AMERICAN NANNY: LOCATING THE MARGINALIZED THIRD WORLD LABORER THROUGH CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood, feminism, and domestic labor have been topics of significant debate for years. Despite the growth of feminist ideals, child-care is still a sensitive topic, especially for women who consider hiring a personal nanny. What are the implications of hiring a nanny? Where should one start looking? How good does her English need to be? Despite the high demand for child-care and the equivalent need for employment by working-class immigrant females, women who work as nannies often face challenges such as ethnic biases and even lack of rights and benefits. This project aims to explore the ways in which recent fiction depicts the role of the Third World working-class female nanny. I focus on three novels: *Happy Family* (2008) by Wendy Lee, *Lucy* (1990) by Jamaica Kincaid, and *My Hollywood* (2010) by Mona Simpson. Each text centers on the nanny’s identity and voice, exposing the struggles and marginalization of the working-class immigrant female and countering one-dimensional views of nannies’ identities and lives. Novelists’ redefinition of the Third World working class nanny thus resists stereotyped images of the nanny constructed by popular culture over time (e.g., the unreliable teenaged babysitter and even the criminal nanny). Specifically, I claim that the novels resist devaluing the nanny’s identity and voice by: 1) raising awareness of the diversity of nanny narratives and 2) countering the notion that the injustices they suffer are solely economic. I situate these three novels as part of the larger field of Working-Class Studies, where rich work on narratives of agricultural and domestic workers has already begun. These texts add an
important dimension to our understanding of feminism, race, class studies, and even globalization.
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INTRODUCTION
A MARGINALIZED PROFESSION

Sitting in the living room during a winter break, I watched my mother care for her charges. It always feels strange to return home knowing I will need to return to school, across the country, in a few days. Five years into the drill and I still cannot get used to it. Getting a glimpse of how life would have been if I had studied at a local school. I want to fast-forward time and reach a point where we can be together again, when I will have a stable job and tell her she no longer needs to care for children for income. She has always liked the children she has to care for, but at her age it can become tiresome, especially now that the youngest of the pair she watches has begun to walk. Over the years she has worked with different children, usually teaching them skills they did not learn from their parents: for example, when they discover flowers, she teaches them how to admire them and even to touch them but in a gentle manner, rather than destroying them as most attempt to do at first. She claps for them when they throw their dirty diapers into the trashcan, encouraging them to learn how to not litter and understand the purpose of a trashcan. If her employers hand her a child who comes in a bad mood, she distracts him/her with fun activities while identifying the source of the frustration: hunger, lack of sleep, need of a diaper change, or a bath. I truly came to admire her parenting skills and advice when observing the differences in parenting styles from those of other families near my university and even those described in literature.

However, in the contemporary U.S. childcare workers do not get the respected they deserve. The nation’s social categorization of care is “characterized by reliance on the private household, feminization and racialization of care, devaluation of care work and care workers” (Glenn, 6). Not only is a woman stereotyped as a certain type of laborer for her background, but capitalist organization of care work denies her value as an essential role and person in the home.
If a nanny is not native to the country of employment, is of color, and has not completely grasped the language in the country of employment, or in other words, is not a “Mary Poppins in the U.K.,” then is she seen as less? Although childcare is an important priority for parents, the influx of cheap labor under globalization devalues childcare due to “cultural politics of inequality” (Hochschild, 29). This is partly due to the historical definition of childcare as ‘women’s work.’ As the feminized labor, in middle-class families, the actual performance is typically passed down to women of lower classes who are usually more available for hire.

Some Third World women already come to this country with transnational educational and economic problems that further limit their job options in the U.S. Rather than targeting these larger global impediments of class mobility, society further marginalizes the nanny laborer with ethnic assumptions and limited compensation. The job itself is unreliable due to the lack of health-care benefits, its possibilities for the nanny to suddenly be fired, and for the unclear set of tasks, making nannies at times complete domestic chores in addition to childcare. In this context, the often available Third World working-class woman becomes the stigmatized representational image of ‘nannyhood.’ This racialized image of the caregiver dates back to an America that forced black enslaved women to care for white children, raising them, even loving them, while growing ever more apart from their own enslaved children who at times were separated from them at an early age. It is important to recognize this racialized concept because race and ethnicity (used interchangeably at times) still operates in today’s current economic class system.

In the early research stages for my thesis, I became exposed to a large web of rich texts that centered around the intersectional ideas found in the nanny topic. As a child of a working-class caregiver, I grew up seeing the need for recognition for the complications within employer-employee setups; especially because although relationships appear to go well, the nanny is not
‘true’ part of the family,’ making injustices ‘easier’ to accept. This project grants me a platform to address the blurred identities of many nannies who go undervalued and exploited, as voiced through fiction; nannies who due to their working class, ethnicity, culture, country of origin, and lack of English-language knowledge are treated as less despite the important work they do for families. To my surprise, I found multiple recent fictional texts that engage in the conversation about the struggles of the working-class and particularly of female nanny characters. Among the original texts I considered for this project include Victoria Brown’s *Minding Ben* (2011), Lisa Ramirez’s *Exit Cuckoo: Nanny in Motherland* (2010), Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), Hector Tobar’s *Barbarian Nurseries* (2011). Third World immigrant nannies who were part of the working class in their home country and continue to belong to this class in the U.S. often lack the opportunity to engage in academic conversation unless approached by a scholar. I share these because I want the reader to know a few of the available texts that add to the literary conversation on the child care-giver role and the surrounding themes of motherhood, feminism, labor justice, and ethnic stereotyping. By writing from the perspective of these women, the authors grant nannies a voice, a form of resistance against the global class systems that forces them into their current labor and diminishes their identity.

Scholars like Miriam Forman-Brunell explain how the notion of irresponsible teenaged babysitters and violent attacks on the children being cared for have constantly obscured the nanny identity. In my project, I focus on the ongoing invisibility of the working class Third World immigrant female nanny. Often the nanny’s accent, cultural habits, and even race enable the employer to create assumptions about her life, potentially leading to prejudiced actions and misunderstandings. As First World parents, American upper-middle-class hiring-families may not automatically relate to potential economic and immigration struggles of women who seek
domestic jobs. Scholars like Arlie Russell Hochschild and Evelyn Nakano Glenn address the
importance of care distribution, globalization displacement, and the coercion that leads
immigrant working women to take working positions in a stranger’s house. Glenn directly states
that the American social organization of care has become a public issue “that is integral to
questions of economic and social justice, gender inequality, race inequality, and citizenship
rights” (5). Additionally, employers may prefer immigrant women not only because are
historically believed to be “cheaper” to hire than citizen laborers. There are also biased
assumptions that as foreigners, they are “superior caregivers” from “traditional cultures of care”
(180). Due to the lack of options for economic opportunities, and noted ethnic stereotypes, the
immigrant working class nanny is forced to take jobs that blur her very definition of selfhood. At
times, the hiring process may degrade the applicant solely to specific ethnic or cultural factors
wanted for the job, ignoring the individual and the reasons that lead her to applying. The nanny
is positioned as an ethnic or even ‘exotic’ woman with a limited social life due to the demand of
her charge’s care-giving needs; and at times, she is even expected to complete an unclear set of
assigned domestic tasks in addition to those of childcare.

Families hire a nanny based on their need, which often involves more than just having a
reliable child caretaker. Whether hired to help introduce the child to a specific language, culture,
or just to avoid placing their child in a daycare setting, the nanny also becomes a visual symbol
of the family’s privilege to afford private childcare. Thus, the nanny both works for the family as
a childcare provider and improves their economic reputation through her display in the
community. By her ‘display,’ I refer to the idea that scholars like Tamara Mose Brown develops,
where the very “presence as sitters in itself serves to indicate their employers’ upper-middle-
class status” (7). I agree with this notion that there is a visual aspect of the job that causes the
nanny to “work on behalf of the upper middle class” (Brown, 7). Thus, even during the process of applying for a child caregiver job and later during the job itself, the nanny’s identity becomes fragmented, categorized by the employers. Despite the fairness of her employers, friction between them due to lack of cultural comprehension and stigmatization sometimes complicates the job. Susan Davis and Cameron Lynne Macdonald discuss the relationship between the hiring mother and the nanny, and how feminist sisterhood diverges due to social class and national differences. With a better understanding of the nanny’s hardships, some upper middle-class mothers, who do not have an economic necessity to work, even call the labor system that allows them to work as ‘disgusting’ (Macdonald, 37). The global chains that lead lower-class women to take jobs that allow others to work are not easy to dissect and are shaped by various politicized factors as discussed in this project. To help us understand the gendered dimensions of these care chains, I engage conversations in contemporary feminism; in particular, I consider the ways that these global care chains complicate notions of feminist “sisterhood.” Placing the politicized class, feminist, and cultural factors in conversation can enable us to understand, and address, the forms of inequity and injustice perpetrated by the current system of care.

Although narrated from the nanny’s point of view, the collection of novels studied in this thesis depict the domestic setting as a site of labor relationships, motherhood ideals, and feminist possibility. The nanny and mother’s nationality, age, childcare-giving experience and native language all shape complications that can arise in the care relationship. Aside from going through a type of vetting process to ensure she matches the expectations of the family, the nanny also experiences a degree of “commodification of emotion” that accompanies the role of caring for a child (Macdonald, 70). The loving image of a happy child with his/her nanny is often left at that, making the nanny’s love “a thing in itself,” a fetish, without knowing the full extent of the
difficult life the nanny lives (Hochschild, 26). At times, the undefined care tasks can even reach across the nanny-mother divide, and lead both or one of them to act as a pseudo-mother for the other, providing support and advice (even if unwanted by the other). Caring ties complicate the idea of the home being a site of economic exchange as mothers try to negotiate the issue of how fully their hired nanny can truly be considered ‘part of the family.’ As the child grows or the family faces economic challenges, the instability of the nanny’s job reminds us that the labor aspects of the relationship complicate genuine care ties. Each of the novels in this project presents a nanny from a different country, with different goals, immigration status, and with a different degree of childcare-giving experience. Although they represent a diversity of identities, all the nanny stories resist the marginalization of the nanny figure, granting her a voice, and a visibility, as more than a stereotype.

In Chapter I, I focus on Wendy Lee’s *Happy Family*, narrated in first person by Hua Wu, an undocumented Chinese immigrant. The plot is set in the early 2000’s, as indicated by reference to the missing twin towers. Not having finished her college education and growing a bad reputation after having an affair with a teacher, Hua, along with her grandmother, decide think she will have better opportunities to climb the economic ladder by moving to the U.S. Hua comes to the U.S. in what we assume to be her late teens, early twenties, with some English fluency, thanks to her studies, that aids her her in navigating the limited job market available for an undocumented recent immigrant. Through Hua’s story, Lee highlights the silence of the nanny while simultaneously telling us about the main character’s mode of obtaining agency through her thoughts and actions. Lee presents a plot that allows us to enter the intricate and often silenced spaces of motherhood, childcare, and working-class labor. I explore the ways misunderstanding the “Other” can occur when employer and employee choose to either silence
or verbalize certain views or parts of themselves to the other. The novel recognizes that marginalization of the nanny is a product of collective effects of the class and cultural differences accompanied with lack of sufficient knowledge to understand the other. Happy Family is an important novel to read under the lens of this project because the nanny’s hire centers on cultural assumptions made about the Third World immigrant, in this case a Chinese worker specifically. Lee shows the important of recognition of the politicized global laborer experience and voice amidst assumptions made about and against the nanny.

A more vocal nanny is depicted in Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy, focused in Chapter II here, where Lucy, the main character, has a childcare job that is strictly set up for a year under the Au Pair Program. I will go into further detail on what this program entails and how it also gives a romanticized idea of childcare, attracting young foreign girls like Lucy to travel and work in the U.S.. Published in 1990, Lucy is set in the late 1960’s in New York City, and is narrated in first person by Lucy, a 19-year-old woman from the West Indies. Although she is foreign, her native English knowledge and given educational opportunity through the Au Pair Program already gives her stronger tools from which to improve in an eventual future in America. In this chapter, I focus on the ways Kincaid presents a child caregiver who resists conforming into her employers’ life, and rather seeks individualism outside of her gender and tasks. Lucy reminds us that feminism may have different meanings for women from a different country, class, and of a different race. As a black woman from a colonized country, Lucy resists the generalization of people and finds that it takes more than just gender to unite women. The very novel uses the caregiving role as simply a frame from which to position Lucy and her self-growth interests. Kincaid keeps the caregiving details at a minimum, allowing us to read Lucy as an individual rather than as a laborer.
In Chapter III, Mona Simpson’s *My Hollywood* allows me to analyze a different type of nanny narrative, where we now hear both the nanny and the mother employer’s point of view. The plot takes place in California in the 90’s, where Lola, a woman from the Philippines is employed as a nanny. Unlike the characters in the other two novels, here we follow an older nanny (in her 50’s), who already has childcare experience from raising her own children. Rather than elaborating as a coming-of-age novel, Simpson uses the character’s age and California setting to make a narrative about sense of fulfillment (reaching one’s own ‘Hollywood’).

Simpson creates an intricate working-class setting, where we are introduced to a nanny community that support and provide advice for one another. I explore how the nanny group allows new concepts of worker’s justice to rise, in comparison to the other two novels. Using the chapters narrated by the mother-employer, I also see a sense of awareness of the working-class employer’s needs. This complicates the employer’s narrative because we learn to become more receptive in acknowledging that they too may have been part of the working class at some point in their lives. Understanding the degree of awareness of the employer helps us better read their actions.
Wendy Lee presents the story of Hua Wu, a Chinese working-class undocumented woman around twenty years old. It is just after three months from her arrival to America that she meets Jane Templeton-Walker and her adopted Chinese toddler, Lily, at a park in New York City. She is hired by Jane and her husband, Richard Walker. This couple is an upper middle-class American family living in the Upper West Side of New York City. Through Hua’s narration, a literary voice is given to the silent Third World immigrant woman nanny, who may not have the opportunity to share her story through literature herself or engage as a scholar. Hua helps us encounter the various intersections involved in being an immigrant laborer within a upper middle-class American family. Although the pay is good, Hua encounters other problems as she assumes the child caregiving role. We are made aware of complications, such as the prejudice that goes into selecting a nanny, the clash with a feminist sisterhood and misunderstood versions of empowerment. Conversations around feminist, global, and working-class struggles revolve around Hua as the immigrant working class nanny, serving as reminders of complications for the laborer. While told in first person by Hua, the novel offers constant flashbacks to key moments of Hua’s life. These stories often remain untold to her employers, preventing both her and her employers’ opportunities to hold a conversation and better understand one another, or at least clarify situations.

Enlaced with Hua’s story as a nanny, is that of the global working-class laborer, which, helps contextualize her story and decisions. Jane, who does not know much about Hua’s background, is given a similar degree of unknowingness as we are of Jane. Because we do not know Jane’s train of thought, speculations can only be made based on Hua’s description of Jane.
and her actions. In providing us with glimpses of Hua’s backstory and labor problems with people she knows, Lee reminds us to locate the nanny narrative within the broad and complex system of global labor. A politicized lack of opportunity in home countries and even within the U.S. often prevent the laborer from reaching higher-paying jobs. Of course, despite the tedious labor, the opportunity to earn more money can be more prevalent in the U.S. than in their home country, making the sacrifice of leaving worth it in the long-run. Unfortunately, cultural and classist differences lead to prejudiced assumptions from others, which further marginalize the laborer in the U.S.. In this chapter, I discuss the ways Lee creates an empowered image of the nanny through Hua by contrasting the struggles of her current job with reflections of memories of home and examples of labor struggle. Through these stories, we do not only listen to the often unheard and unrecognized stories of global labor injustice, but we also better understand her decisions. Her choice to remain silent at moments of prejudiced actions towards her is ultimately better understood as being part of her agency.

