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## **A gendered ethnography of elites**

Women, inequality, and social reproduction

*Luna Glucksberg*

**Abstract:** This article offers a critical ethnography of the reproduction of elites and inequalities through the lenses of class and gender. The successful transfer of wealth from one generation to the next is increasingly a central concern for the very wealthy. This article shows how the labor of women from elite and non-elite backgrounds enables and facilitates the accumulation of wealth by elite men. From covering “the home front” to investing heavily in their children’s future, and engaging non-elite women’s labor to help them, the elite women featured here reproduced not just their families, but their families as elites. Meanwhile, the affective and emotional labor of non-elite women is essential for maintaining the position of wealth elites while also locking those same women into the increasing inequality they help to reproduce.

**Keywords:** Alpha Territories, class, elites, ethnography, gender, wealth transfer

### **Introduction: A gendered, critical ethnography of elites**

This article answers the call of this theme section—for an anthropology of elites that is both ethnographic and attuned to political economic critique—by looking ethnographically at the reproduction of elites and inequalities through the lenses of both class and gender. Class and gender are intertwined, produced, and reproduced through one another, implicating the personal, intimate, and familial relations in which they exist, as well as the broader economic and sociopolitical realities that they help reproduce. I focus on the importance of women’s labor in the reproduction of elite families in relation to the continuing growth of inequality in

contemporary society. I do this by comparing the stories and experiences of two different sets of women: elite women who work to reproduce their families in the domestic sphere and non-elite women whose paid work helps to reproduce the elites. The decision to look ethnographically at elites is born out of an increased concern with the rise of economic inequality worldwide, which is described perhaps most notably by the historical economist Thomas Piketty (2014), as well as out of a revival in the study of elites in the social sciences in general (Khan 2012a; Savage 2015; Urry 2014). Following Anthony Atkinson (2015), I argue that we should be thinking about elites in terms of the *longue durée*: a slow and constant process of accumulation. This process involves not just economic assets but also social, educational, and symbolic capitals. It is not, however, just about accumulating capitals; it is about capitals and people entwined together to forge long-lasting dynasties.

My approach also follows a sociological shift, which is exemplified by the work of Mike Savage and colleagues (2013) on the Great British Class Survey, toward creating more nuanced, detailed understandings of the groups at the top end of the income and wealth distribution curves. This involves a shift away from the obsession, especially in the British context, of drawing boundaries between the working and middle classes. From a more anthropological perspective, it also involves exploring the tensions between studying with and among elites while acknowledging elites in classed terms as the apex of material and symbolic accumulation processes.

The gendered aspect of elite reproduction was first evident during my fieldwork, where it emerged organically from more than two years of interviews and from extended periods of participant observation. The areas I studied constitute the most expensive parts of London, sometimes referred to by estate agents as “prime,” “super-prime,” or even “ultra-prime” London.

This research was conducted as part of a two-year project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) looking at the effect of global wealth on the most elite areas of London.<sup>1</sup> In total, more than one hundred individuals were interviewed for this project: these included elite residents and a broad spectrum of service providers from designers to estate agents, asset managers to art dealers, and beauticians to carers and florists. The main reason for seeking out individuals who were not part of any elite themselves was to understand the impact of elites on the people who lived and worked for and around them, considering the “mutual constitution of elites and subalterns” (Gilbert and Sklair, this issue), and to challenge the fantasy that elites’ privilege is somehow disconnected from the “dire straits of the lower orders” (Toscano and Woodcock 2015: 513).

Methodologically, the project—set up before I joined the team—was based on a geodemographic framework (Burrows 2013). The areas studied sit in a crescent that goes from Chelsea in the south, up through South Kensington, Knightsbridge, Belgravia, Mayfair, Notting Hill, and Holland Park, all the way to Hampstead and Highgate in the north. Areas outside of the center of London but still considered by the project were located around Esher, Cobham, and Virginia Water, which are well known for having the most expensive house prices in the United Kingdom outside of London (Osbourne 2015). Properties in these areas usually sell for more than two million pounds. One of the most important consequences of this spatial, area-based approach was that it dispensed with the need to define “elites” as *people*, whether by income, influence, or position in society, and focused instead on “elite” *areas*: the “Alpha Territories.”<sup>2</sup>

