

Domestic Work Relations in Postcolonial Times: How Does One Learn and Unlearn Them?

Lale Yalçın-Heckmann

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Paula Mählck's *Domestic Work in Postcolonial Tanzania: Gender, Learning and Unlearning* is a sociological study of the domestic work of women in Tanzania. Although the title refers to the postcolonial period, it includes a lengthy discussion of the colonial period as well. In fact, the themes are numerous and broad; they range from the history and political economy of domestic work to postcolonial critical thinking, and from gender, intersectionality, and pedagogy to learning and unlearning. In this review I shall first follow the structure of the book as the author has conceived it and present the main arguments, show the merits of her discussion, and offer some critical thoughts on the book in general.

The book has seven chapters. It begins with lists of figures and tables, acknowledgements, and a preface, and it closes with notes, the appendix (on the research method and participants' profiles), references, and the index. Altogether it has 189 pages. In the acknowledgements we read that two main groups of persons collaborated with the author in the research. One key person is her own domestic helper, who introduced her to a network of other domestic workers. Her respondents were then recruited using the snowball sampling technique. The other group is made up of a network of diplomatic spouses (from expatriate households) like herself, some of whom took part in individual and group interviews. The total of 35 individual and group interviews were conducted among both networks, as explained in the appendix (p. 164).

Mählck sets out her approach in the brief preface, arguing that domestic and care work deserves more research attention than it has received to date, as it relates strongly to debates in major social theories on development, gender, class, and postcolonial continuities and change. The author also engages with ‘prefigurative politics’, which is about ‘imagining a future we do not know’ (p. xiv). These themes are central and elaborated on in each chapter.

The introductory chapter begins with an autoethnographic vignette, where the author overhears a conversation between two white women in their late thirties, who, like the author, are watching their children’s football game at the international school in Dar es Salaam. The women talk about needing a new domestic care worker and one of them describes such a woman and what she does. The conversation goes on to discuss ‘how much she costs’, whether it is possible to ‘make her work for less’, and how ‘she really loves to work’ (p. 1). To Mählck these words sound colonial and reminiscent of the slave trade. She feels uncomfortable, but at the same time gets involved in the conversation with the two women, who probably became her research interlocutors later on (but we do not know this for certain). The themes of the vignette unfold into her main questions: how is the exploitation of female domestic work naturalised, how is it nevertheless intersectionally construed (i.e. differentiated through gender, class, and race), and how do these relationships of exploiting and being exploited involve learning and unlearning? These two latter questions deserve some attention here. Mählck broadly defines learning in the field of domestic work as involving ‘meaning-making processes of domestic and care work’ (p. 3). A similarly broad definition is used for unlearning, where it ‘means seeing or doing things in ways they are not usually understood or done’ (ibid.). Throughout her chapters the author comes back to these concepts and processes, when she shows for instance how the domestic worker ‘learns’ that written work contracts may be fake, and that they do not really protect the worker from exploitation. She aims to illustrate not only how learning and unlearning are decolonised by her interlocutors but also that qualitative research should also be decolonised (p. 4). Her framework for analysing connections highlights three dimensions: first, continuity and change (especially in relation to the organisation of household labour and to loans) are to be interrogated; second, the ‘connections between the everyday and wider societal structures and institutions for processes of learning domestic and care work’ (p. 7) are to be explored; and third, social reproduction theory will be expanded to include and strengthen the decolonial take on this theory (p. 8). These ambitious theoretical points are revisited in the ensuing chapters and fleshed out with varying degrees of empirical support, a point I will come back to later.

