

Re-coding the “Compassionate” Tibetan Nannies of New
York City

by

Tenzin Choden Kyisarh
Class of 2016

An essay submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay would not have been possible without the academic and emotional support of various individuals. Thank you first to my ANTH400 Cultural Analysis classmates who provided me with helpful insights and thoughtful comments during the initial stages of this essay.

Thanks to all my informants who were more than happy to share their experiences with me. This essay would be incomplete without your input. I also thank them for trusting me with their stories and giving me the honor to present their story through this essay. ལུགས་རྗེ་མེད།!

Thanks to Jayleecia Smith and Christian Hosam for reading my essay and helping me in the editing process. And thank you to all my friends, who encouraged me during the process and reminded me that I was “almost there.”

Thanks, Ama for giving me access to this vast network of Tibetan nanny world. You inspired me to write about this. Your sacrifice for our family has always been a motivation for Acha and I which we will always be grateful for. Thanks Papa, for the constant support you've provided me through all these years.

Last, but not the least, a very deep and sincere thanks to Anu. Throughout this whole semester, you've been the one to always put me in check when I strayed away from writing. You provided me with the guidance and support that allowed me to pursue this topic that is so close and personal to me. You gave me confidence to write about it. Your meticulous and thoughtful comments gave this essay the academic and emotional foundation that it needed. I really cannot express how this essay would definitely not be possible without your continuous support and encouragement. I am very grateful for that. Thanks for always having faith in me when I needed the most and reminding me that I finish this essay. मैं हमेशा आप के लिए शुक्रगुजर हूँ!

— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

PREFACE.....	1
SECTION I: THEORIES, THEORIES, AND MORE THEORIES	
1. CAPITALISM	
GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOR.....	6
RACIALIZED DIVISION OF LABOR (THIRD WORLD TO FIRST WORLD).....	9
INTERNATIONALIZED DIVISION OF LABOR.....	11
2. NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION	
STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM (THIRD WORLD TO FIRST WORLD)	14
MIGRATION/ MOTHERING (THIRD WORLD TO FIRST WORLD): STRUCUTRAL ADJUSTMENTS AND KINSHIP ADJUSTMENTS.....	14
SECTION II: VIOCES, MOTHERS, AND ACTORS	
1. TIBETAN NANNIES' EXPERIENCE	
REFUGEES (TWICE DISPLACED).....	17
RACIALIZED.....	18
EXPECTATIONS.....	20
SURVEILLANCE/ EXPLOITATIVE POWER RELATIONS.....	25
SHAME— MENIAL/ UNDERVALUED.....	27
2. FAMILY STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS	
SACRIFICE.....	31
MOTHERING/KINWORK.....	33
EXTENDED KIN.....	36
CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES.....	38
AFTERWORD.....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48

— PREFACE —

— * * * —

“Tring! Tring!” I ran over to the living room to pick up the small red and white landline. I had always been the first person to pick up phone calls. The phone’s resounding ring compelled me to pick it up before anyone else did. On the other side of the line I could hear a faint and soothing voice. I recognized it in a second. It was my mother’s voice. She had not called this month, so I guessed this was it. These calls were a monthly routine that my mother made sure to do. Something to make up for her absence. “Tenzin is that you?” she said. I answered, “Yeah mom it is me! How are you?” It felt as if she was right next to me. Her voice was very clear through the old Bakelite telephone. As I floated away from the conversation, I thought about her new life in New York. I imagined people with suits walking with their black briefcases. Clean and tidy streets with bright lights illuminating the entire city. However, my mother on the other line had started yelling. “Tenzin! Are you there?” she said. I quickly fell back into the conversation. After I was done talking, all my family members huddled around the phone, waiting for their turn to talk to her.

My mother had made the decision to move to New York to work as a domestic worker in order to earn extra income for the family. This was a decision I never understood as a child, but its importance and

meaning made more and more sense as I grew older. My mother sacrificed her life, relatives and job in India to come and work in New York so that we, my sister and I, could have a better chance at a future. After her arrival in New York my mother called every month to check up on what my sister and I were doing. We talked about school, the activities we were part of, our health, what we liked, what we wanted her to send us etc. These phone calls made me feel like she cared about us. We had not become a memory to her. We were not something related to her past but still an active part of her present. There was a feeling that she was part of our everyday lives and it resonated with us every time she called. It made up for the physical distance between us. After several years, her absence had become something that was “normal” to me, even as her monthly phone calls helped me nurture the hope of seeing her someday.

— * * * —

I begin with a snapshot of my experience as the child of a migrant Tibetan nanny as an entry point into the examination of the important phenomenon of migrant care workers and the inequalities of global capitalism on which it rests. This vignette forces us to consider why people are compelled to migrate, why women specifically do so, and how migrant mothers devise alternative forms of mothering in a transnational framework.

As migrant mothers leave their children in the care of extended kin, they

respond to neoliberal shifts in both their home and destination countries: austerity in the so-called “Third World,” the roll back of welfare, and lack of subsidized care for children and the elderly in the West. Structural adjustment of economies results in a parallel adjustment of familial structures where the role of mother becomes that of a distanced “breadwinner” and the extended kin take on mothering responsibilities in the sending countries. While children in the West are brought up by two mothers, one biological and one social (nannies), children in the global south have to rely on phone calls and remittance packages: an experience that attenuates the feeling of intimacy they share with their mothers. This raises concerns regarding the racial and classed division of transnational reproductive labor. As primarily white upper and middle class women are able to compete in the so-called “productive economy,” “Third World” women take on the white women’s reproductive duties in the privatized, domestic realm; as the former focus on their professional and personal development and class mobility, the latter are restricted in low-paying, home-based service jobs.

This essay shows the gendered, racialized, classed, and international inequalities that global capitalism rests on; as well as its exploitative nature via positioning domestic workers as agents who navigate these multiple systems of oppression through sacrifice, acceptance, and kinship adjustments. By analyzing Tibetan migration from the level of the subjects, nannies and migrant children, I avoid giving an essentializing representation of the experiences of migrant Tibetan nannies. Instead, I highlight their experiences through personal interviews and mostly rely on direct quotes as evidence to tell their story. I do not intend to provide a complete unitary picture of migrant Tibetan nannies that would limit their

experiences to just my informants. However, I use their stories to represent the effects of neoliberal capitalist globalization on women of color domestic workers.

My research is based on feminist analyses of transnational care work and open-ended interviews with five Tibetan nannies¹ in New York City, which I conducted between September 2015 and January 2016. I also conducted in-depth interviews with three Tibetan children of migrant domestic workers— all over 18 years of age— so as to examine the kinship adjustments and strategies that occur in the migratory process. I made sure to diversify my informants so that none were related to each other and had different years of experience as nannies. The interviews for the nannies consisted of questions on biographical data, such as years of experience as a nanny, their parenting strategies with their employers, their struggle working as a domestic worker, and their practices of transnational mothering. These interviews were conducted during a get-together at the house of one of the nannies, with the exception of one nanny who I interviewed through Skype. All three interviews with children of nannies were conducted though Skype as well. I also sat in on a conversation during the informal get-together between nannies, which gave me insights about the usual talk that occurs among them, specifically regarding migration, family, community, and work experiences. Most of the interviews with the nannies were conducted in Tibetan and then translated into English. Research participants themselves decided on which language to use in the interview. All of the interviews with the kids of nannies were conducted in English. As someone who lived

¹ My research focuses on female subjects but I am also aware that higher diversity of gender might complicate the narrative.

through the transnational migration process, I have included vignettes of my own experiences as a child of a Tibetan nanny throughout the essay.

