The Nanny Effect: The Impact of Canada's Live-In Care Program on Filipino-Canadian Identity

John-Paul Abelshauser
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ABSTRACT

The Live-in Caregiver program (LCP) has provided tens of thousands of migrant workers an indirect path towards Canadian citizenship. Nowhere has the response to the call been as great as from the tiny Southeast Asian country of the Philippines. Studies have observed the negative effects this access to cheap labour has had on the lives of individual Filipino-Canadians: as undervalued servants, many employers including high profile government Ministers, have been exposed for not only abuse of the program, but for human rights abuses as well. None of these studies, however, have examined the larger effect the program has had on Filipino self-identity and community formation. How has primary identification of the Filipino-Canadian as “domestic” muted the Filipino-Canadian experience, relegating their participation within the Canadian narrative to the back of the proverbial bus? Through an examination of the requirements of the LCP and their impact as expressed by Filipina workers, this paper argues for the need of additional study addressing the entrenched stigmatization the program has unintentionally imposed on the Filipino nanny, and their ability to be seen as equal citizens in Canadian society.

KEY WORDS

Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP); Filipino; Stigma; Nanny; Canada
This poem is for the rundown immigrant who works a shit job, for shit pay, to make sure his kid's life is more than just shit....This poem is for the Filipino housekeeper.

Chris Tse, SPEAKout Summer Slam 2012

Canada is a nation of immigrants. From the earliest accounts detailing Canada’s growth into a “great” nation, there have been pivotal moments where national identity was forged by the sheer will of the newcomer’s ultimate sense of purpose: to seek the better life. The apparent success stories seem seamlessly woven into the national narrative in order to produce the myth of Canada as the land of golden opportunity—a national myth as grandiose as the landscape itself. Recently, Eva Mackay and Daniel Francis, respectively, have challenged the notion that the multicultural narrative of Canada began only after the policy of Multiculturalism was introduced in the 1980’s. As Francis observes in the opening of *National Dream*, “Obviously, many people are excluded or marginalized by the core myths of Canadian history. That is why so many of the myths are under attack at the moment; they do not express a reality of which many Canadians recognize themselves to be a part” (12). So prominent, however, are the narratives of the glorious few who championed the pioneering spirit of the immigrant experience during the early years of Confederation, that it has become increasingly challenging to incorporate the voices of the *others*—those whose narratives are absent from grade-school textbooks. These are the voices of immigrants who have played their own role in the shaping of Canadian identity, but whose stories remain shadowy, often half-formed and misshapen narratives.

This paper attempts to cast light on one of these shadow narratives by directing focus on the experience of a particular group of Canadian immigrants, the Filipino nationals who came to Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). Originally known as the *Foreign Domestic Movement*, the LCP was specifically implemented as an agreement between Canada and Caribbean countries during the 1960’s, designed to bring temporary domestic workers to Canada (Reed 475). It was eventually
renamed and broadened to extend its reach to a much larger global pool (Oxman-Martinez, Hanley, and Cheung 5). Since its inception in 1981, the program has attracted a significant number of Filipino nationals to immigrate to Canada. My paper will direct attention to a little-considered aspect of the program: how it has contributed to the stigmatization of the Filipino community, principally through the association of the Filipino-Canadian with domestic work--what I term the “nanny effect.” The premise of this paper thus examines the initiative of the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) for its two-fold effect: first, for its implications on the workers themselves, and secondly, for the broader, social effect on the Filipino community that the LCP may be reinforcing.

