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8

Geographies of Identity and Difference: Marking Boundaries

Geraldine Pratt

Introduction

I want to begin with three fragments from my own research.

1 In 1992 I published an essay with two colleagues on the social geography of Vancouver (Ley et al., 1992); my responsibility was to cover gender, Dan Hiebert handled race and immigration. Writing about the ways that suburban mothers juggle their identities and responsibilities as mothers and paid employees, I generalized Isabel Dyck's (1989) qualitative research among a small number of suburban women in Vancouver to argue that middle-class women use their networks among other mothers to create safe spaces within their neighbourhoods for their children, to compensate for their own absence during the day. By extending the safety of 'the home' into the neighbourhood and broader community, these women can be read as destabilizing conventional geographies and geographical distinctions (for example, home/neighbourhood, private/public) in order to stabilize their identities as mothers and employees.

2 In 1994 a very different geography of childcare and identity became visible to me as I began a research project on domestic workers in Vancouver (G. Pratt, 1997; G. Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 1997). Thousands of women come to Canada annually through the Live-in Caregiver Program, roughly 60 per cent from the Philippines. In the following quotation, taken from a transcribed focus group with Filipina domestic workers, Mhay describes her efforts to make herself visible within the micro-geography of her (and her employers') home:

I bought a picture with a frame and put it up on the wall [of my bedroom]. Prior to this, all four walls were bare. I did this without telling them because I thought that since I paid for this room, I should be allowed to do something about it. So I arranged the room, put furniture and TV [the way I wanted them]. I would leave the door open so that they [my employers] could see what's in my room, that it's not dull anymore.

3 Filipina domestic workers nevertheless negotiate visibility and invisibility. Mhay, for example, states that: 'Sometimes my employer will open up to me about her family as I am open to them about my family in the Philippines. But when it comes to boyfriends and other private matters, I don't share this with them.' Some domestic workers expressed resentment towards their employers' interest in their family circumstances in the Philippines, partially because they suspected that disclosure was unlikely to work to their advantage. They were certain, as well, that Vancouver employers' interest in their lives as domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong was self-concerned, and hinged on their desire to import the labour conditions that the domestic workers experienced there (longer hours and the requirement to work at a wider range of tasks, such as washing the employer's car) into the Canadian context.

These three fragments illustrate many themes that emerge in contemporary theorizing about identities and geographies. The narratives that we construct about geography and identity are situated (Haraway, 1991); as a white middle-class academic I simply did not see the geographies of Filipina identity at one point in time. The first fragment nonetheless illustrates the multiplicity of identities inhabited by middle-class suburban women, and the way that they renegotiate geography as one way of smoothing the tensions and contradictions between their identities as mothers and as employees. The case of Filipina domestic workers introduces current preoccupations with transnational migration, and the ways that 'differences are constituted at the multiple hinges of the local and the global' (Barnes and Gregory, 1997: 443). It disrupts a simple conjunction of identity and place, and makes obvious the point that multiple identities can inhabit a space (in this case, the space of a single Canadian home: see Gupta and Ferguson (1992) for a cogent critique of assumptions of isomorphism between identity and place). The selective negotiation of visibility and invisibility on the part of Filipina domestic workers also suggests the constructed nature of identity; rather than an essential identity, we see the partial disclosure of identifications (for example, identity as daughter to family in the Philippines but not a heterosexual identity). Stuart Hall has likened this process of

identification to the practice of taking a bus: 'you just have to get from here to there, the whole of you can never be represented in the ticket you carry but you have to buy a ticket in order to get from here to there' (quoted in Watts, 1997: 494). Drawing out this metaphor, Watts writes: 'Accounting for the processes by which we acquire our bus ticket(s) – not least in a world in which the routes are many and global – is a worthy and rather important project ... [M]apping the spectrum of cultural forms onto spatial, class and social identities in the context of global interconnectedness might constitute an important frontier for geographic inspection' (1997: 494, 493).

