

## Reproducing Empathy in Mothers Who Read Nanny Novels

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*Several recent mainstream news articles have reported on studies that suggest reading novels (particularly physical books) may increase empathy in part by the ways in which they ask readers to reproduce characters' emotional landscape. English scholar Suzanne Keen's research, however, troubles the connection made between the empathic experiences readers profess to experience and the prosocial behavior novels are credited with creating. This article will argue that one approach toward mediating differences between mother-employers and nannies is to engage in novels that highlight the intricacies of this relationship in ways that can help both mother-employers and nannies gain a deeper understanding of the role they play in the relationship as well as the ways in which the other member of the dyad may experience the relationship. I will argue that one way that this empathy can be developed is via repeated opportunities for readers to reproduce the emotional and cognitive landscape of characters in consciousness-raising nanny novels. I posit that this may make the act of reading consciousness-raising novels an intrinsically prosocial behavior.*

The tide of responsibilities for mothers of material means has waxed and waned over the past one hundred years (and longer), particularly in the global North. Currently, due to the demands of intensive mothering and an increase in the number of women who work outside the home, many middle- and upper-middle-class women delegate the physical labor of cleaning and the messy maintenance of young children to women who often differ from themselves in terms of race, class, and citizenship status. The precise figures are difficult to ascertain due to the fact that domestic work is frequently part of the informal labor market. There has been a fair amount of debate amongst feminists regarding

the outsourcing of domestic labor with discussions focusing primarily on the social equality of having another woman, often one who has few opportunities for waged labor, perform low-status work for little pay.

The moral issue according to Joan Tronto, a feminist political scientist, is that “greater social and economic inequality and greater demands for child care have rearranged responsibilities” in such a way that women with greater material means are profiting from the labor of working-class women (35). This, she argues, “undercuts basic feminist notions of justice” and is “unjust for individuals and for society as a whole” (35). Others however, like sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, argue that the “abolitionist program smacks of the utopian, and is not feasible” (xxii). While Tronto argues against the social and economic injustices that are inherent in domestic labor as a whole in the statements above, it is typically the outsourcing of childcare rather than housecleaning that excites the national consciousness. A primary reason that hiring a nanny is perceived differently than housecleaning is that when childcare is outsourced it is not only the physical work of motherhood that is delegated but, to varying degrees, the emotional labor as well, which in itself can foster further acrimony between a mother-employer<sup>1</sup> and nanny. There is agreement by many feminists, working mothers, and nannies that the childcare systems that currently exist (or fail to exist) require reformation.

Research by a broad spectrum of psychologists and sociologists indicates that both mother-employers and nannies understand that emotional support must be offered to the child(ren) in one’s care when fulfilling the role of nanny. Trouble ensues, according to sociologists such as Hondagneu-Sotelo, Cameron Lynne MacDonald and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, for at least three reasons. First, mother-employers can become jealous of the relationship that forms between a nanny and the employer’s child(ren); second, mother-employers often expect a nanny to be a proxy mother who works tirelessly for little pay (thereby, I would argue, mimicking the employer’s own financially uncompensated position as a mother); and last but not least mother-employers may require work that the nanny feels falls outside the scope of childcare (and therefore what she is paid to do). Judith Rollins and Parreñas have both drawn attention to how the term “like one of the family”—which employers often assign to the domestic workers they have hired—highlights the overlap between kin-based and paid labor, particularly in terms of uncompensated work and the emotional labor that nannies are called upon to deliver to both the child(ren) in their care as well as their employers. Still, many nannies are reluctant to leave their positions, according to MacDonald, because they may have tenuous citizenship status, may fear marring an otherwise good reference, and because many nannies are emotionally invested in the role they have in reproducing intensive mothering for the mother-employer’s child(ren).

With these factors in mind, it is certainly easy to see why domestic workers, including nannies, are often underprivileged and vulnerable to oppressive working environments. Bridget Anderson, Rosie Cox, Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe, Hondagneu-Sotelo, Mary Romero, and Parreñas have all highlighted the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse that domestic workers have experienced in Great Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Even in more mundane domestic labor relationships, which are the norm according to MacDonald, issues of labor equality, power dispersal, and financial motivations can lead many mother-employers and nannies to construct relationships that are tepid or even adversarial with one another. Even when a mother-employer is predisposed to creating a fair and egalitarian work relationship with the nanny she hires, the mother-employer's cultural, financial, and often race-based capital, undoubtedly places her in a position of power and privilege. Personal issues of jealousy, competing philosophies of mothering, and miscommunication also come into play.

