EMBODIED INEQUALITY:

The Experience of Domestic Work in Urban Ecuador

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Research on bodies and work relies on theoretical perspectives that see the working body as a resource and/or symbol. This study bridges these complementary theories, incorporating two concepts (occupational habitus and body work) that extend and synthesize them into a more holistic model of embodied inequality. Drawing primarily on the accounts of women domestic workers in Ecuador’s largest city, I explore the embodied dimensions of domestic work and show how unequal relations between workers and employers manifest in and on bodies, specifically through interactions around health, food, and appearance/clothing. I argue that paid domestic workers’ bodies are simultaneously resources that can be used (up) for work, and symbols interpreted according to local hierarchies of gender and class.

Keywords: domestic work; body; social class; clothing/dress; Ecuador

I was cooking and I felt like I was suffocating. I wanted to lie down, because I felt sick... I took [spread out] some newspapers and lay on the kitchen floor. I felt like I was dying, that I couldn’t get air. . . . And the employer gets home and the other employee tells her, “The empleada [domestic worker] is sick.” “Oh, no,” she says, “what’s my daughter going to eat now, who will cook for her?”

Cristina, domestic worker, age 40

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Cristina has spent much of her life cooking and cleaning in private homes in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Her anecdote highlights domestic work’s physical demands, and employers’ privileging of their corporeal needs over those of their employees. Based on interviews with domestic workers and employers, I argue that bodies matter for how domestic employees experience their work (apart from often discussed issues of sexual harassment or abuse). Domestic workers’ accounts emphasized physical labor and the embodied inequality between employer and employee. Domestic work assumes particular forms in coastal Ecuador, where workers and employers often have similar racial backgrounds, and middle-class people see their position as increasingly precarious under a left-leaning political regime.

What can domestic work reveal about social categorizations of bodies? Domestic employment entails a unique physical proximity of bodies from different class groups, a boundary-threatening situation that must be managed by workers and employers. In this private sphere, bodies can reproduce or challenge class inequality. Although “domestic work constitutes bodily subjectivity in a particular way” (Bahnsch 2000, 59, referencing Gatens 1996, 69), research tends not to place the social meanings of workers’ bodies at the center of the analysis. Ecuador, with its long history of paid domestic work and rigid class system (Miles 1998; Roberts 2012)—in which even lower-middle-class families have traditionally employed domestics—is the ideal site for exploring class/work/body. Like many low-prestige jobs, domestic work draws on and propagates social constructions of poor people’s bodies as deviant and worthless.

Necessary research on working bodies “progress[es] only by adopting the vantage point of the embodied worker and listening to their accounts of workplace experience ‘from the inside’” (Wolkowitz 2006, 183). I take domestic workers’ accounts of issues concerning health, food, and appearance/clothing as a starting point, asking: How do bodies matter in domestic work? How does this employment arrangement relate to broader ideas about differently classed bodies in Ecuador?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Two complementary theoretical and empirical approaches apply to working bodies. The first, rooted in Marxian theory, views the body as a limited resource, damaged and deformed in exploitative production processes. Marx described factory work’s destructive effects on workers’ bodies and psyches ([1844] 1978, 74) as the collateral damage of capitalist
expansion. Indeed, “Labor power, the power of the body, is central to the reproduction and accumulation of capital” (Bahnisch 2000, 64). In today’s service economies, the “human body continues to be deeply involved in every aspect of paid work” (Wolkowitz 2006, 55). The “body as resource” perspective is often used to describe the types of physical labor identified with men.

The second approach, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus and symbolic interactionism (e.g., Goffman 1959), views the body as symbol. The symbolic body does not communicate unequivocal messages, comprehended similarly by everyone we encounter. However, habitus is observed and interpreted by others according to the “dominant symbolic” (Skeggs 2004a, 87), even if we are unconscious of how social structures produce particular behaviors and (bodily) dispositions. For Bourdieu, habitus “causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be . . . ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable’ to members of the same society” (1977, 79). Bodily aspects of habitus make sense to those able to recognize and classify them.

Dress, appearance, and movement communicate bodies’ positions in hierarchies of race, class, gender, and occupation. Embodied habitus is “a statement of social entitlement” (Skeggs 2004b, 22), reproducing class inequalities in, on, and through bodies and becoming a source of conflict or approbation in interactions between people of different classes. Workplaces can be agents of socialization, building or reinforcing habitus, especially when workers begin at young ages, as in domestic employment. Expanding on Bourdieu, Wolkowitz (2006) elaborated the idea of occupational habitus related to people’s work identities. Domestic work is one setting for the construction of occupational habitus.

The “body as symbol” perspective often focuses empirically on gendered appearance. Research shows how workplaces value certain forms of gender performance (Freeman 2000; Hall, Hockey, and Robinson 2007; McDowell 1997; Nencel 2008; Salzinger 2003). Yet there is scant research on embodied work outside of organizations, except for sex work. Building on the “body as resource” approach, research shows how emotions, signaled through physical cues, are harnessed in gender-segregated service occupations (Hochschild 1983; Kang 2010). Yet Wolkowitz laments the “relative invisibility of the corporeal in the employment-oriented literature on emotion” (2006, 79), and the sociology of the body is just beginning to examine the large portion of an employed person’s life that is spent at work.

