

Capitalist Rhetoric, Anticapitalist Struggle: Reevaluating Wages for Housework

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Abstract: The 1970s international Wages for Housework (WFH) campaign has largely been regarded as a strange deviation from second-wave feminism at best, and an essentialist, white feminist movement at worst. In this article, I conduct rhetorical analyses of capitalism and Judith Butler's concept of performative contradiction to archival materials from the WFH campaign to illustrate how aspects of the campaign's rhetoric that have been read as reductionist actually contribute to a larger strategy of turning capitalist rhetorics against themselves. Focusing on multiply marginalized WFH groups, including Black Women for Wages for Housework and Wages Due Lesbians, I demonstrate how activists reappropriate rhetorics associated with finance capital to draw attention to the limitations of such rhetoric. Through discourses of risk calculation, typification, and credit and debt, WFH campaigners surface and challenge capitalism's contradictory organization of productive and reproductive labor.

Keywords: [anticapitalism](#), [capitalism](#), [economic rhetoric](#), [labor](#), [Marxist feminism](#), [Wages for Housework](#)

Doi: [10.37514/PEI-J.2026.28.3.02](#)

"It is still not clear whether campaigners for wages for housework really want what they are asking for." – Ellen Malos, 1978

"The Wages for Housework Movement assumes that if women were paid for being housewives, they would accordingly enjoy a higher social status. Quite a different story is told by the age-old struggles of the paid household worker, whose condition is more miserable than any other group of workers under capitalism." – Angela Davis, 1981

"But, as with the downsides of Universal Basic Income, the reality is that in developed, Western, capitalist societies, the numbers just don't stack up. Where exactly the state would get this money does not appear to be a question interrogated ... by the activists." – Lucy Denyer, 2025

Although the Wages for Housework (WFH) campaign spanned several countries and decades, it is often relegated to the sidelines of feminist history. As the name implies, WFH mobilized in support of wages for women's work. Feminist groups in countries including Italy, Germany, the US, the UK, and Canada worked together on WFH through the International Feminist Collective, which continues today through the Global Women's Strike (Toupin, 2018, p. 1). This collective encompassed an international body, the International Wages for Housework Campaign; city-based WFH Committees, such as those in New York City and Los Angeles; as well as allied groups organized around particular identities, like Wages Due Lesbians and Black Women for Wages for Housework. At a time when mainstream feminists sought paid employment, WFH was often perceived as counterproductive, since waging housework seemed as though it would keep women in the home. However, WFH feminists conceived of both housework and wages broadly—they argued for payment for socially reproductive labor of all sorts, including "sexuality and emotional labor," and they fought for direct payments like welfare as well as social services and healthcare (Rousseau, 2015, p. 366). Ultimately, rather than "extol the virtues of domestic work," WFH activists intended to show that such work is not a naturally feminine activity, but something imposed on women (Weeks, 2011, p. 123). In doing so, the campaign aimed to open space for women to refuse housework and collectivize reproductive labor. This article suggests that WFH activists work toward accomplishing these aims by using rhetorics associated with finance capitalism to problematize the capitalist organization of housework and reproduction.

The rhetorical strategies of WFH, in addition to being largely overlooked, have contributed to charges of economism, essentialism, and white feminism against the movement. As Marxist feminist theorist Kathi Weeks (2011) put it, WFH “is frequently portrayed in histories of feminism as a misguided movement and, when discussed in feminist anthologies, is typically represented as a rather odd curio from the archives of second-wave feminist history” (p. 114). Scholars remain uncertain how to interpret the demand for wages. Was it, as Weeks asked, “presented as a concrete policy objective or a critical ploy? Was it intended to be an end in itself or a means to other ends?” (p. 128). The demand for wages, especially when interpreted literally, has often been a focal point for critique by liberal and socialist feminists alike, who saw inclusion in the workforce as the path to women’s liberation (Malos, 1978; Dyer, 2025). In response, Silvia Federici (2020), a leading activist with the New York WFH group, noted that money has functions aside from being “a form of remuneration,” like an increase in power and collectivity (p. 4). More damaging to the present-day reception of WFH, however, are accusations of essentialism, especially those coming from feminists of color. Some of the movement’s claims, including especially their contention that “all women are housewives,” have been seen as “universalizing” (Weeks, 2011, p. 126). Angela Davis (1981), for example, questioned whether “women in general, regardless of their class and race, can be fundamentally defined by their domestic functions” when Black women have always worked outside of their own homes (p. 235). However, other scholars, including feminist historian Christina Rousseau (2015), have argued that WFH recognized different oppressions and that “there was no attempt to claim an essential ‘female’ identity” (p. 367). While I do not intend to absolve the movement of these charges, I suggest that a rhetorical analysis attuned to the WFH campaign’s performative rhetoric can shift our understanding of the group. Rather than a strange deviation within feminist politics that should not be repeated, WFH, I suggest, points to the possibility of reappropriating capitalist rhetoric for anticapitalist ends.