I have structured the essay in two big sections: “Theories, Theories, and more Theories” and “Voices, Mothers, and Actors.” Each section has also been broken down into various subsections that delve deeper into issues relating to the topic of the section. Within “Theories, Theories, and more Theories,” I examine the theoretical frameworks of neoliberal capitalism, transnational migration, and gendered, racialized, and international division of labor. In “Voices, Mothers, and Actors” I delve into the narratives of Tibetan nannies in New York City, which highlights the informal networks of care, mothering strategies, and feelings of conflict within their jobs. This section also includes vignettes from Tibetan migrant children, which allow us to get a bigger picture of transnational mothering. Lastly, I rely heavily on Saba Mahmood’s² notion of agency in this section in order to depict the various methods with which Tibetan nannies present themselves not only as victims but also as agents and actors in the reproductive labor force.

² “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival.”

— SECTION I: THEORIES, THEORIES, AND MORE THEORIES —

1. CAPITALISM

1. Gendered Division of Labor

Feminists have long argued that capitalism reinforces gender inequality. Firstly, capitalism creates a binary between productive and reproductive work (gendered division of labor). Secondly, capitalism entrenches the public-private binary. These two tactics combine to associate the productive, public, political sphere with maleness and the private, reproductive, pre-political, natural sphere with femaleness (Brown 1995, 195). The public, productive sphere and labor is privileged, while reproductive work is thereby feminized, naturalized, domesticated, invisibilized, and devalued.

Capitalism promoted “productive” opportunities for men in the public sphere, while women were conscripted to reproductive labor in the private sphere. Reproductive labor refers to the labor that is needed to sustain the productive labor force. “Such work includes household chores; the care of elders, adults, and youth; the socialization of children; and the maintenance of social ties in the family”

(Parreñas 2001, 61). Prior to industrialization, both production and reproduction were performed at the household level. Though women mostly contributed to reproductive labor, they were simultaneously engaged in the production of “foodstuffs, clothing, shoes, candles, soap, and other goods consumed by the household” (Glenn 1992, 4). However increased industrialization forced the production of these goods into the productive capitalist industry. Reproduction, however, remained largely the responsibility of individual households. “The ideological separation between men's “productive” labor and women's non-market based [‘reproductive’ labor],” which overlapped with the public and private division, led to the division of labor in which men's work was associated with production of income outside the home, while women’s work remained centralized with reproduction in the house (Glen 1992, 4).

Since men were seen as breadwinners for the family, women’s role was to ensure the safety and health of men by providing them with service, through housework, so that the men could maintain their productive labor. Women were positioned as “secondary” earners or non-earners. “Marxist feminists place the gendered construction of reproductive labor at the center of women's oppression” (Glenn 1992, 2). They state that since reproductive work takes places most outside the market, it is invisible and not recognized as “real” work (Federici 1975). The “invisibilized” nature of women’s work advances the notion that family and women are a “depoliticized” entity (Brown 1995, 194). Because family is depoliticized, “so is women’s situation and women’s work within it; recognized neither politically nor economically as labor, this work has a discursively shadowy, invisible character” (Brown 1995, 194). Furthermore, the notion that reproductive labor comes

“naturally” to women stems from the belief that the family is “natural,” pre-political, and private, and everything that happens there is essentialized as natural as well: the woman who is the primary worker in the household is also constructed in these terms.

Silvia Federici conveys how “housework is [seen as] a natural attribute of female physique and personality” (Federici 1975, 2). Associating housework with female biological ability and weaker physical and mental strength advances the belief that housework is not a learned skill or specialized labor. “The distinction between housework and ‘real’ work [is that] the former is not seen as ‘productive labor... [with] values [that] can be exchanged in the capitalist marketplace” (Bhattacharjee 2002, 295). The failure to recognize women as “productive liberal subjects” perpetuates the belief that women are synonymous with housework (Brown 1995, 196). “Men benefit directly and indirectly from this arrangement” as they are freed from domestic labor, they can directly concentrate their efforts in paid employment and achieve success in that field (Brown 1995, 195).

These divisions of public and private, and productive and reproductive work, which are, in turn, mapped on to naturalized notions of maleness and femaleness, respectively, perpetuate the belief that women must compete in the productive labor field in order to challenge gender inequalities. This is precisely what second wave liberal feminists, like Betty Friedan, in the US advocated. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan encourages women to search for other opportunities than being a housewife and debunks the myth that all women wanted to be happy housewives (Friedan 1983). In order for women to be equal to men, they needed to seek employment outside the home, in the public, reproductive realm. This, of course,

reinforced the division between productive and reproductive work, and the privileging of the former over the latter, as pointed out by feminists of color. Audre Lorde states in *Sister Outsider* that white American feminist theory does “not deal with the differences between [women of color and white women] and the resulting difference in [their] oppression” when most of the women who tended to their (white women) children were “poor women and women of color” (Lorde 1984, 112). Similarly, Bell Hooks states that privileged white women have always been in the frontier of the feminist movement while poor white women, and all women of color have been in the background (Hooks 2000, 44). Arguing that women of color had always worked outside their homes—often in the homes of privileged White women, in fact—feminists such as Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde pointed to the presumed whiteness and class privilege of mainstream liberal feminism, and the oppressive nature of white feminist movements that lacks the voices of “Third World” women and women of color in general.

2. Racial Division of Labor (Third World to First World)

The labor system is organized to ensure that socially and racially inferior workers are relegated to the jobs rejected by their Euro-American counterparts. As these workers perform “low-wage, dead-end, marginal jobs” the “institutional barriers, including restrictions on legal and political rights,” prevent them from securing higher end jobs and competing with white middle class workers (Glenn 1992, 3). This draws attention to the material advantages whites, including women,

gain from the racial division of labor. Reproductive labor, as Parreñas argues, “has long been a commodity purchased by white class-privileged women in the United States [who] who historically freed themselves of reproductive labor by purchasing the low wage services of women of color” (Parreñas 2001, 62); capitalism relies upon and reproduces this racialized “two-tier hierarchy” among women (62).

Indeed, Glenn points out that white housewives argued against rigid limitation of hours for domestics in the 30s (Glenn 1992, 16). Because privileged housewives saw their own responsibilities as limitless, they felt there was no justification for boundaries on domestics’ responsibilities (Glenn 1992, 16). “They did not acknowledge the fundamental difference in their positions” and gained status and privileges from their relationships with their husbands—relationships that depended on their reproductive labor (Glenn 1992, 16). Instead of alleviating the conditions of gendered exploitation, these housewives reinforced and endorsed the same inequalities by transferring their responsibilities to lower income women of color domestic workers (Glenn 1992, 18). When overlaid, the racialized and gendered divisions of labor produce particular consequences for women of color who work as domestics.

As the commodified domestic service labor market expanded, women of color were “disproportionately employed as service workers in institutional settings to carry out lower-level ‘public’ reproductive labor, while white collar supervisory and lower professional positions are filled by white women” (Glenn 1992, 3). By transferring the responsibility of housework to a paid domestic worker, upper middle-class housewives are able to fulfill their wifely duties “yet distance [themselves] from

the physical labor and dirt and also have time for personal development” (Palmer 1990, 127-51). Racialized ideologies in the U.S. positioned women of color as especially suited for domestic and other service-related jobs. Black and Mexican women were portrayed as being dependent on white women for their employment since they were seen as unqualified for and incapable of professional work (Glenn 1992, 14). Asian workers were depicted to be naturally quiet, peaceful and subordinate (Glenn 1992, 14). Whatever the specific content of the racial characterizations, these stereotypes continually restricted women of color to the service of the dominant white middle class women (Glenn 1992, 14).

