

The Neoliberal State and the

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Cet article examine comment les domestiques immigrantes négocient avec l'État néolibéral américain qui priva-

from domestic workers to migrant women (Carty 2000, 2003; Chang; Hondagneu-Sotelo; Parrenas). While

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tise son pouvoir pour le mettre dans les mains des employeurs autonomes. Devenus assujettis à l'État dans leurs maisons, ils exploitent, sous-paient et intimident leurs domestiques qui se sont organisées face à ces conditions et interpellent l'État en demandant que leurs droits soient respectés.

The phenomenon of impoverished immigrant women—documented and undocumented—working under conditions that resemble bonded labour across the United States has gained a certain degree of visibility in metropolitan hubs like New York City where domestic workers have organized themselves to demand their rights. Activists and advocates estimate there are 600,000 domestic workers in New York City. Ninety per cent of these workers are immigrants from “Third World” countries. In the U.S., traditionally, African American women had been overrepresented in paid domestic work for a century after the failure of post-civil war reconstruction (Amott and Matthaei; Dill; Glenn). In the last decade, feminists who study the commodification of reproductive labour in the U.S. have drawn our attention to the shift in the market

this literature recognizes the role of legal immigration status and citizenship in marginalizing and cheapening migrant women’s labour, only feminist political economists like Grace Chang and Linda Carty have analytically developed how practices of advanced capitalist nation-states in the economic North orchestrate the transnational organization of paid domestic work.

This paper examines the claim that the U.S. takes a “laissez-faire” approach to the immigration of domestic workers compared to Canada, Hong Kong, or Singapore which formally regulate the entry of domestic workers and the terms of their residence in those countries (Hondagneu-Sotelo). The American approach, according to Hondagneu-Sotelo, “represents an opportunity [for domestic workers] to seek better job conditions” (22). However, to read the lack of a coherent set of policies that specifically govern immigrant domestic workers as the absence of the U.S. state from the enterprise of importing women to do domestic work would be to overlook the multiple ways in which the U.S. neoliberal state brokers and profits from the trafficking of impoverished

and displaced “Third World” women to “First World” spaces (see Chang 2000, 1997). In the process of brokering, the American state cheapens these women’s labour to address the crisis in carework it creates by retreating from its welfare commitments. That women make as little as \$200 per month for 18-hour days seven days a week speaks to the intensity of their exploitation. The beneficiaries of the state’s attempts at providing super-affordable careworkers are those middle-class households made up of productive, contributing, and consuming “citizens,” among them South Asian immigrants who are able to execute their state-assigned role as hardworking and successful model minorities on the backs of grossly underpaid South Asian domestics.¹ Neither the presence of South Asian domestic workers nor these women’s pioneering organizing efforts has been documented or analyzed in scholarship about South Asian immigrants to the U.S., even though it is a significant development both in terms of non-traditional labour organizing and making visible class disparities within a community that is considered to be evenly affluent. This research is part of a larger project mapping South Asian social change policies in the U.S. (Das Gupta).

Indeed, the U.S. does not have a Live-in Caregiver Program like the one Canada has developed and applied since 1992. By compelling imported domestic workers to live with their employers for two years of a three-year contract, and by defining them as temporary workers, the Canadian state indentures these women. It reaps the benefits of this indenture by

Domestic Workers' Movement in New York City

subsidizing at the expense of immigrant women the functions that it used to offer through public programs (Stasiulis and Bakan) while continuing to maintain the intactness of the nation by classifying these immigrants as temporary outsiders (Sharma 2002a).

Although the U.S. does not have any such formal program, it achieves the same effect of indenture and its accompanying benefits for the state through a set of privatizing strategies at the heart of its neoliberal character. The lack of a formal domestic worker program means that these women—whose reproductive labour is so necessary for the functioning of another set of workers and capital itself—can be brought into the country by private employers, recruiters, or placement agencies as an underground army of labourers unauthorized by the state. Once immigration laws do their work of codifying the immigrants' entry—the conditions of which also determine their rights—the state *outsources* its policing functions to individual employers. These employers then invoke the state's immigration policies to intimidate and isolate domestic workers. The severe exploitation that domestic workers suffer because they are *immigrant*, a structural location, cannot be seen simply as malpractices of individual employers. The state and individual employers mutually benefit from the arrangement by jointly criminalizing them, and constructing them as a particularly rightless group of people.

