In this paper, I want to question the recent reliance on the care/non-care distinction on which several recent feminists have based political-theoretical claims vis-a-vis democracy, especially as regards the distribution of certain goods and the inclusion of certain persons within democratic communities. For the purposes of this paper, I will take Joan Tronto’s work on “caring democracy” and international migration as representative of this recent turn; for Tronto, care lies at the heart of democracy and the meaning of citizenship therein (2005; 2013). Recognition of the centrality of care-work will not only cause us to rethink the current distribution of rights and responsibilities within democratic societies; it will also lead us to greater inclusion of those on whom the democratic societies of the Global North rely. These are primarily women of color who have migrated from the Global South to become nannies, nurses, teachers, and other care-providers in our societies. Their performance of these tasks, already historically marginalized, has led to their precarious existence among us, even as it has simultaneously enabled the advance of many women in the Global North into the paid workforce without sacrificing the provision of child-care (Tronto 2002)—something that is not necessarily true for the children of those migrant care-workers who must stay behind. Centering care in our democratic theory and institutions would mean, for example, including both care-providers and their dependents in our (which is also already their) polity (Tronto 2005).
While I think this line of argumentation is essential to understanding the way in which racial and sex/gender hierarchies continue to distribute time, life chances, and power within and across nations; I also find that the arguments of Tronto and other care theorists lead me to question the very categories of care and caring-labor they rely upon. I want to frame this critique as an extension of Dorothy Roberts’s (1997) insightful distinction between “spiritual” and “menial” housework, which, she observes, reflects hierarchies among women within the domestic sphere—especially, in the US, racial hierarchy, but also class. Drawing on her argument that tasks, including the respect and remuneration one receives for performing them, are allocated along racial and class lines, and that this reflects and reproduces conflicts between women, I want to argue that the current reliance on care reinscribes similar hierarchies among women, including among women from the Global South. What becomes, for example, of those women who are left behind to work in industrial manufacturing jobs that we do not categorize as “caring”? Such work is equally foundational to the very survival those of us in the Global North. It is also, like care-work, increasingly feminized and racialize, and usually excluded from inclusion in the democratic communities for which they work.

In the rise of “care” as a category, we must be mindful of what it occludes from our analytic and political views that previous terms, such as the “gender division of labor” may be more revelatory and politically fruitful. In the remainder of this paper, I am going to reconstruct Tronto’s analysis of care and her argument for its centrality to democracy; I will then look at Roberts’s distinction between spiritual and menial housework; and finally, I will look at how we can use her concerns to question care and the divisions and hierarchies it reinforces.

**Making Care-Providers Citizens**
In this paper, I am going to focus on one proposal that Tronto (2005) makes: “that we should think of care as a ground for conferring citizenship” (131). For Tronto, making care-provision the basis of membership in a democratic polity is a way of addressing the “care crisis”. This crisis arises out of the ubiquity of commodified care-relations in the contemporary Global North; it not only relies on the exploitation of migrant women from the Global South—making care “an imported commodity” (Tronto 2005, 134)—it also allows the overwork of Global North workers by shifting the burden of care onto other, more vulnerable persons, freeing the former to give as much of their time as possible to their employers. Finally, the commodification of care also relies on the perpetuation of care’s privacy and privatization, in which the relations of exploitation are hidden, and only those who can afford to pay for commodified care will receive what they, in many cases, need to live. This maldistribution of care is compounded by the fact that those wealthy people will not only receive necessary care, but personal service as well, those luxury forms of care that one could perform but opts not to.

The commodification of care, and the importation of care-workers from South to North without giving them access to citizenship, means that we can neither have a public conversation about care-work, its place in our society, or its value (and the value of the work and the lives people who provide it). In contrast, making care a qualification for citizenship could ensure that “to make certain that care is organized with a proper balance among the interests of those who need care, those who give care, and those whose lives are made easier if others receive care” (Tronto 2005, 141). It would do so by making care a part of politics rather than that which exists beneath or prior to politics, as a precondition to citizenship. While the postwar welfare-state model “presumes a citizen worker and a ‘support staff,’ traditionally conceived as the wife
in a nuclear family, whose task it is to perform the ‘reproductive labor’ of ‘the other side of the paycheck’” (Tronto 2005, 139), neoliberal political-economic conditions have eliminated the possibility of single-income families at the same time the state has withdrawn much of its support for care-provision. Yet the model of citizenship has persisted. The result is that citizenship assumes care-provision for the citizen-worker, even as securing that care has become more difficult for larger numbers of citizens: thus the turn to more precarious, less expensive migrant workers.