My research on elite and non-elite women in these geographies demonstrated the various ways in which the reproduction of elites depends on intimately gendered processes. In exploring these processes from a theoretical perspective, my work responds to the position outlined in the

Gens feminist manifesto for the study of capitalism (Bear et al. 2015): “Class does not exist outside of its generation in gender, race, sexuality, and kinship.” In this article, I focus both on the domestic and reproductive labor of elite women *and* the intimately related caring, affective labor of non-elite women present in their lives and homes. I explore the ways in which elites are socialized, and how these practices are embodied, by looking at the labor of diverse female bodies and their roles in creating highly successful elite families. I argue that gender, women, and women’s labor are keys to the reproduction of elites in ways that are specific and different from men’s contributions to these processes. So far, apart from a few exceptions (Bear et al. 2015; Bourdieu 1996; Ostrander 1984; Yanagisako 2000), gender has not been a particular focus of elite studies. The ethnography I present here addresses this gap, showing just how crucial gender is for the reproduction of elites.

The labor that elite women perform often goes unrecognized not just by social scientists but even by the women themselves. This aligns the women in this class with the very well-established paradigm of examining the invisibility of gendered, reproductive, and affective labor. While this paradigm initially emerged to describe the invisible reproductive work of working-class women who subsidized the production of working-class bodies, theorists such as Maria Luisa Setien and Elaine Acosta (2013) and Christine Verschuur (2013) have also demonstrated how flows of labor within the global economy see the gendered, reproductive work of female migrants from the Global South replacing the unpaid domestic labor of women in developed nations.

While drawing on this literature, this article proposes a shift in focus by asking how the paradigm of the invisible, gendered work of reproduction might be explored in relation to the labor of elite women. By adopting a critical ethnographic approach, I pursue this inquiry from

two parallel perspectives. First, I explore—ethnographically—the experiences of two sets of women (elite and non-elite) as they engage in reproductive and affective labor in elite settings. Second, I draw on a critical perspective in order to examine the centrality of this gendered labor to the maintenance and reproduction of elite wealth and status, processes that serve, in turn, the reproduction of social and economic inequalities on a broader scale.

### **Intergenerational wealth transfers and elite reproduction**

Wealth advisers estimate that the biggest wealth transfer event in recorded history will take place between 2007 and 2061. It will consist of \$59 trillion being transferred and divided among heirs, charities, and foundations—and that is in the United States alone (Rosplock and Hauser 2014). Piketty (2014) and others have convincingly argued that Western nations may have enjoyed a brief period of falling inequality from the 1920s to the 1970s, which was, rather than a progressive trend, almost a blip in a much longer historical trajectory of growing inequality. This period of declining inequality, which was characterized by a push toward the redistribution of material resources in society, ended with the introduction of Margaret Thatcher's and Ronald Reagan's neoliberal policies, which enshrined once again the preeminence of the weight of capital accumulated by previous generations. From an anthropological perspective, kinship mattered again. From the 1980s onward, the best way to be part of the elite, or even the middle class, was once again to have been born into it. Thus, Shamus Khan (2012b: 367) asks “whether elite seizure is an anomaly that will be rectified or a return to the kind of normal dominance experienced for much of history.”

In this context, transfers between generations are a key driver of social and economic inequalities. They ensure that wealth is not redistributed but is instead accumulated in the hands

of a small elite, which is sometimes described as “the super-rich” (Freeland 2012; Urry 2014). I argue in this article that it is crucial to understand how this accumulated capital is socialized and passed down through the generations through a labor that is gendered in nature, heavily reliant on women, and currently underresearched. Indeed, Savage (2014: 603) argues that one of the most important tasks for contemporary social scientists consists of asking, “What kinds of rituals and symbolic life is characteristic of the super wealthy and the broader elite?”

This concern with the sociocultural aspects of elite life and reproduction does not, however, signal a retreat from the structural, economic aspects of elite reproduction. I have described elsewhere how elites ensure their continuous financial dominance through long-term economic investment and capital accumulation, which is often entrusted to teams employed by wealthy families precisely to look after their affairs, their “private” or family offices (Glucksberg and Burrows 2016). It would be ill advised to fall into the trap, which Khan (2012b: 368) warns us against, of mobilizing “cultural” explanations for the advantaged (such as meritocratic discourses) while looking for structural explanations for poverty. Indeed, critical ethnography attempts to avoid this trap, considering both the cultural and symbolic practices of these groups, as well as the economic and structural processes that allow them to remain at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchies they are part of.