The term body work (Kang 2010; Shilling [1993] 2003) synthesizes the material and symbolic aspects of bodies. Here, drawing on Gimlin, I consider body work: “(iii) the management of embodied emotional experience
and display, and (iv) the production or modification of bodies through work” (2007, 353). Consistent with a “body as symbol” frame, employers expect domestic workers to present a certain appearance. As in “body as resource” theories, domestic workers’ bodies are produced and transformed through the work.

I propose a more holistic micro-level approach, “embodied inequality.” A theoretical framework of embodied inequality bridges the “body as resource” and “body as symbol” approaches and their conceptual offshoots, “body work” and “occupational habitus.” In this case, domestic workers’ bodies are used as tools, and suffer the physical consequences, yet they must also have an appearance acceptable to their employers and indicative of their socioeconomic position. Unlike academic narratives that privilege only the material or the symbolic, the workers’ accounts combine these perspectives for a broader view of embodied inequality.

PAID DOMESTIC WORK

Domestic work has been studied in Latin America and the Caribbean (Chaney and García Castro 1989; Gill 1990, 1994; Karides 2002), the U.S. and Europe (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002), and Asia (Lan 2006; Ray and Qayum 2009). These studies place domestic work in the context of social and economic inequality, and often focus on gender and race dynamics (Cohen 1991; Colen 1989; Gill 1990; King 2007; Lan 2006; Mose Brown 2011; Glenn 2010; Rollins 1985; Wrigley 1995). Some studies emphasize organized and informal resistance by domestic workers (Bernardino-Costa 2011; Blofield 2009; Mose Brown 2011; Pande 2012).

Several researchers have addressed domestic workers’ embodiment; I expand on this focus in one local Latin American context. Rollins discusses the physical demands of domestic work (1985, Chapter 3), workers’ assertions that employers do not see them as human (1985, 132), the symbolic importance of food practices, and tensions around gifts (e.g., of clothing) (ibid. 69, 132-134; see also Anderson 2000; Arnado 2003; Gill 1990). Rollins’ study was based in the United States, with some domestic workers’ anecdotes dating back to the 1960s; yet many of these issues remain relevant for the Ecuadorian research participants. Some scholars portray domestic workers’ bodies as spatially marginalized: live-ins given poorly located or cramped quarters or workers not allowed to sit on furniture (Gill 1990; Ray and Qayum 2009). Ray and Qayum state that domestic
workers “are expected to do work that requires them to be strong, healthy, and clean” (2009, 153). King argues that “employees’ manner, dress, and deference are integral parts of the employer and servant relationship” (2007, 1). Gill’s (1990) examination of domestic work in Bolivia elaborates the stereotype of domestic workers as “ugly.”

Bodies are always implicated in domestic food practices. Ray and Qayum mention Indian domestic workers eating foods different from their employers’, attributing it to Hindu caste distinctions (2009, 153). In other societies, too, food plays a symbolic role in distinguishing people of different social status (Bourdieu [1984] 2007; Lupton 1994; Ward, Coveney, and Henderson 2010; Warde and Hetherington 1994). The home is an important site in the sociology of food and eating (DeVault 1994) because the “preparation and eating of food is central to household organization” (Warde and Hetherington 1994, 759). Valentine urges scholars to examine “how patterns of eating are negotiated and contested within households” (1999, 491). While much recent scholarship on food centers on the family, domestic workers are often overlooked.

This article investigates embodied aspects of domestic work in a thus far unexplored site, urban coastal Ecuador. Taking my cue from workers’ interview accounts, I set the body at the center of my inquiry. “Zooming in” on the body, we see how crucial embodiment is to women’s understanding and experience of this type of work. Domestic workers described how class relations become embodied and personalized when acted out between individuals in the private sphere. Distinctions between employers’ and employees’ bodies are not simply symptoms of larger inequalities, played out in rote ways; the very distinctions themselves are created through sometimes hurtful everyday interactions. Although bodily aspects of habitus build up over time so that people are not always conscious of the reasons for their actions (Bourdieu 1977), the domestic workers interviewed point to specific moments when they felt degraded as classed, gendered, and sometimes racialized bodies. We can better understand domestic workers’ experience of their work by listening to how they talk about their working bodies.

THE LOCAL CONTEXT

More than 43.6 million women—7.5 percent of the planet’s employed women—are paid domestic workers (International Labor Office [ILO] 2011). In Latin America, about 14 million women (14 percent of women workers) are paid domestics (Estrada 2009). The informal nature of
domestic work means that official statistics surely undercount the women laboring in private homes.

Ecuador is home to approximately 14 million people, nearly 40 percent of whom lived in poverty in 2010 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC] 2010). Approximately 11 percent of employed urban Ecuadorian women are domestic workers, for a total of 155,894 (Pérez and Gallardo 2005). Nationally, 18 percent of employed women are domestic workers (Reyes and Camacho Zambrano 2001). Latin American domestic workers often live in low-income, peripheral neighborhoods, and many are internal migrants (Chaney and García Castro 1989). Today, rural migrant women are often preferred by employers because they are thought to be more submissive and harder-working than city-born women.² In colonial Ecuador, domestic workers were indigenous and African slaves and servants, whereas today racial categorizations can be more complex.

