

## Tell Me What to Do, But Don't Tell Me How

When Elvira Areola, still feeling wounded by the quarrel that had ended her long-standing job, described her ideal employer, she emphasized that a good employer uses plain directives, together with positive feedback. “If she's happy with her employee, she speaks clearly to her so that everything will go well, she communicates more, says, ‘I don't like this, but I do like this,’ or ‘I want you to do this, but I don't want you to do that.’” Directives and clear communication, in her view, were essential. “That way,” Elvira continued, “you don't waste time killing yourself doing something they don't even want you to do to.” Other housecleaners and nanny/housekeepers echoed these preferences.

But today's employers in Los Angeles tend to shy away from defining the tasks they want performed. When I asked employers to describe their ideal nannies and housekeepers, many of them told me they preferred being spared such explanations. “The ideal person in my life,” offered Jenna Proust, who had ample experience employing housecleaners and nanny/housekeepers, “would be someone who anticipates what needs to be done and barely needs to be told. That would be wonderful.” Similarly, when I asked a homemaker what she liked best about her live-in nanny/housekeeper of seven years, she replied without hesitation, “She takes initiative. She doesn't really need me to tell her stuff.” Another woman who had hired many weekly housecleaners said, “My assumption was that they know how to do the job.”

This chapter focuses on labor control, the ability of employers to obtain the work behavior that they desire from their domestics; it also examines the ways in which the housecleaners and nanny/ housekeepers comply with, resist, and negotiate over such control. On assembly lines, in office bureaucracies, or at fast-food outlets, labor control is embedded in the organization of work itself.<sup>1</sup> This is not the case in contemporary domestic jobs. Moreover, the absence of written job contracts, fixed products, and the profit motive suggests that modes of labor control in paid domestic work will be very different from those found in, say, a General Motors plant or a McDonald's. While there is broad agreement about the scope of the job, the tasks are diffuse and there is no standardization of the services that will be performed or of how they will be executed.

Even the specific job requirements are ambiguous. For instance, what exactly is meant by “light housekeeping” or “care for three school-age children”? These phrases are open to multiple interpretations, and employers and employees may have conflicting interests in defining them. Employers—who can hire and fire at will—have more power than their employees; and as we have seen, relations in the domestic occupation in Los Angeles are particularly asymmetrical, as the Latina employees are subordinated not only by race and

socioeconomic class but also by nationality and immigration status. Still, it is a rare employer who straightforwardly explains all the daily job responsibilities at the outset of employment. Moreover, job tasks and the way they are carried out differ from one job to the next. Because employers and job sites vary widely, one nanny/housekeeper job will not be identical to another next door; cleaning obligations may be very different at each house on the route.

To further complicate matters, job requirements often change over time. Many employers increase their demands, while others may reluctantly decide to settle for less. Some employers, for instance, decide to overlook a nanny/housekeeper's poor housecleaning because of her superlative care of the children. Nanny/housekeepers are frequently asked to assume more responsibilities without commensurate increases in pay. “Nos aumentan el trabajo, sin aumentar el pago,” or “They raise our workload without raising our pay,” is a common refrain among Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles.

The variability is, to some extent, understandable: caring for households and young children entails a multitude of activities. Many tasks—mopping floors, cooking, scrubbing bathrooms, changing diapers, doing laundry, and so forth—must be done over and over again, and few are performed in a standardized way or on a strict time schedule. Yet there is an even simpler explanation for the diverse, ill-defined forms of labor control that we see in this job. Employers don't see themselves as employers, and they do not view their homes as work sites.

Many employers, for various reasons, initially feel too awkward to make explicit what they want when they hire a domestic worker. Others refrain from doing so because they are at first uncertain about the services they want performed. Though they unequivocally prefer domestic workers who will take initiative, the direction taken by that initiative may not be the one the employers had in mind. Like the student who works hard to complete a vague assignment only to be told by the teacher, “This is not what I had in mind,” so too many domestic workers are criticized and told what they should have done only after their work is performed. At that point, the directives may take the form of harshly phrased commands and angry ultimatums.

Eventually, many employers learn to use different strategies to get the services they want. They exert control through time management, surveillance, evaluation of output, maternalistic gestures, and, more rarely, written or verbal instructions (figure 2). The tension between their desire to get their “money's worth” from their nannies or housecleaners and their reluctance to see themselves as employers, combined with their ineffectualness in communicating job requirements when employment first begins, often creates conflict. Maternalistic gestures of the kind so widely documented in other studies are not common in Los Angeles today. Whenever domestic employees related their experiences with despotic employers, they almost always involved immigrant employers.<sup>2</sup>

For their part, the Latina employees use diverse strategies as they seek to efficiently deliver services while retaining some degree of control over the work process. The approaches of nanny/housekeepers and housecleaners, like their jobs, often differ. Yet members of both groups wish to receive from their employers some directions about *what* to do, while maintaining autonomy in *how* they do it. Conflicts that arise between employers and employees can often be traced not just to a lack of clear directives but also to issues of *time*. To improve the quality of their jobs, nanny/housekeepers seek to limit the hours that they work and housecleaners attempt to win flexibility in their hours.

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Figure 2. Advertisements in *L.A. Parent Magazine*, July 1996. New industries arise to help parents exert control over the nanny's care of their children and, especially, to allay their fears about any harm befalling their children. Some parents are ready to send the nanny to school to learn how to handle a health emergency. Others want to conduct video surveillance while they themselves are off at work, even though it is parents and relatives who are most often guilty of physical abuse against children.

## NANNY/HOUSEKEEPERS

Many of today's employers of nanny/housekeepers do not want to direct the work or organize and monitor the household tasks that need to be done. While such reluctance to become involved has always been common among male employers, it is now found among female employers as well. When they hire a full-time employee in their home, they prefer someone who will take full charge of most of the household tasks, freeing them of the responsibility not just of doing this work but also of thinking about it. These employers may provide verbal cues or reprimands only if the work isn't done. After all, they are hiring a substitute to deal with their own domestic labor; they don't want to invest time in managing that labor. Employers who work full-time outside the home are more likely to abnegate control, but their expectations of the quality and quantity of work performed may remain just as high. The employee is often left

to intuitively figure out what needs to be done. Millie Chu, a pediatric nurse and single mother of two young children, explained that from her perspective, an ideal nanny/housekeeper is “Somebody who can know what you need before you have to ask—like just know you that well.”

When I spoke with her, Millie was very satisfied with Marisol, her live-in nanny/housekeeper, precisely because Marisol was attuned to the rhythms of her personal moods and household needs. “Like sometimes when I’m trying to get dinner ready and I’m stressing because I’m looking at the clock, she’ll know. She’ll ask me what am I making and she’s seen me make it so much, she’ll just jump in and start cutting the vegetables or cutting the meat or washing the rice, without me saying, ‘Marisol, do you think you can help me wash the rice?’” Although Millie also asked Marisol to do special tasks, she preferred to just have her “jump in” to do the work without being prompted. After four years of working in the household, Marisol had become adept at reading subtle cues from this harried, hardworking single parent. “She can totally sense my moods,” confirmed Millie Chu. “If I’ve had a hard day at work and I come home, she can look at me and say, ‘Okay kids, hang out with me. Give mom a half hour to unwind.’ I’d had another one prior to her who was eighteen years old and the minute I walked in it was like—boom! She went in her room and shut the door and we never saw her again.”

