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# The subaltern morality of the practice of paid domestic work through a posthumanist lens

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*Abstract*

This theoretical-critical essay proposes understanding paid domestic work as a sociomaterial social practice sustained by a subaltern morality. Articulating the sociology of morality, care studies, and practice theories in their posthumanist approach, the article shifts the analysis from the task or contractual relationship to the human and non-human arrangements that make this practice possible, recognizable, and socially justifiable. We define subaltern morality as the prevailing morality that naturalizes the association between care, femininity, racialization, affective availability, physical effort, and low material valuation, producing domestic work as a subordinated activity. The analysis discusses how this morality materializes in the use of domestic technologies, household architecture, transportation, urban temporalities, and practices connected to mobility, leisure, and family care. The article contributes to critical Organization Studies by highlighting the home as an organizational space in which power, affect, control, materiality, and inequalities of gender, race, and class are articulated in the everyday reproduction of social life.

**Keywords:** paid domestic work, subaltern morality, social practice, posthumanism, critical organization studies.

## *A moral subalterna da prática do trabalho doméstico remunerado pela lente pós-humanista*

*Resumo*

Este ensaio teórico-crítico propõe compreender o trabalho doméstico remunerado como prática social sociomaterial sustentada por uma moral subalterna. Articulando Sociologia da moral, estudos sobre cuidado e teorias da prática em sua vertente pós-humanista, o artigo desloca a análise da tarefa ou da relação contratual para os arranjos humanos e não humanos que tornam essa prática possível, reconhecível e socialmente justificável. Definimos moral subalterna como a moral prevalente que naturaliza a associação entre cuidado, feminilidade, racialização, disponibilidade afetiva, esforço físico e baixa valorização material, produzindo o trabalho doméstico como atividade subordinada. A análise discute como essa moralidade se materializa no uso de tecnologias domésticas, na arquitetura da casa, nos transportes, nos tempos urbanos e nas práticas conectadas à mobilidade, ao lazer e ao cuidado familiar. O artigo contribui para os Estudos Organizacionais críticos ao evidenciar a casa como espaço organizativo no qual poder, afeto, controle, materialidade e desigualdades de gênero, raça e classe se articulam na reprodução cotidiana da vida social.

**Palavras-chave:** trabalho doméstico remunerado, moral subalterna, prática social, pós-humanismo, estudos organizacionais críticos.

## *La moral subalterna de la práctica del trabajo doméstico remunerado a través de la lente poshumanista*

*Resumen*

Este ensayo teórico-crítico propone comprender el trabajo doméstico remunerado como una práctica social sociomaterial sostenida por una moral subalterna. Al articular la sociología de la moral, los estudios sobre el cuidado y las teorías de la práctica en su vertiente poshumanista, el artículo desplaza el análisis de la tarea o de la relación contractual hacia los arreglos humanos y no humanos que hacen posible, reconocible y socialmente justificable dicha práctica. Definimos la moral subalterna como la moral prevalente que naturaliza la asociación entre cuidado, feminidad, racialización, disponibilidad afectiva, esfuerzo físico y baja valoración material, produciendo el trabajo doméstico como una actividad subordinada. El análisis discute cómo esta moralidad se materializa en el uso de tecnologías domésticas, en la arquitectura del hogar, en el transporte, en las temporalidades urbanas y en las prácticas vinculadas con la movilidad, el ocio y el cuidado familiar. El artículo contribuye a los Estudios Organizacionales críticos al evidenciar la casa como un espacio organizativo en el que poder, afecto, control, materialidad y desigualdades de género, raza y clase se articulan en la reproducción cotidiana de la vida social.

**Palabras clave:** trabajo doméstico remunerado, moral subalterna, práctica social, poshumanismo, estudios organizacionales críticos.