The female labor market in Ecuador is bifurcated, with a limited set of “good” jobs available to college-educated women, and a set of less desirable jobs, or informal self-employment, to less educated women (Casanova 2011). Women see domestic work as the least appealing employment option because of low pay and potential exploitation by unregulated employers; many prefer other informal work (e.g., selling goods) (Casanova 2011, 164-65).

Guayaquil, Ecuador’s largest city, has approximately 2.4 million people living inside the city limits (M.I. Municipalidad de Guayaquil 2012) and a metro area population of around 3 million. Many of Guayaquil’s residents live in poverty (87 percent in the early 2000s [Floro and Messier 2006, 234]), and middle-class families commonly employ domestic workers. Employment arrangements vary, from elite families employing entire live-in staffs to lower-middle-class households having someone work a few hours per week. Many families’ only claim to middle-class status is the presence of a domestic worker in their household. Long an informal, under the table, contract-free type of employment, domestic work is now the object of increased government scrutiny and public consciousness raising by worker organizations, giving workers and employers the sense that the sands are shifting.

The timing of this study was ideal, as the left-leaning government of President Rafael Correa began enforcing labor laws protecting domestic workers—though not systematically or continuously—in 2009. Domestic workers’ issues were frequently featured in news media, and workers’ organizations ramped up advocacy and outreach to leverage state support and improve working conditions. It had always been difficult for domestic workers to negotiate living wages and bearable workloads because of the
unequal positions of employer and employee and the lack of regulation; public attention around domestics’ legal rights in this period made such discussions even more uncomfortable. In 2010, when I began fieldwork, the Ministry of Labor was conducting house-by-house inspections in wealthy neighborhoods to determine the presence of domestic workers in the home and whether they were receiving the government-mandated minimum wage and benefits (e.g., Social Security). Inspections have since ended, though the middle and upper classes still feel threatened by the populist, socialist-identified rhetoric of the current administration. Employers hearing of the inspectors’ presence in their neighborhood often “erased” a domestic worker’s body by giving her the day off, hiding her in another part of the house, or presenting her as a cousin visiting from the countryside.

The complex racial dynamics of contemporary Ecuador, with most citizens identifying as mestizo (of mixed indigenous and European ancestry) and sizable indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian minorities, are discussed in many studies (Casanova 2004; de la Torre and Striffler 2008; Rahier 1998; Roberts 2012). Throughout Latin America, the high degree of social and economic inequality is often literally written on the body (Bank Muñoz 2008; Casanova 2011; Edmonds 2010; Roberts 2012). Nonwhite appearance and darker skin are generally associated with low class status, and domestic workers are stereotyped as having these characteristics. In Guayaquil, few people self-identify as indigenous or wear traditional dress. Coastal mestizos/as have much less contact with their indigenous compatriots than do mestizos in the Andean region [sierra]; and the paternalistic mestizo–indigenous relations seen in the sierra are largely absent on the coast. Thus, it is rare to find indigenous domestic workers in guayaquileños’ homes. In fact, in 13 years of conducting research in Guayaquil, I have never encountered a woman who self-identified (or was identified by others) as indigenous laboring in a private home. Guayas province, where Guayaquil is located, has the country’s largest concentration of self-identified Afro-Ecuadorians (INEC 2012). While it is more common to find Afro-Ecuadorian women among Guayaquil’s domestic workers, there is widespread discrimination against blacks. My sense from speaking informally with employers is that they prefer mestiza domestic workers; I have also observed more mestiza than black workers in middle-class homes.

Thus, unlike locales where employers and employees are separated by caste (Ray and Qayum 2009) or race (Gill 1990, 1994; Rollins 1985), in Guayaquil it is common for domestic employment arrangements to link women whose official racial classification would be mestiza. As in the
Philippines (Arnado 2003), this employment relationship is not usually a cross-racial one, meaning that class differences—especially embodied ones—can be more fruitfully explored, as they are not conflated with racial differences. However, identifications of race and class in Ecuador are somewhat fluid and mutually constituting: mestizos with higher class status are perceived (and see themselves) as whiter than poorer mestizos, regardless of phenotype. Whereas popular conceptions of race in the U.S. rest on ideas about immutable biological differences, in Andean societies, including Ecuador, race is “experienced as alterable, through changes in body and comportment . . . [rather than] genetically determined” (Roberts 2012, 120). People who are mestizo/a can become white(r) by complying with middle-class norms of bodily self-presentation, education, and employment—by successfully embodying middle-class habitus. Thus, the “fabrication” of race is not “theoretical” or a priori, but rather, “race is enacted and . . . reenacted through a wider range of characteristics than physical appearance as transmuted through genes” (Roberts 2012, 114). This racial mutability makes creating embodied differences a priority for employers, who want to visually distinguish themselves from “the help.” Compounding the racial uncertainty and jockeying for whiteness is the precarious status of the middle class. In my recent ethnographic research, middle-class people’s generally low salaries and their (mostly overblown) sense that they are targeted by government policies that favor the poor have surfaced as important to this group’s self-identification. Thus, it is unsurprising to see lines drawn in the sand in the home-as-workplace to remind domestic workers of their (racialized) class position. The most obvious means for marking the bodies of employees is the uniform. The more frequent use of uniforms in Latin America (compared to the United States) underlines the different and perhaps more acute embodied experience of these workers. Strategies of corporeal distance, degradation, and differentiation are best seen as ways of shoring up tenuous claims to privileged statuses such as whiteness, decency [decencia], and middle-classness in one local race/class/gender context.