### **Gendering the elites**

There were 2,473 billionaires in the world in 2015 controlling a total wealth equal to \$7,683 billion; 88.1 percent of them were males, and men controlled 88.6 percent of the total wealth (Wealth-X 2015–2016). Aside from the obvious imbalance that means that there are 8.4 male billionaires for each female billionaire, the marriage patterns of these individuals are certainly of

note; 85 percent of all billionaires were married in 2015, and the rate was as high as 88 percent for men. In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics estimated that 50.6 percent of adults were married, while in the United States the Census Bureau put the figure at 60.1 percent. Taken together, these data seem to suggest that the great majority of billionaires are not only men (8.4 male to one female) but that they are, disproportionately, *married* men.

Marriage is clearly important to these men. Indeed, they appear to be substantially better than average at being or remaining married. The available data were not detailed enough to understand how many times the individuals in question had been married, but my own qualitative research on succession and family offices (Glucksberg and Burrows 2016) has indicated that divorces are frowned upon and avoided at all costs within elite families because of the threat of splitting the families' capital. This research suggests that marriage is seen as a fundamental vehicle for the production of future generations of elites and that stable, long-lasting marriages are thus seen as integral to a "successful" dynasty-making project.

The ethnographic data presented in this article will show how much labor these women invested in these marriages, how they eschewed the development of their own careers for the sake of their families and the maintenance of their own privilege, and, in general, how they accepted patriarchal gender roles that placed their labor firmly within the domestic sphere. This is not, however, a new feature of elite women's lives. In 1984, Susan Ostrander wrote what she defined as the first study to focus on women of the American upper class. Ostrander focused in particular on the labor that these women exerted and directed toward preserving and strengthening their marriages at all costs. She argued that "the work done by upper-class women is largely invisible: that is, it is unpaid and occurs outside the economic marketplace and labor force. Therefore, the women's role in *creating and maintaining the economic and political*



*power of the upper class* is not typically recognized” (Ostrander 1984: 140; emphasis added).

Ostrander also argued that these elite women accepted being “inferior” in gender terms within their marriages and being submissive to their men because to oppose these norms would have meant challenging the class structures that those men were upholding. The women had no intention of doing this, because they enjoyed being privileged and upper class: the push toward gender liberation was never strong enough to overcome the fear of losing class positioning and material privilege by challenging their husbands’ upholding of patriarchal norms. Similar processes can be seen at play in my own ethnographic examples, which I detail below.

Since the second half of the 1980s, Sylvia Yanagisako has been studying wealthy entrepreneurial families engaged in silk production in Northern Italy. Her work describes, although with clear variations due to the different cultural landscapes of Italy and the United States, similarly strict attitudes toward gender roles and how women should relate to their families and society at large. “Bourgeois gender ideology rendered female independence an oxymoron” (2000: 59), explains Yanagisako: daughters are seen as a loss to the family business because they will “belong” to the family they will marry into. Nonetheless, the biggest threat that they represent is their potential willingness to claim a share of the family business as inheritance, which they would be entitled to by law. Therefore, they are socialized from very early on away from the operational family business and toward the social and relational side of the family, which is just as important and run entirely by the women (see also Bourdieu 1996: 281). Likewise, reflecting on issues of gender and inheritance in the context of Portuguese elite families, Antonia Pedroso de Lima (2000: 41) articulates the complex ways in which family members are not just chosen but *constituted* to continue the dynastic line.

This article thus draws together, through critical ethnography, the anthropological focus

on cultural succession and dynastic constitution—typified by Pedroso de Lima (2000), Yanagisako (2000), and Bourdieu (1996)— and Savage (2015) and Khan’s (2012b) concerns with the structural features that allow the production and reproduction of inequalities from which elites derive benefit. Echoing Ostrander, the elites whom I studied were deeply reliant on feminine, gendered labor that is invisible but crucial to their reproduction. Inequality is thus reproduced through gendered, classed, sexed relationships that stretch from individuals to families, to businesses, and to the broader social structures that exist within a capitalist society (Bear et al. 2015).