Many employers see the ideal nanny/housekeeper as one who can deftly read these signals and then respond to their needs. Such an employee is able to quickly interpret the employer's emotional moods and needs and is willing to actively step in and respond, even when the clock is ticking well beyond official job hours. A common complaint among nanny/housekeepers in Los Angeles, especially those who live with their employers, is that they must make themselves available round-the-clock. Many are required to sleep in the children's bedroom and find themselves literally on call throughout the night; even those who have their own room often must remain on duty with the children when the employers are home. When I interviewed Marisol, she did not express disgruntlement about overextended work hours, but many other nanny/housekeepers did. The retreat to her room of Millie Chu's former employee signaled one nanny/housekeeper's refusal to extend her hours.

Nanny/housekeepers regularly express frustration with employers who expect them to know what to do without telling them. Several employers acknowledged that it was neither fair nor realistic to expect nanny/housekeepers to telepathically sense what needs to be done. One employer admitted that she herself had been at fault: “You know, I probably get mad without giving them a chance,” she said. “Like Sarita, I probably should have told her at an earlier point, you know, ‘Do this, do that,’ and then if she didn’t, gotten rid of her. But I never did, and now I am [getting rid of her].”

Employers who were out of the labor force and at home for a good portion of the day were more likely to give directives. “It’s very important that they know what you expect because it’s not fair,” stated Beverly Voss, a homemaker who employed a live-in nanny/ housekeeper in her large, rambling canyon house. “I can’t expect Marta to figure out what I want. I need to tell her what I want.” Unlike most of the other respondents, Beverly also acknowledged her own obligations in delegating responsibility. When the refrigerator needed to be cleaned out, she asked her live-in employee to do it; but she left it to Marta's discretion as to when and how the

task would be performed. Still, even Beverly reported that she would prefer being able to rely on an employee's intuitions. "An ideal housekeeper," she sighed longingly, "would always keep your house perfectly, and would have an eye for things."

These "ideal housekeepers" are scarce, and many employers are at a loss at how to proceed without them. Employers who are new to the world of paid domestic workers may consult with more experienced friends. Carolyn Astor, who had married into a family of much higher social status than her own, went so far as to have a matron who was a friend of her husband's family come to her home on the day that the new nanny/housekeeper began the job. The older woman taught Carolyn how to instruct the new employee on her duties. She translated from English to Spanish, advised Carolyn to drop by the home unexpectedly during the day to check on the work, and helped her devise and explain a daily checklist on which the employee would record routine events, such as "what time the baby went to sleep, what time he woke up, how many peepees, how many poopos, how many ounces of the bottle." With the list, Carolyn explained, "I came home and looked right on the tablet and I knew how much he ate, how much he slept..." The list, which harks back to the era of scientific management, allowed her to monitor what had occurred with her baby while she was out, and it also allowed her to monitor the nanny/housekeeper's activities. She eventually dispensed with the list and the unannounced visits home, as the baby grew into a toddler and as she grew to trust the nanny/housekeeper.

Information exchanged in the employer networks provides important guidelines. Marsha Fama, a wealthy homemaker and mother of a toddler who employed two live-out nanny/housekeepers, reported that her friends marveled at the facility with which she asked her employees to do particular tasks not in the daily or weekly routine, such as cleaning out the closets or scrubbing walls. In fact, she now advised her friends on how to give directives to their domestic employees. "A lot of my friends, you know, see how good Liliana is, and they say, 'How do you tell her?' Because they feel like they can't always express their needs and wants. And I said, it's not so much what you say to them, but it's just *how* you say it." She explained what she meant. "Like they know that I appreciate them. I tell them. I physically show them. I hug them when they do something really good, or um, if I'm sick and they take care of me, I say, 'Well, thank you very much.'" While her approach smacks of something straight out of the positive reinforcement section of a manual on motivating employees, the several hours I spent with Marsha convinced me that it was a genuine outgrowth of her effusive, sugary personality. Unlike many other employers, she relies on a method reminiscent of the maternalistic style, whose reign in an earlier era is documented in a large body of literature.<sup>3</sup>

Many Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles do want some verbal appreciation and recognition of their work from their employer. But they also want clear instructions, with lines of communication kept open in both directions. Patricia Paredes, who worked as a live-in and spoke very good English, had worked her way up toward the top of the occupation. She stated this preference most bluntly. "I tell them, If I don't like something you do, I will come to you and I won't hesitate in telling you. So I expect you to do the same thing with me. You know, you sit down with me, whenever, and you tell me in a nice way. You don't come to me and yell, because we're not going to get anywhere with that.'" While few Latina nannies are as forthright as Patricia, another nanny/housekeeper commented that the need to speak up in these jobs had

helped her become more assertive. “I learned in my first job,” she said, “to lose my shyness.” Another woman, who had recently switched from working as a nanny/housekeeper to a cleaner, added, “I like it when they tell me what's okay, and what's bad, and I like to tell them what is okay and what is not.”

Yet while employers want employees with initiative, they do not always appreciate assertiveness; and when domestic employees hear negative feedback, they find it hard to take, especially when it is constant. Ronalda Saavedra complained that her employer, Jenna Proust, issued not directives but humiliating reprimands. The underlying dynamic of this arrangement involved Jenna's attempt to make her employee more like a servant, on call at all times, and Ronalda's resistance to such servitude and the loss of all autonomy in her job. “The people I have around me on a daily basis have to be able to help do what I ask them to do,” explained Jenna. “It may be embarrassing,” she admitted, “to ask someone to quickly come and clean a spill,” as she had done at the beginning of our interview when she spilled coffee on a white sofa, “but that is what they're here for, so I can do other things.” Indeed, she had become annoyed when her call for help was ignored—though it seemed unlikely that anyone in a different room in her 6,000-square-foot home could have heard her.

Jenna Proust believed she was purchasing the right to have her nanny/housekeeper perform whatever tasks she stipulated; Ronalda Saavedra expected to follow her employer's directives, but she resented having to constantly seek out her employer to ask how she might be of service. This version of servanthood bothered Ronalda, who was required to regularly enter Jenna's home office or sitting room to see if she had any requests. “Sometimes I go and I ask if she needs anything, and she says, ‘No/ This *señora* is so illogical! It's like I must report,” she exclaimed. “Why can't she come tell me?” Ronalda experienced Jenna's requirement that she submit to occasional requests, rather than be left to complete her instructed tasks or routine job obligations, as a symbol of servitude and a humiliating affront to her dignity.

## LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT: LIVE-IN JOBS

Domestic employees, especially live-ins, wish to establish firm boundaries around their work hours, which employers desire to remain more elastic. As the owner of an agency that specializes in placements of nanny/housekeepers explained, “The truth of the matter is they want a live-in to have somebody at their beck and call. And so, yes, they might give you [the employee] a three-hour break during the day, but they want you to baby-sit at night. That's why they want a live-in. They want the flexibility, the spontaneity, they want to be able to have a life and a relationship with their husband, or date or whatever.” Employer flexibility here clearly depends on round-the-clock domestic service.

The employer's schedules and needs may mandate that the services provided by live-in domestic labor begin very early and end very late. It is not unusual for a nanny/housekeeper to be on the job twelve hours a day, or even longer. Some of the Latina nanny/housekeepers, as we have seen, must sleep in the children's bedrooms. Given such arrangements, limiting the workday to twelve hours may be a major achievement, gained only after deliberate negotiations. Many Latina women who held live-in jobs complained to me, “I had to hold the baby in my arms, even when I brushed my teeth!” After several months in such a job, one

woman who cared for the baby of entertainment industry executives negotiated new work hours, which included some break time in the afternoon but still spanned eleven and a half hours, from 8:30 A.M. until 7 P.M. For her, this was a vast improvement.

