

19. A Male Domestic Worker

An Interview With RJ Maccani¹

Silvia Federici: What is it like to be a male nanny? What are the main differences from the viewpoint of how you are treated by employers, what is expected of you, what tasks you may be asked to do or not to do, and the power relations generated by this work? Were you treated with more respect? Were you better paid?

RJ Maccani: I supported myself for three years by working as a nanny. I've just recently transitioned to other paid work. Over the course of those three years I cared for seven different children from four different households here in New York City.

The vast majority of my peers in this work were immigrant women of color. Sometimes I would run into a young white American woman who was working as a nanny. On only one or two occasions did I meet another man who did so. I was the only 30-year-old man that I knew working as a nanny.

¹ Interview by Silvia Federici with RJ Maccani, on his experience working three years as a child care-worker, in New York. RJ is a member of the Regeneración Collective.

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Amongst the other nannies, even those I was closest with, differences of gender, race, class and citizenship always felt greater than our shared experience as domestic workers. This difference held not only in the rest of our lives but within our experiences of domestic work as well.

My peers were often expected to clean their employers' homes, cook for the family or do their laundry in addition to caring for the children. At most I was responsible for ensuring that the home was in the same condition as when I began the workday, and that the children had well prepared food.

Having worked as a union organizer, I was comfortable initiating frank conversations with other nannies regarding pay and conditions. I discovered that I was usually better paid than most of the other nannies, not always, but sometimes much more so and for less work.

In one case a nanny with whom I was particularly close confided in me that she earned just \$10 an hour, which is a paltry sum given the cost of living in NYC. She worked long hours caring for two children who were in different places developmentally, which is important to note and generally more difficult than taking care of two children of about the same age/ability. She did their laundry and often cooked dinner as well. She was from Mexico, without papers and with little facility in speaking English. The family she worked for was well regarded amongst the network of middle class families in the neighborhood for whom we all worked. Perhaps more troubling, the father of that family had himself immigrated to the United States from Central America, albeit under much more favorable conditions.

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So in some ways I believe that other factors turned out to be as decisive as gender with respect to how employers treated me. The distance between my class background and education level, and that of my employers, was trivial next to the chasm between them and the other nannies.

I was like a value added commodity: an articulate, youthful and earnest white man to take care of your kids. From the most cynical of perspectives, I was the perfect solution for middle class parents who didn't want to see an oppressed person working in their home. I can safely say that none of the families I worked for were so cynically calculating. And in most cases we had, and maintain, a rich connection to each other.

I occupied this undefined, in between position in the neighborhood. Over a couple of years living and working in the same place, socializing outside of work hours with nannies and employers alike, I was inside of conversations that one side or the other, nanny or employer, is not normally included in and yet I was still not privy to the entirety of either group's discussions I suspect.

SF: How has working in a typically female, gender/cast job affected your relationship with your friends, family, and the people you interact with in the course of your work? How do people react on learning you work as a nanny? What has been the reaction of other nannies towards you?

RJM: Well my grandmother always inquired as to when I'd get a real job. I felt sad hearing this. Not because I felt ashamed of my work but because one of the major undertakings of my grandmother's life was raising three children.

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In general, though, reactions from people varied greatly. I got the impression that my employment as a nanny wasn't the sort of thing to announce at a big social gathering. You know, something must be a bit off with me if this is what I'm doing at my age. The more classed the setting, the less accepting or interested people would generally be about my work. My grandmother notwithstanding, women tended to see my being a nanny much more positively, unless they were sizing me up as a potential life partner.

My political community in New York City, as well as my Mother, her partner and a few others, all understood my nanny work as an expression of my pro-feminist commitments.

I met other nannies while on playgrounds and in other public and semi-public settings where it was common for us to congregate with the children. They always assumed that I was the children's father. I was usually met with surprise and either appreciation or suspicion when it was established that I was also a nanny - appreciation for seeing a man take on this work or the suspicion of my intentions for deciding to spend so much time around children.

SF: Care work is often described as a problematic type of work, because of the individualized relation it establishes between worker and employers, because of the isolation in which the work is done, the precise definition of the tasks expected and also because the work takes place in the home of the employer and thus creates a situation of intimacy and at the same time of conflict (about control of space) that is not present in other jobs. How did you live this experience? What were the main difficulties and points of conflict you experienced?

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RJM: Nannying can be quite nerve-wracking for all the reasons you've listed. It's better or worse depending on how happy the parents are, if they are relaxed and down to earth or overprotective and uptight.

With an uptight parent, or worse, an uptight family, the stress level of the work can get really high. As a nanny I often had to make unanticipated decisions without input from the parents. But it's not a question of, "What would I do if this were my kid?" You've got to try to read their minds. If you choose something other than what the parents would have done, you can get in quite a bit of trouble.

Injuries can be terrifying. One day I had an accident where one of the children fell on their head. I can't remember the last time I felt that much terror. Would this poor child be permanently injured? I remember when this sort of thing happened to me while I was a kid with my mother and her friends. But it's different when you're not the parent. The child was fine, thank goodness, and the parents were sympathetic; they had had a similar accident with their older son.

However, there was a family that I worked for where the isolation of the work, the family dynamics and expectations were particularly hard. After working with their two children for a year, the mother scolded me so harshly, and in front of the kids, that I began sobbing. She apologized later and acknowledged that they'd been very happy with my work. But there was no one else there to bear witness to that treatment, or to have a memory of the events that led up to it.