### **Elite and non-elite women in the Alpha Territories: Gender, bodies, and female labor**

Starting from classical anthropological approaches to the study of elites (Abbink and Salverda 2013; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Nader 1972; Shore and Nugent 2002), the research presented here was developed in a way that was sensitive to what Khan (2012a) calls embodied privilege in his close-up, ethnographic study of elite adolescents in the United States (see also Schimpfoss 2014). Shamus Khan and Colin Jerolmack (2013) argue that ethnography and observation during fieldwork become even more important when studying elites, who are likely to be highly educated, articulate, and able to narrate their selves in interviews to present exactly the image that they want the researcher to leave with (on studying financial lawyers, see also Riles 2011).

As the ethnographic case studies presented here will show, throughout my research I attempted to consider the points of view and experiences of different respondents—in this case, women who were elite *and* those women who served the elites—and to hold their roles and concerns in mind as I progressed with the ethnography. This was a pragmatic way to go beyond what James Carrier (2016) calls the tendency to favor sympathy over empathy with our research

subjects, and to follow instead a commitment to studying elites ethnographically and critically. Ultimately, the benefits of studying elites through their habitus and “in place” will become clearer in the case studies, but this approach certainly responds to Laura Bear and colleagues’ (2015) call for studying the inequalities produced by capitalism from an embodied and emplaced perspective that is attentive to the multifaceted, complex, and sometimes contradictory nature of these processes. If large-scale datasets can to an extent answer the what/how many/how much/how long questions of inequality, it is only ethnographic, qualitative work that can attempt to answer the how and the why questions, which are, at the very least, just as important.

So what can such an ethnographic *and* critical study of elites look like in practice? For this article, I have selected case studies that show two very different groups of women; the first comprises wealthy wives who live in expensive suburbs, and the second comprises women who work for elite women, though not directly for the specific women in the first group. The first and second groups do not know each other. Not all the suburban wives were born very wealthy, as their stories make clear, and not all of those who work for the elites are economically disadvantaged: one is, for example, a trained academic as well as a professional yoga teacher. At the same time, all of the women contribute to the reproduction of the elites that they are part of, or work for, through labor that is gendered in nature and very easily missed or erased when approaching the issue of elites and inequality through purely statistical or political economic perspectives.

**“They juggle a lot of balls up in the air, and if they fall it’s a long way down”**

I will call the first group I am focusing on “the wives”: women living in big houses in an expensive suburb to the southwest of London. Unsurprisingly, these women turned out to be

diverse and not very much at all like “ladies who lunch” (a British stereotype used to describe financially comfortable women who occupy their time with frivolous social activities). They knew the stereotypes very well, of course, and played with them. Their houses were undoubtedly big and expensive: big gardens, many rooms, often a swimming pool in the grounds or in the basement, or both. They all had staff, some more than others. The women who said they did not have staff usually meant that their staff did not live in; it was a given that they were not cleaning the houses or looking after the gardens. Indeed, on my first visit to a house like this, I made the mistake, upon being told “no, we don’t have staff” to ask about a team of men that I could see clearly working in the garden. The response came at once, slightly annoyed and baffled at my faux pas: “Well, yes, they do the garden.”

Each one of the “wives” made sure to tell me, in private, something to make themselves look “grounded,” as one of them put it, and therefore not like the “others.” It could be something about not always having had nannies to look after their children, or still doing a few shifts a month of work even though they did not need to, just to “stay in touch” with the “real” world. It mattered to them that I did not think that they had no idea how the rest of society worked, but they chose to demonstrate this to me alone, not in front of the friends whom they would normally compete with in spending on outlandish gifts, cars, holidays, clothes, and so on.

What they wanted to get across, in all of the interactions I had with them, was that being them was not easy. Managing their homes and ensuring the smooth climb of their husbands’ careers by taking care of absolutely everything else was a demanding job, and their husbands were used to efficient and effective staff themselves. Their daily activities included coordinating children’s schooling and numerous extracurricular activities, managing staff, overseeing the maintenance of large, luxuriously furnished houses in different geographies, and relocating

families to different cities when required—doing all of this while maintaining their *own* appearances according to exacting standards of grooming, body shape, and expensive attire. In a popular but well-researched book, the anthropologist and journalist Wednesday Martin (2015) has recently shown how some elite wives of New York routinely get “bonuses” according to how they have performed in any given year and according to whether the children have gotten into the right schools, for example. While I did not find any evidence of this myself, the setup I observed would make it eminently plausible and possible.

