

# the politics of care: conversations with domestic caregivers

## introduction

I began this summer hoping to have conversations with El Salvadorian domestic caregivers working in the Silicon Valley, Bay Area, in order to understand more deeply how care and intimacy are tangled up in contractual and often exploitative caregiving relationships. I envisioned this project while writing critical autoethnography about my experience and relationship with Elena Bravo, the woman who my family hired to care for me while I was an infant until I was three years old. My questions at the outset of this journey were shaped by my reflections on the memories I had of our relationship and the gaps and silences in the conversations we have had since then. Visiting Elena in her home before beginning this project, I felt that we did not have the language or space to speak about many of the deep ruptures that shape our relationship in the present. Instead we circled around a few lighthearted stories and memories that have become the familiar script we follow when we get together.

I came to think of this repeated narrative as formed in the ‘rupture’ that was created by the end of the contract that defined Elena as my full-time caregiver. Though we have stayed in touch, there is so much I do not remember about the time we spent together. In my process of writing critical autoethnography, I theorized that we had both internalized different sides of a structure of erasure and silence that had stifled our relationship, keeping us from moving beyond the asymmetrical structure of contractual caregiving. I began this project with the hope of creating space to reconnect, or to connect differently, to intentionally listen to Elena’s story and the stories of other women working as child-caregivers. I hoped to move toward a deeper understanding of how caregivers experienced and understood the intimacy of their care as situated in contracts that would end in inevitable rupture, and about how their care is exploited and racialized, despite often being situated in a narrative of love and intimacy. I asked: **How does racialized and gendered exploitation pattern the identities and experiences that emerge and are created in this space of “rupture”? And how do caregivers experience and understand the commodification of the intimate and interpersonal nature of care-work?**

## critical race and grounded theory research method

In my research this summer I was in most ways an ‘outsider.’ My questions were grounded in my own experiences, where my ideas about caregivers and their experiences which included the idea that domestic labor was marked by ‘precarity’ and ‘invisibility’ contained within the household as a “private” space. But the work of grounded theory research and critical race methodologies that framed and guided my research process are about recognizing ‘counternarratives,’ that is to say, narratives based in lived experiences that challenge dominant images, narratives, and structural arrangements. It would take seriously the proposition of indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, that “To create something new through the process of sharing is to recreate the old, to reconnect relationships and to recreate out humanness.”<sup>1</sup> Central to critical race theory is the conviction that critical research methodologies, at their core, are about transforming social relationships both interpersonally and institutionally. Research as critical process is, here, about self-determination as an act of political resistance that re-writes the positions of marginalized people in the world.<sup>2</sup>

## theorizing ‘care’ and ‘rupture’

The five El Salvadorian women I spoke with had all held positions as what I called “domestic caregivers,” positions that they referred to as “nanas” or “babysitters.” Unlike in the literature I had read, where childcare work fit under the label of “domestic work” and “care-work,” alongside different kinds of ‘intimate labor,’ the women I spoke with were clear that childcare work was different. They had all held cleaning and housekeeping jobs, and many had left their work as childcare-givers temporarily or permanently to return to these other positions because of the pain that childcare work required. In their experiences, other ‘domestic work’ was completely different from their work taking care of children. This counternarrative marked a first big departure from the text-based research I had done before my interviews. Though the collective and expansive theorizing of “domestic work” and “intimate labor” as terms that recognize the intimacy within different jobs such as child and elder care, cleaning and janitorial work, sex work, and others, has been used both in the academic literature and in organizing strategies, it did not resonate within the experiences of the women I was speaking to. I came away with new questions about the qualities of childcare work that created this separation. I wondered what there was to learn from leaning into this difference as it was being articulated by the women I was speaking to.

Learning especially from the work of Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, I began to think about caregiving work as a transnational experience for many migrant women around the world, and to try to understand how caregivers are situated in the structures of what Salazar Parreñas calls “global care chains.”<sup>3</sup> In this theory, care is devalued through its gendering as ‘unskilled women’s work,’ and as migrant women move across borders to service the homes and of the wealthy, their children are often left to be cared for by poorer women or family members in their sending countries. **The construction of the nuclear family employing a caregiver to help raise their child, is really an erasure, a framing that cuts out, reduces, and denies the larger structure within which care is negotiated. As a two-dimensional image, it also acts as a flattening out of the multiple sites and experiences of caregivers’ intimate labor, reducing their experience and identity to their employment within one family’s home.**