As Julia Wrigley has pointed out in *Other People's Children* (1995), nannies provide a very different service than day care centers, which mandate that parents must pick up children by a certain hour. "When already paid-for labor is available," notes Wrigley, "it takes a strong-minded parent to keep shouldering the work."<sup>4</sup> Many nanny/housekeepers complained about employers who do not engage with their children when they return from work. The nanny/housekeepers generally prefer to care for the children without interference: children, they explained, tend to misbehave more when their parents are around. But parents' interaction with the children every day is crucial to enhancing their job satisfaction. "All of those people who have money," proclaimed one live-in nanny, "don't spend time with their kids, not because they're busy, but because they are tired, they come home, they think that only ten minutes is enough. It is not, you know, but some parents don't see their kids all day and it can be a week, and they don't see them and they don't care." Another nanny told me, "They come home from work, fix themselves a drink, lie down to watch TV in their room, and shut the door." Another alleged her employers came home to smoke pot in their room, while she was stuck with the children. Live-in nanny/housekeepers bitterly criticized such behavior, not just because it reflected employers' unwillingness to recognize limits on their hours of work but also because it branded their employers as irresponsible parents who didn't want to be with their children. In their view, these were simply bad mothers, bad parents, and bad employers.

The parents, however, do feel exhausted when they come home from work, and as employers, they want their money's worth. If their children spend the day at school and return at three o'clock, they sometimes suspect that their nanny/housekeeper enjoys too much idle time during the day. They wonder, "Is she just sitting around watching *telenovelas* or chatting on the phone?" If the nanny takes young children to the park daily, the employers may believe that she is neglecting the housework in order to socialize with other nannies. Employers may assuage their fears by various means of surveillance. The highly publicized monitoring via hidden video camera lodged in a teddy bear is less common than audio surveillance (listening through the intercom system, or eavesdropping from the hallway) or simply surprise visits. Parents sometimes drop by their home unannounced or arrive unexpectedly at the park to make sure that the caregiver is indeed on the job, playing with the children and not just conversing with other nannies. A few of the nanny/housekeepers complained about this, but most agree that looking after young children is a big responsibility, and that parents are entitled to check on how they are caring for the children. Surprisingly, I found that the nanny/housekeepers were much more disturbed by poorly defined job hours than by surveillance.

Enforced isolation is another means of controlling live-in domestic workers. Some employers forbid their employees to regularly meet with other nanny/housekeepers. The nannies may be told not to take the children to the park, because the employers fear that they will network, learn about going pay rates and better jobs, and then ask for raises or shorter hours. Several employers that I interviewed blamed what they perceived to be unfair requests for raises on the informational exchanges among Latina nannies and housekeepers who chat at bus stops and parks.

## TIME ON TASK VERSUS TIME ON THE JOB

Much of domestic work is invisible. When a nanny/housekeeper is in the home five or six days a week, she may devise routines that relegate laundry to Monday, vacuuming to Tuesday, and so forth, perhaps leaving time for her own rest when the children are napping, or before they return home from school in the afternoon. When the employers are homemakers, they may actually observe this rest time—as Beverly Voss had recently done. Her youngest daughter had just begun attending school, thereby relieving Marta, the live-in nanny/housekeeper, of some child care duties. To counter what she perceived as long periods of idleness, Beverly was trying, without much success, to find new tasks that might occupy Marta. Marta kept the 5,600-square-foot home looking perfect, and Beverly and her husband had already made Friday and Saturday night babysitting part of Marta's weekly job duties. Grocery shopping and meal preparation were possibilities, but Beverly did not want to relinquish control over selecting what food came into the home (“you can't know what's fresh and looks good until you're there”); and though she wished she could ask Marta to do the nightly cooking, she felt that the request would be inappropriate, because it was a large addition to the initial duties and they had not started off this way. Moreover, as the homemaker wife and mother who had been largely relieved of cleaning and child-rearing duties, she felt it her responsibility to prepare evening family meals. After all, buying food and planning and preparing meals are, as the sociologist Marjorie De-Vault has shown in *Feeding the Family* (1991), central arenas through which women construct the family. Still, she continued to ponder other new tasks to assign Marta.

Beverly Voss held back on these impulses, but many other employers do not. Thus the Latina nanny/housekeepers often complain of “aumento de trabajo, sin aumento de sueldo”—“raises in work duties without raises in pay.” Because most households no longer have multiple servants handling different jobs, the one employee tends to be given all available tasks; and when the employees learn to manage their time so efficiently that they create some free time, employers think that they have a right to add more responsibilities.

Racial inequality increases the likelihood that employers will require the same employee both to care for children *and* to take full charge of the housekeeping. While white “American” nannies are generally not expected to do housecleaning work, Latinas regularly are. As Wrigley found in her study, parents with sufficient means often make the transition from employing a lower-wage Latina nanny/housekeeper, when their children are young, to a higher-priced English-speaking British or American nanny as their children grow older and begin to talk.<sup>5</sup> As noted in [chapter 4](#), a headhunter I interviewed saw these employers—the “tweeners” moving from one kind of job arrangement to another—as among the most challenging. An American nanny, he maintained, is very different from a Latina nanny/housekeeper, and he must instruct employers that they cannot expect white American nannies to clean and so must bring in someone else to do the housekeeping.

Some of the employers bore out his observations. Ellen Maxson, who had recently hired a young white woman from the South to work as a part-time live-out nanny/housekeeper, said that her family members had counseled her against hiring a white woman. “My mom,” she reported sheepishly, “said, ‘Well, you know, if you hire the Hispanics/ or ‘if you hire the



Mexicans, I guess you can order them around a little bit more.’ And I was thinking through that because my spouse also said something to the same effect, like ‘Don't you really want a Mexican woman that you can order around or something?’” She went against their advice; and as her family members had predicted, the young white woman refused or was unable to do much in the way of housecleaning. For various reasons—her husband was away on an extended business trip, the children had chicken pox, and she desperately needed continuity—Ellen found herself in a relatively weak position to negotiate, so she settled for less. She had experienced a similar problem, however, with a Guatemalan woman who had previously been hired to care for her young children and do “light housekeeping”: the immigrant employee, not the employer, had prevailed in defining the latter job. Perhaps the Guatemalan nanny's relatively high socioeconomic status (she was a homeowner, while Ellen was not) provided some leverage. Class, but more frequently race, nationality, and immigration status, can strongly influence negotiations to redefine the job, more readily enabling employees with relative privilege in one or more of these areas to circumscribe their job tasks.

Latina nanny/housekeepers did not respond uniformly to the demand that they take on more work. Some of them went out of their way to take initiative and find new chores that needed to be done in the households where they worked. Others remained more guarded. In informal settings, I observed Latinas cautioning one another on many occasions against volunteering to do extra household cleaning tasks. “If you start doing them, then they think it's your responsibility,” offered one woman. “The more you do,” complained Gladys Villeda, “the more they want, see?”

### USING EMOTION TO LEVERAGE PRIORITIES: CLEANING OR CARING?

Some nanny/housekeepers develop very strong ties of affection with the children they care for. It is not unusual for nanny/housekeepers to be alone with their charges during the workweek, and for long stretches they have no one else with whom to talk or interact. During the day they are not only vacuuming, scrubbing, and washing dishes but also cuddling, teasing, giggling, and clowning with the children. Not surprisingly, many nanny/housekeepers and young children grow genuinely fond of each other. These emotional attachments do not remain “outside” the labor process, but are often used by both employers and employees to get what they want. They thus become critical elements in the labor process of these care providers.<sup>6</sup>

Nearly all the employers who hire Latinas for live-in and live-out positions and have children at home stated that caring for the children should be the most important priority. Objects in the home are replaceable, they emphasized, while their children are not. Most maintained that “light housekeeping,” or “whatever she can get done” was all they required. Yet many Latina nanny/housekeepers told me a different story, frustrated by their employers' expectations that they keep the house spotless *and* simultaneously look after rambunctious children or needy babies. They worried that their cleaning responsibilities would cause them to neglect the children, who might then have an accident for which they would be blamed. They are hired to do, in essence, two jobs—caring and cleaning—and employers and employees do not always agree on which comes first.