It was routine for these women to leave their careers when they had children. This was not always their preference, but it was clear to them that their husbands were not going to advance in their careers unless “the home front” was taken care of through their own dedication to the numerous activities outlined above, leaving the man free to work and socialize with clients unencumbered by any caring responsibility. Things seem to not have changed substantially from more than thirty years ago, when Ostrander (1984) was describing exactly the same processes at play for upper-class American women in the early 1980s.

The women among whom I carried out my research were not all wives, and not all of them had children; a minority had made money independently, but most were wealthy through their husbands or through inheritance and divorce settlements. Divorce settlements in the Alpha Territories can be the kind of events that shake the stock market, because the CEO husbands have to flood the market with shares in order to pay out what they owe their wives. Oil executive Todd Kozel, French Connection chairman Stephen Marks, and former head of British retailer Marks & Spencer Stuart Rose are some of the high-profile businessmen who have had to sell large amounts of shares in such divorce cases recently. Such headline-grabbing cases, however, distract attention from the financial vulnerability of most elite women in relation to their

husbands and fathers. As discussed earlier, control over financial capital among global wealth elites is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of men, and divorce settlements within this demographic do not always result in the significant distribution of resources among ex-wives. For elite women, therefore, staying married to wealthy men is usually the better guarantee of maintaining access to material privilege. In addition, the frequency with which divorce disputes among elite couples become protracted and antagonistic affairs speaks further to the argument that elite wives' domestic and familial labor is not recognized as a factor in the accumulation of wealth—and subsequent reproduction of elite status—by their husbands.

One of the wives whom I met in the Alpha Territories was called Natasha: she was Russian and had lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union; she had to reinvent herself as a hotel manager after abandoning a promising career as a scientist. She had a PhD and had worked in the health care sector, but after months of her salary going unpaid and seeing no possibility for things getting better, she emigrated to Austria. Natasha changed her career entirely, becoming so successful in her new hotel management role that she traveled the world on business, which is how she met her current, rich husband. As with many of the women whom I interviewed, she had a successful career before her marriage. She used the skills and education she had to make sure that her children succeeded in every possible way, which for now meant doing well in their own education.

Talking incredibly fast, she ploughed through the weekend schedule of her three children, which sounded more demanding than what most adults would take on during an entire workweek. They all attended top-ranking private schools, of course, but also excelled at ballet and rugby and were fluent in Russian. There were sessions in these (and more) for each child every weekend: “We just don’t get to sit in front of the TV, on the sofa, and relax. I don’t know

how people do it; where do they find the time?” She was responsible for taking the children to their activities, selecting their classes, and monitoring the instructors, as well as for hiring the tutors for extra sessions in any subject for which they may not be at the top of the class. She explained how the real cost of private school was not the fees; oh no, she pitied the poor parents who think that is all there is. They kill themselves to get the children through the door without realizing the obscene amount of money required for extra tuition and activities, without which there is absolutely no point in sending them there at all: “They just don’t know, but someone should tell them!”

Natasha was not born into an elite, and her story shows just how fluid this category can be. Families were trying to enter it by placing their children in expensive public schools—sometimes not realizing the cost of the extracurricular activities, as we have seen. Some try to move into the elite by buying houses in exclusive locations: the suburb in question was famous for this, with the wives joking that it was all about the money. Their golf club was, they teased, the “municipal” one. You did not need “good blood” or connections to get in: you just needed to be able to pay the very substantial membership fees.

Most of the women do far more than run their children’s education. They also run their homes, managing staff and cycles of endless decorating required to keep the house as it should be, whether for entertainment purposes—deals, promotions, and general socializing may require inviting clients and junior staff home—or for the purposes of keeping the value of those properties stable or going up. Many work in property development as a sideline, making considerable amounts of money selling and developing properties—often through the networks that they have established while looking like “ladies who lunch.”

All the same, their standard response to questions about what they do is that they do not

do anything; it is their *husbands* who work. Their own labor, crucial as it is to upholding their own privilege and ensuring the successful reproduction of the next elite generation, is often unrecognized even by the women who perform it. In her work with rural women in Poland after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anthropologist Frances Pine (2000) showed how their own farm labor was not thought of as “labor” or work as such. Although it took up a very considerable number of hours in women’s daily lives, while they were also employed full time in industry and caring for their families, farming was not something that women “did.” It was enmeshed in kinship and not separable as a practice as it was for men, who were recognized as farmers by themselves and society at large.