Commodification of the Global Working Class

When the story begins, Hua has a job at a Chinese restaurant before being offered a nanny position. While the novel focuses on the lower class, immigrant, nanny, Lee reminds us that laborers such as Hua are part of a global working-class population by referencing the struggles of other laborers. By interrupting the narrative with memories of Hua’s family’s story, Lee explains the effect of globalization on working-class families and frames the larger international system further discussed in the next subsection. Through politicized labor situations, we are reminded that this international system of labor is linked by similar causes and effects, creating a sense of collective understanding of struggle among global laborers. In this
section, I will introduce Hua’s backstory, her initial moment of subjugation as a nanny, and other ways Lee reminds us of the larger working-class community’s marginalized experience. It is important to note that the sections discussed below are not addressed all at once nor consecutively by Lee in the novel, but rather scattered throughout.

Throughout the novel, Hua recalls how she learned about the degree that the Cultural Revolution affected her family, resulting in their economic descent and the death of family members. Her grandparents lose the house that they designed and are allowed to continue living in it only if they work for the new owners who took it from them. Hua’s grandmother states that her late husband’s lungs were weak and that working as the ‘handyman’ for the people living in his house was emotionally painful for him, further affecting his health. Aside from this, Hua’s parents, like other high school graduates, are sent away to reeducation camps and are later forced to take “unskilled jobs” in a textile factory operated by the government (Lee, 183). Due to the distance of this factory, Hua’s grandmother, who works as a seamstress, becomes her pseudo-mother. Hua continues to live with her grandmother after her parents die in a fatal factory accident caused by a lack of proper safety regulations.

Hua’s grandmother raises her with the hopes that she obtains a brighter future, potentially outside of China, and instead in America. Unfortunately, Hua’s grades make it difficult for her to attend a top-tier university that will lead to good job in America. Due to an unexpected pregnancy (and its abortion) from having an affair with a teacher, she is expelled during her final year from a three-year college. Because Hua has no degree and has a stained reputation, her grandmother sees illegal entrance into the U.S. as the only option to secure Hua’s better future. We later see the Third World immigrant working-class laborers experiencing an unfair economic system, where their lack of citizenship, education, and language skill limits their ability to climb
the social ladder. In combining local and global situations of unfair labor through time, we see Lee critique the larger political problems of the system working-class laborers are beholden to.

Although Hua’s wage does not seem to be an issue for the Templeton-Walker family to fairly provide, Hua does encounter prejudiced comments while on the job. This complicates the notion of ‘fairness’ established by the set salary and kind mingling between the employers and employee. Hua does narrate her concerns, but she does not explicitly inform the reader (neither in thought or in dialogue) on what the precise problem is. We are left to identify the source of these problematic scenes, which could be something like social class stigmatization, cultural prejudice, etc. Hua does not verbally protest prejudiced situations and chooses to remain silent with her employers. Before introducing scenes that depict Hua’s silent responses to prejudice, Lee has already introduced us to some of Hua’s background story and arrival to the U.S. These background stories enter the novel in ways that interrupt the chronological order of the plot. They are presented as recollections of Hua, but are inserted in what I view as strategic ways before problems on the job occur. This gives us enough time to empathize with the character and understand her better before she narrates the silencing scenes.

Hua’s official job offer to be Lily’s nanny comes with a mix of uneasy feelings, since the collective Chinese culture and individual person are mutually objectified in the way Jane states her request:

“But you won’t have to do any housekeeping or anything like that[...]Except, well...I was hoping that maybe you’d speak some Chinese with Lily, teach her a little bit about her culture.”

“Will it be useful for her?”
“Of course! Even if she weren’t Chinese, the language is all the rage around here[...] seriously, Mandarin-speaking nannies are a hot commodity on the Upper West Side.”

[...] the idea of myself as Lily’s caretaker was starting to take shape in my mind. One thought bothered me, though: Jane wanted me to be a role model for Lily, to teach her how to be Chinese. I didn’t know if I could do it. (Lee, 97)

Like Jane, nanny employers often use race and ethnicity to “select qualities” they want to impart on their children, seeking both Otherness and similarities with themselves (Macdonald, 70). Aside from getting along with Lily, Hua’s Chinese background is important to Jane because Hua would be able to impart information that only a Chinese native could teach Lily. Hua feels uncomfortable with being asked to teach Lily how to be Chinese. Jane directly objectifies Hua, “Mandarin-speaking nannies are a hot commodity on the Upper West Side,” treating her race as if it was an economic good (Lee, 97). Through Hua’s narration, it is evident that the ‘commodity’ term is not quite as grasped as the basic fact that there is some cultural bias to the job offer. Hua does not know if she can teach Lily how to be Chinese and replies, “I would like to [...] Except [...] Are you asking me only because I am from China” (Lee, 97). It is obvious to Hua that there is something ethically wrong here, but she does not quite know how to articulate it. Surprisingly, it is not that she is objectified and rated as an ethnic nanny rather than an individual, but more the worry that being Chinese is something you cannot teach. The collective Chinese culture of Hua’s origins is all the parents see. They do not question previous experience or ask anything from which they can better learn from Hua as an employable individual. In an earlier scene, Jane asks Hua, as a favor, to look after Lily at the park while she goes for an errand. Here, we first learn that Hua does not have any child care experience. She worries and
thinks that she has “no idea what watching a child [means]” (Lee, 58). Luckily all goes well during that initial trial, and Jane seems pleased with Hua and Lily’s interaction.

Expectations that come with any nanny job consist of “enacting the mother’s will, not as an evolving activity performed by an autonomous agent” (Macdonald, 91). Ambivalence in the role of mothers acting as employers has placed these mothers in awkward positions, where they must explain their own child-raising methods and try to make sure the hired nanny follows them. Not even having the job secured, Hua is already presented with Jane’s idea for her tasks as a nanny. It is inferred that Hua does not think it is ethically correct to teach an American-raised toddler how ‘to be’ Chinese just because she was born there. Hua previously states how what people see as Chinatown, where her restaurant job is located, holds a mix of people from different areas of China. Just walking there, she would listen “to the strange mix of languages and dialects,” making her feel like she was within an “entirely different country” (Lee, 18). With her explanation of the variation within China, we can better understand the complex problem that ‘being’ Chinese cannot just be summed into one sole image. Still, she does not mention this to the parents and the conversation continues as it becomes clear to Hua that she can and will take care of Lily. This poses the question of how beneficial it is for working class immigrant women to know multiple languages. Is profit worth the bias or misconception of one’s culture and what being ‘traditional’ mean? Hua is not wrong in wondering about the ethics regarding teaching Lily about her ancestor’s culture when her new family is American. She also voices a bit of the cultural prejudice directed at her, but is not able to quite defend her opposition. Her care for Lily, and the unstated but obvious economic gain the job would provide, are implied to factor into her decision to stay.
As in Hua’s nanny position proposal, in other workplaces depicted in the text, occasions of questionable fairness during work hours show that the silencing effect applies to other immigrant workers. This is an unfortunate problem for the lower class, recent Third World immigrants who are laborer in the US. When Li, one of the kitchen workers, accidentally slices off a piece of his finger, Old Chou, the restaurant’s owner does not support him seeking proper care. While another worker jokes, “Just throw everything in […] No one will notice,” Old Chou looks through the slices of pork Li was cutting and simply states, “I see it. Just a piece of skin. Not worth saving,” while (Lee, 38). I want to emphasize the usage of the words ‘notice’ and ‘worth’ here used to devalue the body of the injured individual. Old Chou does not want him to go to the hospital, probably to not deal with the question of insurance policy, etc. He values the safety of his business’ profits over his employee’s body, marking the sliced fingertip as an unfortunate sacrifice of earning a wage as an immigrant. Like Hua, the reason Li is in this job, may be due to lack of options, especially if he also has an undocumented immigration status. The scene thus begins and ends in this private space, without Li seeking medical or legal help. Li himself remains silent and does not voice much feeling during the scene, keeping the textual focus on the cut piece of skin left behind among the consumable meat products. I believe that his silence (both in this scene and in not seeking medical help) enhances the objectification of the worker and the treatment of his body as a usable and replaceable commodity.

Just as Lin is replaced, so does Hua replace Lily’s previous babysitter. While the concept of commodity is not explicitly made in the restaurant scenes, one can visualize the labor chain of interchangeable subjects through this busy setting. It is not until Hua is officially receives the nanny job proposal, where the employer explicitly mentions the ‘commodity’ such an employee would make. I find it intriguing to know why Lee chooses to assign Jane, an educated white
middle-class woman, such word choices in these prejudiced scenes. Possibly due to Hua’s silence, we do not get a critique of Jane in these scenes. Regardless of the amount of ‘care’ Jane chooses to include in her words, Hua loves Lily and does not change her relationship with her. Still, Jane’s use of the ‘commodity’ label, and Lee’s emphasis on it, depicts the nanny profession as a site of economic exchange. Lee genders this concept by making both the talking employer and employee females engaging in business. She thus openly recognizes the child care business to be a field largely operated by women.

Another dimension of global worker silencing incorporated in the novel involves the text’s inclusion of letters. Ah Jing, a friend of Hua’s and former waitress at the Lucky Duck Chinese restaurant where they worked together, writes to Hua from her new home in California. Ah Jing, who is currently living with her husband and his sister’s family, explains that they are required to care for her sister-in-law’s children while she and her husband work. The sister-in-law “has finally found [them] work in a factory, sewing clothes” (Lee, 21). Ah Jing mentions that she has heard about clothing factory jobs as being “harder than working in a restaurant,” but jokes, “at least you get the chance to sit down, right?” (Lee, 21). “Don’t let anyone there push you around” (Lee, 21). Ironically, she gives Hua the advice she herself cannot escape due to her circumstances. From Lee’s depiction, it sounds as though her sister-in-law is taking advantage of the couple. There is an ambiguity as to whether or not the couple has an illegal immigration status. The fact that they are both made to stay at home and that it is the sister-in-law who finds work for them, implies that they may not be able to go out themselves due to lack of legal work authorization documents. Due to their lower social class, and potential illegal immigration status, Ah Jing and her husband are forced to be ‘pushed around’ to a certain degree by his sister, also employer. The new job itself is no escape from her previous one in New York City, and shows
the continuous circulation of working class subjects taken into globalization industries out of necessity. Despite the desire to be independent and defend one’s self, Ah Jing’s letter reminds us that this becomes more difficult for people whose rights and opportunities are limited due to social class.

Assumptions About the Other: Clashes Within Economized Motherhood

To focus on the nanny role, it is important to recognize that the interaction between employer, usually the mother, and employee. In childcare jobs, the way an employer delegates care tasks “shapes the caregiver’s job experience and may affect the care children receive” (Macdonald, 89). While the labor involves the child, the relationship and rules set up by the dealers of the economic exchange is very important to determine the duration of employment and even the quality of fairness. We have already seen the awkwardness in explaining the reason for offering Hua the job, but even more can be learned about both Hua and Jane by examining the moment they meet. Hua first meets Jane and Lily while at a park after her shift from the restaurant job she initially has. Rather than posting an ad or calling friends, Jane happens to meet Hua at the park. Jane interacts with her over the course of a few weeks before trusting her to care for Lily. As a novel about a nanny, Happy Family is written with knowledge about the job and how economic exchange occurs. Instead of introducing the economized childcare job inside the employer’s house, Lee leads the reader to recognize public leisure spaces that serve as extensions of the domestic nanny’s domain for employment opportunity. In a study of childcare workers in Brooklyn, Tamara Mose Brown notes that public parks represent “quasi-offices” for several babysitters, making them “visible” to the community, including their current and potential new employers (Brown, 3). The park can thus be said to be an economized setting not only because of
the concentration of available nannies employers might approach, but also because of the nannies’ visual representation of the employer’s economic status. Due to the overlapping motives for that might draw nannies and potential employers to a park, Hua and Jane are able to meet and develop a relationship to lead Jane to offer Hua a child caregiver position at her house.

Through Hua’s portrayal of the neighborhood park, we see that childcare is a gendered labor. Most of the park’s visitors are “only women and children,” and Hua assumes to distinguish the nannies by observing skin color and language differences between the paired adults and children (Lee, 10). By making Hua project assumptions of what she thinks an American nanny should look like, we are reminded of the global understanding of the biased social hierarchy; This is not just an American issue, but rather a global effect understood and felt internationally. Narrowing this hierarchy to focus on motherhood and childcare needs, we can recognize that each mother in a sense “hires a wife,” passing mothering down the race, class, and nation hierarchy and across national borders (Hochschild, 137). Despite being new to the country, Hua implicitly recognizes and makes social hierarchal assumptions when seeing women of color care for fair-skinned children at a park. Her awareness of such biases speaks about the fact that hierarchy is a global social matter. The presumed nannies she observes embody the way categorization becomes facilitated by globalization.

The performance of motherhood is also attached to this dual leisure and economized setting and to Hua’s reasons for assuming to distinguish nannies from mothers. We know that Jane finds Hua reading on a bench soon before their conversation begins. Hua’s complete dedication to her book, without looking up to follow the movements of a particular child causes her to appear like the nannies Hua describes early in the novel – On her first arrival to the park, Hua educates us on the differences she observes distinguishing nannies from mothers. She
notices how the children “appeared fearless” running and flinging themselves on the playground, and even if one of them falls, the nanny does not seem to notice or attempt to go help (Lee, 11). One nanny, whose charge falls, is described to continue to knit and chat with her friends rather than keeping an eye on the child. Upon noticing how Jane pretends to be reading when she actually keeps a steady watch over Lily, as if watching her “kept her warm and breathing,” Hua knows that despite their different appearance, these two are mother and daughter (Lee, 12). Due to differences in the way the nannies at the park look after their charges, and the way Jane looks after Lily, we can infer that Hua’s more relaxed focus on solely her readings lead Hua to perform non-maternal behavior at the park. Hua’s reading pose also causes Jane to later ask if she is a foreign student. Again, it is unknown why Jane does not begin with discarding the education possibility. A layered perception of assumed ‘nanny’ identification markers is seen here through Hua’s belief that Jane is identifying her as one. Hua sees Jane as inverting the very observations Hua had made earlier when looking at dark-skinned ladies who arrive with light-skinned children. This sense of double consciousness underscores Hua’s agency as someone who is aware of social profiling and categorizations. This makes her less susceptible to being fooled with language in a job setting. Although her English is fluent, it is not perfect and this limits her degree of understanding. Unlike Hua, who does not need to look for child care, Jane’s upper middle-class mother status leads her to see Hua as a potential subject to replace her current nanny. Through the order of her child caregiver and education questions, it is inferred that she wants to obtain information on Hua’s availability as her child caregiver by asking if she currently caring for a child.

