

I
am
a [*not*] your
nanny [other] mother

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I. About

I am [not] your [m]other / “I Am Your Nanny” is an oral history project centered around career nannies living and working in New York. This exploration combines oral history, poetry, prose, film, edited audio, and mixed media. Through the first person testimonies of nannies, I hope to build on the work of black feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Dorothy E. Baker, who have examined the role of caring for young children under many different titles, including careworker, othermother, nanny, and motherworker (Baker and Collins). I hope to uplift the voices of nannies, so that we might question how caretaking and nurturance can be woven into our understanding of both mothering and legitimate work. My hope is that by witnessing these testimonies through multiple mediums, my audience might better understand the sacrifice and deep love that this work involves.

II. Vocabulary

One of the first questions to emerge from this oral history project was how to refer to the narrator’s profession, which is also my own. Are we nannies, babysitters, domestic workers, or caretakers? The discomfort, I soon discovered, was mostly held by outsiders, some who employ nannies, and some who simply look away from us on sidewalks. I choose not to share their discomfort. Nanny is my preferred term and also the term used most frequently by nearly all of the interviewees. Over the course of our correspondence, many interviewees used the word nanny to describe their work, though often interchangeably with other terms such as babysitter, domestic worker, caretaker, and most significantly, mother.

I came to understand very early in the conceptual phase of the project that the work of nannying could not be separated from the work of mothering. When asked to state the difference between nannying and mothering, many interviewees, most of them mothers themselves, stated that there was no difference. As one interviewee stated, “I am a mom. These are *my* kids.” I knew I would have to examine mothering on the record, both in my research, and privately within myself. What is a mother? Is a nanny a mother? Can she occupy this role without displacing another mother? What happens when maternal subjectivities are viewed as oppositional to the professionalization of the work?

I decided to place mothering as the ideological center of the project, using its supple and uncertain boundaries as a guide for my inquiries. I did a lot of reading about mothering, and of the first texts to emerge from my search was Andrea O'Reilly book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. I discovered this text shortly after Toni Morrison's passing in the fall of 2019, when I was first beginning as a student at OHMA. At the time, I viewed myself as an artist trying to pass as an academic, and I looked to Toni's legacy as an example of what being an artist and scholar while black could look like. I appreciated O'Reilly's perspective for the way it placed Morrison's literary configurations of motherhood as a foundation for feminist thought. Much of the language I had been searching for to speak about my goals for this project, which had previously been trapped in a place of abstract feeling, came to light in O'reilly's examination of Morrison's characters. One particular statement that remained with me through the project was her claim that “Morrison defines maternal identity as a site of power for black women that has as its explicit goal the empowerment of children” (O'Reilly). The

empowerment of children was something I had never been able to articulate as an undercurrent for what I believed uplifted nanny work to a spiritual practice. It was something I witnessed on the job, and it was a theme that arose organically from my interviews when I knew to listen for it. These words returned to me midway through the project, when I was struggling to curb my inquiries away from the employer-nanny relationship. O'Reilly's work introduced terms such as "othermother" and "motherworker" to my vocabulary, which I have found both useful and empowering. O'Reilly sites Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thoughts* as the origin for these terms (O'Reilly).

My project title, a visual diagram that could be read in a number of ways, is meant to reflect a non-linear exploration of these terms and also the non-linear relational pathways that exist within the mothering lexicon. I decided that the spoken title of the project would be "I am Your Nanny" because for me, it seemed like the most empowering reading and the most true; because when the children ask me— *who am I*— sometimes years after a job has ended, this is what I tell them. I am their nanny. My hope is that readers and listeners of the project might question how these labels are given and how they might be claimed. I include here a list of suggested definitions of some terminology that emerged in my research, which combine definitions from Morisson, Collins, Baker, as well as the spoken words of narrators of this project, and my own imagination.

mother - one who nurtures, whispers, and holds; one whose sacrifice spans miles and years; a breadwinner.

nanny - a minder of children, whose workplace is a family's private home. A [wo]man caring for children who are not biologically her own in exchange for a

salary. (Collins, et al.)

motherworker - one who engages in the work of mothering as a menial, spiritual, and ritual practice; one who embodies a maternal presence and whose body is the site of maternal nurturance and care (Baker, Collins, et al.)

othermother - women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities in informal and formal arrangements. (Collins and O'Reilly).