Over-valuing mobility and hybridity

This 'frontier' has now attracted a good deal of attention, and bold attempts have been made to chart its topography. Attempts to conceptualize these new cultural geographies, 'as configurations of people, place, and heritage lose all semblance of isomorphism', Appadurai (1996: 46) proposes that 'we begin to think of the configuration of cultural forms in today's world as fundamentally fractal, that is, as possessing no Euclidean boundaries, structures, or regularities.' But why, we may ask, search for one correct geometry to articulate contemporary configurations of identity, difference and geography? What nomothetic desire underlies such an effort? This tendency towards simplification through generalization has been noted by Grewal and Kaplan: 'We mean to address precisely this construction of inert, ahistorical generalisations. The relationship between "transnational," "postcolonial," "center-periphery," and "diaspora" in contemporary usage can be found in the way modernity masks particularities in favor of the appearance of universal categories' (1994: 16).

Efforts to resist the normalization of one correct geometry of identity and place certainly exist; they have emerged especially around what seems to be an over-valuing of mobility and hybridity. Stuart Hall's metaphor of identity as a bus ticket nicely illustrates the way in which mobility has come to define identity. Mobility articulates a non-essentialist identity that emerges out of identifications rather than an essence. One is not born a woman, for example, but one can come to identify as one, and these identifications (of gender, sexuality, class, race, nation, etc.) can shift in time and place. The geographical literature is now rich in empirical examples of historical geographies of identification (Blunt and Rose, 1994; G. Pratt and Hanson, 1994; Rose, 1993). But relatively early on, it was also seen that metaphors of mobility and travel have to be held in tension with the recognition that

identities do become stabilized. There were suspicions that the unambiguous pleasures of mobility and travel were more easily viewed from masculine rather than feminine subject positions (Wolff, 1993; Morris, 1988, 1996), from middle-class rather than working-class perspectives (Kaplan, 1987; Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996), and as a white as opposed to African American (hooks, 1992). These correctives reminded us that non-essential identities are nevertheless boundary projects; identities are constructed through identifying who one is not. Identities emerge from historical geographies of conflict and difference, and these geographies themselves work to stabilize identities. In short, some identities are more mobile than others, but all involve exclusion.

The concept of hybridity has a similar history. The term 'hybridity' has been attractive to cultural theorists because it articulates a non-essentialist view of cultures, one in which cultures are continually produced in relation to others. As a theory of culture, it suggests radical heterogeneity that disrupts notions of purity and stasis: 'wherever it emerges it suggests the impossibility of essentialism' (R. Young, 1995: 27). As Katharyne Mitchell (1997a: 535) notes: 'The identification of peoples who have multiple loyalties, move between regions, do not occupy a singular cultural space, and who often operate in some sense exterior to state boundaries and cultural effects, has proven attractive for theorists who have sought to disrupt normative narratives and understandings of nation and culture.'

There has been a productive layering of notions of hybridity onto our understanding of geographies. Massey (1992) has argued that local places have long been open to global influences. This has the effect of destabilizing claims to the purity of local cultures and places, claims that can be used in attempts to preserve a place and 'people' from 'outside' influences, such as immigration. By tracing the influence of British colonialism in nineteenth-century London, Driver and Gilbert (1998) unsettle the 'purity' of English culture. Colonialism is not something that happened elsewhere; British colonialism shaped the architecture, street names and gardens of London, and not simply those of the towns and cities of 'the colonies'. The especial 'leakiness' of contemporary 'habitats' (Chambers, 1994: 245) is nicely distilled by Clifford (1988: 14) when he states: 'Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhoods; the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth', and is a theme that is explored by Jacobs (1996) and Appadurai (1996), among others (for a review of recent scholarship, see Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996). There is also considerable interest in 'thirdspace', as an in-between space that unfixes cultural solidarity and boundaries across difference. Within geography, Rose (1993) and Soja (1996)

explore the emancipatory potential of such a space, as a way of disordering binaries: thirdspace is 'a product of a "thirding" of the spatial imagination, the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance and meaning' (Soja, 1996: 11).