Meanwhile, the daily life of domestic workers—as described by participants and as I have observed—remains much the same as in decades past. Most families eat their largest meal at midday, which (in households that can afford it) includes a first course of soup, followed by a protein with rice and vegetables. Cooking can be laborious, often requiring tedious and physically demanding tasks such as grating green plantains by hand or peeling and straining fruits for juice. Rather than using sponge or string mops, domestic workers are usually asked to clean floors with wet rags draped over brooms or long sticks. Most middle-class homes have
washing machines; however, employers sometimes require special clothing (like children’s school uniforms) to be washed by hand, usually at stone sinks with washboard-like ridges. Even in homes with automatic dryers, clothing is usually hung outside to dry, which is more physically taxing. Other considerations include the dust that accumulates in this urban environment (even in closed-in structures) and the caustic contents of common cleaning products (domestic workers tend not to bring their own products or request specific products). Most live-out domestic workers have long workdays and live in areas distant from public transportation, making for long commutes.

**METHODS**

This article draws on interviews with fourteen current and former domestic workers (all women) and three employers (two women and one man) conducted in Guayaquil, Ecuador from June through August 2010. Because of the volatility of the domestic labor market, seven of the worker-interviewees were unemployed, though all self-identified as domestic workers and expressed interest in returning to work in private homes (two of these women had been recently hired and were negotiating start dates with new employers). Interviewees ranged in age from 28 to 62. Some had spent most of their working lives in domestic employment, often from adolescence. I asked women about each of their domestic work experiences, beginning with their first and ending with the most recent or current job. Despite the stereotype of domestic workers as rural-to-urban migrants, eight of the fourteen workers interviewed were born in or near Guayaquil. Although I did not ask about racial self-identification, three of the women would likely be identified as Black by most Guayaquileans, and two others appear to have some African ancestry but may not be considered Black. All the women but one were mothers, and most were not legally married.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish in locations around Guayaquil, and later transcribed. Topics discussed with workers included work history, family, work experiences, and future plans. Topics covered with employers included career, family, and experiences with domestics. I asked both groups questions about appearance and uniforms. Other body-related topics, including health concerns, physical demands of domestic work, and employers’ bodies, were raised by interviewees. I focus here on the themes of embodiment that emerged as I analyzed interview transcripts to identify patterns in participants’ accounts. Because I spent more
time with and interviewed more domestic workers than employers (although much of my daily life in the field takes place in the company of employers), and because their subjective work experiences are my focus, I draw more heavily on workers’ accounts.

I use “domestic work” to mean paid domestic work, rather than unpaid household work. Workers did not self-identify using the term preferred by middle-class Ecuadorians, empleadas [employees]. They preferred trabajadoras remuneradas del hogar [remunerated household workers], but for brevity and consistency I use the term “domestic worker” or simply “worker.” Translations from Spanish are mine, and names are pseudonyms.

**FINDINGS**

Common body-related themes in interview accounts were (1) the role of the body in domestic workers’ physically demanding tasks (i.e., body as limited resource, suffering because of the work) and (2) the embodiment of class inequality (body as symbol of social/economic position). The second theme encompasses two subthemes (a) the construction of employers’ bodies as more valuable than workers’ bodies, through health and food, and (b) perspectives on appearance and the use of the “maid” uniform.

**Physical Labor in Domestic Work (Body as Resource)**

Nearly every worker interviewed stressed the physical demands of housework and child care: “the production or modification of bodies through work” (Gimlin 2007, 353). Cecilia, middle-aged and unemployed, complained that “physical exhaustion” set in over time:

> In the first month, we’re wonderful, but in two or three months we’re feeling a physical exhaustion (*agotamiento físico*) that leads to us feeling more and more tired, and we end up getting an illness . . . related to the tiredness, the stress . . . and then the employer begins to complain . . . “What’s going on with you? You started off working hard but now you don’t clean here, you don’t clean over here”—but she doesn’t recognize that I am human, too.

Most of the domestic workers interviewed began work at a young age, some at 10 or 12. The toll on the body over time, and the difficulty of getting hired and danger of being fired as an older worker because of perceived or actual physical limitations, were common concerns.
Some domestic tasks are more physically demanding than others. Longtime domestic Patty recounted:

I have been doing laundry for 22 years, and my hands began to swell up on me . . . there was a horrible pain that grabbed me in my [lower] back . . . and my whole hands were full of fungus, and they bled every time I washed [by hand], they were so irritated . . . it was a rash . . . from the detergent, the soap . . . and the bleach.

After spending a day washing clothes for her employers, Patty would return home and wash her own family’s clothes. She consulted a doctor, who recommended she stop hand-washing clothes: “If you keep washing, you are going to die,” because the exposure to bleach could cause cancer. Despite the tremendous pain, Patty “went on for some time more for [her] children,” whom she helped support. She said, “I was not the same person you see today”—strong, energetic, with a physically commanding presence—because of her overwork. Despite the fact that she no longer washes clothes for a living, I could see the effects of this toil on her hands. For Patty, one of the most troubling aspects of domestic work is that “physically a person gets worn out, deteriorates, doesn’t care for herself.”