The next section of the introductory chapter, titled ‘Situating the Research’, covers a broad range of statistical and general information about Tanzania, but it also more specifically describes the research group the authors focus on. She cites ILO (2016) figures for domestic workers worldwide. She writes that in Tanzania there were 1.8 million domestic workers (the year and source of this information remain unclear) (p. 9). Drawing on an ILO study of domestic workers in Tanzania from 2016 (her research stay in Tanzania and Kenya – as a diplomatic spouse – was between 2017 and 2020; pp. 27, 29), the author presents figures in a rather unstructured way (a table would have improved the presentation) and notes that at that time there were 883,779 domestic workers in the country (5% of the national work force); however, we do not know what percentage of the population the work force forms (p. 9). She writes that 67% of these domestic workers were women and girls (aged 14 to 19), and 68% of these women and girls were internal rural-urban migrants. Nearly 72% of workers were in the informal economy (World Bank 2020) and, according to the Human Development Report 2020, around 82% of total employees had precarious employment, but the author does not explain what this differentiation implies (p. 9). The domestic workers she studied seem to be in the category of waged workers (fn. 5, p. 9), from which one can conclude that they belonged to the more privileged minority category of workers in Tanzania. When describing the city neighbourhoods in which the domestic workers she studied were working (using barely legible maps on pp. 10 and 11), Mählck in fact acknowledges that her research subjects belong to the best paid and most prestigious category of employees (p. 10). Nevertheless, her interlocutors have all ‘described harsh working conditions and hierarchical relations’ (ibid.). The author only examines working relations along the employer–employee axis, but she does not elaborate on what the domestic workers thought about the conditions and salaries of other employees, either in expatriate households or in other local middle-class households. This information would have enriched her arguments and reduced the bipolarity of the focus on employer–employee labour relations. After all, she is describing exploitation as a subjectively defined phenomenon and employees surely compare their own situation not only with that of employers but also with that of other employees.

The rest of the first chapter provides the theoretical background to the main concepts that the author works with. She explains why the process of learning is relevant for examining domestic work, how continuity and change can be studied through the materiality of labour relations, and why attention should be devoted to the variegated nature of social reproduction and the relevance of the intersectional approach in her research. After mentioning important works and theorists in these fields, the author notes that ‘there is a shortage of research into

the everyday and the naturalized and taken-for-granted mechanisms of learning and doing domestic work and the perceptions of women who perform this' (p. 20). The reader's expectation then is that this missing perspective will be covered and analysed in the book. Although the author promises to fill this gap, she does not quite succeed in exploring in depth domestic workers' emic perspective on their own labour. Readers would have benefitted from longer excerpts from the interviews and more engaging references to the biographical narratives.

The next major subsection of the introduction outlines the content of the book and its individual chapters. The author notes (p. 21) that although each chapter is structured to cover a different focus of learning and unlearning domestic work, each one is nonetheless designed to be read as a stand-alone piece. Although this organisational strategy is reasonable for examining different aspects of domestic work, it is somewhat irritating, as individual chapters repeat the same arguments about the main concepts of learning, unlearning, continuity and change, the colonial and postcolonial exploitation of domestic labour, and the class and gender dimensions of these concepts.

Chapter 2 is titled 'Tales of the Field'. It addresses the methodological reflexive issues of being aware of the power relations in research, which also involve global and historical dimensions of coloniality and postcoloniality, as well as intersectionality. The author explains her Marxian framework and methodology of aiming to trace power relations back into history, but also forward into a future of unlearning coloniality and racism (p. 24). She reminds readers that oral history is intersubjective and should not be read as testimony (p. 25). She also explains how she situates herself in her research as a middle-class, mixed-race person, which gives her a 'complex, dual and trans-local insider-outsider positionality' (p. 28). Mählck became more aware of her privileged everyday life as an expatriate, but she also felt disempowered, as she had to give up her own work life in Sweden and during the time of the research was primarily responsible for the household, a disempowerment she also observed among the other expatriate wives and her interlocutors. In the subsection on ethics, the author explains her efforts to overcome the barriers of differential power and positionality between the domestic workers who are her research partners and herself, and how anonymity and rapport were established during her research.

Chapter 3, 'Pedagogies of Unlearning', begins with another vignette, in which the author describes an encounter with her domestic worker in her home on a very hot day. The worker, Rusi, is sitting on the ground outside, taking her break while also sorting the laundry. The author asks her to come inside and shares food with her in the dining room. After some time, during which the author tried to make conversation, the worker asks to be excused so she can return to work: 'I am here

to work', she reminds the author. This incident illustrates how domestic workers 'learn' to use various spaces and not to use others. For instance, Rusi tells her that domestic workers are commonly told that they should not remain in the main house during their breaks and should not use the sofas or chairs without permission (p. 33). For the author, this type of learning signals how gender, race, and class are learned and how they change along the lines of decolonial social reproduction. On the one hand, this is partly a repetition of the general theoretical frameworks and their analytical models (which the author engages with again in the rest of the chapter). On the other hand, it is a missed opportunity to flesh out the possible meaning of the incident. We are not told how or when Rusi learned about or experienced these unwritten rules of conduct for domestic workers in expatriates' households or what she thought of them. Other possible explanations for her comment, 'May I go now?', also remain unexplored: Was she bored? Did she want to finish her work and go home to attend to other things? Such mundane relational tensions, which are, after all, a part of everyday life, may be hard to integrate into an analysis of decoloniality, but they remain significant in everyday life and social reality. Mählck finds postcolonial resistance in her refusal 'to chat with me over lunch as friends' (p. 35). One wonders, if this interaction had occurred between an employer and an employee in Europe, would it have been explained as related to race, gender, and class, or simply attributed to a consciousness of work time (or maybe cited as an example of capitalist time)?

