

a e t h e r

the journal of media geography

"Dirty Secrets": Slumming and the Geography of Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Investigative journalism has its roots in the stunt and slumming journalism of the nineteenth century, a varied practice that meshes "undercover" passing, social justice, exposé and sensationalism. One recurring theme of this tradition has been the exploration of city spaces and the lives of disenfranchised urbanites who inhabit them. In 2006, *The Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's national English-language newspapers, allowed columnist Jan Wong to extend this tradition by going undercover, with her two children, as a (less than) minimum-wage housecleaner. The success of the series depends on the double entry of Jan Wong as a private domestic worker into her clients' homes and public journalist on the front page of the newspaper. Moving between low-income and middle-income homes, city and suburbs, Wong's discourse crisscrosses the physical, social and psychic spaces of labor, poverty and consumption in the contemporary metropolis. I argue these journalistic practices re-organize and stratify these spaces along lines of class, gender and racial politics. Situating this re-ordering within modernity and historical practices of stunt and slumming journalism, I argue that this series says more about Wong as a celebrity journalist than it does about the lives of the working poor.

People in positions of power often enjoy pretending that they are powerless. This is not to say they want to be powerless ... The pleasures of powerlessness rely on a guarantee of safety, on the existence (and vigilant policing) of barriers so high and impermeable between the imaginary and the real that the barriers may survive their own breaching and toppling. The enjoyment of powerlessness is, in some sense, the enjoyment of power (Betensky 2004, 130).

INTRODUCTION

ALL GOOD DRAMA, WRITES W. H. AUDEN (1962, 471), is based on the Mistake. By way of example, he provides the following classic scenario: "I think...that this person is a chambermaid when it is a young nobleman in disguise." This paper explores "Maid for a Month," a five-part journalistic series by Jan Wong in Canada's *The Globe and Mail* newspaper, written on the occasion of the rise of the Ontario minimum wage from \$7.45 to \$7.75 in February 2006.¹ Interested in exploring whether this increase would result in real change to peoples' lives, Wong sets out to work at a minimum-wage job for one month. Immersing herself in the conceit of her story, Wong surrenders her comfortable life in one of Toronto's wealthiest neighborhoods in order to become a reverse Cinderella. As Barbara Ehrenreich discovered through a similar set of escapades, chronicled in her book, *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), securing a minimum-wage job with a university degree on one's resumé is not easy. For both women, though, one job that was always open to them was housecleaning. As she notes explicitly in the series (April 15), Wong ups the ante on Ehrenreich by doing something no other reporter has done: taking her children (Sam, 12, and Ben, 15) along on this stunt, "single-mother-like" (April 1), ostensibly in order to derive the full experience of the life of a lower-class woman. Together, they take up residence in an illegal basement apartment that costs almost half her new monthly salary in rent. In a cheerful moment of class tourism, she and her sons refer to it as "The Hovel."

"Maid for a Month" is not the first of Wong's ventures into sensational journalism for *The Globe and Mail*. From 1996 to 2002, Wong wrote the column, "Lunch with ..."—an often venomous and shocking column based on interviews with a wide variety of celebrities and newsworthy figures. Wong used the genteel setting of the luncheon to her advantage, posing embarrassing questions to her interviewees, and noting food choices and table manners. In one memorable column, Wong took a homeless woman to lunch.

After 9/11 and the subsequent ban on a variety of carry-on objects, Wong intentionally boarded an airplane with a series of banned, sharp objects—box cutters, nail clippers, tweezers, even a poppy with the pin still attached (Nov. 8, 2001). Her stunt caused Air Canada to ban her from flying with them unless she promised never to bring such objects onto their planes again. Her competitors rightly called it a stunt. Based on such forms of reportage, and her Chinese heritage, Wong has built up her own celebrity

status as a tough-edged reporter, prepared to do the unexpected, including using her own life-story and body (not to mention those of her children). Her earlier reportage as the Beijing correspondent for *The Globe and Mail*, particularly her coverage of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, and the experiences of her early years in China as a Maoist fighting in the Cultural Revolution, form the basis of several of her books, *Red China Blues* (1997), *Reports of a Not-so-Foreign Correspondent* (1999) and *Beijing Confidential: A Tale of Comrades Lost and Found* (2007).

"Maid for a Month" re-organizes relations between the city and home via the interfaces of the housecleaner/reporter and the newspaper. Wong enters Canadian homes twice—first surreptitiously, through the back door, disguised as a cleaner; then triumphantly, on the front page of the paper delivered to the porch, as the unmasked crusading journalist denouncing the shortcomings of the readers themselves. This double entry troubles the private/public distinctions between home and workplace, laying bare "the dirty secrets" of her readers, implicating them in the social problems the story describes. The series attempts to transform the place of home by stratifying it along class and ethnic lines; some homes are better workplaces than others, while some are more like home than others. In terms of the values that the series presents, the only workplaces that are *really* like homes are those governed by the upper-middle class, where the (im)migrant bodies that clean them become "part of the family." The full ideological import of this bracketing off does not become evident until the end of "Maid for a Month," when Wong reveals that she herself also retains a long-term domestic.

The effect of this re-organization is that the home/workplaces that Wong describes are never fully situated within the politics of difference that order the socio-spatial. This occurs on several scales. As bell hooks (1989, 21) argues, within the home/workplace, gender, race and class constitute "interlocking systems of domination" that are continuously transformed in relation to one another. But Wong's series brackets certain key aspects of these relations from consideration. "Maid for a Month" also ignores the correspondence of these home/workplaces to the politics of urban geography. Whether cleaning downtown condos or suburban single-family homes, Wong never indicates how the politics of urban settlement invest her work in a suburban-urban divide that has historical (as well as geographic) specificity to it, as formerly middle-class suburbia becomes home to the working poor as the city becomes increasingly too expensive for all but the wealthiest families (cf. Leinberger 2008). In turn, her series remains isolated from concerns on wider spatial scales: colonialism, particularly in relation to migrating and diasporic peoples who do domestic cleaning; socio-economic changes within Canada, like the increase in dual-income and dual-career couples which impacts the need for domestic cleaners; and the wider processes of globalization that have transformed industrial jobs into service ones (Stiell & England 1997, 340-1). It is only by virtue of these elisions and omissions that Wong can transform with equal facility her own Chinese-Canadian, upper-class body, and those of her white, Canadian-born

working poor co-workers into what she calls invisible “untouchables” of the modern Canadian nation-state.