Critics have been wary, however, of over-generalizing a particular experience and politics of hybridity, of positing hybridity as naturally good (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Mitchell, 1997a, 1997b). Rey Chow (Discipline and Place Collective, 1997: 530) argues that the critical potential of the concept of hybridity depends on the context in which it is deployed. She judges it to be of use in 'dealing with a very centrist regime, like the People's Republic of China, where you still have a notion that culture is one thing and where you have a very clear boundary between "us" and "them"'. There is where you can use hybridity with good political results.' But then:

I wouldn't say that in the context of the US, hybridity is totally not useful. I would not say that because the US also has many, many pockets of monoculturalism, monolingualism and so forth, where hybridity can be a useful kind of intervention. For me it's very much a matter of when something like hybridity can be a useful tactic.

Mitchell also draws our attention to the complexities and contradictions of specific contexts. She attributes tendencies towards homogenizing, simplifying narratives (of both hybridity and globalization) to 'a frequent disregard for grounded empirical work' (1997b: 109). Morris has argued that relating 'concepts to circumstances' is one way of maintaining an open system of thinking. It offers a way of dislodging moralistic stances towards distinctions, both the act of making them and the categories that emerge through them, by forcing us to pay closer attention to how categories operate in specific spatial and historical contexts: 'good and bad are in the middle of things, in the processes and conflicts of social life' (Morris, 1996: 393).

Along with a continual movement between concepts and circumstances, we need to remind ourselves of the inherent contradictions and boundary projects that lie within all of our concepts. Robert Young traces the genealogy of the term hybrid to suggest that if it is held against a notion of a dominant, pure culture it will repeat its nineteenth-century origins in theories of cultural/racial degeneration (that is, it will have the effect of reinscribing boundaries). But the relevant point would seem to be that boundaries and conflict are inherent

in any identification and that it is politically unproductive to search for 'good' or 'bad' identities.

This is precisely the point of recent theorizing of radical democracy: identities are always defined through difference, through the construction of a 'constitutive outside' (Mouffe, 1992). A 'we' is inevitably defined through the identification of a 'them'. The democratic imaginary is tied, then, not to founding a 'good' identity of citizen, but to maintaining an arena of conflict by keeping the process of boundary construction alive and open to contestation (Deutsche, 1996; Mouffe, 1995). By extension, we can see our role as critics, not as one of valorizing one resting place of identity over another (whether it be static or framed in terms of mobility and hybridity), but as one of keeping the process of boundary construction in view, as well as tracing the interdependencies of what lies on either side of the boundary. Romanticizing mobility and hybridity could make us rather complacent in carrying out this task.

My argument, then, is that a focus on border maintenance is as politically productive as attending to movement across boundaries and difference; the two complement each other, though one may be more strategic than the other in particular contexts. I would like to particularize this call for contextualized theorizing and the necessity of tracing boundaries through two geographical narratives: one around the home, another involving boundary construction in transnational spaces. I ground both in the circumstances of Filipina domestic workers in Vancouver, as well as examples from the literature.

Feminist geographies of home

Feminist debates about the home can be used to exemplify the strategic nature of theory construction, the limits of over-valuing mobility, and the contextuality of meaning. Materialist feminists have long been critical of the home as a site of oppression for women: they reframed the home as a place of battery and exploitative labour relations (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982). This has been an important and strategic means for disrupting the public/private divide, and opening to critical scrutiny power relations in the home. In the 1980s, this criticism of the home merged with a scepticism about the 'home' of feminism, as a movement that concealed difference and inequalities among women (for reviews of this literature, see I.M. Young, 1997). Young cites the interlinked essays of Martin and Mohanty (1986), Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984), de Lauretis (1990) and Honig (1994) as seminal; they all 'express a deep distrust of

the idea of home for feminist politics and conclude that we should give up a longing for home' (1997: 156). Just as materialist feminists revealed the portrayal of the home as a peaceful refuge as a masculinist one, 'women of colour', working-class women and lesbian women, among others, criticized the home of feminism as a fantasy of white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists, one that veiled power relations among women.