Back in the exclusive suburb, as far away from rural Poland as could be, the women talked about themselves jokingly as “ladies who lunch.” They knew that they were privileged, and they played to the role, explaining how they did nothing really and just met their friends for coffee. Only, it was never just that, much like the women whom Mandana Limbert (2010) describes socializing over coffee in Oman. The “nothing,” another one explained, may well include moving an entire family to a different country at almost no notice, over the Christmas holidays, because of a promotion received by the husband: “Just make it happen,” he said. “So of course, I did it.”

The central argument of the present article, however, is that, unlike the Polish women Pine describes, these women’s labor was not simply reproducing their families: the wives were also reproducing themselves *as elites*. They were facilitating their husbands’ careers and associated accumulation of wealth, maintaining their own privileges, and ensuring that their children remained in, or gained entrance to, the highest echelons of society. Although similar to other (non-elite) women, such as those discussed by Pine (2000), in the sense that their



reproductive labor went largely unnoticed, they were also different in terms of their unique position in society and the impact that the reproduction of their elites status (and the concomitant maintenance of inequality) had on other women around them.

### **Caring for bodies and souls? Affective and emotional labor for the elites**

We turn now to a different group of women in my research, whose labor also served the needs of the elites, albeit in different ways. While they did not specifically work for *women* of the elites, their clients were disproportionately female, and they certainly engaged in labor that in many other settings would traditionally fall on female bodies. As we shall see, they shared several traits (a disposition or habitus) that are necessary when working in the Alpha Territories, as well as a clear inclination toward empathy and the ability to seamlessly perform affective and emotional labor.

Michaela is in her thirties, good looking and well spoken, as are all the other people I have met who work with or around the very wealthy. It is a particular kind of beauty, one that follows very closely the high standards expected of the wealthy themselves, made of thin body shapes, flawless skin, expensive clothes, “good” manners, and a “good” accent, a certain way of being polite and pleasant. This is a habitus that seems to be common, or one could even say necessary, in this milieu. Indeed, the Dorchester, a famously exclusive hotel in Mayfair, recently faced condemnation when a memo detailing the grooming standards required specifically of female staff was leaked to the press: these included regular manicures and waxing for women who were paid, on average, nine pounds per hour. My own research would suggest that those standards are enforced across the board in all hotels in the areas I worked in and among anyone who is expected to work for, be seen by, or come into contact with elite clients. Female staff

seemed much more aware than their male colleagues of what was and what was not acceptable, with some reporting how—informally and never in writing—it was made clear to them at the recruiting stage that only “good-looking” employees would be considered. This would explain why I have never, in two years in the Alpha Territories, come across anyone at work who did not adhere to those exacting standards. While staff were not required to maintain the same levels of grooming as the people whom they served, or dress in such expensive attire, elite spaces’ exacting aesthetics certainly required standards that would cost time and money to maintain, and that were especially difficult for employees on very low wages to maintain.

Michaela has worked as a beauty therapist in Notting Hill and Knightsbridge for years, maintaining bodies to the exacting standards that are expected in these parts of the world, but also, crucially and unexpectedly, looking after other needs of these women—and the vast majority of her clients were women. When we met in a *café*, she was pregnant with her second child and had stopped working as a beauty therapist after more than a decade of full-time work. It was physically demanding, she explained, not just the standing up all the time, but having back-to-back clients for hours almost every day. Many of the treatments (especially the massages) were hard on her own body. For all this, she was paid on average around 10 pounds an hour (according to her, this was standard in the beauty industry) while knowing full well that her clients were paying easily hundreds of pounds per hour for the treatments that she provided.

This disjuncture between the high prices paid by elite women for beauty and “well-being” services provided by workers such as Michaela and the wages received by such workers reflects another aspect of the relations of socioeconomic inequality existent between the two groups of women discussed in this article. Service-providing companies—the “middlemen” in this landscape—control both the access of workers to their elite clients and the market through

which value is placed on the services they provide, reaping handsome profits in the process. Such employment structures contribute further to the disconnect between non-elite women's labor and the role it plays in reproducing elite women's lifestyles.

