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## **Women, Migration, and the Body-Less Spirit of Capitalist Patriarchy** *Women, Migration, and the Body-less Spirit of Patriarchal Capitalism*

By Mechthild Hart<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The continuously expanding global free trade in domestic and sex workers intensifies old capitalist-patriarchal forms of extracting women's emotional, physical, and sexual labor. The patriarchal dream of seizing control of impure, unruly life has now entered its neoliberal stage, exemplified by money begetting money in the virtual sphere of financial speculation, and by biotechnology's promise to create a world that is no longer in need of impure female mothering bodies. The very nature of the work associated with unruly life delivers, however, a major blow to the patriarchal vision of a totally controlled, purified, body-less world. Imported female 'servants of globalization' live in a diaspora where different social spaces are stacked on top of each other in the small geographic space of an alien individual household. This home/workplace is mostly a site of exploitation and abuse. It does, however, also contain elements that not only put a brake on the patriarchal project but also allow possibilities of a non-patriarchal, non-capitalist future to shine through experiences of deprivation and misery. Removing dirt and taking care of the employer's children are actions that illustrate life's messy unruliness: Living bodies need attention and care. They challenge feminist movements to construct a transnational home that is bodily, place-bound as well as translocal or 'nomadic.'

*Keywords:* capitalist patriarchy, migrating bodies, nomadic home

### **Introduction**

Neoliberalism is driven by the goal to extract as much as possible from the earth and her inhabitants. Where human and natural resources are exhausted, or where other financial speculative endeavors promise to be more lucrative, capital moves on. It leaves behind destroyed habitats and impoverished, landless, or jobless laborers. By spreading like a cancerous growth over ever-expanding and deepening areas of life, neoliberal capitalism has become remarkably transnational and transcultural.

In the name of free trade the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank dictate that a country privatize public assets and services, "liberalize" investment restrictions or the flow of capital, devalue its currency by 40 percent, and jack up its interest rates. This severely curtails or destroys domestic production, and unemployment soars. What underlies these and other "conditionalities" is the imperative placed on the "emerging markets" of the south to become primarily export-oriented. Not only does this wipe out traditional areas of agricultural or craft production, it also adds women to the

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arsenal of exportable goods. Women are then sent to countries where there is a crisis in the availability of “domestic services” or where men are eager to pay for cheap sex workers. Moreover, migrant workers’ remittances not only secure their own family’s livelihood but also give indebted nations the hard currency needed to pay interests on international loans.

The subtitle to *Global Woman* (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002) summarizes what many feminist analyses of labor migration have been focusing on: “nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy.” What is old about these occupational titles is their association with typical women’s labor. What is new about the economy is the growing number of women migrating to other countries or parts of the world in order to secure their own and their family members’ livelihoods. What is also relatively new is the array of policies and institutions that propagate, mediate, and benefit from the global free trade of domestic or sex workers. National contract labor and immigration policies guide the actions of official recruitment and employment agencies, individual money lenders, clandestine border crossing agents, brothel owners, and operators of big sex trafficking businesses. They all benefit financially from migrating or trafficked women.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, regardless of the complex and volatile mix of class, racial-ethnic, geopolitical, or cultural differences among the actors, countries, or regions involved in these border crossing moves, old and new, national and international sexual divisions of labor are bolstered by various political and corporate actions and policies in remarkably similar ways. They therefore crisscross cultural and social differences between the nations involved or the women freely traded among them. What provides the unifying ground for all these differences is the fact that it is female migrating, border crossing bodies that cater to bodily needs, functions, and desires, whether as domestics or as prostitutes. The old extraction of women’s emotional, physical, and sexual labor is here intensified to an alarming, life-threatening degree.

Many feminist analyses denounce the global market system and its super-exploitation of women’s paid and unpaid labor. Delia Aguilar (2004), for instance, rightfully argues that an understanding of capitalist class and labor relations is essential for understanding the inner workings of neoliberal, border crossing capitalism, and her approach center-stages women, particularly poor, Majority World women. Hers is not the only investigation that provides important descriptions of the way neoliberalism works with respect to the lives and experiences of millions of women, and how “gender” plays into national and international labor contracts and arrangements. All these analyses depend, however, on a limited, and limiting, conceptual framework. At this stage of global capitalism we need to push our understanding of patriarchal relations into deeper layers of destructive meanings and processes that lie buried under terms such as “domestic” or “reproductive labor.” In particular—and this is the focus of my essay—we need to lay bare what lies at the core of the violent extraction, control, and destruction of sexualized and racialized female bodies’ life force and labor power.