3. International Division of Labor

This racialized hierarchy has been internationalized under neoliberal globalization, such that migrant women of color from the so-called “Third World” increasingly do reproductive work in the US, in addition to native women of color. Rhacel Parreñas describes how the so-called “Third World” women are preferred for care work in the United States in mentioning Filipino care workers in the United States. She states that the migration of women from the “Third World connects systems of gender inequality in both sending and receiving nations to global capitalism” which creates the international division of labor (Parreñas 2001, 72). This division of labor places the racial division of reproductive labor in an international context where women from developing countries are incorporated into the global economy (Parreñas 2001, 72). This division regulates the migration and “entrance

into domestic service of women from the Philippines” (Parreñas 2001, 72). And so, the international transfer of care work creates a social, economic, and political relationship between women in the globalized labor market (Parreñas 2001, 73). Though this relationship is one that is based on class, race, gender, and global inequalities, Parreñas states that in this division of labor, there is a decline in worth of reproductive labor. When the mother performs it, it is “mothering” but when performed by care workers it is “unskilled” (Parreñas 2001, 73). Commodified reproductive labor is not only low-paid but also “declines in market value as it gets passed down the international transfer of caretaking” (Parreñas 2001, 73). As care becomes a commodity, women from advanced countries are able to afford the best quality care for their family by hiring a care worker, as women from developing countries, mostly women of color, must migrate to meet this demand and at the same time assist their own families.

Similarly, in her work with West Indian nannies of New York in the late eighties, Shellee Colen states how Caribbean women are hired as childcare workers in upper-middle class white households which reveals a “highly stratified system of reproduction” (Colen 1995, 78). By stratified reproduction Colen means that “the physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished differentially according to inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migrations status and that are structured by social, economic, and political forces” (Colen 1995, 78). This differentiates the reproductive tasks of the “liberated” white women and the “oppressed” women of color. As the upper-class women is able to hire a help or nanny to fulfill her reproductive tasks, these “Third

World” women perform the reproductive tasks of the white women wherein they are able to fulfill their own reproductive task of supporting their family back home. Thus, Colen calls this a “stratified reproduction” as both groups of women are able to accomplish their reproductive tasks “differentially” depending on their race, class, and global hierarchy. Therefore, this international stratified reproduction of labor employs women from “Third World” countries and reinforces gender and racial inequalities between developed and developing nations.

2. NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

1. Structural Adjustment Programs (Third World to First World)

Structural adjustment programs or SAPs have made developing nations' economies more vulnerable to "First World" exploitation under the pretense of promoting efficiency and economic growth (Chang 2000, 124). "Increasing poverty and rapidly deteriorating nutrition, health, and work conditions have emerged for women in these [developing] countries as a result of SAPs" (Chang 2000, 124). With increased SAP-driven poverty and lack of work and opportunities, women are unable to sustain their families. "Many women have no other option but to leave their families and migrate in search for work" (Chang 2000, 124). Moreover, the cutbacks in healthcare and the lack of government funded childcare services contribute to the increasing demands for migrant workers among middle class households in the West (Chang 2000, 125). "The elite of the 'First World' and 'Third World' quite literally bank on some, profiting immeasurably from women's paid and unpaid labor under structural adjustment" (Chang 2000, 126). Capitalist globalization pushes women from "Third World" countries to enter low-wage service sectors of "First World" capitalist countries (Parreñas 2001, 23). The global capitalist system organizes and reproduces an unequal structural linkage between sending and receiving countries through migration (Sassen 1984), which overlap with gendered and racialized hierarchies.

2. Migration/ Mothering (Third World to First World): Structural Adjustments and

Kinship Adjustments

Economic and political security are major reasons for migration. Just as "globalization simultaneously demands the low-wage labor of women from

traditionally “Third World” countries for the manufacturing and service sectors in advanced capitalist countries” in the care-work industry, it also makes the “Third World” community dependent on the migrant communities of the “First World” (Parreñas 2001, 23). Most migrant communities in the “First World” not only have to support themselves in the foreign country but also, support their extended family back home, through remittances. Workers migrate to provide their family with basic care necessities such as education, food, and healthcare, which are all made possible by the relatively high wages presented abroad (Parreñas 2001, 18). Though most of the workers come from developing countries this does not necessarily mean that migrant women come from low-income families. Most of these women have a high school or college education and have middle class paying jobs prior to their migration (Parreñas 2002; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). In referring to Filipino migrant workers Parreñas states that Filipinos migrate to provide economic stability to their family even if it requires them to take low-wage jobs in the West (Parreñas 2002, 18).

Parreñas, Ehrenreich and Hochschild state that most of the migrant women who perform care work are also mothers, who care for their own children and kin from afar (Parreñas 2005, 103). Migrant mothers come up with various kinship strategies to perform their reproductive labor. By “kin work” here, I refer “to the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations; decisions to neglect or to intensify particular ties” (di Leonardo 1987, 442). In transnational family structures that result from migration, distant mothers are able to perform a limited

amount of kin work as compared to when they live with their family. They perform “attenuated mothering” or maintain intimacy from distance through consistent phone-calls that conjure them virtually across geographical boundaries.

Nicole Constable states: “new technologies offer migrant workers new means to create and maintain a sense of intimacy with family members far away, as in the case of ‘long distance mothering’” (2009, 53). Despite struggling with time difference and work schedules, and having varied access to technology, migrant mothers use phone calls, video calls, or emails to be in regular touch with their children: this give them a sense of continuous involvement and engagement in their children’s daily activities. These forms of communication become a routine part of “transnational family life” (Parreñas 2005, 326). These rituals function as stand-ins for physical closeness and customs — house dinners or family field trips— that are considered the norm of family life. Another way that migrant mothers display their affection and care for their children is by sending boxes of remittances such as clothes, soaps, lotions, toys, and toiletries (Parreñas 2005, 328). These remittance boxes allow mothers to gain intimacy with their children and to bridge geographical distance by contributing to the welfare of their families.

— SECTION II: VOICES, MOTHERS, ACTORS —

1. THE TIBETAN NANNIES' EXPERIENCE

1. Refugees (twice displaced)

Though financial factors play a similar role in Tibetan migration as they do in Filipino migration, Tibetan migration is far more complicated in that the Tibetan migrants are primarily political refugees who predominantly reside in India and Nepal (*Humanity in Action*). Therefore, this is not the first time many of the Tibetan women have moved or been displaced. Most Tibetans who make it out of Tibet are fleeing Chinese oppression and attain refugee status in India or Nepal³. They subsequently look to migrating to First World countries for political asylum and economic stability. With at least 130,000 Tibetan refugees scattered throughout the world, there are roughly 5,000 to 6,000 Tibetans residing in New York (*Humanity in Action*). Today, “the community in the greater New York area makes up the largest concentration of Tibetan in the United States and the western world” (*Humanity in Action*). Due to the Immigration Act of 1990⁴, the Tibetan community of New York and the U.S. has increased annually.

³ Following the invasion of Tibet in 1949 by the Chinese Communist State, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), resulted in the deaths and tortures of thousands of Tibetans and displacement of thousands more (Dolma).

⁴ (Pub.L. 101-649 Immigration Act of 1990, Section 134).