The chapter continues with a discussion of theoretical concepts and writings on social reproduction, the relations of production in Marxist and feminist writings, the ontological origins of these theories, and the contribution of African feminisms. We read another 'example' from her research (the author's empirical data consist mainly of examples), in which she aims to explore the 'interface between bodies, the built environment and space' (p. 46). Mählck describes the spaces where domestic workers spend time, which are often hot, without air conditioning, and designed for people to move around in while cooking, ironing, and working. She contrasts these spaces with those of the employers, which are generously designed to be spacious, pretty, and comfortable. She explores these contrasts further in Chapter 5, which also includes several pictures of the spaces.

Chapter 4 is titled 'Learning from the Archives', which is somewhat misleading. In this chapter Mählck discusses how to learn from history and postcolonial theory as well as reflecting on Tanzania's history, but most of her discussion is based less on her own archive research and more on secondary sources – with helpful analyses by historians and social scientists, such as Bujra (2000) on labour and domestic work in Tanzania and Kiaga (2007) on internal migration and domestic work in Tanzania). The main idea of this chapter seems to be to highlight

the importance of engaging with the historical and economic dimensions of domestic work and to reflect on the various historical and economic events that caused a crisis and changed Tanzania's economy and society. The review of the country's colonial and independent eras is sometimes too general but is still useful. For instance, we learn that in Tanzania, like in many other countries in the developing world, employing a domestic worker is necessary to enable urban educated women to obtain paid employment in industry and administration. This has given rise to internal rural to urban and urban to international migration. Mählck notes that this is not exactly what happened in Tanzania. Citing Bujra (2000: 38), she explains how industry did not provide urban women there with labour-saving devices (such as electric kitchen gadgets), and imported goods were too expensive. It was therefore cheaper to hire internal migrant women as domestic help than buying household appliances (p. 66). During the 1990s, Tanzanian women became increasingly engaged in paid employment and like in other countries they needed female domestic workers for their own emancipation and integration into the formal economy, a point long highlighted by feminist writers. The question is whether the author could have explored these different economic periods more systematically and in greater depth, instead of focusing on the general continuity of labour conditions between the colonial and postcolonial periods. Her argument that even the work contracts applied in the colonial period have not changed much in the contemporary times (being only 'paper constructs' in both periods) needs much more evidence than is provided in this chapter (p. 70) and later on in Chapter 5 (pp. 96–98).

In the rest of this chapter, we read about domestic workers' organising during the colonial period and after independence. The discussion includes non-domestic workers as well. The trade unionisation of domestic workers is interesting because it contradicts the common expectation that unionising individuals in private and separate households would be difficult. The author notes that domestic workers were among the first to be unionised in Tanzania, but this was during the colonial period, and their trade organisation included also hotel workers (p. 79). Around the end of the colonial period, the fight for better wages and improved working conditions was considered to be in line with the anticolonial struggle (p. 79f.). Mählck draws on Bujra's work (2000) to describe developments after independence, and while she mentions nationalist struggles, there is no clear evidence of trade union activities among domestic workers (p. 81). The author then abandons her chronological approach and discusses colonial discourses of domesticity (pp. 81–84). She ends the chapter with an illustration of 'economic violence' using a fictional text and novel by author and 2021 Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah (2012: 84–85).

