

Queering *The Real Househelps of Kawangware*: Reimagining Kenya's Hidden Working Class

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This paper applied content analysis to 30 series (60 to 90) of a television sitcom program in Kenya called *The Real Househelps of Kawangware*. We applied the principal of queer theory to analyze the lived experiences of Kenyan domestic workers as depicted in the show. The analysis yielded two themes: disruption and normativity. Subthemes under disruption included exhibition of agency by domestic workers in the following ways: 1) attempting to survive under precarious circumstances during interactions with the public; 2) challenging employers about better terms of employment and other issues, 3) honoring the intention to thrive in the city against all odds, and 4) becoming and remaining aware of impacting local politics and global trends. Subthemes under normativity included: insecure employment, abuse and conforming to gender and ethnic stereotypes. Our findings showed that disruptions were achieved through roles and behaviors embedded in normalized gender and ethnic stereotypes. We concluded that although the show it is a comedy it is satirical as it raises important issues with regards to the conditions of employment for domestic workers, the connections between private citizens and government officials and barrage of stereotypes. Hence, the paper concludes with suggestions for a better implementation of policies about maids in Kenya and a call for further research on the role of gender and ethnic stereotypes as comedy in Kenya.

Keywords: domestic workers, househelps, Queer theory, Kenya, stereotypes, non-formal sector

Introduction

This paper applies queer theory—particularly *disruption* in opposition to normativity—to analyze a Kenyan Television Network docusoap, *The Real Househelps of Kawangware (RHOK)*. Docusoap deploys observational documentary techniques wedded to the serial narratives of soap opera (Hill, 2005). For example, it follows non-professional actors or actresses through narrative material meant to entertain viewers. It depicts individuals in love, agonizing situations, and stereotypical narratives. In the USA examples of the docusoap include *The Real Housewives (2006-)*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians (2007-)* and *Duck Dynasty (2012-)*.

Reflecting vibrant, dynamic, growing multilingual reality of Kenya, *RHOK* is quintessentially Nairobiian, and Kenyan. Strikingly, the *RHOK* mirrors the grandeur and drama of *RHOK* and plays into the extreme tropes about what everyday life looks like and is seemingly voyeuristic. For example, “househelp” is a term that fuses a brand of Kenyan jargon, with Kenyan politeness, to describe a domestic worker, leading to the feminization of domestic labor in Kenya. Coined by Guy Standing (1989, 1999) feminization of labor is the integration of women in the wage labor market due to globalization process. It also describes the penetration of men into employment that was earlier on assumed to be secondary employment for women. The show is performed mostly in Sheng—a combination of Swahili, English and other local languages—with codeswitching across these languages.

Written and directed as a situational satire comedy by Karanja and Mutua (2014), *RHOK* depicts imagined personal lives of Kenyan househelps. The lives of Kenyan househelps become public only in media reports for doing or suffering something unacceptable. Recently, news stories and social media have turned to the deplorable working conditions, low wages, and with domestic workers sharing their experiences on social media. However, domestic workers (househelps) remain invisible, unseen, excluded from family photos where they are present fixtures, as well as excluded from national conversations about labor rights. Echoing Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak,” we propose that while *RHOK* does not give Kenyan househelps any opportunity to speak, it attempts to understand their otherwise hidden lives. We rely on a queer theory principle to analyze the work and workplace experiences depicted in episodes 60 through 90 of the series. Similar to (Halperin, 1995), we envisage queer as that which does not conform with normal, the legitimate and the dominant. Queer theory helps identify (1) prevailing assumptions about househelps, (2) how househelps disrupt those assumptions, and (3) the normativity of behavior that occurs through playing assumed roles. This framework lends itself aptly to a cultural critique of domestic work as a global, multifaceted and an exploitative phenomenon.

Literature Review

Since the show revolves around the life of househelps, we selected literature that (1) addresses the origins of househelp as an exploited, lower-class labor force and its work-site contexts and (2) that examined the work-conditions of tasks and pay, and the hierarchies and boundaries househelps are required to maintain.

The present-day domestic work is shaped by colonial experience, specifically the civilizing agenda of domesticity. During this time men took house servant jobs, where they were referred to as “boys,” partly to service a hut tax imposed by the colonial government (Sobania, 2003). Upon achieving independence, the role of “boy” shifted largely to women.