These gaps in Wong’s account mean that the series ultimately maps a very different terrain than the one it claims to concern. While the premise of Wong’s piece is rooted in a long-standing tradition of undercover investigative exposé, the series arguably reveals more about Wong than it does about her poor co-workers *really* getting by on minimum wage (or less). Within the context of corporate journalism, the well-known celebrity status of Wong shifts the ideological and political import of this series. I suggest it is significant that her series is bookended with several key reminders of her dual role as perceptive but silent maid and declamatory newspaper journalist. Opening the series with the header, “We know who you are,” serves her well. Straddling both the inside and outside of the domestic cleaning world through the pronoun “we,” it presumes to address her undifferentiated readers directly. Her concluding *mea culpa* when she reflects on the role her own housecleaner performs not only changes the way we read Wong’s social class, it also moves the series out of the genre of investigative reporting and into the realm of the true confession—a genre of writing with which Wong is intimately familiar.

This, of course, does have historical precedent, particularly for women journalists. I suggest that in order to understand its import, one must situate this series within a larger historical context of stunt journalism, slumming journalism and social exploration literature. Though all three have varying legacies and uses, they share the same thorny political and ideological stakes implied by the state of pretending to be powerless. I suggest that this history helps us to better locate the contemporary geography of journalism. As Anthony Giddens (1990, 18) and others have noted, the conditions of modernity that penetrated and transformed specific locales by social relations from outside those locales have radically transformed experience. Journalism, like other media, has helped to create particular spatial orders, thereby alleviating and re-orienting readers living in such conditions. Stunt journalism in which women crossed class barriers to go into the slum (slumming), was one way that the newspaper historically served as a valuable interface between public and private spaces, near and far places, providing guidance to readers on how to navigate this shifting territory. Yet this space disorients as much as it orients. In an advanced state of modernity, newspaper journalism is undergoing what we could term a crisis of geography. Despite the possibilities afforded by digital delivery formats that could broaden the geographic scope of journalism, newspapers remain stubbornly parochial (Gasher 2007; Manthorpe 1998). I suggest that if they remain parochial, they do so generically. As Wong’s series demonstrates, because it is stripped of so much specificity, it can substitute any city in North America for metropolitan Toronto. Significantly, however, her series retains one enduring demand of stunt journalism: its sensational cross-class exploration, rife with secrets revealed, fits perfectly within the rubric of celebrity journalism.

JOURNALISTIC SPACES

Media and space are intimately intertwined. A diverse and interdisciplinary set of media historians, theorists and geographers have all sought to articulate the imbrications of media in the constitution of social space and, conversely, the effects that social spaces have on media forms. As Anthony Giddens (1990) and James Carey (1989), among others, have argued, supported by communication technologies, modernity separates space from place. Mediated communication is a key agent in this process, especially after the telegraph. For Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, media is an important mechanism for the ordering of spaces,² but it is simultaneously “one of the most important *displacements* at work in the relatively centralized ‘order’ of contemporary societies” (2004, 5). While media studies has traditionally dealt with questions of what might be called interior space (like the connection between spaces and ideology), what the interest in space brings to a discussion of journalism is the materiality of both interior *and* exterior space.

Newspapers have always connoted a sense of space, partly because of our understanding of them in relationship to the public sphere (Habermas 1991)—and, importantly for this paper—in relationship to the private sphere as well. As a medium that enters the home, the newspaper is intimately bound up with the rhythms of everyday life and media consumption. Newspapers have historically also been associated with specific geographies as well, such as Fleet Street in London (Harris 1997) or Park Row in New York (Wallace 2006), which in turn connote specific cities and communities (cf. Anderson 1983). With the rise of city departments in newsgathering, local news became a distinctive feature of the reorganization of capital, technology and news production in the late nineteenth century (cf. Mott 1962, Rutherford 1982, Gabriele 2004). Consequently, newspapers have historically been closely tied to the particular geographic spaces they service (Gasher & Gabriele 2004), although their geographic reach has steadily increased since the late nineteenth century. As Barth (1980) and Singer (1995) note, the nineteenth-century urban press helped order the chaos and disorder of the modern city for its readers, while Wallace (2007) notes that city streets gave organization to the newspaper page, with layouts that reproduced the lines between the commercial, entertainment and business zones of the city. In turn, the journalist acts as cartographer, constituting both the symbolic and materials elements of the story/maps being written (Gasher 2007).

Subjecting journalism to a spatial analysis that interrogates its conditions of production, its materiality and its representational strategies for constituting social relations within a variety of spatial scales *across time* provides a particularly nuanced way of understanding how journalism (re)produces power relations. As Doreen Massey (1994, 4) suggests, “the spatial’ ... can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales ... It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities

of space-time." The geographies of journalism in "Maid for a Month" effect a re-mapping of familiar places and spaces in unexpected ways; the city and suburbs, save a few exceedingly wealthy neighborhoods, blend rich and poor, and are ostensibly equally available for exploitation of the itinerant cleaner. Workplace and home become indistinguishable through the eyes of the housecleaner, but this space/place is deeply stratified along racial and class lines, particularly when mapped onto national identities.

This geographic wandering plays itself out on a number of interesting fronts in terms of the geographic representations implied in Wong's series, the socio-spatial relations it claims to map out and the materialities of newspaper production in the twenty-first century. But before I can adequately survey this terrain, I'd like to tease out the historical precedents of this activity.