The stigmatization largely arises from the cultural stereotype that associates “Filipino” with “domestic worker.” The association finds expression in countless ways--usually as jokes about Filipino nannies. Recently, however, the stereotype has inspired more serious contemplation about the unsung heroism of immigrant workers. In the SPEAKout Summer Slam held at the Royal Ontario Museum on August 6, 2010, Chinese-Canadian Carleton University graduate, Chris Tse does just that. Performing a poem titled “Jobs,” he challenges the cliché complaint, “I hate how the immigrants come to this country and take our jobs.” He then goes on to chronicle the hard work, the herculean efforts of immigrant workers, like his father, who do the kind of work no one else wants to do. He sums up the poem’s central message when he finishes with a special dedication: “This poem is for the rundown immigrant who works a shit job, for shit pay, to make sure his kid’s life is more than just shit.” Notably, among the little-regarded occupations to whom he dedicates the poem, he announces: “This poem is for the Filipino housekeeper.” Inspired by Tse’s chronicling of the “unglorious” pioneers of today, this paper aims to address the image of the “Filipino housekeeper” as more than a harmless stereotype but the articulation of a social stigma; moreover, it suggests that the stigmatization goes beyond the Filipina housekeeper and extends much wider, to afflict the Filipino-Canadian community.
The present study suggests through several case studies that the stigma of the Filipino housekeeper shapes and influences not only how Filipinos in general might be perceived by other Canadians, but also how Filipinos perceive themselves and imagine themselves to be perceived.

The Beginnings of Filipino Immigration

According to data collected through Statistics Canada, the vast majority of newcomers to Canada were being drawn, until the early 1950s, from mainly white Euro-centric, British, and American demographics. However, with an increasing shift in global situations and political pressures from Britain, Canada was encouraged to revisit the way immigration policies were being instituted. The end of WWII and an increasingly stabilized Europe had an immense effect on migration to North America in general and to Canada in particular (Nelles 165). New policy challenges emerged as the government attempted to fill the gap created by dwindling numbers of traditional immigrants. In an effort to stem the tide of lower birthrates and stagnating population growth, the Canadian government significantly revised many of the immigration policies, which were primarily race-based. Prior to 1962, Canada’s immigration policies restricted the entry of non-white immigrants; changes in immigration regulations in the early and mid-1960s signaled a shift from a race-based to a points-based system. It was the points-based system that made possible the first significant influx of Filipino immigrants.

In her book *From Sunbelt to Snowbelt: Filipinos in Canada*, Anita Beltran Chen offers insight into the patterns of Filipino immigration. Her study is worth examining in some detail because it is the first and only one of its kind, and because it examines the demographics of the Filipino-Canadian community’s development, which has a relatively recent history that begins largely in the late1960s. Her well documented and thorough study traces the patterns of migration and identifies the key motives fueling the desire in many Filipinos to immigrate to Canada over the last forty years. She notes two early, distinct periods that saw the greatest number of Filipinos...
arriving into Canada. The “first wave,” as she refers to it, began during the 1960s and lasted until the mid-1970s. Doctors, nurses, and secretarial positions were the first types of employment opportunities awaiting the arrival of this wave of immigrants.

The “second wave” of Filipino immigration, according to Chen, began in the late 1970s and continued until the late 1980s. As Chen’s first chapter of her book demonstrates, the socio-demographics of Filipino immigration was shaped by immigration policy and the occupational needs of the Canadian economy. The author observes the heavy concentration of Filipino immigrants in the working age group (between 20-39 years old), noting that almost one in every four nurses admitted into Canada in the late 1960s was from the Philippines (27). The second-wave influx was also due to a shift in government policy that began to focus on reunifying families of immigrants, now presumably settled, that arrived in the previous wave of the early 1970s (59). The government permitted the sponsorship of additional family members, allowing extended family in the Philippines to join those already in Canada. The rationale for encouraging sponsorship was presumably humanitarian, reuniting separated family members; however, sponsorship stringently put the burden, primarily financial but also personal, on the sponsor. As Chen examines in chapters 6 and 9 of *From Sunbelt to Snowbelt*, the presence of these elderly Filipinos affected not only the socio-demographics but also the structures of family, ethnic, and social life of Filipino Canadians.