Lee uses this economically-significant space to place the two main adult female characters, employer and employee in categories from the moment they begin to talk. This claim
is based on each character’s degree of awareness of the nanny-employment possibilities located at the park. Hua visits the park to get away from her disliked but necessary job at the Lucky Duck Chinese restaurant, unknowing that she enters a space that marks her as an employable subject. Jane on the other hand, is expecting to need a new nanny soon. Hua’s observation of Jane at the park does not indicate that Jane has another purpose other than Lily at the park. It is unknown if Jane has already tried interviewing nannies at her home, but meeting Hua gives Jane the opportunity to meet a prospective replacement and talk more. Lee twists the employer-seeking-employee narrative by making Hua be the one to initiate their meeting when telling them about a mitten Lily dropped. Hua somehow identifies herself with Lily and becomes fascinated by the mother-daughter pair (Lee, 12). With no expectation of talking to them again, she uses her free time to wait at the park in hopes of seeing them. Jane notices Hua after some visits to the park and remembering her for returning the lost mitten, they begin a friendly conversation. After a few weeks of talking, Jane trusts Hua to briefly look after Lily at the park while she runs to complete an errand. Whether or not this was Jane’s true purpose, leaving Lily with Hua serves as a test for Jane to better determine if Hua could be allowed to work at her home. Their contrasting awareness of the park’s population and labor usage is evident when Jane begins to talk to Hua and asks which child is hers. Assuming she refers to motherhood, Hua quickly replies she does not have children. Hua then clarifies that she does not work caring for a child when she realizes “what [Jane] meant” (Lee, 45). It is implied that Jane asks who her charge is at the playground, though Hua’s position as narrator prevents us from knowing what Jane really meant when asking the question.

There is an awkward gap between the employer mother and the potential nanny with this initial categorizing moment. After Hua clarifies that she is not a nanny, Jane asks if she is a
foreign student. The order in which she chooses to ask these shows the direct economic and labor interest she has in Hua. Scholars remind us that childcare is a topic mainly handled by women, where negotiating economic transactions and “marking their boundaries” (Macdonald, 9).

Without Jane explicitly confirming so, Hua believes Jane sees her as a potential nanny laborer. Through Hua’s assumed meaning of Jane’s question, she sees Jane to define each of their social-labor categories through her performance of the upper middle-class mother who asks about a labor mothers like her employ. Again, it is through Hua’s assumption that we are made aware of the possibility of Jane’s words. By making conversation with Hua without stating her interest in seeking a new nanny, Jane continues to have an advantage over her. Their conversation becomes a way for her to learn a bit more about Hua and determine if she would be someone to consider offering the job to. Hua, who is fascinated by Jane and Lily’s relationship, follows through with the conversation, not knowing she is potentially being studied for a job.

Despite categorizing Hua by labor, Jane is friendly and sympathizes with her as a newly arrived immigrant in New York City. Jane tries to unite them with the fact that like Hua, she also worked at restaurants when she first arrived to the city at a younger age. Jane explains that tip money from restaurants helped her pay six years of college before teaching undergraduate students. She then mentions that her current job is as a “curator at the Museum of Asian Art,” a potential connection itself with Hua’s culture (Lee, 46). Her labor story shows a trajectory of improvement, probably meant to give Hua hope of career and economical improvement in her own future. Jane also explains that she was not a native NYC resident and had struggles of her own when she first moved:

“[…] I came to New York after college, and before I knew it, twenty years had passed in a flash.”
I must have looked as if I didn’t believe her, because she added, “You’ll see. These first months must seem like ages to you, but once you get used to it, you won’t know where the years went. There’s just too much to do here, too much to soak up. It leaves room for nothing else.”

I didn’t think that could happen to me as easily as it had happened to her, that my days would ever hold anything other than restaurant work and Chinatown. “But we are different,” I pointed out.

“Not so much as you would think.” Jane gave a wry laugh. “I grew up in the Midwest[…] it’s like another country. […] so coming to New York was my first time away from home.” […] “The first place I lived was awful. […] sure got noisy.”

I thought of the other people in my boarding house and agreed. “The place where I live is noisy, too”

“You see? Everyone starts out that way. Well, I was miserable at first.[…]”

[…]

“So,” Jane said, “don’t think things won’t change.” (Lee, 57, 58)

It is Hua who boldly claims they ‘are different’ and is skeptical about how similar they really are. Jane just categorized them, but Hua is the first to clearly and vocally claim their contrast. She does not say this, but based on her idea that she does not see any opportunities in her future, she is thinking about their socio-economic differences. Hua is an undocumented immigrant who acknowledges the difficulty of her situation. Jane is unaware of Hua’s immigration and economic status, and talks about her own struggles back when she was an upper middle-class college student. Jane may knowingly be trying to soften their obvious cultural and
potentially class differences in an attempt to make Hua feel connected, while her privileged position makes her ignorant of the degree to which their situations differ. Although Jane’s hometown may have appeared like a different country, the reality is that it is not. She did not have to change languages, risk her life with smugglers to travel, arrive and not have legal working privileges to advance in career fields. Unfortunately, Jane’s insistence on the topic causes Hua to later understand and be more receptive to the idea. I say ‘unfortunately,’ because Jane has not learned she needs to be aware of the struggles of people of other classes, especially if she plans to hire one. While her enthusiasm is well received, I agree with the claim that “We need to develop a global sense of ethics to match emerging economic realities” (Hochschild, 28). The nanny job has not yet been suggested in this scene. Just in meeting, their nationalities and class differences do not quite allow each other to understand where the other is coming from. Jane will never understand Hua’s impediments for economic success (legal status matters), especially if Hua does not voice these. Scholars like Mitsuye Yamada also recognize this need for women to truly unite as sisters, especially by understanding one our differences as well as similarities. She argues that white women need to “indicate by their actions” that they want to join the struggle of Asian Pacific women “because it is theirs also” (Yamada, 72). Yamada’s direct call for races to support one another speaks to the global sense of awareness in recent feminist scholarship, calling for women to unite as one, but with acknowledgement and support for their differing problems. In thinking about this, I see Jane as not truly wanting to unite with Hua’s story since she does not reach further to understand her real struggles. Instead of attempting to understand Hua’s struggles, she talks about her own previous struggles and inaccurately labels them as equivalent to those Hua currently faces. Simultaneously, Hua withholds information about herself that would have given Jane fuller knowledge upon which to
base her advice. Both women embody the difficulty involved in reaching across the social divide to create a global feminist sisterhood. Misunderstandings and silences complicate the possibility of a true gender alliance. By no means is this simple, especially when national and class differences are at stake, and Lee portrays daily examples of this complexity.

Jane also tries to make a connection with Hua over Chinese culture. She is already involved with art history due to her job, but wants to learn and do more for Lily. When first meeting Hua, Lily is playing with a blond, blue-eyed plastic doll. Jane suddenly becomes aware of the doll’s very different features from Lily’s and, embarrassed, tells Hua, “I know dolls like this aren’t the best thing for her to play with, but dolls that look, well, Asian, are hard to come by” (Lee, 47). She then asks Hua what toys children in China play with, only to learn those same plastic dolls are made in China, and thus, children there play with them as well. Jane insists in learning more about “traditional toys” and asks what Hua played with when she was younger (Lee, 47). Having grown up in a working-class family, Hua cannot think of something suitable to recommend and makes up a lie, kites. Again, we see Jane’s lacks awareness of class differences and even holds some prejudiced notions of what a Chinese toy should look like. Her desire to want to see or interpret something a specific way further disconnects her from Hua’s reality as a working class Third World woman.

Before continuing to analyze Jane’s interest in further connecting with Chinese culture, I want to add something to Jane’s superficial cultural performance. Despite Jane’s worry about the appearance of Lily’s doll, she herself does not quite fit the physical look of Lily’s biological mother, nor does she try to. Instead, she even dyes her hair red, very different from Lily’s black hair. We are first introduced to Jane’s red hair early in the book. When Hua takes care of Lily at her apartment for the first time, she wanders through the rooms and in the shower finds a bottle
with “a picture of a woman with hair the exact same color as Jane’s” (Lee, 79). There is an odd disjunction between the importance of physical traits that Jane expressed and her transformation of her own appearance. Why would she care about the doll looking different than Lily, when she is modifying her own hair color to an extravagant shade, which is very different from Lily’s? In other words, if mothers need not look like their daughters, why does she stress the importance of similarity with dolls? I believe her lack of concern is partly due to the privatization of her hair being painted at home, where no one but Richard knows, whereas the doll appears in a public space and is noticeable. While Jane both invokes differences and aims to establish things shared in common with Hua, it is Hua who learns personal details of the other due to her nosiness. Scholars note that “The nannies know everything about us, and we know little about them” (Cheever, 38). This is a reminder that the private space has now turned a little public under the gaze of a stranger in the house. Working in the private sphere, the employee has access to learn a lot more of the employer than the other way around. However, this nosiness is risky and has the potential to undermine the caregiving relationship.

Later in the text, Jane is excited about the idea of celebrating Lily’s birthday in a traditional Chinese themed-party, and she suddenly decides to have Hua pick up food items from Chinatown and hang Chinese lanterns to decorate the ceiling. The children are not used to seeing these foods and none of them want try them after one states that the noodles “looked like worms,” making these into decoration instead (Lee, 166). Based on Hua’s description, Jane already had plans for party snacks, but decides to incorporate the traditional Chinese food at the last minute. Although Jane is excited about incorporating Chinese culture in Lily’s life, these additions to the party, as with the questions of the doll, seem to originate from guilt of not being able to share Lily’s culture. In a way, this also means that Jane sees Hua as competition for
mothering Lily in the Chinese culture. She feels the need to appear as if she knows and wants certain traditions for her child. Working mothers like Jane, often find “themselves caught in the crosscurrents created by the competing ideals of the ‘unencumbered worker’ and the ‘good mother’ (Macdonald, 21). The importance of the child needing a “good mother” is felt by both women and “whether the mother-employer or the mother-worker was ultimately the better caregiver lay at the root of most mother-nanny conflicts” (Macdonald, 3).

Although Jane and Hua do not argue about who cares more for Lily, Jane’s jealousy from having an additional caring woman is felt as readers. Lily appears to get along with Hua and we know that Hua loves Lily, as explained in the opening letter of the novel. As Hua’s love for Lily unfolds throughout the novel, we also see spaces where Jane gets displaced by Hua’s care for Lily. Later in the novel, there is a moment where Lily speaks to ‘Mommy’ and “She [speaks] with her eyes fixed on [Hua], as if [she] were an extension of Jane” (Lee, 164). Jane responds by sitting Lily between both her and Hua. The erroneous Mommy-calling is understandable at this age, and while Jane does not verbally correct Lily on her mistake, she does by replying and lifting her despite not being looked at. It is normal for toddlers to often use single labels to reference various things or people. However, accepting that someone else has gained the affection of your child (to the point that the child uses the word ‘Mommy’ for her as well), and teaches her/him additional things can be emotionally unsettling at first. In Shadow Mothers: Nannies, Au Pairs, and the Micropolitics of Mothers, Cameron Lynne Macdonald mentions a personal experience where she attends a meeting about care giving for her ill husband. Macdonald is told by a volunteer that “No one loves him the way [she does]. But maybe there are things [they] have to offer him that [Macdonald lacks]” (Macdonald, xiii). These words apply
to anyone looking for care services, especially to mothers whose nannies could teach the child certain things she is not able to. After all, Jane does choose Hua for a reason.

A problematic moment occurs during Lily’s birthday party, when the mother of troublemaker Sam blames Hua for not preventing her son for having additional cake, causing the boy to be sugar-high:

Sam’s mother would not look at me. “Your nanny let Sam have another piece of cake, after I *explicitly* told her not to.”

“Hua must not have understood you,” Jane said. “She has trouble with English sometimes.”

“Don’t they all,” Sam’s mother said.

I stared at Jane, not believing what I had just heard. She returned my gaze, and something in it made me nod and look down. By now the wails had trailed off and Sam went limp in his mother’s grip, exhausted from too much stimulation.

(Lee, 175)

Jane attributes the mistake to Hua’s English comprehension, diminishing her to one of the ‘they,’ as Sam’s mother puts it, who cannot comprehend English. I assume that the ‘they’ refers to immigrant, lower class workers. Rather than confronting Sam’s mother herself or giving Hua enough time to defend herself, Jane, by lying, marginalizes Hua as the ignorant ‘other’ in the room. Jane also sparks a conversation that leads to Sam’s mother further attacking “them”—members of the lower class immigrant community—despite Hua being present. The lack of regard marks Hua as an insignificant subject. Jane later explains why she made that reply to Sam’s mother by saying: “I hope you didn’t mind what I said to Sam’s mother. About your English. She’s just impossible to deal with. I had to come up with some excuse. I know it was an
awful thing to say. So, see you Monday?” (Lee, 176-177). With this, Jane admits that her lie was an ‘awful’ excuse, but instead of apologizing for it, she makes Hua deal with it (as she puts it: “hope you didn’t mind”). Hua, who has not said a word during this incident, replies to Jane with a simple, “See you Monday” (Lee, 177). Unlike in the previous scene example, here we truly do not hear any of Hua’s thoughts, leaving us clueless as to what she thinks of the situation. Her voice is blocked from the reader’s view and we are left to speculate based on the comments of the people who affirm the marginalization of immigrant nannies and of Hua in particular. Through Hua’s previous narration, Lee gives us access to some of Hua’s thoughts, making us aware of problematic situations where Hua chooses to remain silent and not verbally confront the matter. Hua’s self-silencing seems to play with the notion of the socially subdued nanny; however because we know her background story, we can identify her decision as a potential source of empowerment.

It is important to note that Lee arranges a scene where Jane and Hua have a bonding moment where Jane confides in her that she had an abortion prior to marriage. Without trying to force something, as Jane had earlier with the cultural inquiries, in this scene Hua and Jane have a genuine bonding moment; however, Lee emphasizes that Jane does not even realize the extent of their connection because she is unaware that Hua also had an abortion. I claim that this scene, in which the women are revealed to have a shared experience with unwanted pregnancy is a moment of feminist solidarity, centered on the key feminist issue of reproductive rights—a women’s right over her own body. Strikingly unlike the earlier scene when Jane approaches Hua for the first time at the park, here Hua is the one asking questions based on her awareness of

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1 It is important to note that this response contradicts Jane’s attempt to make Hua and herself appear as similar. I discuss this attempt in the first part of this chapter. She makes her allegiance clear in this scene and includes herself with the majority upper-middle-class guests in the room, leaving the de-familiarizing any similarities previously talked about with Hua.
something Jane does not know. Jane confesses that she does regret her decision “Every day. [Her] head says [she] made the right choice, [her] heart says no” (Lee, 162). Even in this moment of reflection, Jane thinks about her image in the eyes of her employee and states, “I’m sorry for going on about it. I can’t imagine what you think of me now” (Lee, 162). It is not until that we learn of Hua’s abortion story and can better appreciate her curiosity for Jane’s in the earlier scene. Ironically both women were younger, single, and they knew raising a child would be difficult given society’s views of single mothers. Hua seems to share more of those difficulties than Jane, who only mentions not being ready. Cherrie Moraga has described the authority of women of color in redefining feminism in the global era: “The prism of a U.S. Third World Feminist consciousness has shifted as we turned our gaze away from a feminism prescribed by white women of privilege (even in opposition to them) and turned towards the process of discerning the multilayered and intersecting sites of identity and struggle-distinct and shared-among women of color across the globe” (Moraga, xvi). Had Hua shared her abortion story at the moment, both Jane and the readers would have recognized this feminist moment and valued its importance at the time it was happening.