JOURNALISTIC SLUMMING

Stunt journalism and the related practice of slumming have left an indelible mark on contemporary journalistic practices. Reformulated as muckraking at the turn of the century, and later, investigative journalism, this practice meshed techniques such as passing "undercover," social justice imperatives, exposé and sensationalism. Contemporary investigative journalism, like its predecessor, muckraking, uses a much wider range of methods for information-gathering than undercover investigation by the journalist (e.g. interviews, document analysis, forensic accounting, archival analysis, etc.). Though considered ethically suspect in contemporary American journalistic circles (Ettema & Glasser 2007, 493), undercover, surreptitious recording remains a favored method for producing popular television, especially consumer reporting programs, because it implies that the reporter is getting the "real" story from the "inside." From its earliest uses in social exploration literature³ and slumming narratives of all kinds, its practitioners have mobilized a rhetoric of witnessing as evidence of their veracity and authenticity.

The fact that "the inside" happened to be areas of the city inhabited by the least desirable classes of citizens only added to the sensationalism. As its continued use indicates, the sensationalist effect of this form of journalism lies not only in what is detailed "inside"; it is also the excitement of the journalist's "passing" himself or herself that makes for a compelling read. Social exploration literature was part of a larger, anxious conversation about class stability, particularly with a decaying city structure, a large working-poor class and growing destitute class (Pittenger 1997, 30). As Mariana Valverde (1991, 134) comments, nineteenth-century Canadians shared the same anxieties as Britons about "not knowing, not seeing, about losing control over the city." In the words of a contemporary (cited in Valverde, 134): "the slums are exceedingly dangerous to the health and morals of a city because they are to the great majority of the people unknown and unexplored retreats." Slumming, perceived as a way to contain and combat dirt and

poverty (Koven 2004, 183), became a way of containing this anxiety by offering well-to-do-women and men a way to "expand their social authority over the poor". Journalism contributed greatly to that knowledge, though its motivations were not rooted in the same desires to categorize, enumerate and, ultimately, to control. Instead, journalism's twin motives lay in contributing to an emerging ethos of the fourth estate and selling newspapers.⁴

Cross-class journalism was intended to provide a socio-spatial document, a map of those places where readers were not likely to go, or even know about. No matter the genre, this form of documentation and accounting often took social injustice and the imperative for change, particularly through social policy reformation, as its basis. By the mid-nineteenth century in Britain and several decades later in Canada, the press's commitment to an educative ideal characteristic of the liberal public sphere was largely giving way to an ethos of the fourth estate, a metaphor for a press speaking to and for the people (Hampton 2004). The representative ideal, as Hampton (111) labels it, advocated that the press could bring about social change, not through dialogue or education, but through the power of publicity. This was "Government by Journalism," W. T. Stead argued (cited in Hampton, 112). "No measure ever gets itself into shape, as a rule, before being debated many times as a project in the columns of the newspapers." This matched perfectly the prevailing objectives of many nineteenth-century self-help movements begun by J. J. Kelso and other social reformers in Canada (Valverde 1991). It is not surprising, then, to find that similar metaphors of exposure through the light of publication pervade both the literature produced in the pursuit of science and reform and that produced in pursuit of profit and education.

An important historical strain of social exploration literature was written by positivist social scientists interested in understanding who was poor and why, with a view towards reform. Despite purporting to act as the fourth estate (a vehicle for the publicity of social evils), journalism cannot make claims to this positivist stance, despite its best efforts. Though there was a shared belief in the power of the press to elicit change, the rhetoric of reform was also self-serving for journalists. Journalism relies on bearing witness for its rhetorical import and its objectivist claims, but it does not do so for the sake of knowledge; it does so for the sake of publicity. Publicity is key to the selling of newspapers. Though the books written by both journalists and social scientists alike share many of the same political economy imperatives, at the height of the popularity of slumming and its variant stunt journalism in the late nineteenth century, the newspaper was experiencing increased pressure to increase sales.⁵ After all, the transformation of the press into a capitalist, circulation-driven, corporate institution coincided with the rise in popularity of this particular genre of journalism. Though the press shared with the social scientists the rhetoric of bringing light to the darkest and ugliest shadows of social life, its light always had a slightly yellow tint to it.

There is an ambiguity about the role of the reporter in such stories. On the one hand, there is a claim to utter realism—the account offered is ostensibly an accurate rendering of witnessed events. Yet, the stories themselves rely centrally on the *sensations* of the reporter; sights, sounds, recollections and experience are the heart of the story, a more subjective experience of the event. Publication of these cross-class investigations can never be read outside the context of sensationalism, precisely because it always coincided with a mode of production that sought profit.

The genre of sensational journalism depends on detailing the particular assaults on all of the reporter's senses (with, perhaps, the expected exception of touch⁶). The role of the senses was particularly important for women journalists, who, lacking the cultural authority to speak assertively, used instead the one source that was deemed to control them: their bodies. As Lutes writes of the most famous of the stunt girls, Nellie Bly, this substitution “transformed her own white, middle class body into a vehicle of publicity that anchored her pursuit of ‘the real’ in corporeal experience” (2002, 220). By the 1890s, sensationalism was constituted beyond word pictures with illustrations, a technological manifestation of the metaphor of shining light on that which was previously unseen (Koven 2004).

Women journalists in particular were susceptible to charges of sensationalism, since their very femininity was on the line with the very nature of their work. Elizabeth Banks, the American woman who gained widespread notoriety in England for her characteristic exploration of unfamiliar spaces, peoples and customs, vowed to her editors that she would never reduce herself to the “seamy side’ of a woman’s journalistic life” (cited in Koven 2004, 146). The contradictions were difficult for women journalists to manage: what made this kind of journalism so marketable and interesting to contemporary readers was the notion of the imperiled female body, yet this was precisely what made her potentially risk her status and credibility as a journalist.