There has been an interesting exchange between these two critiques of the home, as criticism of a feminism that concealed differences between women works its way into actual residential choices. This occurs, for example, in the concluding sections of Minnie Bruce Pratt's (1984) narrative of travel and self-discovery. At the end of the narrative, Pratt is living as a solitary, white, lesbian woman in an African American neighbourhood in Washington DC, choosing this residential location, in part, as a vehicle for continuously destabilizing her sense of identity. Stanley and Wise (1990: 33) take up Pratt's residential choice as a feminist model: 'Pratt is located in an immediate social context in which the origin and oppressed "other" becomes in a sense the norm ... her account is a suggestive one.' Blending the two critiques of home, Massey (1994: 11) has ventured that: 'One gender-disturbing message might be - in terms of both identity and space - keep moving!'

There have, none the less, been two productive reactions to a purely negative rendering of home. First, the simple point has been made that it is easier to criticize home from the position of having a secure one. The meaning and value of home depends on circumstances. To return to the introductory fragments, Mhay's efforts at home-making must be set against the fact that, as a domestic worker admitted into Canada by means of a special work visa, she has a fragile claim to home. The paradoxical situation of mobility and confinement experienced by Mhay is captured by Tolentino's (1996: 58) characterization of the geography inhabited by Filipina overseas contract workers: 'It is precisely in these domestic spheres that Filipinas are allocated to transnational space.' Many Canadian employers are negligent about providing the barest minimum of control over this domestic space. For example a lock on the domestic worker's bedroom door, required by the Canadian State, is often missing (G. Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 1997). It is within this context that Mhay's invitation to look into her room must be understood. Her resistant efforts to stake this place as her home can be read against her sense of vulnerability and stigmatization in other spaces of the home. She recounts her attempts to control the boundaries (visual and olfactory) of her identity in the shared spaces of her (employers') home:

Once, I really wanted to cook my own food, which they do not eat. I opened the windows so they could not smell it in the house. Then I ate in the living room so that I could see them coming. Once I saw them, I would go the kitchen and fix everything so that they would not find out that I cooked my own dinner or food. It's quite tough. (Laughs.)

I am moved by this passage because it conveys Mhay's feeling that she must control not only her bodily and visual presence, but the scent of food that is her 'own'; her culture/home has no place within this house.

It is perhaps not surprising that two of the strongest evocations of home in recent feminist writing come from personal knowledge of the difficulties, as well as the potentials, of home-making, bell hooks writes about the importance of home for African Americans as a space at least partially apart from the oppressive structures of white, racist society, as a space in which positive identifications and powerful political resistance can be nurtured and sustained. 'Historically,' she writes, 'African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist' (1990: 42). In her evocation of the meaning of home for African Americans, hooks has chosen, perhaps strategically, to foreground race and sideline gender relations within the home.

Iris Marion Young tells of her nonconformist mother's efforts to maintain a home. As a recently bereaved widow, newly arrived in a New Jersey suburban development, who drank too much and failed to keep a clean house, her children were removed by the state on two occasions. 'Neglect. The primary evidence of neglect was drinking and a messy house. We ate well enough, had clean enough clothes, and a mother's steady love' (1997: 146). When reunited after the second arrest and separation, 'my mother wasted no time packing up and moving us all back to the safe indifference of New York City' (1997: 147). Against this experience of both the oppressive conformity required of women by middle-class ideals of home, and her own family's, at times desperate, efforts to maintain one, Young outlines four normative values of home that she believes should be accessible to all people: rights to safety, individuation, privacy, and the preservation of individual and collective memories through 'rituals of remembrance' embodied in the home. Young recognizes the 'depoliticising, essentialist, and exploitative implications that the idea of home often carries' but is attempting to balance this against the recognition that 'home carries a

core positive meaning as the material anchor for a sense of agency and a shifting and fluid identity' (1997: 159).