However, there is another side to consider, and this is where I see potential for alliance building. It is important to clarify that like Bonnie Thornton Dill in "Race, Class and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," I do not endorse sisterhood per se, at least not in its conventional sense; rather, I borrow her notion of alliance building and believe empathy may be a critical component to its inception. There are at least three reasons that alliances may bloom from the mother-employer/nanny relationship and all relate to issues of power. First, in many cases, both women are emotionally invested in the well-being of the mother-employer's child(ren) and want to see the labor arrangement remain intact.<sup>2</sup> For many nannies, the relationship between herself and the mother-employer's child(ren) is considered an additional benefit of the caregiver position, and some nannies put the mother-employer's child(ren)'s need above their own financial remuneration or personal satisfaction (MacDonald 131, 159).

In a second (and related) point some nannies claim the emotional aspects of carework offer a sense of power as well. After interviewing more than twenty childcare providers, psychologist Deborah Rutman argues that caregivers often develop a sense of "powerfulness derived from the joy and satisfaction they receiv[e] from the work itself, that is, from caring for children and promoting their healthy development" (643). These claims raise some troubling aspects of essentialism, but they will be accepted with only minor reservation for the reason that it is important for current purposes that the individuals in the study *felt* a sense of power and not whether the power they experienced was "real."<sup>3</sup> I believe that a nanny's perceived sense of power can affect her ability to form a relationship with the mother-employer based on the idea that if the nanny senses that she *shares* power rather than having power only exerted upon her

by the mother-employer, as some theorists prefer to see it, she will alter her outlook, demeanor, and interactions. Similarly, Bonnie Thornton Dill posits that the domestic “worker herself has more power and influence over the job than even she perhaps realizes” (*Across the Boundaries* 85). She adds: the “intimacy which can develop between an employer and employee along with the lack of job standardization may increase the employee’s leverage in the relationship and give her some latitude within which to negotiate a work plan that meets her own interests and desires” (*Across the Boundaries* 85). Despite the low-status of childcare work, many nannies defend their work as both challenging and rewarding<sup>4</sup> and may not see themselves as being embedded in a relationship that is solely a top-down model of power in which the nanny has little or no agency.

The construction and ownership of power rests heavily in the third factor as well, as I posit that a shared sense of vulnerability may unite both women. Not only are both women performing motherhood within an institution that has been established and continues to be defined by patriarchal influences, as Adrienne Rich passionately brings forth in *Of Woman Born*, but mother-employers as well as nannies report feeling that they lack power in the relationships with one another due, in part, to the construction of a symbiotic dyad in which each woman needs the other to achieve the financial and personal goals she may have for herself and/or her family. Mother-employers draw attention to their effort to maintain a strong relationship between their nannies and themselves as well as the effort to ensure that a nanny who has assimilated into her family remains happy with the arrangement. For many families, mothers are exclusively responsible for interviewing, hiring, and maintaining employment with the nanny, all of which takes time that is often in short supply. A nanny’s decision to quit not only affects the mother-employer but, she believes, may negatively affect her children as well. Vikki Ortiz Healy’s *Chicago Tribune* article “When Nanny’s Happy, Everybody’s Happy,” reaffirms this claim as do several essays in *Searching for Mary Poppins: Women Write About the Intense Relationship Between Mothers and Nannies*. These factors suggest that more mutually beneficial alliance building could be feasible, particularly in terms of reforming not only the interpersonal relationships these women experience with one another but the lack of childcare infrastructure available to working mothers more generally. After all, many nannies are mothers themselves and must also struggle to provide care for their own child(ren) while they are caring for another women’s offspring.

In making these assertions, I do not mean to undermine the ways in which women who are culturally privileged have many more options available to them nor do I want to overlook the many cases of labor abuse that happen every year, but it is worth considering the ways in which the mother-employer/nanny

relationship can be one in which both women's needs are met, at least to a greater degree than they are currently, regardless of the substantial challenges that come in play. Indeed, mother-employer/nanny relationships are one of the few places in the U.S.'s race- and class-conscious society in which women from different racial-ethnic and socioeconomic statuses meet with a degree of shared interest and investment, gender-based oppression, and dissatisfaction with childcare options.