Moreover, Chen observes two other significant groups comprising the immigration waves: factory workers for the garment industry in the mid-1970s, and female domestic workers from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. In a Web article designed for the general reader, Chen addresses the prevailing immigration scenario involving the LCP classification, and she articulates precisely the mechanism that created the stigmatized demographic of the “Filipino nanny”:
Those admitted as service workers from the Philippines are mostly employed as nannies and domestics. But they are not illiterate girls from rural areas; rather, a majority of them have had some college training, if not a college or university degree from the home country. Since domestic service occupations are almost the only ones in demand in Canada and Canadians are generally not prepared to take them, they provide the only basis under which Filipinos are admitted into the country. (“Multicultural Canada”)

As Chen’s commentary points out, the Filipino nationals arriving Canada were admitted, for the most part, to occupy a social demographic particularly disdained by Canadians—that of domestic worker. By occupying an employment niche overwhelmingly rejected by most Canadians, Filipino nannies take on the social stigma attached to the work despite educational and work experience that, under different circumstances, should have ensured higher status. And as Chen observes, while the LCP may not have been intended to pigeon-hole Filipinos in particular, the fact that “domestic service occupations are almost always the only ones in demand,” establishes the stereotypical connection between the LCP and the Filipino Canadian who may not even be employed as a domestic worker.

Interestingly, Chen provides statistics that might surprise the average reader, in asserting that the majority of Filipinos in the program represent an educated and skilled labour force. What should be more surprising, however, though it is rarely addressed, is why such a workforce would be willing to accept the economic and social humiliation of menial jobs that Canadians themselves are not willing to do. Is there a perception that by assuming such positions, Filipinos are either unaware of the stigma or are willing to assume the burden of carrying it? While it is beyond the scope of this study to address fully the complexity of immigrant motivations, it nevertheless raises for a single purpose the complex scenario of an often overqualified immigrant assuming work considered too menial for a natural-born citizen to perform: to point to the mechanism that
systemically undervalues the contribution of Filipinos in Canadian society because of the kind of work (menial and meaningless) that they are perceived as willing to perform.

**Literature Review: The Impact of the Live-In Caregiver Program**

The description of a Live-in caregiver as found on the Canadian government’s Website seems quite straightforward and unassuming: “Live-in caregivers are individuals who are qualified to provide care for children, elderly persons or persons with disabilities in private homes without supervision. Live-in caregivers must live in the private home where they work in Canada” (“Live in Care Program”). What previous research and workers’ testimonials have uncovered, however, is primarily the unfavourable, often oppressive and abusive working conditions that the mainly Filipina domestic workers brought in through the LCP have faced.

Distinct from other immigration programs, the LCP appears to reinforce gender and class distinctions. The program brings in service sector labour, mainly domestic workers, and tends to attract mainly women--two particularly vulnerable groups within the Canadian population. Furthermore, the program exacerbates the vulnerability of the female domestic worker it recruits through additional program requirements: permanent status is withheld for the first two years after arrival, and place of residency while in Canada is restricted to that of the employer. Application by the Canadian sponsor is made through the government website, and approval of the sponsor application is granted without a visit to the place of residency ever being conducted. Thus, the LCP applicant must agree to live in the sponsor’s home “site unseen.” Having to live on-site has been cited as a major issue of contention in almost every article critiquing the program. The habitation requirement frequently extends the number of working hours the care-giver must give service, as it promotes the idea of the live-in domestic as available at all times. The habitation requirement also creates potential tensions not experienced in other employment relationships; the blurring of personal
and professional lines may create additional stress in an already uneasy and unfamiliar situation.

More recent studies have begun to emerge from a new generation of Filipino-Canadian academics. Jessica Eric and Maximillian V. Goli have examined many of the repercussions the LCP has had on family situations. They point to the challenging integration issues new community members must face on the long road to citizenship. In spite of their research, however, certain key issues remain largely unexamined. In particular, they fail to address how the very nature of the program and its particular criteria have contributed to a much wider social effect that results when an ethnic group (like the Filipinos) become closely associated (and even identified) with the LCP. This present study points to the need to consider the consequent complications faced by the larger ethnic community long after the ultimate goal of citizenship are met.