As the uprising for African independence spread, wives of colonial rulers began introducing African women to a western style of domesticity focused on the family and community-building via women groups. *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, a national women’s organization, was founded partly on this premise (Wipper, 1975). In 1985 MacGoye wrote “*A Freedom Song*,” a poem that depicts the life of a young househelp called Atieno who is related to the family. MacGoye writes of all the injustice Atieno is subjected to even as she enables members of this family to achieve goals like getting an education and, employment and playing familial roles. Ultimately, Atieno has a short life that is only celebrated at her funeral.

In Kenya, domestic service is a gendered profession predominantly made up of women in both rural and urban areas—most typically, a rural young woman migrant who engages in live-in domestic service until marriage or a more desirable employment opportunity presents itself. While previously these women tended to be less educated, the present demand includes househelps with a high school level of education who can also assist children with homework along with typical housework. Some admitted to postsecondary institutions will take years off of school and work as maids to earn money for their upkeep upon readmission. Typically those with a high school education sometimes begin as househelps in Kenya before getting recruited to work abroad in various countries including those in the Middle East. More temporarily, some young and older women who live in the various slums of Nairobi will engage in day work in the upscale areas of the city. The availability of cheap domestic labor in many Kenyan urban centers means that many households—even those with low incomes—have househelps.

The instability of househelp as employment is reflected in the multiplicity of names for it: in English, maid, the house girl, househelp, nanny, domestic help, house manager, auntie, and the girl (or previously boy); in Swahili, *yaya* (“babysitter”), *msichana wa kazi* (“the girl who works”), *mfanya kazi* (“the worker”), *msichana wa nyumba* (“the girl of the house”) and in Sheng *mboch* (“worker”).

This naming also captures the inclusion and exclusion of househelps in the families they work for as well as their *raison d'être*. Both employers and their children use these terms, though sometimes children formulate their own. This practice is partly in line with the African tradition of not calling adults by their given name. While meant to show respect, the practice not only excludes but otherizes.

Globalization of domestic work in particular has been under the microscope of the International Labor Organization (ILO), a 186-member-country branch of the United Nations established to facilitate improved work conditions especially for vulnerable employees prone to exploitation. The ILO produces strategies via conventions with member states to uphold various agreements, aimed at making domestic work equal to other forms of employment with respect to equitable payment for work, dignified working conditions, and other benefits.

The Work and Pay

Domestic work is *informal* (ILO, 1990), characterized by poor regulations that yield limited or no benefits such as health insurance, unemployment insurance, leave, structured work time, retirement plans, or job security. Countries with laws that protect domestic workers are the USA (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1997), Philippines, Lebanon, Uruguay, Sri Lanka and even though the laws are in place they are poorly enforced, leaving both employers and employees vulnerable as well as leaving employees to face the negative consequences.

The type and amount of work are determined by several factors, including residence location (rural or urban), class of employer, and family membership (especially age and size). Tasks include laundry, cleaning furniture, scrubbing floors, ironing, cleaning bathrooms, straightening beds, cooking, taking care of children if they are not school going, and sometimes fetching children from schools, feeding them, and supervising homework. Some households have washing machines, dishwashers, and vacuum cleaners, thus reducing the physical burdens of performing these chores. Rural househelps spend time fetching natural resources (firewood, water) or even doing farm work along with the housework. Good househelps are those who keep always busy and quiet, yet work hours are typically undefined, the maid being the first to rise and the last to go to bed. Some househelps have days off either every week or month.

Hierarchies and Boundaries

The relationship between househelps and their employers is complicated. Katzman (1978) observed that domestic work also calls for a personal relationship, and therefore the employee is hired both for the work at hand and for personality traits. Most domestic workers are treated with “differentness”.

Employers create rules that inform a distance-keeping behavior on the part of the househelp, such as self-effacement during family photo sessions or only availing themselves when needed but otherwise keeping busy in the kitchen, their rooms, or behind the house especially when there are guests. Some employers restrict what and where the househelp can access; the master bedroom or direct interaction with a male head of household might be limited or prohibited. Such management and distancing is often in the hands of the wife. These days, to enhance a sense of belonging or simply to appear polite, househelps are increasingly called “auntie,” a polite term for referring to any woman.