All of this has been a rather lengthy introduction to the premise of my work, which is to highlight the ways in which novels can reproduce the struggles experienced by both mother-employers and nannies in ways that facilitate the production of empathy and possibly the building of alliances. I posit that one way for women, particularly mother-employers, to gain the insight required to assist in confronting notions of privilege and misconceptions as well as gain insight into the complexities of delegating childcare is by reading novels that address this subject. Clearly, not all nanny novels participate in the construction of prosocial knowledge production in regard to domestic labor, but those that do would fall into a subset of literature that English scholar Lisa Maria Hogeland calls consciousness-raising novels. Hogeland contends consciousness-raising novels "become a dialectic of difference and identification, forged in understanding the range of gendered experience differently constructed by race and class" (xiii). The consciousness-raising novel, I argue, can also be responsible for reproducing not only the emotional landscapes of the mother-employer and nanny characters in the novel but can ultimately reproduce these landscapes in readers' minds as well. Sociologist Marjorie DeVault seemingly agrees when she argues: "Readers of at least some kinds of novels seem to use fictional accounts in making sense of the world, or, at least ... feel entitled to use fictional portrayals as a basis for their own assertions about society" (888). These assertions may help women redefine the personal and political change that is required in order for childcare to meet the needs of more women in the United States.

In *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, sociologist Grace Chang recollects Zoë Baird's 1993 U.S. Attorney General nomination, which failed when it was revealed that she was not paying taxes on the work conducted by her domestic workers. Chang writes: "it was anticipated that a coalition of immigrant advocacy, child-care advocacy, and women's groups might form around the 'shared interests' of women's work in housekeeping and child care" (79). This coalition never occurred of course and I suggest that one way that improved alliance building may take shape is via shared communication and increased empathy. The act of reading consciousness-raising novels that are informed by and inform the mother-employer/nanny relationship may permit women to become more skilled at forming empathetic alliances with the nannies

they have hired while simultaneously fostering deeper self-awareness, which ultimately may diminish some of the jealousy, animosity, and competitiveness that can be intertwined in the mother-employer/nanny relationship. This act of reproduction, I contend, could be construed as a prosocial behavior regardless of whether the reader produces prosocial acts that are linked directly to the material she has read. Reading novels is not meant to be an all-purpose salve; it is one step amongst many in the journey toward greater equality between employers and domestic workers, but it is a step that may prove particularly important in interpersonal relationships that lack a significant overlap in experience and philosophy.

Navigating the individual terrains of identity and empathy is difficult, but navigating narrative empathy, particularly the way in which empathy is reproduced in readers, can be even more challenging. No longer is the discussion about the empathy produced between two people that have varying capabilities of developing and experiencing empathy, but it instead concerns empathy created in a sentient person by a fictional character that has been developed by a third person. I posit that empathy in this milieu can only be unidirectional between the reader and the character (and/or the author and the character she develops), even when the author consciously attempts to develop empathy in his/her reader. Amy Coplan, whose research deals with the philosophy of emotion, argues that self-other differentiation between reader and character is critical, and, for some theorists, this self-other split does not limit personal change. English scholar Mary-Catherine Harrison, for instance, posits that narrative empathy may “operate by encouraging readers to identify resemblances that they might not otherwise observe in characters from other cultural groups” (270). In this way, as well as others, reading empathically may feel safer than empathically interacting with another individual, particularly one who is divided from the other by virtue of class, race/ethnicity, cultural capital, and issues of labor. Keen similarly argues, “fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy” but then adds that this happens in part because readers can engage “without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action” (4). Certainly, engagement with a static character in a novel is different, and possibly more limiting, but regardless of the lack of “demand” placed on readers for action, I posit that this is not the paramount difference between reading and connecting interpersonally. Furthermore, many readers may still develop prosocial behaviors as a result of their engagement with a novel’s characters and plot.

Keen remains skeptical of this point in *Empathy and the Novel* and claims that novels that have impacted the political trajectory of the United States, such as Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, are outliers that cannot carry the cultural weight of

an unquantifiable theory that posits that reading can lead to prosocial behavior (52). Keen advocates for research that supports a connection between the development of empathy and the experience of reading, but she stops short of claiming that the development and expression of empathy is directly correlated to prosocial behavior. Pulling from many academic terrains including the humanities, social science, and cognitive psychology, Keen makes a clear attempt to stymie the cultural flow of connecting reading with prosocial behavior.

Keen finds the majority of the studies on the effects of readers' empathy inconclusive, at least in regard to proving that prosocial behavior results from reading empathetically, although she acknowledges that this is a commonly espoused concept propagated by, amongst other people, authors themselves. Moreover, she asserts: "Fiction may evoke empathy in part because it *cannot* make direct demands for action" (Keen 106). Novels may or may not make direct demands of action, depending on the author and his/her purpose, but regardless I still disagree. Novels may feel safer because they do not make a demand that must be dealt with in the here and now like a solicitor on the street, but we must still consider the ways that novels alter one's schema of the world and thereby produce intrinsic changes that may or may not be reproduced publically. If, for instance, a mother-employer gains insight into her interactions with a nanny she has hired and thereby cognitively *chooses* to change her behavior, I believe it can then be asserted that reading consciousness-raising novels may constitute a prosocial act, regardless of the quantifiable behavioral changes that result.