On the side of the care-providers, the continued feminization and privatization of care-work, combined with the history of racism and nativism in many receiving countries, have resulted in the exploitation of care-workers and their perceived unfitness for participation in public life. “by asking Americans to think about care needs and the noncitizens who currently do a great deal of care work, the rethinking of citizenship and care will open new possibilities for thinking about immigrants’ lives, the nature and value of care, and the costs and advantages of globalizing care work” (Tronto 2005, 140). The point is not simply to remedy the injustice and exploitation immigrant care-workers experience, but rather, to integrate their interests and the work they perform more centrally into democratic decision-making processes, and to change their perceived fitness for public life.

**Roberts’s Two Houseworks**

While I agree with much of Tronto’s reasoning behind changing our definitions of citizenship to include those on whom we depend, such as immigrant care-workers, I find that her arguments actually compel us to challenge the very limitations that care places on such changes. Why should we include only care workers and not all those on whom we depend—many of
whom are also women of color, often those who are marginalized within their own societies so that they cannot migrate to become care-providers? This line of thinking is encouraged by Dorothy Roberts’s (1997) division between “spiritual” and “menial” housework, which I will now briefly summarize.

Roberts wants to complicate the feminist critique of the public–private divide, which is at the heart of Tronto’s care-theory, by noting the ways in which the private sphere is itself divided:

Some work in the home is considered spiritual: it is valued highly because it is thought to be essential to the proper functioning of the household and the moral upbringing of children. Other domestic work is considered menial: it is devalued because it is strenuous and unpleasant and is thought to require little moral or intellectual skill. While the ideological opposition of home and work distinguishes men from women, the ideological distinction between spiritual and menial housework fosters inequality among women. Spiritual housework is associated with privileged white women; menial housework is associated with minority, immigrant, and working class women. (Roberts 1997, 51)

This division often occurs because white women have employed (either for pay or through enslavement) women of color to perform those “nasty, tedious physical tasks—standing over a hot stove, cleaning toilets, scrubbing stains off of floors and out of shirts, changing diapers and bedpans” (55) The Victorian ideology of (white) women’s moral superiority that justified their confinement to home relied on just such a domestic division of labor: “The notion of a purely spiritual domesticity could only be maintained by cleansing housework of its menial parts. The ideological separation of home from market, then, dictated the separation of spiritual and menial
housework” (55). In contrast, the suitability of women of color for menial housework was premised on the spiritual inferiority that it also demonstrates.

There are several features of the spiritual/menial divide that are relevant for my purposes here. First is the historical changes that have produced it, alongside changes to the domestic sphere more generally. So, “before hospitalization was common, for example, women provided skilled nursing care to sick family members” (53–4); similar changes have occurred as the ideologies of motherhood have changed, as in the case of breastfeeding infants, which was previously performed by wet nurses but now “seems emblematic of spiritual bond between mother and infant” (56). How different domestic tasks come to be defined arises from those women who perform them and the ideologies around womanhood in force at the time (see also Tronto 2013, e.g., 1–4).

An important aspect of this changing boundary between spiritual and menial housework, and this is the second feature I want to highlight, is the retention of the most valuable aspects for the privileged, white woman employer.

The modern household worker’s job is defined in a way that prevents its interference with the female employer’s spiritual prerogatives. Even if a child spends the entire day with her nanny while her mother is at work, the hour of “quality time” mother and child share at bedtime is considered most important. Of course, the mother expects the nanny to develop a warm and caring relationship with the child. She wants the nanny to treat the child as a special person, and not as a chore. But the mother nevertheless desires her own relationship with her child to be superior to—closer, healthier, and more influential than—the relationship the child has with the nanny. (57)