My account of the privatizing strategies of the neoliberal state and the struggles of domestic workers for their human rights is based on interviews

with core members of two South Asian groups, Sakhi and Andolan, which have taken a lead in organizing domestic workers in New York City.² In 1994, a feminist organization, Sakhi for South Asian Women, tackling domestic violence within South Asian communities, started the Domestic Workers Committee (DWC). According to a Sakhi founder-member, soon after its establishment in 1989, the group started to receive calls from South Asian domestic workers reporting abuses that in many ways paralleled South Asian women's experiences of domestic violence in the U.S. Both sets of women found their passports impounded by their husbands and employers. Both sets of women were threatened with deportation. Both sets of women suffered from tremendous restrictions on their mobility exacerbated by their

Das Gupta), which in 1997 became Workers' Awaaz or the Workers' Voice. This organization split further with one section walking out in 1998 and forming Andolan (which means "to agitate"). A worker-run organization, Andolan focuses on South Asian women, the majority of whom work in South Asian homes. But it runs its campaigns with Domestic Workers United, a multi-ethnic alliance that brings together Workers Awaaz, the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), Damayan Domestic Workers Association, Filipino Workers' Center, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), and the National Employment Law Project (NELP). Andolan is not modeled after traditional labour unions. In fact, domestic workers do not have the right to

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position as immigrant women who were not familiar with the neighborhoods they lived in, or with the public transport system. Sakhi established the DWC to organize domestic workers in an effort to address the problems of working-class women who were also being abused within a domestic and privatized space.

Conflicts in the goals of Sakhi's domestic violence project and domestic workers' project led to the dissolution of the DWC (Abraham;

collective bargaining under the National Labor Relations Act, reflecting lawmakers' understanding of domestic work as a one-to-one arrangement, facilitating the exploitation of women's paid reproductive labour by consigning it to the private sphere.

Managing a Double Crisis

The entry of South Asian women as domestic workers in the U.S. is relatively new, compared to the pres-

ence of Filipina, Caribbean, and Mexican women whose countries of origin have been historically enmeshed in relations of subordination forged by U.S. colonialism and neocolonialism. South Asian domestic workers in New York City are recruited locally and from their homelands through methods that seem to depend on individual networks and market forces of supply and demand. These methods obscure the structural forces that proletarianize these

South Asian domestic workers are a convenient answer to these problems at no cost to the state and relatively little cost to the private employers.

A severe drop in the standard of living related to structural adjustment programs (Chang 2000, 1997) has pushed South Asian women to seek domestic work abroad. According to one South Asian domestic worker-organizer, "[P]overty, domestic violence, inability to raise children properly on the family income

and on the other, a crisis in carrying out the work of social reproduction for middle-class families in the U.S. The state manages the domestic crisis in carework by replacing the public programs it cuts with women's labour made available as a result of the deep economic crisis in the South. Once these crises are set in motion, private employers and agencies can be left to recruit, transport and place dislocated "Third World" women in labour hungry households in the U.S.

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women and make them available for domestic work. These forces also create the demand for paid reproductive work in U.S. homes. The appearance of South Asian domestic workers in U.S. homes coincide with three structural developments: 1) the aggressive liberalization of South Asian economies led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in the late 1980s and 1990s and their opening up to U.S. capital; 2) the continuing restructuring of the U.S. economy creating unskilled low-wage service jobs as well as high-skilled relatively high paid jobs in information technology, banking and investment both hungry for cheapened immigrant labour (see Sassen); and 3) the exclusion of non-citizens who are permanent residents from an array of public programs with the passage of the 1996 *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act*. Since the state takes no responsibility for how the immigrants—many of whom are temporary workers or permanent residents—can take care of the elder, sick, or children, (and no private insurance is available for those immigrants who might have to take care of their non-resident elderly parents),

back in South Asia, widowhood, and abandonment by the family" are some of the chief reasons that compelled women to find work thousands of miles away from home (Samar Collective 16). The majority of women working as domestics in the New York metropolitan area are from Bangladesh and India (Alam). The rest are from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The artificial devaluation of South Asian currencies against the dollar as well as austerity measures implemented through cut backs in government-subsidized social programs in these countries have made the money women make at home count for less, and the money they can earn by going abroad count for more. To sustain their families in the midst of these enormous economic pressures, many women who have the resources or are offered the opportunity decide to immigrate.

