted me to flirt.”

dehumanization of black women into identity-less and emotionless bodies which can be used however the colonizer pleases.

Moral¹⁴ Violence

The moral violence domestic workers endure includes intimidation, disregard of existence or needs, abusive language, comments, and gestures which ultimately result in a degradation of identity and thus, psychological violence. As Julia Filet-Abreu de Souza argues in her article “Paid Domestic Service in Brazil,”

They [domestic servants] feel that their occupation is undervalued and humiliating. Even if they do not experience these negative feelings in the household where they work, they realize somehow that their occupation bears the badge of servitude. The nature of their work and the personal and daily interactions with the members of the household make them a very vulnerable group (Filet-Abreu de Souza 45).

Domestic workers are continuously subjected to the concept that because of their profession, they automatically occupy a tainted position in society. According to Barbosa, because of this violence and social stigma against domestic labour many are ashamed of their occupation and will not openly state that they are domestic workers. As a result many do not obtain a *carteira de trabalho assinada* to avoid being politically “marked” as a domestic worker. This moral violence results in such extensive psychological damage that domestic workers choose to endure the numerous risks of not having a *carteira de trabalho assinada*. As Derek Hook states “These deeply ingrained notions, attitudes and stereotypes become part of the black man or woman’s *own subjectivity* to the extent that, as McCulloch puts it, they actively participate in ‘forging the instruments of their own

¹⁴ This form of violence directly translates as “moral” from Portuguese; but it carries the sense of psychological and/or emotional violence.

oppression' (1983,70)" (Hook 99). Thus this loss of self-esteem, which is a result of moral violence, leads to political marginalization as well.

Violence is even prevalent in the basic language that is used in this working relationship. Employers are referred to as *patrão* and *patroa*, or *don* and *dona*, which technically mean master and owner. This terminology has persisted from slavery, and reinforces hierarchies between employer and employee. Therefore language also plays a role in the psychological trauma that domestic workers suffer.

Labour Exploitation

The working conditions of many domestic workers are disturbingly similar to those which slaves endured. When Barbosa began working at the age of nineteen, she was provided with second-hand clothing and little food; even her plates were kept separate from the family's dishes (Interview 2). Maria do Carmo de Jesus Santos was not paid a salary as a child domestic worker, and she was only provided with poor quality clothing and leftovers (Interview 6). Creuza Maria Oliveira argues that employers are able to treat domestic workers in this manner because when working in a private sector, where governmental work inspections do not take place, the domestic worker is in a position of vulnerability where she cannot expose her mistreatment (Interview 3).

The main work conflict that I observed at Sindoméstico was that many employers would not pay their employees their last month's wage after they stopped working for them. By not paying these domestic workers' their salaries, whether contracted or not, is a robbing of labour. This is directly linked to slavery, a tactic of domination which was sustained by the continuous theft of labour. As Reis argues, "Because her humanity is only more or less humanity, there is a mentality that this black domestic worker can do

whatever work, in whatever condition, with whatever value and payment” (Interview 4). This stealing of work reflects the employer’s oppressive ideology: that they are entitled to the labour of domestic workers because of their superior position.

Sindoméstico: a manifestation of empowerment

Sindoméstico was founded to fight the political and social oppression that domestic workers face. It initiated a national movement which is successfully obtaining the rights which domestic workers previously lacked, in that when the movement began they were not legally guaranteed any of the basic rights they have today, such as the right to a minimum wage, holidays etc (Interview 1). According to Creuza Maria Oliveira, one of the founders of Sindoméstico, the union is her life project. Sindoméstico is a manifestation of “change, of self-esteem, of the reconstruction of my life, [It’s purpose] is to show society that we have value”(Interview 3). Vilma Reis emphasizes Oliveira’s view of Sindoméstico as a call to change and power, as she conceptualizes the union “as [an] organizing voice for black women, in the field of work where the majority are black women” (Interview 4). Thus, the union is considered a space for action and mobilization. Meanwhile, it does not only focus on changing the political realities of domestic workers, but invoking the valorization of identity. For Barbosa, Sindoméstico is not only where she learned about her rights but “it’s where I learned about race, gender, and the valorization of black women” (Interview 2). The union actively battles the racist and sexist conceptions of domestic workers in Brazilian society, and encourages these women to not only be proud of their professions, but of all aspects of their identity.

For the women that frequent the union, it is clearly a space for empowerment. When I asked domestic workers how Sindoméstico had impacted their lives, the most

common answer was that the union “*tirou minhas duvidas*,” removed my doubts. By providing domestic workers with information that has drastic affects on their careers and personal lives, Sindoméstico is directly empowering domestic workers. Furthermore, the legal services that the union offers assists domestic workers in manifesting their rights into tangible change. When I asked Maria Auxiliadora¹⁵, an elder domestic worker who was prosecuting her employer for not paying for her last two months of work, if she thought the union played an important role in the lives of domestic workers in Salvador she responded: “Sindoméstico is very important because it is helping us with our resistance. Yes, that’s it, this is a resistance” (Interview 7). The union is viewed as a means for domestic workers to battle the continuous marginalization they face. It is a space where they can challenge the injustices that society encourages them to accept, such as inadequate pay and maltreatment. Thus, Sindoméstico plays a crucial role in their empowerment.

