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**Published on** H-Caribbean (June, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Aaron Coy Moulton (Stephen F. Austin State University)

Anasa Hicks’s *Hierarchies at Home* is a much-needed analysis of domestic service in Cuba from the abolition of slavery through the postrevolutionary period. This work is part of a larger scholarly turn in the field of Cuban studies toward decentering the white middle-class experience as the default historical narrative of the island.[1] Those who have spearheaded this turn have utilized the stories of African-descended Cubans to challenge the myth of racial democracy and “racelessness” both before and after the revolution. Hicks’s contribution to the literature is groundbreaking, tracing the history of domestic service to make a larger argument about the intersections of race, gender, and labor in Cuba. The goal of centering domestic laborers as the focal point of this study is challenging—the erasure of their perspectives and contributions from the archival record is a phenomenon that is not uncommon when searching for subaltern voices. However, through strategic against-the-grain readings and interpretations of a variety of sources, Hicks skillfully constructs a narrative that addresses how hierarchies in the home were reinforced and challenged in public and political life.

Domestic laborers—defined as “those who were paid to sustain a household through cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other tasks” (p. 3)—were an integral part of the home lives of middle- and upper-class Cuban families. The overarching argument of Hicks’s study is that even though domestic laborers were integral to “the stability of Cuba’s social infrastructure” (p. 17), their labor was simultaneously devalued and denied legal protections. This was because domestic labor in Cuba was mainly associated with African-descended women, despite the fact that they statistically did not make up the majority of domestics for most of the twentieth century. This racialized and gendered stereotype influenced how domestic work was talked about, legislated, and remembered. This argument challenges the myth that the so-called familial relationship between domestics and those they served was a testament to racial harmony both inside the home and throughout larger Cuban society. This myth was
rooted in Cuba’s slave past, and the nostalgia for the upholding of this harmony was used to suppress the demands of domestic laborers for better working conditions. Domestic workers resisted this suppression through advocating for their citizenship rights and labor protections individually and as a collective.

The opening chapter explores the perception of domestic labor alongside discourses of honor, hygiene, and morality in Cuba’s first decade of independence. The focus of the nascent republican state on policing “literal hygiene and figurative hygiene” (p. 20) resulted in suspicion of working-class women, calling into question their understanding of these concepts. Hicks argues that the treatment of wet nurses is a prime example of how African-descended domestic workers were especially targeted for scrutiny of their bodies. The fitness of wet nurses was debated among “medical nationalists” (p. 23)—doctors, scientists, and journalists who often published their opinions in public health magazines. Articles began to appear in the magazine *La Higiene* that discussed how to avoid hiring a “deficient” wet nurse, if one was to be hired at all. The ideal nurse was described as possessing qualities such as docility, tranquility, and intelligence. It was implicit that these writers were not describing women of African descent. Advertisements placed by families seeking to hire a wet nurse frequently specified their desire for a woman of Spanish heritage. The concept of honor and sexuality is also analyzed in this chapter with regard to domestic labor. The colonial notion of honor continued to grip those in power, casting further suspicion against the bodies of working-class women. Hicks uses court records to examine the outcome of sexual assault cases involving domestic servants. The innocence of the women involved was questioned, and the courts did not view their claims as legitimate. Domestic workers who sought justice in the courts experienced a “double violence”: the initial violation of their bodies and the unwillingness of the court system to serve their needs (p. 41).

Chapter 2 examines the differing strategies utilized by black Cubans in obtaining citizenship rights in the wake of independence. Despite their participation and leadership in the independence wars, black Cubans were excluded from full citizenship rights in the new republic. Hicks interrogates the response to this exclusion and the approaches undertaken to resist it. One of the strategies advocated by the black professional class was one of “racial uplift” that “emphasized cultural refinement, intellectual development, and moral reform” (p. 60). This professional class founded intellectual societies and publications that celebrated individuals who embodied those values. These examples provided an implicit argument that through “uplifting” themselves, African-descended Cubans had earned full participation in civic and political life. However, there was tension between idealized representations of blackness and the lived realities of the island’s black working class. Upwardly mobile black Cubans did not take up the cause of domestics, instead opting to distance themselves from the stereotypical connection between blackness and servitude. While the concerns of domestics were not advocated for by their middle-class counterparts, they still found ways to advocate for themselves and their citizenship rights. The author uses the legal petitions of domestic workers in Santiago de Cuba to demonstrate how they fought to collect the inheritances or war pensions owed to them. The effort of these domestics sheds light on how they sought to claim their rights and personhood in the eyes of the early republican state.