Joseph Gerard B. Cuenca’s research reviews labour and migrant issues as they apply specifically to the Live-in Care Program and its caregivers. Cuenca discusses in particular why Filipinas view Canada as an ideal destination for where to immigrate. Traditional destinations, like Hong Kong or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, have increasingly been scrutinized and publicized for the poor treatment of domestic workers. Canada, on the other hand, with its reputation for fair working conditions and protection of civil liberties, has been perceived more favourably (Cuenca 70). By closely scrutinizing the evolution of the program, however, Cuenca’s study uncovers that although Canada may offer better working conditions for its foreign temporary workers than Hong Kong or Saudi Arabia, it also maintains similar discriminatory practices (70).

Discussing concerns similar to Cuenca’s, The Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity turns the focus on the needs of the immigrant workers themselves. The Centre identifies the additional problems surrounding the program’s ultimate goal to “address the immediate needs of Canadian families for affordable child care and eldercare” (Pratt et al. 6). Ultimately intended to provide an avenue for the unskilled and moderately educated, the Live-in Care program ostensibly
also provides the opportunity to obtain citizenship status in Canada. While Pratt and the others suggest that “the end may justify the means,” they also point out that “getting there” has become increasingly complex. To the observations made by Pratt and the others, this present study adds that while the LCP does provide the opportunity for acquiring citizenship, it comes with a cost to personal, social, and community identity—a cost that is not acknowledged, much less foreseen.

Geraldine Pratt’s work in general has followed the LCP. She provides a critical assessment of its impact for over fifteen years. She has been responsible for documenting the stories of Filipinas who entered Canada as domestics. In addition to her published articles and books, Pratt has written a collaborative theatrical testimonial play that has been instrumental in showcasing the implications of LCP on many Filipina domestics, using their voices to narrate the play. Much of her work in providing detailed accounts of the Filipino domestic worker’s experience has been shaped by feminist theory that recognizes the power of the individual’s voice in recounting their story to shape personal and collective identity. Pratt—despite obviously not identifying neither as a Filipina nor as a domestic worker—demonstrates the value that the role of “ally” plays in helping to ensure all voices are heard and incorporated into the collective narrative.

If studies like Pratt’s focus on the negative experience of Filipinos brought in through the LCR, Ren Thomas’s study examines the societal patterns that have led to Filipinos relative successes in Canada. Thomas’s study focuses on Filipinos in Toronto, Canada’s largest urban centre and examines the qualities that make Filipinos ideal candidates for citizenship within Canada. Without linking the LCP to the emergence of the Filipino community of Toronto, Thomas notes the key reasons for why Filipinos immigrating to Canada should ultimately find success: “....Filipinos have high educational levels, English fluency, and other characteristics that should make it easier to immigrate and integrate into a postindustrial labour market” (5). It becomes questionable then why with these particular
attributes, Filipinos on average continue to occupy the lower socio-economic brackets of Canadian society.