The U.S. state creates a double crisis through its adoption of neoliberal policies domestically, and its globalization of those policies with the help of supranational agencies in the name of structural adjustment. On the one hand, neoliberalism creates a crisis in sustainability for certain sections of South Asian women,

Privatizing State Power

While the privatized, informalized, and devalued nature of domestic work that Dill (1994) diagnosed in her study of African American women working for White employers has not changed, it is greatly complicated by employers' use of immigration status as way of intimidating workers and systematically cheapening their labour. Once the state categorizes these women according to their manner of entry and the terms of their stay in the U.S., it transfers its surveillance functions to the employers, who, since 1986, have been made legally responsible for checking their employees' work authorization. Through this move, the state privatizes and outsources its gatekeeping functions. At that moment of categorization, women who are knowingly brought in by their employers under visas that do not permit them to work (Alam 16) are criminalized and put at risk with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). This risk is then used by employers to keep their employees isolated, ill-paid, and overworked. For the state to successfully solve the crisis in carework for middle-class families, it must depend on inducing the *fear* of enforcement in workers, rather than on actual enforcement or on barring the entry of unauthorized workers. In this context, collective action against these fears that silence and immobilize domestic workers becomes a key organizing tool in the movement.

The ways in which private employers start to operate as the arm of the state are revealed in what domestic worker-organizers identify as some common employer practices. According to them, employers who fly in with their newly-recruited employees from their home countries instill the fear of the police and the INS into women from the moment they board the flight. They routinely seize the women's passports once they pass through immigration at the airport. The employer practice of impounding their employees' passports is not restricted to women brought in from abroad. Workers recruited locally also report having to surrender their papers to their employers. Employers use the threat of INS intervention, arrest, and eventual deportation—all state functions—to hold these women captive in situations that they find intolerable.

Even those who are promised legal residency get locked into low-wage work for years because this form of immigration status adjustment takes an average of eight to ten years, according to the activists I interviewed (see also AALDEF and NELP 21). Since the worker is sponsored for permanent residency by the employer, she gets tied to her sponsor for those years. While Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program binds employees to a three-year contract after which they are entitled to apply to permanent residency (Stasiulis and Bakan), the process for employment-based permanent residency for domestic workers in the U.S., which has no such policy, takes much longer, institutionally prolonging the discriminatory conditions under which these women are forced to work.

The state also criminalizes employers who hire undocumented workers under the Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA) passed in 1986. However, the sanctions against employers—a fine and/or criminal charges—are asymmetrical when compared to what an undocumented worker faces under immigration law. A domestic worker without the right

papers faces deportation—a devastating prospect for that woman's dependent household. Furthermore, in keeping with its neoliberal character, the state makes employers individually responsible for ascertaining the work authorization status of the employee. In practice, employers have successfully passed the burden of proof on to employees. Recognizing this burden, domestic worker advocates remind women who are hired locally that they have a right *not* to answer questions about their immigration status and need only to provide a *copy* of one of many documents (passport, social security card, temporary resident or resident citizen or employment authorization card, birth certificate or refugee travel document) if asked for work authorization (AALDEF and NELP). Andolan and other domestic worker groups raise both worker and employer consciousness about the IRCA's sanctions against employers to deter employers who use the threat of the INS to abuse their employees. This strategy directly intervenes on the workers' behalf by stressing that employers who hire undocumented workers break the law and are punishable.

