From Registered Nurse to Registered Nanny: Discursive Geographies of Filipina Domestic Workers in Vancouver, B.C.*

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration of what poststructuralist theories of the subject and discourse analysis can bring to theories of labor market segmentation, namely an understanding of how individuals come to understand and are limited in their occupational options. I examine three discursive constructions of “Filipina” and argue that they work to structure Filipinas’ labor market experiences in Vancouver. Filipinas who come to Canada through the Live-in Caregiver Program often come with university educations and professional experiences (e.g., as registered nurses) but then become members of the most occupationally segregated of ethnic groups in Vancouver. As domestic workers in Vancouver, they are defined as “supplicant, preimmigrants,” as inferior “housekeepers,” and, within the Filipino community, as “husband stealers.” I demonstrate that geography has much to bring to discourse analysis; there are geographies written into discourses of “Filipina” that work to position Filipinas in Vancouver as inferior. While the examined discourses overlap and reinforce the marginalization of Filipinas, I also explore how discursive analysis can function as ideology critique, by examining the internal inconsistencies and silences within particular discourses and the points of resistance that emerge when different discourses come into contact and tension.

Key words: discourse analysis, labor market segmentation, Filipina, domestic workers.

At the first of a series of workshops with Filipina domestic workers, held at the Philippine Women Centre in Vancouver in 1995, we went around the room and introduced ourselves. With the exception of some of the workshop facilitators, all of the 18 participants were domestic workers, admitted to Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program. But as we went around that room, there was a surprising (for me) disruption of this uniformity. We heard from women who were trained and certified as midwives or as registered nurses, about the difficulties of finding work in the Philippines as a secondary school science teacher, and about the occupational experiences of a trained social worker. We heard about working in a bank in the Philippines and about the experiences of a bookkeeper. As I listened to these diverse personal histories, I puzzled over a colleague’s finding that Filipinas are the most occupationally ghettoized of all women (classified by ethnicity) in the Vancouver labor market.
Analyses of the 1991 census data for Vancouver indicate that Filippinas are especially overrepresented in three occupations: housekeeper, childcare worker (essentially the same occupation labeled in two ways), and medical assistant (e.g., nurses’ aid). The Live-in Caregiver Program requires of participants that they work as a live-in caregiver for two full years before applying for an open visa (at which point they are released from the obligation to do live-in domestic work). However, the experience of coming to Canada as a nanny evidently narrows occupational opportunities long after the requirements of the program have been fulfilled. This is a particular, though extreme, case of a familiar immigrant story: deskilling through immigration, followed by ghettoization within marginal occupations.

If the story is familiar, our ability to accommodate it within contemporary labor market theory is less clear. It has become a common, almost clichéd, critique of labor segmentation theory to point to its inadequacy at explaining why and how some groups (women, visible minorities, immigrants) end up in marginal jobs (e.g., Hanson and Pratt 1995). Recognizing the complexity and specificity of these processes for different groups and in different places has led some (Hanson and Pratt 1995; Hiebert 1999; Peck 1996) to suggest that a lower or middle range of theory and a close attention to empirical detail may be more productive for understanding these processes. While this position helpfully highlights the contingency and variability of social and economic processes, I now think that it is also potentially misleading. This is because it can be interpreted as positing the social and cultural processes that lead to the marginalization of certain groups in the labor market as empirical rather than theoretical puzzles. The point is not only that empirical work is never theory free, but that hiving off the empirical from the theoretical might lead us to miss what a substantial body of contemporary cultural theory can offer to our understanding of labor markets.

If much contemporary cultural theory stresses the importance of the everyday and the local, it nonetheless rests on some highly abstract ideas about subjectivity and social and economic life. An emphasis on the local speaks to methodology and not to levels of theoretical abstraction. Foucault (1990), for example, blurred the distinctions between micro/macro, scales of analyses, and levels of abstraction when he observed that even as power relations ultimately become linked to the logic of a great strategy (a logic not conceived as theoretical abstraction), the appropriate starting point for analysis lies in everyday local power relations. Nineteenth-century European discourses of sexuality, for example, eventually supported bourgeois claims of class superiority vis-à-vis aristocratic classes and were used to monitor the working classes. But this strategy of class formation emerged historically from a disparate set of local power relations, situated in the confessional, the school, the psychiatric hospital, the family, among other institutions. “We will start, therefore,” writes Foucault, “from what might be called ‘local centers’ of power-knowledge” (1990, 98) . . . “[though] no ‘local center,’ no ‘pattern of transformation’ could function if, through a series of sequences, it did not eventually enter into an over-all strategy” (1990, 99). . . . “One must conceive of the double conditioning of a strategy by the specificity of possible [local] tactics, and of tactics by the strategic envelope that makes them work” (1990, 100). By analogy, even as labor market segmentation exists and persists as a grand strategy of capitalist imperialist labor control,¹ our point of departure for understanding how individuals are drawn into this system of class relations lies in a close examination of local power relations and situated practices. It is

¹ This caricatures an early strand of labor segmentation theory (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982). For reviews of four generations of labor segmentation theory, see Hiebert (1999); Peck (1996).
unhelpful, however, to conceive of local relations and practices as more empirical than systematic strategies. Cultural theories, including theories of subjectivity, are no less abstract when they pertain to individuals and local power relations.

Poststructural theories posit a subject and perspectives on language that are useful for understanding processes of labor market segmentation. Poststructural theorists such as Foucault drew from Althusser's antihumanism to conceive the subject as produced through discourse, rather than as a coherent rational subject who exists prior to language. Language does not simply reflect the world; it is a regulated practice that structures our sense of reality and notions of our own identity. Discourse is material in the sense that it brings into being classifications of objects, bodies, and identities (Butler 1990; Haraway 1991) and exists as situated practices, supported by institutions, buildings, and so forth (Mills 1997). Critics sometimes argue that discourse analysis dissolves the materiality of the world into language, but this misses the messiness of the relations being posited between the material and the discursive (Natter and Jones 1993). It is not that discourse theorists deny the materiality of the world; they argue that how we conceive the world is inextricably bound up with discourse. In his recent review of the different ways of theorizing relations between culture and economy, Crang attempts to articulate the mutual constitution of the economic and cultural as "a move beyond just the linguistic or rhetorical fashioning of economic realities, and towards the both told and embodied ordering of economic practice" (1997, 12).

Despite the innovative uses to which poststructuralism has been put by political economists (e.g., Gibson-Graham 1996), suspicion remains that cultural theorists miss the determinate effects of the economy and lose a position from which to critique them (for sympathetic critiques of discourse analysis, see Fraser 1997; Watts and McCarthy 1997). Spivak (1988) has argued that discourse analysis can take the form of empiricist reportage, in which the intellectual abdicates his or her role as critic (in her assessment, this is true of both Foucault and Deleuze). By retrieving the concept of ideology, which Foucault rejects because he sees it requiring a foundational notion of the truth (for Foucault, discourse is neither true nor false but produces truth effects), Spivak urges a reconsideration of material interests and the ways in which they come to be represented in discourse; she is particularly concerned with the ways that the international division of labor reflects and structures material interests and how representations veil capitalist, imperialist relations. Without claiming an exhaustiveness for discourse analysis, we can see it as a means of theorizing how subjects come to understand themselves and their capabilities and how material inequalities are produced through everyday situated practices. It is also a powerful tool for disrupting these situated practices.