Young recognizes that the home can materially anchor a shifting and fluid identity. This points to a second feminist reaction to purely negative representations of the home: we need to consider how binaries run through these representations in ways that flatten and homogenize the meaning of home. There is a growing literature that explores the interdependence between home and 'away' so as to destabilize the meaning of each term (Blunt, 1997; Taylor, 1992). Morris also subverts the equation between nomadism and adventure, and home and stasis, by retelling the stories of Ulysses and Penelope: 'When Ulysses fails to return home after the fall of Troy, Penelope is pestered by suitors. She promises to choose one as soon as she has finished weaving a shroud for her father-in-law: but at night, she unravels what she has accomplished during the day and indefinitely defers the ending of her labours. Ulysses travels from place to place, but Penelope, "model of all the domestic virtues" . . . , is the quick one' (1996: 388). Morris reinterprets home as a moment in a three-point process, both as a way of drawing a boundary around an uncertain identity, and as a place from which to venture: 'home is in the middle of things, like "place" in the work of Doreen Massey (1994); neither origin nor destination, "home" is an effort to organize a "limited space" that is never sealed in, and so it is not an enclosure but a way of going outside' (1996: 386). Massey notes that this unbounded conception of home is, in any case, a more accurate representation: 'a large component of the identity of that place called home derived precisely from the fact that it had always in one way or another been open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations that always stretched beyond it' (1992: 14). But along with emphasizing the movement inherent in dwelling, we need also to examine the process of boundary construction, the efforts to 'organize' this 'limited space'.

The importance of this rearticulation of home as a place is that it suggests that the possibilities and politics of home are also open ones. Moralizing about home in the abstract is likely to be unproductive: 'good and bad are in the middle of things', and the politics of home is a situated one. Mhay's efforts to construct a home as a Filipina living in a white Canadian home on a temporary work visa, Minnie Bruce Pratt's residential choice as a privileged white woman, Iris Young's mother's decision to flee suburbia for the indifference of the city: these are actions that can only be assessed in relation to the identities and geographies in question. This is simply to restate that assessments about identities and places cannot be made in the abstract, and that suspicion

about essentialized identities does not flow unproblematically into assessments of place. As feminist debates about the home have developed, we have come to recognize that it is unhelpful to designate homes in general as 'good' or 'bad'.

Considering the trajectory of feminist theorizing about 'home' also gives us ground for thinking about the movement between spatial metaphors and material practices. One of the attractions of spatial metaphors has been the ability to move across genres; Kathleen Kirby (1996: 9) speaks of the capacity for spatial language to mediate a divide between materiality and metaphor: 'the theoretical turn to space stems from the delicate reference that category [space] promises with concrete reality'. As noted above, Soja portrays thirdspace as existing beyond a dualism between metaphor and materiality. But as we attempt to sort out the complex linkages between proliferating identities and new geographies, it may be problematic to let arguments that develop in relation to identities as 'homes' seep uncritically into our understandings of other homes (as places). The seepage has undoubtedly been creative and suggestive; we must also consider whether critical distinctions have been lost. Home as an identity really is somewhat different from home as a place, though the two are interconnected. It has, without a doubt, been productive to elide this distinction temporarily and consider how theories of identities can be brought into our readings of geographies. But we should also consider that we may be simultaneously simplifying our narratives as we seek to enrich them.