ers exemplifies that stratification. The average *monthly* income of a South Asian domestic worker is \$200 as a live-in nanny-housekeeper compared to the average of \$450/ *week* that an AALDEF and NELP survey found to be the rate for a nanny who takes care of one child and does no housekeeping. According to an Andolan organizer, "No South Asian domestic worker can expect to make more than \$350 a month." Neither citizenship nor higher education brings these women better work conditions because they are deskilled immigrant women of colour (Espiritu; Man) who, in the words of the organizer, have been brought up with the oppressive gender ideology that domestic work is women's work. This statement shows how deeply underground South Asian women's labour has been driven. The pay that South Asian women receive is for an 18-hour workday. They do not receive overtime. Quite often, domestic workers report the steady escalation of their duties without a matching raise in pay. This form of employment does not come with paid vacation, health benefits, or retirement funds. Overworked and grossly underpaid, the women often suffer from daily indig-

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Fighting Back

South Asian domestic workers bear the consequences of these privatized exercises of state power in the form of poor wages, lack of benefits, and lack of labour protections. While these conditions characterize the entire industry, the market is stratified along racial, national and linguistic lines. The stark gap between market wages and what South Asian women receive from their immigrant employ-

ers, acute isolation and alienation, mental and physical abuse as well as sexual abuse.

The unregulated nature of domestic work in the U.S., far from enabling better work conditions, produces a fragmented workforce stratified along a multiplicity of employment arrangements. Each arrangement is associated with levels of protection that domestic workers can legally demand under the state's la-

bour laws. This creates a situation where workers, unless organized, get confused about their rights. Part-time baby-sitters and companions to sick or elderly people do not even enter the definition of employee according to federal and New York labour laws (AALDEF and NELP: 34), and, therefore, do not receive any protection. The next most vulnerable group is live-in domestic workers. They have fewer rights under the law than live-outs.³ Under federal standards, live-ins are not entitled to overtime (NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund). Though New York State does authorize overtime for live-ins, adjacent states of New Jersey and Connecticut do not. The regular work week for live-ins is defined as 45 hours against the 40 hours mandated for live-outs.

To combat these crushing conditions, Andolan, in unison with the multi-racial and multi-ethnic coalition, DWU, has built its campaigns around employer and employee education about existing labour laws that afford wage and hour protections, and the demand for a standard contract. Activists construct the campaigns around labour rights within a larger analysis of immigration policies, which they know punish exploited workers instead of their exploitative employers and systematically undercut labour protections to which workers are entitled regardless of their immigration status. Countering the harmful contradiction between labour and immigration laws for undocumented immigrant workers, the movement insists that the transnationalization of labour must come with the universal recognition of the rights of migrant workers. The activists draw on the 1990 UN Migrant Rights Convention (OHCHR), which came into force in 2002, to demand basic entitlements for undocumented and documented workers.

Andolan's campaign to educate workers about their rights is an immediate organizing strategy to contend with the every-day abuse of those

rights. It must be remembered that in the U.S. domestic workers were not entitled to labour protections afforded under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) until 1974, and that too as a result of persistent lobbying by domestic worker organizations and their allies (NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund). As part of its rights campaign, Andolan raises awareness about workers' entitlement under the federal standards and state laws to minimum wage (currently set at \$5.15 for New York State), overtime, workers' compensation, and unemployment insurance that only documented workers can draw (AALDEF and NELP 19, 34-36). This rights education is a collective process through which workers train each other in labour and immigration law. They also teach each other how to interview for a job, negotiate work conditions with a prospective employer, or demand changes in existing work conditions. This process dispels the sense of powerlessness that the state promotes among poorly paid immigrant workers through its immigration laws and poor enforcement of labour laws (Bonacich 322).

Empowering as this strategy is for domestic workers, the organizations realize that it leaves the task of enforcing labour protections up to employees who have little structural power in a privatized situation. The demand for an industry-wide standard contract has emerged in this context. The standard contract drafted by AALDEF and NELP, in addition to making wage and hour protections binding on employers, introduces workers' entitlement to two weeks of paid vacation every year, one week's worth of paid sick leave, payment for the time employers are away on vacation, and medical insurance. By writing these benefits into the contract, the advocates advanced their dual goals of enforcing federal standards at state and local levels, and addressing the severe gaps in the standards themselves. The campaign for a standard contract gathered momentum with local media cover-

age on the inhuman treatment of domestic workers, as well as worker-led public demonstrations. In March 2002, the lobbying, demonstrations, and testimonies led to the introduction of a bill and a resolution sponsored by eighteen members of the New York City Council.