These relationships are contentious, problematized at times as much by kinship as employment, but also attachments develop due to distance from the employee’s family. Emotional and sexual exploitation remain a recurrent problem. Because 4 of 5 domestic workers are women, they remain vulnerable to sexual abuse by male members of the households where they work. Biko (2015) observed that because of a lack of education, a desperate need to survive—we would include also their lack of credibility to police and a social world more than willing not to believe them—they typically do not bring the law to seek justice.

Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory

Situating our analysis within queer theory, “queer denotes not an identity but instead a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a decision to live outside some social norm or the other” (Ford, 2011, p. 123). Watching an episode of the *Real Housewives of Kawangware*, it is striking to notice that the characters are in drag, as the househelps “establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender ‘reality’ in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms” (Butler 1999, p. xxiii). *RHOK* establishes this in the fact that it depicts hidden, lower working class househelps who also live as individuals with agencies quite contrary to the tradition of confinement within nonstandard working conditions.

Additionally, *RHOK* turns the viewers to the connection of queer acts and time. It shows the four househelps resisting the oppressive social construction of househelps as low-class female employees, confirming Foucault’s (1978) observation how queering discloses knowledge as only and always naturalized through cultural and historic processes. For example, the current idea of Kenyan househelp dates from the colonial era when men were referred to as “boys” and treated as outsiders and different in class despite their proximity to the employer.

This is not to suggest that traditional African households did not previously have helpers. Indeed, extended family members could often reciprocally play the role of helper. The choice to use the term help versus labor requires scrutiny because it shapes and informs how the employee is remunerated, treated and legally represented. Colonialism introduced control of movement and time, monetary payment, hierarchies and new repetitive tasks.

Relatedly, Halberstam (2005) observed that “queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, is in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.” (p. 1). In other words, the queer disrupts heterosexual expectations around managing time and the life arc itself, thus creating other chronologies and expectations.

Method

RHOK follows the lives of four househelps—Awiti, Kalekye, Njambi and Truphena (aka “Turu”)—as they live and work at a lower middle class neighborhood in Kawangware, Nairobi. They are depicted as frequently interacting with a group of men who irk a living by conducting legal and illegal activities called “hustling”. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative inquiry centers people’s lived experiences. As a method, we used content analysis, a technique of qualitative research. Content analysis focuses on classifying large amounts of texts into categories with efficient numbers for themes and meaning making (Weber, 1990; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The ultimate goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Using convenience sampling, the two authors together accessed episodes 60 to 90 of *RHOK* for analysis from online through YouTube, translated and transcribed the dialogues. We also captured notes on the storyline, identified emergent themes, and discussed what the narratives portrayed of the characters. While examining the *disruptions* of images of househelps depicted on *RHOK* their Normativity also emerged as a theme. To give in-depth meaning to these two categories, we further coded behavior and househelps’ roles.

From our thematic content analysis, queer theory identified what constituted a disruption of norms (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016) and we used literature to identify codes that represent normativity of the househelps. Both authors analyzed the transcripts separately and then again together. We drew connections between the characters’ words, behaviors, roles and the setting context to develop themes, we identified as *disruptions* those situations where househelps either did not align with or were referred to by others as not conforming to the conventional, popular, stereotypical image of househelp. For example, Awiti confronting her employer for reporting her (Awiti) to the police for allegedly attempting an abortion constitutes a disruption; the conventional, popular, stereotypical image of househelps as subservient excludes challenging or questioning an employer. Further, we identified as *Normativity* those situations where househelps aligned with or were simply depicted as conforming to the conventional, popular, stereotypical image of househelp. This emerged especially in ethnic stereotypes; Turu, for instance, is regularly depicted as ignorant and gluttonous.

Results

Beyond our own analysis of *RHOK* disrupting the stereotypical, traditional imagining of domestic work, we found that the very existence of the show and its contents already queer normative assumptions about domestic labor in Kenya, precisely by providing a space for an otherwise hidden class of laborers to foreground their lived experiences rather than functioning as furniture or props in the lives of their employers. Even though the show is mediated, which is ostensibly fictional, whatever counter-evidence the disruptions offer to stereotypical imaginings about househelp, the normativity also can reinforce those imaginings in the viewer.