2. Racialized

Tibetan nannies have become a status symbol and a source of social capital for white middle class employers who want to hire a “victim of religious oppression” with a Buddhist background (Sohn 2006). This commodification and racialization of Tibetan nannies raises the “model minority myth” that stereotypes Asians within the American context to be “hard working, docile, quite, intelligent, subordinate” individuals who are a model for other less motivated racial groups in behaviors and attitudes (McGowan & Lindgren 2003).

Being of Tibetan descent also adds a layer of suffering, deserving, and nonviolent victim of Chinese oppression. Tibetan Care, a nanny agency, guarantees “the most compassionate and gentlest” of the Tibetan nannies to someone looking to hire from this ethnic group (TibetanCare). Though the agency is run by a Tibetan woman, the agency uses the ‘model minority myth’ as a marketing tool to attract more customers. Not unlike Aihwa Ong’s contention about how Asians play into the discourse of orientalism as agents (Ong 1987), the agency claims that the expression “Keep Calm and Carry On” was likely invented by a Tibetan nanny due to their “incredibly patient” nature (TibetanCare).

DID A TIBETAN NANNY WRITE THAT?

Eric Sommer · July 16, 2015



Its website states that “when others [non-Tibetan nannies] lose their cool with a temperamental baby, a Tibetan nanny is often not just calm but actually cheerful” (TibetanCare). Agencies like TibetanCare use words such as “compassionate, gentle, patient, calm” that paint a picture of Tibetan women as the ideal nannies to hire in comparison with other racial and ethnic groups. These ads play on the Tibetan value of compassion that has its root in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, in order to appeal to employers of the natural Buddhist ‘attributes’ of Tibetan nannies and present it as a marketable asset of Tibetans (TibetanCare). [These agencies and ads help to create and perpetuate images of which racial and ethnic groups are best suited for care work.] Other ads also reveal Tibetan nannies as women who have “positive family values” and a “peaceful nature” (TibetanNannies).

Welcome to TibetanNannies.com

Tibetan Nannies works with families to select candidates in order to provide their families with the utmost care. Our Tibetan care provider recruits have positive family values, and work with families to cultivate developmental and socialization skills, discipline, healthy eating habits, safety awareness and a life-long caring concern for oneself and others.

These ads problematically essentialize Tibetans as having certain natural traits and beliefs that have economic value on the reproductive labor market. These natural dispositions are themselves marketable; reproductive labor, in any case, needs no skills.

The racial stereotypes of Tibetan women as in-demand commodities reveal the flexibility of racism that employers feel that they are entitled to when they decide to hire a nanny. This connects to the discourse of family as a private entity.

There are no limits and restrictions to our behavior at home. The filters and awareness that we enact outside our home is not applied when we are in the confines of it.

Similarly, given the fact that the family is viewed as a natural, private unit inhabiting the private space of the home somehow makes racial profiling acceptable during the hiring process, and renders the nanny as a privately owned commodity. Tasha Blaine, a former nanny, states that “women who would never feel comfortable making such sweeping generalizations about anyone’s racial background in other areas of their lives, like work, somehow feel free to do it when they’re talking about hiring nannies” (Thomas 2009).

3. Expectations

Similarly, Tibetan nannies are known for their loving, caring and peaceful qualities. Parents with Tibetan nannies claimed that they were ““very balanced and zen and aided in children’s ‘spiritual development’” due to their Buddhist background (Thomas 2009). Moreover, they are also “recognized for becoming ‘one of the family’ and offer the same compassion and quality of care for their charges as they do their own children” (Thomas 2009). Indeed, Tibetan nannies in the recent years have been the “hot new childcare accessory” of the town (Thomas 2009). Sex columnist Amy Sohn stated the “secret to serenity and acceptance when it comes to parenting” is to hire “Buddhist minders,” referring to her Tibetan nanny (Sohn 2006).

Similarly, in the 90s Jamaican domestics in Canada were initially portrayed as “docile, jolly and good with children” but recently have been viewed as

“aggressive, difficult and selfish” (Stiell and England 1999, 48). Stiell and England suggested that this shift was because of the increased collective action by Afro-Caribbeans in domestic worker’s rights groups, which contradicted their initially submissive image (1999, 48). The collective organizing during the domestic worker’s movement was deemed as “aggressive” because domestic workers were portrayed as invisible and always in the shadows. Still and England mentioned how the Jamaican nannies they interviewed were aware of their representations as “aggressive”. In fact, both Jamaican nannies were “proud” of their “aggressive” characteristics because they believed that it showed that “we [Jamaican nannies] don’t take bull, right” (1999, 49). In addition, the two Jamaican nannies also felt that their ability to speak English fluently also advanced the notion of Jamaican nannies as “aggressive” as they were able to challenge the “Third World domestic” stereotype. Here we see how the “Third World” women, mostly women of color (and in this case Jamaican women), can become actors as they internalize these stereotypes to benefit their own situation and to resist exploitation.

Similarly, Tibetan nannies in New York City viewed their representation as “clam, hard-working, and peaceful” as positive characteristics that set them apart from other group of domestic workers. When asked about what they think of the recent trend of hiring Tibetan nannies, Chemi, Rinchen and Sonam, all middle-aged Tibetan nannies based in New York, had their own opinions:

“It is because we do not only do babysitting but we are also open to help in housekeeping.”

(Sonam)

“But that depends on your own choice to do housekeeping or not. For me personally, if they do not tell me to do housekeeping, I just do it out of my own will. We do certain housework even if we are not paid for it because we are also living in the house. Though I am a babysitter, I also spend time in the house. So, I am naturally inclined to do some housework when I see it being dirty. Tibetan nannies are loving, caring and good with kids. We do not have ‘two-face’ where we are someone else in front of the boss and someone else in their absence. We do what is asked of us that is to take care of the kids. We are compassionate. You feel like you are mother and you sympathize with the kids. Since their parents are not present so I feel like I have to do my part in taking care of them even though it is also my job. The kids also spent most of their time with us so it’s valid that they get attached with us.”

(Rinchen)

“One of my good friends [a non-Tibetan nanny] had to leave her job because her boss decided to hire a Tibetan nanny because she had heard from my boss that I did both housekeeping and babysitting. So, she decided to hire a Tibetan nanny because of that.”

(Sonam)

“I think most of the news that we get in this world⁵ - is through word of mouth. Like getting a new job through your friends’ bosses. So I think that the bosses talk with each other about how their nannies are. And most of the ones that have Tibetan nannies have always positive things to say about them. I haven’t heard anything bad being said about Tibetan nannies. It is the Tibetan nature that these employers are attracted to. Our own traditional beliefs are reflected when we take care of the kids. We are compassionate towards them. Our loving and caring side is what attracts employers to hire Tibetan nannies.”

(Rinchen)

Consistent with Rinchen’s view on the nature of Tibetan nannies, Chemi stated, *“Because Tibetan nannies are always the same with the kids when the boss is present or absent. We are good with the kids in both situations.”*

(Chemi)

These interviews reveal the way Tibetan nannies elevate themselves from their non-Tibetan counterparts. Though, it is problematic that these agencies use the ‘model minority myth’ as a marketing tool, Tibetan nannies at the same time embrace the stereotype to differentiate themselves from other nannies and gain an income

⁵ Referring to her work field as a domestic worker.

through these generalized qualities⁶.