As workers negotiated with the state for regulations that would protect them, the state remobilized its neoliberalism while seemingly conceding those demands. The New York City Council's conversion of the DWU's demand for an industry-wide *standard contract* to a bill proposing a *code of conduct* is a working out of its neoliberal logic. The code left it up to a new set of subcontractors—employment agencies—to enforce labour laws. On top of excluding half of the 600,000 domestic workers who do not go through employment agencies, licensed or unlicensed, the proposed code continued to operate within the same logic that led the state to previously outsource its regulatory functions to individual employers.

The bill, on recognizing that “[t]he majority of domestic or household employees in New York City are immigrant women of color who, because of race and sex discrimination, language barriers, and immigration status, are particularly vulnerable to unfair labour practices” (New York City Council), proposed that all licensed placement agencies secure employers' signature to a code of conduct prepared by the council. Agencies that fail to do so would be subject to a \$1000 fine and/or imprisonment up to a year. The code spelled out federal and state requirements already on the books. Unlike the standard contract, it did not ask employers to provide basic benefits, thereby leaving the gaps in the existing labour laws untouched. The standard contract's provision for paid vacation and sick days was turned into a resolution making them non-enforceable. Two radical DWU demands for legal recognition—domestic workers' right to organize and the

right of undocumented workers to regularize their immigration status so as to eliminate one of the fundamental mechanisms of their exploitation—were also relegated to mere resolutions.

The bill and the resolution are rhetorically progressive, and organizers read this legislative action with all its limitations as a sign of their growing visibility and leverage.⁴ But to what extent do they change the privatized mechanisms through which the state severely depresses women's paid reproductive labour? First, if the bill gets passed, it will leave out those women who, like many of the South Asian workers Andolan organizes, are recruited through informal methods. These women are likely to be among the most underpaid, and therefore most attractive for many employers. Second, the fact that the bill makes no provision for a process to monitor the implementation of the code once the worker disappears into the employer's household, or to register a grievance in case of infractions, puts the responsibility back on the worker to take action if exploitative conditions were to continue. Even those who are placed by employment agencies and are likely to benefit from the bill do not have better recourse to justice in case of violations. Third, what becomes punishable in this proposed legislation is the failure of employment agencies to inform their consumers (employers of domestic workers) about their responsibilities under federal and state laws. In effect, the bill turns a labour protection issue into a consumer issue, conflating the conflictual interests of employers and employees. The Department of Consumers Affairs, which is supposed to oversee the employment agencies and track compliance, itself has resisted this confusion by pointing out that enforcing labour laws was the Department of Labor's business (Lee).

The bill does not require the state to change its practices or become accountable. Perhaps the most telling statement of the state's neoliberal move was the one made in persua-

sion of the proposal by Democratic Councilwoman Gale Brewer, "We're in a budget crunch and this bill doesn't cost anything" (Tsai). Indeed, the state can look good without making any investment in services or enforcement that domestic workers would need to free themselves of exploitation and violence.

Conclusion

The domestic workers' movement makes us consider the implications of its rights claims for the debate over trafficking in women, and for the neoliberal state. The deceit, abuse, and exploitation that women crossing borders in search of work suffer—elements identified by international standards defining trafficking (United Nations)—result in part from the U.S. state's restrictive restrictive immigration practices. These controls are essential to maintaining the state's identity as sovereign. Through its border keeping and border policing functions, that necessitate women's clandestine entry, the American state itself creates conditions that domestic workers experience and characterize as "modern day slavery." Even as these conditions fall within an expanded understanding of trafficking in women situated within transnational migration and the feminization of that phenomenon (Lepp), domestic workers organizing in New York do not fit representations of "trafficked" women. As Nandita Sharma's work on feminist positions against trafficking and Annalee Lepp's analysis of national and international policymaking show, these discourses intersect to deny trafficked women their agency, and their right to work and mobility by constructing them simultaneously as victims and deportable criminals. The domestic workers' campaigns intervene in exactly those representations by demanding their fundamental right to migrate in order to cope with their material crisis, and to work *legally as migrants* under just and safe condi-

tions. In doing so, unlike many anti-trafficking activists, they do not mistake the state as the benefactor, even though they direct their demands toward the state. Given the workers' intimate knowledge of the abusive power of the state in their lives, they develop a strategic difference between holding the state accountable and turning to it as their protector. As some feminists have pointed out, centering migrant women's demands and strategies can be useful in reformulating anti-trafficking positions which otherwise strengthen the state's repressive anti-immigrant policies.