Both parents and care providers may exploit the emotional bond between the nanny/housekeeper and the children for their own benefit. Parents are deeply concerned about the quality of care their children receive, and over time, some came to expect less cleaning from their nannies. These parents viewed it as folly to lose a trusted, loving nanny because she did not meet their original requirements for a housekeeper. One employer, who complained that at one point “you could carve your initials in the dust” and that she herself was mopping the floor, resolved the problem by hiring biweekly cleaners to come in on Saturday morning, when the nanny/housekeeper was not there. “It annoys me,” Karla Steinheimer said of this arrangement, “but I just tell myself that I don't have to worry that the baby is safe. I don't worry that the baby is well loved and feels happy and comfortable, and that's what I'm hiring Filomina for. Look, I could make lists and have her do that, but I don't want to have that kind of relationship. The baby is the focus and that's what matters.” In this instance, by providing superior care the nanny won lighter cleaning responsibilities, effectively redefining her job tasks.

Some nanny/housekeepers used concerns about the children's safety as leverage to strengthen their position. Maura de la Covarrubia, a young Peruvian woman who not incidentally had previously worked as an attorney, relied not on her emotional bond with the children but on concern for the children's safety and social development to redefine her job so that her “nanny” duties outweighed “housekeeping” chores. “When it's a question of taking care of children, it's a lot of responsibility, and if something happens to them, they'll put me in jail. In one second,” she said, snapping her fingers to illustrate the haste with which employers might act, “they can do whatever.” She reported that she had used this reasoning to tell her employers that cleaning would have to come second to the children. A young Mexican nanny/housekeeper was waiting a few months before asking for a raise, but she felt confident that the employers would approve her request, as she knew they wanted their child to experience the stability of having only one care provider over a period of time.

Employers want good, loving care for their children, but they don't want to lose their children's affection or feel displaced as parents. Experienced nanny/housekeepers know that they must not antagonize the parents, especially the mothers, by garnering too many overt demonstrations of affection from the children. The *Americanas*, they have noted, tend to become jealous when they see their children running more eagerly to the nanny than to the mommy, or hear them cooing “I'm Concha's baby.” If a nanny/housekeeper watches a one-year-old take his first steps, she may try to stage it again, out of consideration for the mother, who can then think she is seeing that breakthrough moment. And clearly, there are limits on appropriate displays of affection. Still, nanny/housekeepers know that parents want someone who will genuinely “care for” and “care about” their children; and because of that desire, parents may sometimes accept the trade-off of superior child care for less cleaning.

When employers hire Latina immigrant women to work in their homes on a daily basis, they usually expect both cleaning and care work to be done. Some of the employers interviewed created job task lists, but these methods of formalizing the cleaning chores were not always successful. One employer complained, “I have my little list posted inside one of the cupboards that says these are my priorities. When the child is asleep, do this, this, this. Even though they haven't been done, I'll find her reading a book, just doing her own thing.” But she was reluctant

to push: “I really don't want any conflicts, so I'm just not saying anything.” Another employer added, “It's just kind of a trade-off. Is it worth confronting the person? In general, it's not.” A third recalled, “When I told her [to clean], she became exceedingly defensive and upset, and then do I want somebody who is upset looking after my kids?” To explain such behavior, Wrigley notes that in the United States members of the middle class generally avoid face-to-face confrontations; instead, “They routinely refer disputes to specialists, including police, lawyers, and public officials.”<sup>7</sup> While this cultural proclivity certainly contributes to the decisions of employers who settle for higher-quality care in lieu of cleaning, we should also note that these employers are acting as parents who desire high-caliber, stable care for their young children. When that wish is fulfilled, and when their children are flourishing, some employers are willing to choose superior caregiving over thorough cleaning.

The leveraging goes both ways, as the emotional bonds between care providers and the children may anchor nanny/housekeepers to less-than-desirable jobs. Margarita Gutiérrez, for example, stayed at a live-in job in which she remained on call at all hours and for which she was poorly paid; she had passed up better job offers because she felt pity for the little “abandoned” boy whose parents were always gone. If she left her job, “What would happen to him?” she wondered. Another woman, Eloida Ruiz, felt the same way. “I must do everything that she [the employer] indicates she would like me to do, because,” explained Eloida, “it is her house and she is paying me. And I feel so sorry for the little boy, *pobrecito!*”

Latina nanny/housekeepers who had their own children “back home” in their countries of origin also became emotionally anchored to their jobs. For nanny/housekeepers who are transnational mothers, the loving daily care that they cannot give their own children is sometimes transferred to their employers’ children. Still, experienced nanny/housekeepers know they can lose their jobs when employers unexpectedly move or put their children in day care centers, or when blowups occur. Some nanny/housekeepers told me that painful experiences with jobs that ended abruptly had taught them to moderate the love they feel for the children of their employers. Several women reported that they now remained very measured in their relationships and guarded emotionally, so that they could protect themselves against the moment when connections might suddenly be severed. As one woman said emphatically, “I love them, but not like they were my own children because they are not! They are not my kids! Because if I get to love them, and then I go, then I'm going to suffer like I did the last time. I don't want that.”

## AUTONOMY AND AUTHORITY IN CHILD REARING: WHO KNOWS BEST?

Taking care of young children encompasses a multitude of tasks that require making many detailed decisions. Mundane daily events, such as eating meals and snacks, involve so many choices that even employers who do communicate to the nanny/housekeepers what the children should be fed will find themselves at a loss to cover everything. How the food is prepared, what constitutes a nutritious snack, and what passes for table manners are some of the minutiae that require attention. Similarly, rules about child discipline, television viewing, or methods of quieting and comforting a crying baby may not be clearly set out. Even when instructions are

plainly given, they may include many matters about which the employers (usually the mothers) and the nanny/housekeepers disagree. Are nanny/ housekeepers hired to follow parents' orders, or are they hired as professionals who "know best"?

Hierarchies of race, nationality, immigration status, class, and, to a lesser extent, age persist among nannies. Wrigley argues that employers who choose private nannies "similar" to themselves with respect to race, language, culture, and so on not only pay them higher salaries but are also most likely to concede authority to these "expert" care workers.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, employers who hire, say, Latina immigrants who speak little English, are poor, are dark-skinned, and have little cultural capital are more likely to call the shots. Still, there is variation even within this group.

Latina nanny/housekeepers themselves have divergent views on the permissive child-rearing methods that they often witness and are sometimes asked to follow. Some women openly admire American middle-class parents for setting limits on television viewing, or for punishing their children with "time-outs" rather than spanking, and are eager to learn these child-rearing strategies. Other Latina nanny/ housekeepers criticize what they see as American parents' indulgence and coddling of children. Some of these critics try to follow their employers' example because it is their job to do so, while others attempt to establish their own authority as professional care providers, instructing parents on how to properly raise children. All the Latina care workers agree, however, that their biggest problems include neglectful parents and parents who openly undermine their authority.

