Introduction

The Neighborhood

Most mornings around 9:30 a.m., after eating breakfast, showering, getting dressed, and giving a quick send-off to my husband, I feed my kids, get them dressed, and prepare a diaper bag, then walk my one-year-old son and two-year-old daughter in their double jog stroller across the highway bridge and another five blocks to the park. As I arrive at the second block, after walking by a local bakery, I pass a three-foot-high Mother of Mary statue embedded in the front stoop of a brownstone home that prompts me to say a “Hail Mary.” Like the good Catholic my mother always wanted me to be, I say my Hail Mary to clear my conscience. With the fresh smell of coffee and chocolate croissants on my mind, I continue along my path in this once predominantly Catholic, Italian neighborhood toward one of Brooklyn’s oldest public parks. As I look at my surroundings, I am reminded of the changes that are continuously occurring in the area.

This newly gentrified neighborhood has a high density of three- to five-story brownstones on almost every street. Many of these buildings are under renovation by the incoming, mostly young white upper-middle-class professionals who are buying homes for close to and often over one million dollars or renting homes or apartments for several thousand dollars a month (at near-Manhattan rates). Where once lunching on pizza was the choice for many in the midday rush hour and sitting on your front stoop was the main form of entertainment, I now find organic paninis with vegan options and a “mommy and me” yoga class on every block. The “Grups” (yuppies or hipsters, a term inspired by a Star Trek show in which a virus killed anyone who demonstrated the signs of the aging process) are everywhere. Their fashionable white iPod earplugs, over-the-shoulder messenger bags, and T-shirts that appear torn at the seams yet cost well over fifty dollars indicate the Grups as the newest cultural group in Brooklyn’s gentrifying neighborhoods. Where is the older generation? I see evidence of the once-dominant ethnic group
in the form of older Italian men in collared dress shirts with front-pleated slacks and worn dark-colored shoes. Some congregate along the perimeter of the park to engage in regular discussions of daily events or to find out when the next bocce ball tournament will take place. Others can be seen chatting through the dimly lit doorways of Italian social clubs adorned with signs stating “Members Only” that practically demand a peek from passersby.

I usually arrive at the park around ten o’clock. I enter through the open gates of the basketball courts just off one of the main shopping streets, directly across from an Italian restaurant, a pet store, a local grocery, an insurance company, a senior center, and a laundromat. I walk diagonally across the basketball courts, typically empty during that time of the weekday, past the fenced-in bocce ball alley to my right, and through the second entrance of a fence that separates the recently painted courts from a large courtyard area where a statue stands to commemorate those men who gave their lives in World War I. Twenty-one green park benches and three picnic tables border the edges of this space. It is sparsely populated by babysitters, stay-at-home parents, and older local residents, many of whom are Italian immigrants, and of course children, strollers, and pigeons waiting patiently for a child to drop a snack. Behind the benches are several large trees, which in the summer can look lush but in the winter stand strong and naked. On the south side of the park, and regardless of where you are sitting, you can see the neighborhood elementary school; on the north side are a newly opened chain drug store, several four-story brownstone homes, and the entrance to a subway station.

I continue my walk across the courtyard via a narrow ramp bordered by a cast-iron fence. This ramp leads downward toward a playground where a children’s sprinkler separates two play areas, one for infants and toddlers and the other for older children. Both have swing sets and jungle gyms and are enclosed by iron gates. There is a public restroom area with a sink and two stalls (one for men and one for women) separated by a storage space with upkeep equipment such as brooms, rakes, leaf blowers, and cleaners. The city park employees (many of them African American) who use this equipment wear blue and green uniforms and have begun their duties for the day by the time I arrive. At this point I usually look out for some of the West Indian sitters that regularly enter the park area after ten o’clock. I always feel self-conscious as I prepare to absorb the daily events that may or may not arise in the West Indian childcare community, not knowing how these women actually perceive me, a neighborhood resident.

As I sit, a svelte woman walks toward me, well groomed from head to toe. Her jet black hair is tied up in a large ponytail—pin straight, and if I close my
eyes and take a deep breath, the fresh smell of Dark and Lovely hair relaxer penetrates my nostrils. Her voluptuous lips, marking the beauty of her ancestors, are red like strawberries, her eyes deep black. She is pushing a one- or two-year-old white child in a stroller over to the swings. Other black women with white children can now be seen at every turn.

