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## Triply Sewn: Evoking Past, Present, and Future Selves in Guyanese Domestic Work

Courtney Paige Carr<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In this article, I seek to illuminate how domestic work reveals elements of past, present, and future selves through an analysis of an interview I conducted with my mother<sup>2</sup> about her experiences as a domestic worker in New York. My mother's origins in Guyana are important as they illuminate the locational impacts of an economy impacted by the feminization of its proletariat and the emergence of neo-liberalization. In order to capture my mother's existence as a historical being amidst an ever-evolving economy, oral narratives were methodologically employed. An examination of her past self within the oral history serves as a mechanism to track the migratory implications of a transforming economy and her positionality in it. The articulation of my mother's present voice underscores how my mother remains furnished in her identity and relegates agency to herself in the process of recounting. Future imaginations of self from the interview elucidate the fallacy of the American dream and its nightmarish reality for many immigrants and their intersectional bodies and identities. The cumulative conjunction of my mother's past, present, and future selves parallel the tripled conceptualizations of women of color as jeopardized by their race, gender, and class. Therefore, by positing my mother's narrative formulations as 'triply sewn,' the feminization of the proletariat is metaphorically reconfigured, and the ways in which the domestic worker's bodily reality transcends space and time through its multigenerational stitching is elucidated.

**Keywords:** Narrative, oral history, her-story, temporal appraisal theory

### Introduction

Caribbean migration from countries such as Guyana has contributed significantly to the devalued labor supply of domestic workers throughout the United States, particularly in metropolitan areas such as New York City. My mother's migratory journey from Guyana to the United States in the late 1980s encapsulates a deliberate socioeconomic relegation cast onto her immigrant body. In the late 1980s, during her time of migration, a reported 10,000 Guyanese migrated each year, even prompting the government to put a temporary ban on public servants, fearing the repercussions of migratory brain drain (Roopnarine, 200: 17). For the working-class women of color who still migrated, they faced the 'triple jeopardy' of cyclical poverty as they were consigned to a devalued position in the Global North's labor queue.

Guyanese working-class women's devalued positionalities in the Global North's labor queue are symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism's historicized presence. Due to dependent integration on the world capitalist system, periods of prosperity and depression caused by the business cycles of the metropolitan countries affected Guyanese people, whether or not they were aware of this external influence (Rodney, 1981: 19). Economic dependence, rooted in Guyana's

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<sup>2</sup> My mother's name has been removed from interview excerpts to protect her anonymity.

colonial relations with the Global North, advanced the ebb and flow of migratory patterns and re-positioned my mother's body right into the invisible hands of neoliberalism.

The period of prosperity and depression marked by the ebb and flow of economic dependency had far-reaching implications on poverty rates in Guyana. In 1989- two years after my mother's migration to the U.S.- Guyana became the begging bowl of the Caribbean, with 87 percent of the population living in poverty and a gross national product over 600 percent, making it the poorest country in the Western hemisphere (Roopnarine, 2001:19). Guyana was constructed to be the begging bowl of the Caribbean because of how their bowl was emptied by exploitative neoliberal entities, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, that obstructed its extractive practices with cloaks of invisibility.

Monetary support from institutions such as the IMF began in the late 1980s – which chronologically aligns with when my mother emigrated – and put developing countries like Guyana into worsened fiscal debt. “Guyana signed an IMF agreement in 1990 and was slated to receive \$7 million in food aid and \$1 million from the US in structural adjustment support funds in the US fiscal year 1991” (McAfee, 1991: 51). Structural adjustment deals operated on the fallacious notion of economic salvation for impoverished regions with insufficient transparency about the role countries in the Global North played in furnishing that poverty.

As the Global North poured support funds to the Global South, which catapulted them to be international saviors, they were fabricating a commoditized economy from which they could garner extractive labor. IMF-required currency devaluations were pushed in Caribbean nations to offer the region's cheapest labor and lowest commodity prices (McAfee, 1991: 177). The IMF is driven by its neoliberal sentiments, in which everything is commodifiable for surplus-value. A feminized proletariat, which domestic workers are situated within, act as viable sites of surplus labor extraction in a neoliberal economic schema.

### **Stitching Domestic Work**

Grace Chang describes the irony of immigrant women being depicted as disposable in her book *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*. Although they provide society with its most important care services, they are treated as invisible or at best disposable (Chang, 2000: 204). The presupposed disposability of immigrants and women of color workers is further concretized through the illustration of nanny diaper maintenance. Middle-class women are often credited for their profound environmental preservation when they use cloth diapers, even though it is immigrants and women of color who are doing the real work behind the scenes to ensure the cloth diapers are being maintained (Chang, 2000: 34). This demonstrates the invisible and dehumanizing work that working-class immigrant women of color perform behind the scenes that get taken for granted in the homes that they occupy and beyond.

