

MODHUMITA ROY

Labour Pains

“Nannygate,” Undocumented Workers and the Social Cost of Mothering in Contemporary Cultural Texts

Stories are not just entertainment

Don't be fooled.

—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremonies*

When a Thai nanny in Redmond City, California, tells me she loves the American children she cares for more than her own children back in Thailand, is this an example of a rich country “extracting” the ore of love from a poor country?

—Arlie Russell Hochschild

In Ama Ata Aidoo’s classic novel (or “prose poem,” as some have called it), *Our Sister Killjoy* the narrator asks:

It is a
Long way from
Calcutta to
Munich:
Aeroplanes brought you here.
But what else did
Migrant birds of the world [?] (20)

Published in 1977, the work is an intense, even angry, engagement with the abject state of the “third world.” In the 1970s—less than 25 years after de-colonization began in Britain’s colonies in Africa and Asia—the newly independent states faced a new form of wealth transfer from the peripheries

to the centre: the migration of highly trained personnel—doctors, engineers, educators and scientists, that is, human capital flight referred to in common parlance as “brain drain.”¹ Aidoo catalogues this drain vividly:

Gambian ophthalmologist in Glasgow
Phillipino lung specialist in Boston
Brazilian cancer expert
In Brooklyn or
Nancy. (32)

The improved technologies of travel—bigger and faster aeroplanes—coupled with changes in immigration laws and visa categories and quotas, facilitated the travel from former colonies to the metropole (“from Calcutta to Munich”). In the United States, the 1965 *Immigration and Nationality Act* (itself an amendment of the 1952 *McCarran-Walter Act*) abolished “national origin” quotas, instituting instead preferential ones among which were skilled and unskilled workers in occupations for which labour was in short supply. This was a radical departure from the past, explicitly linking as it did, visas with labour. Concomitantly, the devastated economies of the former colonies provided few opportunities, especially for upwardly mobile professionals, significant numbers of whom became in Ama Ata Aidoo’s words, “migrants birds of the world.” But Aidoo asks for a less obvious, more profound engagement with the question “What else did?” Her question asks us to look deeper at the constellation of factors that make this particular migration not only possible, but inevitable. The question also invites attention on the devastation that is left behind—what Aidoo with great economy of expression, describes as “while at home/wherever that may be/limbs and senses rot” (32).

Taking Aidoo’s cue, this paper focuses on a different moment and a different, though related, migratory drain and attempts to sketch out its consequences on those “at home/wherever that may be.” It does so by concentrating on cultural representations of the new phase of migration and its consequences. I present three women—three mothers (or six, depending on how we are counting) as three individual snapshots that capture particular cultural moments: Zoe Baird, President Bill Clinton’s nominee for Attorney General who is a stand-in for mostly white and affluent women who seek privatized childcare and all too often, hire “illegal” nannies; Clara in the film *Clara’s Heart* who is a stand-in for West Indian and other third world nannies; and Josephine Perera, the subject of the documentary *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas*, who stands in for undocumented caregivers around the world. I present their fragmentary stories paratactically. A literary device, parataxis is derived etymologically from the Greek *paratassein* which means “to arrange or place side by side or

to punctuate two or more sentences as if they are one.” (*Oxford Companion to English Language*) In parataxis, no linking information between the parts is provided (“It was raining. We went indoors”) but the contiguity of phrases and sentences, side by side or one after another, is an invitation to provide links and therefore is an invitation to meaning-making. Placing Zoe Baird, Clara and Josie and their stories, side by side, as if randomly, provide an opportunity to think through connective tissues, to think about the not-so-obvious ways in which the “here” and “there” are linked via the gendered political economy of intimate labour and its social cost. I focus on women because unlike the “brain drain” of the 1960s and ’70s, which was decidedly male-centered, this new migration is made up more of women. Of the estimated 200 million migrants worldwide, women make up half, if not more. 70 percent of Filipino migrants, for example, are female, and women migrants outnumber men in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Migration, thus, is a profoundly gendered phenomenon with gendered consequences.

I have written elsewhere on commercial surrogacy or womb renting—the outsourcing of biological reproductive labour (Roy). There I discussed the ability of the affluent to buy eggs and sperm, to create embryos, rent wombs of poor women to make babies at a cut rate. This paper marks a shift from biological to *social* labour required to reproduce the next generation. In particular, I focus on what Shellee Colen calls, “the operation of a transnational, highly stratified system of reproduction” (78) in which “global processes are evident in local, intimate daily events and in which stratification itself is reproduced...” (78) Reproduction, as Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp reminds us, is a “slippery concept” including not only childbearing but also “the constitution of a labor force and ideologies that support the continuity of social systems” (311). In other words, our social selves have to be (re)produced as much as our biological selves and they have to be maintained through performing such labour as cooking and cleaning, tending to the sick and elderly, bringing up and socializing children.

Adrienne Rich describes such reproductive labour as “the activity of world-protection, world preservation, and world repair” (xvi). This task of “world preservation and repair”—social reproduction—also inevitably involves the repetition and reenactment of embedded (and embodied) inequalities whether of gender, race or class, and usually a mix of all of them. It is the cost of *this* labour, which in an obvious pun, I am calling “labour pain.” It is useful to keep in mind Laura Briggs’ reminder that “we live our economic situations in households rather than abstract places like markets”(49). Therefore, we need to examine carefully the necessary labour that households demand and look to the micropolitics of “labour pain” to assess better the hidden costs of social reproduction.