Disembodied, objectivist, fact-based journalism becomes peppered with the physical presence of the star witness, the journalist herself. Stunt journalism and other forms of undercover exposé lay bare what is normally suppressed in journalism: the role of the journalist in crafting a story, carving out the space within which a story will be told. But it does so paradoxically, for the rhetoric of all stunt journalism relies heavily on an account being provided by a first-hand witness. Though there were no hard and fast lines between fiction, social science and journalism—indeed, authors often did a smattering of all kinds of writing, for different purposes—the slip from “truth” to story remains a slippery one, particularly as newspapers, eager to capitalize on the curious interest in such stories, would promote them as ways to sell more newspapers. With their complex mixing of fiction, entertainment and news (*actualité*), newspapers came to stage a wider cultural concern with questions of realism and fiction, authenticity and artifice (Gitelman 2001, 68).

NO FRILLS TOURISM

"Maid for a Month," described variously as an "investigation" by Wong and an "experiment" by her editors (globeandmail.com) is clearly in the slumming tradition. Wong legitimizes her maid work by describing it as being compatible with investigative reporting (April 1)—"Aside from rummaging through people's dirty laundry, I get to manhandle their garbage, eyeball the paperwork on their desks, inspect the size of their refrigerators"—but it is no less a stunt.

Though Wong characterizes her entry into domestic cleaning work as a result of circumstance, she nonetheless mobilizes several rhetorical methods that offer striking similarity to the techniques used by journalists and reformers some one hundred years earlier. Key here is the discourse of exploring the hitherto unknown (at least to middle-class readers) territories; discourses of geography interlocked with morality predominate. A related discourse is one of light and cleanliness; the act of disclosing and uncovering these conditions to the masses stands in for a kind of moral regeneration (Valverde 1991; Koven 2004).

Journalistic slumming always smacked of a kind of armchair travel, for both the readers⁷ and slummers themselves. Like her nineteenth-century predecessors, Wong initially conceives of her undercover stint as an adventure. Her children, accustomed to a particular lifestyle (Wong sends her sons to a private, French-language school, and they have expensive extra-curricular activities), are surprisingly willing to go along with the project. In fact, they revel in the idea of slumming: "Cool, what are we going to eat? KD?" said Sam who prizes Kraft Dinner because he's sick of triple crème French brie." The older brother, Ben, sardonically remarks, "So I'll have a urine-soaked mattress? ... Is the floor going to be concrete?" (April 1) Performing the status of poor, she and her sons "visit"—not shop at—No Frills, an economy grocery chain, "like tourists." When he does not bring enough food to school (April 15), Sam engages in what Wong calls the "private-school version of dumpster diving."

Further adding to her status of poor, Wong calls attention to the vagabond nature of the job, calling agency cleaners "itinerant workers." They work almost as often out of their cars, driving between housecleans, as they do in the homes cleaning. Following a series of strict rules that discipline their behavior on the job, they are not permitted to eat their lunches in their employers' houses. Instead, they eat their lunches outside, in the car, on the curbside. Starkly, the home that is their workplace is transformed back into a home—resolutely not theirs—as soon as its use becomes personal for these workers.

While the series is utterly bereft of the kind of reform suggestions characteristic of slumming journalism,⁸ Wong does try to pull off one heroic, plucky moment when she tries to hold someone accountable. At the close of the series, while she is attending a black-tie function as herself, Wong corners Gerry Phillips, the Minister of Government Services for the Ontario provincial government, and demands to know

why the government does not raise the minimum wage again. In what sounds like facile neo-liberal logic, she continues that, even with an increase, the job of the housecleaner would not be affected since they do not work on an hourly wage—"but it might have a trickle-down effect" (April 29, M7). She notes with some satisfaction, however, that she succeeded in embarrassing the minister.

The transition from illegal basement apartment to black-tie political function exemplifies the way in which "Maid for a Month" maps out several social, physical and journalistic geographies. They include the city and suburbs, Canada and the world, home and the workplace and the news markets for the newspaper. As I argue, these spaces are constituted by relations of gender, class and racial difference, yet they remain curiously indistinct in Wong's analysis.

POOR SUBURBS AND CITY CORE

Many nineteenth-century journalistic stunts involved women spending a night, or sometimes more, in poor houses. They deployed the metaphor of physical descent: "going down" into the deepest, darkest regions, representing a slide in class standards and morality. Wong's temporary residence in a basement apartment in Scarborough during her month as a maid mimics this physical descent (and, despite a liberal veneer, still smacks of implied moral and class connotations). Though this place is clearly a "step down" from her considerably larger home, it is not infested with fleas or overrun by violence or drugs. The conditions are clearly not acceptable for a family of three (there are only two bedrooms) and it is an illegal basement apartment, which likely meant there were not adequate fire exits. Interestingly, however, this apartment, representative of so many other living situations of the working poor, blends seamlessly into an otherwise suburban space, making it an appropriate place for her to go slumming with her kids. Indeed, it is interesting to note that she is very careful about not taking this journalistic stunt too far precisely because she has her children with her. Though Wong seems willing to give her kids a bit of tough love so they can see how "the other half" live, the experiment will only go so far.