Interviewing is a complex craft (Skinner 2013), and for anthropologists it is often about what people do *not* say, what they leave out, the pauses when they speak—what never makes it into a transcript. This time it was about a gesture, which Michaela repeated twice: she put her hand on her heart. Michaela did this when describing the sense of well-being that she felt when making clients feel better. She described how they would come into her treatment room tense, sometimes tearful, often lonely, and how by the end of the treatment they would leave looking happier and more serene. She thought it was about touch: these women were often alone for long periods of time, their husbands focused on their businesses and careers, and they grew lonely and sad. The ability to talk to a beautician and be stroked, massaged, and cared for, the physicality of it—but also the care and emotional labor that Michaela invested in making them feel better (Hochschild 1983; Reay 2004; Skeggs 2004)—certainly did make them feel better. Not only that: it also made *her* feel better. She explicitly said that this was the best part of the job. This was not uncommon, and I will return to this sense of well-being below.

Just like Michaela, Lauren, a young academic who taught yoga part time to supplement her income, felt that her work went way beyond the teaching of yoga—itsself a complex and holistic discipline—and definitely into the caring for, influencing, and managing the emotional well-being of her client. That part, again, was what she enjoyed the most. The client she was describing was a “highflier”—Lauren's term—working in the banking sector. She had hired Lauren to go to her house in South Kensington to practice yoga with her every morning before work. This was connected to the recent breakdown of a personal relationship that the client was

trying to come to terms with. The practice of yoga was thus not just a physical but also a deeply emotional experience that Lauren had to mediate successfully to help her client through her grieving for a lost relationship. Affect and emotional labor were key variables, which were brought to bear by the instructor to allow the healing and continued functioning of a highly paid, successful woman.

Finally, we turn to Aurora, who worked as a carer for very wealthy, old, and infirm individuals. She explicitly argued that working for the wealthy was much better *for her* precisely because she managed to establish an emotional connection with her clients. She compared her experiences working as a carer for the National Health Service (NHS) as opposed to private clients. The money was slightly better, but the support that she received from the private agencies that employed her was entirely different: they cared for her work and, to a certain extent, for her well-being. They understood that supporting her meant that she could cope better with the clients. In fact, she felt that with the private clients she was doing work that was valuable. She had enough time to make a difference in her clients' lives and make them feel better to the best of her abilities, as opposed to being forced to wash, feed, and clothe an elderly person in half an hour, so that she could move to her next appointment. Aurora was aware of and reflexive about the implications of her preferences, openly saying that "if my granny had to be looked after, I would want her to be looked after by someone she can get to know, who spends hours with her and makes her feel valued. Everyone wants that for their own relatives. But not everyone can afford it."

The women in this section all performed labor that, while being reproductive in nature—reproducing and looking after elite bodies and minds—was recognized as labor and paid for. Even though the rates of pay were never much above minimum wage, and the women often had

to spend considerable amounts of money to maintain their own bodies in order to work in the Alpha Territories, they also clearly enjoyed some aspects of their work, especially the emotive and affective parts of it. One could in fact hypothesize whether, to an extent, a trade-off may have existed between relatively low pay and the relatively high job satisfaction achieved through emotional connection with the clients.

This could explain why the women chose to work in the Alpha Territories: they were all articulate and skilled enough to choose other clients had they wished to do so. Indeed, an important part of the story is that the women who worked in these territories adhered themselves to high levels of bodily grooming and were obviously not from the poorest sections of society. Their ability to work in these areas meant that they possessed significant amounts of educational and social capital. In addition, they possessed what Ashley Mears (2015) calls bodily capital and what Diane Reay (2004) refers to as emotional capital, which they were able to mobilize and exchange for money in the manner that Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) and Bev Skeggs (2004) describe elsewhere. It was not simply about wealthy elite women ruthlessly exploiting the labor of agencyless, poorer women.

On the other hand, returning to the arguments laid out at the beginning of this article, we need to recognize how this intensively affective and emotional labor literally enables the production and reproduction of the elites whom I encountered in the Alpha Territories: the wife of the executive, who is always away but manages to be not just beautiful but relaxing to be with and who is pleasant (Ostrander 1984) because her own sadness has been taken care of, which means that her life and marriage are more likely to be a success.