In this article, I argue that features of WFH rhetoric that have been read as essentializing and reductionist contribute to a larger strategy of turning capitalist rhetorics against themselves. Building on and contributing to recent scholarship on economic rhetoric (Sharp-Hoskins, 2023) and feminist rhetorics of work (Gold & Enoch, 2019; Hallenbeck & Smith, 2015; Smith, 2021; Smith & Hallenbeck, 2024), I analyze archival materials from the WFH movement to show how activists use rhetorics of finance capital—risk calculation, typification, and credit and debt—to problematize capitalism’s contradictory organization of productive and reproductive labor. Reading these rhetorics through Judith Butler’s (1997, 2007) “performative contradiction” allows me to explain how WFH reappropriates capitalist terminology to draw attention to the limits of that terminology and, ultimately, of capitalism itself. I discuss, first, how WFH mobilizes risk and typification to reveal the contradictions that emerge from the capitalist separation of production and reproduction. I then explain how activists mobilize the language of credit and debt to point out capital’s inability to properly compensate all reproductive labor. In doing so, I follow Michelle C. Smith (2021) in aiming to “loo[k] beyond success and failure” (p. 45) when evaluating WFH and focus instead on the possibilities that WFH opens for refiguring work and gender.

My analysis also aims to answer Michelle C. Smith and Sarah Hallenbeck’s (2024) recent call for intersectionality in rhetorics of work. Smith and Hallenbeck noted a need for “more explicit commitments to

the intersectional analysis of work-related rhetorics,” given that intersectionality is central to “decoding the complex negotiations through which different forms of work are valued at particular moments in time.” Especially because WFH is often portrayed as a movement of straight, middle-class, white women, my analysis aims to highlight the contributions of multiply marginalized women to the campaign, including Wages Due Lesbians and Black Women for WFH. These activists’ work in particular holds lessons for contemporary feminist activism, as they demonstrate how we might strategically use the language of the capitalist economy to wage an intersectional campaign against it.

Rhetoric, Capitalism, and Women’s Work

In analyzing the WFH movement, I join a growing body of work within feminist rhetorical scholarship on gender and labor. According to Hallenbeck and Smith (2015) and Jessica Enoch and David Gold (2019), a feminist rhetorical approach to the study of work means understanding both work and gender as rhetorically constituted. Not only is work itself gendered, as certain types of labor become “feminine” or “masculine,” but work also functions as a technology of gender, shaping larger ideas about gender—which are, of course, inseparable from race, class, sexuality, disability, and other aspects of identity. As Enoch and Gold (2019) argued, rhetorical studies of work have the potential to illuminate “how women have fought for wider work opportunities and better working conditions, how they have expanded understandings of what work is, and how they have contended with dominant perceptions of the kinds of work women may do and the kinds of workers they may be” (p. 3). Given the ongoing “erasure and invisibility of much women’s work,” Hallenbeck and Smith (2015) further contended that “rhetorical studies of women’s work can help reveal the ideological and rhetorical maneuvers that gender all work and render some women’s work natural, invisible, or inconsequential” (p. 201). It is this dominant perception of women’s work as “natural” and “invisible” that WFH aims to unsettle through their appropriation of capitalist terms.

More specifically, through their redefinition of “women’s work” as “housework,” WFH activists forward new ways of understanding socially reproductive labor. The work of social reproduction is defined by Weeks (2011) as “the production of the forms of social cooperation on which [capitalist] accumulation depends” (p. 29). In simpler terms, social reproduction encompasses the labor of (re)producing and sustaining human life and labor power. This work, which is usually un(der)waged, coded as “female,” and assigned to multiply marginalized women, more concretely includes tasks like cooking and cleaning, education, caretaking and healthcare, raising children, and biological reproduction. Although distinctions between productive (commodity-producing) labor and reproductive labor have blurred following the transition to neoliberalism¹ in the 1970s, a point to which I return in my conclusion, it is important to note here that a Marxist feminist perspective insists on understanding social reproduction as existing in contradiction with capitalist accumulation, or the production of surplus value. Weeks (2011) explained: “Capital requires, for example, time both to ‘consume’ labor power and to produce (or reproduce) it” (p. 27). Western capitalism has traditionally managed this contradiction via the nuclear family, which becomes responsible for workers’ reproduction. This has

¹ I follow David Harvey (2005) in understanding neoliberalism as an ideology and economic system that aims to expand market logics to all areas of life, including social reproduction. Despite its prefix, neoliberalism is not wholly new and is better understood as an intensification or “speedup” of capitalism (Nadasen, 2023, p. 10).

meant, however, a further contradiction in the fact that reproductive labor can be waged or unwaged. WFH leverages these “fault line[s]” (Weeks, 2011, p. 27) to unite women against the exploitative organization of reproductive labor under capitalism.

Feminist rhetoricians have recently begun investigating the ways in which women challenge dominant perceptions of reproductive labor and fight to reorganize this necessary but undervalued work. Jennifer Keohane (2019), for example, demonstrated how Claudia Jones, a Black woman organizer with the Communist Party of the USA, drew attention to Black women’s work in the home to make this labor visible and “sho[w] how labor rendered the experiences of black women distinct from those of white women” (p. 217). Jones accomplished this by applying “workplace terms” (Keohane, 2019, p. 215) to both Black women’s underpaid domestic labor in other women’s homes and their unpaid domestic labor in their own homes—a strategy which, as I show below, WFH also uses. Smith’s (2021) study of nineteenth-century utopian communities further explored the possibilities and constraints of efforts to recast women’s reproductive labor using the framework of the market. Particularly relevant is Smith’s analysis of the Brook Farm community, which attempted to overcome the marginalization of domestic labor by awarding it a wage. As Smith (2021) showed, however, this experiment failed to inculcate a perception of housework as “real work,” largely because “work” continued to be defined by “proximity to the market” and because the most grueling domestic tasks were offloaded to working-class women and women of color (p. 107). This example plainly demonstrates that waging reproductive labor is not enough—feminists must attend to differences among women and, I would add, to the contradictory capitalist logics that govern production and reproduction.