Gendered Labour Crisis and the Care Drain

As many sociologists have noted, in the 1970s and ’80s, (white) women entered the workforce in record numbers, in part to offset declining real wages of men. This increased participation into the paid labour market set off what Laura Briggs aptly terms “a gendered labor crisis” (50). This crisis is neither ‘natural’ nor inevitable in society, of course; it is the consequence of several intertwined factors. For one, domestic work, especially that of caring, has persistently continued to be viewed as *women’s* work. Relatedly, despite the fact that more and more women spend longer hours outside the home, there has been no appreciable decrease in women’s responsibility for the home, and especially for the upbringing of children. This has resulted in the creation of the now familiar burden of the “double shift.” Indeed, contemporary ideologies of domesticity seem to exact ever more time and energy from women.² The caretaking crisis is in no small measure also the corollary of making caring for children one of the least economically-valued occupations in the U.S., which, in any case, lags significantly behind other industrialized nations in providing childcare for families (Waldfoegel; Zimmerman et. al.; Lutz). Notwithstanding this reality, notes Cameron Macdonald, “our ideas about how best to raise children remain firmly built on the ideal of the ever-present, continually attentive, at-home mother” (3). At issue also is the state’s incapacity or reluctance (especially in the United States) to make child care a priority. In 1989, as part of a delegation that studied France’s exemplary child care arrangements, Hillary Rodham Clinton had expressed her frustration: “The problem in the United States is that we have no approach” (Lawson). Throughout the twentieth century, attempts to make paid childcare a social priority not only failed but one outcome of the destruction of the post-war welfare state is now to disparagingly call it the “nanny state.” It is instructive to remember that the Jimmy Carter administration (1976-1980) had taken the new reality of working families into account and had actually initiated discussions about governmental help for mothers of young children who were in the paid workforce. Any mention of such a solution was effectively cut off by subsequent administrations (Reagan and Bush, and even Clinton) with the racialized moral panic of “welfare cheats” and “welfare queens” (Briggs 59).

The ever-increasing, ever more normalized viciousness of privatization has made it impossible to propose even modest state subsidized, affordable childcare for working families. Instead, what has become acceptable is the hiring of migrant women who quite often lack authorization to work—a completely unremarkable fact among two-income couples,” as Linda Greenhouse puts it. Thus, on one side of the equation, is the evacuation of even the *idea* of care work as public, shared, common good: “Child care issues are considered,”

writes Anna Quindlen, “in convulsive and inconclusive national spasms ... because they have been seen too long as private female troubles. At the other end of the world, in the wake of debt crisis of the 1980s, draconian conditions were imposed on poor nations by Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). SAPs demanded a radical restructuring of domestic spending and shrinking government. Deep cuts in social spending including agricultural and food subsidies, education and health, disproportionately impacted women causing them to seek out what Saskia Sassen calls, “alternative circuits of survival” (2000: 515). Among the most important of these global circuits, she writes, “are the illegal trafficking in women for prostitution as well as for regular work, organized export of women as brides, nurses and domestic servants.” (Sassen 2000: 523).

Thus the need for childcare in the developed North coinciding as it did with economic devastation in the global South, created the space for immigrant women (with or without documents) to step in and provide socially necessary reproductive labour, especially that of mothering. Analysts have called this the “international transfer of caretaking” (Parreñas 48). Ironically, the very governments that fail to protect the interests and welfare of poor women have come to rely on the remittances of a female immigrant workforce to balance their national budgets in order to placate international lending bodies such as the World Bank and IMF (Sassen 2000: 523). For example, in 1986, remittances sent back to Pakistan made up 78 percent of foreign exchange earned and much of it came from women who were domestic workers (Enloe 1989: 185). In other words, the debt crisis provided middle-class women, especially in the developed nations, a new generation of domestic servants *and* the export of domestic labour served to prop up sagging economies in the home countries. This astonishing imbrication (overlying) of policies is the partial answer to Aidoo’s question of “what else did?” Cynthia Enloe puts it succinctly when she writes, “When a woman from Mexico, Jamaica or the Philippines decides to emigrate ... as a domestic servant she is designing her own international debt policies. She is trying to cope with the loss of earning power and the rise in the cost of living at home by cleaning bathrooms in the country of the bankers” (Enloe 1989: 185).

While the economic transfer in the form of remittance is well-documented, less commented upon is what Arlie Russell Hochschild characterizes “the importation of care and love from poor countries to rich ones.”

As rich nations become richer and poor nations poorer, this one-way flow of talent and training continuously widens the gap between the two.... [I]n addition to the brain drain, there is now a parallel but more hidden and wrenching trend, as poor countries move to care for the

young, the old and the sick in rich countries, whether as maids and nannies or as daycare and nursing-aides. It’s a care drain. (186)

In order to fully grasp the *human* implications of this “care drain” I wish to shift our focus to what we may provisionally call “deficit calculations.” Here, deficit ought to be understood not so much as a lack, impairment or handicap—though all of these are applicable—but more as the ways in which this form of surrogate care, of “intimate labour” causes a shortage or shortfall elsewhere and which too often gets overlooked.