In general, episodes 60-90 focus on the life of four househelps. To survive, they gossip, blackmail, use violence, intimidation, extortion, form networks and alliances while preserving ethnic identity. Unexpectedly, normativity emerged as a theme of our analysis, along with how ethnic stereotypes showed themselves as the *de facto* means of disruption.

Disruption

RHOK offers disruption in at least three ways: by foregrounding background figures (househelps) as the main characters; by providing them with the space, agency, intelligence, and opportunity to raise issues that househelps face when interacting with employers; by presenting the issues of corruption and the abuse of human rights in a public (television) forum.

The show deploys a disruptive platform where househelps are shown as having autonomy, as if to imply that their employers must be out of the homes for most of the time. They show their morals or manners as less rigid, and with a personal freedom of movement and thought while they construct themselves as individuals with agency and a high sense of self-expression. For example, only Turu is depicted doing typical househelp chores. Awiti and Turu also both engage employers face-to-face, flipping the norm so extremely that they can mock and make a buffoon of their employers. Specific forms of disruption are detailed in the following.

Househelp with agency: Despite the odds and their impoverished circumstances, househelps are represented as exercising their agency. For example, despite Turu being featured briefly cleaning, she seems to be in charge of her daily life like the others. Househelps, moreover, interact with several members of the public in various capacities, including as girlfriends competing for a lover's attention, as businesswomen, and as members of the public who are aware of local politics and global affairs.

Each negotiates and fights for what they desire. For example, when Awiti finds out she is pregnant, she holds one of her boyfriend's responsible and lets the father of her unborn baby know he is the father in her own terms. Threatened with dismissal by her employer, she replies that she has adjusted and prefers the life in the city. She also finds her way back after being drugged, kidnapped, and taken far from the city. After becoming homeless, her fellow househelps—and likely most Kenyan viewers—insist it's time to return to the village, or the ancestral home, but Awiti defies this.

Other major acts of agency occur when: Njambi seeking to replace Awiti at her work (assuming that Awiti would be fired because of her pregnancy); Turu braving a journey to the city she was unfamiliar with to blackmail her employer for a pay rise; and Kalekye letting her boyfriend know she was going to try to date more upper class men and therefore needed a break from their relationship. Agency appears often as well in intimate relations. Njuguna, Awiti's boyfriend, admits that Awiti is always in charge of the relationship. Turu has two husbands—one that is acknowledged and another in a village unknown to her community.

Alternative income: With the exception of Turu, whose pay is discussed and negotiated in the blackmail episode noted above, there is no mention of how the rest are paid by their employers. Njambi has three incomes: as househelp (implied), hawking clothes, and police informer. Awiti obtains ransom money by holding her boyfriend's girlfriend hostage. Kalekye teams up with a higher-class woman in a prostitution racket. Only Turu relies on her househelp income. Broadly, money flows constantly between the househelps, a criminal group, government representatives, and the police force. Everything has a price. Even a small favor like sharing a telephone number costs money.

Confronting employers: Kalekye is never shown interacting with her employer; this represents a disruption at the level of the show itself, which reframes the lives of househelps away from their typical contexts. Similarly, when Njambi speaks to an employer, it is Awiti's (as noted above) in anticipation of Awiti's departure, and she successfully negotiates a better income than her present one for herself; this represents a disruption by showing agency and self-determination in one's workplace including negotiating wages, again in contrast to conventional mechanisms depicting how househelps are hired through a third party and often underpaid. If these are indirect disruptions, Awiti and Turu by contrast directly challenge their (female) employers.

In Episode 68/1 Awiti engages her employer who sought to lay her off by stating that she needed her job to raise the baby she is expecting in the city. She was aware of the tough life in the village and remarked that she would not subject her child to it. Also, she challenges the employer for having reported her to the police for attempting an abortion. She demands that her employer gets another househelp to take over her chores during her pregnancy as she continues to live in her employer's residence.

Turu often has on occasion engaged her employer, Makena, who does not seem to have stable income herself. With access to a compromising photo of Makena, she uses it for blackmail and secures a pay raise as a result. In episode 77/1 Turu argues for better pay and working conditions, and demands parity with the highest paid public employees in Kenya, the members of Parliament.