‘Patriarchy’ is a “densely packed term” (Gordon & Hunter, 1998, p. 72). Visiting feminist debates on the notion of patriarchy in order to clarify one’s own understanding of the term means trying to find one’s way through a thorny thicket of many different and conflicting cultural, historical, and political meanings. Patriarchy may be described as a mere by-product of capitalism; as directly undercutting capitalism; as being rooted in father-right or fraternal right; as being primarily located in the family or individual

household; as being equivalent to male dominance; or as co-existing with “modern forms of male supremacy” (p. 73). Other writers describe how larger, supra-household patriarchal relations in different cultural contexts challenge many Western feminist assumptions underlying the use of the term. As Shelley Feldman (2001) points out, Western feminist discourses may unwittingly recast an imperialist or colonial narrative which prevents them from seeing women’s roles “in social practices that altered the cultural contours of public participation, family life, and public discourse” (p. 1099). Different patriarchies therefore structure “gender” in complex, multiple ways that intertwine with other social orderings (p. 1106). Similarly, Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) state that patriarchies are intrinsic to the formation of and changes within the categories of class and caste, and that patriarchal practices and regulations are not superimposed to but interrelate with “political economy, religion, law, and culture” (p.1, 2).

Today Western patriarchy interrelates with neoliberalism on a global scale. Globalization is therefore like the many-headed serpent Hydra who always grows back two heads in place of the one cut off. These two heads are neoliberal capitalism and Western-defined patriarchy. As indicated by the title of this essay I follow Claudia von Werlhof’s (2001) example of choosing the term “capitalist patriarchy” precisely because it captures capitalism’s continued dependence on patriarchy as one of its primary foundations.

Teresa Meade and Pamela Haag (1998) rightfully ask whether patriarchy is “an appropriate nomenclature for the forms of male domination characteristic of the late twentieth-century United States” (p. 93). They answer that question by claiming that patriarchy can be fatherless (p. 92) although the “ghost of the old patriarchal order” (p. 91) continues to linger. I want to go further by claiming that the father-core of patriarchy is today resurfacing in peculiar, alarming ways. As I show in this essay, making such a claim does not mean re-telling parts of an ahistorical grand narrative but rather investigating how one of the narrative’s core elements keeps growing in terms of strength and scope.

Modern Western patriarchal practices arise out of a particular way of thinking about and relating to the physical and material foundations of our world. As Whitney Bauman (2003) so succinctly summarized it, Western patriarchal thinking is wedded to a Cartesian dualistic framework which makes it “suffer from the desire to be disembodied” (52). Here the old *pater familias* merges with the “head of household.” Although the head governs the body, like the Holy Spirit who descended upon and impregnated the Virgin Mary it still needs a body to let life ripen in its interior. This is a challenge met head-on by geneticists who strive to gain the power of an omnipresent, omnipotent father-god.

The desire to be disembodied has dire consequences for who or what is associated with the body or with the biological or physical foundations of life on earth. As I discuss in this essay, it also feeds into the patriarchal vision of reigning in and controlling the secret of life, no matter at what cost. Genetic engineers are therefore busily working on the patriarchal dream of a motherless society where Virgin Mary’s body is no longer needed and god-like fathers create perfect designer babies (Darnovsky, 2001). In the “stratosphere” (Korten, 2001) of finance capitalism global money gamblers already engage in disembodied, “virtual” practices. Where money begets money, where paying interest on debts makes debts grow which, in turn, create more interest, and all without

having to bother about producing any material goods, the patriarchal dream is fully in action.

In the final section of the paper I identify questions the lives and experiences of migrant domestic workers open up for transnational feminism. “Domestic work” is part and parcel of responding to the needs of a body that is and stays real, and that as such cannot be totally controlled. Life, unruly life, and work associated with it therefore continue to deliver major blows to the patriarchal vision of a motherless father-god world. Moreover, the work and experiences of migrant domestic workers lay the groundwork for affirming *and* transforming the smallness of a “domestic” sphere. They challenge us to construct a transnational home that is bodily, place-bound as well as translocal or “nomadic.” They tell us that it is possible to make analytical and spiritual connections with far-away homeplaces where life is sustained and nourished, and they call on us to not only value and support but also practically engage in such efforts