Social Cost of Mothering I: Zoe Baird and “Nannygate.”

My entry point into the interconnected narratives of care deficit, or what Hochschild calls, “extracting the ore of love from a poor country” (1), is the infamous “Nannygate” scandal of the early 1990s. In 1993 the newly elected President Clinton nominated Zoe Baird as his Attorney General. She was the first woman in U.S. history to be considered for the post and it is not difficult to see why her nomination was positively received, especially by women’s groups. The enthusiasm, however, was short lived as Baird’s confirmation ran aground when it was revealed that she had hired someone who was not authorized to work in the U.S., an “illegal nanny.” Opposition to her nomination began to gain momentum both in Congress and, as evidenced by the volume of phone calls to congressional offices, in the larger public (Sampson 310). The opinion pages of newspapers quickly began to take sides and an article in *The New York Times*, titled “The Lessons of Zoe Baird,” noted, that President Clinton and his advisors seemed to be caught unprepared for “the country’s outrage.” Their strategy was “to treat the childcare story as a non-story—to dismiss it”—a strategy which failed stunningly (Blumenthal 53). The media, talk radio in particular, predictably, engaged in a feeding frenzy of criticism, wagging collective fingers, especially at professionally ambitious women with young children, implying that childcare was entirely the responsibility of women and that they, by venturing out of the home, had abdicated this responsibility. Rush Limbaugh, the incendiary right-wing talk show host, (in)famously labeled Zoe Baird a “feminazi” for suggesting she had relied on her husband to iron out the nanny’s legal status (Sampson 311).

What lessons the nation ought to have learned from this episode seemed unclear though at the very least, it brought to spectacular but brief attention the imbrications of several contentious concerns: immigration, childcare, gender and class privilege. Named the general counsel for Aetna Life and Casualty (at a salary of \$507, 105) in 1990—a job she described as the “most challenging job” of her professional career—and having to commute nearly a half hour to

work every day, Baird and her husband (a constitutional law professor at Yale University) advertised for private childcare: “Live-in Nanny for 7 Mo. Old boy in warm family setting. Light housekeeping, cook dinners. Long term position with appreciative family in beautiful home.” Among desired qualifications they also listed, not surprisingly, “Non-smoker. Driver. Citizen or Green card only.” Failing to find anyone who fit the bill—anyone that is, who was a “legal” worker and for whom low pay but promise of a “warm family setting in beautiful home” were enticements enough—Baird and her husband hired Lillian Cordero, an undocumented Peruvian woman, and her husband.³ One reason for not finding acceptable and legal childcare might have been that despite a combined salary of \$660,345, Baird and her husband were paying \$5.97 an hour, barely above minimum wage. “It is amazing,” wrote Robert Kuttner, “how qualified workers emerge from the woodwork when you offer, say \$10 or \$12.” Anna Quindlen who coined the term ‘nannygate’ put the matter differently: “(m)others,” she opined, “myself included, have sometimes hired the person they thought best for the job although that person was undocumented” (A23). Zoe Baird, herself, echoed this sentiment: “In my hope to find appropriate child care for my son, that I could have confidence might give him some continuity, I gave too little emphasis to what was described to me as a technical violation” (qtd. in Blumenthal 59).

During the preparation for the confirmation hearing, Baird disclosed the information about hiring “illegal” workers but she assured the confirmation team helping her prepare for the grueling hearings, that it was a minor offense, similar to getting a parking ticket. In the face of growing opposition, Baird continued to insist that she had committed only a ‘technical violation’ and that her concern was for the welfare of her infant son: “Quite honestly, I was acting at that time really more as a mother than as someone who would be sitting here designated to be Attorney General” (qtd. in Blumenthal 59). While commentators such as Anna Quindlen emphasized, as Baird herself did, that her main focus was the welfare of her child and that legal issues seemed trivial in comparison, sympathy for her predicament waned rapidly. The *Times* observed that it was “possible to have enormous sympathy for the pain of working parents trying to do right by their children, and to have little for Zoe Baird” (Gibbs 29).⁴ Diane Sampson characterizes the growing public fury against Baird (aided in no small measure by intense, and quite often misogynistic, media attacks) as “an audience riveted by the spectacle of a powerful, wealthy white woman humbled because of her child care arrangements” (311). The general mood, according to Sampson, was a complex mix of “outrage, sympathetic disapproval, and self-righteous disdain” (311).