Disruption in the *RHOK* occurs through roles and behaviors associated with ethnic stereotypes. By name, accent, behavior, and comportment—as well as other mediatized ethnic stereotypes—a knowledgeable (Kenyan) audience can determine the ethnicity of each character. For example, as Luo, Awiti is masculated by being called a man for her assertive behavior, a stereotype of Luo women emphasizing a lack of femininity and therefore unsuitability for marriage. Njambi utilizes multiple means to make money, a stereotype of Kikuyu people (Maina, 2005). Kalekye's resort to sexual appeal and her sense of sexual liberty relies on the stereotype of Kamba as sexual maniacs (Ligaga, 2009). Turu is also masculated, though to a lesser extent, but her ignorance, gluttony, and submissiveness are classic Luhya stereotypes.

Normativity

By normativity, we mean those processes and means within culture, especially within the media, by which actions or ideas are made to seem culturally normal or typical. Three levels of normativity occur in *RHOK*: conforming ethnically marked people to stereotypical expectations (including names, accents, roles, and behaviors); conforming gendered behavior to gender stereotypes; and conforming of the lives of househelps to stereotypes about the poor. As nonformal, lower-class employees who, despite having a great deal of unsupervised time in their spaces of employment, have still not achieved a basic standards of work-related benefits, and who “survive” through every means, however immoral, illegal, self-serving, or undignified.

Normativity and the Poor

RHOK represents househelps as often treated as second-class citizens. Despite their ability to disrupt norms, they suffered different forms of maltreatment in the very spaces where they were exercising their freedom. Demographically, the characters fit the profile of domestic workers of poor women who have migrated to urban centers from rural areas. While *RHOK* does not sketch in any family backgrounds, there is no evidence in the show that the women receive support from their families, as sometimes happens in real cases. Moreover, *RHOK* (in these episodes at least) detail no formal skills they possess; with such, as in real cases, they could have sought other forms of employment than domestic work.

As noted, in real cases the isolation of househelps to predominantly private spaces makes solidarity difficult. This comes out in *RHOK* as interpersonal squabbling. The househelps make fun of each other's situation as worse than their own. For example, Turu calls Awiti, "masufferer" when she was homeless (Episode 77/2), but herself later becomes homeless. Njambi seeks to capitalize on the difficulty of Awiti's pregnancy. Similarly, comparing the pay and kind of work that Turu (Ksh 3,500) and Njambi do (Ksh 5,000), Turu suffers the greater exploitation. While all of the characters struggle to make a living on the precipice of homelessness, hunger, and even death, their plight is presented in almost exclusively individualistic terms. This socioeconomic lack of (depicted) solidarity has its gendered version as well: Njambi and Awiti have multiple intimate partners and fight over them without recognizing the mutuality of their plight.

Instability in work and life: Employment as depicted in *RHOK* is typical for what research shows about this occupation as unregulated (ILO, 1990). Having to find additional sources of income suggests the occupation's poor pay; that Awiti and Turu have to argue basic workplace principles with their employers underscores the exploitation present in such nonformal work. Even the small victories have reversals—Turu's blackmail gambit runs out, and she becomes homeless like Awiti, both of them living in deplorable conditions.

More than once, Awiti's basic human rights to dignity and security are violated by individuals she is close to as well as by representatives of the state. And while Kalekye seems to be banking on upward mobility using her sexuality whether by marriage or prostitution, she alone avoids homelessness but other efforts to make a change for the better do not yield the desired results. Awiti says, after Kalekye's attempts to sell her nude picture online fail, that "that house girl's life is to work, marry and die" (Episode 71/1). Njambi is referred to as a hustler—meaning she is shrewd at making money—but is curious how Turu, who Njambi considers inferior to her, got a raise out of her boss, unaware of the blackmail. Despite being a hustler, she remains in Kawangware, struggling to make ends meet and exposed to violence and abuse like her counterparts. Even Turu's unique status on the show as a wife (twice!) does not shield her from the classic perils of househelp, job insecurity, lack of benefits, and even homelessness.