In her piece⁷, Saba Mahmood introduces a contemporary approach to observing agency in the Muslim women's movement in Egypt. In her discussion of these Muslim women as actors and agents, she states that we must refrain from identifying agency solely based on "moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge" to hegemonic domination (Mahmood 2001, 206). Mahmood states that when women's actions are seen to reinforce the "oppressive" and "exploitative" nature of the group or system they are part of, then these women are not regarded as active agents. She states that can also be understood by as being "self-conscious" of one's subordination (Mahmood 2001, 210). "Such conceptualization also encourages us to understand agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood 2001, 210).

Therefore, these Tibetan nannies' acceptance of their "subordinate" qualities and stereotypes becomes a way through which these women become active actors in this oppressive system of reproductive labor. Instead of explicitly challenging these generalizations, Tibetan nannies internalize these stereotypes and translate it as positive attributes to help them secure their jobs. Thus, they become conscious individuals that allow the oppressive stratified labor system to portray them as "victims." By accepting and reinforcing the "model minority myth" and stereotypes of Asian women, these nannies not only reinscribe the oppression, but

⁶ Clam, peaceful, compassionate and so on.

⁷ "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival."

also acknowledge their oppression and discrimination by using it to navigate their survival.

4. Surveillance/ Exploitative Power Relations

As I spent more time with these women during the interview, I got to hear about various rumors and stories related to their work field. They talked about rumors they heard about from other babysitters wherein some employers install cameras in the baby stroller to keep tabs on the nanny. Sonam then went on to talk about her friend (non-Tibetan nanny) who had cursed in front of the kids and had been fired from the job the same day due to her boss' viewing of the taped incident. I also got to hear a story about another Tibetan babysitter whose employers had installed cameras all over the house and had been oblivious to the cameras up until one month of being at work. Uden went on to say that her friend's employers approached her friend after one month and showed her all the recordings of her and their baby and discussed each and everything that she had done and advised her about the right way to do her work. As I listened to their conversation, they went on to discuss recent events or stories they heard happened with other Tibetan nannies. These informal group conversations and discussions not only act as way through which Tibetan nannies can be updated with the news of the nanny world, but also act as a way through which these nannies display their agency through rumors and stories.

In mentioning their relationships with their employers and discussing their strategies of parenting, Uden stated:

“I feel like I am at work when I am at their house. But when I am taking care of the kids, I take care of them as if they were my own. It is really important to have the nanny and the boss cooperate for the child’s upbringing. Because if I were to say no to the kids for watching TV and she would go ask her mom and her mom would allow her to watch it. Then the kid will never have respect for me or my decisions. I will not be an authority figure to them. There is not going to be any discipline that way because then I am made into a strict nanny. So, the partnership and cooperation between the boss and the nanny is really important to keep the job a healthy place.”

(Uden)

Half of my informants spoke about their very balanced relationship with their boss and the other half expressed experiences where the partnership was lacking. Sonam agreed with Uden, *“The parents have to respect us so that the kids can respect us.”* And Chemi chimed in: *“sharing the ways/ methods of the boss and the nanny is the best way to take care of the child.”*

After talking about the importance of the partnership and cooperation between the employer and the nanny, Rinchen expressed her preference to take care of younger kids as opposed to older children.

“There’s a difference when taking care of kids from when they are small compared to when they are big. That’s why it is good to take

care of kids when they are just a baby because they will get used to you and we will know all their likes and dislikes as they grow up. It's also hard for the kid to adjust with a new nanny when they are big."

(Rinchen)

Here we see the power differentials between nannies and kids, not just parents. The nanny is not only working for the parents (employer) but also the kids. Chemi also expressed her preference for younger kids:

"I prefer to take care of kids that are months old. Because I will be able to teach them and guide them in my own way as I do when I take care of my own kids. But, when I start taking care of kids when they are above the age of 3 then it gets a little difficult because they refuse to listen to you."

(Chemi)

5. Shame— menial/ undervalued

As I mentioned earlier, most Tibetan nannies working in New York City, have had at least graduated from high school in their previous country of migration. Therefore, the struggle of taking "menial" domestic jobs when they moved to the United States was a topic that came up in every interview I conducted. In talking about the shame and stigma that is associated with the domestic field, Uden initially

felt shameful, having internalized ideas about class, work, and status.

“I don’t think I was ever ashamed with my job. But I remember this one time when I was walking with the stroller in Brooklyn and I spotted one of my students from afar. I did not know what came to me, but automatically, I hid myself because I wondered what she thought about me since I had been her teacher and hostel matron back in India. That was the only time I questioned myself about my job. But now, I just take it as a job. A way to gain income. Nowadays, even my teachers from India are doing the same thing as us here even though there was a status difference in India. It’s just a job, so what? Everyone does it.”

(Uden)

Rinchen conveyed similar sentiments:

“When I first arrived here, I used to think, ‘Even after coming to America, I ended up as a maid or servant’ I had those feelings. However, after a while, I started to think that of it as job no matter what I do. Everyone is here to earn for their family. My boss is working for somebody right, and I am working for her right. She gets the money, I get the money. It’s a job for me just like it’s a job for my boss. There is no feeling of shame for what I do.”

(Rinchen)

For Uden and Rinchen, their motivation to support their family outweighed the feelings of shame and embarrassment that is often associated with their work.

These Tibetans nannies not only faced surveillance as another form of control and discrimination at their workplace (the homes of the employers), but also dealt with the stigma that is associated with their work. However, I need to point out here that this is not the full extent of what is happening. As the nanny goes to her employer's house to take care of their kid, the camera is not the only form of surveillance and control; the children are as well. The children also have authority and control over the nanny, in so much that they report back to their mothers about their nanny's day-to-day activities. So far, the nanny is represented as a "docile" and "exploitative" being, who is exploited not only by her employer, but also by the children as well. However, as Mahmood mentions agency comes in various and nuanced forms. "Agency is [also] understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (Mahmood 2001, 206).

These Tibetan nannies not only display agency with the rumors about employer stories, but also demonstrate their preference when choosing a certain age group to take care of. This aspect of agency portrays them as "conscious" individuals that take their "own interests" into account. In this process these "docile" Tibetan nannies exhibit themselves not as "victims" but as actors. Moreover, submitting to the presence of surveillance cameras voluntarily, these women demonstrate their awareness of being observed. They are actors in that they are able to control and modify their actions to the likes of their employers. Not only are they "submitting" to

their employers, but also they are “recoding the instrument of their oppression” in personal intimate ways as a technique to demonstrate their loyalty and devotion to their job (Mahmood 2001, 205). Tibetan nannies “re- direct and recode to secure their [own interests and agendas], a recoding that stands as the site of women’s agency” (Mahmood 2001, 205). “What may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressive point of view, may very well be a form of agency...[Agency] is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability” (Mahmood 2001, 212). Therefore, Tibetan nannies prove their agency by voluntarily allowing the employers to surveil them for the purposes of their work benefits.

These nannies also illustrate their agency by coming to terms with the shame that is associated with their work. The two nannies mentioned above associated their shame with the lower class status that is linked with domestic work. Rinchen and Uden were both teachers back in India and expressed how they had difficulty accepting their change of status when they moved to the U.S. However, they move beyond the shame by defining it simply as “work”; thus, the value of their job is based on how their work is able to help her with family maintenance. Therefore, these women are able to “realize their own interests” and goals (supporting their family) “against the weight of obstacles” such as shame and embarrassment (Mahmood 2001, 206). Thus, presenting the “calm” and “compassionate” Tibetan nanny as not just victims of religious, political, and global oppression but, as actors of their own rights.