Moreover, rather than looking at specific data and interpreting the outcomes that are produced, which is how scientific research is often conducted, I argue that readers' sense of empathy and even any ensuing prosocial behavior is an *amalgamate* of past experiences that include, in addition to many other activities, the specific act of reading novels. It seems Keen has missed a key point, namely that if reading can increase empathy then perhaps the act of reading *itself* is a prosocial behavior. Reading empathetically and ultimately *acting* with empathy, according to Judith Kegan Gardiner, can narrow the gap that exists between women of varying races and classes. Gardiner is convincing when she argues: "Even partially understanding another person requires granting that the other person exists separately from oneself, and such tentative understandings are both the prerequisites and the difficult goals for reading, for analysis, and also for progressive social change" (101). While I deviate a bit from her meaning as I ground the work in the mother-employer/nanny relationship, it is not amiss to infer that this statement supports my argument. There is considerable room for improvement in the construction, depiction, interpretation, and understanding of mother-employer/nanny relationships within novels; however, these texts (and the novelists behind them) can help us in two ways: first, by reproducing



the ways in which common misunderstandings are born, thereby mirroring back to readers the ways in which they and others act in similar situations and second, by reproducing models that help readers give words and thought to an emotionally complex relationship. Consuming these narratives, I argue, will not only lead to more empathic interactions but may ultimately be actively incorporated into one's daily life as well.

A fertile place to ground this argument is in Mona Simpson's *My Hollywood*, which skims satire as it explores mothering in the last breaths of the twentieth century via two women's lives. The first is Claire, an upper-middle-class U.S. woman who is attempting to navigate a professional career and motherhood. The second is Lola, a 52-year-old woman from the global South who is pursuing, among other things, financial stability for her adult children in the Philippines. Claire, a talented but relatively unknown composer, is married to a television script writer whose long hours at work leave her essentially alone to care for their newborn son. *My Hollywood* permits these two women to share the space of the novel nearly equally in alternating chapters with each woman presenting her concerns and struggles—struggles that sometimes have to do with one another but not always.

In the opening chapter of *My Hollywood*, which is titled "50/50," Claire describes her first date with Paul, whom she met in her early thirties. Claire informs Paul that maintaining a career as a musician and becoming a mother may be incompatible goals, but Paul, like her mother, tells Claire she can successfully do both. Paul seems unfazed by their "conversation about who would do what," recognizing perhaps what he sees as a simple solution: they can outsource the reproductive labor (3). In college, where, according to Claire, "everything felt equal already," her utopian view of motherhood allowed her to have children and work. She notes that in this fantasy "[h]e, the putative he, would work a little less and I'd work a little less and the kid would have long hair, paint-spattered overalls, and be, in general, a barrel of monkeys" (10). Unsurprisingly, her life does not conform to this fantasy. While women succeed to varying degrees in making concessions in regard to either their careers or to their roles as mothers, for Claire this is more complex in part because she begins the journey feeling deeply ambivalent about motherhood and struggles with feeling adept as a mother as a result of her fractured relationship with her mother. Her work as a mother stands in stark contrast to her involvement in composing music, which for Claire, "was not exactly work" and instead "formed something I'd had since I was a girl, a banister I touched to be calm" (92). Uncomfortable with mothering and missing the comfort she obtains from the quiet hours of composing (which has also become stalled since the birth of her son), she hires a nanny she meets in a park.

Lola had hired her own domestic servants in the Philippines, which was



common for families of even modest means, but she is new to being a domestic servant herself. Her post with Claire is only her second job in the United States. Lola feels the money she earns is critical in order to send her five children to prestigious universities. She relays to her children that she views her work as a sacrifice to which she willingly submits herself in order to be a good and devoted mother. Even though her work takes her away from her children for many years, she projects a belief that she is a better mother as a result of her choice. Contrastingly, while Claire explains she has a nanny “just because I wanted to work. Needed to or wanted to?,” Lola easily states, “I wish only for money. To buy schooling. So my kids, they will have their chance” (10, 39). When Claire questions Lola regarding who cared for her children while she helped lead her social organization in the Philippines, Lola lightly tells her the yayas. It is not her answer that surprises Claire, but, as she explains, “No American woman I knew could say that so simply” (364). Here, Simpson encourages readers who identify with Claire’s allegiance to the dogma of intensive mothering to question how other ways of mothering can be and are successful.