I argue that WFH works toward this end by appropriating the vocabularies and discourses of capitalism. To do so, I draw from Butler’s (1997, 2007) notion of the “performative contradiction,” which she described as the reappropriation of political terms to draw attention to their limitations. For Butler (1997), performative contradiction occurs when “Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary” (p. 145). An example of this concept, according to Butler, lies in the activism of disenfranchised groups who lay claim to rights they do not currently have. In “claiming to be covered by that universal,” they “expos[e] the contradictory character of previous conventional formulations of the universal” (1997, p. 92). Similarly, although WFH’s fantastical and seemingly impossible claims have contributed to confusion and critiques of the movement, reviewing their rhetoric through the lens of performativity suggests that WFH resituates the language of capital in a new context, that of women’s reproductive labor, to highlight capitalism’s limitations.

Capitalist Rhetoric in Wages for Housework Materials

My analysis focuses on WFH rhetoric produced during the 1970s. Although WFH continues today through the Global Women’s Strike, this decade contains some of the most radical slogans and demands, which have not only contributed to negative perceptions of the movement, but which are particularly ripe for rhetorical analysis. The 1970s also saw significant changes in women’s employment status—while around 30% of married American women were homemakers in 1970, that percentage dropped to about 23% by 1980 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In the same time period, the rate of white women’s participation in

the labor force rose from about 43% to 51%, with Black women's increasing from around 49% to 53% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). WFH materials from this decade take advantage of these shifts to call capitalist logics into question.

The materials I analyze in this article are primary documents from WFH groups. I limited my scope to materials from English-speaking countries—the US, the UK, and Canada—excepting one translated speech from the Italian movement.² In addition to Federici's (2020) personal archive published in *The New York Wages for Housework Committee 1972-1977* and open-access materials available online, I cite materials from Barnard College's Christine E. Bose Wages for Housework Research Collection, which I was able to view digitally thanks to the generous help of the Barnard archivists. Maintaining a commitment to intersectionality, I intentionally sought out archival materials from Black Women for WFH and Wages Due Lesbians, which are often less visible in mainstream histories of the movement. Tacking between the archives and existing scholarship on economic rhetoric, I came to understand risk, typification, and credit and debt as central not only to WFH activism, but also to capitalism itself. Thus, my tripartite analysis makes the case that WFH activists use discourses of risk calculation and typification to support their argument that reproduction is central to capitalist production and to draw attention to capital's internal contradiction of separating productive from reproductive labor. The campaign ultimately uses the language of credit and debt in a performative contradiction to highlight the impossibility of appropriately valuing all reproductive work under capitalism.

Risk Calculation

The production, management, and circulation of risk is a central function of finance capital. Capitalism, owing to its insatiable need for expanding markets, its reliance on speculation, and its disregard for “externalities” like workers' health and reproduction, is inherently risky (Baucom, 2005; Beck, 1986). Crucially, this risk is distributed unevenly along lines of difference, such that communities marginalized by race, gender, and class pay the price for capitalist wealth accumulation that benefits predominantly white elites (Sharp-Hoskins, 2023). As feminist historian Premilla Nadasen (2023) illustrated, however, the risks offloaded onto reproductive laborers are obfuscated by perceptions of the household as a haven from the ills of the market: “The gendered ideal of the domestic sphere as a site of leisure,” she wrote, “also obscured the physical strain and economic contributions of household labor” (p. 52). It is in this context that WFH intervenes. Like Claudia Jones decades earlier (Keohane, 2019), WFH uses language typically associated with waged, productive work to refer to women's un(der)waged work in the home to make home visible as a workplace—one that has always posed risks for women, especially for women of color working in other women's homes.

Many WFH materials reframe the negative aspects of housework as workplace hazards to position housework as work. The Los Angeles WFH Committee, for example, wrote in a newsletter: “A woman's home is her factory. The more cramped we are, the worse the plumbing, the more polluted the neighborhood—the more housework we have to do” (1977, p. 3). By referring to the home as a “factory,” the newsletter portrays the

2 The translated speech appears in Louise Toupin's (2018) *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972-1977*. I include this speech because it is the clearest example I came across of WFH activists casting physical reproduction as a workplace risk.

home as a place of work for women. In doing so, it dispels the myth of the family as a refuge from capitalism, or a “freely invented site of authentic and purely voluntary relations” (Weeks, 2011, p. 129). Like the factory, the home contains workplace risks. In this example, the newsletter frames poor housing conditions like inadequate space, failing infrastructure, and pollution as hazards that women encounter not merely as residents but as workers. Using the language of workplace risks allows the newsletter to enact the WFH campaign’s central argument that housework is work. Framing the home as a site of work also supports the campaign’s demand for a wage. In their “Wages for Housework Notebook,” a more theoretical publication, the Montreal Power of Women Collective (n.d.) argued, “The cost—which up to now we have borne entirely alone—of running this domestic labor power factory should all be unloaded onto the system” (p. 8). If women have been made to “to absorb the cost of the risks” taken by capital (Berg, 2014, p. 167), recognizing them as workers can compel capital to bear its own risks. The problem is not that women exist outside of the capitalist system, but that their labor often goes unrecognized as work and is therefore un(der)waged.