### **Entertaining the Stratos Dweller**

Migrant domestic workers are alternately referred to as nannies/housekeepers, breadwinner maids, foreign domestics, or, in relation to their status as mothers, remote mothers, substitute mothers, mobile mothers, transnational mothers, migrant mothers, or mother-domestics. Regardless which terms are used by academics, states, recruitment agencies, employers, or the workers themselves, and regardless of often tremendous cultural differences and geographical distances between sending and receiving countries, the capitalist-patriarchal underbelly provides the connective tissue of all—paid or unpaid—versions of similar kinds of labor. This labor has always supported a capitalist “interior infrastructure” of service and servitude, one that now has gone global. Moreover, foreign domestics are aliens from a different culture. Their citizenship status marks and regulates them as bonded or enslaved laborers. As undocumented illegals they may be desperate enough to put up with any kind of abuse. Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) lists various agency names in the Los Angeles area, which she studied: Mama’s Maid to Order, Domestic Darlings, Maid in Heaven, or Custom Maid for You. She also observed that the name the maids themselves give to all of them is “Domestic Desperation”(p. 92).

Despite the abundance of feminist literature on female “servants of globalization,” (Parreñas, 2001b) the move from productive to extractive capitalism is rarely mentioned. Arlie Hochschild (2002) does, however, compare the “extraction of material resources from the Third World” to “the extraction of emotional resources” (p. 27), but her general observation remains in the background of her investigation of the emotional fate of children left behind by their migrant mothers. In texts written by male leftist economists I found the most detailed and highly alarming analyses of the speculative or virtual dimension of extractive capitalism, that is, precisely the dimension which shapes neoliberalism’s very core, its destructive, deadly essence (see, for instance, *Alternatives to Economic Globalization*, 2002; Ellwood, 2002; Hahnel, 1999; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001). Where investment capital keeps flitting across the globe at lightning speed, and where “for every US dollar circulating in the real economy, \$25-50 circulate in the world of pure finance,” the economy is delinked from the actual production of any value or wealth, that is, the “real” economy (Petras & Veltmeyer, p.15). Investors are therefore increasingly spinning around in the stratosphere of pure speculation.

Women and children are hardly ever mentioned in these studies, although they bear the brunt of the neoliberal credo of unlimited growth and development. This is not only a theoretical-conceptual problem. It is also paradigmatic for the patriarchal logic underlying all capitalist-economic moves, particularly those taking place in the stratosphere of financial speculators. Female bodies are there to clean up after the speculators and take care of their children in a socially and politically invisible sphere.

The image that keeps popping up is one of “Stratos dwellers” (Korten) who get a kick out of looking down upon the entertaining dramas enacted by female employers and their female employees on the interior public stage of private, isolated households. They may chuckle when an employer withholds the pay for her live-in maid in order to keep her from running away, where she gives her a sub-minimum wage but extends her working hours into the night, or where she subjects the foreign domestic to intimate scrutiny and control of her sexual life. Thus, patriarchal orderings of human relations do not exempt relations among women. Moreover, the ugliness of a patriarchal, masculinist de-valorization of “women’s work” blends into the ugliness of female employers’ hierarchical orderings of the world in terms of class, caste, or racial-ethnic differences.

Filipina domestic workers’ experiences illustrate how different racialization processes can be in operation in spatially dispersed places such as Italy, the United States, Canada, Jordan, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Regardless of cultural and geographic distances, Filipinas are variously constructed as “different” or “other,” thus demanding thorough scrutiny, management, and sanitation of such otherness (Cheng, 2003; Constable, 1999, 2002; Parreñas, 2001a). The category “foreign” is often used to shroud the fact that racial-ethnic background and immigrant status of most paid domestic workers has made the occupation homogeneously “nonwhite.” As Shu-Ju Cheng remarks, an “emphasis on national and cultural differences accentuates foreignness and diminishes the racial identity of alien labor. It disguises the embedded racial inequality within domestic service and schemes of labor importation”(p.183). Bernadette Stiell and Kim England (1999) observe how racial inequality is wedded to another racialized ranking system where “national identities are seen as signifying a group’s proclivity for domestic work” (p 45). As described by Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) complexion, phenotype, and stature may be an added bonus to such a natural proclivity as it “readily marks [the worker] as subordinate” (p. 101).<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly amusing for the Stratos dwellers to see how the actors build fragile edifices out of building blocks whose shapes the dwellers had already deformed according to their cultural and patriarchal values. In addition, the actors bring their own culturally different notions of femininity (or motherhood) into the play, but the one in power may dictate her own version to the one who has to submit to a regulatory regime. General patriarchal as well as economic, class-based relations not only continue to deform and discolor the building blocks themselves but also define the boundaries within which they can be moved about, stacked up, or used as projectiles in “blow-ups” that are rarely instigated by the workers themselves (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002). Domestic workers are ensconced in power relations with their employers, and these relations run the gamut of a focus on the personal or benign maternalism to more directly exploitative, invasive, or abusive strategies (Cheng, 2005; Constable, 1999; Hidden in the Home, 2001; Lan, 2002, 2003).. For the domestic workers, especially the live-in

nanny/housekeepers,<sup>3</sup> the stack of deformed and discolored pieces is therefore particularly high.