Previous researchers have argued that one reason domestic childcare providers’ work is emotionally taxing is that it is isolating: they are left in the private household of their employer with few options for constructing an identity outside the work they do. In many cities across the United States domestic childcare workers need transportation such as a car or reliable bus service if they want to move about public spaces in order to break some of the isolation felt during the workday. In such cities, homes may be far apart, so providers are scattered and it is more difficult for them to create a community. Providers are usually working one on one with a child in the employer’s home, which at every turn underscores the inequality of the relationship the provider has with her employer. Boundaries of the job’s responsibilities become ill defined in such a private sphere and are almost reminiscent of past relationships between servants and their masters. The racial difference between employer and employee heightens the potential for exploitation in this relationship regardless of the geographic location. Sociological studies by Mary Romero on Chicana domestic workers in the Southwest and by Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo in Los Angeles with Mexican undocumented immigrants employed in middle-class residential areas show how the private sphere can be isolating when domestic workers do not have access to the public spheres that other urban areas offer. In contrast, this study examines gentrifying neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, where the public sphere is geographically close to dense residential housing. While access to the public sphere or spaces in these neighborhoods does not entirely dispel the isolation of domestic work, I show how childcare providers, through their use of public spaces, can create a collective space and collective definitions of what they are doing during the day. Providers can reach some form of consensus about how their work should be conducted, what they do, what constitutes a good parent, and what employers can and cannot ask of them. They find ways to preserve their autonomy in the public places where they gather and rely on new communications technologies (mobile phones, Internet) to do the same thing when they are physically apart in both private and public places. Community streets and public parks in Brooklyn became quasi-offices for several babysitters, rendering them visible to the rest of the community and ultimately their employers.
Given this form of control that providers have over their workday, parents are reduced to certain tactics in order to combat their feelings of losing ground: as I show in this book, they may, for instance, use various means of surveillance, develop new rules, or simply speak badly about childcare providers—not always without reason. I also show how parents can overcome their feelings of losing control by tapping into the social solidarity and autonomy of childcare providers, since it may improve not only their relationship with the provider but also the relationship between the provider and the child being cared for.

For several days each week, I spent time in the park with my daughter and eventually both my daughter and son. My purpose was twofold. My children benefited from playing and socializing with other children and adults, and I would participate in the conversations and daily activities of different types of people. Mainly I spent time with West Indian childcare providers because they could see I was not a potential employer and thus not a potential nuisance. After all, I was with two children who had a complexion like my own. Somehow my lighter but obviously black phenotype meant that I wasn’t a typical (i.e., white) neighborhood member, and because I was using the parks on weekdays the sitters did not at first see me as a “working mother” (the issue of phenotype and my own West Indian identity among the sitters will be taken up in later chapters). In the beginning, I believed that park visits served to let out the energy of children and dispel some of the monotony of the workday at home, but I later found them to involve much more than that. For many babysitters, as well as stay-at-home parents, the public park was a venue for participating in sociability and cultural expression. Complex cultural expression and networking occurred on multiple levels for various parkgoers and partially determined the daily events in which children would be involved. For babysitters, the park became, among other things, a place where food was exchanged and talked about frequently, a central point for meeting before going about daily activities, and a place where solidarity was formed. The children being cared for in this public place became the beneficiaries of such solidarity and sociability, in part by forming relationships with other children and their caregivers in their neighborhoods, sometimes without their parents’ knowledge.

In this book I provide a framework for understanding how social spaces are shaped by West Indian babysitters who move between public and private places in gentrified neighborhoods, how their identities are reconstructed through these spaces, and the meanings they create in their everyday interactions. I illustrate how a group of women who are traditionally viewed as one-
dimensional in their work have multidimensional experiences influenced by cultural traditions: through these traditions, communities are formed and a communal life invigorates an otherwise mundane workday.

My position as a field researcher creates inevitable self-consciousness and biases in terms of the interpretations I offer. This is a given drawback in doing fieldwork. However, I can obtain access to certain information that has not yet been written about. The similarity between my heritage and that of my participants allowed me to move from location to location, both public and private, and to trace daily social space construction by looking beyond domestic work alone to define these women's lived experiences. This knowledge was augmented by the longitudinal approach of my participant observation, which allowed me to discriminate between routine behavior and onetime unique events. The longitudinal approach gave depth to my observations and allowed me to form relationships with my participants to a point where I could clearly make meaning out of their daily work lives. Although I cannot truly confirm my acceptance in the group I studied, I have throughout this process had experiences that gave me a unique vantage point on participants' collective life. Through the ethnic background that I shared with these women, I was able to gain insights into a world characterized by striking cultural juxtapositions (between employers and sitters, as well as among sitters) and solidarity within the sitters' shared West Indian culture.

Daily life in the park is filled with mundane activity—a caregiver feeding a child; a child playing on a slide, then on a swing, then going back to the slide; a caregiver providing another feeding. But the women presented in this research have somehow managed to develop a sense of community out of, or in spite of, these routines. The park is a public place, which I define as a physical and geographical structure with specific boundaries that is open to the public. Specifically, I look at public places as points of contact for purposes of socializing, as do other urban and community studies.³

**Social Space and Public Place**

Why are place and social space important? A city location alone cannot provide enough information about a group of people. The study of the way particular ethnic groups come to be associated with a community's image, what Graeme Evans has called the “symbolic association” of a group of people with a community, helps one to truly comprehend how places and social spaces are created.⁴ The social spaces occupied by babysitters are considerably more intimate than any other kind of workspace,⁵ just as the relation-
ships with families for whom they provide care are more intimate than other kinds of employer-employee relationships, and babysitters are being paid to demonstrate care in a variety of ways and places. Yet for decades many studies of West Indian domestic workers have bypassed the importance of the interaction order within the public place of the park. While it is known that public parks in Brooklyn act as an anchor to the larger community, how they ensure the face-to-face interactions of West Indian sitters has been relatively unresearched. Thus the formation of community and the meanings created by these women within public parks have been overlooked.