Many nanny/housekeepers were given no instructions by the parents on how to care for the children. Often it was up to them to figure it out on their own, sometimes with the help of those in their social networks. Some of the Latina nanny/housekeepers who admired the child-rearing strategies of their employers reported that they consciously modeled their discipline strategies by observing and imitating the parents. "You have to do is do what the mother does," explained Celestina Vigil. "So for example, when he was a baby and he would hit faces, she would grab his little hand and say, 'No, you don't do that.' She would speak very loudly, so then I would say to myself, 'Well, that's what I have to do.' The child wasn't even a year old, and she was already giving him a time-out." Maura de la Covarrubia, who had worked her way up from being one family's nanny/housekeeper to specializing as a once- or twice-weekly nanny/babysitter who brought along special crafts materials and did minimal housecleaning or laundry, said that the best part of her job had been learning about different ways of child rearing. "In our countries, children are educated with repression and punishment," she reflected, "but since that's not allowed here, you need to develop other types of activities. I like working with children, and I've learned a lot. It's a very gratifying experience." Both Celestina, who had been a university student in El Salvador, and Maura, formerly an attorney fighting for social justice in Peru, had urban, middle-class backgrounds, which may have predisposed them to American middle-class child-rearing methods. Yet even they, who were so eager to follow this approach, had to take the initiative to learn and then modify this kind of child rearing. Directions and how-to hints are scarce.

All the Latina nanny/housekeepers want jobs in which the employers will allow them the authority to discipline the children. Most of them are happy or at least willing to follow the discipline method that the parents prefer, but they are profoundly disturbed when the parents

interfere with how they administer it. One woman described what had happened when she had placed a child in a time-out for striking another child. The mother walked by, asked the child what had happened, and then affectionately embraced him; after telling him not to do it again, she released him from his time-out. The similar experience of another nanny/housekeeper led to a serious confrontation. Soraya Sanchez recalled an obstinate child who refused to get out of the bathtub; since the parents had told her to get the children in bed by 8 P.M., she had drained the bathtub and threatened to rinse the child off with cold water. When he began to scream, the mother walked in, sided with him, and shouted at her. Soraya told me that later, she had taken the mother aside and said, “‘Don't yell at me again in front of the children, because I'm trying to get them to listen to me and respect me; and if you come in and yell at me, I won't be able to control them.’” Apparently her warning had little effect, because the same pattern continued for the remainder of that job. When parents routinely undermine their authority over the children, Latina nanny/housekeepers are apt to quit.

The paid caregivers and the parents also disagreed on matters such as what children should eat, how warmly they should dress, and how best to deal with crying babies who refused to nap. In these struggles, nanny/housekeepers sometimes secretly subverted their employers' wishes. Eloida Ruiz, a Mexican woman who worked in a live-out job caring for a toddler, expressed deep frustration with the *señora*, who instructed her to feed the child only peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, macaroni and cheese, and jars of baby food. “‘Many times,’” she recited, as though it were an incantation, “‘I pray, Lord, today I brought yogurt with me, and a little salad or soup. And I say, if they don't see it, I'll switch it for what they have left. And I give it to the little boy, because I want him to eat yogurt and fruit, because it's good for him.’” In a dramatic, histrionic style, inspired by her Evangelical background, Eloida raised her hands high in the air to condemn peanut butter and jelly. “‘That's not food! Lord, help me and allow her to one day set me free in the kitchen!’”

In this instance, the real issue was not the food or workload but autonomy. Eloida Ruiz did not directly confront her employers, but quietly supplied fresh foods in place of processed foods when they were off at work. Another Latina nanny/housekeeper believed that her employer was too rigid in demanding that a seven-year-old boy, who had been diagnosed as hyperactive, never shout in the pool and always eat with utensils. She reported that the mother shielded herself with earplugs and that at dinner, in an ill-fated effort to get the child to use a fork, the mother had once tied one of his hands to the chair. Under these circumstances, the nanny/housekeepers did not directly challenge the employers' authority or attempt to change the rules—but neither did they enforce the rules with conviction. On the contrary, they attempted to quietly subvert those rules of which they disapproved. Most employers want, as one of them said, “‘someone who will do it my way’”; but though nanny/housekeepers will accept and even welcome directives, they want a modicum of authority and autonomy in carrying them out.

Other employers shy away from giving directions even about something as basic as their child's diet, and some nanny/housekeepers do give the children inappropriate foods. Alice McCoy-Fishman, who worked full-time as a physician, recalled her and her husband's distress when they discovered their live-in nanny/housekeeper's penchant for handing out Turns antacid tablets as candy for the children. Yet neither wanted to speak to her about it. “‘I remember talking to him about things like that. ‘You tell her.’ ‘No, you tell her.’” They were both

dissatisfied with their employee's actions, but they did not want to risk conflict over a relatively minor issue (i.e., too much calcium in the children's diet). The employers' abnegation of responsibility here afforded the nanny/housekeeper autonomy—and numerous opportunities for placating the children with Turns.

## HOUSECLEANERS

Housecleaners are involved with different issues of labor control than nanny/housekeepers for a number of reasons. First, as we have already noted, cleaning other people's household objects is a job less complex and less fraught with emotional baggage—and therefore less apt to spur contention—than caring for other people's children. Second, the face-to-face interactions between the housecleaners and their employers are usually rare and fleeting. Many cleaners enter the home with their own key, clean the house in solitude, and pick up their payment, seeing the home's occupants only briefly or not at all. Other cleaners work while some members of the employer's family are present, but even then they meet only weekly or twice a month, not daily. Finally, unlike their peers who work in live-in and live-out arrangements, housecleaners have several different employers, cleaning one or two different houses on different days and perhaps maintaining other part-time jobs. Thus a well-established cleaner with multiple jobs runs little risk if she drops one that has become particularly problematic. Far fewer conflicts over labor control issues emerge in housecleaning than in live-in and live-out nanny/housekeeper arrangements.

The sociologist Mary Romero, who has studied Chicanas who clean houses in Denver, uses the term “job work” to refer to these arrangements because the workers are paid not by the hour but rather by the job, performing agreed-on tasks at their own pace and using their own methods. Under this system, Romero argues, domestic workers are able to position themselves as professionals who sell their services in much the same way that a vendor sells a product to various customers.<sup>9</sup> The housecleaners can set their own hours and work schedules, and can avoid the personalistic entanglements that live-in and live-out nanny/housekeepers often experience.

Housecleaners deal with great variety in their work. Those who are successful in building up a full route of houses must become accustomed to different job sites, different cleaning products, and different items to clean, as well as various types of employer relations. Housecleaners must be flexible. At one job, they may feel encouraged to exhibit great deference; at another, the employer may dislike deferential gestures. Cleaning the oven may be included as part of the job at one house, but not at another. In Los Angeles, standard cleaning routines include vacuuming and mopping floors, dusting and polishing furniture, and thoroughly cleaning bathrooms and kitchens. Other, sometimes contested, duties include doing laundry, ironing, changing bed linens, and cleaning ovens and refrigerators. Most housecleaners do not see it as part of their job to bathe and groom animals; clean out garages, basement playrooms, and boxes of cat litter; clean patios and patio furniture; and wash cars. Doing windows, the cleaning cliché, is rarely requested but sometimes performed. More than in the cleaning itself, the cleaners must exercise creativity in responding to the employers.

“It takes a long time to understand them [employers], to understand their ways,” observed

one, “because the truth is, they're all different.” The cleaners prefer to work alone, and the vast majority of their employers prefer to be out of the house while the cleaning occurs. Happily, on this point housecleaners and most of their employers concur. “Don't think I prefer working alone because I'm going to do bad things when they're not around,” explained Celestina Vigil. “It's just that the job takes longer when they're there. When I go into the kitchen to mop, there they are, in the middle of the kitchen, so then you lose time.” Other cleaners said that they became nervous and dropped fragile items when the employers were watching, and a few mentioned that the chatty employers set them behind in their work. But most employers make a point of not being present when the cleaning occurs. Still, conflicts over job issues sometimes do arise.