While I had initially conceptualized “rupture,” as pertaining to the end of a contractual relationship and the experience formed in its aftermath, caregivers spoke about ‘daily ruptures’ such as the end of each work day when the parents arrive home and the child starts ‘acting up’. According to Emilia López, one of the women I spoke to, the shift in the child’s behavior is because of the difficulty and ambiguity of negotiating different kinds of caregiving dynamics and relationships, but nonetheless the effect ends up falling on the caregiver, who is left competing with the parent for authority, proving to the parent that the child *has* had a good day, or experiencing a shift in attitude and treatment from the child themselves. Without romanticizing caregivers’ labor or ignoring the ways in which the

## works cited

<sup>1</sup>Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Second. London : Dunedin, N.Z.: Zed Books ; University of Otago Press.

<sup>2</sup>Solórzano, Daniel G., and Tara J. Yosso. 2002. “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8 (1): 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>.

<sup>3</sup>Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. 2012. “The Reproductive Labour of Migrant Workers.” *Global Networks* 12 (2): 269–275. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2012.00351.x>.

<sup>4</sup>Nadasen, Premilla. 2015. *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*. Beacon Press.

harassment, microaggressions and trauma caregivers often experience from their employers are mixed up in the language of “care”, these experiences of intimacy and care *as labor*, were one way in which caregivers’ narratives challenged the notion of domestic work as ‘unskilled’. They challenged one of the dominant narratives that the exploitation and dehumanization of caregivers depends on: the image of the nuclear family simply hiring a caregiver to watch over their children while parents work outside the home. Here, a caregivers’ personhood slips out of the dominant narrative of family life. *How* caregivers show love and care - making it legible to parents despite their asymmetrical employer-employee relationship, while often deeply caring for the children, is complex and deeply challenging, it involves intimate knowledge of family dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

## invisibility/hypervisibility the politics of attention

From both my conversations with caregivers and Premilla Nadasen’s scholarship to complicate the narrative of the “invisibility” of domestic work, recognizing instead the “hypervisibility” of domestic caregivers and their labor.<sup>3</sup> Domestic caregivers are integrated into the fabric of daily life; their presence is naturalized in different spaces and social encounters where they are visible yet nonetheless remain unseen or unrecognized. **Once the hypervisibility of ‘care work’ is acknowledged, the question then becomes an issue of attention, of who one is seeing or being asked to see.**

“Contextualizing the research I was part of in the wealthy suburban neighborhoods of Silicon Valley, where many employers have the option of sending children to expensive private day-cares but choose instead to hire a full-time caregiver, I am interested in thinking about how recognizing the humanity of domestic workers through the complexity of their labor might completely change the dominant ways in which we visualize and map the Bay Area’s wealthy suburban neighborhoods and family life and the extreme racial discrimination and segregation that it depends on and that *is* visible on a daily basis if one only pays attention.

## histories of labor organizing

These mappings live within a history of extensive domestic worker organizing that has roots in the activism of African American women during the Civil Rights movement and recently of multi-racial coalitions mostly in large cities and urban areas such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In Premilla Nadasen’s *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*, she writes about the organizing strategies developed and carried out by the Washing Society, a group of women in Atlanta who the city depended on to do it’s washing in the 1880s, the complex and integral role of domestic workers during the Montgomery Bus-Boycott, and how speaking against the devaluation of domestic work, African American activist renamed themselves “household technicians,” to emphasize the skilled nature of their labor.<sup>4</sup> In an ongoing battle, domestic workers’ coalitions continue to fight for versions of the Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights to be passed in states across the country. This important piece legislation protects domestic workers as laborers who have historically been excluded from major labor laws.

But for the El Salvadoran women I spoke to in suburban Silicon Valley, there is a contextualized sense of isolation. They do not have access to the communities of domestic workers and advocacy around domestic worker’s rights that exist in San Francisco or Los Angeles. And increasingly so, because of extensive gentrification in the area, they do not have access to networks of domestic workers. The experiences they shared with me were structured around their individual relationships with families rather than their identities as workers who share common experiences including the deep knowledge that their care and love is a painful part of their work.

## toward more equitable remembering

I continue to think and write about a different politics of care as labor and how the history of domestic workers’ activism as well as lived-experiences, offer new models for labor organizing and theories about care, taking into account the nuances of workers’ isolation, visibilities, intimate interpersonal dynamics, and transnational positionalities. By centering the historical and ongoing activism of domestic workers I hope to also continue to engage a different politics of memory, one that might make space to care and remember more equitably.

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