As with much manual labor, domestic work’s detrimental physical effects are not well compensated. In interviews, workers listed negative physical consequences: back pain, exposure to hazardous chemicals without protective masks or gloves, and injuries. Former worker Ximena recounted cleaning marble stairs during the final weeks of her pregnancy, when she slipped and fell. The pain she felt afterward, she soon realized, was the beginning of labor. (Perhaps Ximena was fortunate to be working, as two other domestic workers reported being fired when employers learned of their pregnancies.) Patty affirmed, “The work in the home is hard . . . and one arrives home dead, pulverized.” Since asking for time off is often not an option, several workers noted that they would simply quit a job when they needed rest, taking a month or two off before returning to work, usually for a new employer.

Workers used embodied metaphors to describe their toil. Belén, employed in one of Guayaquil’s wealthiest neighborhoods, referred to her job as earning money “with the sweat of your brow,” and Cristina claimed to have “given up even my lungs” to the work; these powerful embodied images signify the bodily sacrifice of domestic work. Such statements recall a tradition of “body as resource” theories inspired by Marx, who saw the body destroyed by the capitalist mode of production. These bodies are modified negatively, and (re)produced as lower-class bodies, through
physically demanding tasks. Although their occupational habitus involves executing physically difficult work, the women identify its negative consequences on their bodies.

**Employers’ Bodies as More Valuable (Body as Symbol)**

Workers often discussed distinctions made by employers between employers’ and workers’ bodies as related to health and health care, food, and clothing. These accounts recall the “body as symbol” perspective: Bodies are seen as carrying different amounts of social worth. Health issues also relate to the physicality of the work and the body as an exhaustible resource. Workers’ bodies are so devalued by differential treatment that Cecilia asserted, “The family dog is treated better than the household worker.”

Nearly all the workers described myriad health problems, some leaving them temporarily unable to work. Ailments may stem from a variety of causes, including physically demanding work, poor women’s precarious health status, and lack of health care access. As former domestic Ana María put it, “A [domestic] worker has little time to go to the doctor.” Rather than seeing a doctor, she said domestic workers “go to the pharmacy to self-medicate,” or consult neighbors and friends. Because most of these women depend on subsidized health services or low-cost clinics, a doctor visit can involve waiting an entire day (or more) to be seen. Paola, a full-time student and former domestic worker, discussed employers’ inflexibility with regard to workers’ schedules: “We don’t have any right to get sick.” Paola and other interviewees connected health disparities to class inequality: “We are also human, just like them [employers], except the difference is that they have money, and we don’t.” When employers get sick, they visit the doctor and take time off from work to recuperate; when domestic employees get sick, they are often unable to do either. When Fátima asked her last employer to help pay for her prescription, she was berated by his adult son, and felt that skin color and class prejudice were at play: “They let me know that because a person is ugly, [and] Black . . . and they [the employers] are white, they can give you a kick in the rear. . . . But why, if we are all human and have feelings?” She compared this employer to a previous one, who, when she fell ill, took her to an expensive private hospital and paid the bill. Workers see the body as a resource they can use, and see the employers’ denial of their health needs as a material and symbolic devaluation of their bodies.

Food was another site for drawing lines between upper- and lower-class bodies. Based on my interviews and observations, deep-rooted practices,
such as having domestic workers eat separately and offering them different (or less) food, are still common in urban Ecuador. Several women complained that employers denied them food during the workday. Fátima said, “They didn’t even give me a piece of warm bread.” Others recounted having to eat reheated leftovers when there was plenty of fresh food available, or watching employers throw out food the worker had requested. Domestic workers, said Cecilia, often do not get “decent food.”

More offensive to Belén was being forced to use dishes that were just for the help: “From the teacups to the spoons, everything . . . all the utensils were different from theirs.” This humiliating experience made her feel insignificant. The symbolism of objects that touch only a worker’s body, but never an employer’s body, communicates a powerful message of inferiority to the worker. Another worker recalled having to eat outdoors while the employer’s family ate inside; typically, domestic workers eat in the kitchen or an adjoining room. Legitimating the study of food as a social and cultural object, Bourdieu ([1984] 2007) focused on divergent eating habits based on class-based tastes, yet here different eating practices are based not on taste but on the exclusion of lower-class bodies from nourishment and desirable foods. By refusing to share eating utensils and eating space with domestic workers, employers shore up embodied class boundaries and prevent even indirect bodily contact. In describing “good” employers, workers often pointed to eating the same food, or eating together at the table, as evidence of kindness. Alternatively, we could see this egalitarian gesture as a distraction from the inherent economic inequality in the employment situation. Given the incorporation of food-related routines into domestic workers’ occupational habitus, it is likely that many workers, unlike those interviewed, do not resist or complain about these practices.

Cristina recalled taking her young daughter to work, so she could “see what I do.” Her daughter asked, “Mami, why do you make such delicious food here?” Cristina replied, “At home we don’t have the same money as they do here.” Her daughter complimented Cristina’s cooking, saying she wished she could cook such rich foods at home. Cristina responded, “M’ija [My daughter], that is why I am working here, because sometime we want to eat well too.”

Employers I spoke with connected food and bodies in ways that reaffirmed or obscured class boundaries. Clara, a 30-something woman, claimed to have fired a previous employee in part because of her messy cooking style, saying the food “had a bad flavor [because] her hands were dirty, and her whole appearance was . . . messy.” With their current worker, Clara and her husband Alfredo emphasized, they all ate together.
They looked down on those who made domestic workers eat separately, since “we are the same, human beings.” The new employee’s ability to present a neat appearance made her presence at the dinner table palatable to her employers.