Black women’s experiences as mothers and domestic workers are particularly crucial in positioning the home as a workplace. As US Black Women for WFH (1977) recognized in their regular bulletin, not only have Black women had to care for their families and homes in deplorable conditions, as in the case of “the ghettos of South Africa ... where Black women work for no wages, with no electricity or running water,” but “Black women have always worked outside the home” in *other* women’s homes (pp. 3–4). Black women’s labor allowed wealthy white women the freedom to view the home as separate from the market, and to escape the need to perform drudgery in the home. As Nadasen (2023) indicated, historically, “the most difficult and backbreaking tasks ... were outsourced to other women,” namely “Black domestic workers” (p. 52). UK Black Women for WFH (1978) added in their newsletter that Black women also face “racist attack[s],” which are their own form of “extra housework” in the shape of an “emotional burden” (p. 2). From this standpoint, the home does not appear as a refuge from capitalism, but as fully imbricated with its racist and sexist logics. For Black women, then, the household has been a site of both paid and unpaid labor, both of which brought unrecognized and uncompensated risks.

Sexuality and biological reproduction, which WFH includes in their understanding of “housework,” also pose danger, especially for multiply marginalized women. As Italian WFH activists claimed in a speech, “Making love is housework, and doing so under these conditions without safety provisions (laws, contraceptives that are safe and not harmful), is also very risky” (Toupin, 2018, p. 149). They went so far as to argue that “getting pregnant against our will is a work-related accident” (Toupin, 2018, p. 149). While sex and pregnancy are not normally considered as akin to productive work, WFH activists position this reproductive labor as work by putting it in terms of “work-related accidents.” The International WFH magazine (1976) emphasized that this work is particularly dangerous for women of color: “We are expected to undergo agonizing and dangerous induced births, be forced to have coils fitted by untrained doctors, and sterilized when they decide they need us to have less children, especially if we are black or Indian women” (p. 11). This passage implies that safe birth control and guaranteed abortions are necessary for women’s workplace safety, which supports WFH’s advocacy for reproductive justice as a part of the “wages” women should receive for housework (Capper & Austin, 2018, p. 448). It also suggests that the embodied risks of reproduction, from

birth to forced sterilization, connect women's bodies to capitalism—women may not receive a wage for getting pregnant and giving birth, but they are made to bear the health risks of reproduction. Defining reproductive labor in terms of risk therefore demonstrates how reproduction is shaped by capital.

Indeed, WFH ultimately uses the framework of risk to problematize the devaluation and separation of reproduction from production within capitalism. If it seems strange to refer to unwanted pregnancies as “work-related accidents” (Toupin, 2018, p.149), that is because it is strange—or rather, because capitalism has *made it strange* by partitioning productive and reproductive labor, such that applying market-like risk calculation to reproduction seems nonsensical. However, the very strangeness of these claims serves to make visible the capitalist ideology applied to reproductive labor. By removing the language of workplace risk from its commonplace referents and situating it in a new context—the home—WFH gives this terminology “a nonordinary meaning” in order to promote “deconstructive thinking” (Butler, 1997, p. 161). This performative contradiction opens capitalist logic up for critique, as it asks readers to question why it is that the risks associated with un(der)waged reproduction are not considered in the same way as the hazards faced by waged workers. What is actually nonsensical is not WFH's use of risk to frame reproductive labor as work, but the fact that capitalism often does not recognize this labor as work. Why, for example, should women of color domestic laborers be paid to take care of other women's children, but not their own? In drawing attention to inconsistencies like these, WFH aims not to subsume reproduction to market logics, or to integrate all women into the labor market, but to free women from necessarily having to perform housework. As US Black Women for WFH (1977) put it: “We don't need more work. We need more money to work less” (p. 3). By challenging the distinction between reproductive and productive labor under capitalism, WFH aims to allow women to choose what kind of work they want to do, rather than having reproductive labor imposed on them.

Typification

WFH rhetoric further draws from the language of capitalist risk calculation by mirroring actuarial logics. Legal scholar Jonathan Simon (1988) defined “actuarial practices” as “techniques that use statistics to represent the distribution of variables in a population” (p. 771). Actuarial science purports to produce knowledge about an individual by referring to demographic or other groups to which that individual belongs, including race and gender (e.g., the assumption, in health insurance calculations, that a given woman will live longer because women, on average, live longer than men). For postcolonial literary theorist Ian Baucom (2005), actuaries' “invention of the average and the typical” can be understood as a process of “typification,” which reduces people into certain “types” (p. 105). I locate typification in WFH's provocative, seemingly essentializing claims about women, including their well-known assertion that “all women are housewives.” In making these claims, WFH draws attention to the fact that, as Marxist theorist Beverly Best (2021) stated, capital requires “the necessary evacuation of all concrete specificity of laboring subjects . . . even as it emerges from concretely specific modes of oppression (including gender) and takes social form in them” (p. 898). WFH's categorization of women as “housewives” and “welfare mothers” plays with this contradiction to suggest that gender, race, and sexuality are produced, in part, through capitalism—or, to be more precise, through the un(der)waged reproductive labor assigned to gendered and racialized subjects. These abstractions allow WFH

to unite women around their shared experiences of exploitation as reproductive laborers under capitalism.