The taken-for-grantedness of working-class women of color's labor is a byproduct of neoliberalism's universal commoditizing. Within the neoliberal state, elements that are not actually commodities, such as sexuality, culture, history, heritage, and nature, become commodifiable (Harvey, 2005: 166). Therefore, although women's bodies were never produced for the purpose of monopoly extraction, they become socioeconomic entities that can be expended and disposed of. This disposability is amplified as working-class women of color's bodies become 'sex-typed' in the labor economy. When the proletariat becomes feminized, a disproportionate female workforce in poorer countries that had largely remained outside the industrial economy becomes mobilized (Sassen, 1998: 84). As IMF policies emerged and poverty became heightened, the proletariat

became further feminized to expand the labor pool, and my mother's body was still circuitously entangled in this interwoven labor pool even from miles away in the United States.

The ways in which my mother's proletarianized body was entangled is demonstrated through the hierarchical exploitation dynamics with African American and Caribbean immigrant women in the capitalist hierarchy. Mary C. Waters portrays these socioeconomic shifts in *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dream and American Realities* as niche formation and succession, where she exemplifies how African American women were frozen out of entry-level jobs, while immigrant bodies began to concentrate exploitable sectors of the economy, such as in the service economy (Waters, 1999: 108). Although African American women who existed in the service economy climbed to higher spheres of employment, their subjugation was maintained through discriminatory hiring practices, while contrastingly immigrant women's bodies became sites of super-exploitation.

### **My mother's her-story**

An oral history based on a semi-structured interview with my mother was methodologically employed to illustrate how Guyanese immigrant women's bodies have been rendered disposable and how my mother persevered nonetheless in a neoliberal economy that relegated her to be commodifiable. The analysis of my mother's interview will serve as a case study to prove how Guyana has been cycled into neoliberalism through its involvement in structural adjustment programs, which marginalized people by orbiting them into poverty. The resulting poverty whirled women's migratory bodies into devalued labor positions at home and abroad. The materiality of my mother's oral history will unearth subjugated knowledge to generate in-depth knowledge about the participant from their perspective (Leavy, 2011: 4). The transcription of my mother's vocalizations is also evocative of historical materialism because my mom's existence as a living individual will encapsulate a consciousness that belongs to her (Marx and Engels, 1972: 23). The experiences mapped onto my mother's body as a working-class immigrant woman of color provides a unique perspective and consciousness that historicizes Guyanese domestic work in the 1980s.

In the process of reiterating her experiences to me, my mom unearthed the potential of liberation from her stitched past as a domestic worker. Storytelling is an avenue through which a person can express herself in her own terms and reconstruct her life/her-story in the act of telling (Dossa, 2009). By recounting her own story on her own terms, it is ensured that dominating structures do not have the capacity to continue to replicate subjectivized narratives that reinforce a slated power dynamic and gaze. Through the enactment of telling her story and seeing its transcription come to fruition, my mother is staking her experiential past in the present and dictating its continuity in the future. Within this transcension of time and space, she is not only speaking for her place in the world, but she is also *making* one's own place and erecting one's own narrative (Boehmer, 2005). Although her positionality as a domestic worker rendered her as disposable, she continued to carved space for herself in the moments of spatial and cognitive confinement.

The following responses featured below are excerpts from the interviews conducted with my mom, including the first question, which asks why my mother emigrated from Guyana, to which she replied:

In Guyana, back then, New York was the glam... You heard about America and New York, and it just seems like, a land with milk and honey...

In Exodus 3:17, the land flowing with milk and honey is seen as a Promise Land for the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, away from the affliction of Egypt. Therefore, my mother's discursive analogy implies that America was a promised land of dreams, away from the challenges of poverty that she was riddled with in Guyana. Similar to many Caribbean immigrants, New York City played a salient role in her mental map because of its perception as a special object of dreams, curiosity, a sense of achievement, and drive for adventure (Foner, 2008: 28). For my mother, America and New York City surpassed dreams and took on biblical materiality.

Contrastingly, her entrance into domestic work upon her emigration to New York, eventuates the jolting capitalistic pigeonholing that occurs to immigrants' bodies:

They were the only ones who would hire you to work [...] so it wasn't a choice, you didn't have a choice, and it was work... it paid the bills, and you eat...