Chapter 5 is titled 'The Racial Grammar of Paid Domestic Work'. This chapter and the next one cover more of the empirical data. Following the same organisational structure as the previous chapters, the author starts with a vignette. She describes visiting a house with a real estate agent and that the woman was surprised when the author said of one small, dusty, windowless room that she might make it into her office. Mählcck 'later found out that it was supposed to be used as servants' quarter for a live-in domestic worker' (p. 89). The focus in this section is on the 'cheapening' of domestic labour and how this is racialised and learned. The real estate agent's reaction of surprise illustrates, according to the author, how the value of a domestic worker's work is a learned and internalised type of thinking and behaviour (p. 93). She explains that the 'cheap value' of domestic work and domestic workers is inscribed in the space and in the specific organisation of the house. For unlearning this 'racial grammar' she notes how in her house the domestic worker was 'invited to dwell in the living room during her breaks' (ibid.). As well as learning and unlearning, the chapter also discusses strategies of coping, where coping is defined as the ways in which domestic workers (and victims) learn how to make meaning out of and during oppressive labour conditions (p. 93). As noted above, the domestic workers the author talked to belonged to an elite stratum and earned nearly ten times more than ordinary domestic workers in local middle-class households (p. 95). Nevertheless, the lack of written contracts in expatriate households is an issue for them, and one interlocutor said that her salary was lowered when she asked for a contract (p. 95). The author notes that these workers have to 'learn' how to cope with oppressive work, and she traces the roots of such informal work arrangements back to colonial times. In the next subsection, Alice, one of the author's interlocutors, explains how some employers manipulate existing contracts to create 'fake contracts'. Alice recounts how she and her friends discovered a 'fake contract' when they looked at the contracts they had received. Mählcck adds that 'reading' these contracts requires that the workers know English and are able to read between the lines. Domestic workers then also have to cope with such contracts, which apparently do not offer any guarantees of regulated and fair working conditions. One might ask, then, what happens when domestic workers have 'real' contracts. If employers break them, are there any cases of legal complaints? We do not know, but it is interesting that domestic workers are concerned about not having written contracts, which puts them at a disadvantage.

The next subsection of Chapter 5 examines the 'built-in instructions of cheapening'. This is about the spaces designed for domestic workers to occupy and live in. The author provides a picture from a house in Nairobi, Kenya. She notes the low standards of domestic workers' living quarters, where any problems are

left unaddressed. We read examples of how domestic workers try to cope with such living quarters. One example is the case of Fatuma, whose employer gave her a wooden trolley as a bed to sleep on, and when Fatuma's daughter saw the 'bed', she cried and brought her mother something proper (p. 102). Fatuma also recounts being unable to limit her hours of work, especially when living with her employer's family and caring for their children, who would come to her late in the evening to play and be with her, which she could not resist (p. 103). These are examples of 'inhuman treatment', a lack of respect, all of which lies at 'the core of the process of cheapening [a female domestic worker's] labour' (p. 103). The emotional labour involved in working with children is highlighted (but not dwelled upon here in any depth). Instead, the author moves on to discuss the relationship between a worker's skills, the acknowledgement of those skills, and the relations of dependency that exist through loans provided to a domestic worker by her employer. We read that it is very common for domestic workers to ask their employer for a loan; workers' salaries are barely enough for to survive on and not enough to support a family (p. 104). Loans are provided informally, and bank loans are not an option for people working without a written contract. Mählck refers to James Ferguson's (2013) work in South Africa, which discusses how loans can be part of personal networks which can then help constitute personhood. For the author, while she acknowledges Ferguson's point, the dependency of a poor person on others with greater resources should primarily be read as a lack of independence and autonomy (p. 105). She dwells on the dimension of learning and unlearning through the colonial past to the post-colonial era, and notes that debt and dependency should be analysed within the context of 'change as a multilayered and complex phenomenon' (p. 106). In the colonial period, debt was like indenture in relation to the state and it underlined dependency, whereas in the post-colonial era loans are understood as something domestic workers are entitled to, as they have 'unlearned [their] position of dependency' (p. 107).

The third example of domestic workers' efforts to cope concerns the process of unlearning and is presented in the next subsection titled 'Unlearning the Selective (De)Valuation of Diplomas'. Here Maria describes how she learned about acquiring qualifications for various professions, but this did not necessarily lead to a better salary. The labour required to acquire these qualifications may still be considered invisible and showing certificates to employers can be a delicate matter, as they may then be scared off by expectations of a high salary (p. 108). Alice, another interlocutor, mentions another skill that domestic workers need: learning and deciphering what an employer expects from them as work. This indicates how unclear the definition of domestic work is and the desires and imaginations it involves (p. 111). The author interprets these processes of learning for domestic

workers as ‘assimilative’ and ‘accommodative’, ‘which implied learning the personalized and situational aspects of the family and adjusting the domestic work accordingly’ (p. 111). Although this sounds obvious, Mählck emphasises that it involves a ‘highly complex process’, which means it includes many unspoken and invisible aspects of knowledge acquisition (p. 112). This can even lead to domestic workers losing their job, if, for instance, they cook food the wrong way (p. 113), though we do not know whether there were any cases of this in reality.