2. FAMILY STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS

1. Sacrifice

Pema, a Tibetan nanny who lives in Queens, New York and works for a white-middle class family in the Upper West Side. Also as a single mother, Pema told me during a Skype interview that she came to New York in 1997 *“for a better life for myself and my daughter.”* Prior to her migration to the US, she was an elementary school teacher in India. Pema claimed that her teaching background helped her tremendously with her job as a nanny. She was able to connect and to communicate easily with kids. In asking her about how her decision to move to the United States and work as a nanny compared to her job as teacher back in India, Pema responded by saying: *“I don’t regret my decision to leave India and my job because I was able to provide for the whole family as a result of that.”* Economic security and *“good financial health”* for her daughter and her extended family were the main reasons for her migration.

Chemi, an experienced twenty-two year veteran Tibetan nanny revealed:

“At first it was hard to get into the job because, I was a businesswoman back in Nepal. And now I had to take care of kids, clean the house, change diapers for others. At first I was taken aback by the job. However, I realized that it was due to my job that my family back in Nepal was able to live a happy life.”

(Chemi)

Pema's and Chemi's experience also sheds light on how migration becomes a strategy of "family maintenance" (Parreñas 2001, 64) for Tibetan women, many of whom become sole breadwinners and challenge traditional gender roles. Pema not only supports her daughter with the remittances she sends home, but she also aids her extended family members who rely on her for their household income (she makes about \$1200 per week and she admitted to sending remittances annually to India). Though she still fulfills her conventional "female role" as nurturer by supporting and providing for her distant family through remittances and transnational kin work, she also contests gender ideologies of "being feminine defined as sticking close to home" through her migration (Enloe 2000, 21).

Pema and Chemi not only contest the hegemonic female narrative of women being synonymous with home (Federici 1975), but also debunk the "Third World domestic" narrative of being forced into migration and reproductive labor due to global capitalism. Both women reveal the migratory process to the "First World" as a response to global capitalism by the "Third World." Their experiences disclose the various sacrifices that these women make for families. They've all sacrificed their jobs in their home countries, their family, and their life in order to move to a new country and to provide their children with better opportunities - even if it means doing what they consider "lower-tier"⁸ jobs (compared to those that they were used to back home). Here, sacrifice (of family, job, and life) for the purposes of migration serves as a form of agency for Tibetan women that differs from straightforward victimhood. They have been actively and consciously engaged in their process of migration and

⁸ Services jobs such as housekeeping, babysitting, domestics etc.

use their sacrifice as a way to “[respond] to hegemonic praxis” by navigating the structural constraints placed on them by global capitalism (Mahmood 2001, 206). “Agency [is] the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist” (Mahmood 2001, 217). Their ability to “survive” in the “ongoing presence of pain” during the migration process instead of directly transgressing, “does not have the sense of ‘passive submission but of an active engagement’” (Mahmood 2001, 217). Therefore, Tibetan nannies’ sacrifice of their family, life, and job in their previous country as well as their enduring survival during this process of migration acts as another way that these women exhibit agency.

2. Mothering / Kinwork

Being that all of the migrant Tibetan nannies I interviewed were also mothers, they revealed their kinship strategies during their separation with their kids when they moved to the U.S.

Rinchen, a forty-three-year-old Tibetan nanny from India, who is now based in New York, recalls sending money back to her family in India.

“I missed my kids every time. I always thought of them when I was doing anything. Thinking about what they were up to back home. I was always concerned about how they were taking care of my kids etc. Whenever ate something, I always shed tears because I would think about how I am having a good meal and I always wondered whether

my kids had the same opportunity. So every time I got my paycheck, I would go shopping for my kids so that I can send parcels packages to them. Every time I saw something nice that other kids would have here in the U.S. whether it be clothes or shoes, I would think to myself that I would send it to my own kids as well. I still remember that each of those [remittance] boxes cost \$102. At that time my pay was not very high either but I wanted to make my kids happy so I always sent them gifts, money, and called them regularly.”

(Rinchen)

Chemi shares a similar experience when she first moved to New York in the nineties from Nepal to work as a nanny. Her elder daughter was seven and younger daughter was two at the time.

“It was really difficult at first. I missed my kids all the time. Back in 1994, when I used to call my kids in Nepal, it was \$10/minute for a phone-call. I used to get paid \$350 in a week so I used to spend more than \$100 to call my family back home. So after all that, I would be left with not enough money for the daily necessities here. But, I still had to call them because I was concerned about them all the time.”

(Chemi)

Uden, a forty-year-old Tibetan nanny who was previously a middle school teacher in

India, immigrated to New York three years ago after being accepted into the Fulbright scholarship at University of Iowa. Like many of the other women, she talked about her experience as a nanny and a student in the United States. However, Uden's story differs from other Tibetan nannies who come to New York as political asylees.

“My son wanted to go to school for Dental Science but the fees for the school is really expensive in India. So, I applied for Fulbright and got in at University of Northern Iowa for one year. They gave me a monthly allowance and I sent some of that money back to my family in India so that I could contribute towards my son's tuition. My pay back in India was very low as a teacher. My monthly salary was 9000 rupees around \$133. I was also a hostel matron at the same time so I got an additional 1000 rupees (approx. \$15) for that. That salary rupees would usually finish at the twentieth day of the month most of the time. After my completion for the program [at Iowa], there were a lot of opportunities for scholarship to pursue further studies but I could not support my family with that because to study more means that I need to spend more money. So, I decided to stay in New York and work as a nanny.”

(Uden)

3. *Extended Kin*

Other strategies of structural adjustment of kinship and transnational mothering include the involvement of the extended kin consisting of aunts or grandparents in childcare in the home country. Parreñas's research on the Filipino migrant mothers reveals that almost half of her sample migrant children "resided in their paternal or maternal ancestral home" (Parreñas 2005, 322). Another important "informal network" that is formed in migrant families is that childcare is not only performed by the specified caretaker, but also shared with the entire community (2005, 84). With the help of the community at large, these caretakers, including neighbors and distant relatives, communally take part in the upbringing of the child (Cheever 2003). Therefore, childrearing becomes a communal process instead of a nuclearized process, with many "surrogate" parents who do kin work for absentee biological parents. Grandparents play an especially important role in these "skipped-generation households" where children live with their grandparents without any parent present (Ochiai and Molony 2008, 35). Dawa described growing up with her maternal grandparents and calling her grandfather as *pala*, which means father, instead of *popo* or grandfather. These relational terms reveal how migrant children of Tibetan nannies in "skipped-generation households" overcome the lack of their parents' presence by reconfiguring kin relations. Similarly, Karma told me that she called her mother's sister *ama* or mom. "*I never lacked a mother, in fact, I had two*" said Karma, appreciating her extended kin. Migrant workers share this appreciation. Pema, a nanny in New York, told me, "*My extended family represented me as a*

mother and dad to my daughter.” Similarly, Sonam stated:

“Every time I called my kids they would call me ‘aunty then ama.’ Because they had grown up with my older sister, they had been used to the word ‘aunty.’ So, I would always tell them that they needed to take care of their aunt because she was their ‘real’ mom since she had fulfilled all the mother duties that I was not able to. I still do not know what I would have done without the help of my sister. I owe their upbringing to her.”

(Sonam)

These examples highlight the kinship-based “structural adjustments” that take place as a result of migrant work. Transnational families function as an “adaptive unit” that responds to external forces of dislocation and separation (Parrenas 2005, 50). The children give up intimacy and familiarity with their biological parents, while the extended kin perform kin work, as social parents. Migrant mothers are able to supply their families in the origin country with basic essentials and to provide them with opportunities to uplift their economic status by putting their geographical proximity on hold; their intimacy is attenuated.