### **External and Internal Border Controls**

The fear of the female body's impurity has a close relative in the fear of having one's nation or culture infected by foreign blood. Internal border controls, that is, the surveillance of a live-in maid's intimate life in the interior prison of a private household go hand in hand with external border controls. Patriarchal, nationalist and ethnocentric traditions therefore mold a receiving country's specific response to the in-flow of foreign migrant workers. What Cheng (2003) writes with respect to the collaboration of the Taiwanese state with individual employers in controlling and regulating foreign domestic workers has therefore general validity: "The monitoring and surveillance of both their bodies and emotions are integral to the state's attempt to police national borders and ultimately to control the racial/ethnic composition of its citizenry" (p.172).

Taiwan has one of the most restrictive and invasive foreign labor policies, exemplified by its numerous, clearly spelled out rules and regulations. Its political Stratos dwellers stay in control by attaching the power and authority ceded to the employers to a string of various financial punitive measures. If the "gift" of transferred power is not handled appropriately, if, for instance, the foreign domestic worker runs away, an employer may lose the deposit she was mandated to give to the state in order to pay for the maid's cost of living and deportation (Cheng, 2003, p.174). The employer also needs to manage and surveil the worker's sexual life and make sure she does not get pregnant, one of the side effects of the state's law against foreign domestic workers marrying other foreigners or native-born men.

Singapore has similar regulations. For instance, its allocation system for imported domestic workers sets as a condition for giving two-year work permits that the workers do not marry Singaporeans, and that they not get pregnant. The workers have to undergo a medical check-up (pregnancy, VD tests) every six months. The employer withholds money from her employee and calls it a "security bond" that the worker forfeits if she does not comply with any of these conditions (Yeoh, Huang & Gonzales, 1999a, b).

In the U.S. the resurgence of Mexican women immigrants with their dangerous potential of giving birth to alien babies (who automatically become U.S. citizens) has given rise to the threat of becoming an alien nation, one faced by a "Latino menace" (Lovato, 2004). Such threats feed into the militarization of external border controls where an infrastructure of deterrence is expanded and intensified. This causes illegal immigrants to cross more difficult terrain where they are less likely to survive their journey, and where many die each year by drowning, dehydration, or hypothermia (De la Luz Ibarra, 2003).

Being foreign-born means being dependent on a country's immigration and labor contract policies. The informal privacy of individual, isolated households invites employers to keep desperate undocumented immigrants or non-immigrant, "imported help" in slave-like conditions. Live-in jobs, the typical point of entry for Latina immigrants in the United States are therefore often experienced as prisons, where *te encierras* - you lock yourself up (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001, p.13, p. 63). Human Rights Watch issued a report on particularly alarming levels of abuse of non-immigrant domestic workers who enter the U.S. as imported help (Hidden in the Home, 2001). The provisions

of special visas (A-3, G-5, and B-1) allow foreign nationals, diplomats, IMF, World Bank, and OAS officials as well as American citizens to import domestic workers.. The State Department does keep records of the whereabouts of A-3 and G-5 domestic workers, but “this information is classified as confidential, for the privacy of the employer.” B-1 is a catch-all business category, and the State Department keeps no records of domestic helpers imported under its provisions. It not only allows foreign nationals but also American citizens with a permanent residence abroad to bring along domestic help when visiting the United States. The workers suffer some of the most blatant abuses, from having to sleep outside with the family dog, being sexually harassed, or working for sixteen hours per day all week long for 100 dollars a month. In contrast to A-3 and G-5 visa holders, workers employed under the auspices of a B-1 visa do not have the legal right to transfer to another employer which makes the women “live as prisoners in the homes they clean” (Zarembka, 2002, pp. 145-47).<sup>4</sup>