Despite these ethical questions about parenting, journalism and sensationalism, the situation is striking for how it calls attention to an emerging pattern in North American cities affecting the suburban-urban divide. Many other working poor no longer live in the depths of the downtown core; that space is too expensive for them as revitalization and gentrification continue to claim what were previously affordable sectors of the city. As a recent feature in *The Atlantic* (Leinberger 2008) has highlighted, many of the middle and upper classes are moving back into the city.⁹ Meanwhile, the lower classes, pushed out of the urban core and seeking a better lifestyle, are moving to the suburbs. Leinberger (2008) writes: "The experience of cities during the 1950s through the '80s suggests that the fate of many single-family homes on the metropolitan fringes will be resale, at rock-bottom prices, to lower-income families—and in all

likelihood, eventual conversion to apartments ... [M]any inner suburbs that are on the wrong side of town, and poorly served by public transport, are already suffering what looks like inexorable decline." Shifting lines between inner-city crime and the suburbs is evident in Canada too, as the suburbs of Toronto increasingly become the favorite location for grow-operations for marijuana and other drug-running. Like countless other people around the world,¹⁰ Wong takes up residence in a makeshift, stratified living quarter where the already poor (her landlord is also a cleaner at a hotel) exploit those who are poorer still (or more desperate) via informal living arrangements. Even Wong's workplace is makeshift, as the workers all converge every morning, not in an office, but in one of North America's most generic of spaces, a low-end coffee franchise called Coffee Time. Couple this lack of corporate situatedness with the private mobility of the car that moves these cleaning teams about town, and with the socio-economic conditions of neo-liberalism that demand "hoteling" and flexible workers, and we see the signatures of what Raymond Williams so aptly called "mobile-privatized social relations" (1983, 189).

Of course, these conditions are not new and have been gaining voice in the press. What is striking is that Wong fails to contextualize the experiences of "going down" with these larger socio-spatial changes. Wong fails to easily codify or name the specificity of twenty-first-century class struggle as it marks and is marked by the shifting demographics of Toronto's urban core and the suburbs. Though a study of Canadian census data by Fong and Shibuya indicates that "the spatial separation of the poor from the non-poor in fact is more extensive in Canada than in the United States" (2000, 450), the same study, which included not only downtown Toronto but also Mississauga, Scarborough, North York, East York, Markham and Etobicoke, among other locales, "indicates clearly that pockets of poverty for visible minorities exist in Canada side by side with upscale residential areas in cities with vibrant economies" (2000, 457). In other words, in the contemporary Canadian metropolis, space, gender, race, and class all combine into arrangements of power that fail to conform to historical patterns and classifications. In Wong's analysis, however, the spatial proximity of rich and poor is re-mapped according to the acute social distance needed for the premise of the genre of journalism. Historically, slumming journalism and its offshoots rely on the spatial proximity of social groups precisely to highlight the moral and social distance between such groups. Wong's map, then, is formed not so much on the basis of a claim for change as it is to create shock value.

THE CANADIAN NATION AND THE WORLD

"Maid in Canada." The headline that appears on the front page of the inaugural installment of Wong's series describes a problem that has its beginnings in the nation and resonates across it. As Wong puts it, the relative decline in the hourly wage compared to inflation means that by many socioeconomic measures, Canada is a poor

nation. Yet the pull quote on the front page explicitly invokes a diasporic experience that is clearly not Wong's, nor that of the many white co-workers she chronicles in her series: "We are maids, and therefore we are invisible, subhuman, beneath notice. We are the untouchables of the Western world" (April 1, A1). The implication here, clearly, is that, in an era of globalization and itinerant labor patterns, such problems are no longer confined to other places. One cannot help but wonder if the "hard lessons about life" that Wong learns—and presumably her readers too—have more to do with the global flows of human capital than with the life of the domestic housecleaner. After all, there is not much in the series detailing how these women actually feel about their jobs in their own words. We are only offered what Wong surmises about them from the scantest bits of information they share about their lives. Instead, the series focuses much more on how hard the life is for *Wong*.

Just as Wong's prose reduces the specificity of a particular city and its particular suburbs to an indistinct suburban-city space, it also becomes part of an indistinct globalized space, complete with its own caste system and migrating peoples. This Canadian space is marked by class and racial identities that complicate Canadian national identity, particularly through a globalized reference to the working poor. Calling her co-workers untouchables challenges the dominant idea that Canada is a classless place that offers the same opportunities to anyone. Our favorite national rhetoric of universal education and healthcare supports notions like that by the sweat of one's brow, anyone can get ahead. Wong writes: "I had never considered Canada to be a poor country. But it turns out that despite ever-higher educational levels and productivity, we have one of the biggest proportions of low-paid workers in the world, defined as those earning less than two-thirds of a country's median annual earnings" (April 1). These are startling statistics that trouble a national myth of a land of prosperity, wealth and equity shared by both immigrating and native-born peoples.

These class distinctions are even more stark because of the way that they map onto national identity. But Wong never stops to consider the appropriateness of this metaphor to describe a relatively new economic phenomenon in Canada. In Wong's prose, "untouchables" erases the specificity of what "working poor" means for immigrants versus native-born Canadians. According to Wong, these untouchables, however, are mostly white and Canadian-born—an assertion which she provides only anecdotal evidence to support. Yet, as Herod and Aguiar (2006, 431) demonstrate in their study of professional cleaners (as opposed to domestic workers, which often also involves child-care) in and around Toronto, "the cleaning labor force is overwhelmingly made up of women and non-white (often immigrant) workers."

The dynamic that Wong portrays between herself and her work partner, Maggie, is nonetheless peppered by class and race. Wong characterizes Maggie as suffering from low self-esteem; she chronically undercharges the clients for the amount of time it takes to complete her work and fails to notice when clients treat her badly. Maggie offers no

comment—or at least none that Wong reports to us—when they are tipped only ten cents: “perhaps because we deal with dirt, we’re treated like dirt ... It’s no coincidence that only women work for companies with the word maid in their names” (April 22). As if to emphasize this, Wong opts to use the term “maid” throughout the series to highlight how little respect cleaners receive. She writes (April 1): “Every other lousy job has a euphemistic title ... Whores become prostitutes and then sex worker. Gender-specific professions have neutered their titles too ... Waitress has become server. But maids! The companies that employ us—and try to entice you—revel in the feudal groveling and female subservience the word implies.”