Poststructural theories of the subject and discourse indicate three possibilities for disruption. First, discourses are productive in the sense that they produce subject positions. These subject positions subordinate individuals but they also function as resources. Foucault (1990) examines, for example, how the identity of homosexual emerged in the nineteenth century in Europe. Homosexual practices became a stigmatized, criminalized, and medicalized identity: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (1990, 43). But if this regulatory regime identified and stigmatized "the homosexual," this identification also becomes a political resource for those who claim rights in the name of their homosexuality. So too, the meaning of the stigmatized term "queer" has been reworked as a critique of heteronormativity. In the labor market, we can think of how claims of class standing (in solidarity with the working class, for example) work as political resources. A second political possibility comes from the understanding that individuals are "hailed" by multiple, sometimes
Contradictory discourses. Managing these contradictions, or bringing one discourse into relation with another, can open points of resistance. Lisa Lowe argues, for example, that the liberal principles of American democracy (including claims to universal rights) are at odds with the various ways that Asian American citizens enter discourse: as “the model minority,” or “the invading multitude, the lascivious seductress, the servile yet treacherous domestic, the automaton whose inhuman efficiency will supersede American ingenuity” (1996, 18). Placing these discourses in tension creates a space from which to criticize constructions of the American nation and an economic system “that profits from racism” (1996, 26). Third, poststructuralists influenced by deconstruction have been attentive to the contradictions within any discourse. In Spivak’s view (1988), it is by uncovering the disruptions and contradictions between and within discourses that a critical vantage point on discourse is gained. Discourse analysis can lead to an incisive critique of ideology by revealing the “mistakes” that found knowledge, the contradictions within discourses, and the things that are left unsaid or cannot be said, by “measuring silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation” (Spivak 1988, 296; original emphasis).

Discourse analysis has offered geographers a rich terrain to think within, and there is now a considerable body of geographic research influenced by it, from investigations of the geographies of subject formation (e.g., Blunt and Rose 1994; Keith and Pile 1993; Kirby 1996; McDowell 1995; Pile and Thrift 1995) to critiques of political economy discourse (Barnes 1996; Gibson-Graham 1996). And, as others have noted, it is not simply that geographers have much to gain by drawing on poststructural theory; a close reading of geography has much to offer to cultural studies. This is because discourses emerge as situated practices in particular places (they thus are inherently geographic (Pred 1992)). There are sociospatial circuits through which cultural and personal stories are circulated, legitimated, and given meaning. By mapping these circuits we map a type of discursive geography. Moving between places may also be one way in which individuals become aware of contradictions between various discourses. But additionally, geographic terms have important effects within discourse. Feminists have long recognized how constructions of home influence women’s work experiences; Moss (1995) and Gregson and Lowe (1995) provide recent examples of how constructions of home affect paid labor performed within that space. We can usefully consider how other discursively embedded geographies work to structure labor markets.

In the following case study, I map discursive constructions that circumscribe subject positions available to Filipina women, delineating for them a limiting space within the labor market. In so doing, I pay special attention to how geographic terms function within discourse. McClintock (1995) argues, with reference to Victorian England, that the domestic worker was a very productive site of discursive construction because domestic work at that time embodied a double gender and class crisis, “between men’s paid labor and women’s unpaid labor and between feudal homestead economy and an industrial wage economy.” As a way of negotiating this crisis, “domestic space became racialized as the rhetoric of degeneration was drawn upon to discipline and contain the unseemly spectacle of paid women’s work” (1995, 168). The circumstances of domestic workers in Vancouver in the 1990s differ, in part because the geographies of neocolonialism are central rather than rhetorically transposed onto gender and class conflicts, as McClintock argues. A central discursive struggle surrounds whether domestic workers are interpreted in racial/immigration or class terms. I will examine this struggle, and attempt to get some critical perspective on discursive constructions by attempting to measure some

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2 I thank an anonymous referee for this phrasing, which helps to clarify my point.
of the silences and contradictions within them. But I also want to suggest that rup-
tures between subject positions, as pre-
scribed in different discourses and in differ-
ent places, open spaces for agency and
opportunities for rewriting the meaning of
"Filipina" in Vancouver.

My discussion of subject positions is orga-
nized by considering paired terms, each
defined in relation to the other, reflecting
my understanding that identities are rela-
tional constructs and that they are defined
in relation to what they are not: live-in care-
giver is defined in opposition to Canadian
citizen; and Filipina domestic workers are
constructed in relation to European ones,
through the terms "housekeeper" and
"nanny," respectively. Within the Filipino
community, nanny takes on meaning in rela-
tion to the term "immigrant." These cate-
gories supplement each other and rigidify
Filipina domestic workers' occupational tra-
jectories, such that their entry into the
Canadian labor market via the Live-in Caregiver Program narrows their choices
thereafter. Complex geographies are woven
throughout this trajectory. To fully under-
stand Filipinas' positionings, one would
have to consider conditions within the
Philippines that drive them to migrate. My
analysis is restricted to discursive construc-
tions of Filipinas in Vancouver, but the last
discourse considered, one that circulates
within the Filipino community in Vancou-
ver, begins to gesture toward important
class relations in the Philippines that con-
tinue to construct "Filipina" in Vancouver.

Mapping discourse is a vast, open-ended
task. I rely on interview material collected
between 1994 and 1996. In 1994 I inter-
viewed ten agents operating in the
Vancouver area, the only ones who would
speak with me and, by their own assess-
ment, the ones who handled the largest
volume of placements (see Pratt 1997 for
details of the methodology).3 In the sum-
mer of 1995, I interviewed a randomly
selected sample of 52 households in the
Vancouver metropolitan area who had
advertised for nannies in the previous year
in one of two local newspapers. Most were
currently employing a nanny when we
came to do the interview.4 Through the
summer and fall of 1995 and spring of
1996, I collaborated with the Philippine
Women Centre to conduct a series of focus
groups with 14 domestic workers.5 All
interviews and focus groups were unstruc-

women, who typically had employed nannies
themselves. In the quotes from nanny agents, I
have retained the same alphabetical labeling
used in Pratt (1997). Agents C and D work for
the same agency and were interviewed
together. All other agents were interviewed on
their own.

I gratefully acknowledge the research assis-
tance of Trina Bester, who shared the task of
doing these interviews. The employers were
found by sampling advertisements for nannies
in the Vancouver Courier (a west-side Vancou-
ver community newspaper that is "known" as an
important place to advertise for nannies) and
The Coquitlam News (a suburban community
newspaper).