The Changing Face of Brooklyn

Understanding Brooklyn as a place is requisite for framing how people use its spaces. The places of Brooklyn have their roots in a history-rich past. The place-names and cultures that ultimately embellished this borough can be traced back to Native Americans, followed by European settlers including the Dutch and English in the 1600s. During colonial times Brooklyn’s economy heavily relied on slavery. As early as the mid-1800s Brooklyn was a rapidly developing metropolis that housed a variety of businesses and diverse newcomers, and the bridge built in 1883 would forever change the place by connecting it to Manhattan.

Brooklyn, as one of the most populated cities in America, conceded to its merger with New York by the end of the century and became one of the boroughs of New York. Popular landmarks continue to bring visitors from around the world as well as locals. By the mid-1950s, white flight to the suburbs brought blight to the borough in terms of education, housing, and race relations. It wasn’t until the early 1990s that the rapid gentrification of Brooklyn by builders, small business owners, and residents began.

One of my four sites, like many of the gentrified places studied for this book, had a residential history of mainly European working-class migrants. Composed primarily of first-generation Latinos and Italians, it saw a change in population from 1995 to 2005. It is now made up of mostly white upper-middle-class residents from a variety of backgrounds (both European and American), many of them former Manhattanites with young children. The community is currently regarded as an area where professional and college-educated young couples move in. Many of these residents work both in and out of the home. With a higher median household income than in the 1980s, these families seek the comforts of a friendly neighborhood with the unique “Manhattan-style” conveniences. Up until the 1990s Brooklyn was in the
shadow of Manhattan as far as being a cultural hub or place that families would seek out for a higher standard of living. It has since developed its own identity as a borough that builders and businesses can invest in and that professionals with families move to, or, as urban sociologists would say, gentrify. The sociologist Sharon Zukin defines gentrification as “a process of spatial and social differentiation” that results from the influx of middle-class people into low-income areas. Gentrification, then, always focuses on changes in the resident population.

Gentrification and Childcare in Brooklyn

Gentrification includes changes in commercial streets and services, but more importantly changes in population demographics and the lifestyle accommodations that are made on behalf of the incoming group. In gentrified areas in Brooklyn, the incoming group includes many two-income households in which both parents work in Manhattan, requiring the services of childcare providers for longer hours to accommodate parents’ commuting. It also includes employers who are part of what Richard Florida calls the “creative class,” or what the sociologist Julia Wrigley calls the “cultural specialists,” working as freelancers from home (four out of ten parents in this research worked from home regularly) but requiring childcare while they work, and thus forcing childcare providers out of the home and into public places. People today celebrate the breaking down of barriers between home and work space, but this can be problematic. Creative class employers have a flexible workday, and their employees must be similarly flexible, with the result that childcare is more difficult, not less. When Mom or Dad is home, providers have limited use of the house or apartment and do not necessarily feel comfortable using the home in the way that they normally would. Often, they must keep the noise level to a minimum so that the employer can work from home, a challenge when dealing with small children, and must repeatedly explain to the children why they cannot enter the area where the parent is working. Consequently childcare providers often spend more weekday hours out in their employers’ neighborhood than inside their employers’ home.

The sitters use public spaces for work on behalf of the upper middle class, mainly during the weekdays, and their presence as sitters in itself serves to indicate their employers’ upper-middle-class status. My research looks at the contradictions that arise out of the obvious racial differences between sitters, their employers, their employers’ children, and stay-at-home moth-
ers and their children. These contradictions are continuously negotiated in both the public social spaces created in public parks and the private spaces of the employer’s home. This book, therefore, also discusses the sitters’ bodies as marked by class and race locations within the social order of public spaces and compares the extent of the sitters’ authority in the private space of the employer’s home versus the public social spaces of the “white” gentrified neighborhood. It describes the design of the public places, particularly parks, that West Indian babysitters frequent as an influence on their interactions and explores the kinds of control that are exerted in these public places and social spaces.

I learned about the various ways in which West Indian babysitters create and maintain unique collective social spaces while dealing with the tensions and negotiating the power dynamics inherent in their work. Specifically, I observed their acute awareness and understanding of racial and ethnic identity, and of that identity’s implications for their workdays. In the parks, I witnessed how special events organized by babysitters for babysitters, and typically centering on the sharing of food, solidified their relationships or sometimes disrupted them.

I also learned from sitters and domestic workers’ advocates that some parents “graded” different racial/ethnic groups on their suitability for employment as childcare providers, whether on the Internet or in direct conversation, and that there was a prejudice against West Indians in particular. Some West Indian women I interviewed were cognizant of their disadvantage both in getting hired and in keeping their jobs and therefore went out of their way to accommodate their employers by submitting to requests that exceeded their perceived responsibilities.