Interviewees also discussed embodied inequality in dress and physical appearance. Domestic workers admitted that there were clothes or other items that they enjoyed or aspired to purchase. As Cristina put it, “Although I don’t have money, I like to go to stores, to look and to fantasize.” Fátima referred to the popular Ecuadorian saying, “They treat you according to how you look [a uno como lo ven, lo tratan].” She used this social practice of judging appearance (Casanova 2011, Chapter 4), which connotes a particular—often racialized—class status, as a justification for always wanting to look good in public. With such statements, workers like Fátima reaffirmed the symbolic importance of physical appearance for women of all class backgrounds. Her employers took notice, and when she requested their help in buying her prescription medicine, they criticized her for having money to do her hair and nails and buy perfume but not to provide for her health, implying that lower-class bodies did not deserve to be made attractive. Her attempt to make a claim on middle-class bodily habitus was thus delegitimized.

Workers often criticized employers’ “vanity” or “fashion,” referring to the value placed on presenting a socially acceptable middle-class appearance. Elsa had recently left her job over issues of back pay and vacation time. Elsa’s employers claimed they couldn’t pay her the salary she was owed, yet Elsa noted that any time the mother and daughter were invited to “half a party [medio reunión],” they would rush out to get their hair or nails done. Other workers said money that could have been used to pay domestic workers (whose presence in the home is a key symbol of middle-class status) was spent on what they perceived as superficial, temporary, bodily markers of class. Irma, an experienced domestic worker, was overwhelmed by the quantity of clothing, makeup, and accessories in her employer’s home, confiding, “I’d go crazy with so much clothing, it’s amazing . . . there were suitcases full of purses, full of every kind of makeup.” It is harder for low-income women, including domestic workers, to access and “properly” use these symbolic props for middle-class respectability.

Female employers sometimes loan clothing to workers, or give them used clothing. Some workers viewed this as a benefit of their job. At Christmas, Patty’s former employer gave her money to buy clothes, and loaned her clothes to attend social events in her rural hometown. Yet she maintained the class line distinguishing worker from employer: Patty was
told never to wear her employer’s borrowed clothing “in the [employer’s] neighborhood,” only out of town, and she complied. Marina, a worker whose daughter had also worked in private homes, told me that she accepted used clothes from her former employer because she did not want to waste them; she distributed them among family and friends. Not all workers appreciate hand-me-down clothing. Marina’s daughter Francisca frowned on those “who give you the blouse they don’t want any more. . . . No, that’s not a good employer. A good employer says, ‘Come on and I’ll buy you a new blouse.’” Cast-off clothing, especially if worn or ill-fitting, marks the lower-class body (Adair 2001), whereas new clothing adds value to the worker’s appearance.13

The Uniform as Embodiment of Inequality

In popular culture portrayals, it is easy to pick out the domestic worker in a privileged space: She’s the one wearing the maid uniform. Uniforms are sold in Guayaquil’s department stores and grocery stores, where uniformed domestic workers can be spotted pushing employers’ shopping carts or tending to their children (Figure 1). These garments tend to be loose-fitting housecoats, or resemble medical scrubs: the stereotypical, black-and-white version is rare. Uniforms are different enough from everyday street clothing to visually distinguish women as domestics at a glance. Many employers pay for or provide uniforms for their employers, whereas others (to the chagrin of workers) take the cost out of the employee’s pay.

I asked both workers and employers14 about uniforms. The employers interviewed did not require uniforms, describing them as unnecessary and old-fashioned. They mentioned wanting the worker to feel comfortable, especially when caring for young children. Employer Clara, who wore a uniform in her job as a hotel manager, said she had denied her domestic worker’s request for a uniform. Perhaps because of her own embodied experience of wearing a uniform as a professional, she saw uniforms not as indicative of low social status, but the opposite: “I personally see the uniform as a differentiation of social strata, so here you see people wearing uniforms who are . . . from a higher socioeconomic level.” For Clara, the uniform symbolized middle-class, professional, rather than low, status; it was part of her occupational habitus as a college-educated manager.

Of the workers who expressed opinions about uniforms, seven viewed them negatively and one positively.15 Plain-spoken Paola, who had to wear a uniform a few times at a previous job, declared it “a humiliation” and “a piece of trash [una porquería].” When a domestic worker goes out in public with her employer, Paola said, “a person can distinguish who is
the employee and who is the boss.” This is especially relevant when both the employer and employee are *mestiza*. Patty, who had never worn a uniform, described domestic workers’ uniforms as “sad dresses.” She said that simply because a woman was a domestic she shouldn’t have to be “all scruffy . . . with ugly sandals.” (In Guayaquil, “ugly” sandals or flip-flops signal lower-class status—middle-class habitus generally reserves flip-flops for beachwear or housewear.) The point of such a display, Patty said, was for an employer to demonstrate that “that person is his/her employee.” When the lady of the house goes shopping with her daughter, no one mistakes the daughter for a domestic worker, Patty remarked. Domestic workers generally felt that when they wore uniforms in public, people thought, “Look, there’s an *empleada*, a nanny.” The uniform clarifies and amplifies the message of the symbolic body.