Meanwhile, Lola seems somewhat mystified by Claire’s doubts. She states: “My employer has the American problem of guilt. But you should not be guilty to your children. It is for them that you are working!” (31). This sanguine outlook on intensive mothering troubles the ways cultural conceptions of motherhood influence a mother’s sense of identity. Lola’s seemingly unwavering stance is challenged when she accompanies Claire on a business trip, however. After finding the check Claire is given for teaching a symposium, Lola realizes the amount Claire earns does not cover the expenses she, Claire, and William accrue on the trip. Perplexed, Lola cannot imagine why Claire would still pursue her work. It is clear Lola accepts her absence from her own children only because she feels she is providing a more valuable service via her income, but she views Claire as a good person and loving mother and must therefore re-form her perception of what constitutes good mothering, particularly in regard to delegating the care of a child to another woman. Lola is also pushed to consider Claire’s rationale and her empathy with the woman encourages an opening to ways of mothering that she is prone to reject initially.

While frequently light-hearted, Lola consistently argues (perhaps in order to convince herself) that the money she is able to send to her children for their education will make a more substantial impact on their future lives than her physical presence. In this sense, she struggles with some of the same issues Claire does. Simpson presents contradictory information regarding Lola’s guilt, and readers are left to intuit for themselves if she is bluffing to placate her employer, being forthright, and/or deceiving herself in order to maintain peace of mind. Clearly, however, both women are working to define what good mothering is in an abstract sense as well as what good mothering means in

their own contexts specifically. Simpson does not dilute either approach and remains empathetic with both women.

Claire respects Lola's pragmatism and confidence in her pursuit to earn the funds that will likely yield increased social capital for her children. As a mother, Claire has little confidence and is often perplexed by Lola's natural comfort with William—a comfort she believes she, as his biological mother, should possess. However, Lola is the first to admit that she is a different caregiver as a nanny than she was as a mother to her own small children. Having been in both roles, she has the advantage of being able to compare the two. She explains: "Some nannies favor their own and some the other, just like mothers. As a mother, I was stricter with mine. But with William, I am more fair" (37). Lola, interestingly, admits: "When I first came here I was already a Lola and I was a better Lola than a mom. With mine, I had too much pride in them. I wanted them to be more than I was" (354). Not only does Lola's point of view give Claire a reason to reassess her own insecurities, but in the process Simpson asks readers to abort preconceptions they may have about mothering and work while adopting the more emotionally generous landscapes she depicts of the women.

The characters themselves, however, are not always emotionally generous with one another. Lola recognizes that many employers want both anonymity and emotional support, including Paul and Claire, but she still cannot help but feel diminished by this. Readers likely feel compassion for her when she explains: "They remember I am here and they forget. It is the way they would be in front of a pet" (79). However, Lola resists pity, pointing out that "everyone has somebody to help" in the Philippines and, at least for her, there was scant personal involvement; the woman she employed was simply "the One in the House" (44). That woman is now her and while she does not relish her submissive role, she retains the ability to empathize with her employer's perspective. Lola's position as someone unfamiliar with U.S. culture similarly allows her to comment on events around her as an outsider, but her middle-class status fosters a perspective that frames a tendency to compare rather than experience only the differences between the cultures. Far from hypercritical, Lola both envies and rebuffs the extreme wealth of the female employers with whom she comes into contact. She maintains her dignity in part by demeaning the requests for labor she and her peers receive and recognizing the ways in which her employers seek to be infantilized. Lola explains: "Americans enjoy to have done for them what a Filipina would do only for children small small" (101). In the process, she frames herself as capable and powerful with her employers being the converse.

Whether in a conscious effort to reform the social contract of marriage or out of the natural camaraderie that develops between Lola and herself, Claire eventually begins to see Lola as someone who fills the space between spouse

and mother and therefore can execute what she needs in both capacities. Together Lola and Claire remodel the kitchen Claire found so unsightly thereby making the physical home more palatable. It is more than just the aesthetics that change though since the act brings them closer together as Lola teaches Claire how to install tile and Claire promises to teach Lola how to play the piano in return. Claire slowly acknowledges that while “it would be nice to be by myself in the house sometimes,” she also deeply appreciates the fact that Lola “worrie[s] with me about Will,” adding: “Without her, I’d be alone” (228). She sees Lola as someone emotionally invested in William in a way that makes sense to her, in a way that supersedes the financial contribution Paul provides. The women also reproduce intensive mothering while simultaneously producing a new form of caregiving, at least for Claire. Claire was not mothered well when she was a child and Lola is able to perform a skill that Claire finds alien and unattainable. Simpson ultimately permits women of varying mothering philosophies to gain insight (and perhaps empathy) for other types of mothering.