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## INTRODUCTION

Paid domestic work is one of the most persistent expressions of the structural inequalities that cut across societies marked by coloniality, patriarchy, and racism. Although often reduced to a list of tasks, such as sweeping, cooking, washing, and caring, it is a historically situated, morally marked practice shaped by asymmetrical relations of gender, race, ethnicity, social place of origin, age group, and class. In Brazil and in other Latin American contexts, the figure of the "empregada doméstica" (housemaid), often a middle-aged Black woman situated between formality and informality, remains central to the everyday organization of the private lives of the middle and upper classes (Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Collins, 2019; Glenn, 1992; Teixeira & Silva, 2020; Teixeira et al., 2020; Toit, 2023).

This centrality is accompanied by a consistent body of theoretical work on domestic work, care, and social reproduction developed from the Global South and, in particular, from Brazil (Gonzalez, 2021; Leão, 2017; Monticelli, 2021; Saffioti, 1978a, 1978b; Teixeira, 2021). This literature shows that the naturalization of domestic work stems not only from its historical recurrence but also from a social imaginary that articulates colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and class inequality in defining which bodies must care, serve, clean, and sustain the everyday reproduction of other families (Collins, 2019; Glenn, 1992; Nogueira, 2019; Teixeira, 2021).

In this article, we propose understanding paid domestic work as a sociomaterial social practice sustained by a subaltern morality. In doing so, we shift the analysis from the mere performance of tasks or the contractual relationship between employer and worker to the human and nonhuman arrangements that produce, distribute, and socially justify this practice. The analytical focus, therefore, does not fall solely on who performs the work, although this profile is unavoidable, since these workers are predominantly Black women over the age of 40 with low levels of schooling (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [IPEA], 2011; International Labour Office [ILO], 2013). Instead, it focuses on how domestic work becomes recognized as a naturally feminine, racialized, arduous, affective, and undervalued activity.

To develop this argument, we mobilize practice theories in their posthumanist approach (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019, 2022; Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2015). From this perspective, social practices are constituted in situated agencements involving bodies, objects, affects, discourses, competencies, spaces, temporalities, and other materialities (Bispo, 2013, 2020). This approach allows us to understand paid domestic work not merely as interaction between people but as a practice composed of houses, utensils, transportation, wages, platforms, pets, cameras, service elevators, and urban temporalities that take part in its everyday organizing (Barad, 2006; Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2015).

By subaltern morality, we mean the prevailing morality that organizes paid domestic work as a subordinated practice. This morality defines not only what must be done but also how it must be done, by whom, with which instruments, under which conditions, and with what recognition. It materializes in public transportation, in the precariousness of utensils, in the architecture of houses, in the difficulty of accessing the city, in forms of internal migration, and in the technologies accepted or refused in everyday care (Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Leão, 2017; Menezes, 2023a, 2023b).

Building on this foundation, we understand nonhumans as material elements, artifacts, infrastructures, spatialities, temporalities, technologies, and other forms of life that take part in the constitution of social practices. This definition displaces the centrality of the human as the only relevant agent of practice and allows us to observe how utensils, houses, transportation, wages, platforms, pets, cameras, service elevators, and urban temporalities also compose paid domestic work as a sociomaterial practice (Barad, 2006; Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019; Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2015).

This article takes the form of a theoretical-critical essay. By critical review, we mean not a systematic literature review but a problem-oriented conceptual articulation that unsettles established interpretations of paid domestic work. We select the works mobilized along three axes: studies on domestic work and care; the Sociology of morality; and practice theories with a posthumanist approach. The empirical examples used throughout the text serve an analytical and illustrative function; they draw on prior research and ongoing observations and are not intended to constitute an autonomous empirical analysis.

Thus, this essay's main contribution is to propose the concept of subaltern morality to understand how paid domestic work is produced, justified, and stabilized as a subordinated social practice. In doing so, we contribute to critical Organization Studies by shifting the analysis from the formal organization to the private space of the home, where power, control, affect, materiality, and inequality also organize work practices. In this sense, the domestic does not appear as external to organizations but as a constitutive dimension of the social organization of life and of the everyday reproduction of hierarchies.