Gentrification of an area also raises issues concerning who is entitled to frequent public places because of race and class and the surveillance tactics that employers use to monitor sitters who are working away from the employer’s home. The gentrified neighborhood that I resided in and used as one of my research sites maintained a presence from the pregentrification population or “old-timers” who were predominantly Italian and to a lesser extent Latino. Some blacks lived in the neighborhood, but the majority resided in nearby housing projects that were considered hostile territory. Some housing project residents would shop on nearby commercial streets that bordered the gentrifying neighborhood, but that spillover was limited. This was important because it meant that participants in my study were marked racially and probably considered outsiders to many of the old-timers, thereby perhaps facilitating their surveillance in public places. In other gentrifying neigh-
neighborhoods in Brooklyn with a predominantly black population, such as Fort Greene and Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, or with a substantial black minority among older working-class residents from a variety of backgrounds, such as Park Slope and Boerum Hill, my participants might not have been seen as outsiders in the same way.

While my research took place mainly in smaller public parks in Brooklyn, I also explored other neighborhood areas outside that public place. Public parks were sites that were markers of gentrification in terms of who used them and what type of events would be held throughout the day. Some parks had maintenance employees that parkgoers could call by name if there was a problem or if a toy was requested since some parks stock donated used toys for toddlers. Parents and other community members volunteered their time throughout the workweek to plant flowers, paint trash cans with child-friendly designs, and hold special events such as birthday parties or music shows.

I also studied the meanings created by West Indian babysitters in the public library, in other local play spaces, and even in my own home, where several sitters came to spend time with the children they cared for. Through this shadowing and extended place methods—which sociologist Mitchell Duneier explains as the extension of a study from one local site to other sites as a way of connecting local events and features to larger political, social, and economic events and forces (e.g., moving from a local gathering of homeless people to the city council or corporate offices that produced the policies that created the gathering)—I learned of the intimate relationships these women had with one another and how social spaces could be created in public and then dispersed (though to some degree maintained through cell phone contact) as providers entered the private space of their employer’s home.  

My research enabled me to learn not only about the workday experiences of these women but also about the educational aspirations that many had, and thus to understand more about their private lives. Though some women expressed fears about going back to school, more often they expressed a desire to further educate themselves. In this aim, they had the moral support of the older babysitters. Often the younger West Indian babysitters viewed domestic work as a stepping-stone to living the American Dream, while older ones viewed it as a way of keeping up their hopes of one day achieving the American Dream.

Most of my time in public parks focused on West Indian women who were hired to care for white children. I slowly discovered that the structure of the workday had several components that led to a social order that embodied
race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender. During this ordered workday, much of which was spent in public places, onlookers such as potential employers assessed babysitters and sometimes made reports to Web sites on their actions. Several studies have demonstrated how West Indian women migrate to the United States to find work that can improve their family’s life chances and depend on the existing cultural networks to find domestic work. My research is different because it focuses on the lived experiences of this work.

Sample and Methods

I first entered the social group of the childcare providers that I studied through frequent visits to the local park with my newborn daughter in 2004. Indeed, my child acted as an aide throughout my research. In the park, I came to know Hazel, a soft-spoken Grenadian childcare provider in her mid-twenties, who later introduced me to others in her circle, including West Indian babysitters from Guyana, Trinidad, and St. Lucia.

After two months I became a fixture among this group of women: I was introduced to other sitters and participated in daily activities among a variety of social groups with overlapping membership. After two years in the field, I spent several hours each week with babysitters at the park and in other public places such as the local library and children’s movement classes, and on playdates held in private homes. While I did not work as a babysitter for other people’s children, from the fall of 2004 to the spring of 2007 I spent my days as someone who cared for children throughout the workdays and paid for some additional childcare. Thus I felt that I could somewhat relate to the monotony of the days these childcare providers endured. It is noteworthy that many of these women also had their own biological children to care for outside their duties to their employers, so that their job was far more difficult than my own privileged situation.

Over those three years, I spent time observing West Indian and other childcare providers. I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-five West Indian childcare providers, ages twenty-five to sixty-one, whom I shadowed regularly as they moved from public parks to their employers’ homes and from children’s activities to other neighborhood locations. All the women were first-generation West Indian migrants. The majority of the interviewed providers (nine) came from Grenada; of the remainder, six were from Trinidad, three from Guyana, two from St. Lucia, two from Jamaica, two from St. Vincent, and one from Barbados. I also conducted interviews with ten employers whom I lived among.
As a member of the same racial and ethnic group these women belonged to, I found myself treated as a cultural “insider” after spending some time in the parks. This was displayed through the sitters’ use of specific West Indian idioms and intentional accent dramatizations that only someone familiar with West Indian culture would understand. I was also seen as a student and college teacher who could help some of the younger babysitters navigate the higher educational system in New York City (see Appendix A for more information). However, my West Indian identity was constantly being challenged by the women in my study, since I am the daughter of Trinidadian parents who emigrated to Canada during the 1960s. Growing up in Canada, I identified as Canadian first and then West Indian and constructed a particular racial identity (black Trinidadian and Indian Trinidadian and others) that perhaps constrained my interactions, a dynamic I discuss later in the book. In negotiating my hours in the field, which included public parks and other places in an area where I resided, I had to consider and carefully time my work as a researcher and as a resident. While not all of my sites for observation were in my neighborhood, several were, and this raised issues.