Despite this moment of potential bonding, Jane’s task as the mother employer is complicated when she must confess to Hua that the family is divorcing and Hua will no longer be needed. Jane, who has until now been working part-time, will have to go to work full-time and place Lily in day care. She tells Hua, “I’m afraid, it means that we’re going to have to let you go […] Hua, it’s been great having you take care of Lily. But now she’s old enough that I feel comfortable putting her in day care […]” (Lee, 180). Jane understands that this is an unexpected announcement and offers to give a good reference for Hua to other mothers looking for a nanny, along with paying her an extra week after her last day with Lily. The necessity has
now changed and regular child care is the priority. Scholars note that nannies “come from alien cultures to fill our culture’s most important job: raising our kids[...]. The truth is, we are more like our nannies than we realize - strung out between the old ways and the new, between demands of money and the demands of love[...]. There are bad nannies and good nannies, just as there are bad mothers and good mothers, but it’s our similarities rather than our differences that make the situation so painful” (Cheever, 38). Hua and Jane have shared so much together and have learned more about each other through her labor with Lily. Jane is being as fair of an employer as she can, but the reality of the situation is still difficult for both. Hua has given up her job at the restaurant for Lily and is now finding herself without either to go to soon. Despite being friendly to each other, this moment redefines their roles and leaves Hua as the disposable subject left to scramble. It serves as a reminder of the insecurity of the job the nanny holds and the problems this causes the laborers that depend on that job’s income as well as come to feel affection for the family.

As surprising as it is, this middle-class family never asks about her previous work experience. Hua occasionally thinks about the lack of experience, bringing this to the attention of the listening reader. In fact, she almost feels guilty, as if she’s agreeing to a lie. During her first time on the job with Lily at their apartment, Hua is nervous and describes Lily looking “as if she knew that not only was [Hua] not her regular babysitter but [she] was no kind of babysitter at all” (Lee, 76). She is not confident of herself correctly performing her first child care-giver role, yet is curious about this family and does not voice thoughts of not wanting the job. Her lack of confidence makes her paranoid that the child knows something is not right, but more importantly, she never considers if the parents also have this potential idea of her. Lee does not
provide us with information to know if the parents ever question Hua’s childcare ability, but their absence from Hua’s worries mirrors their lack of asking Hua about her work experience.

Perhaps the Templeton-Walkers are genuinely nice people, maybe even a bit too liberal in trusting a stranger and not asking for references or work experience details. Hua’s position as narrator prevents us from seeing what they actually think about this, if anything. Lee almost uses reverse psychology by having Hua be the one to become conscious of the lack of experience, rather than the employers themselves. The very form of hiring without requiring reference itself silences Hua’s labor qualifications. Although here she is assumed to be competent to take on the job, the fact that she is not even given the opportunity to affirm (or dismiss) this ability arguably defines her as a silenced and invisible subject.

The lack of more personal information, by default, makes things easier towards the end of the novel when Hua decides that she is a better caregiver for Lily than her own parents and temporarily kidnaps Lily. The competition factor mixes here when Hua learns that her employers will divorce, leading Hua to believe that taking Lily will be the best solution to ensure Lily continues to be fully loved. Hua’s attachment to Lily leads her to no longer want to “always be apart,” on the outskirts of events in the main family (or in a larger metaphorical crowd); to no longer appear in a picture as a “blurred version” of herself, off to the side from the group; and much less to be forgotten by her dear Lily (Lee, 190). Lee inverts the dismissed request of background qualifications for the nanny job and Hua’s personal information by using this ambiguity of facts against the very employers. While traveling with Lily during their brief trip, Lee directs us to this inversion through Hua’s reflection: “I had always been polite and respectful […] [Jane] couldn’t think of me as a criminal […] But gradually […] Jane would realize, with a sense of foreboding, how much of a stranger I really was to her” (Lee, 97). Hua’s comments
allude to a critique of her employers’ hiring process, where a ‘nice’ cultural nanny was hired without truly knowing the individual or how she thought.

The novel itself begins with a letter from Hua, who now lives in California, two years after the events in the novel occur. Despite being displaced in time and location from her intended reader, Lily, she voices some of her thoughts through this letter. After reading the novel, we can infer that the chances of Lily ever actually seeing Hua’s message are not likely. After informing Lily of her new life in California, Hua states, “I hope that by now your parents have forgiven me for loving you as much as they did. If they were still married, maybe they would even thank me” (Lee, 5). Hua finally voices some of her thoughts regarding her role as Lily’s nanny, but her employers are no longer there to hear them. She seems to not regret kidnapping Lily, and believes this may have even helped Richard and Jane prevent the divorce. She envisions this act as in Lily’s best interest, referring in the letter to the possibility of Lily’s parents not divorcing thanks to her. It is unknown if Hua intends to mail the letter to Lily or if she is just writing a journal to herself as if she were talking to Lily. Hua’s decision to temporary kidnap Lily after her position ends is complicated and I cannot analyze it in detail; but what is important to note is that through this act Lily affirms the legitimacy of her own maternal “love” for Lily and refuses the precariousness of the nanny position. Lee further illuminates Hua’s motivations later in the novel: when Jane first tells her that her labor will no longer be needed, Hua considers that returning to her job at “the Lucky Duck [restaurant] would be a defeat.[…]The thought that Lily would forget [her] made [her] heart shrink into itself” (Lee, 181).

Lee displaces Hua to a different location and time to finally have her reach out to Lily. It is in this moment when Hua seems to want to confront her past despite not having her previous
employers before her. In saying this, I must clarify that I believe the writing does help Hua therapeutically review her recent months in relation to Lily. However, it also highlights her ongoing decision to not speak out to her employers and clarify her concerns. After kidnapping Lily and then returning her to her family, Hua goes away; through the letter, we can infer she has not contacted them since. Neither Hua nor the novel’s reader will ever know what Richard and Jane did or thought of her during the time Lily was missing. Unlike with the other situation of silence, in this instance Hua seems here to bear responsibility for any biased notions made by the employers. Although this letter appears at the beginning of the novel, I address it towards the end of this chapter, because it is only once we have read the novel that its significance is clarified.

The inclusion of problematic scenes that seem to diminish Hua’s identity and value, after the reader has been given more through flashbacks, fragments her as a character. By the time we reach these problematic moments in the text, Lee has already given us enough information about Hua to be able to empathize with her struggles more than characters within the plot are in a position to do. As we receive new information about Hua, Lee seems to deconstruct her as a character. By deconstruction, I mean that Lee fragments the character not only by foregrounding her labor role, but also by portraying Hua as an ethnic, immigrant, working class, caregiver with a coming-of-age story of her own. Ironically, this very deconstruction is part of what brings Hua to Jane and Richard’s attention in the first place, what allowed her to become Lily’s nanny, and what has led to the story being told. I believe that Lee wants to get at something here. If the very creation of this novel is due to the deconstruction of this young immigrant’s identity, then we need to truly pay attention to what these moments of marginalization have to say about our society. Lee’s clever ways to invert silencing through Hua’s empowerment resist the larger diminishing effect silencing has on the nanny. Scholars have argued that nannies “destabilize the
construction of the family as a space of depoliticized inclusion through her labor, revealing the neoliberal inequalities” (Cheng, 249). I agree that the inclusion of this worker in the house exposes inequalities (through her physical presence; through visual and verbal differences between nanny and employer; and by depicting prejudiced actions by the employer). In her argument, Cheng frames the family as a site of neoliberal privatization, challenging the ideal family image. I want to use part of her argument to further illuminate the moments of marginalization Hua faces. These instances do break the façade of the “perfect family” and remind us that the family is the site where political views are molded. Hua’s story alludes to the complications in finding the ‘perfect American Dream.’
CHAPTER II: MORE THAN A NANNY: SEEKING INDIVIDUALISM IN JAMAICA KINCAID’S LUCY

*Lucy* is set in the late 1960’s in what is implied to be New York City, where we follow the story of Lucy Josephine Potter through her point of view. Lucy is a 19 year old woman of color from the West Indies who travels to the U.S. as an au pair. Au pairs are young people who come to the U.S. on a J1 visa as part of an au pair program that matches them with a host family. This provides young foreigners the opportunity to live in the U.S., obtain some higher education, and receive ‘pocket money’ in exchange for a year commitment with the family as a child caregiver (Cox, 4). Lucy references this arrangement introducing her role in the host family as “the young girl who watches over the children and goes to school at night” (Kincaid, 7). Although the novel takes place during her year commitment as an au pair, caregiving is not a large focus in the main plot and rather serves as a frame from which her story develops. Instead of elaborating on her responsibilities with the family’s children, the novel focusses more on detailing her personal views, reflections, and aspects of her newly-found social life in New York.

It is her relationship with Mariah, the mother of the four children, that becomes a central point to the plot. With their relationship comes flashbacks of her life in the West Indies and particularly, of her own mother; and Lucy’s perception of empowerment through differing from others, unknowingly performing as a feminist though different from Mariah. Coming from a family with a large male population, Lucy alludes to cultures where there are differences in opportunities based on gender. In Lucy’s case, she is encouraged to pursue a technical career in nursing, unlike her more educated brothers. Nursing is something she later determines is not what *she* wants to pursue. In this coming-of-age story, Lucy discovers that she is “inventing” herself despite being at a working class status, she uses her empowered sense of “memory,”
“anger,” and “despair” (Kincaid, 134). Although I will not go into detail on what we learn about Lucy’s mother from flashbacks, it is important to understand that Lucy’s confrontation against what appears to be feminism does not originate with interacting with Mariah, but rather from Lucy’s mother. Kincaid references to this through Lucy’s reflections where she states things like that the times she hates Mariah, as with the times when she loves her, are both due to Mariah reminding her of Lucy’s mother (Kincaid, 58).

**Colonialism Rebellion: Lucy and Racial Prehistories of Care**

The relationship between Lucy and Mariah as women of differing economic, race, and national backgrounds allows Kincaid to reflect on the similarities and differences in child rearing as well as the possibilities and limits of “sisterhood” in second wave feminism. Through Lucy and Mariah, Kincaid depicts the conflicts between the “white and black feminist agendas” (Nichols, 194). In creating Lucy as a character who is aware of Mariah’s different ways of thinking and resists her influence over her own way of thinking, Kincaid moves the feminist conversation beyond national borders to show white feminism’s “colonizing tendencies” (Nichols, 194). It is important to note that Kincaid wrote *Lucy* soon after the 1980s push by feminist scholars, especially those working on class, race “to rectify the exclusions” of the 1960’s and 70’s second-wave feminist movement (Nichols, 194). Keeping this in mind may help understand Kincaid’s motives for highlighting gender, class, and race as she does. The novel empowers the colored working-class immigrant female who was largely invisible in white, middle-class, second wave feminism.
Kincaid presents Lucy as a kind of rebel to the globalized labor system that brings her to America. Although her host family treats her fairly, Kincaid describes Lucy in a way that she resists becoming another “member of the family.” Lucy does so by identifying differences in everyday situations, and some of Mariah’s problematic assumptions. To a certain point, Lucy is both aware of and embraces her ‘Otherness’ as a person with different views situated in a family that is not her own. By this capitalized Otherness, I refer to her empowered sense of self-acceptance as a non-normative and unique member of her new community. It is through identifying distinctions that she comes to realize that some versions of America, its people, and life in general are not as glamorous as she once imagined them to be before her arrival.

Additionally, her labor and economic position create a reminder of her limited possibilities in comparison to the kind of lifestyle her host family enjoys. She tries to not let her host family’s more expensive lifestyle blind her from the reality that she will not be independently able to sustain that consumer lifestyle once she leaves them. In this way, I see Lucy’s position as the ‘Other’ within an American home evolve into a macro-evaluation of her new life in this country as an immigrant, working-class female. She formulates critiques of this family not only to contrast them with her own upbringing, but also to build a better idea of how she wants her future to be.

Embracing her Otherness, Lucy rejects being part of the host family. She thus rejects a larger stereotype of the ‘American Dream,’ and more specifically feminist ideals regarding the Dream. Ironically, this rejection challenges the ideal of becoming that the Au Pair Program advertises. On the Au Pair Program website, provided by the U.S. Department of State, the following words on the main page caught my attention: “Participants can continue their education while experiencing everyday life with an American family, and hosts receive reliable
and responsible childcare from individuals who become part of the family.” Just as Lucy learns of the promises of a glamorous America through global media, the website enables the fantasy that as an au pair one can “become part of the family.” In this form of advertisement, the potential promise of being part of a family romanticizes the notion of leaving one’s home country to work for people in another. It is important to note that an au pair is claimed to be “cheaper than a domestic worker” and framed in terms of “cultural exchange between equals;” the au pair is then susceptible to labor abuse if tasks are not clearly defined (Cox, 1). The necessity for affordable and reliable child-care, even if it is only secured for a year at a time, often leads parents into enrolling to be a host family. The combination of a need for caregiving labor and a genuine attempt to make the au pair feel at home are both present in Lucy, serving us as a reminder of the importance and power of this job on the global scale.

Bringing Individuality Forward: Resistance Against the Labor Image

Lucy’s role as a child caregiver does not encompass a large portion of the novel itself. Through Lucy’s narration on subjects other than her work with the children, Kincaid focuses on Lucy’s individuality rather than on her actual job for the majority of the novel. While the year that Lucy narrates is framed by the opportunity to travel to the U.S. precisely for her job as an au pair, most of the novel is not about her actual tasks but rather about personal reflections and identity growth. Kincaid thus depicts the laborer as an individual and subject rather than restricting her existence in the novel to solely her value as a laborer. We obtain more thought narration and social life than in Lee’s Happy Family, helping us understand the main character better. Lee’s style shows resistance in making us interpret the laborer rather than having the laborer explain herself. I find Lee’s style powerful because it replicates the effect that Hua, as a
foreigner beginning her life in a new country, may have when not knowing something well. Lee will not give us everything, and makes us work for it ourselves. In Kincaid’s Lucy, we may see more of Lucy’s thought process due to the character’s personality, but her narration also presents a form of resistance. Although she goes into detail regarding her previous life events, she provides little of her interaction with the children she works with. I read this as an effort to establish the personal and potentially psychological effects the job can have on a young foreign child-care worker. We read Lucy to be discovering herself throughout the plot, as well in her new country. Although her job is temporarily binding, she makes sure to mingle and have a social life outside her work schedule. Lucy thus establishes her place as an individual amidst her year of required labor. Continuing, I will elaborate on Lucy’s theoretical confrontation, particularly against generalizing Western feminist ideology, and how this contributes to her growth as an individual.

Although her job tasks are not a focus point in her narration, the fact that she is like a live-in nanny makes it impossible to not have moments of reflection within the job setting. It is important to note that most of these reflections are not generated while interacting with the children but rather with Mariah. Kincaid focusses more on their relationship, similarities, and contrasts to locate splits in feminist ideologies. While Mariah tries to make Lucy feel welcomed, and even tries to mentor her, as further explained within this section, she does not fully understand Lucy’s standpoint as a working-class woman from a foreign country. The global chains of prejudiced ideologies have a long history in America, especially when dating child-care back to enslaved ‘Mammies’ in the history of the country. Even after slavery ended, our nation continued to search for racial markers with which to categorize and limit working-class people. Labor market discrimination was even seen through "welfare laws that denied black and
Mexican single mothers benefits so that they would be forced to take on domestic employment" (Glenn, 36). Lucy’s experience as a woman of color growing up with post-colonial education that still praises colonist authors, makes her acutely aware of this history of racialized labor and exploitation. While Mariah identifies as a feminist, Lucy’s position as a “transient, racialized, laboring woman” disturbs second-wave western feminism’s “conservative reactions to racial difference” (Nichols, 188). Lucy and Mariah’s backgrounds thus inevitably clash despite Mariah’s repeated attempts to make her understand the white, upper middle-class feminist point of view.