## DOMESTIC WORK AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

More than an individual task, paid domestic work is a social practice that organizes relations marked by asymmetries. Thinking of it as a practice lets us understand it within the broader organization of social life, connecting it to other practices such as the organization of families, non-domestic work, urban mobility, consumption, the use of technologies, and the everyday reproduction of inequalities. This approach stems from the movement known as the Practice Turn (Hui et al., 2017; Schatzki, 2001) but, in this article, adopts a posthumanist approach (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2012, 2019, 2022; Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2015).

From this perspective, social practice is understood not merely as a recurrent set of human actions but as a situated construction of knowledge in the collective doing of humans and nonhumans. Practice is accomplished through sociomaterial connections that involve bodies, objects, affects, discourses, competencies, spaces, and temporalities. Agency, therefore, is not located exclusively in subjects but emerges from the relations among the different elements that compose the practice (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019, 2022; Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2015).

In the case of paid domestic work, this perspective makes it possible to observe how houses, utensils, technologies, transportation, wages, affects, relations of trust, and social hierarchies take part in the everyday organizing of the practice. The reproduction of this work, therefore, depends not only on legal norms or individual decisions but on a sociomaterial and moral ecology that defines what counts as well done work, dedication, competence, availability, and care.

For Hora (2020), the praxeological approach changes the entire understanding of social order. For example, the homo economicus model explains action by appealing to individual ends, intentions, and interests. In this scheme, social order is therefore a product of combined individual interests. The homo sociologicus model explains action by pointing to collective norms and values, namely the rules that express social normativity. Social order is thus guaranteed by a normative consensus. By contrast, the novelty of theories of social practices lies in explaining and understanding actions based on the reconstruction of symbolic structures of knowledge that simultaneously "enable" and constrain agents to interpret the world according to certain forms and to adhere to them. Social order, therefore, appears not as a product of the conformity of reciprocal normative expectations but as anchored in collective cognitive and symbolic structures—in a "shared knowledge" that gives rise to a socially shared way of making sense of the world.

Viewing domestic work as a social practice invites us to think about this phenomenon from a broader perspective, based on how it composes, and is composed by, other dimensions of social life: urban mobility, health, education, and public safety, among others. Thus, the contribution of practice theories to research on domestic work is to think about it beyond the labor relations established between domestic workers and their "patroas" (female employers). The idea is to reflect on the practice of domestic work from a posthumanist perspective (Braidotti, 2015; Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019), considering elements traditionally underexplored in this type of research, which involves the relationship between human and nonhuman agencies.

This means understanding that domestic work takes place not only through interactions between people, but that these interactions are also entangled with the agencies of nonhumans, such as artifacts, objects, and other forms of life, within and beyond workplaces, which compose its practice both objectively (wages, the utensils used, transportation, the physical space worked in and lived in) and subjectively (in the form of sociabilities, affects, and favors). To illustrate these nonhuman agencies, one may mention weather conditions, the presence of cameras, service elevators, "maids' rooms," public transportation, traffic, uniforms, and pets, among others.

## CARE, DOMESTIC WORK, AND SUBALTERN MORALITY

As one of the faces of care, domestic work is transported socially and geographically to the places where it is made common and in demand (Blofield & Jokela, 2018), especially by virtue of the historical macroprocesses that compose it, which operate in the creation of historical meanings that shape society and place its representatives on a lower rung of the social hierarchy, given its reproduction as a subordinated labor practice. This subordinated way of life-work (Menezes, 2023a) may appear both through the material conditions that compose it—wages, the income bracket of its workers, schooling, housing conditions, etc.—and through more subjective conditions, in which domestic work appears as a mold of life that operates in the creation of a lived experience in which affective bonds are activated by the distinct contexts of this work and by the relationship created between employer and employee (Teixeira & Silva, 2020; Toit, 2023).