If Wong’s body is marked by class difference, it is also (and perhaps most obviously) marked by her race. Race, ethnicity, class, and their imbrication with the nation also demarcate the spaces of home and workplace. An extended quote from the second installment showcases how Wong stages this relationship early in the series (April 8):

Maid service, sold by the hour, is now accessible to the vast middle class. The employees work below the radar, without breaks or benefits, for long hours and low pay ... I’m not talking about freelancers, the entrepreneurial cleaners from say, Portugal, the Philippines, Jamaica or Canada itself. They work alone, are paid cash and are treated, as so many of my friends tell me, “like part of the family.” They never call themselves maids. That group is dominated by self-starters, sometimes well-educated, who came here seeking a better life. At maid services like Maid-It-Up, the cleaners are often white and Canadian-born, and have abbreviated educations and limited skills ... At Maid-it-Up, my co-workers do call themselves maids, with all the self-abnegation that implies. They are sweet and lots of fun. But some can’t calculate the GST, or spell, or navigate the Toronto transit system. Many can’t deal directly with clients. A few don’t even look up when they speak.

Wong’s implication here is that white, poor Canadians lack enough motivation and entrepreneurialism to pull themselves out of poverty, supposedly unlike the domestics she and her friends employ. Furthermore, it misrepresents the lives of those domestics who do find employment in those homes, as I discuss below. This quotation demonstrates a profound ambivalence in the characterization of these women. There is an unwillingness to come down hard on the owners—they are themselves part of that immigrant population willing to work hard and who think in terms of the white-collar work that Wong comes from herself—and there is very little discussion of more general solutions for her co-workers. Instead, the series reduces systemic issues of education, cultural capital and poverty to the pop-psychology catchall category of poor self-esteem. Wong’s purpose is to point out the irony of how these homes (the homes these women should be occupying themselves?) convert to factory floors where worker behavior is closely monitored—no talking, radio playing, smoking in or near the house, no eating or drinking or using the toilet. To do this, however, Wong takes an unexpected detour

through race and ethnicity in order to stress again that these *white* women, including Wong, however temporarily, are untouchables.

Oddly, Wong's own ethnicity is not mentioned here—a performative contradiction since she herself does not fit the profile that she describes for these workers. Instead, she cites the daughter of Nariman, the owner of the agency for whom she works, as saying “no immigrant would do this work—they have too much ambition” (April 8). Though Wong herself is not an immigrant, her earlier mention of her Maoist past emphasizes again the point that she is not like these women. This mythologized vision of the immigrant body not only naturalizes it as being predisposed to hard labor (Stiell & England 1994), it misrepresents the cleaning labor force.

There is the subtlest of suggestions that the class and racial differences that mark these two women as different from one another map also a sense of morality. In a telling story about a young couple “necking furiously on the couch,” Wong can barely contain her indignation: “She’s in his lap, giggling. He’s feeling her up. My middle-aged partner has a clear view from the galley kitchen, which opens onto the living room ... this is ridiculous. I’m practically under the covers with them” (April 8). Yet what she finds ridiculous, even repulsive, makes her partner comment after they leave: “Aren’t they a lovely couple?” Wong retorts that they are doomed to fail since neither of them is willing to clean a toilet and allows her sarcasm to mask what is clearly a class-based assessment of appropriate public sexual behavior.

There are moments in the stories when Maggie develops some complexity, but they are fleeting. For instance, the complicated ways in which gender intersects with class are teased out in a poignant conversation between Wong and her partner Maggie about the latter’s relationships with her first and second husbands (April 22). Despite the lingering traces of behaviors spawned by abuse—Maggie’s willingness to do anything to please her clients, like she did with her husbands—by Wong’s own admission, she fails to understand any of it. It is Wong’s subjective experience that takes center stage here and throughout the series, not analysis, and not the experiences of her co-workers who really are living on less than minimum wage.

Wong highlights her own difference at key points in the series, not through her visible-minority status, but through her class. The marks of class distinction (Bourdieu 1984), she suggests, are evident, even if she has managed to pass herself off as a cleaner to her fellow workers. Her boss, Nariman, on the other hand, sees her foreignness. Nariman reveals he never considered her to be like the other cleaners, nor believed she would stay, but nonetheless begs her not to quit when she tries. She writes: “I feel terrible. I assumed maids were as disposable as Kleenex. But it turns out I’m a valued employee. I show up, I’m punctual and I can read and write. I can calculate the GST. I can drive and read a map. ‘We’ve been forming the teams around you,’ Nariman says. ‘You can’t quit’” (April 29). Though Maggie works just as hard, it is Wong who a client perceives to be the “boss” (April 22). Like the stunt girls before her, Wong is careful to

leave enough traces of her respectability and class status visible so that she is never in danger of going too far undercover to safely regain her former status."¹¹

HOME AS WORKPLACE

In the final installment of the series (April 29), Wong reflects on her own home as a workplace for her housecleaner, Mercedita Iborro, called Cedes by the family. She worked full-time for Wong's family for eleven years, dropping down to half-time a year earlier than the publication date of the series. The inclusion of Cedes in the final installment is telling, for it insulates Wong's home against characterization as a workplace, and limits further critique against the use of domestic housekeepers. Yet sociologists of domestic cleaning situations have repeatedly documented similar abuses for salaried domestic housekeepers, especially those who live-in and are immigrants (for example, see Stiell & England 1997 and the special edition of *Antipode*, 2002). In fact, Stiell & England conclude that the greater the difference between employee and employer, the greater the likelihood of abuse within the work environment. This situation is particularly troubled by the nature of the work, which depends on affective labor and intimacy, often captured in the euphemism that paid domestic workers as members of the family are somehow driven by a labor of love (Stiell & England 1997).

Wong not only implies that Cedes has built an emotional relationship with the family by being in their employ for so many years, she also suggests this is further consolidated by a handsome salary: "I'd tell you what I pay Cedes, but she'd kill me" (April 29). In a curious "role reversal," Wong is envious of the pay Cedes receives, takes her hand-me-downs and joins the circle of clothing exchange held between the Rosedale (another extremely wealthy neighborhood of Toronto) cleaners receiving castoffs from their wealthy employers: "all the housekeepers try them on, and I get what's left. They're pretty good dregs. Last year, I got a full-length black suede coat." This further contributes to a sense of "false kinship ties" (Gregson & Lowe 1994; cited in Stiell & England 1994, 351).