At times I felt as though my social position was marked because of my ability to reside among several employers of West Indian childcare providers. Not only was I marked visibly by my children as I walked down the sidewalks in the neighborhood, but often, as was mentioned before, on my way to teach as an adjunct lecturer I wore clothes that were significantly different from those I wore in the parks. Often my hair would be styled in a way that showed its natural length (straightened with a hot iron), a characteristic that further exhibited my ethnic status, since many participants wore their hair in shorter styles or wore weaves to make their hair longer. When I encountered the women I studied, they always mentioned what I was wearing, how my hair was kept, or even the official nature of my walk with a bright red briefcase on my shoulder. It became an ongoing joke among us, and I found myself having to justify “the look.” For the sake of my book, I wanted these women to feel comfortable with me and not necessarily associate me with their employer’s status. I was earning less than what the sitters were making (I made $2,500 over a four-month semester as an adjunct teaching two hours a week while preparing and correcting work for six hours a week) and although I wasn’t working as many hours as they did, I still felt that they associated me with the bourgeois residents they encountered on a daily basis while in the neighborhood since I had the “option” of staying home with my children and not having to worry about making an income.
My part-time babysitter was another indicator of my class status in the eyes of the providers I studied. Members of the community I lived in, which was predominantly white, usually hired West Indian providers (and women from other immigrant groups) to care for their children, but my family, considered a West Indian/Canadian/black professional family, hired a white woman (an Italian American who happened to live next to me when I had my first child) as our childcare provider. We chose her because we did not know anyone in the neighborhood and community members had recommended her as someone who had been raised in the neighborhood. This issue of having a white provider did not at first dawn on me as worthy of discussion, but I quickly found out that the providers noticed this white woman with black children at the park. I found myself explaining over and over again how she came to be our babysitter, but the providers never pressed any further in an effort to reserve explicit judgment (although I still felt it when they would comment on her dress or the amount of makeup on her face).

There was a seemingly inherent mistrust among the West Indian babysitters as well that didn’t allow many of them to know each other’s names, even after seeing one another at parks and other play spaces for over three years. Once I entered the field and babysitters began to understand, not only that I was participating in activities as a parent, but that I had an interest in what West Indian babysitters “did,” some sitters chose not to “go on record” to tell me the details of their lives, though they did continue to interact with me and tell me specific information that they felt would be useful for my research. Sometimes it appeared as though having someone to listen to their story was better than having no one to listen at all. They needed a witness to their daily lived experiences, and I was their confidante.

I used my field participation to observe meanings as they were being constructed by participants as well to show patterns of action in their immediate context and to trace any inconsistencies inherent in the meanings that participants gave during the formal interview process. Semistructured interviews allowed participants to reflect on events while providing more in-depth narratives as constructed or remembered. Some of these semistructured interviews took place in my home, where some of the babysitters and I cooked West Indian food for lunch while the kids played in the house.

Seeing and talking with this group of women all working in the same gentrified neighborhoods at the same job with similar daily experiences, sharing similar cultural values and traditions, I often wondered whether they considered unionizing. Because of this, I wanted to understand the politics behind efforts to organize these women into a more cohesive group where
wages were discussed openly and benefits negotiated with employers for a better standard of living. For this reason, I conducted additional interviews at the offices of volunteer organizations such as Domestic Workers United (DWU) and at the time what was called Immigrants Justice Solidarity Project (IJSP), where I also volunteered my time. Through participant observation at DWU and IJSP, I was able to experience the monthly efforts made in outreach work to domestic workers from all over New York City, but primarily to West Indian women from Brooklyn. The volunteer organizations addressed concerns on multiple levels, from training sessions in CPR to free legal services for those whose rights were violated in their workplace. I also questioned local residents, the employers of West Indian childcare providers, local storeowners, and park personnel. I conducted more than twenty-five interviews with the babysitters I shadowed in which I asked about their “immigrant story” and its connection to childcare work. These interviews, carried out on park benches, at private homes, and in coffee shops, lasted between one and four hours. I paid the babysitters fifty dollars when the interviews were complete. This was compensation for their time outside work.

After two years, it became clear which of the daily events, conversations, and activities were typical of everyday public place interaction. Over this period, I was able to fine-tune and expand my ethnographic methods with the use of a digital voice recorder. The recorder itself was usually attached to an outer pocket in my jacket or jeans, or sometimes on my diaper bag. It was used to pick up ambient noises along with some of the conversations I had with those babysitters whom I had met only a few times in the park. All sitters were made aware that the recorder was turned on. I have used pseudonyms because of the sensitive nature of the work these women do, the range of immigration statuses, and the confidentiality that I guaranteed them. For the voices of people who were not intending to be recorded in public places (e.g., a babysitter who came up to talk with a sitter that I was interviewing or with whom I was having a recorded conversation) I have also used pseudonyms after receiving their consent.