This retention of the spiritual aspects of domesticity are at once enabled by the working mother’s freedom from menial housework and through the low status of the nanny and maid who perform
that work. But it can also exacerbate the meniality of that work and the marginalized, even precarious status of the women who perform it. Insofar as the nanny must be a competent and compassionate child-care–giver, and likely spends more hours with the child than the mother does, then she is in constant danger of encroaching on the mother’s spiritual preserve, with possibly disastrous consequences for her continued employment.¹

Finally, I want to call attention to the political problem that Roberts observes the spiritual/menial divide creates for feminism. “Even contemporary relationships between domestic servants and their female employers are characterized by rituals of deference and maternalism that symbolically reinforce the domestic's inferiority and enhance the employer's ego”; from the standpoint of feminism, we might worry, for example, that “the possibility of replicating this hierarchy in relationships between day care center workers and clients raises questions about the promotion of universal day care as a panacea for women's economic problems” (76).² The spiritual/menial hierarchy complicates many feminist economic projects premised on revaluing women’s work to attain equality with men’s, as such projects are often premised on revaluing only the spiritual work performed by white women—including their work of supervising the menial labor of women of color (77). By focusing on the kinds of work performed by privileged white women, Roberts argues, it ignores racial and economic

¹ This is something that nannies are aware of, leading them to, for example, not report that an infant had spoken her first words or taken her first steps while the parents were away (Tronto 2013, 23).

² Roberts, however, does not reject universal daycare as a feminist goal: “Universal day care is critical to women's financial well-being. It will help to ensure women's ability to handle childcare responsibilities while holding down a job. Yet feminist efforts to establish universal, government-supported childcare must simultaneously seek to secure the economic well-being and respect for workers in these settings. If these positive conditions are fostered, childcare centers have the potential to be sites for grassroots women's community-building efforts” (76) This seems consonant with Tronto’s argument.
hierarchies that simultaneously make their entry into the male-dominated paid workforce possible, and that continues to demean housework and those who perform it, regardless of their race and economic position. “Strategies to achieve gender equality in the workplace must incorporate the goals of racial and economic justice in order to succeed for all women” (78–9).

Care’s Other

The hierarchy within housework that Roberts describes easily applies to other forms of care-work that are the objects of Tronto’s and other care-theorists’ concern. Roberts does some of this extending herself, as when she discusses how “this conflict between women also plays out in institutional settings”; for example, the “tension between doctors and nurses… is redirected so that predominantly white registered nurses clash with predominantly Black aides over work assignments and supervision” (76). Similarly, “the racialized division of household work has also survived the post World War II transfer of many menial tasks from household to market” (60), so that now, “although white women constitute a majority of service workers, they are preferred for positions requiring physical and social contact with customers, leaving minority women to do the rest” (61). Thus, we may wish to speak not just of spiritual and menial housework, but of all care-work as divisible into spiritual and menial components that are often apportioned to different women along hierarchies of race.

However, I think we also need to look at the hierarchy formed through the very category of care, namely, between care-work and non-care-work—especially feminized sectors and forms of labor. I am thinking here of, for example, industrial manufacturing in the Global South, most notably clothing and food manufacture (including agriculture) which tends to employ women (Sassen 1988; Sassen 2008; Enloe 2014). The last half-century have witnessed ever-greater
numbers of women joining the industrial workforce, especially in the Global South, often replacing the labor of Global North as those jobs have been sent abroad to capitalize on lower wages and decreased labor and environmental protections. As with the distinction between spiritual and menial labor, much of the allocation of care and non-care labor follows hierarchical lines, including race and class. Indeed, one way of thinking about the history of the menial/spiritual hierarchy is that the most menial of care-tasks are cast out of that category, and out of our view, entirely. In calling attention to this hierarchy, we will see that many of the concerns that theorists like Tronto have about care likewise apply to feminized non-care work; and that distinguishing between and proposing policies around the care/non-care distinction may exacerbate those hierarchies. I am going to make these points by revisiting the three features of the spiritual/menial hierarchy that I observed in the previous section and extending them, and thus Roberts’s critique, to the care/non-care distinction. Ultimately, I find that Tronto’s arguments regarding care as the basis for citizenship undermine the very basis for relying on that category.