Despite Lucy’s young age, she has her own understanding of the world. Some concepts she has come to understand include many that Mariah will not be able to undo. Lucy repeatedly defends these views with Mariah. Lucy’s outspokenness about differing views go against the typical meek au pair image. Due to their dependency on the employers who are also the host families, au pairs have found it difficult to disagree or complain about things out of fear “that the host families might respond with coldness” or that they may create tension within the home (Cox, 42). Lucy does not consider this potential awkwardness or tension, and speaks her mind. This action shows that her individual beliefs come before any set system, even if the system was part of the job that allowed her to have this new life in the U.S. through a visa. If she has no worry about saying the wrong thing and potentially having her visa voided, then challenging a feminist view that she does not think equally apply to all women is not a problem.

**Resisting the Colonizing Western Feminism**

Part of why I read Lucy’s narration as not placing her job as the novel’s central focus, is due to the limited amount of detail about her position. Along with mentioning her role in the
house as the child caregiver who studies at night, she also presents a summarized list of her daily work schedule:

My waking hours soon took on a routine. I walked four small girls to their school, and when they returned at midday I gave them a lunch of soup from a tin, and sandwiches. In the afternoon, I read to them and played with them. When they were away, I studied books, and at night I went to school. (Kincaid, 9-10)

The detail of giving the children food from “tin” shows that Lucy notices the low number of home-cooked meals Mariah provides. This implies a critique of the traditional mother-cooked meals demanded by the gender norms of society. This simultaneously clashes with the production of ready-to-eat foods that have become popularly acceptable for people of this family’s economic class during the time the novel is set. It is not stated, but food from “tin” in other places is what poverty-driven people receive as food donations. Whether or not Lucy is referencing to all or any of these, she finds something peculiar about the idea that this family eats from ‘tin.’ This may also have a critique of gender performance in a patriarchal society, where the wife is expected to always have a home-cooked meal for the family. If so, it shows a rooted mentality obtained from her family, one that Lucy has not been able to get rid of despite her desire to seek a new path for herself.

Ironically, the mother who provides soups from tin for her children is also explained to be a bit picky about the foods her children consume. In one scene, Lucy is trying to feed Miriam, the youngest child, “a bowl of stewed plums and yogurt specially prepared for her by her mother” (Kincaid, 44). Lucy knows that Miriam does not particularly want to eat the meal, so she tries to persuade her by stating that it is “special food […] sought after by the fairies,”

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3 As mentioned on page 1 of this chapter, Lucy describes herself as: “the young girl who watches over the children and goes to school at night” (Kincaid, 7).
something her own mother told her when she was young (Kincaid, 44). Lucy mentions how she must do this hidden from Mariah, who does not believe fairy tales should be told to children. Lucy explains:

I was not Miriam’s mother, and, in fact, whenever I fed her and told her these stories, a sort of bribe to get her to do things my way, I always did it in a low voice, so that Mariah would not overhear. Mariah did not believe in this way of doing things.[…]She thought fairy tales were a bad idea, especially ones involving princesses who were awakened from long sleeps upon being kissed by a prince; apparently stories like that would give the children, all girls, the wrong idea about what to expect in the world when they grew up. Her speech on fairytales amused me, because I had in my head a long list of things that contributed to wrong expectations in the world, and somehow fairy tales did not make an appearance on it. (Kincaid, 45)

Lucy acknowledges that she is not Miriam’s mother and knows that Mariah does not want her children to believe in fairy tales. Still, Lucy goes against her will in an attempt to help encourage Miriam to eat. Lucy positions her reason for persuading Miriam in this way within tradition when explaining that this was what her own mother would tell her when Lucy did not want to eat something (Kincaid, 44). She values this effort and wants to repeat the cycle through her interaction with Mariah’s child. Despite going against Mariah’s instructions on her child-raising ideals, Lucy’s attempt to help Miriam is a selfish way to follow her mother’s tradition. The narration does not provide evidence on this, but the fact that the dish was specifically prepared for Miriam makes me think it is a home-recipe for potential digestive problems. Plums are normally not a child’s favorite snack, and it is obvious Miriam does not like them stewed and in
yogurt, a good source of probiotics, implying the possibility that this recipe was meant to provide some digestive aid. If in fact Miriam is being forced to eat this for her health, Lucy’s fairy tale story is meant to help the child eat the dish a bit easier.

Lucy is amused to think that there could be anything wrong with generating such stories for children as Mariah seems to believe. With so many other wrong things in the world, fairy tales seem to offer something to look forward to, even if the child does not actually believe them, such as Lucy did not believe her mother at the time. There is a more direct hint of the differences in life experiences here through Lucy’s comment of fairy tales not appearing on her ‘long list.’ Lucy differentiates herself and Mariah as people with varying backgrounds and views of the world. As someone who comes from a place of economic struggle and not of so much privilege, Lucy considers herself to know worse things that create wrong expectations of the world than simple fairy tales.

Simultaneously, we notice that while Lucy is aware of things Mariah is not, Lucy does not accept the feminist notion behind the opposition of dependent princess stories. She may not understand Lucy’s feminist motives here, but she does identify a sense of resistance about her. For instance, Lucy later learns that Mariah was a rebel when younger, but does not quite identify this as feminism, perhaps for not knowing the concept. Kincaid labels Mariah as a second-wave feminist through Lucy’s descriptions of a younger Mariah seen in pictures with long hair, who did not shave her legs or underarms as a “symbol of something” (Kincaid 79-80). This ‘something’ indicates her understanding that there is some reason for Mariah’s actions, but either Kincaid is not telling us Lucy’s degree of comprehension, or Lucy truly does not know about feminism.
Just as Lucy generates assumptions of Mariah’s knowledge, Mariah also attempts to have some power over Lucy. While we do not see her thought-process due to Lucy’s first-person narration, we do see assumptions in her attempts to make Lucy feel like part of the family. In trying to make Lucy feel at home, Mariah treats Lucy as if she were an additional child of hers and wants to show her things she assumes Lucy has never seen before. Lucy notices that Mariah wants to include her when she tries to get the children to see things a certain way. While the children happily take on her lens, Lucy thinks to herself that she already has a mother of her own and would rather face death than just be an “echo of someone,” even of her mother (Kincaid, 36). I read this reflection as a form of resistance against trying to change her views simply because she is in a new country. For Mariah to want to treat her as an additional child whom she needs to show things to, she must consider Lucy below her to a certain degree. The combination of her younger age, working class status, and recent arrival to the U.S. may have led her to think Lucy wanted or needed her help in seeing things. At times Mariah forgets Lucy is already an adult and tries to give her advice on even her friendships. Mariah worries when she learns of Lucy’s friend Peggy, who smokes and is out on the street often. Mariah cannot quite tell Lucy what to do, but she does give her “lectures” about what a “bad influence” someone like Peggy can be (Kincaid, 63).

With this quote, I see a narration pattern of importance in establishing the type of power a person lacks, in this case, parenthood. Twice now, Lucy has established that Mariah can only tell her certain things because she is not her mother or parent. Despite the repetition, each still

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4 Lewis, Mariah’s husband, also has moments when he treats Lucy as one of his children. Though it rarely happens, it is important to acknowledge it since he is also an employer figure in the family. Lucy explains how he sometimes “treated [her] as if [she] were one of his daughters, and he would tell [her] fantastic stories just to see [her] face as it formed belief and then fell apart in disbelief” (Kincaid, 47-48).
attempts to make a difference for the other. The lack of power limits the degree in which they can try, as seen by Lucy’s continued efforts to tell fairy tales to Miriam when Mariah is not within listening range. This is important because it means that Lucy is indirectly formulating a sense of individuality within a set system of assigned parenting. She acknowledges the boundaries of her parenting, something child caregivers often forget to do. Surprisingly, the employer can also participate in this quasi-parenting as seen with Mariah’s mentoring attempts to help Lucy. Rather than being a competition to prove the best tactics, child-rearing (or mentorship between Mariah and Lucy) is of personal interest for both of them; each aims to do what she thinks is best.

A direct mention of Mariah’s attempts to mentor and “parent” Lucy appears towards the end of the novel. Lucy has just learned of her father’s death and shares with Mariah how she was always the outcast child, even though she was very much like her mother. She could not bear the lack of pride in her mother’s eyes when she saw her, and promised herself she would separate from them as soon as she could. As soon as she finishes telling her this, Mariah responds with the following:

[…]Mariah wanted to rescue me. She spoke of women in society, women in history, women in culture, women everywhere. But I couldn’t speak, so I couldn’t tell her that my mother was my mother and that society and history and culture and other women in general were something else altogether.

Mariah left the room and came back with a large book and opened it to the first chapter. She gave it to me.[…]Mariah had completely misinterpreted my situation. My life could not really be explained by this thick book that made my hands hurt as I tried to keep it open.[…] (Kincaid, 131-132)
Again, we see a misunderstanding between the two women. Mariah does not realize that Lucy does not want to be empowered by reading a generalized notion of womanhood through the Western feminist lens. She does not identify with this and believes Mariah will never quite understand where she is coming from. For their friendly employer/employee relationship to continue working, “gender alliance alone cannot fully account for this camaraderie” (Majerol, 18). The fact that Lucy’s womanhood and that of the people she identifies with is ‘something else altogether,’ shows she is conscious of the differences in the womanhood described in these books even if she does not recognize the name, “feminism.” We see her exalt her Otherness in this comparison, as something educated white women and their literature cannot access. Despite her sharing some of her life with Mariah, Lucy does not continue to explain her thoughts, not giving Mariah a chance to try to understand and interpret things differently. Mariah thus remains with her own understanding of womanhood and her own limited understanding of feminism.

Another example of Mariah’s “parenting” attempts is when she assumes Lucy has never seen Spring and plans to take her out to the countryside as soon as the season arrives (Kincaid, 17, 19). Without allowing Lucy to answer whether she knows spring, Mariah has already determined she has not, or at least not the spring she knows. I do not see this as an attempt to try to help her fit in, because Spring is not a touristic attraction, but rather a season and type of natural beauty that might have existed in Lucy’s own homeland. Mariah makes plans for the family to visit her summer house near the Great Lakes and seems more excited about showing things she likes than about getting Lucy’s input on the experience. Her actions cause Lucy’s individuality to become lost among all the planning. After all, it is her job to care for the children, and if they plan to make a trip, she would have to join. There is a kind of selfish motive behind Mariah’s specific plans, as if she wants others to understand and value her ways,
potentially due to rising marriage problems. There is a hint of Mariah’s longing for a companion in activities she enjoys doing. Lucy states, “An early-evening walk in the spring air – that was something [Mariah] really wanted to do with [her], to show [her] the magic of a spring sky” (Kincaid, 19).

As with the feminist books, Mariah wants to expose Lucy to an upper-middle-class life with the aim of “transforming Lucy into the type of person whose consciousness transcends the bounds of a domestic worker” (Majerol, 20). Despite these well-intended desires for Lucy to experience the same things she and her children do, I do believe that there is a selfish desire here. At no moment does she ask Lucy what she really wants to do or visit while they are with her. She wants to show her a different world from what she could afford, but does not provide her with the tools to achieve that lifestyle (i.e. advice on education paths and even better explaining what feminism is so that Lucy understands Mariah’s ideas). However, Lucy’s silence in requesting help on any of this also shows her power as an independent woman finding her own way in this new country.

When Lucy travels with Mariah and the children to their summer home, we again briefly receive a narration of Lucy’s child caregiver role, along with a different sense of labor and working-class awareness:

On the train, we settled ourselves and the children into our compartments—two children with Mariah, two children with me. In one of the few films I had seen in my life so far, some people on a train did this—settle into their compartments. And so I suppose I should have felt excitement at doing something I had never done before and had only seen done in a film. But almost everything I did now was something I had never done before, and so the new was
no longer thrilling to me unless it reminded me of the past. We went to the dining
car to eat our dinner. We sat at tables—the children by themselves. They had
demanded that, and had said to Mariah that they would behave, even though it
was well known that they always did. The other people sitting down to eat dinner
all looked like Mariah’s relatives; the people waiting on them all looked like
mine. […] Mariah did not seem to notice what I had in common with the waiters.
She acted in her usual way, which was that the world was round and we all agreed
on that, when I knew that the world was flat and if I went to the edge I would fall
off.[…]

[…] Early that morning, Mariah left her own compartment to come and tell
me that we were passing through some of those freshly plowed fields she loved so
much. She drew up my blind, and when I saw mile after mile of turned-up earth, I
said, a cruel tone in my voice, “Well, thank God I didn’t have to do that.” I don’t
know if she understood what I meant, for in that one statement I meant many
different things. (Kincaid, 31-33)

This is Lucy’s first time on a train and although she claims to not be so excited, her narration
claims something else. She provides specific information that shows she pays attention to detail
of things like seating choices. She even recalls that she has seen similar scenes in movies before,
making her conscious that she is living a reality she has only previously watched through
television. In acknowledging this and choosing to not call this excitement, she seems to absorb
this moment and accept the reality that she can now perform the role as a train passenger.
However, part of the suppressed excitement may be due to the fact that she knows that she will
probably not repeat such a ride with frequency outside her current job opportunity due to lack of
funds. Although she does not mention this idea, she does continue to identify with the workers aboard the train when seeing them in the later part of the paragraph quoted above. This implies her disconnection from the lifestyle Mariah is trying to accommodate her in while she is with them. I share Majerol’s belief in that Mariah tries to “inscribe [Lucy] into a narrative of immigrant inclusion and upward mobility,” but fails due to “Lucy’s past, a recollection of a personal history in which she has consistently occupied, and continues to occupy” ⁵ (Majerol, 18). Lucy may be a rebel herself by resisting generalizations and making her own judgements, but she is much more grounded in her reality as a working-class person than Mariah could ever understand.

Labor and particularly, ethnic differences within labor are touched upon in this later part describing the waiters. Lucy’s Otherness within this new setting activates her identification of equals within the room, something that we cannot know if Mariah also considered. Scholars like Nichols see Mariah as performing a “form of white liberal discourse on racism that chooses not to recognize race in order to avoid having to confront the ways white individuals, even when supposedly anti-racist, benefit from white privilege” (Nichols, 200). In what we have seen of Mariah and heard from Lucy, I think it is safe to say “Lucy individuates, while Mariah amalgamates,” each in a well-intended way (Nichols, 203). Kincaid’s emphasis on differences in races among the workers and the passengers in the train cart enables her to identify inequality

⁵ Complete quote: “Mariah, as a privileged, liberal feminist of the First world, consistently attempts to assimilate Lucy and, in a sense, inscribe her into a narrative of immigrant inclusion and upward mobility. But it seems that every attempt of this kind has a contradictory effect: that is, these attempts open up a space from Lucy’s past, a recollection of a personal history in which she has consistently occupied, and continues to occupy, only the periphery or background to Mariah’s narrative, rather than the center.[…]sense of disidentification[…]” (Majerol, 18).
among labor division in this country. Lucy may notice it, but does not know that this attention to working class minorities goes far past the train and au pair stories. A similar thing happens with the section mentioning the plowed fields. Instead of just admiring them as Mariah does, Lucy connects with the view of a laborer by thinking of the work that went behind it. Her thought on how this statement meant ‘different things,’ implies there could potentially be some serious attention to labor assignments among society: “Lucy is particularly conscious of the luxuries that accompany the lifestyle of her employers – luxuries that are not only material, but also personal and political[…].” (Lenz, 103).