To think about these subjective contexts and the social relation of work, we start from the understanding that morality should be treated neither as an abstract normative code nor as an individual attribute, but as a processual, situated dimension embedded in social practices. Morality operates in the criteria of judgment, the values, and the justifications that make certain forms of action recognizable as appropriate, natural, or necessary (Bispo, 2024; Hitlin, 2015; Rawls, 2010; Walker, 2007; Weiss, 2015). In this sense, every social practice carries a moral basis that orients its doings, sayings, objects, relations, and forms of recognition, even though this morality often presents itself as custom, neutrality, technique, or simple practical necessity (Bispo, 2024; Vandenberghe, 2015).

By subaltern morality, we mean the prevailing morality that organizes paid domestic work as a subordinated social practice. This morality naturalizes the association between care, femininity, racialization, physical effort, affective availability, and low material valuation. Its strength lies precisely in the fact that it does not present itself as morality but as trust, affect, family obligation, expected competence, or the "right way" to care and clean. Thus, subaltern morality does not correspond to the morality of domestic workers but to the social morality that produces, justifies, and stabilizes the subordination of this practice (Spinelli, 2022; Teixeira & Silva, 2020; Toit, 2023; Tronto, 2015).

This formulation engages with Tronto (2015), who argues that care should be understood relationally, based on the multiple social characteristics that compose it, including its hierarchies. Although gender is a decisive structure in the social organization of care, it does not operate in isolation. Paid domestic care is produced by a social ordering traversed by moral systems of subordination that articulate gender, race, class, coloniality, and social place of origin (Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Davis, 2016; Teixeira, 2021).

Along these lines, racism, colonialism, and patriarchy are not merely structures external to domestic work but constitutive elements of the morality that sustains it. Colonialism and coloniality organize enduring hierarchies among subjects, forms of work, and ways of life, converting historical differences into unequal social positions (Césaire, 1978; Quijano, 2005). Racism structures the unequal distribution of recognition and dignity, causing racialized bodies to be historically associated with service, obedience, and devalued reproductive labor (Collins, 2019; Davis, 2016; Ramos, 1955). Patriarchy, in turn, naturalizes care as a moral extension of femininity and domesticity, converting socially necessary tasks into obligations assigned to women (Federici, 2017; Hirata, 2022; hooks, 2018; Tronto, 2015). In the articulation of these systems, the subaltern morality of paid domestic work is reproduced as a social practice.

Therefore, social systems can and do exist as moral systems by virtue of the specific groups that are part of them (Rawls, 2010). From our perspective, these three historical movements—colonialism, racism, and patriarchy—function as the basis for what we call subaltern morality, within a perception of social organization that engenders the imaginary of domestic work as a well-known intersectional communion: low-income Black women. All three of these systems of social domination have served, and continue to serve—as a structure not only of actions but also of the social imaginary they foster—as a way of organizing society and the labor market. They rest on socially arranged asymmetries, while they may create others depending on how apparent they are at a given moment in society. This historical echo, therefore, resonates in the following questions: 1) What is the profile of the paid domestic worker? 2) How is the practice carried out? And 3) What morality gives rise to it?

As briefly seen in the introduction, the profile of the domestic worker has remained the same over the years: women who enter this practice while still adolescents, most of them Black or brown, and migrants. In the case of the state of Paraíba — and we believe this to be the yardstick of the practice, based on other studies (Glenn, 1992; Leão, 2017; Teixeira, 2021)— they are also migrants between the countryside and the state capital. This movement reflects the fragility of the employment bond and an unequal employer-employee relationship. This is expressed in housing shared with employers and in returning to the countryside only one day a week, or twice a month, to save money, for example (Menezes, 2023b). In this sense, the practice remains largely unreflective and qualitatively poor for workers. Even though rights under the law have been modified (through equalization with other forms of work, formal registration of employment [*carteira assinada*], and the right to paid vacation, for example), the proximity between the hiring party and the hired worker persists, whether because employers need to keep it that way, as a form of domination (Toit, 2023), or through affect as gratitude and, consequently, the loosening of a bond that should be primarily one of employment.