Trafficked domestic workers live in a diaspora that respects the barbed-wired fences foreign or U.S. nationals build around their imported help. Under U.S. law all live-in domestic workers are excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act’s overtime protection, the National Labor Relations Act’s guarantee of the right to organize, and from the Occupational Safety and Health Act’s mandate to enforce “safe and healthful working conditions” (Hidden in the Home, 2001, p. 54, 30). Although minimum wage law and certain limited regulations concerning working hours do apply, they are not enforced, nor are employers encouraged to follow them. This exacerbates non-immigrant domestic workers’ extreme vulnerability as they live in a diaspora that condones or silences their imprisonment. When joined by the full diplomatic immunity some employers of non-immigrant domestic workers enjoy, workers are inhibited or prevented to seek legal redress (p. 34). Social and political assumptions associated with Western-style patriarchy here smoothly blend into the cruelty of patriarchal arrangements that are molded by class or caste differences.

### **The Dream of a Motherless Society**

The work of paid or unpaid nannies/housekeepers is grounded in the universal reality of human bodily needs. As previously mentioned, in masculinist analyses of the dangers and devastations of global capitalism women hardly ever appear in any substantive sense, nor do issues related to “women’s work.” Removing such work from the theoretical landscape means abstracting from the most concrete, intimate, bodily foundation without which male elite money gamblers could not construct and dwell in their stratosphere. Theoretical analyses that abstract from these realities therefore unwittingly lay bare the patriarchal dream of a world purified from the dirt and excrement of bodies. According to the purification process enacted by the proponents of this dream, it is particularly nonwhite female bodies that need to be removed, except, of course, in the form of maids that do their work when nobody is around, prostituted bodies that are “home-delivered” to American soldiers in US military bases,<sup>5</sup> or sexualized technobodies available in cyberspace at the flick of a finger.

As Claudia von Werlhof (2001) points out, at the core of the capitalist-patriarchal system lies its quasi-religious belief in “the power of money to force all of life into prostitution,” which “makes our system out to be a kind of Christian pimping” (34). We are here dealing with a rather dense knot of contradictions which, when unraveled,



illustrate the perverse logic of the desire to control or do away with impure female bodies. According to this logic these bodies may need to be kept in a confined, tightly supervised space where they care for and clean up after the products of higher-ranking female bodies' reproductive capacity. The state, the church, or father-husbands may also mandate that women's bodies keep reproducing. Where these bodies are prostituted, their reproductive capacity becomes entirely irrelevant in the overall scheme of control and exploitation, at least as long as it does not interfere with their primary purpose of serving male sexual desires. It is rather ironic to see how Christian pimping joins hands with Christian church imperatives that women give in to the body's reproductive power rather than take control of it. As Ninotchka Rocha from GABRIELA told me in a personal conversation (May 8, 2004), the children of prostituted women workers in American military bases are treated as disposables, like their mothers. They grow up in severe poverty and without education or any other social services. When I asked her what the women can do to protect themselves from becoming pregnant, she said they are discouraged from doing so because the Catholic Church does not allow any form of contraception.

Money, *der Stein des Weisen*, the philosopher's stone, the essence of life, has the power to change everything into money, and to destroy or bomb out of existence what stands in its way. To possess money, or capital, therefore means to possess and trade life. In von Werlhof's words (2001), "Money appears to be life itself, or the cosmic life force which can incite or force the continual production of something new, something previously unknown." The capitalist religious faith in the power of pure, unfettered financial speculations de-linked from the "real" economy of production of goods functions like the alchemist's non-substance, or "alchemy without matter." The body-less, pure spirit, of finance capitalism gives rise to the underlying patriarchal illusion of ultimately being able to replace a self-recreating, self-renewing ("first") nature with "pure" money, the "pure" essence of life, the one-and-only God (p. 30, 35). In other words, "*patriarchy crystallizes into capitalism*" precisely at the point when "'homo faber' is supposed to be finally replaced by 'homo creator,' a sort of secularized God" (von Werlhof, 2004, emphasis in the original).

Von Werlhof draws convincing parallels between the beliefs of pure financiers and ancient alchemists. The alchemists tried to find the secret of life by discovering the right tincture or elixir through "dissolving" and "combining," through separating pure from impure matter, or "mater" which, in order to be purified, first needs to undergo a process of mortification (p. 27). The Stratos dwellers, just like the alchemists, also desire to possess life in its "pure" form in order to produce life independent of nature itself. The power of the uterus, the female body's capacity to let new life ripen in its interior and give birth to it therefore needs to be usurped.