One researcher offering an explanation for the challenges being faced by the Filipino community is Harsha Wailia. As a Vancouver-based writer specializing in the law, her article examines the effect that cheap migrant labour has had in establishing what she dubs, in the title of her essay, “the apartheid of citizenship.” Wailia points to the various means by which migrant workers are maintained in a state of vulnerability, available as a pool of cheap labour but excluded from belonging to the nation. Her research also explores the qualities that make migrant programs, such as the LCP, a breeding ground for abuse: in particular, she points to the LCP requirement that ties the migrant worker to their place of employment. Wailia cites many grievances blemished the programs, which are astoundingly perceived as having a successful reputation among Canadian Immigration officials. In a CBC radio interview defending the program, Immigration Minister Jason Kenny calls the LCP “valuable,” viewing it as “a pathway to permanent citizenship” all while “filling a very important labour market need (“Caregiver & Minister”).” In fact, the “labour market need” to which Kenny refers are the menial types of work Canadian women are no longer willing to engage in. While Wailia’s article does not directly address the gender issue in particular, she does identify the abusive work conditions such migrant employment has typically been accused of producing, offering a litany of characteristic features: among these, “low wages, often below the official minimum, and long hours with no overtime pay; dangerous working conditions; crowded and unhealthy accommodations; denial of access to public health care and employment insurance...” (72). Thus, while the LCP may not have willfully nefarious, misogynistic intentions, the program seems to combine the potential for abuses inhered by the migrant worker scenario with the inherent gender-bias of a program meant to recruit domestic workers. In many respects, then, the LCP shapes the narrative of the Filipino Canadian in a way that does not reflect the immigrant aspiration of creating a “better life.”
The “real” situation represented by LCP recruitment is not the Filipino narrative offered in Canada’s Museum of Civilization, in a permanent exhibit known as the Pacific Gateway. Though the exhibit does not focus only on Filipino migration, it does dedicate a specific corner of the exhibit to the arrival of twenty Filipinos in the early 1970’s. Admittedly, the story of the Pacific Rim highlights the arrival of the first wave of Asian migration; but is particularly intriguing is how the story of the twenty fails to capture the breadth of the Filipino immigration experience. If we consider the Museum mandate to preserve and promote the heritage of Canada and “all its peoples throughout Canada”; and, its mission to contribute to the collective memory and sense of identity of all Canadians, functioning as “a source of inspiration, research, learning and entertainment that belongs to all Canadians”--one might ask where the Filipino nannies fit in the Pacific Gateway narrative. While the exhibit offers a fine portrayal of the few Filipinos who immigrated as doctors and nurses, the Museum almost seems to recognize the stigma of the Filipino nanny in its apparent disavowal of their stories of often underpaid and frequently undervalued labour, and unrecognized social contribution. Theirs is a shadow narrative that stands behind the apparently more “inspiring” one of doctors and nurses and other professionals. In this way, the exhibit fails in its self-defined mission to be “a source of inspiration” to the Filipino Canadian, in its failure to include the narrative that represents the personal narrative of many who came to Canada under the humbler auspices of the Live-in Care program. The Pacific Gateway narrative reinforces the voicelessness of the Filipino nanny.

The Emerging Filipino Voice

The voice of the Filipino nanny, however, is beginning to emerge. Recently, a Cabinet minister’s assertion about the LCP drew a direct response from Pura Velasco, a nanny from the Philippines advocating for over twenty years for nannies’ rights. Minister Kenny emphasized the minimal criteria of the LCP, which makes it possible for many Filipina
migrants to qualify to come to Canada for work—even though authors like Chen and Pratt adamantly assert the higher levels of educations and skills training a majority of women arriving through the LCP. Velasco observes how the LCP capitalizes on the sad state of the economic situation of the Philippines and the resulting high rate of unemployment that has created a vacuum effect benefiting Canada through the cheap migrant workers supplied by the LCP. Velasco thus challenges Minister Kenny’s claim and suggests that the system does little more than guarantee Canada a large supply of servitude labour at minimal national expense.

But does the supply of cheap labour to the Canadian workforce really benefit Canada? Unlike many of the earlier studies, which focused primarily on the traditional shortcomings of the program and looked mainly at the immediate effects of working conditions on the participants and their immediate family, many studies are now also turning towards assessing the effects the program on the broader Filipino community. One direct result, observed by a collaborative working paper series based in Vancouver, “Deskilling across the Generations: Reunification among Transnational Filipino Families in Vancouver,” has found that the LCP and its mandatory two-year work placement actively contributes to the de-skilling of an already skilled workforce (7).

As Pratt has found in her collaborative work with the Philippines Women Centre of BC, moving through the LCP into citizenship disrupts the fixity of the distinction between migrant worker and immigrant (7). After women complete the requirements of the LCP, they re-encounter the Canadian state—not as an isolated worker, but as an immigrant embedded in family relations. They cross a legal and social border, between the migrant worker who must eventually leave and the immigrant who must eventually be integrated. This is not only a problem for the nanny’s themselves, as the emblematic struggle of Filipina domestics dramatically impacts the families that eventually are reunited with them. Studies suggest that, on average, five years will pass before a nanny can establish the means to begin the process of bringing loved ones over. Much can happen in the five years, which can make subsequent re-unification of the family unit
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problematic. What has become instrumental to the increased awareness of the plight of the nannies, however, is not the collection of statistics about them, but the opportunity for the nannies to tell their own stories.