Upon reflection I realized that the mother had frequently talked down to the father in front of the children

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as well. The misgivings I had about the way I was treated wouldn't be validated by anyone else's first-person experience until a friend of mine also worked in that home some time later. That kind of affirmation can be a rare luxury for a nanny. It was through our conversation as back-to-back nannies that we recognized a pattern when the older of the two children began talking down to the father as well. This is the kind of really intimate stuff that stays with me.

SF: How did you deal with the emotional aspect of childcare: the desire to and danger of becoming too attached to the child/ren you care for, in a situation in which you can be suddenly separated from them and have no authority to shape decisions affecting their lives or preventing negative treatments of them by the parents?

RJM: I miss all the children that I've known through this work. They're so cute, how could I not want to see them? That being said, I don't miss the work itself. It feels very mundane at times, and yet it often requires your full attention. I was usually quite happy to return the kids to their parents at the end of my shift.

I never felt that I had much authority. I could mitigate a problem, or be supportive of the child's self-determination, but that was about it. There was a very young boy I took care of who insisted on wearing dresses. It was great to be there for him, to affirm his choice, to talk gender with a four year old, but I had no illusions about my overall power in the dynamic of his home.

I do want to see all of them again, to see how they are doing. This is for me more than them, though. The youngest ones will not even remember who I am.

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SF: Has being a man enabled you to better control the conditions of your work or made it more difficult? What tactics, forms of ‘subversion’ have you used to resist unwanted tasks, express discontent, force different relations? Have you joined care workers organizations? What have been the most effective form of resistance /struggle you have engaged in?

RJM: Sometimes just my being a “man” was a service I provided. In some cases the parents felt their children needed to spend more time around men, or needed a man to keep up with their kid. Lowered expectations around my capacity to provide certain forms of care, such as cleaning or food preparation, meant that I often got out of work that female nannies would not. This was a curious reproduction of part of the problem that I was presumably there to solve: in three out of the four households it was the mother, in some form or another, who was more responsible for the children than the father.

I got involved with care work as political work as early as 2004, maybe earlier. For example, as members of Critical Resistance NYC, a local chapter of a national penal abolition organization, Mayuran Tiruchelvam and I would step out of meetings inside of an alternative to incarceration facility for women to take care of the children so the mothers could more fully participate. Over the summer of 2005 I joined two other volunteers, Ileana Méndez-Peñate and Radhika Singh, in serving as a bilingual presence within a childcare cooperative, Pachamama, that was created and run entirely by mothers of color in Brooklyn – most of whom spoke only English or only Spanish.

Pachamama was a political project that grew out of Sista II Sista and other organizational experiences of women of

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color in the city. One of the organizers and mothers in the cooperative, Ije Ude, was the person who first politicized me around my experiences of sexual abuse as a child. By the end of 2005 Ileana, Radhika, Mayuran and I formed *Regeneración*, a collective grounded in working with children and relationship building with radical immigrant, queer and women of color organizations.

I've found *Regeneración* to be an effective form of struggle. Many more people have become involved in the collective since we initiated it back in '05. We've worked in concert with local organizations as well as national gatherings to create space for children to be present and sometimes directly participate in struggles. For example, a couple of years ago we worked with one of our partner organizations, Domestic Workers United (DWU), and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice as well, to create a children's vigil in support of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaign. The children of domestic workers came together with children taken care of by domestic workers to draw, sing and demonstrate in front of City Hall.

And, of course, *Regeneración* being there to work with the children has facilitated parents' participation in groups such as DWU, Families for Freedom (fighting detentions and deportations) or Center for Immigrant Families (defending, improving and building beyond public education in Manhattan). It was through working with the collective that I was first approached to do paid childcare work, to be a nanny.

Although I was a domestic worker, I never joined DWU as a member because of that chasm I described earlier between the relative privileges of my lived experience and those of the immigrant women of color who are DWU's

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base. It's been through *Regeneración* that I've found a space to directly organize around care work.

SF: What are the main lessons you have learned about (a) the nature of care work, childcare in particular, and (b) the forms of struggle that are appropriate for this type of work. It is often argued (also by childcare/eldercare workers) that the forms of struggle that apply to industrial work do not apply, as you cannot (for instance) sabotage the people you are caring for. On the basis of your experience how would you want childcare/carework to be restructured, reorganized?

RJM: Part of the reason that I became a nanny, aside from the fact that I needed to earn a wage, was to gain experience in a sphere that felt very unfamiliar. I learned that childcare is very hard work. It's led me to think hard about whether or not I want to be a parent one day. As a job, it's harder still for how little money and respect is granted to those who do the work.

Domestic Workers United is an obvious reference point here as a form of struggle for this kind of wage labor. Beyond this, taking into account the mostly uncompensated care work that is happening all the time can lead us to shift how we struggle. This is one of the insights we've had within *Regeneración*. What's the pace of a movement that includes parents, children, elders, people who have fallen ill or are living with disabilities? These categories inevitably encompass each of us for at least some period of our lives. What do we gain when we acknowledge that, plan for it, build all of ourselves into the plan of struggle?

I'd like to see care work reorganized so that it is not always some who are giving and others who are receiving. It is something to which we all can contribute, in one fashion

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or another. It can be a pleasure not only to receive care but also to give it. Care work can be deeply humanizing. Let's share this work. Let's feel joy, despair, suffering and relief, together.