Chapter 6, titled ‘Can the Oppressor Be Oppressed’, turns the focus on expatriates themselves. This chapter is about the expatriate wives who are the employers of domestic workers. In her vignette, Mählck tells of how the group of diplomatic spouses her interlocutors belonged to is sometimes referred to as the ‘nail polish group’ by members of the group themselves. In the author’s view, this shows how the work of this group is de-valorised, and how they can come to be represented as women who care only for their physical appearance. Despite this overall depiction of the women in this group as privileged yet subordinate, she argues that there are ‘intersecting circles of inclusion and exclusion’, and that expatriate women ‘learn, cope with and unlearn domestic work in the everyday’ (p. 116). Their learning process is ‘shaped by processes of migration, graded citizenship, gender power dynamics in expatriate households and (...) the regulations and cultures of international diplomacy and international business’ (p. 117). The author then discusses the major works dealing with how colonialism and housewifisation worked together in this context, and how international diplomacy can turn a woman into an ‘incorporated wife’ (p. 119). She examines the pamphlets in which newcomers are introduced to life in Dar es Salaam and are offered advice on practising a ‘racialized division of labour’ (p. 122). Drawing on her interviews, she cites Doris, an expatriate wife with three children, who prefers to homeschool her eldest children and employs ‘an extra nanny to take care of the pre-school ones’ (p. 122). Mählck interprets this as an instance of the ‘racialized division of domestic labour’, where her interlocutor Doris, as a privileged white woman from the West, prefers to teach her own children, while a local black woman can take over the task of ‘cleaning the floor and toilets’ (ibid.). This is an unconvincing argument that reduces labour to a one-dimensional phenomenon. The argument is constructed as privileged work versus demeaning work and done by a white woman versus a black one. These dimensions are indeed present, but we have no information about the availability of local teachers for homeschooling and read nothing about the expatriate wife’s motivation other than what she says: ‘I love homeschooling!’ (ibid.) Would this not be a legitimate reason for taking on this task and seeking help with other tasks? My objection here is to calling this ‘racialised work’ without knowing whether there were alternatives and how realistic they were.

In the next example we read about Josephine (pp. 122–123), an experienced expatriate wife who grew up in an expatriate household. She learned from her mother how ‘to respect staff and value people more than things’ (p. 123). She reasons that by respecting and caring for domestic workers, ‘they will work harder to please [one]’ (p. 123), Mählcck highlights the ‘colonial’ aspect of this exchange and how it overshadows the humanistic aspect. She describes this as ‘a colonial discourse of naturalization’ (p. 124). Although the author acknowledges that the positionality of these privileged expatriate women is ambivalent and complex, she primarily wants to underline the colonial and racialised learned attitudes of her interlocutors. Nevertheless, the merit of this chapter is that it includes the fullest descriptions of and discussions with her interview partners, making altogether satisfactory ethnographic reading, even if the analysis remains limited at times.

The final section of the chapter contains a discussion of gifts and loans that is reminiscent of the anthropology of gift exchange. Here the author adheres to the Marxist framework that views loans and gifts first and foremost as exploitative, class-based, and indenture-like (p. 140). However, her expatriate interlocutors were seeking to bring about ‘change’, for example, by investing in the domestic worker’s education and future plans. The author nevertheless concludes that these good intentions still need to be seen as ‘pedagogical practices of reproducing the colonial state’ (p. 140).

Chapter 7, the final chapter, discusses how to envision a different future for domestic work and work relations that breaks free from the colonial, racialised, and gender-discriminatory state of affairs in this field. The chapter partly engages with related philosophical writings and at the same time summarises the author’s contributions to the existing literature on domestic work, learning and unlearning coloniality, and social reproduction.

To conclude, Mählcck’s book is written with a convincing voice, but its theoretical points are partly overdrawn given the limited empirical evidence offered in support of them. Although readers learn a good deal about the theoretical frameworks the author uses, the characters she portrays are lacking in ethnographic depth. The passages from the interviews with the domestic workers are relatively thin, giving readers the impression of a missed opportunity to understand and learn from domestic workers in Tanzania. We hear too little from the domestic workers in their own words as individuals with their own histories, dreams, lives, families, failures, successes, and opinions, and not enough about them as migrants from the countryside or about their everyday lifeworld. However, readers interested in theoretical discussions on learning and unlearning coloniality and postcoloniality will find the book very helpful, especially if they read the chapters individually without looking for connections between them.

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Lale Yalçın-Heckmann

University of Pardubice

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Department of Social Anthropology

Lale.Yalcin-Heckmann@upce.cz