Soon after she identifies herself with the working ethnic minority within the cart, she again identifies with the unknown and unseen group of agricultural workers who just plowed the fields. I italicize ‘unseen’ here because Kincaid presents a visual example of making the laborer invisible. Agricultural and domestic labor are just a few of the many fields largely occupied by immigrant workers, who are often not acknowledged. With mass production and labor necessity, they become another number in line for production. Lucy and Mariah only see the product as they pass the fields, and only Lucy sees the ‘freshly plowed fields’ as laborer-made. Kincaid’s Lucy focuses on the laborer, establishing her as an individual and as mentioned, placing the labor itself to the side. With this in mind, the scene acts as a window to another dimension of what immigrant labor looks like for many other people. Lucy’s seemingly sarcastic comment thus has truth. She is lucky to not have to work in such a job and is instead seeing this as a passenger in a train with her host family, again, enjoying the luxuries they can afford is her life for now. However, a recently-arrived immigrant laborer, Lucy is aware of the limited number of jobs available for her. Here she references the known agricultural labor other immigrants enter, something that could have well been her task had she entered the U.S. under a different program.
Towards the end, Lucy more specifically acknowledges the privileges she has been given with this specific family, but again knows this cannot be her actual life after the year is over. She states that while she would not mind living with her employers, she “could hardly imagine spending the rest of [her life] overseeing their children […] And the children would not remain children forever” (Kincaid, 110). Her childcare labor returns here as a reminder that it is the only reason she was able to meet the employers in the first place. The possibility no longer being needed, a reality for all child caregivers, rises here. Although she describes Mariah to be like a “good mother” to her, who would think of her when buying things at the grocery store and sometimes paying her “more money than it had been agreed [she] would earn,” she knows that this intimacy will not continue after the au pair year agreement is over (Kincaid, 110). With realizing the temporal limits of her job, she begins “to feel like a dog on a leash, a long leash, but a leash all the same,” which I read as not only referring to the family but as her position in the larger setting as a laborer in the U.S. (Kincaid, 110). It is important to note the ‘additional’ money she receives from Mariah, because scholars have found that most au pairs do not seem to mind their ‘pocket money’ wage. The “consequence of understanding their work as transitional” is that au pairs “often [do] not consider their wages low” (Macdonald, 52). While Lucy is rightfully grateful for this extra income, she also shows that Mariah is a conscientious employer who either realizes Lucy’s wage is small as it is, or simply likes her and wants to give her more. Whatever the case may be, the mention of pay and wanting to give more, signals the minimal pay au pairs receive in general. Although most may not see this unfairness due to the housing and meals they receive, the au pair arrangement is part of the cycle of “U.S. policies that […] keep immigrant ‘women of color as a superexploitable, low-wage labor force’” (Macdonald, 49).
Lucy decides to remind Mariah about her year commitment coming to an end just after Lewis has left her for another woman, her own friend, and Lucy has just been informed of her father’s death. At this moment of their own approaching separation, both women had a male figure depart them, though Lucy had physically departed from hers the moment she left her homeland. Mariah’s situation is thus more recent, and her reaction to Lucy’s reminder comes at a time her mind is not quite so straight. With a voice “full of anger” she tells Lucy that the year she was “supposed” to stay is not over yet (Kincaid, 141). In the few weeks left of her job, Lucy notices that Mariah speaks “harshly all the time now, and she began to make up rules which she insisted that [she] follow […] It was a last resort for her – insisting that [Lucy] be the servant she the master” (Kincaid, 143). Mariah’s new reality is that she was not able to keep her husband by her side, making her feel powerless. Unfortunately, she decides to take it out on someone below her, someone who’s departure had been known from the beginning, a woman whom she had wanted to consider her friend. Despite temporarily breaking her feminist and friendship ideals, Mariah still has a place in Lucy’s mind and Lucy knows they will someday be on friendly terms again.

Blowups can occur when child caregivers leave the family. In Mariah’s case, Lucy is departing just weeks after Lewis and her have decided to separate, leaving Lucy to experience the anger effects of Mariah’s new solitary reality. Mariah’s reaction to the dual separation serves as a reminder that “‘labors of love’ do not really constitute employment” (Hondagneu-Soleto, 120). In an interview with a mother complaining about her nanny who wants a raise, Hondagneu-Soleto quotes the mother, “I try to have a nice house for [the nanny] to live in […] You know, again, it goes back to this thing of spoiling these people. But you know, she probably didn’t appreciate it or something” (Hondagneu-Soleto, 120). While we may not hear Mariah’s
thoughts during the time just before Lucy leaves, we can use her actions to interpret it may sound something like this. It has not been long since Lucy explained the ‘additional’ sentimental and monetary care she was receiving from Mariah before the story changed soon after the reminder of her leaving. Mariah may have truly cared for Lucy and perhaps is not even thinking about these extra things she provided her during this angry stage. However, she is obviously not finding her departure easy at this time, which is understandable, but as the responsible adult she has shown to be, she is surely taking it all out on Lucy at the end. Despite the nice space she has provided Lucy, everyone knew that this day of departure would come. Thus, any feeling that Lucy being ungrateful for leaving is an absurd excuse to not see this agreement as the paid domestic work it truly represents. It is unfortunate that Mariah leaves her feminist theories of sisterhood behind in these final moments of being the employer.

From early in the novel, Kincaid allows us to see Lucy’s complex train of thought. Although she may not have been exposed to theory enough to understand certain comments by her employers, she does create elaborate ideas of her own. For instance, when explaining a dream to both Mariah and Lewis in which they both had appear in, they react by joking Dr. Freud was for her. This confuses Lucy, for she does not know who Freud is, and wonders if Mariah and Lewis understood that “only people who [are] very important to [her] had ever shown up in [her] dreams” (Kincaid, 15). Considering this example, alongside the previously-mentioned references on fairy tales, we see that Lucy shows how both feelings and personal experience influence the way she perceives things. Her thoughts depict a notion of the world as non-applicable to universalizing concepts. Through her narrated thoughts, there is a constant reminder of inequality in the world, despite claims of feminism sisterhood by Mariah. As a foreigner watching America for the first time, Lucy elevates her Otherness by critiquing America
and the idealized picture of it she had imagined from afar. Her larger critique of the nation is micro-replicated through the observation of her employers’ family problems and differing views.

In the first chapter, titled ‘Poor Visitor,’ we are exposed to this realization of a poor America through her disillusion with the way the surroundings appear. Lucy describes how now being in the unspecified U.S. city, items in its famous landscape looked “ordinary, dirty, worn down,” used and visited by many for whom they were a “fixture of fantasy” for as well (Kincaid, 4). In providing this realization so early in the novel, Kincaid quickly “gives a lie to the chapter’s title […] It is the US that is poor [not her], after all, disheveled and unattractive, a place where even the sunshine is poorer, robbed of its warmth by the winter air” (Nichols, 193). While the reader expects to learn something for which to pity Lucy, she establishes herself as the one to judge and shares her views of the pitifully worn down city, though people fantasize about it from afar. Equally, the idea of the upper class American family is dismantled before her eyes as problems arise. From seeing the city as a whole, Lucy narrows her critique of America to just focusing on the family. This critique creates a micro-replica study of America. By studying her beliefs amidst this family, she can better value them and determine the person she wants to be.

When the host family is first described, she gives details of them while looking at photographs in their home, “a husband, a wife, and the four children. […] In the pictures, they smiled out at the world, giving the impression that they found everything in it unbearably wonderful” (Kincaid, 12). As with the city landscape, these photographs present a romanticized picture of the family as one that has no problems. She makes assumptions of them based on photographs, snapshots of moments most people smile and pose for. Since this is Lucy’s first encounter with an American family, the first impression of them may potentially be that of the American family stereotype in general. Lucy is fascinated by the child-raising ideals this family
has. As previously noted, Mariah’s feminist beliefs make her hope her daughters will not grow up hoping a prince charming will rescue them as in fairy tales. While Lucy finds this intriguing, she is against it and even continues to tell fairy tales in secret. Mariah and Lewis’s modern child-raising theories are not all badly critiqued though. Lucy likes the freedom of expression the children are given:

[The children] would spill their food, or not eat any of it at all, or make rhymes about it that would end with the words ‘smelt bad.’ […] I wondered what sort of parents I must have had, for even to think of such words in their presence I would have been scolded severely, and I vowed that if I ever had children I would make sure the first words out of their mouths were bad ones. (Kincaid, 13).

This is the first time Lucy talks about potentially having children and what her parenting tactics would be like. It is important that as the hired child caregiver, she notices these parenting styles that respect and encourage childhood and creativity. In the chaos of finding child-care, this can be temporarily ignored, causing the child to become objectified in a way. Fortunately, this is not the case with this family and Lucy is absorbing these details of child-care for her own potential future use. The scene directly shows how she is using her job to take note of other lifestyles and choose to take things that she agrees with. She definitely chooses to discard Mariah’s theoretical advice on womanhood, but here we see that Mariah’s action as a parent is approved of and taken as an advice note for Lucy’s future. Again, this shows Lucy’s power as an individual enacting her freedom of decision-making.

Unfortunately, Mariah and Lewis’ marriage breaks apart towards the end of the novel. Although they are a seemingly-loving couple, Lucy notices problems and even sees Lewis be affectionate with Dinah, Mariah’s friend. Although they try to not argue in her presence, Lucy
notices Mariah’s eyes constantly “in one of the various stages of a cry” (Kincaid, 112). After the divorce and Lucy leaves her role in the family, Lucy and Mariah meet and identify themselves as friends again. Lucy notes that Mariah “looked even more thin than usual. She was alone, and she felt lonely. She lived with her four children, but children are not companions” (Lucy, 163). It seems that Mariah was not quite as happy in her marriage as Lucy thought. The description of her that Lucy provides indirectly points at “the masks of motherhood […] cracking through,” making us wonder her reasons for having children to begin with (Rich, 25). She is obviously in some state of depression, and being a single mother seems like a burden. However, she appears to be willing not to give up on her children.

Despite being a feminist upper-middle-class white woman within her home country, Mariah is struggling, and Lucy sees it is ironically for a man. The function of a male figure⁶ in the family and how he completes or breaks the illusion of ‘perfectness’ is called into question here along with the actual strength of Western feminist theory. Returning to the micro-setting of the family, both Mariah and Lucy’s broken families show that some structures “have no national borders,” and have the same battles and consequences (Nichols, 191). The only effective motion out of this is “the effort of trying” and moving forward (Nichols, 192).

Later, when reflecting on her post-au pair life, Lucy realizes that although she has “crossed the threshold,” has her own apartment and is living “a life [she] had always wanted to live,” she does not yet feel accomplished (Kincaid, 156, 158). Still part of the working-class,

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⁶ The idea that the father is the bread-winner but also the rule-maker of the house has diminished women’s work in the house and as a mother. This societal concept dates back for centuries. In literature, Greek mythology character Apollo mentions how the “mother is no parent […] but only a nurse […] The parent is he who mounts” (Rich, 120). In this quote, the ‘nurse’ indicates an equally diminished role of a child caregiver. Lucy shows the opposite, of how it is the mother who is the one parenting the majority of the time. The child-care itself is important as well, for someone from a foreign country had to be hired.
Lucy has a while more to go before obtaining a better sense of self-accomplishment. The pursuit of ‘something else’ leaves Lucy at a place of motion again, though in a less binding situation than when she first moved to the U.S.. Kincaid illustrates the beginning of Lucy’s ‘new chapter’ with Lucy physically writing her first line in a blank journal Mariah gives her. Tears and a scribbled message absorb the page as the novel ends, alluding to the insecurity Lucy feels as she moves forward. Simultaneously, her participation in writing, illustrates a powerful metaphor of the brighter future that awaits her as an empowered woman.
CHAPTER III:
CARE TIES IN MONA SIMPSON’S *MY HOLLYWOOD*

Mona Simpson’s novel takes place in the mid 90’s in California and follows the story of Lola, a woman from the Philippines who works as a nanny for children in upper-middle-class families. Unlike *Happy Family* and *Lucy*, *My Hollywood* is narrated in first person but employs not one but two narrators: chapters alternate between Lola’s experience and that of her first employer, Claire. The alternating point of view allows us to better determine actions and misunderstandings as interpreted by each character. Reading from the point of view of both characters helps us identify important differences between employee and employer. Unlike Hua and Lucy, Lola is an older nanny in her fifties, with parenting experience of her own as a mother of five. She works to send money home to the Philippines to help with the college expenses of her now adult children. Despite loving the children for whom she cares for, she initially sees her stay in this country as only temporary and tries to send most of her earnings home. Through Lola’s labor and interaction with other nannies and Claire’s perspective, Simpson enables us to formulate a map of the dangers and challenges immigrant women face in relation to with those experienced by upper-class, American, white feminists. Together, Lola and Claire’s narratives challenge the classist and national systems they each represent, and bring attention to important issues in the commodified market of motherhood. Although this novel is rich in conversation about the commodified market of motherhood, I will only focus on major parts that best describe the child-care system and its participants.
Confronting the Marginalization: Inner Resistance and Worker Alliance

*My Hollywood* touches on the dangers of illegal scams, mistreatment, and activism within the working-class community. Lola’s decision to move to California is motivated by the apparent prosperity of a lady she knows who works in the U.S. and sends money home. After reading a flyer, Lola is soon encouraged to move to a particular region in California. The flyer reads, “JOBS IN AMERICA! MOTHERS, NURSES, COOKS! SEND MONEY HOME. RETIRE RICH IN FIVE YEARS!” (Simpson, 54). The mystery job in the flyer turns out to be a scam created by people who operate an unregulated home for disabled adult patients. The patients are not taken care of properly, nor taught basic skills and disorderly eat out of cans of soup and from packages of frozen hot dogs left out for them (Simpson, 56). Lola observes how this “pink one-story hotel with a chain-link fence all around” does not provide the attention and care it should to its residential patients (Simpson 56). On her first day, Lola meets a father with two daughters who also came looking for work. The makers of the flyers, see the group of job-seekers, laugh among themselves, and decide to take the rest of the day off, leaving them no instructions as to how to care for the patients (Simpson, 56). Lola explains that during the forty days they worked for the managers, they would always leave the laborers locked in the property. Food is the only compensation for their labor, giving Lola headaches in trying to think of options while only seeing the “chain-link fence” (Simpson, 57). The job is a physical entrapment to forcibly perform the daily chores for the facility’s managers, including looking after the difficult patients. The managers also try to instill fear and make it seem as if the laborers should consider themselves lucky to have shelter. One even tells Lucy, one of the laborers that she is “Not even legal here,” and that she should be grateful the authorities have not been contacted (Simpson, 58). To this, Lucy replies that they were registered when entering the country and the topic does
not resurface during the short time they are held captive. The reason for this lack of further conversation is most likely to not raise the possibility of rights violations with subjugation of both the laborers and the patients.

Lola and the group of laborers are soon rescued by Ruth, a woman who approaches their fence and promises them of better jobs as care-givers in mansions. Ruth is slightly older than Lola not only saves her, but also becomes her good friend and mentor. Lola recalls the scene of her rescue and describes how, “Ruth rattled the gate and said she had heard about [the immigrant workers] here. [She later learns] Ruth goes to that place every month. She knows about their flyer” (Simpson, 59). I read Ruth as the embodiment of the activist and justice-seeking laborer among the working-class immigrant women. A character who physically resists labor injustice on uninformed recent immigrant laborers incorporates the presence of the real social movements and legal demands union groups and others have accomplished. However, because care-giving and domestic roles exist behind closed doors, the laborers themselves must be the ones to help each other or else the larger unaware society will not. I agree that “Domestic workers, home care workers, nurses, and other largely female contingents must organize their workplaces or the work that most women do will continue to be undervalued, virtually unregulated, and precarious” (Jaffe). Simpson adds a layer to the critiqued feminist sisterhood seen in the previous chapters. By bringing a strong female figure like Ruth and having her help our main character, Simpson displays the way the immigrant laborer can become empowered and help others. Surprisingly Ruth has been able to do this without contacting local authorities.