Black feminist scholar Dorothy E. Baker's writing on spiritual and menial labor greatly influenced my thinking about how and why the work of nannies, particularly nannies of color, has been devalued in western society. I add Baker's definitions of spiritual and menial work to my project's vocabulary:

menial work - work that is considered strenuous and unpleasant and is often devalued and thought to require little moral or intellectual skill (Baker).

spiritual work - work performed within the home which is valued highly because it is thought to be essential to the proper functioning of the household and the moral upbringing of children (Baker).

The introduction of this menial/spiritual dichotomy served as an organizing framework when I was developing my interview questions, even before I had had words for it. Though I would not use the terminology directly in conversation with narrators, the distinction would arise organically, sometimes as "emotional labor vs. physical labor" and more often in discussions of love. I wondered, was love the spiritual labor I could not name? Baker sought to demonstrate how "the devaluation of menial houseworkers' spiritual qualities helps to sustain the racialized separation of spiritual and menial housework" (Baker). I hoped that oral history might help counter this devaluation by providing spiritual testimony. I wanted to make a project about love,

and oral history seemed like the most profound and elegant way to get close to it.

Some surprising sources to emerge from my research of mothering terminology came from various assignments I received while participating in oral history-adjacent explorations in storytelling while at Columbia, such as Deborah Paredez's seminar, *Witness Record and Document*. It was here that I discovered documentary poetry as an essential vehicle of oral histories. After receiving an assignment to use a dictionary or other reference guide as a source text to create a poem, I found myself drawn to various encyclopedias of flowers. The organization of one book in particular, Cheralyn Darcey's *Flowerpaedia: 1000 Flowers and Their Meanings*, alphabetized flowers by their meanings rather than their names, which allowed me to search for terms related to my project. I was surprised by the unexpected themes that entered the project's lexicon by nature of their alphabetical proximity to already established terms. I came to appreciate the randomness and playfulness of returning to the Flowerpedia, for both grounding and inspiration. I loved to read the flower names aloud, their latin translations and the various meanings. The use of these definitions in the project and in this paper is an offering for playful meditation. I encourage you to read them aloud.

Mother >> Lily [Lilium]

Mothering >> Lewis Mock Orange [Phladelphus lewisii]

Motive, sincerity of >> Deer Grass [Trichophorum cespitosum]

(Darcey).

III. Background

I cannot discuss this project without first acknowledging my deep connection to the work

of nannying. Three years into this process, I have now told the story many times, but I find myself coming back to the words I wrote in my application for OHMA:

I started working as a nanny in 2010, when I was 22 years old. Unlike many of my peers, who found themselves in the same line of work as a temporary stepping stone from which to navigate an unstable economy, I became deeply enmeshed in the work. Domestic work was, in part, a rejection of feelings of want and exclusion I encountered as a person of color in academia. It was also a return to a legacy more aligned with people who look like me. For ten years, I devoted myself fully to the work of whispering and holding. There didn't seem to be an academic practice that would foster these skills more profoundly than simply doing the work. I found myself coming back to it, even as other opportunities presented. It fed my brain and heart; it kept me afloat. By the time I turned thirty, my peer group was made up almost entirely of women; most were immigrants from Grenada, Trinidad, St. Lucia, and Guyana. Their way of speaking, working, and loving called back to a long history of quietly leveraging power and social capital. I began to think critically about the complicated dynamics of domestic work—the intersection of race, class, gentrification, immigration, love, and money. I started talking about it, to anyone who would listen. I felt that I had a project of some value, but did not feel called to one medium over another. I often confused their inherent limitations with my own. I was also confronted by a feeling of smallness within my own story—a feeling that it did not belong to me, or only to me. This was around the time that the concept of oral history as a practice came into my awareness, and the threads started coming together.

In 2019, I was admitted to OHMA and began collecting the oral histories of nannies in my community. In the first year, I collected three oral histories on the record, and many more testimonies off the record, through field notes, recordings, and recorded personal memories. My role as both nanny and oral historian would come to define my methodologies in complex ways. I began this project while I was working full-time as a nanny. Being a part of the community provided unique opportunities to build relationships, with access to shared spaces where we could meet as equals and assume similar risks. In the early stages of the project, I struggled to de-center my personal experiences of being a nanny. I also struggled to confront my privilege as a student of higher education, who could leverage rather than fear the powers behind me. I avoided the use of language I feared would alienate narrators, which ultimately added more discomfort when I presented consent forms that depended on this language. Eventually, I learned to find balance, and to appreciate how both parts of my identity have enriched the process.