Many WFH materials use the figure of the “housewife” to denaturalize the assignment of reproductive labor to women on the basis of gender. A flyer from the Los Angeles WFH Committee (1975) proclaimed: “Housework ... all women do it. Whether or not we’re mothers, whether or not we have a second, paid job, we are all housewives.” This statement reduces all women, regardless of their differences, to the position of housewife. It does not, however, suggest that all women are *literally* housewives, as the flyer notes that many women are not mothers and that still many others work outside their own home. What this claim does suggest, then, is that “all women” are responsible for some form of reproductive labor. As such, the flyer points not to some essential gender identity but to the gendered “type” that follows from women’s reproductive labor. WFH wanted, of course, to reject this role and, as the same flyer puts it, “to stop working for nothing” and “to take time for ourselves” (Los Angeles WFH Committee, 1975). Reading the claim that “all women are housewives” in this context illustrates how the flyer adopts typification to challenge gendered capitalist oppression. Women may be reducible to the housewife “type” under capitalism, and housework may be considered a naturally feminine activity, but WFH wanted a future where this was not true.

Lesbian organizers further elaborate on the ways in which capitalism produces the “housewife” through compulsory heterosexuality. The Wages Due Collective in Toronto³ opened their position statement by writing: “We do not think that lesbians are special cases. We think that all women are special cases in the definitions of the state. ... We recognize that all women are houseworkers” (Agger et al., n.d., p. 2). The collective identified compulsory heterosexuality as a core aspect of the housewife’s situation, as “all women are socialized to be heterosexual and to get married” (Agger et al., n.d., p. 2). Ultimately, Wages Due held that “Women who are called lesbians and women who are called straight are all existing for the same purpose in the eyes of the state—to serve capital through serving men. This is what we mean when we say all women are straight” (Agger et al., n.d., p. 2). This statement does elide differences among women that do not relate to sexuality, most notably the fact that women of color are made to serve not only men, but also white women. At the same time, the position statement aims to unite straight and queer women by suggesting that they share an experience of heterosexuality following from the type of work that women are expected to perform under capitalism. Here, “heterosexuality” takes on a capacious meaning beyond simply sexual orientation to encompass the patriarchal organization of labor under capitalism, in which women perform reproductive labor that benefits men.

Wages Due Lesbians (1977) further identified un(der)waged reproductive labor as the source of women’s vulnerability. Referring to violence and exploitation against women in their 1977 organizing packet, they said, “we all know, being women, that [violent crimes] are not just happening to someone else, that they could all potentially happen to us, because we are all fundamentally in the same position. The problem has been to locate what the foundation is so we can attack it” (p. 9). This excerpt suggests that the specifics of one woman’s situation do not matter so much in determining her fate as her “type” as a housewife, someone who is or can be made to engage in reproductive labor for little to no pay. Women certainly do not all ex-

3 I am fairly certain, but cannot confirm, that the Wages Due Collective and Wages Due Lesbians, both based out of Toronto, are the same organization.

perience violence in the home—though, as Black Women for WFH groups acknowledged, too many Black women face racist violence in other women’s homes—but any woman *could* have this experience in the future by virtue of her gender. This logic is eerily like the workings of insurance, which insists “that the real test of something’s value comes not at the moment it is made or exchanged but at the moment it is lost or destroyed” (Baucom, 2005, p. 95). Tautologically, the fact that women could experience violence owing to their un(der)waged vulnerability is both what categorizes them as housewives and what follows from their identity as housewives.

A similar logic underwrote the type of the “welfare mother” or “working mother.” Like the housewife, the working mother/welfare mother figure applied to all women for WFH because all women perform some type of housework. But the welfare mother has power that the housewife lacks—she has already won a wage for her reproductive labor. UK Black Women for WFH (1978) affirmed that “Black mothers have been in the lead not only in the U.S.A. but in Britain too—in demanding Welfare benefits” (p. 2). Although the “wage” welfare mothers received was low and constantly vulnerable to changes in government policy, it symbolized success for all women, according to the US Black Women for WFH collective (1977): “By their demand for money in their own hands for themselves and for their children, Black welfare mothers established once and for all that EVERY MOTHER IS A WORKING MOTHER. They won the first wage for housework. In claiming their money, they staked everyone’s claim” (p. 2). Because welfare mothers received pay for mothering their children, they became proof that the state recognizes mothering one’s own children as work worthy of a wage, thereby making plain the arbitrary nature of what work is paid under capitalism and what work is not paid. Every woman is, then, a welfare mother, because every woman deserves a wage for housework: “WE’RE ENTITLED TO THE MONEY BECAUSE EVERY WOMAN IS A WORKING MOTHER” (Black Women for Wages for Housework UK, 1978, p. 4). What was aspirational for white, middle-class housewives was already achieved by the Black, working-class welfare mother.