A series of articles and Filipino-directed documentaries, such as the National Film Board’s When Strangers Re-Unite (1999), have begun to chronicle the nannies’ stories. Directors Florchita Bautista and Marie Boti provide a rare glimpse into the trials and tribulations many nannies are experiencing. As the documentary follows three different women’s stories in Toronto and Montreal, the negative effect of the program on their lives and on the lives of their families becomes vividly apparent. Compounding the sheer frustration and torment that the program caused these women, there is the additional pressure they experience when their estranged families come to join them in Canada. The individual women’s distress takes its toll on the members of their family, as each story in the film exposes many of the terrible repercussions of these women’s quest to establish a better future for themselves in Canada.

One story in particular illustrates the LCP’s deep impact by articulating the personal effect of the experience on the nannies’ self-perception. An accountant in the Philippines, Fe expresses her difficulty in accepting the demeaning tasks associated with being domestic worker. She discusses the effect that menial labour and the restriction on her personal movement have had on her personal self esteem:

You feel like you’re really a slave or someone below, like really down. You make yourself respectable enough or presentable enough, but you still feel that you’re down because, you know, your work--you’re serving people here, you’re a servant.

Fe’s testimony and self-acknowledgement of how her situation made her feel is poignant and telling. The personal consequences of the LCP on immigrants and their families are clearly evident; however, the additional consequences go beyond the personal struggles that Fe and her immediate family members endured. Fe’s case signals a larger implication that the
documentary doesn’t fully explore: the effect of her low self-esteem, poor self-image, and strained familial relations may have on the larger Filipino-Canadian community to which Fe and her newly immigrated family ultimately belong and which they help shape. It is difficult to underestimate the larger effect, on a social level, that such poor self-valuation will have on the group identity of the Filipino-Canadian community. As the literature review demonstrates, however, insufficient critical attention has been directed to the way the negative experience of the LCP worker—specifically, of Filipino origin—has negatively impacted Filipino-Canadian self- and communal identity.

Although not particularly apparent in the NFB film nor explicitly documented in many studies, the broader implications of the influx of over one hundred thousand Filipina caregivers is becoming increasingly evident. In addition to self-perception, the way Filipino-Canadians are perceived by other Canadians requires greater attention. A recent Quebec’s Human Rights Tribunal ruling highlights the systemic cultural ignorance regarding the eating practices of one of the largest immigrant groups. In an incident in 2006 dubbed “The Fork and Spoon” that gained national attention, a Filipino boy in a Quebec school was publicly chastised by his teacher for consuming his lunch in the traditional Filipino way—with a fork and a spoon. Notably, he ridiculed the boy for “eating like a pig.” The teacher’s action resulted in a Quebec Human Rights tribunal awarding the family $17,000 in damages. While the school board, the principal, and teacher involved are being singled out for violating the boy’s rights to equality and dignity, the case has broader implications. Indeed, this case signals a shift in the self perception of Filipinos as full-fledged citizens, with rights to inclusion within the Canadian narrative.

In the past seventy years, little scholarship has addressed the place of Filipino’s within contemporary Canadian society—despite their burgeoning numbers. The “Case of the Fork and Spoon” (as it was commonly referred to) is a social marker connected to the “nanny effect” on several levels. First, at its most obvious level, the case points to the cultural ignorance in Canadian society regarding Filipinos, which the Human Rights tribunal
ruling officially documenting the systemic nature of this ignorance. At the core of the “Fork and Spoon” case is a teacher (supported by his school board) who perceived that he could publicly ridicule with impunity the boy’s cultural practices. At a second level, such a perception is, I contend, a function of the stereotype of the subservient Asian domestic, under which the teacher presumably was working. It is a cultural stereotype that arises from the predominant image of the Filipino immigrant as a “nanny,” the teacher’s behaviour reflecting the wide-spread perception of Filipino-Canadians as subordinate and unlikely to assert themselves. And, finally, in a mother’s outrage that eventually becomes a Human Rights Commission charge, one finds the emergence of a Canadian-Filipino social identity beyond the traditional Filipino stereotype of caregiver or nanny. The Human Rights commission case illustrates not only the most obvious immediate, practical need—for more diverse educational curriculum—but also for further scholarship on the model of multicultural citizenry that Filipinos in Canada may increasingly demonstrate.