The Zoe Baird incident, however, was more complicated than the easily slotted story of class privilege (Baird) and class resentment (the public). Her

defense (and cultural commentary on it) both raised the legitimate issue of (inadequate) childcare and obscured it. Baird’s own defensive explanation also created a false dichotomy between her professional persona and motherhood. To think like a mother, she argued, one stops thinking as a professional. Baird’s defense, as Diane Sampson noted, “begged the question of what it means to act ‘more as a mother’ than as attorney general” (312). Did legitimate concerns for the welfare of one’s child cancel out legal prohibitions? Judy Mann characterized her own misgivings about “nannygate” not so much as class resentment as anger against a “woman who could go first class on child care and still did it on the cheap.” By the 1990s, a majority of college-educated mothers of infants worked outside the home. This clashed with the prevailing beliefs—expounded *ad nauseum* via advice books, parenting magazines, television shows—that ‘mother presence’ and continual attention to the child was crucial to its healthy development. This “intensive mothering,” a term coined by Sharon Hays, which she defines as “child-centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive mothering” (69), was particularly directed at educated affluent mothers whose absence from daily child rearing duties, the pundits were quick to conjecture, might damage the child. This “punitive cultural logic of intensive mothering and the anxiety it produces” (Macdonald 201) led women such as Baird, to opt for “in-home childcare as a way to approximate mother-care while they are at work.” (Macdonald 13). It is within the increasingly accepted cultural demand for ‘intensive mothering’ and the ambivalence, sometimes shrill disapproval, about working mothers that some commentators such as Anna Quindlen, like Baird, interpreted “nannygate” as a mere technicality. The need for acceptable childcare, it would appear, trumped all other considerations.⁵

Few were willing to raise the issue of society’s shared responsibility for social reproduction. Nor were there questions raised about “parental” (rather than maternal) responsibility in raising children. By focusing exclusively on Baird’s decision and motivation, moreover, the discussions had the insalutary effect of normalizing “intensive mothering” as a model. Missing from mainstream attention was Lillian Cordero, the “shadow mother” (to use Cameron Macdonald’s evocative term). “What was conspicuously absent from most of the commentary on the Baird controversy was concern for the plight of the undocumented workers themselves,” observed Grace Chang (40). In the entire hullabaloo about Zoe Baird and her rights and wrongs, Lillian Cordero vanished from our sight. She was indeed, as Chang put it, a “disposable domestic” (40). Equally absent from public discourse was any attempt to contemplate how the demand for privatized care giving created a concomitant deficit of care elsewhere. Viviana Zelizer accurately sums up the “baffling contradiction” between the “sentimentalization of our children and the collective indifference

to other people's children" (xii-xiii).

Social scientists such as Grace Chang, Rhacel Parreñas, and Evelyn Nakano Glenn among others, have demonstrated that while child rearing is ever more valued, childcare, in the U.S. is one of the least valued occupations. Nonetheless, it is the shadowy presence of caregivers that make possible the idealized domesticity of professional households: well-cared for children, cooked meals and spick and span homes.

Social Cost of Mothering II: Clara's Heart or Mammy Redux

Zoe Baird's desire and need for dependable childcare is understandable enough. It is this palpable need (which must stand in for countless others who opt for privatized childcare) that connects her to Leona, the anguished mother in *Clara's Heart* and the gratified mother in the documentary *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas*. I will look briefly at these two films—one from Hollywood, *Clara's Heart* and an independent documentary *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas*—to analyze the centrality and function of the black or brown caring body (cast as maternal surrogates) to the production and maintenance of the idea of "home" as the site of social reproduction, as the place for rejuvenation and re-creation of the class and race privileged "self" in the global north and the simultaneous erasure or dismantling of such a space and such possibilities for migrant mothers in the impoverished South. By placing these women side by side, I wish to make manifest their invisible but quite real connection. By reading the *representation* of "care drain"—what does this deficit *look like?*—I wish to draw attention precisely to the missing link, the absent presence in the nannygate discussions—the nanny herself. What I am arguing here, is that what may seem like random or accidental connections—Zoe Baird to Leona to a Greek household—upon closer and careful inspection allows us to trace the lineaments of a pattern: the insidious connection of intimate labour performed in different spaces that globalization has made inevitable.

Both films focus on the indispensability of the nanny as surrogate mother but each has a quite different ideological and pedagogic agenda and therefore the place and function of "care" and the positioning of the caregiver are represented quite differently. In *Clara's Heart*, especially, we see a crumbling marriage and a neglected child whose nurturance and passage to appropriate adulthood (appropriate to his class, especially) is overseen by the surrogate rather than the biological mother. In the documentary, *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas*, on the other hand, we infer that the marriage—and by extension the household—is stable. But the ability of each partner, husband and wife, to be themselves, to pursue their interests, hobbies and even caring relationships, is predicated on the labour of an undocumented woman.

Based on Joseph Olshan's 1985 novel, set in New York city, *Clara's Heart* registers the cultural phenomenon of the ubiquitous presence of West Indian nannies, especially in cities on the East Coast. Released in 1988, the film though a modest critical and box-office success, earned Whoopi Goldberg top billing as Clara Mayfield, a Jamaican hotel worker transplanted to upscale suburban Baltimore (rather than New York, as in the novel) to be the "Jill of all trades" in a nuclear household in crisis. To underscore her position in the narrative schema, the first spoken words of the film—spoken by Clara herself—is, "The maid is here." The opening shots, however, frame the cherubic face of a young—and then unknown—Neil Patrick Harris, wearing huge spectacles, staring out at the camera. Through a series of fade-ins, accompanied by pathos-filled music, the film quickly establishes the "back story"—the death of a baby girl, the emotional breakdown of the mother Leona, and her trip to Jamaica to recover from the loss. It is here that she (and we the viewers) meets Clara who, announcing herself as the maid, enters Leona's hotel room and promptly takes charge. She gets Leona out of the bath, insists she get dressed and have breakfast. Leona introduces Clara to her husband David as "the most wonderful person" and the only person who seems capable of saving her from her crippling grief. "I know what's best for other people," Clara declares to Leona as she urges her to eat *cho-cho* and through the literal consumption of "traditional" island culture, and a figurative dose of island wisdom, revitalizes her life.