While several of the childcare providers who informed my research made clear what should be presented as an accurate portrait of their lives, I have selected only the narratives and other material that I feel illustrate their experiences as childcare providers in both public and private places. Interpretations of the research material presented in this book are based on my own working knowledge and the tools of ethnographic analysis, which I detail in Appendix A.
My goal has been to make the ideas, sentiments, and voices of the participants heard. To ensure this, I have included in quotation marks reasonably accurate transcriptions of conversations. In some cases, I have taken the liberty of slightly editing some of the dialect without risking changes in meaning in order to illustrate main ideas more clearly (e.g., when they said “deh” I would write it out as “they”). I have sometimes altered descriptors of the main participants in order to preserve confidentiality, since some babysitters could be easily identified. The terms babysitter, sitter, nanny, and childcare provider are used interchangeably, reflecting their interchangeable usage by participants themselves.

**Terminology**

**Occupational Titles for Childcare**

I was sitting at a table in a coffeehouse, reading for my oral exams in graduate school, when I overheard a customer talking on her cell phone as she was heading out the door with her child, whom she was pushing in a stroller. She was white and appeared to be upper middle class in that the stroller was a Bugaboo costing perhaps $800. The son was by my guess about a year old, since I had earlier seen him walking but still a little wobbly on his feet. The woman was saying, “I need someone just a few days a week. I just want to cry. It’s not that Thomas’s too much, it’s that everything is too much.”

But who is this “someone”? To construct a meaningful way of discussing childcare providers I wanted to have a concrete term that would be respectful to the people participating in this work, the people who are fighting for the labor rights of these workers, and the readers of this book. Judith Rollins’s work on African American domestic workers and their dyadic relationship with their white female employers in Boston pointed out that domestic workers did not like the term girl, as did Shellee Colen in her domestic work research on West Indian women in New York when she said, “Many protest being referred to as ‘the girl’ or ‘the maid.’”

The term nanny, as popularized by shows such as Supernanny and Nanny 911, whose characters are all white and British, was used by West Indian childcare providers and throughout the mass media (as in “nanny-cams”). Only after I had immersed myself among West Indian childcare providers and their employers did I notice that terms such as babysitter, sitter, and caregiver were being used interchangeably with nanny. In an effort to understand this further, I asked some of my participants to explain how they defined
their role in the work that they did. Perhaps, I imagined, the sitters, when speaking among themselves, would use different terms, and accord them different meanings, than employers would use among their peers or with their “own” child. I wanted to know if they used terms such as servant, as Julia Wrigley does when writing about domestic workers.¹⁹ One November morning, while swinging my children on the swing set in the public park beside Hazel (who is from Grenada) and the child she cared for, I asked, “Do you call yourselves ‘nannies’?” She told me that they called themselves sitters or babysitters but that the “parents call them nannies in order to make themselves seem important.” Hazel was alluding to parents’ attempts to claim upper-middle-class status by having private in-home childcare, a class marker among white women.²⁰

By demonstrating the ability to hire an outside childcare provider, upper middle-class employers are publicly announcing their class status and thereby symbolically reconstituting it at the same time. It should be noted that no employer or West Indian worker ever used the term servant. However, not all babysitters felt the same way about specific terms.

During a conversation with Janet one afternoon, she used the term nanny to describe the other West Indian women in the neighborhood that she worked with. I stopped her right there to ask: “Why do you say nanny and not babysitter?” She said, “Nanny, babysitter, it’s the same thing.” Molly, Rachel, and Debbie, who were all close by, seemed to agree. Rachel, however, seemed more critical of my question and said, “Well, some people may think that ‘nanny’ is at the very bottom [of the social/employment hierarchy], and then some people may think that saying ‘nanny’ is something more than just a babysitter because maybe they cook and clean.” Molly and Debbie began to explore this further by saying that they know women who “cook, clean, shop, wash clothes . . .” I asked: “Do these sitters get paid more than if they only care for the children?” and Molly said no, not necessarily. So while some of the childcare providers distinguished between terms on the basis of how they reflected the employer’s status, others did so on the basis of the amount of responsibilities one had during a workday, and still others did not distinguish between the terms at all. In the end, it didn’t matter which term I used in the field: all of the childcare providers encountered multiple terms and in the end understood what they denoted.

I asked the same questions of a worker at Domestic Workers United (DWU), an organization that is currently attempting to organize domestic workers in New York City. Which of the terms such as nanny, housekeeper, and childcare worker was most reflective of the work domestics did, or was
most respected by employees? I wanted to understand how domestic workers perceived their position. Ai-jen, the director, responded, “I think that there's a range. I think that what we try to do in terms of language and recognizing that language is also very powerful in how people view this work... we try to really like talk about our identity and our role as workers... And then I think we like to recognize that it's important to also reclaim... and bring dignity to some ways in which we are defined by society... but that terms like help, for example, aren't helpful... or maid, you know, we don't generally use those kind of terms... But, anything like worker or housekeeper, or anything like that, we feel like yeah, that's the profession, and it should be respected.”

I then asked Ai-jen more specifically about the terms nanny versus babysitter, since in my fieldwork sitters disagreed regarding them. Ai-jen responded that in her work contention did sometimes arise surrounding such terms but that “it's not usually that significant.” She continued, “I mean, it definitely comes up, and some people prefer babysitter and some people prefer nanny. Like some people feel like nanny sounds more professional... and some people feel the other way around... So, I think in general we tend to support the ways in which workers define it, or what they like to be called... unless it is in some way directly derogatory or something... unless, you know, people feel like we need to reclaim maid, which some workers may feel better reflects the work that is being done.”