Aside from this physical extraction from labor abuse, Ruth also provides the laborers she helps, mostly women, with a support community and a collection of written advice and stories documented called, *The Book of Ruth*. Lola mentions that she sees Ruth as her “teacher of
America” (Simpson, 15). Lola values the book because it “tells the story of [the nannies and domestics] careers in America” (Simpson, 45). Lola eventually has possession of the book and while she determines what to add to it, she tries to fix its evident wear. Through Lola’s care of the book, her attempts to restore its physical condition, and her reading of some of the works, we become aware of the value these stories hold. They know they are strangers in this country and are aware of the racial and cultural differences with their employers. This becomes an important ‘How to’ resource for Ruth’s nanny group.

The teacher of Ruth was a picture bride, and then she worked domestic.

On the first page, she typed HOW TO WORK FOR THE WHITE.

They do not like their own smell. Their waste. Their own used things.

Americans, they are very dirty. They used to be clean. The grandparents are clean. And the habits they lost are what they crave from us.

I have with me tonight this old book. Comfortable gave it so I will make repairs. I walk to Palisades Park, sit on a bench, and lift out the frail book from T-shirts I have wrapped around. The spine is tearing from so many times being opened, and some of the pages glued in, the paste has dried and they are coming loose.” (Simpson, 45)

The Book of Ruth is presented as a collection of stories and advice from multiple laborers that Ruth has come to know. Lola explains that the book is also used as type of “memorial,” where weddings, baptisms, and even funerals are celebrated by attaching letters into the book (Simpson, 49). The book as a whole brings a bold notion of the value of writing stories not only for self-therapy, expression, or advice, but also to empower their labor as a whole through documenting their stories. The nannies in the three novels analyzed in this project engage in a
form of writing. I see this as a performance of a certain level of power by recording their thoughts, one which is often linked with the privilege of being a scholar. Now, Kincaid’s Lucy character is a student while working as an au pair, but the scholarly writing that I refer to is the type of scholarship accessible to mostly people in the academia and with higher education. In allowing fictional women of a lower economic and educational position to engage in some type of writing at the end of their childcare-giver role, performs a resistance against the global classed system that limits them from doing so in real life. The novels thus present an embodied version of the possibilities women of their category could engage in. In Happy Family, Hua begins the novel with a reflection letter written in her present, future from the narrated story. Lucy ends with Lucy beginning her own journal and exclaiming a desire for her future. My Hollywood goes further in this writing aspect by presenting a book that embodies a missing but powerful text in current scholarship, a collection of childcare labor experience made solely by the employers themselves.

Hardship, experience, and more are seen in the inserts women have added over time. The worn-off condition of the book indicates its successful usage over time among the laborers Ruth has presented it to. However, the danger of physical loss or damage also reminds us of that while these women have created a valuable project, it is still trapped within the secrecy of themselves, inaccessible to a scholar audience, and fragile without a permanent online existence. Although their project is rich in content and is more elaborate than the individual writings we begin to see in the other novels, there is a sense of limitation in its lack of presence among scholars and the danger of its current storage format. Its absence from and even the lack of consideration for archival work being done on it serves as a reminder of their status as uneducated and lower-class women. The choice to keep the book only within themselves may be a sign of resistance against
the system that does not care in giving them support and guidance as this book does. However, the long-term usage and preservation of this book is never noted. It is never known if they have not made attempts to publish or at least digitize its contents for a reason. This leads me to believe that they have just not considered digitizing their work and much less creating a published piece out of it. As scholars interested in working-class studies, this book would have been very valuable for us, so having it presented to us in this fictional and unattainable mode in a way does create a sense of resistance formulated by Simpson for the nannies.

Simpson uses the California setting and the narration switch to her advantage to show that although Lola’s employers work in the culturally-glamorized life of TV comedy writing and music production, like everyone else, they have difficulties of their own. Ideas of adultery and frustrated career periods challenge the idealized preconception of the employers’ lives. The idealized ‘Hollywood’ façade is interrupted through individualized family narratives, juxtaposed with Lola’s own labor narrative. Despite their differing economic and nationality background, both the employee and employer narratives are presented on the same platform, disrupting the sole focus on the glamour appraisal. The plot thus allows us to see the importance of the workers of the Hollywood creators and that “While we all worry about the glass ceiling, there are millions of women standing in the basement – and the basement is flooding” (Jaffe). I read the ‘basement’ as Jaffe calls it, to refer to the working-class ‘flooding’ in struggles. In this child-care domestic labor in particular, the ‘basement’ refers to the economic necessity and degree of affection that entraps women into accepting various types of job offers despite the sacrifices these may imply. While employers are worrying about making the next recognized piece of music or TV production, as Lola’s employers are, or even moving into another “Beverly Hills mansion,” as the employers of Lita, friend of Lola, nanny employees value job opportunities
based on salary and employer’s kindness. Lola jokes that the nannies “compare jobs the way women compare husbands” (Simpson, 34). While Lola’s immediate circle of nannies has fair-paying jobs, they learn of a woman who also comes from a place of mistreatment. She is treated like a slave by Saudi employers who feed her “only table scraps […] What they feed to the dogs […] Her bed is in the garage, on the floor. She sleeps with the dogs” (Simpson, 96). Knowing that “This’s gotta be illegal,” they later help this woman as Ruth has done for others. It reminds them that while they each have sacrifices of their own, “the world is full of sad stories. They are not all [theirs]” (Simpson, 97).

Simpson embeds important facts about these working class nannies that remind us of the larger injustices in the national classed labor system and global problems as well. These include having minimal rights while being employed by a private citizen as well as previous factors their home countries already affected them with, like limited education. Some nannies, like Lola, even participate in the global domestic employee-employer chain through hiring a domestic of their own for even a lower wage. While some of these facts are not mentioned but once in the novel, their appearance remind us of the reality many women in their profession face. Their inclusion builds to the complexities that limit the resources these women have in this country, outside their child care-giver job. As part of a reflection project on nannies, author and editor Elissa Schappell recalls, “It never occurred to me at the time that nannies have no union, no one to fight for their rights when they are abused, fired without warning, or cheated” (Schappell, 132). Simpson even incorporates the concept of unconsented recording of the nanny through the ‘nanny cam’ Lita, a nanny friend of Lola, finds in a stuffed animal. Shocked at finding a video recording, Lita exclaims, “They are spying me. I should have known, the toys all wood. They would not keep a bear so ugly” (Simpson, 35). The discovery causes evident paranoia of surveillance and makes
Lita rightfully suspicious of her employers. Ironically this spy instrument later unintentionally allows the nannies to listen to conversations of the employers recorded near the bear. The video recording shows them their employers’ torsos as the women talk together about “what their nannies do and do not do; they compare [them]” (Simpson, 201). With Lola’s witness of such recordings, we also come to understand the mother employers’ reliance on one another for ideas on assignments the nannies can help them with and even for nanny gift and wage ideas. “Mother-employers tended to use market logic, asking friends and agency owners for information on the ‘going rate’” (Macdonald, 63). While a known ‘rate’ is accepted and sought on both the employer and employee’s side, it is interesting to unveil the performance of how the other subject engages in this conversation. Privacy is morphed in a way the employer did may have not originally intended through the camera bear’s recordings. Ironically the nannies do not realize they are being recorded when they are looking at the videos, looping the performance of discovery within their market labor if we consider the likelihood that the employer will also view them viewing her.

The interaction of Lola with the other nannies raises observations of differences between them, bringing attention to the global class categorization even before entering their labor in the U.S. While these women all fall under the same labor type and economic category in their new country, Lola’s narration reminds us that they are not all equal and each come from a different background. Lola’s narration of Mai-ling, a fellow worker who meets with Ruth’s worker circle, brings to attention some of the class struggles immigrant women bring with them. She describes Mai-ling as, “Bowlegged, one hundred percent Chinese, Mai-ling really is a peasant. [In America] they have homeless, but that is different” (Simpson, 136). If it were not for their current labor that united them in a new country’s working-class, Lola does not believe they
would have known one another, “unless she worked in [her] house [back in the Philippines]. A peasant, ethnic Chinese, she has no education. Only Lita lived in [her] social class […]” (Simpson, 35). Something about Mai-ling leads Lola to identify her as one of the poorest working class people in her home country. Although they are all in the same playdate group, their home country’s prejudiced notions follows them and we experience this kind of assumption-making as seen in Lola’s thoughts. Through specific details, we are lead to understand what she means about Mai-ling’s self that mark her as a lower-class immigrant. Lack of basic education is one indicator of a lower status. Mai-ling explains that she “cannot read” since she “stop at grade three” (Simpson, 137). Aside from categorizing Mai-ling within their current social class circle, Lola’s narration brings about a reality of lack of opportunity these workers may already bring into their new life in America as immigrant working-class laborers. Luckily lack of literacy has not been an issue with her employers, who may not be aware of the issue, but this lack could be problematic in other basic survival situations in her daily life even outside her job.

Another indicator of lack of resources the women have is presented with Mai-ling and the question of health insurance. When Lucy, a young immigrant nanny who hopes to complete her medical studies in the US is with Lola and the other group of nannies and begins using her stethoscope on them. Lucy tells Mai-ling that she has a “Heart murmur […] You know you have that? You go where they have EKG. Do you get Kaiser?” (Simpson, 200). The issue of health insurance benefits for childcare workers is invoked through the specific name of one health insurance company, Kaiser, presumably Kaiser Permanente. To this, Mai-ling responds, “No. I work seven days” (Simpson, 200). The mention of the number of days she works per week may is intriguing because either 1) she knows she has no medical care benefits and resents this despite
working so much, or 2) she knows but does not think she would have time to visit a doctor. No more is said on this topic because the nannies are soon interrupted when a visitor enters Ruth’s house.

Despite their similar job struggles, Simpson highlights there are differences and aspirations within the group of nannies, as noted with Lola’s idea of Mai-ling’s global lower class status. Claire’s narration helps us see that she is also aware of the workers’ desires for economic power, and the reality of class divisions in society. When her husband, Paul, a comedy writer, is invited to attend the Emmy Awards ceremony despite not being nominated, Lola is heard boasting about her employers’ attendance. In listening to nannies at the playdate talk, Claire thinks that “The servants’ dream was to have servants, not to free all the servants and make everyone do their own wash. That was Mao’s dream, but Mao had been born rich” (Simpson, 172). At this point, Claire is already aware that Lola had a girl to help her with housework and child-care back in the Philippines. The nannies had experienced class divisions in their home countries; recognizing their desire to prosper economically, Claire thinks they fantasize about never having to do the housework again. In some sense Claire recognizes what Arlie Russell Hochschild calls ‘global care chains,’ “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring […] may be local, national, or global” (Hochschild, 131). In this case, Claire notes a person’s increased economic power might create jobs for others but at the same time, this subjugates new laborers, positioning them in the lower status that one had just came from. She even references Mao, hinting at differing perspectives about desires for economic equality and capitalist profit, but ignores her own situation in this moment of critique. However, Claire is an active participant in this economic cycle, and a privileged employer, unlike the nannies. She too wants better paychecks and even
has the privilege of being able to discard certain job opportunities, like teaching, simply because she thinks it is “a job for money […] for not enough money” where “it would be hard to afford a family vacation with clean bathrooms” (Simpson, 172). Even if this were the case, she does not even consider that it would not be her cleaning the bathrooms, because she has help for that. She is also unaware of the existence of *The Book of Ruth*, a source of psychological support for the workers and means of valuing for one another. Had she known about its creation, she may not have critiqued the nannies’ comments as much and may have more justly reflected on the global system that leads them to their current classed location.

**Gendered Labor and the Commodification of Care**

The demand for child-care in the upper-class family is so urgent that when interviewees do not work out, Claire decides to go out and look around, setting up interviews in coffee shops, and finally hires Lola right off the bus stop. Her failed attempt at finding an adequate nanny through official interviews also shows the necessity women of working-class are going through in trying to fit into any job despite not being qualified. Dually, Claire is trying hard to focus and juggle time to give her job a priority so that when little profit is made from the music she composes, even Lola finds herself confused. She describes Claire as having “the American problem of guilt. But you should not be guilty to work for your children. It is for them that you are working! Then [she] remembers that check for a thousand,” Claire’s small profit compared to the effort and money spent to make travel for the performance and lecture possible. (Simpson, 31). Lola concludes that “[Claire] is doing [work] for something else. It does not pay. [Lola, she works] for money” (Simpson, 21). The performance that Lola refers to does not pay the expenses it took for the family to travel and attend, leaving her wondering how there could be such a thing
as work without profit. Her own family’s dependence on her does not let her see that there are ways to work for what you like doing without profiting economically. It is unclear if Lola understands that the family’s current economic class allows Claire to make such performances without profit in return. What we do see is a degree of care on Lola’s side. By noticing and caring to wonder about Claire’s decision to invest so much money in return for little, Lola represents the ideal mutual care employers and employees should have to make a situation fair. Possibly due to Lola’s understanding of the wealth of the family, she does not proceed to actually ask Claire about this and remains quiet. Simpson does not let us miss Lola’s caring thoughts though.

Care chains are seen from the beginning of Lola’s laborer experience in the U.S. Even though she knew the managers of the center were not being fair, she tried her best in caring for the patients. She even teaches them useful skills that the managers would have never exposed them to. When leaving with Ruth, she still looks back and considers the fate of the patients without her care. This moment of guilt for leaving the care-recipients behind highlights the primary danger care-givers face. True care for the person, those emotional chains that restrict the worker in finding a better job, make her pause for a second. Luckily Lola knows the situation is not acceptable and her goal to help her own family back home help keep her focused on her own interests. As a responsible care-giver, she leaves the patients knowing they are safe and will stay alive until one of the managers comes for them. Lola describes how “[she] wanted to leave” but then she remembers “the retardeds. We cannot leave! But if we put them back in their rooms […] with the windows open on top, they will not suffocate” (Simpson, 59). A similar attachment and sense of dependence on her is felt when Lola begins to work as a Nanny for Will, Claire’s son. Even when offered a higher-paying job, she cannot make herself leave Will. “Like property,
servants and other paid carers can be discarded when no longer useful […] But] those who lack other options and/or become attached to those they care for continue to work in home care for extended periods (Glenn, 149). When Lola’s weekend employers propose to hire her for the week at a higher rate than Claire and Paul do, Lola is attracted to the prospect of a higher wage. But Will needs her, and Lola’s care for him outweighs more profit:

But $110 every day! Five days or seven. Up to me. That is $770 a week instead of $482.50. Per year, an extra $14,950. My God. I think I have to take that. Plus in that house, I will have made my coffee made every day. That is $416 saved.

Helen is young. They will want more kids. Maybe two more. This is a good job for a long time

[…]

As I come into the weekday house, Claire shouts “Lola, we’re in here.” Her arms cross. Williamo looks the way he looks when he gets bad, his face the shape of a box. This is my sign. My heart slopes.