Clara, though seen as the moral core of the film, is presented in the mode of what Donald Bogle calls the "all-too-familiar cultural fantasy of the black woman as the 'mighty nurturer'" (298).⁶ The long hours and isolating nature of private domestic service are recast as wise, effective and often amused rearrangement of the household: Clara always knows best—that ironing shirts without starch is better for the fabric; or meals should be a balance of nutrition and indulgence. It is as if the nuclear family itself is an immature child in need of Clara's mothering in order to maneuver it and its members to maturity and stability. We see Clara move through the chores calm, unruffled and unflustered; she is at the centre of the narrative, present in more frames of the film than any other character, yet we know nothing at all of her life in Jamaica except that she worked as a hotel maid and that she now works as housekeeper in suburban Baltimore. While Lillian Cordero's "illegal" status was at the heart of the "nannygate" scandal, the film, conveniently, bypasses the thorny issue of legal/illegal worker altogether. The needs of the household—and especially those of Leona—seem to magically transform Clara's status from Jamaican hotel worker to a Baltimore nanny without any of the difficulties and distress faced by the likes of Lillian Cordero. The film further muddles her position by its unwillingness to cast Clara as merely a domestic servant despite the fact that she is seen to be working in almost every scene. In the familiar idiom

of sentimentality in which the movie is suffused, Leona wants to cast Clara “like one of the family.” As she makes her way to the guest room—which is to be her room now—David comments, “I thought you were a maid. This is the guest room.”

Whether as efficient hotel worker in a swanky resort or a nanny in the upscale U.S. suburb, Clara’s life seems always to have been linked to the welfare and well being of white families. Throughout the film, Clara’s impassive expression and loose and baggy clothes hide any hint of a desiring or desirable person. The film, in other words, reduces Clara to her functionality, allowing her only to be a nurturer, a caretaker, a caregiver. To allow a fuller, more multi-dimensional life for Clara would invoke anxieties about the jezebel, the sexually seductive woman whose aggressive sensuality would undermine the very core of white domesticity.⁷ Clara, in fact, is a familiar, recurrent figure in Hollywood films and to the culture at large: she is the much-loved “mammy” figure of the white imaginary. In describing Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*, Donald Bogle writes that her “mammy” character becomes “an all-seeing, all-hearing, all-knowing commentator and observer. She remarks. She annotates. She makes asides. She always opinionizes” (88, 89). Historians and cultural critics have pointed out that after slavery, as black women’s labour shifted from the fields to the household, her presence within the white family had to be re-imagined as “an asexual, omniscient, devoted servant” (Melissa Harris-Perry 71).

The mammy figure, made ubiquitous throughout the twentieth century as an icon in the marketing of pancakes and syrup, also successfully marketed to white audiences the “notion that black women’s domestic labor is a natural extension of their skills and desires” (Harris-Perry 77). What is especially noteworthy is the fact that “the mighty nurturer” ideal is realized specifically *in not caring for* her own children. Her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were/are reserved exclusively for white women and children (Harris-Perry 73). She is what Melissa Harris-Perry calls a “magical figure”—one who exists only to solve her mistress’s crisis or cater to her needs “without ever hinting at the depth of their own oppressive circumstances” (Harris-Perry 78). Her existence is entirely defined by her ability to maintain the home as a haven for the white family. Clara, in other words, is a recycled stereotype. In its cultural moment, that is the late 1980s, the film simultaneously acknowledges the presence of West Indian nannies and utilizes the perennial appeal of maudlin sentiments to normalize their function. Clara’s existence in the film is predicated on the family’s need for “intimate labour” of caring. All her energies are directed toward protecting and nurturing first Leona, and then the needy pre-teen boy. As soon as each member of the family is able to negotiate their way out of crisis, the film ends. Like David, we the viewers, too, turn away from Clara.

When Clara enters the home in Baltimore, David, the young neglected son, accuses his mother of abdicating her “motherly” (that is, caretaking responsibilities): “You want strangers to take care of me so you don’t have to.” Indeed, by appointing a surrogate and transferring caretaking to Clara what is produced is not only the socialization of the child but an orderly, well-managed household, a prerequisite for social reproduction. (Recall that Zoe Baird had hired her nanny precisely for the same reasons.) Equally important—Clara’s labour produces surplus time and energy for Bill and especially for Leona to survive the tragic loss of a child and further to survive their failing marriage. It is within this surplus time that they both reinvent themselves: Leona focuses on new age fads and grief workshops and Bill on becoming more hip and urbane—moving to the city, into an ultra-modern apartment whose decorator doubles as his new sexual partner. Leona, too, falls in love again. The break-up of the marriage throws young David into an emotional crisis. But Clara has gently but firmly overseen his passage into adulthood and by film’s end we see him emerging as a confident young man. Also at film’s end we see Clara looking out lovingly at David’s vanishing figure—David who is dressed in formal conservative winter coat and scarf and contact lenses, a sharp contrast to the scruffy, bespectacled kid he used to, indicating the change that has taken place in his life. Clara, on the other hand, remains the same—dressed as she has throughout the film. The only change is that Clara has moved from the private and privatized space of domestic care giving to the more institutional setting of a nursing home, now tending to the sick and incapacitated. Clara returns, with alterations, back to the public domain of care work—hotel maid to nursemaid.