My mother was conscious of the choicelessness given to immigrants when they are in need of employment. Her survival was dependent on her capitalist contribution to society, which manifested as domestic work.

Pierre Jalee identifies the optionlessness that workers, such as my mother, become subject to as elemental to the relations of production. In the capitalist mode of production, proletarians own nothing but their labor and are obliged to sell it to the capitalist owners of production to survive (Jalee, 1977: 12). My mother's journey illuminates this: she was left with no other options, but to engage in domestic work. When asked what domestic work meant for her, my mother replied: "It meant being able to have a normal day to day life... domestic or not, it was work... I was able to pay for a place to live; I was able to buy clothes, food, the normal necessities... You say domestic, I say work..." This saying embodies how my mother was not concerned by the technicalities of what she did; she just had to survive.

The survival mentality my mother had is further elucidated through her description of cleaning procedures that negated her embodied reality:

They didn't think about how you felt, how tired you were, if you had problems, if you were missing family, all of that didn't matter; clean my house... it needed to be cleaned a certain way. This needs to be done by this time...

The people she worked for saw her as a commodity that was there to perform labor, and they held her performance to refined standards. Bonnie Thornton Dill explains how there exists a continuous tension between identification with the superior (the giver of gifts and rewards) and social distance (protection of independence) (Dill, 1994: 9). This tension is exemplified in my mother's dehumanizing experience as a domestic worker: they were not concerned about her family or livelihood because their relationship was constructed based on the employer-employee dichotomy that depended on her exploitable labor.

The lack of concern for my mother's livelihood was demonstrated through her detailed description of the live-in work she performed:

I'm downstairs, my back is hurting, my feet are hurting, and I'm trying to get myself into relaxed mode before I take a shower and go to bed so I can start the hell all over again at

6:00 the next morning...The whole house had buzzers you could talk into, "Can you come up here? I need help" You don't know how many times I thought of poisoning that bitch?!

The woman she worked for did not let her get a second of mental relief, which corresponds to Hondagneu-Sotelo's analysis of domestic work in *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*, where she describes how "live-ins cannot even retreat to their own rooms because work seeps into their sleep and their dreams. There is no time off from the job, and they say they feel confined, trapped, imprisoned." (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001:31) This aligns with my mother's explanation of the hell that she would have to return to the next day, illuminating the nightmare of domestic work, obstructing the gleaming land of milk and honey that furnished her American dream.

The nightmarish reality of my mother's American dream is further illustrated through her discussion of an employer's ostracization after she was sick with the flu. Her employer exclaimed, "You got that and brought that here... Well, go home, go home..." My mother reflected on the occurrence stating, "She acted like it was the worst thing like I brought Ebola or something..." The construction of the immigrant as diseased is reflective of an unrealistic racialized perception about imported germs, even though these germs can be incubated just as elusively and easily in American tourists heading back from vacation in the Bahamas as in a Russian visa applicant (Markel and Stern, 2002). The ability for tourist or visa applicants to be equal contagions for a disease is concretized in my mother's inclusion of the fact that she probably got sick from her employer's daughter. With her sick daughter, the employer showed compassion; however, my mother as a domestic worker, was an othered entity.

The mistreatment of my mother after she got sick is reflective of an embodied erasure is hierarchically amplified when the structures of race and gender are considered within the matrices of oppression. The servant role was employed as an effective means of keeping Blacks in their place, emphasizing the superior status of whites, and maintaining the status quo (Dill, 1994: 14). The historical presence of slavery deemed Black bodies as exploitable and Black female bodies as super-exploitable in the economic hierarchy, cementing their triply jeopardized bodies. One's placement in these triply self-perpetuating structures predetermines one's ability to move in, out, and beyond these structures. The definition of labor, the allocation of workers of distinct places in segmented labor markets, and the composition of the underclass have all been dependent on race [ , gender, and class] as the organizing principles or rules of the game (Omi and Winant, 1986: 67). Strategies to win in games such as chess include being three steps ahead of your opponent. However, in the slated chess game of capitalism, only capitalists aided by their colonial ties, are able to employ these strategies of advantage to its fullest extent.

At the end of the interview, when I asked my mom what her hopes for the future were, she realistically replied:

Sometimes I wonder if I do have a future, it feels so hopeless sometimes...

My mother's response is reflective of how America rendered her disposable after years of extracting labor from her. This is not a story that ends with gold at the end of the rainbow. It is rooted in the reality of feeling, even if that feeling is hopelessness. My mother's vulnerability is an American reality that illustrates the confines of the American dream and clarifies its existence as a capitalistic consumptive creation.