Non-motherly giving birth means wielding non-motherly or fatherly power, where the "father" stands in for the "lawful ruler, God, something superhuman" (von Werlhof, 2001, p. 18). The ultimate vision of a world where mothering is no longer dependent on an impure body is already temptingly waving its magic wand over investors who hold a quasi-religious belief in the power of money. It is money that begets interest which beget interest, all seemingly out of nothing, out of pure financial abstractions removed from anything concrete, material, and, even better, corporeal (von Werlhof, 2001, p. 34). Moreover, genetic engineering promises the ability of creating custom-made, womanless

children “from the glass: made to order by the ‘gods’ in the labs” (Klein, 1999, p. 196), thus disposing of the need for substitute birthing bodies. The Holy Spirit can therefore bypass the body of Virgin Mary by descending on a “virtual” mothering body. In the meantime, substitute mother-bodies certainly will, just like those of live-in or live-out maids and housekeepers, sex workers, and those laboring in sweatshops, be homogenously of color, Majority World, and poor, that is, those who most exemplify for the Stratos dwellers the impure aspects of life. International, national or local money lenders, national governments, recruitment and placement agencies, and individual men but also women, all collaborate in the process of hyper-regulating, controlling, and exploiting these real, impure bodies.

The patriarchal dream is still a dream but a lived nightmarish reality for real bodies who do real, material, place-bound, physical work in and on the natural, biological underground of life, the “blood, guts and gore” that leak out of messy bodies (Klein 1999, p. 196). These bodies are feeding the pure spirit of financial speculation, and their impurity has to be kept in check. They—and their exploitation—have to stay out of public sight, invisible, private, de-sexualized. Or real bodies must serve patriarchal men by becoming public goods, commodities that can be officially, publicly traded, displayed, or home-delivered like pizza.

### **Place-Bound Nomadic Feminism**

Poor, foreign-born, imported female servants of globalization live at multiple intersections of neoliberal-patriarchal constellations. Moreover, they move about in the small, confined space of a private household where fundamentally different social and cultural spaces are stacked up. Numerous surveillance and control mechanisms serve as a dam against the powerful waves that keep washing away the lines of demarcation between public and private, insider and outsider, us and them. These realities certainly ignite our fury. They can, however, also ignite our desire for a radically different, “‘deep’ alternative” to capitalist patriarchy (von Werlhof, 2004).

Traces of such a deep alternative can be found in various forms of agency, resistance, and organizational efforts of the workers themselves, or of groups affiliated with them. National or international organizations such as Andolan, GABRIELA, The Break the Chain Campaign, CASA, or RESPECT<sup>6</sup> all address issues related to labor and immigration rights, provide legal assistance or advocacy, develop a network with related political and social agencies, and engage in multiple efforts to increase public awareness. They all stress the need for respecting the workers, and for publicly recognizing the importance of domestic work for everyday living.

Where domestic labor has become the moving, mobile underground of a predatory extractive global capitalism our understanding of the relationship of capitalism and patriarchy has to change accordingly, and our demands have to push beyond calls for dignity and social recognition. Above all, as long as we remain fixated on the umbrella term of “reproductive labor” that is “gendered” according to patriarchal structural and ideological constellations we will not arrive at a point where a deep alternative can truly be envisioned. Extractive capitalism reaches into the interior of life, and it violates or destroys its integrity in a way that pushes beyond and below the descriptive or explanatory value of ‘gender,’ ‘reproduction,’ or ‘domestic.’

In the 70s, that is, precisely at the time neoliberalism started to rear its ugly and all-devouring head feminist analyses began to appear that challenged these conceptual frameworks. They were anchored in concerns about the loss of indigenous local subsistence economies in various Third World countries, and how this loss was accompanied by a “housewifization” of women’s labor. The term housewifization signified the disassociation of labor performed by women from presumably really “productive” activities, thus delegating “women’s work” to a confined “domestic,” “reproductive” sphere (Mies, 1982). By centering on the notions of ‘subsistence labor,’ ‘subsistence economies,’ or ‘subsistence production,’ and by emphasizing the vital importance of related work, corresponding analyses directly countered the patriarchal underpinnings of the capitalist definition of productive, that is, waged labor.

Within the framework of this essay I can only quote what Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies (1999) offer as the most valid summary of “subsistence production”:

Subsistence production or production of life includes all work that is expended in the creation, re-creation and maintenance of immediate life and which has no other purpose. Subsistence production therefore stands in contrast to commodity and surplus value production. For subsistence production the aim is “life,” for commodity production it is “money,” which “produces” ever more money, or the accumulation of capital. (p. 20).

As Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies concede, subsistence is a concept that is “awkward, not easy and smooth” (p.19). It suffers from a host of negative connotations which arise from the “barrier of disgust which today surrounds all unpaid, essential-for-life subsistence activities” (p. 17). I assume feminists are not immune to the effects of this barrier.

The concept of subsistence “demands an explanation.” It is therefore less able to be co-opted than other, more “plastic” terms such as sustainability (p. 19).<sup>7</sup> It appears in Leftist and mainstream economic analyses in ways that illustrate the life-threatening, patriarchal undercurrent of both frames of thought and action. Providing an explanation therefore means to turn these frameworks upside down and to dismantle the illusion that progress and development transform unpaid subsistence labor into modern wage labor. Wage labor, or commodity production, cannot exist without subsistence labor. Rapidly vanishing conditions of subsistence labor do therefore not signify that economies are equally rapidly developing. Rather, it signifies neoliberal trade agreements’ “license to plunder” (Mies & von Werlhof, 1999) and to wage war against the remnants of subsistence economies. Where the physical, social, and spiritual conditions of people’s livelihoods are destroyed, subsistence labor becomes mere survival work. Renate Klein (2001) points out how the license to plunder life, to extract life, is today “happily married” to cyber- and reproductive technology. Where “the annihilation of the organic human body ‘of woman born’ [is] enthusiastically advocated,” we can therefore speak of the threat of a “final patriarchal takeover” (p. 91, 98).

For the past 25 years I have been following these discussions and integrated many of their insights into my analyses of motherwork (author, 1999, 2002). Motherwork typifies core elements of subsistence labor, particularly its place-bound character. Subsistence work attends to the kaleidoscope of needs of bodies, creatures, or plants that

depend on a ground on which to grow, move about, or rest. I previously investigated how this place-bound work is inserted in a political economy of race-class segregation in the inner city of Chicago where mothers do this work in a confined, sectioned-off space (author, 2002). I examined how the “welfare debate” of the 90s—culminating in the 1996 welfare act in the United States—neither criticized racial-economic segregations nor the relocation of jobs most inner city residents had held in the steel or car industry to cheap labor countries. I described how it did, however, “criticize” the place-bound nature of the work “welfare mothers,” also referred to as “welfare queens,” were doing. How can the government be expected to pay for work that makes women get stuck in one place without the supervision of a male head of household? Welfare mothers had to become mobile, had to get away from their children or disappear between the cracks of a punitive welfare system or economic realities that offered jobs only to some, and only for non-living wages.

It is not difficult to see a link between this enforced mobility and the growing internationalization of domestic and cleaning work. In order for the state to reduce its expenses, or to receive remittances badly needed to pay back growing interests on international loans, mothers have to be torn from their children. The children become the invisible and never-talked-about little figures being pushed around in an abysmal or non-existing childcare system or taken care of by invisible women “back home.” These children testify to the latest stage of the interplay of patriarchal and capitalist relations. Bordercrossing capital is accompanied by bordercrossing nannies/housekeepers, thus undermining the place-bound groundedness of subsistence labor and transforming it into mobile involuntary captivity. The ruthless, life-threatening exploitation of the workers therefore directly mirrors the poisonous reality of the patriarchal dream of a motherless society.

This nightmarish reality nevertheless contains core elements of a deep alternative which we can only discern when we turn things upside down. We need to begin envisioning, and constructing, such an alternative literally from the ground up, that is, from a grounded, place-bound affirmation of the material and bodily foundations of life. Rather than arising out of an omnipresent contempt or hatred of such foundations, and of the people in charge of their care, bordercrossings or nomadic journeying across vast geographic and cultural distances would instead be grounded in deliberate, conscious political motions that connect an affirmation of place-bound work with diasporic living.

Filipina migrant workers, for instance, are providing the outlines of a blueprint for a transnational feminism that is engaged in place-bound nomadic journeying. They have shown that it is possible to develop “transnational bonds” or “transnational family ties” across vast geographical and geopolitical distances (Parreñas, 2001a, pp. 1151, 1144; GABRIELA).<sup>8</sup> In other words, they live the possibility of transnational homemaking.