We met for six full-day sessions, first to
develop themes, two times to break into focus
groups of five or six women each in order to dis-
cuss the themes, and three more times to code,
verify, and analyze the personal narratives.
Except for the focus groups in which I partici-
pated, discussions were carried out in Tagalog
and then translated and transcribed (when I
participated, discussions took place in English).
We assumed that the personal nature of some of
the accounts could more easily and more com-
fortably be communicated in the women's first
language. All of the women who participated
were already coming to the Centre, and there is
no technical way of claiming a typicality for their
experiences. They were, however, connected to
women who both did and did not come to the
Centre and spoke more generally of their own
and their friends' and relatives' experiences as
domestic workers. For details about the
Philippine Women Centre's activities (which
focus substantially but not exclusively on the cir-
cumstances of domestic workers), see Pratt in
collaboration with the Philippine Women

3 The 10 agents represented 9 of the 15 nanny
agencies advertising in the Vancouver Yellow
Pages at that time. All but 2 of the agents were
tured, taped, and transcribed, a necessity for a study of discourse in which the fram-
ing of meaning is the object of inquiry.

Live-in Caregiver: Noncitizen, Not-Yet-Immigrant

The live-in caregiver is defined in relation and in opposition to the category Canadian citizen, and it is the noncitizen status of job occupants that structures the work conditions of live-in caregivers. Table 1 indicates the numbers coming to Vancouver through what was called the Foreign Domestic Movement (1981–93) and then the Live-in Caregiver Program (1992 to the present).6 Over the years a larger proportion of the mostly women who have come through these programs have come from the Philippines; by 1996 fully 87 percent came from the Philippines. In its informational booklet, the federal government explicitly locates occupants of this job as non-Canadians: “The Live-in Caregiver Program is a special program whose objective is to bring workers to Canada to do live-in work as caregivers when there are not enough Canadians available to fill the available positions. . . . The Live-in Caregiver Program exists only because there is a shortage of Canadians to fill the need for live-in care work. There is no shortage of Canadian workers available for caregiving positions where there is no live-in requirement” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 1999). A provincial employee who administers the Live-in Caregiver Program in one Vancouver employment office stated in a telephone interview in May 1994: “The reason that we have to bring in from abroad is that the occupation is so poorly paid and no one wants to do it. . . . The program is set up for the Canadian employer, to allow them to get on with their lives and get out to work.”

This difference between live-in caregivers and Canadian citizens has been encoded in stark terms by provincial employment regulations, which govern the work conditions of live-in caregivers. Regulations vary by province. In British Columbia, until March 1995 live-in domestic workers (along with farm workers and other homeworkers) were excluded from regulations governing overtime pay and hours of work. As the West Coast Domestic Workers’ Association (1993, 2) put it in their brief to the Employment Standards Act Review Committee in March 1993: “by imposing a daily [as opposed to hourly] minimum wage and excluding domestics from hours of work protection, [provincial regulations], in effect, work with the federal immigration program to provide foreign domestic workers as cheap labor.”

Why is it that Canadians so readily accept that some categories of people living within Canada are undeserving of protective labor codes available to other citizens? Why are some categories of people assumed to have minimal subsistence requirements? Three geographic concepts are used to negotiate what would seem to be an untenable contradiction between universal rights of Canadian citizens and unequal treatment of workers in different occupational categories. In the U.S. context, Lowe (1996) argues that this same contradiction is negotiated through racial categories; I am arguing that this racialization process in Canada is explicitly intertwined with a number of geographies. First, the promise of potential citizenship works in a potent way to legitimate labor conditions acknowledged by the Canadian government as unacceptable to Canadians. While, strictly speaking, the Live-in Caregiver Program is a work visa (and not an immigration) program,7 in practice it

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6 The data for Table 1 are based on the administrative records of the department responsible for immigration in Canada and, as such, are the best data available. Due to problems in the ways that landing forms are filled out and coded, however, they may contain some inaccuracies.

7 The distinction is one that the Canadian Department of Immigration insists upon. One
Table 1
Number of Individuals Coming to Vancouver through the Foreign Domestic Movement (1982–1992) and Live-in Caregiver Programs (1992–present)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Arrival in Canada</th>
<th>Philippines (%)</th>
<th>Europea (%)</th>
<th>Other (%)</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>60</td>
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<td>88</td>
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<td>851</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Landed Immigrant Data Base, Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

a Includes United Kingdom.

b From 1993 onward, numbers entering through Foreign Domestic Movement and Live-in Caregiver programs are combined.

entitles the occupant to apply for immigrant status after working two full years as a live-in caregiver. There is a widespread understanding that live-in caregivers endure short-term hardship for the opportunity of applying for landed immigrant status after two years working as a live-in caregiver. Obviously, the two-year trial period as a potential immigrant may effectively dampen workplace militancy. As Agent E put it: “Filipinos have a very different motivation [from European nannies] . . . they are coming to immigrate, to get citizenship, to bring in their families. They will put up with a lot in order to have a clean record, which makes for a whole other set of problems. But it means that they’re likely to stay on the job” (interview, May 1994).

Since changes to the Employment Standards Act in 1995, overtime and minimum hourly wage regulations cover all domestic workers in British Columbia. But it is interesting to listen to nanny agents argue against these changes when they were first proposed in 1994. Agents indirectly threatened domestic workers that changes to labor regulations would restrict their opportunities to immigrate.

G.P.: I think that the requirement for a 40 hour work week, with overtime on top of that, is in the works.

Agent H: Which of course will not work at all. There’s not the money there. It will just cut down on the amount of immigration from the

practical effect is that entry through the program opens the opportunity to apply for citizenship without implying entitlement.

8 The enforcement of the new regulations is another matter. See Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre (1997).
Philippines tremendously, because that [the Live-in Caregiver Program] is the foot in the door for so many immigrants. One of our people here did the two-year stint. She went to Hong Kong. Worked in Hong Kong. Then came here. Two year stint here. Now she’s working 16 hours a day to show she has enough earnings to bring in her husband and her three teenaged children, whom she hasn’t seen for years. This is a woman driven. You know, things are not good back in the Philippines. And she wouldn’t be able to get in [if the Employment Standards Act was changed—as it was]. They would be doomed to a life there. And, you know, I’m a great believer in immigration. So, you know, this is colored with my own opinions. Open the gates! You know, let them in! And certainly the Filipinos have been good. It’s interesting. Back in the Philippines they’re so corrupt. Bribe and that! They get over here. Everything’s by the book! You suggest on their tax [form], “Well, let’s just . . .” “Oh, no, no, no, no! Can’t do it! Can’t do it! Can’t do it!” Just incredible. And they make good immigrants. They’re hard working. And they Canadianize extremely well, extremely well.

(Interview, June 1994)

In another interview, two other agents made the same argument:

Agent D: You’re not getting 19 bucks an hour [working as a domestic worker], but the majority of Canadians treat you nicely. And you’re getting Canadian citizenship, which is what people are lining up for, dying to come.