Francisca, otherwise calm and soft-spoken as we chatted, spoke excitedly when the talk turned to uniforms: “It’s like they [uniforms] make you feel like a *cachifa* [derogatory term for maid], like you’re less than.” While working for a downtown family, she had to wear a uniform only when she went shopping. When asked how she felt, she replied, “Ooooh, like the lowest, because, imagine, in the middle of downtown and dressed like that . . . I felt really very bad [*me senti recontra que mal*].” Francisca eventually told her employer that she didn’t like going shopping, and,
surprisingly, the employer did not push back. Francisca forfeited an opportunity to escape the confines of the home because of the embarrassment the uniform entailed.

While workers expressed concerns about public perceptions, they also discussed how these stigmatizing clothes looked and felt on the body. Several bemoaned the poor quality of the uniforms required by employers. Francisca described feeling physically uncomfortable in the uniform, which was “like, too hot, different, [when] one is used to wearing her own little clothes.” Paola said vehemently:

Aside from everything else, it’s a poorly made uniform. . . . If it were a uniform, a little pantsuit with a little T-shirt, great, fine. Or, why can’t I wear pants and a T-shirt like they do in offices? . . . But instead they have to buy the worst fabric . . . because that’s how they’ve treated us, like the lowest of the low [la última rueda del coche].

More egregious than bad fabric was bad fit. Patricia complained about having to use worn-out uniforms left behind by previous employees. Women’s bodies are all different: “One is fat and the other is thin . . . there should be a uniform that fits one’s body.” When Belén protested the poor fit of her uniform, her employer replied, “I bought it for your body.” Belén disagreed, telling me, “I look like a potato sack with no potatoes, because it fits me so big, and I don’t like that.” So she wore it around the house, but changed into her own clothes to go out, because the uniform “fit me so ugly.” Ugliness is thus associated with both domestic work and lower-class status.

Several workers described households as having just one uniform, to be used by whoever was working in the home. References to a one-size-fits-all, used uniform evoke the image of a garment hanging on a hook in the kitchen, waiting for a domestic worker to literally put on or to embody the role of the help. The uniform stays on the hook and the individual worker (with her unique size, shape, and preferences) changes. This represents the ultimate de-individualization of the worker, in which any body can be stuffed into or swim around in a generic uniform not chosen for her needs, but to symbolize a social/occupational role. Irma, who generally liked uniforms and whom I often saw wearing medical scrubs–type garments, decided to get her own well-fitting uniforms in order to avoid those provided by employers, which she described as “mistreated” and “badly washed.”

Some interviewees interpreted the employers’ choice of ill-fitting (usually too large) and unattractive uniforms not just as a demarcation of workers’ low status but as an effort to desexualize their bodies, to prevent
them from being viewed or targeted sexually by male employers. Patricia commented, “The important thing is that it fits you big, because they don’t like it small,” yet for workers, such a large garment felt like “a nightgown.” When Cristina was searching for words to describe the physical encumbrance posed by overly large uniforms, I interjected:

Erynn: You have to be able to move to do things . . .
Cristina: Yes, of course, right? So sometimes they give you a long dress, but I say, what’s the reason for the long dress? . . . They must be thinking that you’re going to steal their husband or something, right?

Cumbersome clothes limit the ability to use the body as a resource, but also have a symbolic dimension: Cristina viewed these modesty requirements as a way of managing the sexual threat posed by the presence of an unrelated female in the home of a married couple. Paola was explicitly instructed by a female employer to “be careful around the son and the husband,” and to “wear a bigger pair of shorts, so that you couldn’t see my...” While we might applaud the employer for wanting to protect her, it is worth noting that she put the onus on Paola to discourage harassment, rather than expecting her male relatives to behave appropriately. Paola agreed with the employer’s suggestion, saying “it was obvious” that she should dress more modestly. Domestic workers thus adjust their appearance as employers require, whether or not they internalize stereotypes that characterize them as hypersexual.

CONCLUSION: EMBODIED INEQUALITY

The questions driving this research were (1) How do bodies matter in domestic work? and (2) How does this employment arrangement relate to broader social ideas about bodies of different class status? In the accounts presented here, workers described their embodied employment experience in ways that fit both “body as resource” and “body as symbol” theoretical frameworks, pointing to the usefulness of a more comprehensive, holistic approach to embodied inequality.

Bodies matter in all jobs: Even the most cerebral, intellectual tasks are performed by humans who have/are bodies. In discussing their work, domestic workers emphasized the physicality of the tasks and the deleterious effects on their bodies. They described their work as exhausting, accelerating the deterioration of their bodies, and potentially dangerous.
These accounts conceive of the body as a limited resource women draw on to do their work, which can be used up or damaged in the process.

Bodies also matter in terms of the symbolic distinctions drawn between “good,” middle-class/elite bodies and “bad,” lower-class/deviant bodies—between employers’ and workers’ bodies. Workers face clear boundaries between themselves and employers in relation to health, food consumption, and appearance. Even employers who buck tradition by pursuing more egalitarian relations (e.g., dining with their workers) are aware of the differential values typically placed on differently classed bodies. The uniform, an iconic symbol of domestic service throughout the Americas, was viewed by most of the workers and, interestingly, by the young employers I interviewed, as a superfluous relic of a more oppressive class order. Yet, 70 percent of the domestic workers interviewed had been asked by employers to wear uniforms, so the practice is still alive. Most workers hated being made to wear ill-fitting, cheaply-made uniforms, and several described feeling embarrassed for other women they saw visibly marked as domestics in public spaces. Many who referred to the physical challenges of domestic work also drew on the idea of the body as a malleable symbol of status in describing the embodied aspects of their relations to employers.