“Homemaking” is a rather loaded term. It conjures up a host of associations with women’s work in the home, and with the rule of the father or the male head of household. I nevertheless use the term because ‘home’ does not as automatically conjure up images of narrowness, smallness, docility, or captivity as does ‘domestic.’ Rather, home is a multi-faceted, multi-layered and fluid notion. Home can be small or large, and it can refer to a concrete dwelling or a real or figurative home country. It can be a material place or a psychological or spiritual space. Furthermore, the term allows us to open the small confined space of a private household into a “zone of possibilities” (Anzaldúa, 2002) that

lets a better future shine through the domestic workers' suffering and hardship. Drawing on the notions of home and nomadic journeying therefore enables us to rethink and revalue what is already "together" in a highly coercive way, and to lay bare the radical core of "doing home" (Bowlby, Gregory & McKie, 1997) under these conditions.<sup>9</sup>

Migrant domestic workers are doing home in a diaspora that not only surrounds their place of work, that is, the homeplace, but also slices through its very interior. They move in several in-between spaces simultaneously. Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) writes about *nepantla*, the in-between-space when describing the struggles of a traveler in transition to a new way of seeing herself, and herself in relation to others and to the world. She links home with the in-between-place of a bridge, that is, a place of "constant transition." She thereby underlines its politically charged nature which makes this "bridge called home" "the most unsafe of all spaces" (p. 574).

Migrant domestic workers are travelers in constant transition. Their experiences speak in direct ways of home as the most unsafe of all spaces as well as places. It is not their desire to cross a political and spiritual life threshold that, according to Anzaldúa makes home the place of transition. Rather, it is brutal economic necessity that brought them to a place where their lives are regulated, controlled, and supervised in bearable or unbearable ways. They do not engage in subsistence labor due to political convictions but due to the fact that living bodies need physical attention and care. However, this is precisely where they, and the work they do, speak of a grounded, an embodied *nepantla*, and where they ask us challenging questions: Can we envision a future where diasporic and place-bound living are conjoined in dignified, life-affirming ways? Can we create a planetary home by anchoring our political nomadic journeying not only in an acknowledgment but also in concrete, material support of the universal need for physical, bodily, place-bound work?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'trafficking' used to refer primarily to women's experiences in the commercial sex trade. The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons ([http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/trafficking\\_human\\_beings.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/trafficking_human_beings.html)), the ILO 's Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labor (Chew, 2003), and the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act ([www.usdoj.gov/trafficking.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/trafficking.htm)) all expanded the term to include the processes leading up to and sustaining forced labor of any kind, performed by children, women, or men.

<sup>2</sup> Space does not allow me to describe the many different cultural and national backgrounds of migrant domestic workers who experience their own variations of national or cultural stereotyping, such as Indian or Thai women in Singapore (Yeoh and Huang 1999a), or Christian, Muslim, or Hindu Sri Lankan women in the Middle East (Ismail 1999). Their stories are unique *and* they illustrate their universal fate of being super-exploited.

<sup>3</sup> In Hondagneu-Sotelo's writings the term "nanny/housekeeper" is deliberately used in order to capture the fact that the paid domestic worker is doing the job of two for the pay of one (2001). She is, however, quite conscious of the fact that employers and recruitment agencies directly "whiten" the occupation when using the term nanny as it invariably refers to white American or European-born women.

<sup>4</sup> There exists different visa requirements for European-born “au pairs” and imported domestic workers. Young, middle-class women from Europe enter the US with J-1 visa as part of the congressionally sponsored au pair program that pays for hotels upon entry, organizes orientation sessions, and fosters networking among au pairs. See Joy M. Zarembka, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> This was reported by Ninotchka Rocha, the founder of GABRIELA, a U.S.-Philippine solidarity organization, at the Midwest Conference on War, Labor, Migration, and Trafficking: A Focus on the Filipina, DePaul University, Chicago, May 7- 8, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See their websites for more information: Andolan <http://andolan.net>, Break the Chain Campaign <http://www.breakthecaincampaign.org>, CASA <http://www.casademaryland.org>, GABRIELA <http://www.gabnet.org>, RESPECT <http://www.solidar.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Genevieve Vaughan (1997) provides a related feminist analysis of the “gift paradigm” that is grounded in a “gift economy” and “gift labor. Within the framework of this paper I cannot do justice to her writings, especially as this would require a careful rendition of her painstakingly detailed descriptions of the many misperceptions and distortions the notion of “gift” easily lends itself to.

<sup>8</sup> See Benmayor and Skotness, 1999, for other examples of transnational family ties created by emigrants and return migrants.

<sup>9</sup> I am here building on previous work on the theme of creating a nomadic home where I discuss the various meanings of diaspora and nomadic journeying. See author, 2004, 2005.

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