IV. Narrator Privacy and The Archive

The archive, in its most idealized conception, has the ability not only to immortalize but also legitimize the stories of communities that would otherwise be invisible to history. But what if invisibility enables survival in some way? What if it ensures protection from persecution. When I first began speaking to nannies in my community about my project, I found that nearly everyone wanted to talk, and we would, often for hours on the playground, in a cafe, or over the kitchen island of a million dollar brownstone which was our parlor between 8-6pm. Indoors we

talk with hushed voices. Outside we screamed, laughing. We shared stories and named names, but when it was time to schedule an interview there was often hesitation. I quickly realized that nannies were a vulnerable population. I had no doubt there were amazing stories to be told, but whether it was safe to record them needed reexamination. When asked to submit an archiving plan as part of a fieldwork class at OHMA, I balked:

We nannies have a code. It is unspoken and unwritten— off the books, so to speak. Before the internet began to replace the use of agencies, word of mouth was the main vehicle for traveling between jobs; we rely on the recommendations, resources, and connections of our former employers. Many of us do not get benefits, insurance, or social security. Our reputation is the only job security we have. We must be “trustworthy, reliable, patient”; “Good with children” is often secondary. We must be flexible with our hours and generous with our love. We must never get sick. We must be available in a crisis and invisible on vacations. We must also engage in the delicate work of attempting to respect your privacy, despite working in your home. We must pay no mind to your exposed body, your finances, your FedEx deliveries, your marital spats. Nevermind the secrets the children tell us. Trust is earned with silence and punctuality above all else; We ask only that you pay us on time. We must take everything with us when we go— our shoes, coat, and food from the fridge. Also our memories, and anger and joy and everything we heard and saw. We must leave no trace.

Looking back on these words, I realize I was afraid. I was afraid of the candidness with which nannies spoke to me and my lack of confidence in whether I could protect them from

ramifications if I did not translate their words with care. This became a sticking point in the project, dictating who I felt comfortable speaking to and what questions I felt comfortable asking. Even with the promise of anonymity, I did not want to perpetuate a stereotype of the gossiping nanny— even if that so-called “gossip” was part of our lived experience and especially when it involved exploitation.

My first protective measure was to denounce the archive, as inessential and outdated to the work of oral history. There was some merit to the argument, but it was mostly based in fear. I did not yet know if I had the power to protect narrators who may share sensitive information about their experiences and employment. The project remained stalled here for many months as I pursued another personal oral history project. It was during this time that I really immersed myself in the work of nannying and began to reflect on my own experiences. These reflections would lead me to shift the foundation of the project in a way that I eventually realized would empower nannies and protect them at the same time. The answer, it turned out, was a narrative shift, away from the employer/employee relationship and a refocusing on the mothering relationship between nanny and child. Mothering emerged at the focal point of my project as a reaction to my inhibitions about the archive. I rewrote my interview questions to examine nannying as an embodied practice. In my next two interviews, I asked very few questions about employers. At first, I worried that turning away from the employer dyad would not give space to confront many of the social justice issues that nanny work presents. To some extent there was a shift from a project focused on exploitation to a project focused primarily on love. The next phase would be to confront love as political and find a way to

translate that love in a way that encouraged advocacy.

Nurture >> Lewis Mock Orange [*Philadelphus lewisii*], Sego Lily [*Calochortus nuttalli*],
Sweet Potato [*Ipomea batatas*]
Nurturing >> Primrose [*Primula vulgaris*], Chickweed [*Stellaria media*], Elder [*sambucus nigra*],
Chenille Plant [*Acalypha hispida*]
(Darcey).

V. Translation: a multidisciplinary approach

i) Transcription

Reading Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon* in my first semester at OHMA provided the first glimpse of how I might attempt to translate the oral histories of nannies into a thesis. I was immediately drawn to Hurston's creative approach to transcription, and the way it honored her narrator's unique way of speaking. The vast majority of the women working as nannies in New York are of Caribbean, Latin-American or African descent. I felt that my project, which featured narrators from diverse backgrounds with beautiful accents and dialects, would benefit from a more creative approach to transcription. I began to experiment with many forms of creative transcription, including poetry and playwriting. The culmination of this exploration was a transcription project submitted as my final project for OHMA's Oral History Fieldwork class. I want to include the opening paragraphs from that project to explain where my thinking was at this point, early in the project, and why I eventually turned away from it.