This devaluation materializes in striking statistics. According to Oxfam Brasil (2020), women perform more than 75% of unpaid care work worldwide and make up around 60% of the paid workforce in the care sector. In the Americas, Brazil leads with more than six million domestic workers, of whom 91.1% are women and only 8.9% are men, figures that reflect the profile of female and domestic work in Brazil and around the world (IPEA, 2011; ILO, 2013). Most of these workers are Black and work informally—whether as day workers, cleaners, or *mulheres a dia* [day women] (Mãe, 2017). Even with legal advances over the last 15 years in Brazil, such as Constitutional Amendment 72/2013, known as the "PEC das Domésticas" (Domestic Workers' Constitutional Amendment), precarization remains a structural feature (Araújo & Lombardi, 2013).

These data do not point only to a problem of regulation or of access to rights. They reveal a social logic that naturalizes inequality, anchored in moral values that associate care with feminine duties, self-denial, and subservience. Together, these three elements demarcate a condition of class, race, and social place of origin that also helps delimit the profile of the female actors of this practice (Hirata, 2022; Toit, 2023). This is a morality that organizes care practices based on a framework of subordination (Spinelli, 2019, 2022)—of those who provide care and of those who receive it—and that is reenacted through affective discourses ("she is almost part of the family") and through organizing mechanisms such as informality and outsourcing (Fischer, 2022; Menezes, 2023b; Nascimento, 2015; Toit, 2023).

This morality of subordination is also expressed in the way physical effort is valued at the expense of the technification of work. One example is the account of a former client of a domestic cleaning service provider in South Africa, also a colonized territory, who stated: *"I would go on my hands and knees to scrub the floor, but they [the outsourced domestic workers] only want to use a mop"* (Toit, 2023, p. 1074, emphasis added). In this imaginary, technologies that could make the work less arduous are treated as signs of carelessness or moral inadequacy, reinforcing the expectation that care must be performed with visible, almost sacrificial effort.

In this sacrificial identity, which borders on a class destiny (Bourdieu, 1989; Nascimento, 2015; Nogueira, 2019), the subaltern morality of the practice of domestic work can be translated as an activity that has to be arduous because it rests on a colonial, patriarchal, and racist imaginary, in which its female actors still reproduce the same historical profile of its workers, even if, at times, with a greater technologization of its practices and utensils.

This union, therefore, of private and public bonds, work and personal life, few options for social reproduction, and a profile programmed, both socially and in the social imaginary, to perform this role, implies other experiences and textures that make work not just work, but a practice that orients this actor's lived experience of the physical and social world around her through nonhuman elements present in her everyday life, which become her lens on the world: public transportation as opposed to the private gated community accessed daily, the house where she works, the large or small supply of available utensils, and the affective connections made in this social microworld.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE

To analyze how this sociomaterial relationship unfolds in the practice of paid domestic work amid an arsenal of behaviors, feelings, and moralities, we must understand it as a broader process of organizing. To do so, we revisit the idea of texture (Gherardi, 2012; Gherardi & Strati, 1990). Here, we use this term to designate a set of sociomaterial elements that shape this practice beyond its labor dimension and help practitioners understand it from within, as a world intersected by actions. In the first theoretical movement made by the authors, a study of an exact sciences department at an Italian university, they point to two ways in which the texture of organizational practice could be perceived: 1) in the ways in which work was culturally organized; and 2) in the ways in which department members felt their belonging (Gherardi & Strati, 1990).

In this relationship, we identify two points in common that we use in this approach to paid domestic work: work as a culturally organized action, therefore the product of a society and delimited within one or more social practices; and the way each person perceives this culture, that is, their work practice, and retains more or less intimacy with it. For this, the practice has to be felt, performed, and belonged to in different ways by its various actors. In our case, that of domestic workers, the textures of this practice are incorporated into everyday life through objects, affects, utensils, and sensations that denote this belonging, this feeling shared with the practice and for oneself. Moreover, they correspond to the morality that delimits the practice. In this case, the sociomaterial elements are also subalternized.