If the Zoe Baird hearings by-passed any discussion of the “entrenched racialization of domestic labour,” (McElya 211), *Clara’s Heart* not so much ignores the issue as functions by displacing it. In the most obvious sense, the film displaces Clara herself from Jamaica to Maryland, although her move is not a result of *her* economic situation, as Leona’s emotional need. Instead of the island’s deteriorating economic condition, captured vividly in Stephanie Black’s documentary *Life and Debt* (2001), the glimpse of Jamaica presented in *Clara’s Heart* is the one that *New York Times* travel section in 1984 described as “about an hour and a half south of Miami by jet, is a little smaller than Connecticut... It not only has beaches, sparkling clear water and foliage you would expect ... but it also has mountains...waterfalls, caves...The national language is English, and you can drink the water” (Cliff 200). The island’s existence/value, like Clara’s, can only be determined in terms of “your” (that is “our”) needs. For, indeed, it is “our” need for particular kinds of domesticities that transports Clara from Jamaica to Baltimore. But there are deeper and more sinister displacements at work. It is a Hollywood film whose main emotions are nostalgia and sentimentality that both reminds us of “mammies” *and*

attempts to obscure the similarity.⁸ By making Clara not a *domestic* domestic but an exotic island one with a lilting accent and deep wisdom, the film seems to ask us not to read her as another Hattie MacDaniel. But the subterranean, insidious links to the histories of enslavement and violence erupts without warning when an angry David lashes out at Clara, saying: “You will just be a nigger in the end.”

By focusing relentlessly on David’s misery, his rite of passage from troubled and neglected teen to self-possessed adult, the film, like the nannygate hearings which oscillated between sympathy for Baird’s dilemma and anger and *resentment* towards her, manages to shift our attention away from the mother surrogate and her deeply tragic losses. Entirely absent from the film’s focus is the sacrifice or labour pain experienced by countless Claras and their children, recorded with heart wrenching precision in Velma Pollard’s short story, “My Mother” (1989). Pollard’s is a paean to laboring mothers, who are compelled by circumstances to travel thousands of miles to other households and to other children. “Nothing smells exactly like my mother’s boxes” says the unnamed narrator as she stands watching West Indian women emerge from the Lexington Avenue subway train in New York, hurrying to work (383). “It was a smell compounded from sweat and mustiness and black poverty inheriting white castoffs” (383). Her mother, we learn, had left Jamaica when the narrator was five or six and her memory, she tells us, is “carved out of my own imagination with patterns all mixed up, of other people’s mothers and of those impersonal clothes in the annual barrel” (385).⁹

Care Drain: When Mother Comes Home for Christmas

What we do not see either in the media swirl around Zoe Baird or in *Clara’s Heart* is this poignant, human accounting of the care deficit which children across the global South incur. For the calculus of such costs of care, we have to turn to a documentary film, *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* (1996). Directed by Nilita Vachani, the short documentary introduces us to Josephine Perera, a Sri Lankan woman who, having worked overseas for eight years without a permit, is returning home for a month-long visit. Josephine, or Josie as her employers call her, has travelled half way across the world first to Saudi Arabia and then Kuwait and now finally Athens, Greece where she works as a nanny to the two-year old adorable infant Isadora and as a housekeeper for her parents. With each change of employment Josie has been able to make a better wage and now of the \$500 she earns, she mails a remittance cheque each month for her children’s upkeep, including their school fees. Clara’s prehistory in *Clara’s Heart* is withheld from the viewer as if to suggest that it holds no significance—she emerges before us a fully capable, admirably efficient

carer—for the purpose of the film is to soothe us into believing that as Zoe Baird had hoped, “a warm family setting” and “a beautiful home” make up for other losses. The film, by relentlessly excising out Clara’s life prior to her meeting with Leona, avoids scrutinising any underlying connection between Jamaica and U.S.—between first world and third, between structural adjustments and misery. The purpose of the documentary is exactly the opposite: its intention is to disturb, to educate, to question. Vachani wants viewers to see first-hand what the deficit of care looks like. At what cost, the documentary wants us to ponder, beyond genuine if limited concerns of Zoe Baird, or Isadora’s parents, or David and his family who all want *someone* to look after their children, their homes and their loved ones, at what cost and to whom, is the care purchased and transferred? If remittance cheques sent back buoys the home economies, this transfer of care should also be seen as a remittance, as drain, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild, have argued, from the poor to the rich.