The judgment of the 2008 Quebec Human Rights Tribunal functions as salient case study pointing to future study of the emergence of Filipino-Canadian social identity as it moves beyond the “nanny effect” of LCP workers-become-citizens. In their original findings the tribunal acknowledged that an injustice had been perpetrated, but did not render a decision that offered any compensation to the victims at that time. Notably, after hearing an appeal mounted by the boy’s family, which asked the Tribunal to consider additional evidence, the Tribunal rendered a new decision and awarded punitive damages. The Filipino community reacted with unprecedented political action not normally attributed to Filipinos in Canada, with hundreds rallying at embassies across Canada and in the Philippines as well. The incident gained both national and international attention, as Filipinos everywhere found solidarity in the perceived injustice committed against a shared Filipino heritage.

The outrage in the Filipino-Canadian community incited by the “Fork and Spoon” incident is telling because of what lies behind it, the
perceived oppression of Filipinos by cultural stereotypes that paint them as submissive, subservient, and voiceless. In an interview of the boy and his mother after the new Tribunal judgment was rendered, the anchorwoman for the Filipino news-magazine show Balitang Canada observes how the judgment for the boy is significant to other Filipinos: “[In Tagalog] You know, Theresa [the boy’s mother], those who heard about your story were truly inspired, but what do you think your victory means for your family, and other Filipinos, especially Filipino immigrants to Canada?”

Significantly, the Balitang Canada anchor ends the interview by praising the mother and boy for their courage and toughness, that they did “not get to be [sic] intimidated by your culture.” Clearly, the anchorwoman praises the mother for sticking up for her son, for asserting her right to respect and equal treatment. It is unclear, however, what the anchorwoman may have meant by “your culture”—whether she refers to the oppression by the dominant white culture within which the Filipino Canadian must integrate; or, to the self-oppression instilled by poor self-image and low self-esteem of the Filipino Canadian stereotype. In some regard, the anchorwoman seems to praise the mother for her courage to rise up against oppression, to praise her for possessing characteristics typically not attributed to Filipinos.

As the literature review documents, the Live-in Care Program has had dire negative effects on the Filipino nationals who participated in the program. The program separated many women from their families in the Philippines; it engaged women in forms of domestic servitude often characterized as “work that no other Canadians will do”; and, in the characterization of the immigrant Filipino as primarily a domestic worker, the program has stigmatized the Filipino Canadian with a social identity that ranks among the lowest in the social scale; and, moreover, it has imparted the further stigmatizing effects associated with the poor self-image and sense of self-worth inherited by the cultural stereotype. As the Filipino narrative of the Museum of Civilization's Pacific Gateway exhibit documents, the stigmatization may even work its way into the “official” narrative precisely through the disavowal and exclusion of the Filipino nanny’s story. A growing body of work documents the experience of the Filipino nanny and the impact of the Live-in Caregiver program on both
the nannies and their extended family. Such documentary work provides a venue for articulating the nanny’s narrative, and from such articulations the voice of the Filipino Canadian has begun to emerge—as witnessed by the activism of former nannies like Pura Velasco who challenge the stereotype. The case of the Fork and Spoon significantly illustrates the broader, social implications of the cultural stereotype. First, the teacher’s behaviour and the school board’s response enacts the narrative of domination and submission that the shadow narrative of the “Filipino domestic” engenders among the social mainstream; however, secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the incident demonstrates the imminent change in Filipino Canadian identity, as the outraged mother’s defense signals the larger Filipino community behind her. It is a community beginning to rise above the stigmatization of the “nanny effect” and to assert its proper place within the Canadian multicultural narrative.

Works Cited