Normativity and Ethnic Stereotypes

This plays a large role on *RHOK*; that is, major parts of the narrative presuppose normalized stereotypes to make the narrative culturally comprehensible. Awiti is masculated, assertive, confrontational and speaks her mind—traits that have an uneasy positive status at best and which have often been used in other media for satirical, comic effect. As such, major parts of Awiti's narratives result from her use of violence with her counterparts, in intimate relationships, and even strangers in public. Turu is ignorant and likes to eat.

When she gets a pay rise, she turns to listening to music and bouncing to the sound while bragging how she has money. Kalekye—relying on her sexuality—appears well-dressed and wearing make up in all the episodes in this study. Njambi has two goals: to make money and to win Njuguna’s love.

At times, ethnic stereotyping can “collide” directly with disruptions. For example, Turu observes that a hawker who sells wares door to door dressed like a “Christmas tree” makes the education system that produced him seem like a pyramid scheme. As a business model that tends to benefit just a few at the top, Turu critiques an education system that fails to produce anything more than just a few successful graduates—the “Christmas tree” hawker not among them. Despite this complex analogy, however, Turu also lacks a basic knowledge of banking and seems to believe that opening a bank account requires literally purchasing a tangible container from a store to put money in. Here, then, we see where a disruption—a queering of househelps that generates space for a pointed critique of the educational system—becomes diffused (or is at least counterbalanced) by the normalizing ethnic stereotype of Luhya people as ignorant. The following summarizes narrative uses of ethnic stereotypes.

Table 1: Themes Normalizing Ethnic Stereotypes

Description	Awiti	Kalekye	Njambi	Turu	Total
Masculated	6			2	8
Ugly/animal names	8			1	9
Associated with liking food				30	30
Make reference to belief or use witchcraft		4		4	8
Show aggressiveness/fights/quarrels	19	2	1	2	24
Sexuality		5			5
Reference to ethnic rural origin/identity (home)	5	3		3	11
Businesslike			2		2
Total	24	14	3	39	97

Normativity and Gendered Stereotypes

As women, the characters experience a degree of gender-based discrimination and violence that obscures any view of other aspects of their life (in the same way that *RHOK* essentially never depicts the actual work situation; one could almost begin to think that the exploitations of work might be preferable to non-work). Fearing rejection, Awiti is shown as knowing impregnated her but chooses to force Njuguna her less masculated boyfriend to be responsible.

The men are seen colluding to con them out of their money, while the women fight for their attention and are even subjected to physical and emotional violence. They often behave in ways that poorly imitate the sophistication of modern city dwellers.

Abuse: Househelps experienced physical and emotional violence from both men and women. Awiti is exposed to drugs twice and kidnapped. Njambi is held hostage by criminals and beaten over a boyfriend. Kalekye suffers emotional distress many times. She seems to hope that she will get out of poverty via men, but her efforts fail or only have short-term success. Her emotional stress, shame, and lack of support from the other househelps brings her finally to attempt suicide. The women’s cattiness is normalized as a form of female abuse.

Table 2: Themes Normalizing Gender Stereotypes

Description	Awiti	Kalekye	Njambi	Turu	Total
Feminine/beautiful/marriageable		8	1		9
Uses men for money		6			6
Subjected to violence (physical and emotional)	9	2	4	1	16
Total	9	16	5	1	31

The frequency tables have no statistical significance, but simply highlight to what extent *RHOK* employs stereotypes and how the characters (and audience) make sense of actions through ethnic stereotypical lenses. For example, while all of the househelps used different ways to make money, only Njambi—ethnically stereotyped as a hustler—has her actions specifically tagged as such.

Discussion

Results of our analysis indicate that the househelps disrupted norms. Read closely, *RHOK* disrupts the depictions and imagination of househelps in Kenya along with the expected and accepted sociocultural and heteronormative expectations. Disruptions emerged in the autonomy househelps enjoyed as they freely roamed the neighborhood as “hustlers” a word that means engaging in multiple activities (legal or not) for personal gain.

Disruptions, however, still reflected ethnic stereotypes. As we watched the episodes, we noted how the show queered the notion of househelps by giving them a platform to be authentic, but simultaneously normalized the experience(s) of househelps as vulnerable/informal lower-working class women whose jobs are neither protected by the law nor adequately paid.