WFH’s use of the welfare mother and housewife “types” can therefore be understood as a performative reclamation of these traditionally pejorative terms. In particular, WFH’s use of the welfare mother as a positive persona challenges the racist and sexist “welfare queen” trope (Nadasen, 2007, p. 52). As WFH recasts the “welfare mother” as a powerful figure who exposes fault lines in capitalism’s treatment of reproductive labor, the harmful terms with which women are addressed are “taken up” and “turned, becoming the occasion of speaking back and speaking through” to power (Butler, 1997, p. 95). In the case of Black women, the welfare mother stood as a particularly revolutionary figure because she engaged in “demanding money for the work of raising Black children and being the support and comfort of Black men in the ghettos of America” (Black Women for Wages for Housework US, 1977, p. 2). Before the implementation of workfare, which emerged from backlash to Black women’s receiving welfare, the welfare mother further challenged the fact that Black women were “more often seen as laborers than mothers” (Nadasen, 2007, p. 56). Instead of caring for other women’s children, the welfare mother got paid to take care of her own family, asserting the importance of Black mothering and demonstrating that women could win a wage for housework.

Both the welfare mother and housewife types ultimately held power in their ability to unite women

against capitalist exploitation. Women faced a great many barriers to collectivizing on the basis of housework, including isolation and social stratification (Toupin, 2018, p. 3). The Boston WFH Committee (1977) recognized this challenge in their newspaper, writing, “By calling welfare women ‘cheats’ and ‘chislers,’ by terming prostitutes ‘whores’ and ‘sluts,’ the state seeks to convince us that there are two kinds of women: the ‘bad women’ who demand money for their work, and the ‘good women’ who—they hope—will be content to work for free” (p. 4). Similarly, *Wages Due Lesbians* (1977) identified sexuality as another dividing line: “We are separated off from other women when we’re forced to organize separately as lesbians, around ‘lesbian issues’ which are supposed to be different from ‘women’s issues’” (p. 8). In the face of the intentional divisions sowed among women by the ruling class, WFH’s typification provided a shared position around which women could unite. If all women are housewives, then their common cause is organizing against un(der)waged housework and the capitalist system that imposes it upon them—and the welfare mother, who has won a wage, provides motivation to organize. In this way, WFH’s typifying claims lay the groundwork necessary “to constitute a feminist and anticapitalist political collectivity whose ultimate aim was the radical transformation of the institutions of work and family” (Weeks, 2011, p. 136).

Credit and Debt

The WFH movement’s ultimate tactic for challenging the un(der)waged nature of reproductive labor was, of course, the wage demand. Although the demand is usually framed in the language of wages—and it is this language that WFH is known for—it is also figured in terms of credit and debt. While systems of credit and debt took shape far before finance capital, they helped capitalism emerge (Baucom, 2005; Graeber, 2011). According to anthropologist David Graeber (2011), our contemporary understanding of debt “has been so shaped by the market” that it is almost impossible to speak of obligation without using capitalist logics (p. 13). Rhetorician Kellie Sharp-Hoskins (2023) further revealed that debt’s appearance as “an ahistorical, arhetorical fact” emerges through rhetorical maneuvers that position debt as “individual, volitional, and moral” and “numerically and mathematically calculable and quantifiable” (pp. 6–7). For Sharp-Hoskins, these premises mask how debt actually circulates and adheres to certain bodies in racialized and gendered ways; debt is positive when in the hands of wealthy white elites, for example, but becomes a moral failing when attached to marginalized groups, especially the working class and people of color. WFH challenges these logics by reappropriating the language of debt while breaking apart its major premises. In WFH materials, debt is not individual but collective, representing wealth owed to women and communities of color by the capitalist class. WFH ultimately posits that women’s reproductive labor cannot be quantified, thereby rejecting the entire capitalist system of valuation.

WFH activism often casts the demand for wages due in terms of wealth owed to women, particularly women of color. As US Black Women for WFH (1977) wrote, they “refus[ed] ... to be satisfied in a ghetto of poverty in the midst of plenty,” because “no one had a bigger claim to that plenty than the daughters of the 400 years of slavery that made Europe and America great” (p. 2). Here, these Black women activists draw attention to a contradiction of racial capitalism and imperialism in the fact that white elites lay claim to the wealth that enslaved and formerly enslaved people generated. UK Black Women for WFH (1978) added a transnational understanding to this phenomenon: “We have ALWAYS worked for Britain in the Third World

where we produced, first, wealth and workers for the British Empire, and now wealth and workers for Britain” (p. 4). This statement broadens the international scope of the WFH campaign by demonstrating how Western capitalists benefit from the labor of women of color not only in the Global North, but also in the “Third World” or Global South. In pointing to the wealth capitalists glean from forced and coerced reproductive labor, these publications counteract what Sharp-Hoskins (2023) termed “colonial amnesia,” or the “forgetting” of credit’s origins in racialized violence (p. 11). Further, UK Black Women for WFH activists return to the type of the welfare mother as leading “the whole working class in demanding that the wealth we have created come back to us” (p. 2). In this way, the wage demand figured as a wealth transfer that allowed WFH activists to fight for racial justice.