There are few unions for domestic workers on an international basis, and thus, Sindoméstico is both a powerful and rare example of how the subordinated is resisting the oppressive structures of colonialism. At first glance Sindoméstico seems to have taken up the unfeasible task of empowering what is arguably one of the most marginalized sectors of Bahian society. However when I asked Oliveira if it was possible to change the *patroas* and *patrões*’ conception of domestic workers as inferior individuals, and thus their dominative ideology which originated from slavery, she stated that it was possible.

¹⁵ Since *auxiliadora* means “assistant” I am unsure if she called herself in order to not disclose her real name (as Maria is a common female name in Brasil, it could be seen as an ironic “Jane Doe” like title) or if this is in fact her actual name

Yes it is possible. It's possible because we have been doing this not only in the last 72 years, but since the time black men and women were trafficked from Africa to Brasil, and to all parts of the world to work as slaves. And when they did not accept their enslavement, many committed suicide, others had abortions so that their kids would not be born as slaves, they created *quilombos*¹⁶ in order to escape from the farms, from the *senzalas*¹⁷, they wanted to create a free republic. It means since then, we already had a dream for this change. Because first we were slaves, then we were milk mothers, then we became *criadas*¹⁸, and now today we are domestic workers. We are part of the workers' class. So we have been struggling to prove to society that the domestic workers have social value" (Interview 3).

As a movement deeply rooted in historical struggle, it is one of incessant difficulty and conflict. Nonetheless, it is clear from my study that Sindoméstico is a manifestation of empowerment which is establishing a more just reality for domestic workers in Salvador.

¹⁶ A rural community of black Brasilians with a connection to African ancestry

¹⁷ Slaves' quarters

¹⁸ Housemaids whose primary responsibility was to take care of children and to accompany their mistresses

Conclusion

The focus of my Independent Research Project was to analyse how the relationship between employers and domestic workers in Salvador perpetuates colonial oppression. More specifically, I planned on studying how the specific violence of slavery as a colonial tool of domination was being perpetuated. I also wanted to investigate if Sindoméstico is empowering domestic workers to change this dynamic, and if so, how they are achieving this.

During my research there were numerous unexpected realizations. Firstly, I was unsure of how willing Sindoméstico's directors or other individuals I interviewed would be to discuss the history of domestic work and slavery. However, I was mistaken, as this seemed to be common knowledge that was frequently discussed within the union. Secondly, I was not fully aware of the specific facilities that Sindoméstico offers before I began my research. Thus, I was incredibly impressed with the services that the union supplies – from establishing work contracts, to basic information, to prosecuting employers in a court of law.

Throughout my research it became clear that the numerous forms of violence which domestic workers face today are deeply rooted in slavery. Many employers still suffer from the colonial fallacy that they are superior to their employees. Thus, the reinforcement of the false hierarchical binaries of slavery is still very visible in the relationship between domestic worker and employer today in Salvador. At the same time, Sindoméstico exceeded my expectations in terms of the degree to which it empowered domestic workers. This union is definitely on a decolonizing mission, as it not only

serves as a space for legal empowerment, but one for eradicating detrimental mentalities which stem from colonial oppression.

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Indications for Further Research

While I learned a lot during my time at Sindoméstico, I was only able to scrape the service of the domestic workers' movement and the conflicts that this group faces. Also there are many layers to this movement which I was not able to study, and many sub-groups within domestic work which I would like to research in the future. For example, if I had more time to conduct my study I would have liked to interview the few men that are involved in the movement. I think it would be very interesting to research the situation of male domestic workers in Salvador, as this is a working group that to my knowledge has not received much academic attention. Also, I am interested in the issue of child domestic labour in Salvador, and conducting a study with this focus group. I would also like to learn more about domestic labour in the interior. According to my advisor Marinalva de Deus Barbosa, domestic workers in the interior are subjected to very difficult working conditions on *fazendas*¹⁹, with an average salary of only R\$50,00 per month. Thus, this study is simply a starting point which opens up dialogue regarding the many complicated avenues of the domestic workers' movement in Salvador, Bahia.

¹⁹ Large farm

ISP Appendix

1. *Could you have done this project in the USA? What data or sources were unique to the culture in which you did the project?*

No, I would not have been able to do this project in the USA since one of the major components of my project was to conduct a post-colonial study. While it is arguable that there are similar populations in the USA, my project was focused on a working class that was experiencing the same forms of violence from the days of slavery in their occupation. Thus, working with domestic workers in Salvador, Bahia was key to conducting my study.