Agent C: And not costing yourself anything. Like I said before, the West Coast Domestic Association [sic] will argue that [domestic workers are exploited]. And they’re going to do themselves out of a job.

Agent D: They’ll wreck it for these women, who come in and 99.9 percent of them are happy to be here. And they’re not militants. That’s just so sad. Because it’s just that little few that are banging on.

To me, what is of interest in these passages is the way in which benefits to the Canadian state and Canadian households (which allow Canadian men and women “to get on with their lives and get out to work”) are translated into a benefit for domestic workers. A discourse of free and fair exchange (immigration for two years of servitude) is commonplace but it is staged without a careful weighing of the units in exchange; indeed, Agent C cancels out the costs to the domestic worker entirely: “And not costing yourself anything.” We need to measure this silence about costs, in part through a more serious analysis of the terms of exchange—that is, whether an opportunity to immigrate can and should be valued against two years of paid servitude. This discussion must be broadened to consider Canada’s responsibilities in relation to global patterns of uneven development.

There is a second, fragmented geography that confuses live-in caregivers’ rights as employees—that is, the jurisdictional division in the administration of the program. The federal government has responsibility over the Live-in Caregiver Program, whereas the provincial government regulates employment standards. There is, then, a type of discursive rupture in the way that live-in caregivers are defined in relation to the two levels of the government. For the federal government, they are defined as visa holders; for the provincial governments, they are employees. Sometimes the federal and provincial governments’ objectives of producing and maintaining a productive labor force seem at odds. Of particular concern to domestic workers is the federal government’s prohibition against educational training for those registered in the Live-in Caregiver Program. In their view, the effect of this prohibition is deskilling, as the following conversation among domestic workers attests:

9 There is not, however, a neat dichotomy: the federal government administers and regulates some aspects of the employment relation, notably the Employment Insurance program, which addresses gaps between employment rather than the employment relation per se.
Susan: It is stated in the work permit that you cannot go to college, you cannot work for others and you cannot work in other provinces.

Cecilia: So, there are plenty of restrictions. Just because you are a contract worker, you don’t have any other choice to improve or develop yourself. It takes two years before you can have an open visa here in Canada. By that time you shall have been deskilled and it becomes extremely difficult to get other jobs beside housework. So your past training is almost nothing. If you are a nurse and if you haven’t worked as a nurse for two years, you can hardly go back to the profession anymore. Two years is a long time.

Susan: After you have not worked for two years in the trade or profession that you have trained for, you begin to doubt if you still have the ability to do your previous work.

Jeorgie: Things are not fresh in your mind anymore . . .

[The conversation continues and culminates with the following:]

Mhay: What you know now is only how to clean and polish the bathroom.

Elsie: That’s your skills these days.10 (Focus group discussions, August 1995)

Domestic workers perceive that living within the regulations of the Live-in Caregiver Program makes it difficult to recover a previous occupational identity (see Fig. 1).11 Yet it is difficult for them to make a strong case to the federal government because this exceeds the discursive boundaries of the Live-in Caregiver Program, which positions them as noncitizen visa holders.

The governmentally fragmented administration of the Live-in Caregiver Program makes lobbying for change a complicated process. It also lends an air of confusion about entitlements as employees. Among women attending the focus groups, for example, there was a great deal of uncertainty about their entitlement to the federal government’s Employment Insurance (EI) program, despite the fact that they paid into the program. This confusion about entitlement is of considerable importance because access to employment insurance benefits could allow a domestic worker to leave an especially exploitative or abusive employment situation. I quote one conversation at length, in which the director of the Philippine Women Centre attempts to convince a domestic worker of her entitlement, because it demonstrates the persistence of the latter’s uncertainty about her rights as an employee while registered within the Live-in Caregiver Program.

Cecilia: What about Unemployment Insurance [now relabeled Employment Insurance, or EI]?

Susan: I don’t think it is possible.

Cecilia: Of course you can go on UI. That is why you are paying the premium so that you can apply for this when you are out of a job temporarily. So while waiting for your documents you may apply because you did contribute to the plan.

Susan: Isn’t it so that they often reject your application?

Cecilia: Sometimes, but you can always appeal if you think that you are fully entitled to one. For example, take Jeorgie’s case. Now she is renewing her contract and it takes at least two weeks for her to get papers. In the meantime, she is unemployed and not making any money. And you cannot actually work

10 I do not want to be read as implying that the words of domestic workers are somehow more “authentic” or true than those of other speakers. But, as Spivak puts it, “Such a testimony . . . constitute[s] the ingredient for producing a countersentence [that is, a counterdiscourse]” (1988, 297).
11 Hiebert’s (1994) analysis of occupational segregation in Vancouver provides some support for this perception.
because it would be illegal. So you can apply for unemployment insurance in the interim.

Susan: In two weeks you can receive it?

Cecilia: I don’t think so. It might take five weeks before you receive your money. But then, you can already borrow because you know that you will be getting unemployment benefits soon.

Jeorgie: Why does it take so long to process the claims?

Cecilia: Well, it’s because of the bureaucracy . . .
Susan: But I read that you cannot apply for UI if you terminate your contract.

Cecilia: It may be true. But still, they cannot stop you from applying.

Susan: But then they will reject you.

Cecilia: Even if they reject you, you can appeal. And then you can tell them the reason why you left your work. There is an appeal board at the UI.

Susan: But it takes time again.

Cecilia: But at least you are getting something if they approve your appeal. I mean, you don’t really lose anything. You have terminated your contract and you are just exercising your right.

Susan: Right . . . It is your right to apply. Even though you terminated your contract, but you still have to apply.

Cecilia: You have the right to apply for that UI because you paid your premium. You should at least try to get something while looking for another employment.

Susan: But I read that if you terminate your contract you may not be able to collect or apply for unemployment insurance.

Cecilia: But you can still appeal if you are rejected because you terminated your contract with cause. You terminated your contract not because you just wanted to move but rather, there is something wrong in your employment condition. That is why you can appeal. To collect unemployment for a couple of months at 50 percent of your current wages, which is already low, is much better than not collecting anything at all.

Susan: You might have a point there.

Cecilia: Of course. It is an exercise of your right and nobody can stop you from exercising this.

Susan: When you file your application, don’t think that it will be rejected. It is plainly an exercise of your right.

Cecilia: That’s right.

Susan: Just do it then. The worst that can happen is they reject your application.

Cecilia: And that is also trying to find out whether or not this is a democratic country. And in doing so, you can learn something about whether there is a different set of rights between you and other Canadians.

Susan: I kind of like that. (Focus group discussions, September 1995)

The second geography, then, is one of jurisdictional fragmentation, which confuses rights as employees with the status of noncitizen.