Despite this, the final installment of "Maid for a Month" reads much like a *mea culpa* (April 29). Wong re-maps her own house via the landmarks significant only to a cleaner's eye: three bathrooms crowded with clutter, white kitchen counter tops, terrain that changes from hardwood to carpet in one room, mirrored doors and pale limestone tiles. She describes herself as the client from hell, but a reformed one as she has learned some hard lessons (as the opening promotional lines promised us): the kids and her husband now chip in with the cleaning, the kids make the occasional dinner, the whole family does laundry and the excess bottles around her tub are now gone.¹² "I still make lists for Cedes, but they're shorter now" (M7). In the end, the series is enlightening for the upper-middle class reporter—and, presumably, readers—but one cannot help but wonder if, or how, the lives of the cleaners that Wong encountered on her adventure have appreciably changed. Presumably, their lives have become harder for the loss of such a valued worker.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF NEWS MARKETS

Apparently *The Globe and Mail* was not entirely sure for whom “Maid for a Month” was relevant. The inaugural issue of the series in the Toronto edition featured the story twice: once in the News section, and once in the Toronto section. Each segment following this first one is featured in the Toronto section (Section M) of the Toronto edition, but appears in the National news section (Section A) for editions sent out to other parts of Ontario.¹³ This suggests that the editors believe that the series is pertinent to the entire country, though the minimum-wage increase is only for Ontario. It is also obviously a story *about* Toronto; yet, the invocations of industrialization, imperialist pasts, and migrant diasporic workers also point to a larger process of globalization. Further, the series, now two years old, remains available online at *The Globe and Mail's* online news site (globeandmail.com). Although *The Globe and Mail* retains a parochial focus on its home province of Ontario in this series, the representation of spaces within its largest city remains generic enough that it could appeal to any of the geographic markets it reaches, including a larger North American audience. And, this finding does not conflict with the determining principle of geographic, emotional and cultural proximity; in fact, it facilitates it as the newspaper stretches itself out over space and time.

CONCLUSION

The newspaper acts as the map across the uncertain terrains of home, workplace, and home-as-workplace in the contemporary metropolis. It is Wong's double entry into the home via newspaper work that holds the piece together: as journalist *and* worker, she is the interface that permits access to these worlds and experiences. This dual status is crucial, for we as readers rely completely on her experiences, authority and writing to tell us the real story behind the increase in minimum wage. To accomplish this task, Wong exercises the true power that the reporter has: public disclosure. Significantly, Wong uses the inclusive pronoun “we” when describing this power, while pointing unflinchingly at the readers:

About one-third of our clients leave keys. We never see them. Yet we know the most intimate things about them. We know that you—yes, you—are the vice-president of a financial services company and make \$175,000 a year. (You left your paycheque lying on the desk we wipe clean.) We know the colour of your hair; and how long it is. We know if it's curly, and whether you have a problem with that. We know the date you got married and what you wore. But we know when the bloom is off the rose. The day after Valentine's Day, we know who got flowers—and who didn't (April 1).

Though all the housecleaners have the ability to “read” these homes, they lack the cultural capital that would give them a means to publicize that information. After all, without the reporter, the columnist or the author to literally authorize the “dirty secrets,” where lies the power of disclosure? Would this information mean anything at all outside of its revelation on the front page of the Toronto section?

"Maid for a Month" is ultimately more about the constitution of Wong as a celebrity journalist than it is a piece of investigative journalism. After all, Jan Wong is the same journalist who is planning to write a book on domestic service (Donnelly 2007, 13), much like she published *Lunch with Jan Wong* (2001), based on her previous column. Like the women journalists who prefigured her in the stunts of the nineteenth century, Wong herself figures heavily in this series. The series is not really about the women who *really live this life*; it's about Wong's experience at *temporarily fake-living* this life.

Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues that the abstraction of space, like in the spatial representations that journalism produces, is a kind of violence. He writes, "*the space of a (social) order is hidden in the order of space*" (289). Wong's selective efforts at producing certain kinds of "safe" homes where the politics of difference somehow melt away when (im)migrant domestic cleaners become "part of the family" suggest precisely this kind of violence. Added to the implied violence in denying the documented experiences of exploitation and lack of respect that predominate in relations between white, upper-middle-class female employers and their (im)migrant female employees (cf. Stiell & England 1997; Herod & Aguiar 2006) is the violence of what Lauren Berlant (1999, 58) calls "the politics of feeling," where feelings of empathy, even identification, with forms of exploitation substitute for real social change. Such politics can be located at both the level of Wong's narrative, and the particular ways she tries to implicate some readers in this story more than others (middle-class readers who use these services versus the wealthier readers who hire domestics). Linking this concept with Barbara Ehrenreich's similar cross-class exploration of agency cleaning work, Carolyn Betensky (2004) insists that Ehrenreich's identification (and that of her readers, one might add) with the workers she met while incognito acts as a "weapon of identification as a liberatory strategy" (153), thereby releasing her from examining how she is implicated in those structures of domination, or the latent pleasures implied in acting powerless.