## **Triply Sewn**

My mother's retold experiences as a Guyanese domestic worker illuminate the ways in which a Caribbean immigrant woman's body can be triply sewn. The "sewing" acts as a metaphor for the jeopardized stitching thrust onto the intersectional bodies of working-class women of color. The triply stitched threads recognize economic exploitation on the basis of race, gender, and class (Lindsay, 1979: 105). Within the practice of sewing and its engagement by immigrant women of color's bodies: "Sewing spans time and space, while also serving as a personal means of expression" (Boerema, Russell, and Aguilar, 2010). Sewing is intertwined as a practice congruent with domestic work, so its quilted patterns embroider itself onto conceptualizations of my mother's past, present, and future selves.

The ways in which the interstices of stitching locate and dislocate while simultaneously transcending time and space is an instructional framework to consider when examining the impact of domestic work on my mother's narratorial past, present, and future. In the process of hemming, women's bodies transcend chronology in correspondence with the arrhythmic motions of their sewing. In the process of their intermittent embroidering, differential temporal planes emerge that set the stage for interweaved realities to be deciphered (Bendien, 2013). As my mother's location changed as she went from house to house and family to family as a domestic worker, she remained woven in her identity that acted as a protracted needle amidst the punctures of an exploitative economy.

Sewing is interwoven as a readily exploitable occupation because of its ties to preexisting social structures. It evokes understandings of femininity while upholding class, race, and gendered hierarchies and blurring the boundaries between paid and unpaid (Gordon, 2014). The occupation of sewing replicates societal respectability politics while maintaining structures that leave working-class women of color readily expendable, similar to domestic work. Through the loops of sewing, sites of resistance have the capacity to impose themselves amidst the seams. As a craft, sewing can function in multiple ways as a mechanism for contestation, intentionality, and collective action (Bain, 2016). While rendered dispensable, my mother still remained adamant about her humanity, intentional about the delegation of her rights, and perceptive about her connectivities to other domestic workers and the lessons they could teach her, which imply how she crafted loopholes for her liberation.

## **The Hems of Past, Present, and Future Selves**

My mother's past retelling of self, reverberated through her oral history, echoes the experience of many women before and after her. By articulating past moments into present realities, the disposability that economic hierarchies attempted to transfix onto my mother's body is mitigated. Beyond my mother's story, it is hoped that through this narrative formulation, dignity will be brought back to domestic work and that the global economic system that treats so many domestic workers as disposable will be disrupted (Chang, 2000: viii). My mother's story is not only a stitching of selves but also a ripping to the seams of institutions that have exploited and continue to exploit working-class women of color because of the accountability that her story provokes.

The construction of my mother's her-story reinforces her presence in the present. Although the extent to which temporally extended selves are incorporated to the present self varies, a subjectively proximal self almost belongs to the present self by association (Peetz and Wilson,

2008). Temporal appraisal theory<sup>3</sup> is useful to instituting how my mother's narrative is a reclamation of her past self. Through my mother's engagement of her past self, the disposability thrust onto her domestic worker body is recyclable. Concurrently, in order to concretize her future self, the remnants of her contracted American dream must be revisited. The land of milk and honey that she envisioned was spoiled, dried, and stickier than she could have ever imagined; the American dream was a nightmare. Rather than allowing the entrails of the nightmare to be the beginning, middle, and end of my mother's story, this narrative seeks to uncover the possibilities that lie in the deconstruction of that nightmare.

### Reflection

My mother's story is a microcosm of many women like her who turned to domestic work as a means of survival. Although my mother's life as a domestic is rooted in a past version of self, its ramifications on her perception of present and future selves are evident, which concretizes the far-reaching impact of domestic work on one's life. As the daughter of my interviewee, my body is threaded to her future perceptive self. Therefore, this oral her-story was so much more than storytelling for me; I saw myself in every pause [ellipsis] and every emphasis [punctuation mark] I recorded during her interview. She started doing domestic work at the same age that I was when I conducted this interview for a class as a Master's student. Even though time, location, and condition had changed generationally, her voice had not and was still being preserved across generational timelines. As I continue to stitch her stories together, I remain grounded in knowing that she is the needle, thread, and seamstress of her own story and the stories of her ancestors.

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<sup>3</sup> From "The temporally extended self: The relation of past and future selves to current identity, motivation, and goal pursuit" by J. Peetz and A. E. Wilson (2008). *Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(6), 2090-2106. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00150.x>

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