A third geography is literally written into the Live-in Caregiver Program: registrants must live in their employers’ homes. The requirement that domestic workers live “in” clearly lowers the costs for employers, because they can deduct $300 a month for room and board from the required minimum wage payment.12 It thus brings privatized childcare (which costs the employer approximately $900 a month after this deduction)13 within the reach of middle income families.14 Problems attending live-in requirements have long been recognized by domestic worker advocacy groups.15 Living in an employer’s home dampens wages, tends to stretch the work day, and

12 This figure dates from 1995, when most of the interview and focus group material was collected. Room and board deductions subsequently have increased to $325 a month.

13 The costs to the employer are further reduced, as childcare expenses are tax deductible.

14 Given that a one-bedroom apartment rented for roughly $640 a month in 1995 (“West End Top Choice” 1995, 6), nannies living outside an employer’s home clearly require a higher wage. In fact, live-out nannies do command a higher wage, about $1,400 a month.

15 The views of the domestic workers who participated in the focus groups are detailed in Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre (1997, 1998). Stiell and England (1997) discuss this in the Toronto context.
can make domestic workers vulnerable to sexual abuse. It also makes it more difficult for the domestic worker to challenge her employer because her workplace is also her home.

Discourses of home and family are woven through these material effects. Aitken (1987) documents how constructions of home as a private space have been used in Ontario to justify minimal state intrusion into the home and thus very weak regulation of domestic workers’ employment situations (see also Stiell and England 1997). The domestic worker is sometimes constructed as a family member, who is loved and cherished as such; some have argued that regulation of domestic work within the framework of employer-employee relations penalizes the domestic worker because it degrades her status as a family member. We can see constructions of the nuclear family at work in British Columbia in a legislative debate in 1980, when a member of legislature, Ms. Sanford, tabled an amendment to the B.C. Employment Standards Act to ensure overtime wage provisions for live-in domestic workers:

Mr. Mussallem: The hon. member for Comox [Ms. Sanford] has to be admired for her tenacity. But here we see again the socialist atmosphere against the democratic way of life.

Ms. Sanford: What!

Mr. Chairman: Would the member relate this to the amendment.

Mr. Mussallem: Remember that a domestic has to be accepted into a family. She [Ms. Sanford] misses that point. That is the reason a domestic cannot keep time. You are accepted into the family as part of the family, and the principle that you have your time recorded doesn’t work in the family scene. As part of the family, a domestic . . . That’s the point at issue.

[Interjection.]

The West Coast Domestic Workers’ Association quoted Mr. Mussallem in their brief to the Employment Standards Act Review Committee in March 1993, countering with the comment that: “The West Coast Domestic Workers’ Association strongly disagrees. Live-in domestic workers can keep time and should be paid for the hours worked” (1993, 4). In arguing thus, they were entering a discursive battle, attempting to redefine the domestic worker, not as family member, not as potential immigrant who should be grateful for her temporary lot as a domestic worker, but, quite simply, as an employee. There is much at stake: hours of work and overtime regulations would likely raise wages and shorten hours of work. It is also a struggle to redefine the domestic worker in the language of class so that the politics of class solidarity can be brought into play.16 Framed in this way, and following Gibson-Graham (1996), we can interpret changes in the Employment Standards Act as a moment of progressive class transformation.

Colonial Geographies: Filipina as Housekeeper

There is another grid of identity formation in which Filipinas are marginalized; they are often unfavorably compared to European women who come to Canada via the same visa program.17 Filipinas are constructed as housekeepers, while European

16 It is thus no surprise that it was a Social Democratic provincial government (with strong links to the labor movement) that instituted the changes to the Employment Standards Act.
17 For a consideration of these distinctions in Toronto, see Arat-Koc (1992); Bakan and Stasiulis (1994, 1995); England and Stiell (1997).
women are called nannies. The ways that these two groups of women are positioned differently within the same occupational category points to the importance of understanding the intertwined cultural and social processes of identity formation and labor market segmentation.

Nanny agents who were interviewed in 1994 were very clear on the distinctions between Filipino and European nannies. Agent F made the distinction simply when she said: “And you can get all grades of help. You get from the little Filipino girl that is just a nanny/housekeeper to the British girls that are NNEB [Nursery Nurse Examination Board]” (interview, March 1994).

This characterization requires some examination. A high school diploma is a requirement of the Live-in Caregiver Program. The NNEB is a two-year certificate program in early childhood care and education. Elsewhere (Pratt 1997) I have argued that there is a fundamental inconsistency in the way in which nanny agents represent domestic workers’ educations. They recognize that many Filipinas come to Canada with university degrees and even go so far as to draw an equivalency between a university degree in Canada and one from the Philippines (they were in agreement that a university degree from the Philippines was equivalent to two years of Canadian university education). And yet the agents displayed an odd forgetfulness about Filipinas’ educations while assigning the NNEB certificate weight and importance. Human capital appears to be measured by an inconsistent yardstick.

Many employers nevertheless absorb the agents’ distinction between European nanny and Asian housekeeper, something that came across clearly in interviews with employers who had employed Filipina and European domestic workers. Consider, for example, the comments of a family who first employed a Filipina nanny. She was replaced when their child turned two, an age when the employers became more concerned about the intellectual stimulation of their child. The Filipina nanny was subjected to a covert test, which involved asking her to read to their child during the day and leaving designated books in a marked position on the table. The nanny failed the test—the books were in the same place at the end of the day—and a Slovakian nanny was hired as her replacement. The employers were clearly fond of the Filipina nanny, in part because she did not intrude. They admired their Slovakian nanny for her skills as an early childhood educator, and they spoke in some detail about her other training and skills. They did not, however, like her much, and they were appalled by what they perceived to be her persistent overstepping of social boundaries. I quote from the interview transcript because they express these distinctions in such an open way.

Bob: But I think the big difference between the two was that Rosa [Filipina nanny] never took anything for granted, and when we honored her a privilege, which she thought was a privilege, she would never take advantage of that privilege again unless the honor was there again, whereas with, unfortunately with Brigid [Slovakian nanny] . . .

Wendy: She’s very good as a caregiver.

Bob: Wonderful and stimulating, a good teacher and the whole bit, but as soon as we grant her something . . . Say once she asked if she could use Wendy’s skis for the weekend, and we said OK, but after that she used them for the whole season and never asked anymore.

Wendy: And she often uses my things. Bob couldn’t see my point at first. I mean I had only skied once since Aidan was born. So I said to him, “How would you feel if we hired a gardener and he just used all your golf clubs and stuff?” And that soon put things in perspective!

Bob: It was funny, when we would have people over with Rosa we would feel Rosa was part of our family. And a lot of times—not so

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18 See Gregson and Lowe (1994, 159–64) for details about the program.
much on the weekends because she was never here—but on the weekdays, if someone was coming over after work or whatever and we were going out for dinner, we would always invite her to eat with us . . .

Wendy: But she would always have eaten before we got home. Whereas with Brigid we feel like we’re practically serving her and she’s talking back and forth [with our guests].

A little later in the interview, they turned once again to differences between Filipina and Slovakian nannies in terms of intellect and perceptions of entitlement.

