

EXPOS 20
HARVARD WRITING PROGRAM
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DOMESTIC LABOR

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Domestic work, according to labor activist Ai-jen Poo, is [“the work that makes all other work possible.”](#) yet the people who clean, cook, and care are so often invisible and undervalued. Because domestic labor takes place within the home rather than the factory or other industrial sites of labor, what are the consequences of the erasure of boundaries between home and work, for both the employer and the employee? To what extent do domestic workers possess agency when their very occupation is to serve their employer? In addition to physical and mental labor that are required, what forms of emotional labor are also expected? What are the individual and societal ramifications of this labor force being largely unregulated, underpaid, and unappreciated?

This course considers the complex forces of classism, racism, and sexism that have contributed to the subjugation of domestic workers and the labor they perform. In the first unit, students will closely read the popular British television series [Downton Abbey](#), Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “Sweat,” and Maya Angelou’s biographical fiction “What’s Your Name, Girl?” to consider how the text illustrates servants possessing or lacking agency. In unit two, students will use sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor as a lens through which to examine Alfonso Cuarón’s film [Roma](#), which features the perspective of an indigenous housekeeper and the blurry boundaries between work and family. In the final unit, students will develop their own interpretive framework alongside the scholarly work of others by focusing on a text of their choosing. By thinking about how domestic labor is imagined in literature, television, and film, students will unpack paradigms of privilege and power and develop arguments about exploitation, identity, and [the care economy](#).

SOME OTHER TEXTS WE’LL EXAMINE ALONG THE WAY

- [“Why Are Domestic Workers’ Rights Essential? With Alicia Garza”](#) *Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness* podcast episode
- Stephanie Land’s recent bestselling memoir [Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother’s Will to Survive](#) (which is currently being adapted into a Netflix mini-series)
- [The nanny ad](#) that went viral last year

WHY I LOVE TEACHING THIS COURSE

First and foremost, I have an unhealthy obsession with the television series *Downton Abbey* and love the opportunity to introduce it to students who have not watched it prior to class. In addition to juicy drama and amazing one-liners, the series provides a telling glimpse into what servant life was like in the early 20th century. The politics of intimacy, class, and gender expectations are featured prominently in the show and provide a useful foundation for our later work, which grapples with complex discussions of ongoing racial inequality, contemporary public policy debates, and the role we all play as individuals in (de)valuing domestic and care work. Furthermore, this course helps students deepen their understanding of what [intersectionality](#) means and looks like in everyday life. By being more attentive to overlapping systems of oppression and privilege, this course equips students with a vocabulary for understanding their own intersecting identities so as to hopefully better understand others’.

I also love teaching first-year writing. Adapting to college life can be challenging and my favorite part of my job is helping students navigate this transition. Finally, I firmly believe that writing is a tool of empowerment and my goal is to use writing to help students find their voice, their style, and their confidence inside and outside the classroom.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT CARE WORK?

While many of the texts we examine in class are fiction, I make a conscious effort to connect our conversations to the real life people doing this work today. Just this month, U.S. Senators Kristen Gillibrand and Ben Ray Lujan and Representative Pramila Jayapal re-introduced [the National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights](#). This national legislation would ensure that the over 2.2 million domestic workers in the U.S. are protected by common labor laws while creating new regulations and ways to enforce them. This legislation is supported by President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh and comes at a critical time for working women. The pandemic has highlighted the precarious nature of work that domestic workers, who are disproportionately Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous women and immigrant women, face everyday. The academic work we do in the classroom anticipates what will hopefully be a defining moment in American (and global) culture, where precarious workers who are deemed “essential” gain rights and benefits that such designation should afford, including, but not limited to: paid time off, affordable health care, a fair wage, protection from sexual and racial discrimination, and, above all, respect and dignity.



Domestic work is real work.

HOW STUDENTS HAVE RESPONDED TO THE COURSE MATERIAL

Students enjoy the freedom to explore their own interests in the final research project and I am always delighted by the creativity and thoughtfulness that animate these essays. In past semesters, students have pursued projects on films as diverse as *Parasite* and *Mary Poppins*, the book/television series *The Handmaid's Tale*, and even the culture of Japanese maid cafes.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions about the class and/or my approach to teaching.