Josephine’s story is “one of wrenching global inequality” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2). In Greece, Josie takes care of Isadora leaving her own children to the indifferent and uncertain care of surrogates: neglectful relatives and cruel orphanages “While Isadora enjoys the attention of three adults, Josephine’s three children ... have been far less lucky” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2). Norma and Suminda, her two youngest, who were nine and two when she left, and now ten and eighteen as she comes home for Christmas, have felt their mother’s absence keenly and this absence has left indelible marks in all their lives. For Leona (and for Zoe Baird), successfully negotiating mothering and a fulfilled life outside the domestic sphere involves hiring a surrogate. For Josie, the options are fraught. She must be in the world, thousands of miles away, in order to provide her children a home. Barbara Ehrenreich makes clear the stark choices available to Josie: “Josephine can either live with her children in desperate poverty or make money by living apart from them. Unlike her affluent First World employers, she cannot both live with her family and support it” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2). When all options for arranging care for her children appear to be equally bad, Josie depends quite literally on divine intervention. The documentary opens with Josie (along with a group of other nannies) in a church in Athens, writing a letter. Desperately worried for the welfare of her children, as a last resort she appeals to the Virgin Mary to “mother” her children. “Mother Mary, Take care of my children. Protect them from sickness and sorrow till I come home for Christmas. Your devoted daughter, Josephine.” The circuit of transference stops at the door of faith.

Before we are introduced to Josie and her life, the documentary lists a set of disturbing “facts”—one out of ten Sri Lankans lives abroad. The economy depends on the export of labour, who are mostly “unskilled” and mostly

women. We also learn that 70 percent of women workers are housemaids in foreign countries. Perhaps most startling, the documentary tells us that: “It is no longer the export of tea that brings Sri Lanka its highest foreign earning. It is the export of housemaids.” Lest we imagine that caring and caretaking are somehow natural attributes of the thousands of women that are now scattered across the global north as domestic workers, the documentary also records the efforts of the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment to produce a cadre of housemaids who are trained in the proper use of “modern” appliances—the microwave oven, vacuum cleaner and food processors. Proper etiquette in serving tea and coffee as well as the importance “always to be clean and tidy” and “never to let them [employers] think you are lazy” are drilled into groups of women aspiring to cross national borders, legally or not to become nannies and maids. We see Josie, for example, constantly tending to the house—polishing, cleaning, vacuuming—and especially caring for the two-year-old infant. She showers all her affection and attention on Isadora, even as she acknowledges in countless letters written home how her own children are suffering from her absence. “You never send me a happy letter” she writes to her troubled daughter Norma. “You only think of me when you need money,” she complains. Isadora’s mother, meanwhile, is full of admiration for Josie’s omni-competence: she cooks, cleans, takes care of the infant from the time Isadora is up until the time she is ready for bed. “I admire Josie,” she tells the camera. “She is able to do everything ... she is a perfect second mother.” Of course, the cruel irony is that Josie can be a perfect second mother to Isadora, but not a first or any kind of mother to her own children.

Throughout the documentary, the camera records Josie not only as she works; more significantly, the camera captures her humanity—her ever changing expressions from joy to worry, from laughter to tears, the difficult and awkward interactions between herself and Norma, her now grown but estranged daughter. The film insists on showing us the consequences of “care drain” the many ways in which, as Aidoo put it, “While at home,/wherever that maybe,/limbs and senses rot.” Josie, like the mother in Pollard’s short story, sends gifts and money to her children. But these gifts are not enough to fill the emotional void. Pollard’s young narrator’s deep sadness and Josie’s children’s difficulties are seen as the direct results of prolonged absences—of the absence of maternal care that no amount of money can be adequate compensation. Pollard’s narrator, who as an adult is still “numb with a nameless grief,” as a child had expected her mother’s return, year after year. “But she never came. The year I was in third form, they flew her body back,” she tells us (385). Josie, too, acknowledges her children’s loss. “It is true,” she admits with sadness, “they have suffered.” Suminda is a very troubled boy, disruptive, difficult to control, performing poorly at school; Norma has attempted suicide a number of times.

Conclusion

Two crystallizing images of the transfer of care from the poor to the rich in the two films will serve as conclusion to the discussion. “When I am here I feel like one of you” declares David on one of his visits to the impoverished part of Baltimore where Clara gets a small apartment for herself. These occasions are filled with local colour—a beauty parlour where all the women are from the Caribbean and speak in patois (though not so heavy as to alienate the viewing audience), the obligatory reggae/calypso music playing in the background (party-goers jamming to Bob Marley’s “Jammin”). Here David comes into his own. Starved of attention from his parents, timid and shy in school, here among the Caribbean immigrants, David is at home—singing acapella, charming young girls, dancing awkwardly but with pleasure, the only white face in a sea of black and brown ones. He is teased and flattered and given a new hair-cut. He is made-over, made new. Clara’s mothering, in other words, births a new David—a David who is confident and self-assured.

In *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* Josie asks Isadora “Whose baby are you?” The toddler first points away from the camera, presumably indicating her biological mother who, working in the next room, is absent from the frame. “No, you’re *my* baby,” says Josephine, teasingly to Isadora, as she hugs her with deep affection. The toddler attempts to acknowledge both women in her life, saying “together.” But we know that despite the infant’s attempt at inclusion, the fact remains that Josie is her *not-mother*, her nanny; and as the film also shows us, Josie’s dire economic situation, prevents her from being a mother to her children. She is not their caregiver though she is a provider.