Bob: We basically decided in lieu of a Filipino nanny to go with a European nanny, because of the learning skills, the interaction. We were finding that Rosa was really good and loving and hugging and doing everything proper for him and feeding him, but the alphabet, the numbers, the colors, those things weren’t happening . . . I think that’s the trade-off. But you’ve gotta remember that they’re educated ladies [Slovakian nannies], and I don’t think . . . well I don’t know, but I kind of think somewhere down the line it’s gonna be: “Well, why am I ironing this man’s shirt when I used to be a university scholar?” When we come home at the end of the day, Brigid will have read the paper from front to back. She knows everything in The Vancouver Sun. And then she would pull out extracts about taxes going up or the minimum wages going up and she would say to us, “Look, I need a raise, the minimum wage has gone up” . . . Well you’ve got to remember that these women [Slovakian nannies] are intellectuals, and you’re not going to have six intellects living in a house at the weekend, sleeping on the floor. Whereas with Filipino nannies, they love to roll all over each other all weekend! [He is referring to the common practice among Filipina nannies of sharing rental accommodations during the weekend.]

Wendy: And there’s nothing wrong with that, but they’re [Slovakian nannies] a lot more demanding and they’re looking at you thinking, “Well you live in a $400,000 house and you say you can’t afford to raise my wages?” You know, you can just see their minds working. So it’s hard, but the bottom line is, I mean we had to pretty much say to Brigid: “Listen, this is how much I make and this is how much Bob makes. If we pay you any more then it’s not worth me going to work.” You have to say that to them. (Interview, July 1995)

Another employer, who hired a Quebeceois woman after a Filipina domestic worker, complained about the vast amount of food eaten by the Canadian woman, remembering fondly that the Filipina woman “survived on toast and air.” These remarks suggest that the two sets of domestic workers are in fact operating with a different set of rights, with the European nannies situating themselves in a less subjugated position. The nanny agents said as much, drawing out the implications for wages. Agent I indicated that domestic workers from the Philippines initially make minimum wage, while those from Europe and Australia make $100 more a month.

Agents themselves play a powerful role in constructing for the prospective employers the idea of Filipina woman as servant-housekeeper. This begins with advice to Filipina women on how they should represent themselves to their prospective employers. Women at the Philippine Women Centre spoke of agents’ recommendations to include two pictures of themselves in their files, one showing them caring for children and another displaying them cleaning (mopping the floor on their hands and knees, washing dishes, or using a vacuum cleaner—the last demonstrates their facility for using “Western” technology). Some agents told women not to send a picture that displays them as attractive. Some women were instructed to take off jewelry, wear no makeup, and tie their hair back. An agent in the Philippines cautioned that a picture that displayed a woman as attractive would suggest that “maybe she would go to Canada and seduce her employer.” The text that supplements these images of hard-working servants also signals to prospective employers that these women are ripe for exploitation: several domestic workers were told to indicate on their applications forms a willingness to work long hours.
Further, it is often the case that Filipina live-in caregivers have worked previously as domestic workers in Singapore or Hong Kong. Both the agents and employers attempt to bring the highly exploitative conditions for domestic workers from these places to Vancouver.\textsuperscript{19} They do this by calling upon personal experiences as domestic workers in Singapore or Hong Kong as they ask Filipina domestic workers to work longer hours and at a wider range of non-childcare-related tasks (such as washing the car) than would be required of European women.\textsuperscript{20}

Historical geographies of colonialism and racism continue to define housekeeper and nanny within Vancouver. Filipinas are discursively constructed as housekeepers, with inferior intellects and educations relative to European nannies. Agents encourage Filipina women to represent themselves as exploitable, and they are reminded of their personal and collective histories as domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore in the Vancouver context.

**Stigmatization within Vancouver’s Filipino Community: Filipina Domestic Workers as Husband Stealers**

Filipino agents are complicit in constructing Filipinas as exploitable labor; hegemonic white Canadians have no monopoly on constructions of Filipina domestic workers as inferior. Domestic workers who participated in the focus groups told painful stories about a stigmatization process within the Filipino community, one that revolved around a distinction between immigrant and nanny. The term immigrant was used to refer to individuals who entered Canada through the “regular” immigration system. Some of these would have entered through the family reunification program, some through business class programs, and others through the point system. The point system is complex and the criteria for assembling points periodically readjusted by the federal government, depending on labor requirements. But, among other criteria, points are given for having a sponsor (business sponsorship earns more points than family sponsorship) or specialized training in specifically designated occupations (often technical ones).\textsuperscript{21} Feminized skills are usually undervalued and typically do not score many points. While, strictly speaking, the Live-in Caregiver Program is not an immigration program, in practice it is often the most accessible route for a Filipina woman who wishes to initiate immigration to Canada. Once she has obtained landed immigrant status, she is able to sponsor her family through another immigration program, that of family reunification. The distinction between immigrant and nanny thus carries both class and gender associations; in the former case the lead family member is more likely to be male, with considerable capital and/or educational resources, in the latter a woman. These class and gender dimensions are laden with moral ones: domestic workers who participated in the focus groups saw themselves as being perceived, not only as inferior in class terms, but as promiscuous husband stealers.

\textit{Mhay:} Because most of us, especially we Filipinos, we go into small groups. One group will say, “Oh, there go the nannies, out on their day off together.” It’s mostly Filipinos like us who say that. And then there’s that


\textsuperscript{20} Agents commonly complained of European nannies’ unwillingness to do housework, or to cook for the entire family (as opposed to the children only). For details see Pratt (1997).

\textsuperscript{21} I thank Dan Hiebert for sharing his own technical knowledge on this matter.

\textsuperscript{22} Another point of entry into Canada has been through the business class programs, which require capital investment in Canada.
other issue about being, since you’re a nanny, you’re, you know, someone who steals husbands. That’s why wives are angry with us. [Mhay is referring to Filipino men and their wives within the Filipino community—not to employers.] (Focus group discussion, September 1995)

In another focus group conversation (September 1995), Ana says much the same: “Like this is how the Filipino people look at the domestic worker. They look at the nanny as just a sex object and a husband stealer.” Susan substantiates the point: “Outside the house, I haven’t encountered whites who say, ‘Oh, a nanny’ just because I’m Filipino. It’s just that the difficulty is with Filipinos like us.”

This stigmatization may be understandable in the context of what Rafael (1997) has identified as an identity crisis for Filipinos, one that he ties to massive state-encouraged movements of Filipino workers and immigrants over the last 25 years. He argues that middle-class Filipinos are sometimes embarrassed by being mistaken as domestic workers when they travel outside the Philippines: “Embarrassment arises from their inability to keep social lines from blurring (thereby rendering problematic their position as privileged representatives of the nation) and maintaining a distinction between ‘Filipino’ as the name of a sovereign people and ‘Filipino’ as the generic term for designating a subservient class dependent on foreign economies” (Raphael 1997, 276–77).