When we look at the work itself, and not only at the social life of the worker that we intend to analyze, this dimension still appears "low-tech." Both its physical and social environments operate with restricted material and technological use, as work that has to be arduous and that admits few changes over time (Anderson, 2000; Teixeira, 2021). Even so, it remains anchored in precarious instruments and in an expectation of physical effort as a sign of commitment (Toit, 2023).

We assume that the technologies accompanying the socio-historical elements that are part of the practice of domestic work present themselves as a situated innovation (Brown & Duguid, 2001) that persists alongside other discontinuities of this same practice. Such discontinuities are present in the legal and institutional elements that have undergone relative advances in recent years, which can be seen in the equalization of domestic workers' rights with those of other industrial workers, but which still do not provide the same control over working hours and coercion found in other sectors (Blofield & Jokela, 2018). Thus, we can think that this practice of domestic work presents very specific textures (Gherardi, 2012) that are not flattened by everyday technological innovations and that still represent a special place for it: one that is subordinated and that repeats past socio-historical elements, especially in the Latin American colonial situation (Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Teixeira et al., 2020).

With some of these social factors and issues in mind, in this section we seek to discuss some possible implications of the practice of domestic work for the social lives of its practitioners—the workers—and how many of these issues involve not only interaction with technology and its developments but also concern the role of the state as a non-action with regard to urban organization, public transportation, real estate speculation, and "what counts as a workers' neighborhood."

We divide this section into two parts. The first addresses the relationship between this social practice and the technological advances of the last decade; the second focuses on the relationship with the city and public transportation. At the end, we open a door to a deeper understanding of domestic work as a sociomaterial practice connected by nonhuman elements as its co-creators. We seek to conclude this text by showing how care and domestic work are intertwined through sociomaterial relations of subalternity, constituted by interactions between humans and nonhumans and marked by moral and material inequalities.

### Technologies and access

Domestic technologies help to visualize how subaltern morality operates in the practice of paid domestic work. The central point is not whether artifacts exist to make the work less arduous, but how employers, workers, and domestic space incorporate, refuse, or morally judge them. Vacuum cleaners, mops, washing machines, cleaning robots, cameras, apps, and platforms are not merely neutral instruments: they take part in the sociomaterial organizing of the practice, redefining times, controls, performance expectations, and forms of recognition of work (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic made this contradiction more visible. By restricting the movement of people and placing part of domestic tasks back under the direct responsibility of employing families, the pandemic led groups that had historically outsourced everyday care to perceive it as repetitive, exhausting work indispensable to the reproduction of life. This experience brought to light something already discussed in the care literature: the everyday reproduction of families depends on a set of tasks that are materially necessary but historically devalued when associated with feminine, racialized, and subordinated work (Hirata, 2022; Teixeira & Silva, 2020; Tronto, 2015).

However, when domestic workers use artifacts that reduce physical effort, evaluators may interpret them ambiguously: rather than signaling qualification, time savings, or reduced bodily strain, they may see them as a lack of diligence, laziness, or incompetence. Here, technology reveals its moral dimension. In the subaltern morality of domestic work, good performance is measured not only by cleaning or care results but also by visible effort, bodily availability, and a willingness to work hard. This expectation closely aligns with the "competent domestic worker" figure discussed by Abrantes (2014), whose competence is socially evaluated by criteria that mix trust, obedience, diligence, discretion, and conformity to the employing family's expectations.

Toit (2023) analyzes an account in which a client states that she "would go on [her] hands and knees to scrub the floor" while the workers "only want to use a mop," highlighting this moral expectation of effort. The instrument that could alleviate the work becomes a sign of inadequacy, as if technological mediation diminishes the moral value of the service performed. The worker's expected competence thus appears linked to repeating traditional, physically costly ways of performing the service, reinforcing the association between care, bodily sacrifice, and subordination (Abrantes, 2014; Toit, 2023).