Chapter 3 focuses on growing labor activism and the solutions put forward by the state and Catholic Church to address the grievances of workers. The proposed change relied on charity and “uplifting” workers through education, without any proposition for tangible workplace reforms (p. 72). The Catholic Church was one of
the first institutions to extend support directly to
domestic workers. This chapter traces the efforts 
of charitable organizations such as María Inmacu-
lada, a religious order founded to aid young wo-
men working as domestic servants. The goal of 
this particular order was to “educate, instruct,
freely house, and place young women dedicated to 
domestic service in houses with recognized hon-
or” (p. 75). Even though the typical domestic work-
er was understood in the Cuban imagination to be 
a black woman, women of Spanish descent were 
the primary beneficiaries of charitable aid. Hicks 
argues that charity-based solutions were not 
enough to curb rising labor radicalism after World 
War I. She also argues that domestic workers 
played an important role in the activism of this 
time period, despite being excluded from larger 
narratives about militant labor. One such example 
is the participation of domestics in the labor un-
rest at the Báguanos mill outside the eastern city 
of Holguín. Domestic workers were persuaded to 
quit alongside sugar workers advocating for better 
conditions at the mill. Sugar workers advocated 
for the concerns of domestics including “a thirty-
dollar monthly salary, free meals, and an eight-
hour work day” (p. 71). Despite the expansion of 
organizing and advocacy efforts by domestics, 
they did not receive the same legal protections 
granted to other laborers. Hicks aptly argues that 
this was because militant domestic workers chal-
lenged the unspoken hierarchy that underpinned 
race relations in Cuba. The granting of concessions 
threatened the myth of the harmonious relation-
ship between domestics and their white employ-
ers that was supposed to be a testament to a larger 
racial democracy on the island.

The exclusion of domestics from progressive 
labor reform is discussed in depth in chapter 4. In 
this chapter, the author challenges the idea that 
this exclusion is a product of domestic workers’ in-
ability or unwillingness to organize. Similarly, the 
omission of their demands was not because they 
were unimportant or too informal to codify into 
labor protections. Instead, Hicks argues that the 
role of domestic workers in Cuban homes was too 
important to the status quo, making any efforts to 
protect them incredibly controversial. This is evi-
dent in the staunch opposition to Decree 1754, a de-
cree that granted paid vacation to domestic laborers that was quickly rescinded due to public 
pressure. The decree was introduced in 1938, a 
time of general reform on the island that would 
lead to the notably progressive 1940 Constitution 
just two years later. The backlash against the de-
cree was swift and intense, with commentators in 
the popular press stoking a panic over what the 
new law meant for the middle-class Cuban family. 
One article went so far as to imply that the out-
come of Decree 1754 would lead to the destruction 
of Cuba’s middle class as a whole. The media also 
used the stereotype of the domestic worker as “al-
most like one of the family” (p. 105) as a rhetorical 
weapon against any formalized labor protections. 
This rhetoric had been used to silence grievances 
for decades, including Cuba’s slave past. This in-
tense backlash reveals a larger dependence that 
Cuba’s elite class had on unregulated domestic 
labor. Even as the state failed to recognize their 
rights, domestic workers still organized alongside 
feminist and communist allies, as well as through 
more moderate civic groups and mutual aid or-
ganizations.

The final two chapters move into the era of 
the 1959 revolution. Chapter 5 focuses on the ac-
tion taken by the revolutionary government to ad-
dress the inequalities inherent in domestic serv-
vitude. Leading up to 1959, domestic worker uni-
ons publicly supported Fidel Castro and the 26th 
of July movement in the hopes that the new re-
volutionary state would address their concerns. 
Instead, the revolutionary government worked to 
eliminate domestic service on the island and “res-
cue” the workers that had been suffering from 
“lifetimes of drudgery” (p. 130). This narrative of 
the revolution rescuing domestics from victimiza-
tion at the hands of the greedy bourgeoisie ignores 
the organization and advocacy they had fostered 
on their own. The state undertook a labor census
in 1960, encouraging domestics to participate and be counted. Shortly after, schools for domestics were opened with the goal of retraining them in other skills such as taxi driving or typing. Similar retraining efforts were also extended to sex workers and campesinas. These schools also offered “not just a practical but also a revolutionary education” (p. 134) as an effort to politically consolidate the revolution and dismantle a class-based society. These schools were successful in training domestic laborers in a number of new skills, providing opportunities to them and their children that were previously seen as unreachable. However, the state’s perception of domestics as helpless and in need of saving erased their agency, similar to the erasure they faced before the revolution.