There are, however, contradictions and silences. In Vancouver, the line between immigrant and nanny may be blurred through a repression of memory and family history. Again, Mhay’s remarks are instructive. They follow an incident when she had been insulted by other Filipinos in a public place.

Mhay: It was okay with me, because I really am a nanny, but it was my companion who was hurt. (Laughs) So I asked my friend why he was going into this dark mood, when it was me who was a nanny, not him! [He said,] “No, it’s because those people look down on nannies. Where are their roots, anyway?” I said, “Well, from nannies.” I was also curious [about his reactions] so I said, “And what about you? If your girlfriend was a nanny, what will you tell your parents about her? Will you say she’s a nanny?” “Well, yes” he said. “What if your family looks down on her?” “Well, many people here are like that. If they do that, then they’re denying where they came from.” It turns out that his family was able to come here because his sister was a nanny. So it was funny that he was reacting like that. But it’s really hurting here, that people look down on nannies. (Focus group discussion, September 1995)

Mhay’s story shows how the line between nanny and immigrant for many Filipino families in Vancouver is blurry indeed (before this encounter she assumed her friend to be a “regular” immigrant and not an immigrant sponsored by a nanny) and suggests that the distinction is constructed in part through some strategic forgetting within self-identified immigrant families.

How this stigmatization within the Filipino community affects occupations and opportunities after a woman attains an open visa is an unanswered question. We know from other contexts that social networks are critical for developing positive occupational aspirations, hearing information about job openings, and receiving help in “landing” a job (Granovetter 1974, 1985; Hanson and Pratt 1995). Stigmatization of Filipina women within the Filipino community is a concern insofar as it potentially excludes them from valuable employment networks.

There is an interesting geography to these narratives of stigmatization. Moments of stigmatization tend to take place in transit, often quite literally on public transit. The following is typical:

Inyang: I was on the Sky Train and we planned to recruit a person [I saw] to the Centre [Philippine Women Centre]. We had just said, “Oh, you’re probably new here, right?” After saying yes, she immediately said, “Wait, but I’m not a nanny, okay?” Look at that! So that time, we never talked to her again. It turns out she was brought over by
In another conversation, Mhay recounts another transitory incident of stigmatization:

*Mhay*: I encountered someone once. My driving lessons were over, and we were in the park to eat, because we were hungry. There were many Filipinos in the park, and near the car were some Filipino men and women talking. My companion asked me: “Why are they smiling at you? Do you know them?” I said “No, and I didn’t know why they were smiling.” They must have heard me, so they said something . . . bad. They said, “Oh, those are nannies. And they’re trying to look like something else.” They were criticizing some other women, and perhaps they were including me. So I said, “Oh, I don’t know” but I was feeling uncomfortable. So we left. (Focus group discussion, September 1995)

These narratives may reflect the fact that contact with other Filipinos is transitory, given that domestic workers live in their employers’ homes and work long hours, and that class and other social differences divide the Filipino community. This geography of transition nevertheless stabilizes the construction of Filipina nanny as inferior and immoral because the insults come as incidental, glancing slights, against which she has (literally) no ground for retaliation or renegotiation of discursive categories. She must find other spaces and other grounds for reestablishing self-respect.

Reworking Discourse in Other Spaces and through Boundary Crossings

Although my concern has been to demonstrate how discourses tightly patrol the construction of Filipina in Vancouver, discourses are also productive, open, and polyvalent. In outlining constructions of Filipina, I have tried to mark places where the discursive boundaries might be destabilized by noting silences, contradictions, and patterns of forgetfulness within these constructions. I now turn to other sites where other discourses might be constructed, and then consider how bringing different discourses into tension can be disruptive.

In other places, Filipinas undoubtedly construct meanings that disrupt and repair their sense of themselves as supplicant-preimmigrant, inferior nanny, and immoral husband stealer. My discussion here is speculative, as focus groups concentrated mostly on roles as domestic workers. A number of domestic workers who took part in the focus groups also regularly attended church. In Singapore, Yeoh and Huang (1998) consider the importance of attending church as a temporary respite from employers’ surveillance. Demonstrating how religious discourse can be reworked in other contexts, Lisa Law (1996) has considered how dancers in Cebu in the Philippines rework ideas from Catholicism, and especially themes of martyrdom, to reclaim self-respect as participants in a stigmatized occupation. Though domestic work is in no sense as stigmatized an occupation, some domestic workers may nonetheless deploy a similar discursive strategy. Given that the majority remits large proportions of their incomes to their families in the Philippines, this theme of martyrdom may intersect with discourses of familial responsibility. A number of those who took part in the focus groups spoke of the pressures to earn wages as a dutiful daughter or mother with financial responsibilities in the Philippines. This counterdiscourse of responsibility and duty may reestablish or maintain self-esteem and simultaneously empower women to demand higher wages. It does, however, have mixed effects. Mikita (1994), from her survey of 100 Filipina domestic workers in Vancouver in 1992, estimated the mean monthly remittance to be $245 a month.

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23 See Yeoh and Huang (1998) for a range of strategies deployed by domestic workers in Singapore.
ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

With such a large proportion of wages going toward family remittances, it is extremely difficult for individual women to contemplate and manage educational upgrading, even when released from the restrictions of the Live-in Caregiver Program. Understanding oneself as a dutiful daughter or sister or mother thus has material effects; in the long run it may lock Filipina women into jobs as domestic workers if the burden of monthly remittances cuts off possibilities for upgrading skills.

Another counterdiscourse may emerge around the identity of consumer, as an individual with the rights and freedoms to consume. Women at the Philippine Women Centre spoke critically of the many Filipina domestic workers who congregate at the Pacific Center Mall in downtown Vancouver on weekends. One can imagine, however, how conceptions of consumer freedom might supplement and offset the grinding restrictions experienced as domestic workers, especially if status within extended families in the Philippines is wedded to the ability to supply and display consumer goods. Consumer consciousness may prepare the ground for resistance if the desire for goods leads domestic workers to challenge employers to comply with new minimum wage and overtime provisions in the Employment Standards Act.

Domestic workers learn another identity at the Philippine Women Centre; they learn to see themselves as exploited Third World women and to understand their situations within a socialist feminist theory of imperialism. We have seen a pedagogic process at work in the preceding quotes from focus group transcripts, especially when Cecilia Diocsin, director of the Philippine Women Centre, urges Susan to apply for unemployment insurance for her immediate material benefit and to “learn something about whether there is a different set of rights between you and other Canadians.”