As Massey (1994) argues in "Politics and Space/Time," socio-spatial relations are dynamic, and thus require equally attention to time. Couldry and McCarthy (2004, 5) further this argument by suggesting that the spatial structuring and (re-structuring) of media representations specifically are historically particular. Though this same violent dynamic existed within nineteenth-century contexts, the broadened scale of *The Globe and Mail's* reach matters here. It is precisely because of this broadened reach that Wong can so easily substitute Canadian-born workers, with relatively heightened access to a social security net, including education, social welfare and health care, for a historically, culturally and regionally specific caste of "untouchables," or the homes of middle-class urban and suburban homes for the factory floors of the nineteenth century.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour (1993, 44) observes that the kind of unmasking and denunciation that has always characterized stunt journalism and slumming was the "sacred task" of modernism. This denunciation of the shortcomings of the social was also always what allowed critics to differentiate themselves from and rise

above the ordinary people that were the substance of their studies. Instead of continuing that cycle of denunciation, which leads, ultimately, to endless criticism substituting for critique, perhaps attempting to map out the spaces and places that slumming and the journalism of social exploration continues to take us in series like “Maid for a Month” will help us to finally begin to diagram the topologies of our indignation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the reviewers (blind and otherwise) of this article for their helpful suggestions. Nicole Gerholdp roved an invaluable Research Assistant. Research for this paper was supported by funds from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture and the University of Windsor.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Globe and Mail* is one of two national newspapers published in Toronto, Ontario. It is one of Canada’s oldest newspapers, founded in 1844 by the Hon. George Brown. Today, it is owned by the media conglomerate CTVglobemedia. *The Globe*, the predecessor of *The Globe and Mail*, was one of the first in the Toronto markets to expand its weekend editions to include a separate Illustrated Supplement, a woman’s column, children’s column and lots of other entertaining features. In keeping with this tradition, it is interesting that Wong’s series appears in the weekend paper, replete with photographic illustrations. Given this history, and the larger news circulation on Saturdays, it’s not surprising to see it appear in the weekend edition. After all, written by someone with Wong’s history (as is discussed later), the series is as entertaining as it is intended to be enlightening.

² Just a few important examples include, Lefebvre (1991), Giddens (1991), Couldry (2000).

³ The terms social exploration, slumming, and stunt journalism all have varied histories that are worth delineating, though I have limited space for such a task here. I mobilize these terms because they all shared a similar method of going ‘down and out’ (Pittenger 1997) by passing themselves off as one of the destitute, poor, or otherwise ignoble members of society. As Seth Koven (2004, 5) describes, upper-class men and women had been journeying to the slums in search of illicit sexual experiences in London from at least the seventeenth century. But by the mid-nineteenth century, cross-class explorations of the slums had become “an indispensable method of gathering knowledge about urban poverty” (5; see also chapter 4). These explorations were not always incognito; in fact, slumming was frequently characterized as armchair exploration, with men and women looking curiously on at the poor in the dangerous, filthy streets of the poorest sectors of the city in their fashionable dress and impossible hats, areas and peoples that were normally forbidden for respectable upper and middle class folk. Despite this “prurient curiosity [disguised] in the garb of social altruism” (7), slumming was also commonly practiced by philanthropists like the lassies of the Salvation Army, social scientists and moral reformers (see Valverde 1991 on moral reform in Canada specifically; also Nord 1987, Walkowitz 1992 for a sampling of the British perspective on the poor). Increasingly, by the mid-nineteenth century (and later too; see Betentsky 2004), there was a feeling that to really “know” poverty—to understand its effects, its causes and to propose solutions to it—one needed to live it. One form of stunt journalism—a term used to describe a contrived situation for the purposes of creating a newsworthy story—was slumming, though it could also be characterized by social exploration literature. Slumming and social exploration are terms used to describe a wider array of literature than journalism, as Koven (2004), Pittenger (1997) and

Keating (1976) delineate, though the literature addressed by each historian includes work done by journalists and published in newspapers or periodicals.

- ⁴ Mark Hampton (2004) suggests that the fourth estate as a professed objective for journalism does not emerge full force until the British press enters into a stage of capitalism whereby it has shed its commitment to a liberal public sphere. Hampton suggests this waning of a liberal ethos that was committed to educating, elevating, informing and influencing the public gave way after the mid-Victorian period to a representative ideal that was characterized by the metaphor of the Fourth Estate, or a journalism for and on behalf of the people.
- ⁵ Overhead costs associated with new presses and other technologies, coupled with increased competition, meant Toronto’s newspapers were desperate to keep circulation as high as possible. See Kesterton 1978, Walkom 1983, Rutherford 1982, and Sotiron 1997.
- ⁶ For more on sensationalism and stunt journalism as performed by women, see Gabriele (2004).
- ⁷ This included listeners too, for critics of slumming charged that ladies would go slumming in order to have witty and engaging conversation to make at dinners (Koven 2004, 6).
- ⁸ Included in her list of “Little Kindnesses”: tipping \$5 to \$10 for several hours of work; tidy up before your cleaner arrives (you get “more bang for your cleaning buck if you tidy up”); do the dishes yourself (it’s not economical to pay someone to do them for you); offer a drink (“remember, maids are itinerant workers”), let your cleaners turn on the radio, and say thank you (April 22).
- ⁹ They move there to achieve a pedestrian-friendly urban lifestyle and because inner-city housing has become too expensive for lower wage earners.
- ¹⁰ The correlate on a larger, much more devastating level in developing countries is well documented in Mike Davis’s moving *Planet of Slums* (2007). Though the situation is most calamitous in the case of the rural poor, Davis notes that the effects of neo-liberalism have also hit the “downwardly mobile middle classes” of many urban places, pushing them into poverty (16).
- ¹¹ This point has been made by virtually all historians of stunt journalism as well. See, for instance, Koven 2004, 146-9. Lutes, (2002, 221) comments, “The stunt reporter’s success as a crosser of boundaries depended not only on her sense of derring-do, but also on her ability to reconstruct the very social boundaries she transgressed.”
- ¹² These claims are all, of course, dubious, as she had boasted in an earlier column that even before the experiment had begun she had “been training the boys for years,” nicknaming them Benderella and Cinder Sam (Apr. 15).
- ¹³ The author collected these stories from an edition in an Ontario city other than Toronto. While the author was not able to confirm that an edition received in another province included the story in the same section, it is reasonable to assume that this would be the case. Interestingly, the story is not included in the Focus section, which tends to focus primarily on contemporary fashion and design, but has certainly published feature news stories in the past. This fact possibly suggests that *The Globe and Mail* may have some idea about the geographic import of this piece to its readers in different parts of the country.

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