Before moving on, however, I need to briefly summarize Tronto’s definition of care to show why, for example, employment in industrial clothing or food production does not qualify as care-work. In her most recent work on the topic, Tronto (2013) defines care as, “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (19). First, I should note that this is a far more capacious definition than other care-theorists have provided (see, e.g., Kittay 1999; Held 2006) thus, if it cannot encompass women’s industrial labor, then that is likely true for other authors’ definitions. And second, while it is possible to include waged manufacturing work in this definitions, it
seems equally true to include a wide variety of other practices, too—such as military service (Tronto 2013, 76–80), that would likewise seem to fall outside care. When the question of production does come up, it is “at one remove” from care, and it is in reference to men’s waged employment as a means of providing the material bases (i.e., paychecks) for women to engage in the “direct and intimate ways usually associated with care” (70). As such, Tronto treats production primarily as a way of giving men “a ‘pass’ out of what we normally regard caring responsibilities” (70). This would seem to exclude, then, both the ever-growing numbers of women employed in industrial production, often replacing men, and relates the caring component of that labor not to the production itself, but rather to the remuneration it provides as a form of caring for the worker’s family. And yet the things that workers produce—and, over the last half-century of post-industrialization in the Global North, it is Global South women in growing numbers who actually make the things we buy—that also form the material bases of care as Tronto understands it, yet that do not receive her attention.

History

Just as there is a history of changing boundaries between spiritual and menial housework, so too have the borders between care and non-care work shifted. Like the shifting location of care-work, so too has the changing boundary between care and non-care work followed the movement of the most menial tasks from domestic production to the market:

Just as industrialization almost completely shifted goods production from the home to the market, so the conditions of urban America increasingly commodify domestic tasks. Daycare centers, fast food restaurants, maid services, nursing homes, and recreation facilities offer a reprieve from housework to women who can afford them. The commodification of housework, however, has not altered its gendered nature. Although
As I claimed above, we can see the historical trajectory of the care/non-care distinction could be usefully thought of as the movement of the most menial of care tasks outside the category of care altogether. For example, while clothing and food production were formerly performed by women within the home, they of course now take place largely outside the home—and even outside the country of purchase. They are so far removed from the ultimate purpose that their manufacture is not only menial, but has been severed from the very caring relationships that they will, upon consumption, be used for.

The Continued Importance of Spiritual Care-work

I would argue that the contemporary privileging of consumption both popularly and within feminism specifically—including shopping for, purchasing, and maintenance of industrially produced goods—is another manifestation of the spiritual/menial hierarchy that also falls onto the care/non-care division. It is primarily women of color who produce the food and clothes that wealthy, often white, women will then carefully select for their families; and yet, as with nannies, it is this selection process, the spiritual work, that is privileged in descriptions of care-work through its inclusion in the category of care (see Tronto 2013, 80) and the concomitant exclusion of industrial manufacturing jobs from that category.

The geographic and categorical separation between production and consumption is, seen from this angle, the perfection of the spiritual/menial hierarchy. Unlike the nanny or other domestic care-provider, the industrial wage-laborer who makes a family’s clothing or food is in no position to threaten the spiritual prerogatives of the wife and mother. The producer’s absence
allows a care relationship to be assumed between the worker and consumer’s family—for example, in the case of artisanally produced or Fair Trade goods—regardless of either the affective state of the worker or the conditions under which she labored. Yet the fabrication of this care relationship, or at least its consumption, becomes just another form of the spiritual work that the consuming woman can take credit for; unlike the nanny, the far-away wage-laborer is the ultimately controllable employee because she can remain largely fictive.