2. *Could you have done any part of it in the USA? Would the results have been different? How?*

I could have conducted a study on a marginalized group of workers in the USA, such as garment workers in Los Angeles, but I would have lacked the historical and colonial component of my project here in Brasil. Therefore, if I did such a research project in the USA, it would be conducted in a post-colonial framework.

3. *Did the process of doing the ISP modify your learning style? How was this different from your previous style and approaches to learning?*

The ISP encouraged me to learn in a very active and participatory manner. Instead of listening to information from a professor or reading it, the ISP pushed me to go find the knowledge I sought. It required my continuous involvement, and greatly depended on my own initiative. While this style of learning has been employed throughout my education before, the majority of my college education has consisted of classes. Thus, the ISP gave me the opportunity to step out of the classroom and to find my knowledge in a different manner.

4. *How much of the final monograph is primary data? How much is from secondary sources?*

I would say that about half of my final monograph is primary data, and the other half is from secondary sources.

5. *How did the “drop-offs” or field exercises contribute to the process and completion of the ISP?*

These activities served as practice for my ISP in that they required me to practice Portuguese, and gave me experience with how to navigate myself as a visitor in an ONG or union.

6. *What part of the FSS most significantly influenced the ISP process?*

The most significant part of the FSS that influenced my ISP was the community visit. This portion of the course was, in a way, a mini-ISP – as it involved constantly working with a community, learning about an organisation and analyzing its affects on a community, and lots of Portuguese practice! I would say that out of everything we did during the FSS class, the community visit helped me prepare for my ISP the most.

7. *What were the principal problems you encountered while doing the ISP? Were you able to resolve these and how?*

I feel that my principal problem was the language barrier. It was difficult to resolve when conducting informal interviews, in that the informal interviewees seemed slightly irritated when I made a mistake while speaking or when I asked for clarification. But during my formal interviews, interviewees were very willing to re explain responses for me so that I would understand what they were saying.

Another problem I faced was my living situation; as I think I would have been able to connect with my community more if I had lived with a host family. Also, it

was strange for me to travel from *Barra* – where many of these domestic workers actually worked –to *Vasco da Gama* where Sindoméstico is located, as these *bairros* vary greatly in terms of economic status. Though living in Barra didn't necessarily impede my research, I feel like my study would have been richer if I was with a host family.

8. *Did you experience any time constraints? How could these have been resolved?*

Yes, I definitely experienced time constraints! Three weeks is a very short amount of time to conduct a research project, especially since it takes time to establish a bond with the community where you are doing your research. For example, I only felt comfortable conducting interviews once I had been at the union for about one and a half weeks because I wanted my interviewees and I to get to know each other before I conducted such a personal interview. Also, this short amount of time made scheduling interviews difficult. Therefore, I felt rushed to complete my interviews towards the end of the ISP.

9. *How did you go about finding resources: institutions, interviewees, publications, etc.?*

I utilized the Internet to find publications for my research, and also used numerous books to support my research paper. In terms of interviewees, I interviewed directors that I had met through my time at the union, and set up interview with the help of my advisor and of Valéria. I also found out about individuals that I was interested in interviewing by reading numerous publications they had written or been quoted in.

10. *Comment on your relations with your advisor. At what point was he/she most helpful? Were there cultural differences, which influenced your relationship? A different understanding of educational processes and goals? Was working with the advisor instructional?*

My advisor was indispensable and wonderful! Marinalva really helped me every step of the way. She helped me get interviews, took me to a conference and another organisation, gave me lots of literature to read and research, guided me around the union so that I always had something to do, and was always willing to answer my questions and converse. I feel that my advisor and I shared a lot of similar political and social opinions and thus, we were able to identify with each other through this common ground, despite our different cultures.

11. *What were the principal lessons you learned from the ISP process?*

To be organised while conducting research, participate as much as possible, pay attention to detail, and that it is crucial to be patient, especially when you are being welcomed into a community.

12. *If you met a future student who wanted to do this same project, what would be your recommendations to him/her?*

I would recommend that the student know what services will be offered during the semester they are at the union. Since I was not aware of the format of the services as Sindoméstico – I thought legal workshops were offered, I was not aware that they were individual consultations – I had to rework my interview methodology. However this is a wonderful community, and the staff at Sindoméstico are so helpful that I do not think that future students will experience any obstacles they cannot get around!

13. Given what you know now, would you undertake this, or a similar project again?

Absolutely! I would definitely undertake this same project again, and with the same union and community, as I really enjoyed my time at Sindoméstico! Not only was the union a great environment to conduct my study in, but also all of its members are so inspiring and truly helped me expand my consciousness on multiple levels.