For my first round of interviews, I interviewed two women from Jamaica, one from St. Lucia, and one from Colombia. Translating their dialects to the page turned into an exploration of linguistics, politics, art, and appropriation. I wanted the transcripts to feel

alive, particularly the West Indian dialect that I have come to love over many years of listening to nannies. At the end of my first interview with a nanny named Deloris, she gave me a t-shirt designed by the Domestic Workers Alliance with a slogan printed on the back that read, “Tell Dem Slavery Done!” The logo seemed to capture what I love about the language-- how it can walk the sharpest edge between humor, anger, and pride. There is a kind of playfulness in the tone. I wondered, do I have the right to play too?

My research into transcription led me to an article written for Potent Magazine, entitled *I am Translation: Writing the Global Caribbean Language*. The author, Dorothy Potter Snyder, follows the 36th annual Key West Literary annual seminar in January of 2018, in which writers and poets of the Caribbean met to speak with each other in panel discussions and gave presentations on a number of topics concerning language, translation, vernacular, compromise, and “the ongoing negotiation in their lives and work between textbook English and the many points along the dialect spectrum.” Trinidadian writer Rober Antoni claimed that his own process of giving voice to West Indian characters “involves not only documenting authentic speech convincingly, but also inventing and even fabricating expressions and grammars that can offer meaning to readers who have never traveled to Trinidad.” I took this as an invitation to be creative and experimental, still bearing in mind that this was not my language (Snyder). The products of this transcription process included a mix of traditional transcription, poetic translations, and a two page original script combining many narrators’ voices into one voice. The project was well received by my peers at OHMA. However, when the time came to share the translations with the narrators, I was flooded with uncertainty. I experienced feelings of

embarrassment and trepidation about the creative liberties I had taken. I wondered if what I had created was truly an accurate representation of their story if I was too afraid to share it. While I took away many valuable lessons about translations and appropriation, ultimately, most of the creative transcriptions from this first experimentation would not make it into my final project design. As my graduate studies progressed, the invitation to play would end up leading me away from writing and towards more physical mediums like film and collage.

Obligations >> Cotton [Gossypium]
Offering >> Maple [Acer]
Open mind >> Billy Goat Plum [Planchonia careya]
Openness to love >> Love-in-a-Mist [Nigella damascena]
Others, love of >> Ithuriel's Spear [Triteleia laxa]
Our love shall endure >> Cactus [Cactaceae]

(Darcey).

ii) Serious Play

I came to the OHMA program as a writer. My early conceptions of what was possible for an oral history thesis were inspired by OHMA alums Carlin Zia and Nyssa Chow. Both entered the program as writers and would go on to incorporate image and sound in nuanced ways. I too followed a similar path, expanding my tendency towards prose to a multi-disciplinary approach.

The first film I created for my thesis, "Serious Play" is named after the course title from which the work originated. Recorded on an iPhone while I simultaneously worked as a nanny, the film was an exercise designed to confront my dual identities. The second film, "Coco"

makes use of my personal video archive of videos recorded while nannying, in an attempt to document the powerful intimacy of nannying. The third film, *Untitled 5*, recorded on an empty playground, is an attempt to decenter the body, a reaction to the isolation of the pandemic.

My objective in using film as translation was to attempt to capture more of the embodied experience of nannying. I hoped to capture the close physical relationship between a nanny and a child— brown skin against pastel fabrics, pale pudgy fingers grasping at dark arms and breasts. I began filming myself at work, close up, to protect the identities of certain children but also to communicate the wonderful claustrophobia of so much touch. I filmed on my iPhone. I filmed while one hand rocked the baby. I filmed from the floor where I spent much of my time, looking up. I did not look at the camera as I filmed. I preferred for the phone to be hidden and not disruptive to our normal rhythms. I let the camera capture what it captured. I wanted to be present.

There were several obstacles to acting as a filmmaker and caretaker simultaneously. Some of these obstacles created interesting artistic results. Having a child with me allowed me access to intimate spaces that I would otherwise not be allowed. I was able to film from an iPhone unnoticed. I was also able to use my personal relationships with parents and nannies to ask for permission to document their homes and other private spaces. I was forced to be spontaneous. I was both filmmaker and caretaker at the same time, and the films reflect that perspective. The third film, *Untitled 5*, filmed during the pandemic without a child in my care is my favorite of the three because it breaks that mold. I was curious how returning to these spaces without a child will affect my artistic vision. What would I be drawn to when I am not

being led by the spontaneous whims of a child. What choices would I make? Would I still find myself close to the ground, looking up? I believe the beauty of this film is derived from the intimacy of a nanny's vision of even an unpeopled world.