The experiences of Uden, Rinchen and Chemi reveal the various hardships that Tibetan nannies go through when they first move to the United States, as well as the kinship practices through which they can support their family. Through the means of phone calls, remittances, and remittance boxes, Tibetan migrant nannies

are able to fulfill their role as mothers. Though, due to economic and citizenship status, they are unable to meet their children regularly, the adjustment of kinships through various outlets of communication allow them to be actively engaged in the child rearing process. Therefore, the adjustment of kinship in these households also becomes a form of agency, rather than just an outcome of capitalism. These adjustments of kinship ties relate to Mahmood's point about how the women "recode"⁹ their oppression to "secure their own interests" as a technique of survival.

4. Children's Narratives

From the perspectives of migrant children, transnational mothering strategies are very important to keep their relationship and bond with their mother. Karma, a twenty-one-year-old daughter of a migrant Tibetan nanny in New York, who moved to the United States in 2007 from India, reveals her experience of receiving transnational reproductive care. Karma met her mom for the first time in New York in 2007, after twelve years of separation. Phone calls and remittance boxes, she told me, played a huge role for her to remind her of her mother's presence, albeit long-distance.

"These phone calls were so precious to me, even the five minutes I had to talk with her, I valued dearly. I don't remember what we talked about, but I know we talked... My mother not only provided financial

⁹ (Mahmood 2001, 205).

support but also sent me parcels with clothes, food, and books. My ama¹⁰ (mother's sister) also documented my life for my mother by sending video tapes of me to her."

(Karma)

By regular phone calls and video recordings, Karma's mother was able to be long-distance mother and a virtual part of her upbringing and life.

Dawa, a twenty-two-year-old Tibetan college student from Wisconsin, expresses conflicting views about these kinship strategies.

"My mother called us every month to catch up. She also made sure that she was the first one to wish us on our birthdays, that she never forgot. At those times I felt her presence." However, Dawa also added that *"it's not the same over the phone. I needed my mother's company. But her calling me was enough because she was working hard for us in America. I'm never gonna know how it would feel like to grow up with a mother. So, for me the phone calls were enough to show her love for me."* Though Dawa missed her mother, she accepted the separation as "normal" and necessary; what else would they have done, given the circumstances. *"When I saw my relatives with their mother, those were the times I would miss her. But then I realized that I don't have that option to go see my mom if I missed her because she*

¹⁰ Originally means mother in Tibetan but Karma calls her Aunt *ama*.

was so far.”

(Dawa)

Unlike Karma, Dawa realized that the phone calls or the remittance boxes did not make up for the physical lack of her mother. However, she reconciled with these feelings of loneliness and longing, by reminding herself of her mother’s sacrifice. She had to make do with the phone calls because “*she didn’t have the option*” of seeing her mother who was “*working hard for us in America.*”

— * * * —

In March 2007, my sister and I arrived at the JFK Airport in Queens, New York. I was carrying one carry-on suitcase and a pink Jansport backpack that my mother had sent me on my eleventh birthday. An Air India Airlines flight attendant accompanied us since we had been traveling alone for an exhausting fourteen hours straight. With the “Unaccompanied Minor” or “UM” lanyard on our neck, my sister and I made our way to the arrival gate where we would meet our mother whom we had not seen for nine years. Oblivious to all that was happening around us and not realizing that I was only minutes away from meeting my mother, I reached the arrival gate with my sister, where I saw a familiar face looking in our direction. The woman was wearing a black down jacket, which matched her black velvet pants and brown leather UGGS winter boots, engulfing her small 4’11” frame. She was looking at us with a yearning and an overwhelming happiness that eventually welled up in a tearful smile when she approached us.

— * * * —

I recall this moment of reunification with my mother clearly; other children of migrant Tibetan women share similar stories. It was a puzzling yet a happy moment in my life. During the initial months of reuniting with my mother, I had to overcome feelings of unfamiliarity. Due to our lack of physical closeness, I still felt awkward and shy around my mother. Karma tells me of similar feelings.

“I wasn’t raised by this woman so I felt like I was sitting with a stranger in a room at first. I had no memories of her physical self while I was growing up. So, I was very careful of what I said to her. I wanted to impress her and show that I am a good child that I grew up well.”

(Karma)

Here, Karma displays the experience of migrant children in seeking approval when they first interact with their mothers. Similarly, Dawa expressed how cautious she was in the beginning. *“I thought, I don’t know whether she will like me. What if I turned to be someone she didn’t like?”* This speaks to the insecurity that migrant children feel with the long separation from their mothers. They know that economic factors motivated their mothers to migrate, and they do not want to be a source of trouble or burden to their parents with additional concerns. Guilt, awkwardness, and anxiety impel them to become “model daughters” by offering a helping hand to their mothers in the house or when accompanying them to their work.

“I felt really bad for my mother when I was exposed to her work. However, it made me love her even more and made me want to work even harder.”

(Dawa)

Karma added, “I feel sad because my mom had a college education but now she works as a nanny despite all the credentials and has the ‘burden’ to take care of her employer’s family.”

(Karma)

Both Karma and Dawa expressed how the exposure to their mothers’ job as a nanny and domestic worker allowed them to understand their mothers better. They were able to recognize their sacrifice personally as they got to see their mothers do their work. Karma acknowledged the decrease in their economic and social status when she immigrated to New York. She also recognized her mother’s job as a nanny is not ideal.

“I know she’s not having fun doing her job. But you gotta think about it in terms of progress and wealth because we don’t have the privilege of embarrassment.” Karma, said that though housework *“may not be recognized or valued by other people, I appreciate all that she has done for me and our family by bringing me here [New York]. My outlook of my mother and her work completely changed when I saw what she was doing.”*

(Karma)

It ignited feelings of respect and pride for Karma in that her mother was able to do so much for her. Karma also expressed remorse for not understanding and appreciating her mother when she was separated from her -- unexposed to her sacrifices. Karma contended that the “privilege of embarrassment” is only provided for people with options. Her mother had no option when she migrated to New York because financial reasons dictated the migration. Karma was not entitled to feel ashamed. In retrospect, Karma stated, *“Now I know what she went through to get me here.”*

Likewise, Dawa described how she helped her mother when she came home with leg cramps as a result of standing on her feet all day doing house chores for the employer. *“I made sure that my mother did not have any trouble at home, so I gave her massages when she would come home.”* However, the work of the migrant mother does not end once she comes home, it continues into a “second shift” (Hochschild 1989). She has to perform her duties as a mother to her own children as well, just like she did through transnational mothering when her children were back in the home country. One might also argue that this makes the jobs of migrant nannies more difficult because they have two sets of kids to take care of: one at home and one at her workplace. However, by the time Tibetan migrant children relocate most of them are already in their early teens, and are able to help with house chores, do their own homework, and so on.

— AFTERWORD —

Often times, the oldest of the siblings act as surrogate parents, picking up younger siblings from school and aiding them with her homework. Children of migrant domestic workers, then also take on reproductive tasks that their mothers are not able to perform at home. This represents yet another “structural adjustment” of the transnational families of migrant workers. Thus, this creates a more cyclical phenomenon where the children of migrant women must perform the labor of their mothers while simultaneously competing with their white peers. Dolkar, a migrant child of a Tibetan nanny who attends a community college in New York shared her experience of taking care of her siblings.