WFH also described women as creditors for capital in order to put women in a position of power relative to capitalists. Italian activists said, “We demand compensation from the state for all the times we got pregnant against our will, in addition to money and damages and interest for each abortion that we are forced to suffer!” (Toupin, 2018, p. 149). The mention of “interest” here stands out because interest is not usually attached to wages but to loans. If “debt and wages impose relations of dependency” (Dowling, 2016, p. 15), the housewife as creditor makes capital dependent on her. Indeed, WFH suggests that the housewife could require payment of her loan by no longer providing the contracted services. New York WFH (n.d.) activists threaten to “serve notice” to the government and write that “If we don’t get what we want, we will simply refuse to work any longer” (p. 44). They concluded with the following demand: “WE WANT IT IN CASH, RETROACTIVE AND IMMEDIATELY. AND WE WANT ALL OF IT” (New York WFH Committee, n.d., p. 44). Here, WFH women speak as creditors threatening a borrower in danger of defaulting, as they require that all the wealth they are owed—all the wealth women have ever created—be paid back immediately. The narrative WFH constructs here is the opposite of the dominant narrative in which actual financial debt and an imagined social indebtedness to the family compel women to work (Berg, 2014). Rather, WFH demands that capital not only “recognize the debt as its own” (Berg, 2014, p. 167) but also pay it back in full. Just as the housewife and welfare mother types turn women’s weakness under capitalism—their obligation to perform reproductive labor—into their source of power, the woman as creditor holds power over capital by threatening to refuse to perform.

Importantly, WFH’s use of the language of credit and debt through the wage demand is not meant to be taken completely seriously. As I mentioned earlier, some aspects of the WFH campaign, like struggles to preserve welfare payments, did truly advocate for women to be paid, whether through a wage, increased social services, or welfare, for their domestic labor (Weeks, 2011). Some materials, notably UK Black Women for WFH’s publication and a 1978 International WFH special bulletin, do also attach dollar amounts to women’s reproductive labor. Far more common, however, are demands that seem incalculable and functionally impossible to meet. For example, a New York WFH Committee (n.d.) pamphlet entitled “The Women of the World Are Serving Notice!” demands “wages for every dirty toilet, every indecent assault, every painful childbirth, every cup of coffee, and every smile” (p. 41). Although this pamphlet lists different activities for which women want compensation, it offers no guidance as to how much money they are owed. Similarly, the “Wages Due Song” printed in the Wages Due Collective position statement on lesbian women contends that

“If women were paid for all we do ... there’d be a lot of wages due for every time we smiled” and “every time we’ve been raped” (Agger et al., n.d., p. 5). The lack of specific demands suggests that WFH activists do not literally want to be paid for smiling, or for making coffee, but to draw attention to and transform the un(der)waged conditions of their reproductive labor. Perhaps the most absurd claim comes from the New York WFH Committee’s (n.d.) demand that they “immediately” receive “cash” for all the wealth women have ever produced (p. 44). Who, exactly, would pay? Who is to say how much value women have produced for capital? And even if someone could come up with such a number, how would every woman’s individual contributions be tabulated?

The point, of course, is that they cannot. As the Toronto WFH Collective (1975) noted in a student magazine, “There is never any end to our work because it encompasses our entire role as women—and that is not a quantifiable thing” (p. 21). Indeed, Best (2021) affirmed that reproductive activities cannot fully “count” for capital, because none can be quantified by capital,” and “capital is a system of domination by math” (p. 901). WFH activists therefore do not demand a literal wage, but a mass transfer of wealth and an end to the exploitation of women’s un(der)waged reproductive labor. As such, WFH complicates Sharp-Hoskins’ (2023) contention that the claim that reproductive labor “cannot be adequately *represented* in terms of money simultaneously denies any claims for financial compensation” (p. 160). If we view WFH’s appropriation of the language of credit and debt as a performative contradiction, one which makes seemingly impossible claims to point out the limits of capitalism’s ability to properly value and reward reproductive labor, then we can understand the demand for wages as akin to the demand for reparations, which “subverts logics of debt and accounting by dramatizing their failures” (Sharp-Hoskins, 2023, p. 161).

It is here that the most radical potential of the wage demand emerges. By calling for all reproductive labor to be properly rewarded, WFH calls for an end to capitalism. If reproductive labor cannot be fully quantified, it follows that the capitalist value form will no longer suffice. Not only is it impossible to calculate all the wealth that reproductive labor contributes to capital, but it is likely not possible for all reproductive labor to be fairly waged within the capitalist economy.⁴ As Federici (2020) put it, “capitalism requires unwaged labor in order to contain the cost of labor power,” such that waging all housework would mean “break[ing] the process of capital accumulation” (p. 4). Asking for all reproductive labor to be waged can therefore be considered functionally equivalent to asking for the end of the profit-driven capitalist economy and of the separation of production from reproduction. In this way, I would suggest that WFH gets beyond the limitations of the Brook Farm approach to literally waging housework, as described by Smith (2021), by forwarding a perspective in which it is impossible to achieve a wage for housework within the capitalist system. What WFH fights for instead is a system in which reproductive labor would be well supported, removed from its seemingly natural attachment to women, and collectivized—in short, a socialist system.

4 Scholars who study reproductive labor do not agree on whether capital can afford to pay for reproduction; Best (2021), for example, suggests that commodifying reproductive labor might benefit capital by allowing it to subsume more value. However, WFH theorists subscribed to the position expressed by Federici.