Claire clearly feels indebted to Lola, but when William’s prestigious preschool notices issues with the boy’s behavior and recommends Claire and Paul fire Lola, Claire concedes (after briefly resisting). Competitive parenting again trumps her own beliefs as a mother and loyalty to Lola. “Paul had made the decision to fire her, but he still went to the Lot. All of a sudden I understood with an awful clarity. He made more money than I did now, and for him that explained everything,” she states (274). Of course, both women’s goals were reliant on Paul’s income, but more importantly, Claire fails to recognize that she was active in Lola’s termination. She prefers to place the entire onus on Paul. The fact that Simpson implicates Claire fully in this decision, while creating a moment of personal ignorance, is worth highlighting because, as Paul Mandelbaum writes in his *Los Angeles Review of Books* article, “It’s possible, since Claire will eventually evolve toward a place of greater worldliness and empathy, that *My Hollywood* means to take her to task over this” (“Whose Hollywood Is It Anyway?”). Claire mourns her relationship and, later in the novel, compares the separation with Lola to her more recent separation from Paul, noting, “[w]hen Lola left, no one had asked anything. The difference had been profound but private, like the end of an affair that turned out to be the love of your life” (329). Simpson’s pleas for the production of mother-to-mother empathy are again clear here.

Lola is devastated by Claire’s decision. Not only did she pass up a more lucrative job offer while employed by her, but she pines for her time with Claire and William, which also highlights once again the complicated dynamics innate to the indefinable combination of emotional labor, sincere attachment, and financial remuneration. Lola takes another position with a single woman

named Judith and her infant daughter, Laura. She regroups but recognizes that the relationship is not and will never be the same as the one she had with Claire. After working for and living with Judith for six years Lola states, “we cooperated, but we are not close,” adding: “We made a so-so marriage, like many others, bound for the love of a child” (354). She suggests, in turn, that her relationship with Claire was different while still identifying that mother-employer/nanny relationships are more complex than more traditional employer-employee dyads. Claire similarly identifies this when she is traveling to the Philippines in the waning chapters of the novel to petition for Lola to return to Los Angeles. Hurling between countries, a flight attendant asks Claire if she is traveling for business or pleasure. She replies: “*Neither really. Or, both, I hope*” (362). This statement attests to the profound ways that the mother-employer/nanny relationship in this novel resists categorization and by extension how the women in them struggle to find a place in which they feel centered and valuable while simultaneously deciphering where ‘want’ ends and ‘need’ begins.

At the conclusion of the novel Lola, Claire, and Judith are all without male partners who, Simpson suggests, unwelcomingly and unfairly influenced the structure of their (more authentic) relationships with one another. Claire and Judith devise a schedule in which Lola can work for both of them, considering not only their own needs but what Lola desires as well. When Claire tells Lola about Judith’s proposition in person, Lola reiterates the title of the opening chapter: “Half-half” (361). William, who is in school full-time, does not need Lola’s supervision, and Claire, it seems, has settled into her role as a mother and musician, but she proposes that Lola care for her mother who is deteriorating mentally while Laura is at school. Importantly, however, both Judith and Claire return to Lola not as infantilized and needy women but empathetic adults set on establishing a mutually beneficial and egalitarian relationship based on assessing their own needs alongside Lola’s needs. Claire sells the advantages to Lola: “So you’ll have two salaries. Two rooms. For your weekends. Your offs. You can bring Laura [to my house] too. I want it to be your American home” (365). Not only does Claire use Lola’s word for vacation days (i.e., “offs”) thereby indicating a conciliation of sorts, but she again addresses Lola’s liminality as an advantage that fulfills Lola’s competing interests. Moreover, Claire does not present her home as Lola’s only home, conceding that Lola has a life of her own. Lola will not only have two homes in the U.S., but a third in the Philippines. She therefore remains dislocated yet paradoxically more rooted, according to Simpson. Lola in return seems content with the arrangement and her ability to maintain the relationships she has formed with the children in her care as well as her employers. It is not the arrangement Claire had envisioned, or likely one Lola would have agreed to

when she first perceived her place in the U.S. as temporary, but both women find in the other a place to establish a home. In this way Claire, Judith, and Lola succeed in satisfactorily restructuring traditional family dynamics and consequently achieving a radical reconfiguration of mothering.