“After I am done with my school, I have to go pick up my siblings from their elementary schools. Since my mom works in Manhattan until 8pm, she is not available to pick them up. So, most of the time, I have to schedule my classes by taking that into account as well. When we get home, I also have to make sure they get their homework done for the day. After they’ve finished all their homework, that’s when I get the time to do my own work.”

(Dolkar)

Just as the extended family back in the home country acts as a surrogate for the absent mother, these migrant children also take on the duties of the mother in the

“First World.” This problematizes the issue of migration, which is associated with economic and social progress.

My parents immigrated to the United States with hopes to achieving what they called “a better life” and opportunities for my sister and I. The same goes for the nannies, I’ve interviewed in my essay. The image of America as the “land of opportunities” has always been linked with the dominant immigrant narrative (Stiglitz). My informants (Tibetan nannies), as well as my parents, left their lives of economic and political comfort to claim a life as hard-working immigrants in the United States. They (Tibetan immigrants) take on “lower-tier” jobs being that their refugee status makes them unqualified for “high skill” positions. Thus, they are compelled to take on jobs requiring hard labor, without having any prior experience with these positions in their country. I still remember my father taking on a service worker’s job during our initial months of moving to New York. For a man who had been behind the office desk doing accounting and leading a carpet company, one day’s work of moving giant carpets was extremely draining. Similarly, for my mother who currently works as a nanny for an upper-middle class White household, in the few instances that I visited her during her working hours, I was unable to hide the feelings of pity and sympathy that I got from seeing her work. During these instances, I was reminded of their “sacrifice”¹¹ to give me a “better life.” However, experiences such as Dolkar’s, makes me skeptical about the “American Dream” and the myth of opportunity.

In a migrant workers’ household (in this case the households of Tibetan nannies), kids like Dolkar have to step up in place of their mothers in order to perform

¹¹ Sacrifice of their previous live in the origin country.

the necessary “motherly” tasks. Though Dolkar immigrated to the United States as per her parent’s desires to provide her opportunities and resources of a “better future”, she still ended up partaking in the same jobs as her mother. Where the so-called “progress” is in all of this one might ask? Though she receives better educational opportunities than she had before, isn’t the point of migration and “American Dream” to give their children better opportunities so that they do not have to do the same work as their parents? This raises issues of class inequality and equal educational opportunity as well. I am conflicted with these emotions and questions about migration as a route toward a better life. As I proceed to ending my essay, though I have presented issues about the dominant immigrant narrative, I want you, the reader, to take away at least one point from this essay: the various forms through which Tibetan nannies are “consciously” actors in the gendered, racialized, and international division of reproductive labor.

The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaign in New York is another form of unified agency that domestic workers are asserting. The bill is “statewide legislation that will recognize the domestic workforce and establish basic labor standards” (Poo 2010, 2). It will “provide overtime pay, protection from discrimination, notice of termination and other basic benefits for the more than 200,000 women — most of whom are immigrant of color — who work as nannies, housekeepers and companions for the elderly in New York State” (Poo 2010, 2). With the help of domestic workers across the state with different racial, class, and political backgrounds, the bill has led a transformative change in the domestic worker’s rights movement. Moreover, the children and employers of these domestic workers have also stepped in to show their support for the bill (Poo 2010, 12). The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights

demonstrates the political possibilities and the means through which domestic workers in New York can claim their rights as active workers and act as agents in the workforce to make care work valuable.

I conclude, then, by highlighting and positioning Tibetan nannies as “active agents” in the workforce who defy and “re-code” their oppression as a means to meet their benefits rather than to being in complacent about the “victimized ‘Third World’ domestic.” Tibetan nannies have responded to external forces of distance and separation by creating innovative networks of kinship, which alter the popular definition of care and intimacy. Before I wrote this essay, I, myself, was unaware of the strategies and movements employed by Tibetan nannies. However, after conducting the interviews, I have realized and acknowledged the differences that women of color in the domestic worker community face in the system of commodified reproductive labor. Therefore, I plead for recognition of the discrimination, exploitation, and oppression that these women face every day at their workplace. Most of all, acknowledge and appreciate their heroic narratives of agency.

— BIBLIOGRAPHY —

Bhattacharjee, Annanya, Sonita Sarker, and Esha Niyogi De. 2002. "Immigrant Dreams and Nightmares: South Asian Domestic Workers in North America." *Trans-status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia in a Time of Global Mobility*. 289-307. Durham: Duke University Press.

Brown, Wendy. 1995. "Finding the Man in the State." *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. 194-197. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Brudzińska, Kinga, Chloé Choquier, and Michael Keller. "One Home One Dream: Exploring Tibetan Diaspora in New York City." *Humanity in Action*.

Chang, Grace. 2000. *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Cheever, Susan. 2003. "The Nanny Dilemma." *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. 31-38. New York: Metropolitan.

Colen, Shellee. 1995. "'Like a Mother to Them': Stratified Reproduction and West Indian Childcare Workers and Employers in New York." In *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, 78-102. University of California Press.

Constable, Nicole. 2009. "The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex, and Reproductive Labor." *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

di Leonardo, Micaela. 1987. "The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship."

Dolma, Dawa. "A Fight for Freedom."

<http://issuu.com/dawadolma/docs/a_fight_for_freedom>

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Arlie Russell Hochschild. 2003. "The Care Crisis in the Philippines: Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy." *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. 39-54. New York: Metropolitan.

Enloe, Cynthia H. 2000. *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Updated Edition With a New Preface. University of California Press.

- Federici, Silvia. 1975. "Wages against Housework." London: Power of Women Collective.
- Friedan, Betty. 1983. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: The Vail-Ballou Press, Inc.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 1992. "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor." University of Chicago Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. 114-119. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1989. *The Second Shift*. Penguin Books USA Inc.
- Hooks, Bell. 2000. "Global Feminism." 44-48. *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2001. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival."
- Mcgowan, Miranda Oshige, and James T. Lindgren. 2003. "Untangling the Myth of the Model Minority." Social Science Research Network.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ochiai, Emiko, and Barbara Molony. 2008. *Asia's New Mothers: Crafting Gender Roles and Childcare Networks in East and Southeast Asian Societies*. Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental.
- Palmer, Phyllis. 1990. *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. 2001. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2008. *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2005. *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2005. "Long Distance Intimacy: Class, Gender and Intergenerational Relations between Mothers and Children in Filipino Transnational Families." *Global Networks*.
- Poo, Ai-jen. 2011. "A Twenty-First Century Organizing Model: Lessons from the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Campaign." *New Labor Forum*.

Pub.L. 101-649 Immigration Act of 1990, Section 134.

Sassen Koob, Saskia. 1984. The New Labor Demand in Global Cities. In *Cities in Transformation*, edited by Michael P. Smith. Beverly Hills, California.: Sage.

Steill, Bernadette and Kim England. 1999. "Jamaican Domestic, Filipina Housekeepers and English Nannies." 43-58. *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*. London: Routledge.

Sohn, Amy. 2006. "Victims of Religious Oppression Hot New Childcare Accessory For Fall." *Gawker*.

Stiglitz, Joseph. 2010. "The Price of Inequality and the Myth of Opportunity." *Common Dreams*.

Thomas, Susan Gregory. 2009. "Tibetan Nannies: Parents' New Status Symbol?" *NBSC News*.

TibetanCare. N.p., n.d. Web. Jan. 2016. <<http://www.tibetancarenyc.com>>

TibetanNannies. N.p., n.d. Web. Jan. 2016. <<http://tibetannannies.com/Home.aspx>>