### “*NOS EXPRIMEN*: THEY ARE WRINGING US OUT”

Most Latina housecleaners in Los Angeles resist taking jobs in which their time is strictly monitored. They may welcome cleaning guidelines and some initial directives, but they want to arrive at the households, do their cleaning unencumbered by surveillance or added tasks, control their own pace and cleaning methods, and move on to the next job or return home when they finish. They resist efforts to control their labor by time restrictions and monitoring because they know that unscrupulous employers try to use these means to get more work out of them without compensation. Erlinda Castro, a Guatemalan woman who had recently secured a full route of house-cleaning jobs, described the least desirable employer this way:

The bad one for us is the one who's there *craneando* [using her cranium], as we say, trying to devise new work to make the exact eight hours. “Clean the patio around the pool! Wash the patio chairs! Clean the garage! Go sweep outside!” That's the bad one, the one who wants a full eight hours. It's inconsiderate, and among ourselves we say, “They are wringing us out!” They are wringing us out for forty or fifty dollars.

As she spoke, she grimaced and pantomimed the wringing out of a washcloth to emphasize how some employers try to squeeze out every last drop of effort from their workers in the allotted period of time. But when I asked her to define her ideal employer, her enthusiasm became palpable:

One who tells you what they want done, and who doesn't follow you around, supervising every instant. One who supervises after the work is done, but one who isn't behind you, behind you, behind you, behind you! See, because you feel pressured that way, and no one works well that way. When one is alone, one works very nicely. It feels really beautiful! It's tranquil and you might even sing. And if I leave the house very pretty, one stands there, looks at the mirrors here, looks over there, and sees everything clean and shiny. That's the ideal, that the woman isn't home!

Notice that she does not object to the supervisory role of the employer but rather to any infringement of her ability to work independently. The pride and satisfaction in doing a job well that this housecleaner and many others describe are linked to autonomy on the job, and to the visible outcome of their efforts. Unlike nanny/ housekeepers, who may watch their work immediately unravel when a child tracks mud onto a newly mopped floor, housecleaners who work alone and according to their own pace—and then can see the results—express satisfaction with their jobs. Conception, execution, and brief visual appropriation of the job are unified. The last step, even if it is merely a backward glance at the job completed, may be

an important moment in exerting control over their work. Another woman told me, “I really like cleaning the bathrooms and then going back to see them, because whenever I do things well, I say to myself, The work is laughing with me.” Unlike a worker standing next to a conveyor belt that moves the product down the assembly line, the housecleaner can, if she wishes, give a second to the work already completed and pause to appreciate her mastery and the finished job. This moment of satisfaction can occur only when cleaners control the pace of their work.

In some housecleaning jobs, the control of time remains a point of contention. While most of the employers I interviewed pay by the job, some of them noted that they felt cheated when the cleaner left earlier than anticipated. One employer, a retired teacher, recalled having been rushed to the hospital; when her husband returned to their home to pack her bags, he discovered that the housecleaner had left early. The housecleaner later said she had had a family emergency, but the employer didn't believe this. She felt that her trust was betrayed, even though her house had been cleaned. Employers with this attitude toward the job may try different strategies to get their full six or eight hours' worth of work.

Among the most forthright in describing these tactics was Julie Thompson-Ahib, a former surgeon who had given up her practice to stay home with her two children, both in elementary school. She complained that housecleaners in Los Angeles were not as pliant and willing to work as those she had employed elsewhere. She was particularly offended that they would respond to her requests for extra chores, such as cleaning the pool cabana, by requesting an extra \$10. In other words, she resented the loss of control that the switch from time to task signified.

Some don't really want to work for their money, some want more money for anything extra. Maybe I was spoiled, because for the first ten years [in San Diego and Vancouver] it was like, “Okay, ITI pay you money and in exchange for the money I get x number of hours,” so if today I tell you “I don't want you to clean the house, but I'd prefer to have the chandeliers washed or I want you to sweep outside,” I thought that was part of the deal. But here, I find a lot of resistance to being able to make suggestions as to what I would like them to do in *my* house as opposed to what they want to do in *my* house.

Julie blamed the housecleaners themselves, as well as very wealthy employers (whom she assumed paid too well) and employers who live in apartments (which she assumed required only light cleaning), for this sorry state of affairs. “Here, I feel like they're doing me a favor for showing up!” she exclaimed. Whenever her cleaner was about to leave, Julie would try to stall her and make her work longer. “If there's something that I know she hasn't done, I'll usually say, ‘Well, why don't you clean the top of the fridge, and I'll get your check.’”

Few Latina housecleaners that I interviewed had tried to charge more when extra tasks were requested. Many of them accepted the need for a certain flexibility in approaching their jobs, noting that particular tasks might be required in one house but not in another. When presented with unfair requests for extra chores, some cleaners relented and did them, a few negotiated, but many others quietly resisted. They may say “Yes,” when asked if they would scrub stubborn, permanent stains out of carpet or bathe the dog, but then, recognizing these tasks as properly under the purview of a professional carpet cleaner or dog groomer, ignore them. If they are lucky, these tactics will enable them both to avoid confrontation and to placate the employer, at least momentarily. Bonnie Thornton Dill found such chicanery and cajolery to be



common among African American domestic workers who worked on the East Coast during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

### EMPLOYED EMPLOYERS: “I'M NOT ON TOP OF EVERYTHING ALL THE TIME”

Homemakers have more time to dedicate to household activities than do women who work outside the home. Although current versions of domesticity tend to be more child-centered than hygiene- and home-centered, and no longer rely on nineteenth-century notions of household supervision and scientific management, homemakers' identities are still closely tied to the appearance of their home. For these reasons, they may keep close tabs on their housecleaners' work.

Employed women often take a more laissez-faire approach to managing their housecleaners. For example, Nora Powers, a theater critic and drama coach, and Alice McCoy-Fishman, a physician and mother of two school-age children, both had complaints about the ways their houses were cleaned but hesitated to make their concerns known. They were kept quiet by a mixture of absorption in their busy work lives and liberal guilt. Moreover, when it came to house-cleaning, they preferred known imperfection to the hassle of seeking out and getting used to a new housecleaner.

Nora Powers, who had employed numerous housecleaners over a span of thirty years, complained that cleaners would over time begin to neglect the heavier tasks (vacuuming, mopping, and waxing hardwood floors) in favor of lighter work (such as dusting books). That bothered her, yet she sometimes held back from complaining. When I asked her why she wouldn't say something to those cleaners, she said, ‘They kind of take control, and I just—I'm embarrassed. I don't like to be critical and I don't like to play the boss. I'll hint something like, ‘Hmm, the floors look a little weird.’ But I don't want to think about it. I'm not on top of everything all the time. And then things slide.’”

Nora was clearly uncomfortable with delivering commands, directives, or even guidelines. As a Jewish woman who still identified deeply with the civil rights movement and progressive politics, she had a liberal social conscience that militated against being “the boss” to women of a lower social class and subordinate raciaethnic groups. Several times she mentioned that fear of retribution prevented her from giving orders: “It's like I'm afraid they're gonna yell at me or afraid that they're gonna say, ‘Well, you are the boss, you know, and you're a hypocrite because you don't believe in bosses and yet here you are, you know, I'm poor and you're able to afford. I have so little and you have a beautiful house and you can afford to rent help and I'm a human being.’” While no one had ever actually *said* anything like this to her, the mere possibility of such sentiments being voiced kept her from asking for what she wanted.