This contradiction helps explain why technological advancement does not, by itself, alter the practice's subaltern position. When technology serves the autonomy of employing families, it tends to be valued as convenience, modernization, or time savings. When it reduces the physical effort of domestic workers, it may be reinscribed in a moral grammar that demands meticulousness, sacrifice, and control. The issue, therefore, is not merely technical but sociomaterial and moral: artifacts enter the practice through prior hierarchies that define who can save time, who must demonstrate effort, and who has the right to enjoy the conveniences produced by innovation (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2022; Teixeira & Silva, 2020).

Thus, domestic technologies do not automatically break with the subordination of paid domestic work. They can alleviate tasks while also reinforcing controls, intensifying performance expectations, or preserving the image that this work must remain manual, discreet, and physically demanding. Subaltern morality is reenacted precisely in this ambiguity: the modernization of the house is accepted, but not necessarily the unburdening of the body that works in it. In this sense, nonhuman artifacts take part in the reproduction of the practice because they are incorporated into a prior moral ordering that defines domestic work as a naturally arduous, feminine, racialized, and little-recognized activity (Gherardi, 2019; Toit, 2023; Tronto, 2015).

## Moving between the city and the "casa de família"

Not only domestic architecture but also urban planning and city governance have historically adjusted to the availability of paid domestic work. The "maid's room"—almost always on the hottest side of the house (Mendonça Filho, 2009)—service elevators, side entrances, the long distances between peripheral neighborhoods and higher-income areas, as well as daily commutes on public transportation, make up an urban materiality that organizes the practice of domestic work beyond the interior of the house. These nonhuman elements do not merely surround the work; they reproduce it by distributing places, times, access, and forms of circulation between employers and workers (Nascimento, 2015; Soratto, 2006; Teixeira & Silva, 2020).

This dimension becomes especially visible when we observe workers' daily circulation through the city. In the Paraíba study, for example, certain bus lines connect peripheral neighborhoods to higher-income areas, gated communities, and spaces of consumption and services where domestic jobs and other precarious work are concentrated (Menezes, 2023a; 2023b). In this sense, public transportation is not merely a means of getting around but part of the sociomaterial texture of the practice: it defines the time available for rest, family life, leisure, and study, and shapes the very body that arrives at work already marked by the fatigue of urban circulation.

Subaltern morality appears here in the naturalization of this time spent and this bodily strain as if they were external to the work. The domestic worker's working day tends to be recognized only when it begins inside the "casa de família" (the employer's family home), while commuting, waiting, insecurity, the cost of the fare, and the distance between home and work remain individual responsibilities. In this way, the city takes part in the subordination of the practice by rendering invisible a decisive part of the conditions that allow domestic work to take place daily (Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Hirata, 2022; Teixeira & Silva, 2020).

The "casa de família," in turn, occupies an ambiguous position in this relationship. It is a workspace, but also another family's private space; it is a place of remuneration, but also of affects, trust, control, and asymmetries. For this reason, the domestic worker's insertion into the city is often mediated by work rather than by the full right to urban life. A sociomaterial organization that combines low wages, long distances, precarious transportation, and expected affective availability limits access to leisure, cultural goods, rest, and family life. The city, in this sense, is not merely the setting of the practice but one of the material conditions of its unequal reproduction (Leão, 2017; Picanço & Brites, 2014; Teixeira, 2021).