“Do not worry,” I whisper. “Your Lola will not leave you.” (Simpson, 72).

Knowing she has dismissed an opportunity for more income, she feels that her family will not understand her emotional reasons for doing so and decides to keep this a secret from them. Lola knows that her grown children “are a little jealous […] because they have their own. And it is true. [She is] closer to Williamo than [she is] to [her] grandchildren” because of the daily interaction (Simpson, 33). She dismisses a better job opportunity later while caring for another child; when Lola works for Judith caring for her daughter, Laura, she learns that Helen and Jeff are going to need a new babysitter but she does not pursue the opportunity of earning more money with them because she is “needed here,” with Laura (Simpson, 309). Even when it is
suggested that she could care for both families’ children at the same time, she replies that “Laura, she will still not say okay” (Simpson, 309). She knows that Laura “is not like [her own] kids or [Will]. She is behind,” and she seems to be the main one who worries over her health care needs and takes to her speech therapist (Simpson, 324). She knows that others, including Laura’s own mother, do not care for Laura the way she does. Other women who care for Laura on days Lola does not “forget to give the medicine” despite Lola taking the time to leave instructions (Simpson, 295). She loves Laura so much that she even misses out on her daughter’s wedding back in the Philippines to stay with Laura, promising in The Book of Ruth to “stay until Laura is five” (Simpson, 325). Both instances of dismissing a better-paying job reflect her well-intentioned goal of helping a particular child through his/her first years. In an article published only seven years before My Hollywood, Susan Cheever explains dual complications with the economized child-care market:

This collision of necessity and need is a disaster for working mothers, who have to find reliable child care in an unreliable market, and for the nannies who work for them with no protection or guarantees. [...] (A nanny is a full-time employer who lives in or out and is paid between $250 and $600 a week. (Cheever, 32)

The definition of a nanny in terms of a wage range makes a powerful, direct statement in the language that seems almost awkward to employers when negotiating their value for child-care. While these numbers are a rough estimate of rates for New York, we can get an idea of how Lola’s rate falls in the better half.

Through Will (and later Laura), we are introduced into the concept of behavioral differences within the upper-class children population and their parents’ parenting skills. Parenting is surely not easy and can understandably bring about traumatic experiences. Even the
physical act of birthing can bring these stresses, as seen with Claire’s ‘leaking problem’ and lack of sexual activity with Paul. It is implied that after having Will, Claire suffered “nerve damage,” making her depend on adult diapers from then on, feeling “ashamed to be less” (Simpson, 67). Pumping milk is also a difficulty when Lola first begins to work with the family. Despite all her attempts, Claire cannot seem to provide sufficient milk to satisfy the then baby’s hunger. On her first day at work, Lola finds her “employer crying [...] trying to breast-feed and she had very little [...] The nipples of Claire had cracks that oozed, already infected,” but she persists in trying to pump (Simpson, 15). Later, when Will begins to speak, he soon shows signs of being a smart boy and is known to memorize “To be or not to be” (Simpson, 33). Despite being smart, Will displays signs of aggressive behavior, implying there is either a lack of discipline or an undiagnosed psychiatric problem or even slight autism. The novel reveals the challenges in parenting and shows how “The smiling faces of lovely, well-behaved toddlers on the cover of Parents magazine, so proactively displayed around the checkout counter, tell a different story, though” (Auerbach, 9). Frustrated at her parenting skills not helping her child, Claire does not “know what [she’s] doing wrong [...] Maybe [she] should find a psychologist for him” (Simpson, 44). With Paul at work all day, Claire sees parenting as solely her responsibility at times as seen here where she seems to only blame herself. Despite this moment of taking some charge, Claire does not follow that but does consider the idea that he may need to be placed in a school for ‘special’ children. The only other time we see the mention of a psychologist is when Claire gets one for herself (286)

Unfortunately, Lola’s position as a worker in the family leads to her separation from Will. Helen is the first to introduce the idea that the boys may be “outgrowing Lola” and that she is considering getting “a college girl” for Bing (Simpson 216). Helen uses the fact that she saw
Will hit Lola to support her argument, implying that a Third World country woman is too subjugated to teach the boys better manners. The boys may ‘outgrow’ her in the sense that they become aware of the power dynamics within their house, causing them to know the potentially-interchangeable nanny and domestic worker does not have authority over them as the parents do. Citing a hierarchy among workers, Paul later comments to Claire that “A UCLA girl isn’t going to do the dishes” (Simpson, 217). Without directly phrasing it, both Pail and Claire are aware of the class and labor positions at play here. From the various parenting advice Claire receives, it is the one from Will’s school’s director and assistant teacher that lead her to fire Lola. They mention Will’s behavior may be due to their “housekeeper […] not really [controlling] him” and not able to “pick up the tones” and correct him (Simpson, 226). After suggesting finding a replacement for her, Claire replies “But she loves him! […] And he loves her,” but they believe “In a few days, the kids almost completely forget [their nannies]” (Simpson, 227). Claire is shown to care for Lola and it is during their last days together that she realizes “as soon as [they] fired Lola, [she] knew it was wrong. [Lola] deflated. Did a small bump stick out her back? [Claire] realized she was a few inches shorter than [her]. [Claire had] always thought [they] were the same height” (Simpson, 273).

**Care Across the Class Gap Division**

Despite agreeing with the suggestion to fire Lola towards the end of the novel, Claire is still not depicted as a complete villain in this economized domestic space. We can see that while things are interpreted in different ways due to their own class and nationality background, as with the characters in the other novels, both Lola and Claire are well-intentioned towards one another. I see a connection between the text’s depiction of the employer-nanny relationship with
those that appear in Susan Davis and Gina Hyam’s 2006 edited collection of stories, *Searching for Mary Poppins: Women Write About the Intense Relationship Between Mothers and Nannies*, where upper-middle-class women describe their struggles to identify their role as feminists while employing a nanny. They seek to make justice to the critiqued house wife by presenting personal stories from the mother employer’s perspectives. Notably, Claire’s role in the novel persists, despite not being the employer at later points of the plot. In Simpson’s novel, Claire even appears to try to be more aware of Lola and gains consciousness of economic struggles throughout their time together. During a winter holiday with Lola, Claire wants to give her as much as possible in addition to a pair of earrings she bought without her husband knowing. Knowing that Paul likes mimicking what Helen and Jeff do, when Paul asks her about how much they were planning to give Lola (who works with them on the weekends), she lies and replies $300 even though “Helen had said two fifty” (Simpson, 198). We also later learn that Claire had already given her $300 the year before, likely unbeknownst to Paul. When Paul wants to keep the bonus at that amount instead of being generous and adding more, she reminds him that “[Lola] works for us five days! Lola’s present should be more than the cost of one dinner out” (Simpson, 198). They both know that Lola sends everything she is given to the Philippines and Paul does not believe this is worth their effort to give her more. After Paul tells her to do what as she pleases, “Trembling, [she writes] the check for one thousand,” still not telling him about the earrings (Simpson, 198). Outside of her economic aid for Lola, we see acts of kindness that show Claire is a caring person towards Lola. The mutual dependence and personal affection for Lola as a person is observed in instances such as during the trip to New York for Claire’s concert performance when Lola’s jacket is not warm enough for the weather. Without asking for one, Lola describes her “employer [unzip] her suitcase to give [Lola] one of hers” (Simpson, 17).
Lola also notices that unlike other nannies who sneak food under their bed, she is lucky Claire cooks well and “every night she puts too much on [her] plate” (Simpson, 36).

In giving Lola her present, Claire feels guilty that “all the money [they would] ever have” would not be enough for Lola and her efforts to help her people, (Simpson, 199). Claire even imagines the relatives that depend on Lola as people with “each one thing wrong: a patch of hair missing, teeth broken, thick legged. Multiplying […] distant relatives, even dead parents […] ghosted up with open hands,” showing her consideration of the various possible needs of her people back home (Simpson, 199). Claire mentions that she “wanted to save [Lola]. But Lola refused to be one person” (Simpson, 199). I believe that Claire refers to the fact that any gains she makes are automatically considered for her family members rather than for herself to enjoy.

In an earlier chapter narrated by Lola, we learn how she “always [keeps] in the corner of [her] room a box for [her] next shipment home,” and how her employer becomes upset when she sees presents meant for Lola wrapped to send (Simpson, 45). Claire tells her that she “wants Lola’s “life here to be a little nicer” but Lola believes she “is not here to settle” and that “America may be the future of the world but it is not the future of Lola” (Simpson, 45). This interaction scene brings so many different concepts that are important to note here. Claire as the first-world, upper-class female attempting to help a working-class immigrant sister is described by both Lola and herself, as attempting to, but not fully understanding Lola’s decisions.

Although Claire tries to be conscientious of the potential needs of Lola’s people and respects Lola’s commitment to helping them, her social position and lack of a deeper personal relationship with Lola prevents her from truly understanding. The fact that Lola is the one to mention the constant presence of the shipment box in the room and then to note her refusal to settle in America can be read as an empowering moment since she rejects staying in the country
of wonders. While challenging an idealized picture of global exchange of labor, Lola still of course is contributing to globalized-labor exchange. Invoking this complexity, at one point in the text Claire notes, “I’d wanted to save her. But Lola refused to be one person” (Simpson, 199). It is not until she travels to the Philippines that Claire become aware of the impoverished conditions and how even “[her] old running shoes” are gladly used by Lola’s people (Simpson, 362). Then she realizes why “Lola always had a box in the corner she was sending home,” and feels compelled to later send them gifts herself (Simpson, 364).

Simpson’s is the only novel in this project to include narrated sections by the mother employer, so it is important to understand the noted motives behind some of Claire’s views and actions. Although Claire seems to care for Lola, I see Simpson add a layer of social class-construction through Claire’s narration. Claire’s ability to understand Lola’s struggle, and her real feelings of care for Lola, derives from the fact that she came out of a lower class herself. Claire constantly reflects on details of her life growing up that imply her family struggled economically at times. These struggles have made her receptive to acknowledging and attempting to understand the struggles of others. Claire mentions how she had “been hungry sometimes when I was growing up. It happened when my mother brought a dress. She was in the first generation of divorcées forced to work […] Clothes struck her as a necessary expense” (Simpson, 83). Lola even realizes there are differences with Claire and other employers. As she helps Claire in the kitchen, she thinks to herself, “[Claire], she did not grow up with a helper.” She will not ask easily. So I take the tomatoes […] with a smile. It is not hard. Not when you have a purpose. And I have five purposes, the youngest twenty-three studying medicine”

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7 This statement is accurate, Claire did not grow up with a nanny. In one chapter she recalls, “I never had a nanny. I had a mom, like everyone else I knew, and occasionally, a babysitter: a caustic high school girl who was not above mentioning that she was only tending me for money” (Simpson, 9).
(Simpson, 43). Like Lola, Claire also had desires when she was in a lower position. Although she says to not have identified “behind the upper-middle-class kids who, from college on, moved everywhere around [her], wearing their advantages […] lessons, tutors […] I’d understood that when I had children, they would resemble those kids more than me” (Simpson, 53). The cycle of wanting something better for the next generation, a desire for prosperity she ironically critiques when hearing the nannies, is somehow a universal desire of good parenting.

While Claire’s previous lower economic status allows her to relate to some of Lola’s necessities, or at least imagine those and attempt to help her, racialized class differences do divide them. After she has bad experience trying out different interviewed nannies, Claire begins “trolling parks,” arranging interviews at coffee shops, “scanning the tables for the one dark head among blondes” (Simpson, 12). She eventually finds Lola “sitting on a bench and [hires] her, without references. [Claire likes] the way she looked. [Lola] was small, dark, and well joined” (Simpson, 12). It only takes a short interview to see that Lola plans to involve Will in playdates and gain Claire’s approval for the job. From early in the novel, Lola is aware of ethnical prejudice and her narrated thoughts reveal how she thinks her employers value the way their so-far Filipina nannies manage to care for their children. When first taking care of Bing, Helen and Jeff’s child, he manages to sleep through the night without waking anyone, astonishing the parents. Lola concludes they must be thinking she was skilled because she is a Filipina. Supporting Lola’s ethnic assumption, we soon learn that Claire “says when a baby comes home from the hospital, a Filipina should arrive with him. That, for her, would be a perfect world. ‘It’s the Asian thing […] They’re more gentle with kids than Hispanics” (Simpson, 32). No specific Third World ethnicity was originally looked for when hiring a nanny for Will, but Claire is happy with Lola. By hiring an immigrant “nanny, many such employers implicitly hope to
import a poor country’s ‘native culture,’” particularly referring to “its warm family ties, strong community life, and long tradition of patient maternal love of children” (Hochschild, 23).

Lola finds this stereotyping amusing and jokingly thinks that Claire may very well think this way about “every single human being from Asia. [But Lola] could introduce her to a few” that would change her mind (Simpson, 32). The job market opportunity this ethnic connection gives nannies such as Lola encourages them to consciously appropriate the idea, showing how “such a formalization of difference does not always put workers in the subordinate position” (Romero, 23). The stereotyped care-giver reputation has become so attached and widespread onto their ethnic community, that nannies believe “a lot of people, they are looking [for] Filipinas” and tease each other that they “are status symbols. Like a BMW” (Simpson, 35). Through such comments, we see how they know their job commodifies them, but they are aware of the value the ethnic stereotype gives them, allowing them to feel empowered to a certain sense.

At the end of the novel, Lola decides to move to America with the goal of permanently staying. She realizes it is not about the nanny role as a job for her anymore, but rather about the difference she will make for a growing child. She mentions how “[Her] kids, they are asking [her] to stay. […] her] son says, ‘We are five here. Why you are going back for one?’ But Laura is young. Maybe she will still need her Lola” (Simpson, 366). With Lola’s adult children’s replies in mind, consider the following: “From the critical modernist perspective, globalisation may be increasing inequities not simply in access to money, important as that is, but in access to care. Though it is by no means always the case, the poor maid’s child may be getting less motherly care than the First World child” (Hochschild, 142). Ironically it is a First World child who will suffer more if Lola does return to her. With her adult children carrying out their own lives, she
can now work out of choice and not for them. At the end, Lola rebels against the economic reason for nanny employment and focuses only on the parenting aspect of its care-giving role. I agree that “There is an international care chain, so that even motherhood and parenting are being shaped by globalisation” and here, Lola seems to embrace this concept, appropriating care for herself, and for Laura (Giddens and Hutton, x). Lola’s new purpose in life flips the economized notion of care so that her role is now transformed into her newly found treasure, her own version of a ‘Hollywood.’
CONCLUSION

The collection of texts studied in this project are only a small portion of the various texts surrounding the working class care labor. There are also other formats, such as film that I encourage the reader to explore. With new hiring technologies, like the care.com website and others, the rising middle class has sufficient resources to find a suitable childcare option. Unfortunately, such hiring platforms exclude immigrant women who may not know how to navigate the website or be a strong applicant in comparison to a college student. In one form or another, there will be a struggle for both the employer and employee. As explored in this thesis, care is not easy to negotiate. The degrees of care and undefined expectations that come with it will never be ‘perfect’ due to our various backgrounds. However, because it is such an important need in our current society, and because prejudice actions against the Other are a hot topic in current politics, I hope to add to the needed conversation of the economized care that occurs within our homes. With a very prejudiced federal cabinet and president in our own nation, it is important to bring out these stories, to have conversations, and to try to be understanding of one another. Such ideas begin at home with one’s children, and if we cannot overcome the system of marginalization of the people who care for them, then what example are we truly setting for the next generation?
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