*The Difficulty of Feminist Politics under Hierarchy*

Given the physical separation and relations of exploitation that divide women in industrial manufacturing in the Global South from women in the Global North, we should expect the political difficulties that Roberts observes arising from the spiritual/menial hierarchy to be exacerbated. To return to the example of consumption, we should expect most solidaristic political efforts on the part of women in the Global North to remain unlikely to challenge their privileged performance of spiritual care-work, and even to reinforce it. This is certainly one way of understanding the Free Trade “movement”, which provides only questionable and limited benefits to the workers in the Global South that it is purportedly for. Similarly, efforts at charitable consumption, for example the automatic donation through consumption programs of companies like Tom’s Shoes, may actually harm the nascent domestic industries in recipient countries and exacerbate problems of poverty. As Iris Marion Young () argues, the kind of structural injustice that wage-laboring women in the Global South face demands a different kind of responsibility than simply blaming sweatshop owners and the companies that contract with them. Instead, we must look to ourselves as consumers to see how we reproduce those structures in our own behaviors and relationships.
The very emphasis in recent feminist scholarship on care-work is another manifestation of political problems that exacerbate hierarchies among women and undermine the basis for a more egalitarian political movement. In addition to creating the hierarchy between producers and consumers, or that between menial non-care-workers and spiritual care-providers, the current emphasis on care also rests on and reproduces the hierarchy between menial, paid care-workers and menial, paid non-care-workers. Why are some women able to migrate while others are not able to do so, and what are the benefits to the former that the latter are denied—benefits that, should care become a basis for citizenship as Tronto proposes, would only be exacerbated?

As Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2000) shows as regards the “international transfer of caretaking”, those emigrant Filipina domestic workers rely on women who stay behind to provide care for the former’s dependents, and that this labor is often also unwaged, performed by family members or neighbors of the women who migrated. According to Salazar Parreñas, these women who stay behind are those who are “who are too poor to migrate” (569), and are thus unable to take advantage of the greater income they could earn were they to do so. “Most likely, they are other female relatives, but also less privileged Filipina women, women unable to afford the high costs of seeking employment outside of the Philippines. Thus, migrant Filipina domestic workers are in the middle of the three-tier hierarchy of the international transfer of caretaking” (570). In contrast, this latter group, “migrant Filipina domestic workers, as shown by their high level of educational attainment, tend to have more resources and belong in a more comfortable class strata than do domestic workers in the Philip- pines. Such resources often enable Carmen and other migrant Filipina women to afford the option of working outside of the country” (571).
This privilege is exacerbated by their successful migration, which induces what Salazar Parreñas calls the “conflicting class mobility” of being a menial worker in the receiving country despite being relatively privileged in one’s country of origin. These workers “cope with their marginal status in the receiving country by basing their identities on the increase in their class status in the country of origin. In the same vein, migrant Filipina domestic workers resolve their conflicting class mobility by stressing their higher social and class status in the Philippines” (574). At the same time, from the standpoint of gender hierarchy, “the process of migration for women involves escaping their gender roles in the Philippines, easing the gender constraints of the women who employ them in industrialized countries, and finally relegating their gender roles to women left in the Philippines” (570). Those are left behind, meanwhile, face the same double day that many women elsewhere face: paid employment followed by domestic duties, and for lower wages than their employers receive.

**Conclusion**

All of the problems of hierarchy and privilege that Salazar Parreñas identifies between migrant Filipina workers and those who perform care-work in the Philippines are likely to be the same across sending countries, and are also likely to be true for those women who remain behind not to provide care-work (or only to do so), but to work in factories, sweatshops, farms, and plantations. But while concerns over what Salazar Parreñas terms the international transfer of caregiving can be easily encompassed within a care-theoretical framework, it is less clear where industrial manufacturing fits in. And yet, our societies are no less dependent upon such work to function properly, and like care-work, non-caring manufacturing is likewise assumed as a condition of possibility for contemporary citizenship—indeed, as we saw following both the
September 11 terrorist attacks and 2007 financial crisis, consumption is an act of good citizenship. And, just as care-work is often occluded from view by its performance within the private sphere of domesticity, so too is the production of many goods hidden within the private sphere of the factory or sweatshop, often further hidden from view through these facilities’ location overseas. This location also places such workplaces outside the regulatory spheres of the consumers’ countries, much like migrant domestic workers often find themselves outside their receiving countries’ labor-protective regulations that native-born workers enjoy (see, for example, Nakano Glenn 2012).

Given all these parallels between care-work and non-care work, as well as the potential for “care” to reproduce hierarchies and exploitation while undermining the potential for political solidarity among women, perhaps we should resurrect other terms that have now fallen out of favor among many academic feminists, such as the international gender division of labor. If our interest is, as Roberts argues it must be, racial and economic justice for all women, then we may be better served by a category that highlights the gendered, racialized, and classed nature of feminized work in as capacious a way as possible.

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