While none of the characters are extraordinarily empathic at the conclusion of the novel, there is clear movement in this direction, specifically indicated by an ability and even a willingness to assimilate the perspective of other individuals and to overlook past wrongs. Forgiveness, it could be argued, is based at times on empathy. As readers witness the neglected opportunities, the missed connections, and the errors that get produced as a result of looking inward rather than out, they take in Simpson's proffered example of the ways in which a lack of empathy can be harmful. Simpson provides complex and evolving characters who showcase some of the difficulties that are rife for many nannies while also offering a somewhat sanguine ending to the novel. Importantly, Simpson avoids portraying the ubiquitous nanny that raises suspicions, has an affair with the male partner/father, or punishes or chastises the mother for her absence, which occurs in a host of other U.S.-based novels.<sup>5</sup> Simpson acknowledges that she wanted to get "beyond the 'extreme stereotypes' of the haughty socialite who bosses around the subservient ethnic" (Rosin). Deviation from stock depictions of nannies should be encouraged, and I argue that reader empathy in mother-employer/nanny novels may be affected in part by the degree of realism the author is able to reproduce. Therefore, fully developed characters not only better represent the multitudes of women who do this work but may encourage readers to question preconceived ideas regarding race and class as they relate to mothering, maternalism, and the ways that power and empathy are reproduced in the dynamics between mother-employers and nannies.

Importantly, diversity of representation in novels may be augmented if more novels by women of color were published. I believe there is reason to be cautious about an author's ability to accurately reproduce the inner landscape of individuals who are markedly different from themselves by virtue of class, race, and gender, particularly if the reproduction is not based on substantial research, which Simpson confirms she had done. Indeed, feminist philosopher Naomi Zack writes: "Successful empathy thus requires the ability to evaluate one's own competence to accurately imagine oneself in the circumstances of another, as she experiences them" (142). This, of course, certainly pertains to novelists, but also addresses the ways in which novels can contribute to this production of knowledge (and later empathy) in readers. Zack further explains that the "self-reflection" that is "necessary for successful empathy is in itself a practical feminist virtue" (142). I see the development of this skill not only as practical but also prosocial and one which may develop while reading prosocial novels.

As stated, I remain unconvinced by some of Keen's central arguments in

*Empathy and the Novel*. Her claim that reading can encourage empathy but does not directly lead to prosocial behavior is an interesting parsing of words that permits readers to have an emotional, even empathetic, response from reading while not necessarily leading to prosocial behavior. I find this perspective to be limiting on two fronts. First, as stated already, the act of reading may be a prosocial act in and of itself particularly when it helps readers reproduce the emotional landscape of adversarial people in their lives and second, the research Keen determines as inconclusive should not necessarily carry the weight of conclusiveness. While Keen highlights research that strongly suggests that readers identify in a personal way with some characters, she draws attention to the gaps in scientific results that confirm the development of prosocial behavior. I suggest that it is somewhat besides the point to claim that a dearth of evidence proves the absence of prosocial behavior. I am not proposing one accepts the existence of this phenomenon as a matter of faith, rather I suggest that a phenomenon may exist despite the lack of scientific testing that proves its existence. Focusing on the differences of gender and reading specifically, Gardiner similarly argues: “Attempts to test empathic behavior in laboratory situations have not succeeded in validating these self reports [that women are more empathic than men], but reading and writing are more likely to be affected by one’s self image than by one’s testable behavior” (166). I would go even further and suggest that it may be prudent to retain a healthy skepticism of positivism particularly when examining research on rather intangible and unquantifiable areas of research such as the production of empathy and prosocial acts.

In *Maid in the U.S.A.*, sociologist Mary Romero suggests that conflicts between women on opposite side of the monies earned via domestic labor cannot be ameliorated. She writes, “Recognizing the opposing class positions of the women involved [in the mistress/maid dyad] transforms sisterhood either into another means for employers to extract emotional and physical labor, or, conversely, into the means for employees to improve working conditions and increase pay and benefits” (74). This line of thinking presumes a zero-sum game and does not give full weight to the complexity each woman brings to the relationship she forms with the other. Power, according to sociologist Victoria L. Bromley, “is not simply possessed and wielded; it is also something that can be struggled against and it can also be shared” (49). This shared power, which she terms empowerment, can be gained, I believe, partly through knowledge. Knowledge, I have also argued, is reproduced through the production and consumption of prosocial novels.

To be clear, I have not been suggesting that reading novels about the mother/nanny dyad can transform all labor-based affiliations or even specifically those centered around carework into non-adversarial relationships that will not need

to address many challenging obstacles, including differences steeped in class, race, philosophies of mothering, access to power, and desires for altered work output and wages, amongst others. Instead, I see the mother-employer/nanny relationship as one in which there is enough commonality based on gendered waged work, an intrinsic understanding of reproductive labor, and a shared interest in the child(ren) of the employer that reform seems more likely to be produced here than in many other outlets. The reproduction of the emotional landscapes of the other may help. Impediments to understanding must still be addressed. I contend that reading consciousness-raising novels, such as *My Hollywood*, may be one prosocial action in a complex list of acts that could improve interpersonal and labor dynamics between mother-employers and nannies.