The yoga sessions in the morning allowed Lauren's client to keep making money for herself, her clients, and the institution she was working for, literally reproducing the inequalities

that were structurally responsible for the existence of wealthy elites in the first place. The caring that Aurora provided not only allowed the dignified existence in old age of wealthy people, but also liberated the time of other women, who could dedicate themselves to other pursuits, which would likely involve the reproduction of their own elite families.

All of this—the nuances, the specificities, and the contradictions—can only be gathered and held up for scrutiny, simultaneously and side by side, through an approach that is both ethnographic and critical. They do not need to negate one another, nor do they necessarily fit and complement each other, but they all exist: they are all part of what was in the field and of what constitutes elite reproduction today.

## **Conclusion**

The successful transfer of wealth from one generation to the next is a key concern of the very wealthy, especially at a time when the weight of accumulated capital plays an ever-greater part in individuals' likeliness to belong to the top of the elite, which is usually referred to as “the super-rich” (Piketty 2014). Savage (2015: 188) uses the image of climbing mountains as a metaphor for achieving elite status, stressing how much easier it is to get to the top for those who start higher up and who can afford the best “kit.”

If this ascent to elite status is in large part achieved through the accumulation of financial capital, it is usually men who are credited with “making the money” and thus ensuring their families' maintenance of wealth and status. The examples explored in this article show, however, how women's labor enables and facilitates these processes. First, women cover “the home front,” taking care of absolutely everything so that their men can focus on their work—and noted accumulation of wealth—just as the upper-class women described by Ostrander (1984) did in the

1980s. Second, they invest heavily, to the point of leaving their own paid careers—their chance to “climb the slopes” independently—in the education and all around development of their children, ensuring not just access to the best schools but also monitoring their performance and facilitating their social activities. In this sense, if we continue with the climbing metaphor, they make sure that the base camp for the next generation is as high up as possible, and they carry their children there. Third, in a different context they employ the labor of other, non-elite women to help them set up the camp.

Yet, all of this labor is often invisible and unrecognized, even by the women who perform it themselves. This misrecognition—the ladies who lunch, the mothers who are just looking after their children—is in line with the devaluation of domestic and reproductive labor, which is typical of a patriarchal paradigm whereby it is only “productive” labor that takes place outside the household that is recognized. This article has attempted to build an analysis of this paradigm, however, by examining the invisible labor of elite women alongside that of non-elite women who work for them, and by demonstrating how the labor of both groups of women contributes directly to the social and material reproduction of elite privilege and status.

Dynasty making is a key concern of elite families: it is pursued through long-lasting, successful marriages, as well as through the most tax-efficient transfers of inheritances. It is bound up with children’s education, as well as with their broader socialization and, eventually, their own appropriate, class-compatible marriages. Just as economic capital needs to be protected and increased, so does the family. These are long-term, intergenerational concerns that fit well with Savage’s (2015), Piketty’s (2014), and Khan’s (2012b) focus on the *longue durée* of accumulation processes and the structural—as well as cultural—processes that make elite reproduction possible.

The data presented in this article show how, in the transfer and reproduction of wealth, and the lives of the people able to manage and grow that wealth, women's work is clearly central. By using a critical ethnographic approach, I have focused on the *how*, and in doing so have opened up spaces to consider the two seemingly distant, if not contradictory, categories of "wives" and working women. In light of these data, elite London has emerged as a social space structured around strong hierarchies not just of class but also of gender. It is essential to understand more about the interplay of these two structuring principles within elite spaces, focusing on the "invisible" labor performed by both elite and non-elite women.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. “Life in the ‘Alpha Territory’: London’s ‘Super-Rich’ Neighbourhoods” (ES/K002503/1) led by Roger Burrows (Newcastle University) joined by Mike Savage (LSE), Caroline Knowles (Goldsmiths University), Tim Butler (KCL), Rowland Atkinson (Sheffield University), David Rhodes (University of York), and myself.

<sup>2</sup>. The downside of such an approach was that I was never sure of the exact economic or financial position of my respondents: I relied instead on indicators such as the house prices of the areas they lived in coupled with their mentioning of a number of second homes in prestigious locations, the use of wealth management services, private clubs, and the types of cars they would drive. It would have been impossible, however, to conduct in-depth ethnographic work with these groups had there been a need to have clear, open conversations about their financial positions, especially at the beginning of the research process.