The closing chapter of Hierarchies at Home expands the scope of the work into the decades following the 1959 revolution. Hicks shifts her focus to an exploration of the memory of domestic service on the island and in exile in the United States. The sources used in this chapter are rich and varied, including prerecorded oral histories of exiles in 1970s Miami, personal letters and papers, and the author's own oral interviews. Hicks discovered that these recollections never included instances of politically active domestics despite ample evidence that they were organizing in the years leading up to the revolution. Instead, many of these memories upheld nostalgic myths of racial harmony, intimacy, and familiarity between servant and employer. This nostalgia was used to denounce the revolution, with many exiles arguing that their memories were evidence of how Cuban families “transcended racial difference” (p. 170) in their treatment of domestics. Hicks does not deny that intimacy existed between domestics and the families that employed them. In fact, her interviews with women who had worked as domestics revealed a fondness for past employers. Instead, Hicks argues that that this intimacy and harmony relied on an implicit understanding of one’s role in the racialized and gendered hierarchy that was inherent in Cuban society. The oral interviews undertaken by Hicks herself, some as recently as 2015, demonstrate that stories of activism were not discussed even in the memories of women who had worked as domestics prior to the revolution. While domestic service may have been formally eradicated post 1959, the ghosts of hierarchy and power linger in memory into the present day.

Hierarchies at Home has broader implications for the field of Cuban studies as well as the study of race and gender in postslavery societies across the Americas. Anasa Hicks successfully uses the stories of domestics as a way to challenge the myth of racial democracy in twentieth-century Cuba. It serves as a corrective to the understanding of domestics as apolitical and fond of the status quo. Through the use of rich sources read against the grain paired with careful analysis of concepts such as agency, memory, and resistance, Hicks's work is a must-read as an example of a nuanced history from below.

Note

McIvor on Hicks, ‘Hierarchies at Home: Domestic Service in Cuba from Abolition to Revolution.’

Anasa Hicks’ *Hierarchies at Home* is a much-needed analysis of domestic service in Cuba from the abolition of slavery through the postrevolutionary period. This work is part of a larger scholarly turn in the field of Cuban studies towards decentering the white, middle-class experience as the default historical narrative of the island. Those who have spearheaded this turn have utilized the stories of African-descended Cubans to challenge the myth of racial democracy and “racelessness” both before and after the revolution. Hicks’ contribution to the literature is groundbreaking, tracing the history of domestic service to make a larger argument about the intersections of race, gender, and labor in Cuba. The goal of centering domestic laborers as the focal point of this study is challenging – the erasure of their perspectives and contributions from the archival record is a phenomenon that is not uncommon when searching for subaltern voices. However, through strategic against the grain readings and interpretations of a variety of sources, Hicks skillfully constructs a narrative that addresses how hierarchies in the home were reinforced and challenged in public and political life.

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The final two chapters move into the era of the 1959 revolution. Chapter 5 focuses on the action taken by the revolutionary government to address the inequalities inherent in domestic servitude. Leading up to 1959, domestic worker unions publicly supported Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement in the hopes that the new revolutionary state would address their concerns. Instead, the revolutionary government worked to eliminate domestic service on the island and “rescue” the workers that had been suffering from “lifetimes of drudgery” (p. 130). This narrative of the revolution rescuing domestics from victimization at the hands of the greedy bourgeoisie ignores the organization and advocacy they had fostered on their own. The state undertook a labor census in 1960, encouraging domestics to participate and be counted. Shortly after, schools for domestics were opened with the goal of retraining them in other skills such as taxi driving or typing. Similar retraining efforts were also extended to sex workers and campesinas. These schools also offered “not just a practical but also a revolutionary education” (p. 134) as an effort to politically consolidate the revolution and dismantle a class-based society. These schools were successful in training domestic laborers in a number of new skills, providing opportunities to them and their children that were previously seen as unreachable. However, the state’s perception of domestics as helpless and in need of saving erased their agency, similarly to the erasure they faced before the revolution.

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