iii) Collage

Collage was a hot topic in my thesis pod from our first meeting, and I credit OHMA alums Jenni Morrison and Liú méi-zhì and my thesis advisor Nicki Plombier, for reminding me of this in the critical final stages of this thesis. The mixed media artwork included on my project website was one of the final elements to emerge in the construction of the project. It began as a restorative practice, as a way to interact with the "materials" without engaging with technology. The process of physically touching archival images, photography, canvas, and glue, reflected the ideological process of making and processing in other mediums. Collaging was the most physical and profound translation of the motherwork of the entire project. Like filmmaking, it was an opportunity to represent embodied experiences. The images are created from architectural magazines, archival images, and my own archive of personal photography. I was also able to make use of archival images of black mother-workers in a way that was both playful and provocative. I played with the cut-out figures like paper dolls, placing them in various backgrounds and then photographing the collage, often without gluing. I experimented with bringing the figures to the foreground and pushing them to the background, hiding them behind pillars, and placing them in doorways. Each composition changed the energy of the scene in complex ways. I got to play with color and space to reiterate themes I explored in words and sound. A more detailed reflection of the collage process and the evolution of the

images appears on my thesis website alongside the images, entitled “Black Bodies, White Babies: Evolution of an image:

iv) I am Your Nanny

Perhaps the most important translation of the oral histories collected over the course of this thesis is represented in the form of edited audio. Five “episodes” appear on the project website, featuring the oral histories of five nannies, entitled “I am Your Nanny”. The first two episodes focus on the early lives of nannies, their home countries and the women who raised them. The third episode covers the experience of immigrating to the US, getting their first nanny jobs, and the daily struggles of being a nanny. The final two episodes cover the emotional process of moving on from a job and the nannies' relationships with their own children. Most of the audio I selected focuses primarily on the nannies' relationships to children and to the work, only breaching the topic of employer relationships in two of five episodes. This was a choice I made on both a methodological and artistic level. The conversations I wanted to facilitate can be uncomfortable; they are about black bodies, white babies, love, privilege and exploitation. I knew the way I presented these conversations could run the risk of alienating certain audiences while inviting others. I initially decided the audience for many of the original products featured on my project’s website, and particularly the podcast, would be a closed group of the narrators, their friends, and family. For most of the first year that my project materials were published, these audio episodes remained password protected on the project website. Eventually, with encouragement and feedback from narrators, my peers, and mentors, I decided to open the episodes to the public to hear. I believe the stories are powerful and the anonymous editing style

highlights the universality of the testimony themes without sacrificing intimacy.

VI. Privilege and Reciprocity

Throughout the project, one of the central questions has been a struggle to define how reciprocity would function. This meant confronting both my privilege and lack of privilege in many different contexts. It meant questioning the true value of oral history— is deep listening enough? I worried about the burden of free labor that taking the time to sit for an interview would cost narrators. Revisiting reciprocity in the latter stages of the project meant confronting how my lack of organization and advocacy skills created an obstacle to securing funding that could provide monetary compensation. However, it is important to mention that throughout the entire project, from conception, through the interviewing, and curating stages, I was employed as a full-time nanny. I worked hundreds of hours, commuted dozens of miles daily, and was subject to the same instability as the narrators. Much of the work on this project, from speaking to nannies, to writing this paper, and even an interview, occurred during work hours while the narrator and/or myself had children in our care. The extent of my privilege (time, money, access, power) was limited, but not non-existent. Eventually, I was able to obtain some funding in the form of a grant to compensate narrators for their ongoing collaboration. I know this work is just beginning.

VII. Addendum

As of January 2023, it has been one year since my graduation from OHMA and the

completion of this thesis project. I am back in the business of whispering and holding, now as an infant/toddler teacher for an early childhood center in Harlem. For the first time in my adult life, nannying is not my primary source of income, though I wonder, is it possible to stop being a nanny? My understanding of the work of nannying deepens with each day I spend away from it, and also as I revisit it through memory and this project. I am a nanny. I am a mother. I am not your mother. I am your other mother. I am *your* nanny— and this statement holds true for over a handful of children and former children across the city and the country. I don't think the work will ever be finished. There is something I want to say about care, and it sometimes keeps me up nights, because I'm not sure if I have said it fully. It has been said before and it will be said again and again, as long as children are raised in the arms of other mothers— something about black bodies and white babies. I am sure that it is in the tapes, in the oral testimonies of the five nannies featured in this project, which is why I know this work is both important and unfinished; and also why it is essential to revisit the archive as a tool to preserve these stories. Mostly, what I would like to say, to anyone who comes across my work, is that it is a story about love.

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