The neoliberal state's convenient retreat from its welfare commitments, and the transfer of many of its traditional functions to non-state agencies lead to the emergence of apparatuses that operate in a state-like fashion alongside it, rather than above it or below it, giving rise to what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta conceptualize as transnational governmentality. The state in enabling these co-actors actually puts itself in crisis because it can no longer imagine itself through "the vertical topography of power on which the legitimation of nation-states has so long depended" (995). It is this crisis brought on by the state's neoliberal strategies, rather than a neutral non-interventionary state (Hondangneusotelo), that pries open a space for the rights claims domestic workers are making, particularly around their human right to legally reside in the country where they live and work. The workers' formulation of their entitlements lies outside of conventional ideas of state sovereignty, citizenship and its accompanying rights all of which are called into question as transnational governmentality goes about transforming the state.

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¹The racialized class politics of South Asian middle-class immigrants employing impoverished women from their countries of origin, and the complex reasons behind South Asian domestic workers ending up in South Asian homes is discussed elsewhere (Das Gupta). It is important to point out here that domestic worker-organizers strongly argue that the conditions they face in these homes structure the entire industry and are by no means exclusive to South Asian employers.

²I would like to thank the participants from Sakhi and Andolan for their thoughtful interviews. Nahar Alam, Andolan's key organizer, was particularly helpful in laying out the growth of South Asian domestic workers' organizing efforts since 1997.

³Most South Asian domestic workers, especially those who were recruited from their homelands, are hired as live-ins. Subsequently, their extremely poor pay, and the very high cost of living in the New York metropolitan area prevent them from moving out.

⁴No action has been taken on the bill, Int 0096-2002 since June 2002 (New York City Council).

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DONA STURMANIS

For my mother

Slope-shouldered,
treads softly
in doeskin shoes,
sits for hours,
a statue
in the flickering blue
TV light,
watches Dallas re-runs
morning and night.
Presides in her chair
at the head of the table.
Reads whatever's available.
Queen Elizabeth
posing for a stamp,
internal royalty,
Mum's survived
with her stoic dignity.

Before he died, Dad
was the mouthpiece;
Mum never had a chance
to speak.
She is traumatized
by his death,
was shushed
into deeper silence.

Mum reads me
a letter by *her* father
at her birth:
She is small & dark & frail.
We're not sure
she will live.

She's not weak;
she is weed-root strong.
There is strength in
spared words.
Mum lives,
has survived past my father –
"an exciting man,"
she called him.
All that wasn't in her lonely
life
as an invisible, faithful wife:
travel! celebrities! parties!
booze! cigarettes! infidelities!
It killed him, not her.

Mum's thrills:
Likes driving fast
with my hellion husband

Dona Sturmanis' poetry appears earlier in this volume.

DONA STURMANIS

Aging Parent Poem II

Mother wants stimulation.
You arrange to meet
in the downtown park
to see *The Tempest*
as the sun goes down.
She spends all day
choosing green pants & aqua
top,
reads the script of the play
so she'll remember.
Tells her grandson
about Shakespeare-Under-
the-Stars
in Central Park
when she was a child.

The promenade from the
parking lot
to the theatre by the lake
takes 45 minutes. Grandma's
out of breath, but she makes
it.
You have brought
sandwiches,
fresh shucked peas
steaming coffee & many
blankets.

She plunks herself down on
the grass.
But she cannot hear the
actors.
The clouds are moving in
as Prospero conjures up the
Tempest.
When the wind starts to
blow,
it feels like Prospero waved
his arms
at the heavens.
But when the rain comes,
they feel like lead upon her
brow
and she runs for cover under
a tree.

Takest me home,
says she.