Border crossings/boundary constructions

In a second attempt to relate concepts to circumstances, I want to consider the multiplicity of boundaries and naturalized identities that are constructed as Filipina women cross national borders to come to Canada as live-in caregivers. I pursue this to make the simple points that the effects of mobility and hybridity are multiple (and by no means necessarily beneficial), that new boundaries are constructed even as borders are crossed, and that these boundaries are multiple and complex. We need to map out these boundaries with care in order to think through political strategy in relation to the Canadian government's policy towards and regulation of domestic workers.

The domestic workers with whom I have worked have told numerous stories about the reinscription of essentialized identities and boundaries

within transnational geographies. They told the most explicit stories of stereotyping and stigmatization in relation to other Filipinos in Vancouver. Mhay, for example, tells of some boundary maintenance that took place in an ideally inclusive public space: a city park:

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. 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.

This is an instance of boundary maintenance at the line between immigrant and domestic worker, two distinct points of entry into Canada. The line also marks class and gender differences: entry into Canada as an independent immigrant is possible through either the point system (in which technical, typically masculinized occupations tend to be more favourably weighted) or the business class of programmes (which require substantial capital). A woman who initiates immigration for herself and her family is more likely to enter via the Live-in Caregiver Program, a temporary work programme that allows the possibility of applying for landed immigrant status after two years of working as a live-in domestic worker.

The line between immigrant and live-in caregiver works away at 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 twenty-five years. The middle-class press in the Philippines features anecdotes about:

Europeans equating the word 'Filipino' with domestic helpers, or Filipino tourists being asked by OCWs [Overseas Contract Workers] in Singapore shopping malls or Madrid parks if they, too, were on their day off. In these stories, Filipino elites as well as nationalists feel themselves incapable of maintaining the boundaries of class differences as they are associated with an ethnically marked group of service workers. 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. (Rafael, 1997: 276-7)

But just as the massive international movement of workers and immigrants has altered the meaning of Filipino in uncontrollable ways, Rafael argues that the pity felt for overseas contract workers has, in recent years, generated a sense of national community. In a 1988 speech to a group of domestic workers in Hong Kong, President Cory Aquino first referred to OCWs as heroes: 'You are the new heroes' (Rafael, 1997: 274). The execution of the domestic worker Flor Contemplacion in Singapore in 1995 then ignited a further surge of nationalist identification. President Ramos saw in Flor Contemplacion's death the beginning 'of our own soul searching ... We have been reborn as a national family' (quoted in Rafael, 1997: 279). In Rafael's view, the politicization of the situation of OCWs' founded on the commercialization of the Flor Contemplacion 'story', but the fact remains that the identity of Filipina domestic workers is intertwined with other identities and geographies in complex ways: though it confuses key class boundaries in ways that embarrass elites, it is simultaneously taken up by key political elites to reconstruct national boundaries.

As Vancouver Filipino immigrants strive to reinstate the class boundary between themselves and domestic workers, they supplement other boundary projects that produce Filipinas as inferior to European nannies in a hierarchy of live-in caregivers. This hierarchy is produced through a complex set of processes, but the globalization of information is by no means irrelevant. Two domestic workers discuss how their employment conditions in Singapore are brought to Vancouver by agents and Vancouver employers:

ANA: These employers here in Canada, they just ask you about your previous employer because maybe they will learn the fact of what you are doing in Singapore. Like, oh, [you were] washing the car, then they will think that they can ask you to do this here.

ENDROLYN: They are asking me. [They think:] Oh, I like this girl. She washes the car. But they [her employers] wash the car. I said

she should do that. It is not my job. That's why I came here to Canada: to work less. That's why I spend my money [more than two thousand dollars] to come here to Canada. Because I want to escape my job in Singapore.

They are thinking, maybe, just like, 'Oh, maybe she will do it here, because she did it in Singapore. Why can she not do it here?'