In this context, ethnic stereotyping becomes complex and problematic. Although, on the one hand, stereotyping was used to queer househelp as a form of exploitative employment, one may still read *RHOK* as using ethnic stereotypes to “entertain” in the negative sense of reinforcing associations with stereotypes: ignorance, gluttony, sexual manipulation, and so forth. This stereotyping is explicitly embedded in the naming and marking of the Other even while aiming at power and subjectivity. According to Rose (1995), the constructing of the Other or Othering is a process of “defining where you belong through a contrast with other places, or who you are through a contrast with other people” (p. 116).

Stereotyping has a relatively short history in Kenya, beginning particularly in the British colonial attempt to “otherize” the African as a “bestly savage” who nonetheless represents a long-lost value in themselves (Maina, 2005). The much longer ethnic history of Kenya, of course, recognizes innumerable cultural differences between groups—such as the aggressiveness of Luo women—but these noted inter-ethnic differences did not yet carry the dehumanizing sense that stereotyping does.

In a post-colonial context, the media becomes vital in shaping, reshaping, and forming existing ethnic identities (Ligaga, 2009). Stereotypes start representing a reality—or begin to seem to—when they are verbally repeated and also presented through various media platforms. With time, these stereotyping messages unintentionally develop a ‘schema’ for referencing a group that reflects the dehumanizing impulse. This, then, becomes the source for making judgment in interpersonal situations about an individual or a group of people.

This study’s content analysis discloses how househelps embody various ethnic stereotypes about Kenyan women. Generally treated as second-class citizens, they survive but are shown as lacking the sophistication of modern city dwellers. At times able to disrupt norms, they nonetheless remain subject to abuse in the very spaces where they exercised their freedom. Thus, if aggressiveness in Luo women like Awiti could previously be a mark of distinction, in a post-colonial context, it becomes a mark of sanction and abuse. There is, then, a distinction/sanction ambivalence at work here. On the one hand, the directors tap into a Kenyan masculating discourse that at times refers positively to women as “men” because of their hard work, aggressiveness, or lack of effeminate character. But calling women men just as often aims to discipline as encourage; references to Awiti as a man in *RHOK* are consistently pejorative.

Worse, Awiti is further stereotyped and dehumanized as an animal, referred to, at different points, as an elephant, a buffalo, even a kangaroo. Here again is another ambivalence, insofar as humans have long drawn flattering analogies with the power and grandeur of animals; analogies, however, that sour in a world with the advent of a racism where being an animal of any sort meant inferiority and lack of civilization. Smalls (2014) points out that the dehumanization of black personhood has a long winding history such as the manifestations of social Darwinism that depicts other cultures and structures as primitive.

That *RHOK* at times reproduces these tropes can threaten to negate its disruptions; the content of Awiti's critique, for example, can be upstaged by her performance of it as simply a piece of beastliness. The show avoids this when it depicts otherwise stereotypical traits as more general. For example, while Turu is stereotypically ignorant, househelps on *RHOK* are shown as being aware of local politics and global culture even as they are simultaneously ignorant. They will present snippets of information from media, but frequently do not adequately understand it. This itself is stereotypical along class, rather than ethnic, lines. Proponents of knowledge gap theory, for instance, not how individuals with less education are less socially integrated and thus have fewer ways of countering prevailing social perspectives and less diverse stories to enable them to understand public issues better (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970).

Perhaps the most generative way of discussing stereotypes is to examine the damage they cause as they turn into negative stigmas. As Awiti tells Kalekye, "we are just maids and will not make much out of our lives." We see this normification as well in the househelps' most outstanding or recurrent disruption, i.e., in how freely they interact not only with a broad network of people living in their neighborhood but also authorities like police and elected politicians. Like "anybody else," they interact with the full range of their community, albeit often in circumscribed ways. Similarly, this freedom permits them to engage in other activities to earn income, albeit sometimes immoral or illegal. Like "anybody else," they at times escape the repetitive routine of work to pursue self-determined destinies, albeit often unsuccessfully.