Joan Tronto argues that the intrinsic injustice of domestic labor requires government-level reform; however, it seems worth considering that this type of reform will not likely occur without substantial support from the very women who are benefitting from the system as it is currently constructed, namely mother-employers who hire nannies. I argue that in the mother-employer/nanny relationship there may be room, for those mother-employers and nannies who are willing to try, to build upon their shared vulnerability in ways that could enhance their relationship in ways that both women find beneficial. Novels may help female readers better understand what is at stake, not only in their personal relationships with the nannies they have hired but more broadly as well. The ways in which motherhood is constructed, perceived, and experienced is critical to examine as one approaches literary fiction concerning mother-employers and nannies since both the authors who have written the texts and the readers who consume them often function within the confines of predetermined notions of mothering, as Adrienne Rich eloquently and passionately describes the as the institution of motherhood. Reading novels that accentuate how we reproduce empathy may therefore be a prosocial act that interferes with the perpetuation of ideologies and relationships that could serve women better.

## Conclusion

Novels often spin tales that merge fact, fiction, theory, and even the unconscious in a manner that welcomes and challenge readers. This invitation, I have argued, may be incomparable to other means of knowledge production and the production of empathy. Nanny novels in particular address issues that mothers often confront and not only provide a platform upon which the conversation regarding women's labor, mothering, and feminist justice can be rooted but provide a safe place to explore the feelings of ambivalence, anger, jealousy, and love that often shape the mother-employer/nanny relationship. Mona Simpson presents such a case in *My Hollywood*. Through the reproduction of



a mother-employer/nanny relationship, Simpson's novel guides readers toward considering the role they play in retaining employment, developing philosophies of mothering, and fostering healthy emotional bonds with children. By examining how these fictional relationships both mirror women's angst and shape the ways women perceive the 'other,' readers can more clearly understand entrenched ideologies and move toward a place of deeper knowledge and action-oriented empathy, which can ultimately be applied to the framework of the mother-employer/nanny relationship.

The mother-employer/nanny relationship is frequently a relationship between two women in which differences based on class, ethnicity, and approaches to parenting can be fraught with difficulty; however, I see opportunities for reform in the mother-employer/nanny relationship in light of the emotional investment put forth by both women. Both women typically want—at least initially—for the labor agreement to be maintained, and both women are often emotionally invested in the mother-employer's child(ren). Moreover, in many cases, both women feel they need the other in order to achieve their own personal and/or financial goals. Therefore, while significant in their economic, political, and cultural weight, the mother-employer/nanny relationship is also one that is important in very personal ways to the individual women who participate in them and thereby provide unique opportunities for women across differing races and classes to witness one another intimately and in an environment of shared compassion for the children with whom they have bonded.

It is advantageous for both sets of women involved in this dyad to maximize the components of this relationship that predisposes it to being mutually beneficial. I have argued that both mother-employer and nanny can benefit concurrently from developing empathy through the reading of consciousness-raising novels that reproduce the internal and external landscape of both mother-employers and nannies. While not enough in and of itself, reading in this way may be considered a prosocial act, particularly when readers' emotional and cognitive landscape shifts toward a willingness to relate more empathically with another individual. In other words, even if the mother-employer's behavior is not dramatically altered, novel reading may still be a critical component in the production of empathy and may contribute to efforts to bridge differences between mother-employers and nannies.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Credit for this term is given to Cameron MacDonald who accurately points out that many nannies are mothers and both employer and employee often work for their salary. I refrain from using the term mother-caregiver due to

the fact that in the majority of novels on this topic caregivers are not mothers and when they are their children typically play inconsequential roles.

<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that all nannies feel deep affection or love for the children they tend; some women enter the work out of economic necessity and a lack of other options. Moreover, limited options for work does not automatically exclude a woman working as a nanny from developing a close bond with the child(ren) for whom she cares.

<sup>3</sup>MacDonald highlights other means of resistance as well including talking with other nannies about their struggles, retaliating via subterfuge or breaking rules, as well as setting up and participating in contests of competency (148-54).

<sup>4</sup>While the term caregiving can be associated with a variety of people in need, I will use this term interchangeably with nanny since the context of this work eliminates other groups who may need care (e.g., the elderly or individuals with special needs).

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, *A Perfect Arrangement* by Suzanne Berne, *The Good Nanny* by Benjamin Cheever, *Men and Angels* by Mary Gordon, *The Pleasing Hour* by Lily King, *The Nanny Diaries* by Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus, *Lady of the Snakes* by Rachel Pastan, and *Substitute Me* by Lori Tharps.

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