Recognizing that language does play a role in how society in general views domestic work and childcare work more specifically, Ai-jen offered more explanation about using a term such as maid to describe the work that domestic workers do: “You know, and they feel like that might make sense under some set of conditions. But in general it's about really talking about the fact that without this work, nothing else could happen. And that's always been true, and... it's part of how patriarchy has shaped our society and economy that like the whole system and society is built on taking for granted the work that women have done to raise families. ... You know, there would be no working class without women raising the working class, you know?” Ai-jen's comment refers to a point that has been made by several scholars: the structure of the American labor market affects how housework and family work are constituted and who performs them.21

Childcare providers' willingness to accept a variety of titles to describe the work they did gave me the impression that what they considered important was really the work they did (although that work seemed to go unrecognized often by the employers), not how it might be categorized. A pro-
vider’s use of one work title over another might also have had something to do with the social status of childcare and domestic work “back home”: if in the home country certain terms used for domestic work referred to positions that were respected, the childcare providers in Brooklyn would use those terms.

I use childcare provider when speaking of my participants in general, but where the providers themselves used a specific title, I adhere to that specific term. In addition, I use other terms such as sitter or babysitter since these are the most common terms used in the field among West Indian childcare providers.

“My” Child

When employers talked with me about their childcare providers, they often used a metaphor of family, as in “Oh, we just love her, she is like family.” Sometimes employers took advantage of this: for example, asking providers to work later than usual by making them feel as if all “family” members had to chip in. Providers attempted to push back on such requests by rationalizing the job situation and defining boundaries: setting hours, explicitly outlining responsibilities, and itemizing tasks that they refused to do. Employers might see this as laziness or inflexibility, but the control that providers were trying to gain could be seen as a way to make the hierarchical employer-employee relationship more equal.

Working in people’s homes, a situation that fostered isolation and unclear boundaries, led childcare providers to slip into family metaphors as well: talking about the child as if the child were family and, at times, expressing pride and satisfaction when the children being cared for seemed closer to them than to the parent. And although West Indian babysitters did not encourage the children they cared for to call them anything but their first name, the amount of awake, hands-on caring time that children spent with providers, which included everything from feeding, to being tucked in for naps, to being taken out to play in the park, contributed to the tendency of children to refer to their sitters as “Mommy” or “Mama.”

Often, these sitters took on the responsibility of treating the children they cared for as their own, as one sitter, Flora, explained to me. After commenting that the other nannies in the park were “mostly nice, but some are not so attentive with the children, but most of them are nice,” she continued, “We all take care of these children as if they are our own because we wouldn’t want someone not taking care of our children.” An indicator of this attitude
was the sitters’ tendency to refer to the child they cared for as “my child,” a phrase that sounded parental when said. I saw this occur when I was invited to come with my daughter to a “playdate” that Sara, from Grenada, hosted in her employer’s home. During the many formula feedings that occurred in the hours that I was participating in this playdate, the nannies would all boast about which child could hold their bottle on his or her own. But it was more than boasting; the personal attachment that they felt towards these children quickly turned the boasting into a competition. Catherine could be heard saying, “Look at Sally, look at her, well, my child can already hold her bottle by herself.” All the babysitters laughed. Soon after, Molly, one of the matriarchs of the childcare provider community—a black Guyanese childcare provider in her early sixties, mother to seven children who were now all adults—piped up with “Well, my child can almost stand up and she’s only nine months old.” This professional competition over who could do what continued, indicating a constructed norm that the childcare provider was doing her job well, but what was most striking was the phrase “my child,” used consistently throughout the conversation and in a tone that emphasized possessiveness.

Another incident, which occurred at the public library at storytime, showed both a sitter and a child using the term mama to refer to a childcare provider. That day, I was with both of my children and a few of the providers and their charges. At one point during a storytime session, I had to deal with a problem with my daughter, so Molly took my son and held him. Immediately the two-year-old girl that Molly cared for came up to her as Debbie, another provider, said to the little girl from over my left shoulder, “You want your mama.” Molly then stated that the little girl was jealous because she was holding my son, so I took my son back up in my arms. Then Taylor, Debbie’s charge, came over to Debbie, calling “Mama” and again two more times, “Mama, Mama,” and Debbie responded to her without hesitation. I would think the child’s use of this name for the sitter would pierce the heart of any mother who heard it (or perhaps not, because it was at least an indication that the child felt secure). It was not the first time I had heard children call their sitter “Mama” or “Mommy.” The sitters just responded to the children and didn’t correct them. (The children were often not corrected for saying “Mommy” when out in the playground until they “should know better,” according to a sitter I overheard one day in the park.) Perhaps this non-response should come as no surprise given the sitters’ expressed indifference, for the most part, regarding what occupational titles they were given. It became increasingly obvious that these children were close to the sitters,
who would eventually be replaced by other kinds of caregivers (teachers, other family members, family friends) who could not be mistaken for their “mama.”