This connection between house, city, and transportation shows that paid domestic work does not end in the contractual or affective relationship between employer and worker. As a social practice, it articulates with other practices (e.g., urban mobility, peripheral housing, family organization, leisure, rest, and access to the city) that also shape its everyday reproduction. The posthumanist lens reveals that buses, routes, schedules, distances, domestic spaces, and urban infrastructures are not a backdrop but sociomaterial elements that compose the practice and shape its conditions of possibility (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019). Subaltern morality operates by naturalizing the difficulties that precede and follow the work performed in the "casa de família": commuting fatigue, restricted free time, distance from one's own family, precarious access to leisure, and individual accountability for urban circulation. Thus, subordination lies not only inside the house where the work is done but in the chain of practices that makes it possible for some families to outsource care while other women reorganize their entire lives around this availability.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article set out to understand paid domestic work as a sociomaterial social practice oriented by a subaltern morality. By articulating the sociology of morality, care studies, and practice theory in its posthumanist approach, we sought to shift the analysis of domestic work from a reading centered solely on the task, the contractual relationship, or the identity of the workers to the arrangements that make this practice possible, recognizable, and socially justifiable. In this movement, domestic work appears not as a residual activity of private life but as an organizing practice central to the everyday reproduction of families, of inequalities, and of social life itself (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Gherardi, 2019; Teixeira & Silva, 2020; Tronto, 2015).

The article's conceptual contribution is to frame subaltern morality as the prevailing morality that organizes paid domestic work as a subordinated practice. This morality does not correspond to workers' morality but to the social ordering that naturalizes the association between care, femininity, racialization, affective availability, physical effort, and low material valuation. Its strength lies precisely in not appearing as morality but as custom, trust, affect, expected competence, or family necessity. Thus, the subordination of domestic work is reproduced not only through the absence of rights or through economic inequalities but also through moral criteria that define who must provide care, how care must be provided, with which instruments, under which conditions, and with what degree of recognition (Bispo, 2024; Hitlin, 2015; Spinelli, 2022).

The second contribution lies in showing that this morality is realized in sociomaterial relations. Technologies, utensils, houses, transportation, routes, wages, temporalities, and urban infrastructures are not a backdrop to the practice but elements that take part in its organizing. The expectation of physical effort in using domestic technologies, the naturalization of long commutes, the centrality of the "casa de família," and restricted access to the city show that subaltern morality operates before, during, and after the working day in the domestic space. In this sense, domestic work connects to other practices (e.g., urban mobility, housing, leisure, family organization, and consumption) that also produce workers' everyday subordination (Leão, 2017; Picanço & Brites, 2014; Toit, 2023).

This reading also contributes to critical Organization Studies by showing that the organization of work is not limited to companies, formal markets, or bureaucratic organizations. The home, as a private workspace, also organizes power, control, affect, trust, hierarchy, materiality, and inequality. The domestic, therefore, is not outside the organizational field: it reveals one of its most persistent and least recognized forms, especially in societies marked by coloniality, racism, patriarchy, and class inequalities. By bringing domestic work to the center of organizational analysis, the article broadens the understanding of what counts as organization, work, and practice.

As a limitation, this theoretical-critical essay does not offer an autonomous empirical analysis of the experiences of domestic workers, employers, or intermediaries of domestic work. The examples mobilized serve an analytical and illustrative function, making explicit how subaltern morality materializes in specific sociomaterial situations. Nor do we explore, at this point, South American regional variations, the differences between monthly-paid domestic workers and day workers, or the role of digital platforms and outsourcing companies in the recent reconfiguration of this practice.

These limitations open a research agenda. Future studies could empirically investigate how domestic workers, employers, and intermediaries recognize, reproduce, or challenge subaltern morality in everyday life; how domestic technologies and digital platforms alter or preserve expectations of effort, control, and availability; and how the city, transportation, housing, and leisure compose the sociomaterial texture of this practice. It is also necessary to deepen Latin American and intersectional comparisons that show how race, gender, class, age group, migration, and social place of origin modulate different forms of subordination in paid domestic work. The analytical wager of this article is that understanding this practice requires looking not only at who works but at the set of human and nonhuman relations that continue to make it natural for some lives to be organized to free up the time, comfort, and social reproduction of others.

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