Unlike middle-class women in the nineteenth century whose status demanded a display of leisure and fragility, in the contemporary moment the pressure on women is to display the ability “to do it all.” The illusion of servant-less homes, which seemed possible especially after the Second World War, through the availability of labour-saving devices (vacuum cleaners, washing machines, ready-to-prepare meals) and “modern” uncluttered furnishing styles which made cleaning easier, seems to be disappearing, especially for those juggling long hours at work with the bringing up of children. “Affluent career women,” writes Barbara Ehrenreich, “increasingly earn their status by apparently ‘doing it all’. But the production of this ‘superwoman’ who maneuvers a full-time career, thriving children and contented spouse, and a well-managed home requires ‘domestic workers and nannies [who] make the house ... perfect, feed and bathe the children, cook and clean-up—and then magically fade from sight’ (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 4). Domestic work, especially that of childcare, is increasingly outsourced from women to other women, in a long, connected chain. Laura Briggs makes the important point that “If a growing number

of middle-class households in the United States are relying on labor from elsewhere because they can pay less than U.S. women earn, it is equally true that migrant women who leave their children in home countries are relying on the lower cost of reproductive labor outside the United States or Europe. It is a form of “offshore (re)production” (Briggs 51). While this transfer of care is not a new phenomenon, as the long, often brutal history of extracting such labour from women of colour would attest; in the current conjuncture the labour of caring is increasingly being extracted from women who come from elsewhere, from places we can barely point to on a map. These “disposable domestics” as Grace Chang calls them, “make it possible for middle- and upper-class women to pursue salaried jobs and not have to contend with the ‘second shift’ when they come home” (41). Part of the problem, whether in the North or the South, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn has argued, is that “caring has been mythologized as love, rather than labour” and ideologically continues to be imagined as women’s innate responsibility (2007: 49).

While some attempt to cast this chain of intimate labour as advantageous to all concerned, arguing that after all, migrant women such as Josie are able to send home remittance cheques or to bring back modern gadgets to adorn their homes which are the envy of all. This however, should not obscure the fact that undocumented workers cannot return home (Josie didn’t for eight long years), cannot be reunited with their family, do not have access to any surplus (whether of time or resource) within which to build their lives, intimacies, families. The aim of this essay has been to make visible the cultural blind spots in representing the human cost of care drain. My analytical inspiration for the paper came from Cynthia Enloe (2007) who urges us to employ what she calls “feminist curiosity”—a curiosity that is never content with what appears “natural.” Instead, she motivates us to take things apart, to make connections, so we can see more clearly what had been latent, concealed, camouflaged. By connecting the uproar over Zoe Baird’s hiring of an “illegal” nanny to Clara’s self-sacrificing mothering, to Josie’s and her children’s heart-wrenching loss of intimacy, the paper connects and thereby underscores the differentially located, differently experienced, and unequal “labour pain” of social reproduction.

¹Originally coined to refer to highly trained technical and scientific personnel who moved to North America from Europe after World War II, it has now come to denote the migration of skilled professionals from the South to the North.

²Zoe Williams, in a recent column, cites a “Household Panel Survey” conducted in Britain over 15 years and involving 5,000 families. The startling findings of the survey was that single men and women spend four and seven hours a week, respectively, doing housework. However, married or co-habiting

women do 12 hours of domestic work per week while married/co-habiting men contribute 40 minutes!

³See Sydney Blumenthal’s “Adventures in Babysitting” for an account of Baird and her husband’s attempts to find “legal” privatized childcare. Among the impediments they encountered was an expressed prejudice of one nanny who admitted she did not wish to work in a Jewish household.

⁴It may be worth remembering that the next nominee for the same post, Kimba Wood, of the Federal District Court in New York, also withdrew from the nomination for having hired an undocumented nanny.

⁵In a “Letter to the Editor” in *The New York Times*, Bonnie Shullenberger disagreed. “The resistance to President Clinton’s nomination of Zoe Baird,” she wrote, “was based on the simple assumption that the country’s highest enforcement officer ought to be someone who obeys the law.”

⁶For a more sympathetic reading of the film, see Keser.

⁷White nannies, by contrast, have a different narrative position in novels and films. More often than not, they function as the romantic interest and move from being nanny to mistress of the household, from surrogate mother to step- or actual mother. Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë’s eponymous heroine, and Maria in the film *The Sound of Music*, are two quick examples.

⁸The continuing appeal of the mythologized, sentimentalized black servant is apparent in the success of *The Help* (Stockett), a novel about black maids and their white madams in the South. The novel sold over five million copies and was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for an astonishing 100 weeks or more. The film version scored four Oscar nominations and Octavia Spenser won as the Best Supporting Actress for her role.

⁹Women often shipped back to the islands barrels filled with food, everyday household items such as cooking oil and rice—commodities that were too expensive or chronically unavailable—as well as used or hand-me-down clothing. Children, who were the recipients of these gifts, are often referred to as “barrel children.”

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