Providers’ and Employers’ Terms for Each Other

In my fieldwork, I never heard a childcare provider call her employer by his or her first name, but I did hear employers call a provider by hers. Providers would often refer to their employer as “the mother of the child.” Calling one’s employer by his or her first name would be considered disrespectful or else might suggest that the provider was “too close” to her employer (an issue taken up later in the book). Some employees couldn’t even remember the names of their employers because they did not call them by name (much as providers did not necessarily know each other’s names but could still recognize each other). Others, when asked the name of their employer, had to think about it for a while. Frequent turnover in childcare jobs, even within the span of a few years, and frequent work for more than one family at a time could be another reason for this.

Some employers were less comfortable with the term babysitter than the childcare providers, perhaps because they felt it devalued the work being done in the home or because it made them feel uncomfortable to admit that they needed childcare. Other employers, however, used the term freely, perhaps because it suggested casual, occasional work and thus downplayed the amount of time they spent apart from their children. Some simply used the term because the provider herself did.

The Term Ladies

Sitters used the term ladies to refer to other West Indian sitters. I would often hear one provider speak of other West Indian providers as “the ladies sitting over there” or say something like “The ladies will be coming to the park just now.” It appeared that the term was used not to indicate a job-based identity but rather in some way to elevate the childcare providers’ status. In addition, the sitters saw the term ladies as a call for respect when it was applied to other childcare providers, since in the Caribbean titles are often used for family members or even close friends of the family. For example, my children called all of the providers they met in the park “Auntie” because in Trinidad you must address the elders you visit regularly with respect. To call a person, especially an elder, by his or her first name is considered rude.
Plan of the Book

I begin the empirical portion of this book with a chapter addressing the history of domestic work in New York City and how West Indian women came to be one of the dominant groups that do this type of work. This first chapter also looks at the economic conditions in New York households, specifically those of the white middle class, that create the demand for low-wage workers. Through an analysis of national ethnic identities and a pan-ethnic identity that I am calling “West Indianness,” this chapter shows how West Indian childcare providers saw their role in the Brooklyn communities where they worked, as well as the divisiveness that was sometimes expressed between childcare providers of different ethnic, national, and racial identities.

Chapters 2 and 3 concern childcare providers’ use of public places and spaces during the workweek. In chapter 2 I look at how West Indian childcare providers used and interacted in Brooklyn public parks and how local residents, parents, and a park employee perceived them. Chapter 3 identifies the other places where West Indian childcare providers took the children they cared for, either on behalf of their employers or because they wanted to occupy their workdays with events: specifically public libraries and movement studios that offered classes for young children and their parents or caregivers.

Foodways were a key element in the preservation of West Indian culture among the childcare providers I studied. Chapter 4 takes a closer look at these foodways in a variety of public and private places to determine the meanings of West Indian food for this group of women in terms of culture and identity. Providers discussed how they shared food with each other, how they associated food preparation with good mothering, and how they judged their employers on the basis of food issues.

Providers frequently used cell phones to construct workday norms and patterns of interaction. Chapter 5 discusses cell phones as one of the tools that providers now need to do their job effectively. However, the question of who is responsible for ensuring that this “tool” is managed and paid for becomes important to understanding how domestic work has evolved. Providers viewed their personal cell phones as a means for reaching out to one another and to family back in the islands, but some employers felt that cell phone use should be work related, limited to such functions as keeping employers involved in what was going on at home or contacting help in an emergency. This chapter also discusses surveillance, through the use of both cell phones and the Internet, as a dimension of childcare employment that
West Indian providers had to contend with. Nanny-cams, parenting blogs, and frequent calls by employers have created a dynamic between employers and employees that often goes unacknowledged in studies of domestic work.

Chapter 6 looks at the informal economic savings accounts called “susus” among West Indian childcare providers. This chapter provides a small window into the world of providers that is rooted in the preservation of culture. The providers go into detail about the structure of susus, how the saved money is used, and why this institution works or doesn’t work. Finally, chapter 7 looks specifically at how one organization, Domestic Workers United, is trying to formally organize West Indian domestic workers in and around New York City to obtain labor rights that would include a minimum hourly rate, a signed contract between employer and employee, severance pay, and other benefits.

This book draws on the varied perspectives of the many people I interviewed, including the providers, their employers, members of Domestic Workers United, park employees, and other people who worked in public spaces to describe how the West Indian childcare providers I studied used public places and found ways to live collectively during their workweek. Understanding the networks between childcare providers can help employers not only to obtain the childcare they seek but also to gain a broader sense of the relationships that are building the social worlds of their children. This book shows how the complex networks of childcare providers benefit employers, providers, and children alike. It also promotes understanding of the tensions involved in childcare work in both the private and the public spheres and how these affect relationships between providers, between employers and employees, and between providers and the children under their care. The group of women who became the subject of this book helped me to connect personally and professionally with West Indian culture in the form of social groups that confront everyday experiences while giving depth to a world that is not widely written about. I hope to bring this to life and to provide a glimpse of the dynamic collectivity that these women share.