A critical potential also emerges from border crossings between sites and discourses, by bringing one discourse into relation with another. The educational process at the Philippine Women Centre, for example, involves not only an exchange of information but a good deal of support and an effort to dislodge the rhetoric of the home as a private, unregulated space, as well as domestic workers’ identification with the needs of their employers. The identity of exploited Third World woman that domestic workers learn at the Philippine Women Centre is then introduced to Canadian employers within their homes. In some instances, domestic workers first role play their challenge to their employer with other domestic workers in the safe space of the Centre. As domestic workers attempt to establish their rights as employees rather than family member or supplicant-preimmigrants, they are forcing employers to reconfigure their relations within the terms of labor relations, away from constructions of family or a liberal reading of immigration (which would see individuals entering Canada as lucky, with no appreciation of complicated webs of political economic relations and dependencies between Canada, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Philippines). Many employers interviewed in the summer of 1995 displayed a remarkable ignorance of changes to the B.C. Employment Standards Act made earlier that spring. Domestic workers spoke of their efforts to inform their employers of these changes. As Cristy states: “I also used the Employers Standards Act. My employer was startled, because I never spoke up before. But you know, we came here to make money” (focus group discussion, September 1995).

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I should underline the speculative nature of this claim. It has been the experience of the Philippine Women Centre that the desire for consumer goods makes it more difficult to organize women; organizers at the Centre are skeptical about the political potential of consumer consciousness.
Individuals draw strength from transporting meanings from one context to another, even as they recognize the bitterness of their situations in the translation exercise. At the first workshop, I was introduced to a joke among domestic workers in Vancouver when Lisa said: “I was an R.N. in the Philippines and I’m an R.N. in Canada. Only in the Philippines I was a Registered Nurse and in Canada I’m a Registered Nanny” (focus group discussion, August 1995). Their joke points to links between power, discourse, regulation, labor market segmentation, and one geography (transnational migration within neocolonial relations) that mediates them. The joke is political and empowering because it is simultaneously an act of remembering and a recognition of present circumstances. As they remember their professional training in the same term that defines their current situation, memories of the former are reactivated within the latter.

And Back to Labor Market Theory

The challenge of reactivating professional qualifications obtained in the Philippines in the Canadian labor market is clearly going to require more than small instances of decisive wordplay. I have argued that discourses create definitional and social boundaries that contain the horizons of possibilities for individuals and social groups who must live within them. In the case of Filipinas, the discourses of domestic worker seem to constrain them long after they obtain their open visa, given their long-term segregation in the Vancouver labor market. Powerful overlapping of discursive frames of meaning lead to a multiple and polyvalent devaluing of certain categories of people. The word “Filipina” is not only equated with “supplicant-preimmigrant”; the term also connotes “just-a-housekeeper” and “husband stealer.”

Contemporary cultural theory also suggests that the overlap of discourses is incomplete, however, and fails to totally envelope individuals caught within them; R.N. is also R.N. In the slippage between discourses and through the contradictions within them, as they are taken up and lived by creative individuals and organized social groups, there is room for agency, and for the creative redirection and redefinition of subject positions.

I am not suggesting that redefining subjective meanings of particular subject positions is sufficient to disrupt labor market segmentation. I do believe that we have to understand how these cultural processes can be put to work as part of this process of disruption. I have attempted to demonstrate how government policy, state regulation, and the informal negotiations that take place between domestic workers, nanny agents, and their employers are all framed within particular discourses that persistently devalue Filipinas. Criticizing these discourses is an important element of disrupting these oppressive institutional practices.

This is a process of critique that sees itself as resistant to, but fully implicated in, the discourses under scrutiny; there is no privileged point from which to claim truth or a vision of nonoppressive social relations. The Philippine Women Centre, for example, is a source of a powerful and productive criticism of neocolonialism, racism, and gender and class oppression in Filipino and Canadian societies. It is worth considering, however, Law’s (1996) assessment of the controversies among nongovernmental organizations working on HIV/AIDS education in the Philippines, some of which turn around whether their own discursive constructions too readily posit the domestic worker as victim. My point is not that the organizers at the Philippine Women Centre construct discourse that does this, but that their discourse, from a Foucauldian perspective, is no less neutral or “true” than other discourses, although it does produce different subject positions and political possibilities. The task for the critic is not one of uncovering the truth of one discourse but of understanding how subjectivity is produced within these multi-
ple discourses, and to evaluate their effects. Foucault challenges us to generate a critical discourse “whose power effects are limited as much as possible to the subversion of power” (Poster 1989, 30). Like others (Fraser 1997; Gibson-Graham 1996; Watts and McCarthy 1997), I attempt to wed discourse analysis with a critique of exploitation, in my case by assessing how the effects of discourse emerge out of and further exploitative north/south international relations through the sedimentation of Filipina immigrants to Canada within a limited range of low-paid occupations.

Whether I have been successful in generating a critique of exploitation that is limited to the subversion of power is an entirely open question. An Immigration Legislative Review, entitled “Not Just Numbers,” commissioned by the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and released in December 1997, recommended the termination of the Live-in Caregiver Program, in part because of the kinds of criticisms (voiced by academics and activists) leveled in this paper. One assessment (e.g., Hyndman 1998; Philippine Women Centre 1998) is that the recommended changes would mean that women currently working in Canada as live-in caregivers or admitted through the proposed Foreign Worker Program will no longer be eligible for permanent resident status and possible citizenship. Indeed, current debate among domestic worker advocacy groups in Vancouver turns on how far to criticize the Live-in Caregiver Program, recognizing that one potential effect of this criticism is termination of the program.

Nevertheless, the exposure, politicization, and disruption of conceptual boundaries can be conceived as an important geographic task. My argument has been that geographies are deeply embedded within these boundary projects, in the construction and control of discursive borders. In this sense, geographers have much to bring to cultural theory. Immigration, colonialism, and domestic space are part of the production of borders that define workers as worthy or unworthy, competent or incompetent, skilled or unskilled. These classifications are then intimately tied to the segmentation of labor markets and, in particular, the processes through which particular categories of workers are both allocated to and assume particular occupational niches. Subject positions of “Filipina” are often about, and constructed in relation to, specific places: live-in caregiver is defined through the meanings attributed to the “home”; imagined geographies25 of “the Philippines” and “Britain” enter into definitions of skills and evaluations of wage requirements. Careful genealogies of place-meanings thus become part of the project of unraveling particular subject positions and releasing certain social categories from particular labor segments.

The case study suggests that geographic strategies of discursive disruption are multiple and complex. When terms from one discourse are used to transform the meanings in another—for example, when a class analysis disrupts the framing of domestic worker as member of the family—we encounter an enabling type of discursive porosity. On the other hand, when the definition of “domestic worker” in Singapore and the definition of the same category of worker in Vancouver leads to more exploitative conditions in Vancouver, we encounter the negative effects of discursive and geographic porosity as poor labor conditions are dragged from one place to another. To point to the particularity and contingency of geographic effects and political strategy is not, however, the same as arguing that low-level theorizing is adequate to the task of conceptualizing these processes. “Big theory” lurks within contemporary claims about subjectivity; this paper is one effort to bring discourse the-

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25 The term “imagined” refers to the power of representational practices and not to the fictional nature of these constructions (Gregory 1994).
ory into sharper analytical focus in relation to processes of labor market segmentation.

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