Although habitus, and the newer idea of occupational habitus, implies behaviors and physical orientations that are automatic rather than intentional, interview accounts point to moments in which workers resist what is seen as the appropriate corporeality for their station in this social and political environment. While they generally enact the physical labor and appearance related elements of domestic worker habitus, they sometimes resist the symbolic degradation of their bodies. However, when the workers aspire to or attempt to embody elements of gendered middle-class habitus in Guayaquil (e.g., getting their hair professionally styled), they are sanctioned by employers.

These accounts highlight “the management of embodied emotional experience and display” (Gimlin 2007, 353) seen in domestic workers’ acquiescence to the bodily regimes of employers in a context of limited employment alternatives. The successful embodiment of modesty (in dress and manner) required by employers is one example of the ways that domestic workers manage their bodies and emotions. Workers’ stories of the physical damage and health hazards of the job exemplify “the production or modification of bodies through work” (Gimlin 2007, 353). Bodies are often changed for the worse by engaging in domestic work, and lower-class women’s bodies are (re)produced as “less than” or “the lowest of the low,” to use the workers’ terms.
This empirical study can help further theoretical understandings of bodies, work, and class in Latin America and beyond, following the lead of the domestic workers as folk theorists who combine the “body as resource” and “body as symbol” perspectives in a comprehensive view of embodied inequality. Examining one case in depth demonstrates how class-based occupational habitus is created or resisted in employment situations, especially those that begin early in life, like domestic work. Domestics in Guayaquil come from lower-class (sometimes rural) backgrounds, and their bodies are marked as poor and undesirable prior to entering the workforce—in a sense, the lower-class body is already a sort of uniform. Workers become further accustomed to the material and symbolic devaluation of their bodies as they are fed inferior food with separate dishes in separate areas of the home, not permitted to attend to their health problems (some of which emerge from the repetitive physical damage of domestic labor), and denied the objects associated with an acceptable or attractive middle-class feminine appearance. Workers exercise the most resistance in the area of appearance, subverting employers’ dress codes, or compensating for the symbolic degradation of their bodies at work by investing in a feminine appearance outside of work. In a local context characterized by racial and class anxiety, and (perceived or actual) political challenges to middle-class status by Ecuador’s left-leaning government, employers are invested in holding the line that separates them from employees, and employees are acutely aware of this.

NOTES

1. Aside from its symbolic aspects, habitus can be a source of identification and meaning-making for individuals.

2. Of help wanted advertisements appearing over 52 weeks, 18 specifically requested a domestic worker from the country (Casanova 2013). A typical ad reads: “Señorita del campo puertas adentro para casa [Young lady from the countryside live-in for housework].”

3. In her study of domestic work in contemporary South Africa, King identifies the uniform as a “symbolic representation of the regulation of their [workers’] constructed role” (King 2007, 36). For uniforms’ role in society, see Joseph (1986).

4. These interviews are part of an ongoing multi-method study of domestic work in Guayaquil, including informal interviews, participant observation with a domestic worker organization, archival research, and analysis of help wanted ads. I met the domestic worker interviewees through fieldwork at the organization, and employer interviewees were referred by personal contacts.
5. All workers interviewed were connected to the domestic worker advocacy organization where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork. This may bias my sample: interviewees may be more committed to domestic workers’ rights or more politically oriented than other domestic workers.

6. Other themes included sexual harassment, violence, and caring for employers’ bodies. Since much attention is paid to harassment in popular, NGO, and scholarly reports, and there were few mentions of care work, my analysis excludes these topics.

7. The legal monthly minimum wage in Ecuador, to which domestic workers were legally entitled at the time of the interviews, was $240 (plus benefits: Social Security, overtime, vacation, etc.). Most domestic workers in Guayaquil were paid around $200 per month, with unpaid overtime and no benefits.

8. In Ecuador (as in many developing countries), most drugs are available in pharmacies without a prescription.

9. See Auyero’s (2011) excellent ethnography of “poor people’s waiting” in government benefits offices in Argentina; Sutton’s interviews with domestic workers in Argentina also highlighted long waits to see doctors as a reason that women “neglected signs of illness in their bodies” (Sutton 2010, 56). One domestic worker Sutton interviewed said, “I know I cannot get sick” (ibid.).

10. Historian Shailaja Paik notes the similar embodied exclusion of Dalit people in India, particularly in educational settings (personal communication).

11. Thanks to Tamara Mose Brown for highlighting this point (personal communication).

12. Patty offered clothes lending as an example of how a “good employer” behaves.

13. Rollins argues that gifts from employer to domestic, not expected to be reciprocated and often used or worn, highlight employees’ inferior status, symbolically defining them as “needy” and “dependent” (1985, 192-94).

14. The employers I interviewed were working professionals in their 30s, just starting their families. Thus, their opinions on uniforms may differ from older or wealthier employers.

15. This worker favored uniforms, yet was critical of the quality and appearance of those typically offered by employers, and thus preferred to buy or make her own (at her expense).

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