Her striking admission that she is “not on top of everything” in this part of her life also strongly suggests that she did not say anything about cleaning because she thought about it only infrequently. She was often immersed in theater productions, and she traveled internationally with her husband. Vigilantly monitoring the cleanliness of her home was a relatively low priority for her. Similarly, Alice McCoy-Fishman had in the past held back her criticism of a cleaner who was rough on the appliances and furniture, and who would inappropriately use

suds on the hardwood floors. “She would destroy vacuum cleaners,” Alice chortled. “It was like having the L.A. Rams come in! You couldn't buy a mop with an orange post because you'd have little orange spots all over the walls!” When I asked why she didn't instruct the cleaner not to do these things, she replied, “I just couldn't. She was strong willed and she just wanted this to be clean, you know.” While Alice may have felt too intimidated to confront this cleaner, whom she described as “just such an imposing figure of a person,” she mainly wanted to avoid the trouble of finding someone new. “Rather than go through a search like you do for employees at work,” she said, “it was just good enough. It was fine.”

Of course, employers who are themselves in the labor force can provide instructions or ask for particular services, such as to wipe down the cobwebs or vacuum under the beds. They can—and some do—leave written notes, perhaps consulting a Spanish dictionary, or they can arrange to be home when the cleaner arrives and ask that specific tasks be done. Some purchase standardized Spanish-English checklists that allow them to simply mark off what cleaning they want performed. None of the women I interviewed had used this last method, but at the time these checklists were widely available in Southern California. Employed employers can customize their cleaning and attempt to control how it is done; but most of them—with, as we will see, significant exceptions—are not inclined to do so.

Of those employers who are not working, only a few reported that they cleaned alongside and watched the cleaners. Most of them, as already mentioned, arranged to be out of the way. Some scheduled appointments, had lunch dates, or ran errands on the days when the cleaners arrive, and others retreated to the home office or den. Regardless of what they did, nearly all of them reported feeling uncomfortable in the presence of someone else cleaning their home. They either felt guilty about a less privileged woman cleaning their house, feared that they were in the way of the cleaners, or felt that the cleaners intruded on their privacy. Some found the sounds of vacuum cleaners and the banging of other implements annoying, and left the house entirely. “If I'm going to pay for cleaning,” crowed one woman, “I'm going to enjoy it.” Many of them said they prepared for the “cleaning lady's day” by decluttering countertops, maybe checking the stock of cleaning products, and then making themselves scarce.

Those women who do like to clean alongside and supervise the cleaners are, for the most part, homemakers, and they tend to be older than the baby boomers. One such woman, the wife of an attorney, said, “I could never sit and read a book, and I can't now either when I have a cleaning woman. So, if I'm home, I'll be on the other side making the bed, or I'll grab the towels and be washing them when she's in the bathroom.” She performs the activity not to ensure that the work is done properly or quickly, but to prevent the appearance of idleness. A homemaker's job involves, among other things, domesticity as display. “I feel guilt not doing anything while she is there, so I do have to pretend to do something.”

Several women, among both the homemakers and the employed, reported that their husbands were particularly concerned about the possibility of theft. In some cases, a husband would allow a cleaner in the house only if his wife agreed to be present. Here, surveillance was used not to manipulate the cleaners to work harder or longer, but to guard against theft. For their part, many housecleaners fear that they will be unfairly accused of stealing from their employers.

## CLEANING SERVICES: RATIONALIZING THE IRRATIONAL?

Cleaning firms are small businesses that take many different forms. There are national franchises as well as small, independently operated businesses, typically owned by one person who books the jobs and who may drive a van transporting several employees to the different work sites. The sociologist Jennifer Bickham Mendez has studied both types of businesses, and she finds that workers in firms often are exploited more than those in private cleaning arrangements. Contrary to many researchers who have argued that informal, personalistic relations are the source of exploitation in paid domestic work, Mendez finds that in a bureaucratic, rationalized organization, the cleaners lack autonomy, lose control over the work process, and receive lower wages, since the firm must extract a profit.<sup>11</sup>

A USC college student whom I interviewed, a young white woman, had taken a summer job with a cleaning service in Southern California. She complained that the firm, which operated on a shoestring out of a woman's home, had misled her into believing that she would be earning \$8 an hour; in fact, her pay hovered closer to minimum wage. On the job, standardized cleaning checklists served as her nightmarish supervisor.

The kitchen had twelve things. I had to wipe down all the counters, wipe down all the appliances, get the cobwebs out of everywhere, take everything off the refrigerator, and wipe down the top and the sides of the refrigerator. On the stove you have to take off all the knobs and soak them, take out the burners and soak that and then wrap them in aluminum foil, sweep and mop, oh, and clean the top of the broilers, which I never did because it was just too time-consuming, and if I did it I would be getting paid like \$3 an hour.

Cleaning the bathroom involved twenty-two steps. At her firm, both the clients and cleaners were instructed to check off items and sign the checklist, but few participated in this mode of labor control.

Only two of the employers I interviewed were currently having their homes cleaned by a cleaning service (in fact, both used the same agency, which consisted of three men), but several others had in the past. Some of them said that they liked the cleaning agencies precisely because it allowed them to remove themselves from the supervisory role. If they were unhappy with the result, they would simply call the agency and ask for someone new next time, thus sparing themselves the potentially messy and unpleasant task of directly communicating their displeasure with someone's work. They lacked any expectation that they would ever have to act as employers. This distancing, Mendez points out, also spares them from investing time in forming face-to-face, personalistic relations with the cleaners.

Most employers prefer the private, informal housecleaning arrangements. They are generally less expensive than the agencies—which have to support their overhead—and afford employers flexible, customized cleaning. One woman referred to the cleaning firms as “the McDonald's” of paid housecleaning. “You know what you're gonna get,” she said, presumably referring to a product that is fast, predictable, uniform, and perhaps of mediocre quality. Several employers who had very large homes noted that several rooms scarcely saw any human traffic. Their weekly housecleaner might always clean the kitchen and bathrooms, but clean the other rooms or floors only every other week. Finally, some employers did not like the sensation of having individuals they didn't know cleaning their home. “I had a weird feeling,”

recalled Margaret Hamilton of the people from the cleaning service. “It was like having strangers in the house. I guess because I didn't get to know them, it was like having your house broken into.”

The contractual, rationalized checklists used by the cleaning agencies sometimes seep over into the culture of private cleaning. In an attempt to gain some control over the work performed and get their money's worth, a few inexperienced employers had created long lists of household duties, which they duly presented to their cleaners. One young homemaker recalled her first experience hiring a cleaner: “I really didn't know what to expect. I had never at all been involved in managing the gal who cleans my stepmother's home. So I wrote down this huge, long list of what cleaning substances I used on each piece of furniture, and then now of course, I've thrown all caution to the wind!” Several others had initially made lists and then dispensed with them.

Of all the employers I interviewed, none had drawn up so ambitious a list as Lena Jenkins. She included not only what should be cleaned but precisely how it should be cleaned—specifying which products and tools should be used, and how often the cleaning should occur. “That way,” she explained, “I knew I wasn't getting ripped off and I knew that they had something to reference.” She recalled one cleaner who liked having the list, but she admitted that “most probably thought it was condescending of me.” When I asked to see the list, this very well-organized woman readily retrieved it, even though she had not used it in three years:

#### LIVING ROOM, DINING ROOM:

Dust all furniture, use only cloths supplied, vacuum carpet and upholstered furniture and lamp shades, dust lamps, clock, china closet with feather duster;

Note: Upholstered furniture need only be vacuumed once a month. Use rubbing alcohol on mirrors. Mirrors need to be cleaned monthly.