As such, reading the meta-level of *RHOK* generously, it uses normativity to address the aforementioned stigmatization of househelps; The show attempts to neutralize this stigma and revive the spoiled identity of househelps by giving them a human face and not deserving discrimination. It remains an open question, however, whether this gesture can (or does) overcome the weight of class, gender, and ethnic stereotypes it depicts. Very many episodes of *RHOK* could be read precisely as househelps enacting a normativity assertion of being "like anybody else" and thus unfairly stigmatized. But the continuous failure of their schemes could be read as puncturing this critique; one would have to focus on the resilience of the characters to forge a link or argument of solidarity with viewers of the show who, similarly, found a resilience to carry on despite setbacks.

In contrast, the imagery of househelps and their ethnic stereotypes on *RHOK* seemed more evident instead. Moreover, none were presented in terms of the social capital of good wife material. Awiti is continuously aggressive, physically abusive and/or threatening. Turu is depicted as having a great liking for food—referencing it even in regular conversation—but is also already twice married and later abandoned by her husband. Kalekye overtly forefronts her feminine wiles for upward mobility, while Njambi alone seems fixated on a true love in a conventionally romantic way, but even that doesn't work out.

For *RHOK*, this would mean househelps writing and directing the project, which seems not to be the case. Instead, we see depictions or dramatizations of the reactions of househelps to stereotypes. In most cases, they conform to and confirm the stereotypes, but just for this reason we cannot entirely dismiss counter-cases, where househelps are not simply submissive bodies with no agency but act and seem to determine their lives, even when things don't work out. Ndonge, Yieke and Onyango (2015) nonetheless observe that Kenyan media perpetuates stereotypically ethnic jokes and that such "comic relief" is too troubling for how it marginalizes groups, impedes social cohesiveness, and sanctions a destructively biased way of evaluating personalities. In fact, since 2012, when Kenya enacted a hate speech law, media houses in the country have regularly used ethnic stereotypes in comic genres as a way to do business at the expense of non-majority groups (Ndonge, Yieke & Onyango, 2015).

Narrative and discourse, however, can never—except in the most extreme of situations—function with perfect control. In other words, we may still find disruptions in *RHOK*, even against its intention. All narratives of the Other (whether in terms of ethnicity, class, or gender) require such empathy, but especially narratives of women. Gender stereotypes that beat on women tend to be pervasive than others. In this respect, perhaps the most unforgivable "sin" of househelps on *RHOK* is their misuse or non-use of female sexuality for strictly procreative purposes; a sin exemplified in the very prominent role that Awiti's abortion attempt plays in her narrative.

Conclusions

The *Real Househelps of Kawangware* highlights the plight of househelps as employees and as citizens. As employees, they are at a far remove from achieving parity with individuals holding similar positions. This paper demonstrates how by learning about disruptions, local advocates for domestic workers can include them in their strategies for change. Admittedly, the use of stereotypes might just as easily lead to backlash against househelp such as a paranoid use of cameras to monitor househelps when employers are out; a possibility that aligns with a general discourse that construes househelps as sexually and physically abusive to children.

At the same time, other stories describe househelps as loyal servants who worked hard and became part of the family or as good women who eventually to pursue education and degrees. *RHOK* gives a particular and limited visibility to the lives of househelps in a specified socioeconomic milieu. It reinforces as well as disrupts associations of gender, labor, class, patriarchy, and ethnicity. While the househelps are typical rural, ill-educated, lower-class young women working in a poorly regulated non-formal sector, the lack of regulation also affords them opportunities to exercise agency in seeking intimate relationships, extra income, and interactions with a broad network of individuals for both personal and monetary gain not normally imagined by mainstream culture.

Simultaneously, they exercise agency explicitly through a lens of ethnic stereotypes and more implicitly via gendered stereotypes. Future work in this regard could use gender-centric discourse and critical discourse analysis to give a deeper interpretation of women's agency in *RHOK* and cultural productions generally. Such work would deeply interrogate the real, consequential, and intended impacts of shows with overt ethnic and gendered stereotypes. The question of gender in the Kenyan context should not overshadow the ethnic one. The ethnic divide currently plaguing Kenya, implicitly and explicitly, requires continued attention. Although hate speech has been banned in politics, ethnic stereotypes in comedy which have the potential of counterproductivity akin to hate speech makes the ban to be merely cosmetic. The ethnic stereotype comedy that is rife in Kenya from street comedians, to those in Media houses like "Churchill Live" might actually be socially corrosive.

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