Toward Anticapitalist Feminist Rhetorics

I have argued that WFH activists reappropriate capitalist rhetorics in order to highlight the limitations of how reproductive labor is understood and organized under capitalism, thereby pointing to the need for a new political economic system. By playing with the meaning of work and risk, WFH situates women's reproductive labor firmly within capitalism and troubles the divisions between productive and reproductive, and waged and unwaged, labor. Through the figures of the welfare mother and the housewife, WFH unites women around their un(der)waged condition, which, they suggest, is both the source of women's lack of power in capitalist society and the source of their revolutionary potential. Finally, WFH uses the language of credit and debt to illustrate the impossibility of fully compensating women for their reproductive work and therefore the necessity of anticapitalist resistance. What underwrites all these strategies is a performative politics (Butler, 1997, 2007) that makes capitalist ideology strange by resituating its terms in the context of women's work. Workplace risks occur in the home because of the absence of a fair wage, not its presence; "welfare mother" refers not only to women receiving welfare but to all women who deserve a wage for their reproductive labor; and the wealth women produce for capital is a loan that is impossible to repay. By extending, shifting, and tearing apart the referents of capital's terms, WFH critiques the contradictory treatment of reproduction within capitalism.

Reading WFH materials through the lenses of performativity and capitalist rhetoric also allows us to rethink some of the movement's supposed faults and shortcomings. The claims that "all women are housewives" and that "all women are welfare mothers" can be understood as performing typification that links the gendered and racialized risks women face to their un(der)waged condition. In this way, these "types" provide a basis for women to organize around this shared condition. This is not to say that this strategy is without fault—as I mentioned earlier, it can flatten differences between women that occur due to intersecting oppressions—but that it should not be wholly discounted as essentialist. Similarly, it is certainly true that the conflicting expressions of the demand for wages, with some serious calls for compensation on the one hand, and outlandish demands for wealth redistribution on the other, contributed to confusion about the campaign. But it is also true that the seemingly nonsensical demands expose a key weakness of capital: its inability to properly value and compensate reproductive labor. These demands and the typifying claims made by WFH activists are therefore not something to try to hide or explain away as indicators of the datedness of the movement. Instead, they should be considered as integral to its performative strategy, even if, like all strategies, they are imperfect.

In particular, as Butler (1997) explained, in order for performative resignifications to function, terms must be distanced from their original contexts and understood in new ways. WFH's rhetoric only makes sense in the context of activists' redefinitions of concepts including "wages," "housework," "welfare mother," "housewife," and even "women." Interpreted through the dominant lexicon, slogans like "wages for housework" and "all women are housewives" are certainly reductive and exclusionary. When we understand "housewife," for example, as a woman who performs unpaid labor in the home, the term excludes the many women who work for a wage; however, an expansive understanding of "housewife" as any woman who may

be called upon to perform reproductive labor can unite women. The question becomes, then, how activists can help audiences understand their reappropriation of terms. One partial answer may lie in context itself—while the demand “wages for housework” communicated in isolation, on, say, a sign at a protest, is provocative but likely confusing, a different, more nuanced picture emerges when activists explain the demand in a flyer or pamphlet. Ultimately, however, it is worth remembering, as Butler (1997) did, that all communication risks miscommunication. At the same time, the very possibility of miscommunication is what makes resignification possible. And if, as Butler (2007) argued, “there can be no radical politics of change without performative contradiction” (p. 66), we must not allow the potential for failure to prevent us from engaging in performative politics.

Indeed, I would assert that, considering economic changes under neoliberalism, WFH’s performative rhetoric remains highly relevant for feminists today. The growth of the service economy has waged more forms of reproductive labor, and traditionally productive forms of work are “increasingly reproductive” in that they, too, generate “social landscapes, communicative contexts, and cultural forms” (Weeks, 2011, p. 141). Women of color, immigrant women, and women from the Global South continue to perform a significant proportion of the world’s un(der)waged reproductive labor (Federici, 2020; Nadasen, 2023). What’s more, the contingency and precarity that has always characterized women of color’s reproductive work is expanding to larger sectors of the working class (Nadasen, 2023). Given the recent resurgence of anti-work politics (Alexander, 2024), there remains an opportunity for feminists to reappropriate capitalist rhetorics for anticapitalist ends. Following WFH, contemporary activists might use discourses of risk and credit and debt to ask why only certain forms of reproductive labor are waged, and why risk and debt are distributed unevenly among women. If one of today’s “types” is the precarious service worker, we might come together around the fact that in one way or another, we all serve capital. Similarly, activists can draw from Black Women for WFH and Wages Due Lesbians in centering multiply marginalized women, like migrant domestic workers, who are at the forefront of the fight against capitalism’s exploitation of reproductive labor. So long as capitalism continues to exist, there will be a need and an opportunity for feminist movements to point out its contradictions and collectivize against it. And, as Butler (1997) has reminded us, “within political discourse, the very terms of resistance and insurgency are spawned in part by the powers they oppose” (p. 40). Capitalism, in other words, produces the possibility of resistance through its own language and practices. It’s up to us to take advantage of it.

Biography

Olivia Rowland (she/her) is a PhD student in Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy at The Ohio State University. Her research brings intersectional, anticapitalist feminist theory to bear on academic labor and activist rhetorics. Olivia’s work has recently appeared in *Kairos* (with Hannah Locher), *Xchanges*, and *The WAC Journal*.

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