ANA:

Personal and collective histories, as with domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore, are dragged into the Vancouver labour market by agents and employers, who expect Filipina domestic workers to work longer hours and at a wider range of (non-childcare-related) tasks than would be asked of European women.² They solidify a hierarchy of difference among live-in caregivers, in which Filipinas inhabit the identity of 'housekeeper' and European women are thought of as 'nannies'.

Boundaries that are blurred in one place may be reinvented elsewhere: sensitivities about the blurring of class distinctions may add to their vigorous re-establishment within the Filipino community in Vancouver. A remarkable mobility as part of a transnational labour process may have no necessary relation to non-essentialized identities. In the Philippines, OCWs are taken up in the creation of an essentialized national identity, situated around an ethos of familialism, care and suffering: 'the figure of Flor Contemplacion appeared to furnish a benign basis for reconsolidating the imaginative borders of the Philippines' (Rafael, 1997: 278). (This parallels an example cited by Mitchell (1997b) of the creation of a new essentialist discourse of 'Mexican' identity, built around the transnational movement of people and capital.) In Vancouver, knowledge of labour experiences elsewhere helps to define Filipinas as exploitable servants, distinct from European nannies.

At the same time, one can see the emancipatory potential of travel. Filipinas are well aware of the different labour standards in Vancouver and Singapore; their knowledge of this is what has driven a second round of migration, and they defend this difference against their employers. Creative acts of translation also emerged in workshops with domestic workers, as, for example, when Mhay defended herself from stereotypes within the Filipino community in Vancouver by a subtle act of translation. Mhay is resisting the stereotype of husband stealer:

I don't get entangled with that issue, because I don't steal husbands. That's a dangerous situation. I'm not ashamed of myself, and think very low of myself because I'm a nanny, since I'm not doing anything wrong. I cook, clean, take care of children. I'm not just a nanny. I'm also a nanny [Tagalog for mother]. (Laughs.)

Mhay resists one identity by calling up her identity as nanny, but she simultaneously reworks the meaning of that term through a readily available but imaginative translation. In the end, and through a striking play of cultural hybridity, she has metamorphosed herself within the terms of the classical representational dualism of 'Woman', from whore to mother. But the point is that precisely at the moment that boundaries are blurred, they are reconstructed. There is no end of conflict in third-space, and new boundaries are created even as we move through space.

Mhay's invitation

By decorating her room, Mhay stakes a territory. When she leaves her door ajar, she is redefining the boundaries between her and her employer: she is both defining her identity (a border) and opening a space for exchange. The opening is situational and strategic: Mhay tells her employer about her family in the Philippines but not about her boyfriends. Mhay's invitation suggests to me the necessity and possibilities of working across borders, of seeing into each other's worlds and working across differences, without erasing histories of conflict and difference, without identification.

I have argued that our commitment should be one of opening doors for communication and that this can be done not only by documenting the hybridity of all cultures (that is, the fragility of borders and the interdependence of differences) and the creative potential for new critical identities to emerge at the border, in thirdspace, but by remembering the exclusions that found every identity. I see our job as one of creating trouble, even in thirdspace, by making visible boundary constructions and the production of difference, and by keeping alive the question of who, inevitably, is being excluded as identities are defined. My current research involves an effort to make visible the boundary that prevented me from seeing domestic workers living in Vancouver in 1992. This involves unsettling the complacency that many Canadians feel about admitting live-in caregivers into Canada without granting citizenship rights or guaranteeing live-in domestic workers the same regulative protection expected by other classes of workers. It seems to me that it is by starkly outlining the boundaries that separate my life from that of Mhay, by unravelling the layers of social-material borders that both produce and hem in our movements and identities, that a basis for communication and collaboration can be established. Marking boundaries, insisting on the materiality and persistence of differences, may be as politically productive as blurring them in notions of mobility, hybridity and thirdspace.

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Notes

- 1 Employers often come to know about practices in Singapore and Hong Kong because descriptions have been put into domestic workers' profiles by their nanny agent.
- 2 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 G. Pratt (1997).

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