#### KITCHEN:

Mop floor and shake rug, wash counter tops with Soft Scrub, wash behind all items on counter, wipe items on counter with damp cloth, wipe all appliances with damp cloth, use Dust Wax on kitchen table, wash kitchen window above sink inside and outside;

Note: Grout should be cleaned monthly. Use special solution and scrub brush. Cupboards should be cleaned inside quarterly, outside monthly with Old English polish.

#### FAMILY ROOM:

Vacuum carpet and upholstered furniture and lamp shades, dust furniture, clean glass tables with rubbing alcohol, feather dust clocks, pictures, etc.

#### BATHROOMS:

Scour shower and tub and sinks, scour toilet bowls, clean mirrors, vacuum guest bathroom floor and mop and wax master bathroom floor. Wipe off lid, back in base of toilets, outside of cupboards, towel bars, toilet paper holders and light fixture above mirrors. Feather dust mini blind.

## ENTRY WAY:

In the front entry way mop floor, vacuum runner rug, wipe off baseboard, dust antique sewing machine, feather dust lamp and picture frames.

## BACK ENTRY WAY:

Mop floor, wipe off washer and dryer with damp cloth including inside of washer lid.

## BEDROOMS:

Vacuum and dust all bedrooms. Clean all mirrors (don't forget the wall mirror in master bedroom), feather dust toy shelves in Tiffany's room, wash shelves on changing table, clean pad of table with rubbing alcohol, change bedding.

Note: Vacuum lamp shades monthly.

## GAME ROOM:

Vacuum carpet and upholstered furniture, dust furniture, use alcohol on pinball machine rather than dust cloth, wipe off leather sofa and brown chair with clean damp cloth. Dust or wipe with damp cloth on window sills. Use rubbing alcohol on the glass bookcases.

## MUSIC ROOM:

Vacuum carpet, dust furniture, clean mirror.

## MISCELLANEOUS:

Weekly: Ensure all baseboards are dusted. Ensure all wall items are feather dusted or wiped with damp cloth or alcohol.

Monthly: Check all brass and silver for possible polishing, wipe off all glass shelves and china cabinet, wash windows if necessary.

Lena Jenkins had begun by having her home cleaned by an agency; as she gradually switched to private cleaners, she initially attempted to control their time and direct their labor through an elaborately customized—though, I suspect, a much more demanding—version of the agency's cleaning checklist. Eventually she found a steady housecleaner, a Mexican woman, and she stopped relying on the checklist. Still, she kept it in a file for possible future use.

## HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES AND DISJUNCTIONS

In the late nineteenth century, white middle-class women emulated the capitalist factory system and applied scientific management principles to their homes and to their servants.<sup>12</sup> They instituted work speedups; downgraded the domestic jobs by depersonalizing, deskilling, and standardizing various household tasks; and took seriously their own roles as supervisors. “Domestics,” writes Mary Romero, “were reduced to unskilled labor and subjected to constant supervision.”<sup>13</sup>

The historian Faye Dudden refers to this process as the change in labor control from “task” to “time.” Rather than “having a certain amount of work to do, as help had, domestics were expected to work constantly unless explicitly ‘off.’”<sup>14</sup> The employers, in this case middle- and upper-class housewives, would then devote themselves to enriching family life, managing the household by devising lists of commands and by monitoring the quality of the manual labor performed. Romero refers to the expectation that domestics would work constantly as the shift from the hiring of “labor services” to “labor power,” and she understands contemporary housecleaners’ occupational struggles as an attempt to recapture professional expertise and to resist the extraction of pure labor power.<sup>15</sup> Today, the scientific management of domestic workers’ labor finds its fullest expression not in private housecleaning or nanny/housekeeper arrangements, but in cleaning service agencies and in the hyperregulation of domestic labor overseas; in Hong Kong, for example, private agencies, employers, and governments impose strict job rules, Tayloristic timetables, and “codes of discipline” to control Filipina domestics.<sup>16</sup>

In the twenty-first century we find many variants of white middle-class womanhood in the United States, but none of them are so squarely centered on the cult of domesticity as their historical predecessors were. The entrance of many white middle- and upper-middle-class women into the paid labor force not only has prompted greater demand for paid domestic work services but also has profoundly changed the quality of labor control and directives in the domestic occupations. As many *patronas* have themselves gone off to work, they have ended their constant and direct supervision of domestic job sites. Some homemakers who employ daily live-in or live-out nanny/housekeepers are better able to monitor the work that occurs in their households; and though they may attempt to maintain the domestic job's definition as constant labor over a set time, even they are sometimes reticent about identifying just what it is that they want. In fact, as Wrigley suggests in her study of parents who hire private nannies, they may be at a loss when it comes to wielding “the skills of command.”<sup>17</sup> Other employers ask their domestic employees for what they want and don't get it. Today we see multiple forms of labor control and multiple forms of resistance and compliance at work.

As has been clear throughout this chapter, domestic workers now want jobs that offer clear directives and rules, but their employers often fail to define the tasks they want performed. At first glance, it may seem paradoxical that paid domestic workers should desire rules, directives, and precise job definitions of the sort that many industrial workers have struggled against. When paid domestic work and factory work are compared historically, however, the puzzle disappears. Factory workers, after all, organized into unions not only over bread-and-butter issues of wages and hours but also to regain the control they had enjoyed as craft workers; paid domestic work, in contrast, has evolved from arrangements more characteristic of slavery, feudalism, and despotic control.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the efforts and desires of Latina domestic workers to obtain clear job directives are parallel to those of contemporary industrial and service-sector workers whose unions negotiate collective contracts that carefully delineate their job tasks. Their demands for clear job parameters are modest ones.

Paid domestic work is an occupation that takes many forms. We see clear distinctions in labor control between nanny/housekeeper jobs, which typically involve day-to-day child care, and weekly housecleaner jobs. Nanny/housekeepers struggle to impose and maintain finite

hours of work—especially live-in employees, who may be expected by their employers to be on call twenty-four hours a day. Nanny/housekeepers provide extensive care for young children, and intense emotional bonds often tie the children and their care worker. As we have seen, both nanny/housekeepers and their employers may deploy these bonds as leverage in their struggles and negotiations to control the employee's labor. But in housecleaning jobs, the employees want, as Romero's research has indicated, flexible schedules and standardized tasks.<sup>19</sup> They also resist, as we have seen, the imposition of extra work without extra pay. Both nanny/ housekeepers and housecleaners want clear instructions, but they remain adamant about the importance of having autonomy on the job.

The ability of nanny/housekeepers and housecleaners to control both the pace of their work and the methods by which it is performed depends on their employers. Employers who work away from home, who are thus absent from the work site and who do not always bother to keenly observe the minute details of their households, are less able and less likely to interfere with a domestic worker's autonomy on the job; homemakers are better positioned to monitor work and interpose themselves. Yet both groups of employers prefer domestic workers who will take initiative and spare them from delineating the job requirements.

Throughout contemporary Los Angeles, paid domestic workers and their employers have created a myriad of strategies to get the work done. The process need not involve conflicts, but those that do arise can often be traced to one of two problems: undercontrol or overcontrol of labor (sometimes the latter following an attempt to correct the former). Across the board, the employees prefer employers who give clear, fair directives, and who then get out of the way. Nanny/housekeepers resist servanthood by trying to establish firm boundaries around their job hours, and housecleaners take control over their labor and their lives beyond work by establishing flexible times for starting and stopping their jobs.