Introduction

When people exist under one roof, a tiny society forms, . . . the stuff of novelas: masters and servants unconsciously dancing in lock step so that, when things go wrong, traumas converge. —James L. Brooks, Spanglish

She’s just a displaced person. She doesn’t belong in a mansion but then she doesn’t belong above a garage either. —Samuel A. Taylor, Sabrina Fair

She had spent her whole life working for de la Torres, and it showed. If you stood them side by side—Mrs. García with her pale skin kept moist with expensive creams and her hair fixed up in the beauty parlor every week; Mamá with her unraveling ray bun and maid’s uniform and mouth still waiting for the winning lottery ticket to get replacement teeth—why Mamá looked ten years older than Mrs. García, though they were both the same age, forty-three. . . .

“The girls, they treat you well. Doña Laura has a special place in her heart for you.”

“I know, Mamá but they’re not our family.” —Julia Alvarez, ¡Yo!

A story of a child growing up within a household where her mother or father is employed as a maid, nanny, or butler can conjure up a plot filled with opportunities for social mobility. Sabrina, in both novel and film, elevates her social status from chauffeur’s daughter to wife of the employer’s son. In Spanglish, Cristina (the maid’s daughter) takes a journey all the way to Princeton University. Sarita (from ¡Yo!) is rewarded for determination and hard work when she becomes an orthopedist at “one of the top sports medicine clinics in the country” (71–72). Indeed, a common plotline for the children of live-in servants is rags to riches. Transformation from the servant class to the employer class is imagined as a result of gaining access to privileges and exposure to the lifestyle of the upper class. Living in the employers’ household allows them to see
how the upper class lives, creating desires to escape the social status of their birth. Less often does popular culture imagine servants’ children rising above their ascribed class as a result of their parents’ hard work and of witnessing the working-class capital of entrepreneurship. Nor are the complexities of the daughter-mother bond considered when employers insist that both are “like one of the family.” As the daughter is positioned to take advantage of the selected privileges that employers offer her, there is also tension that her upward mobility will leave the parent behind. This is not a surprising theme since social mobility in the United States calls for children to assimilate into the mainstream, leaving their culture of orientation and embracing middle-class whiteness.¹

As in literature and film, the voices of the children of domestic workers are seldom explored by scholars.² Yet many researchers acknowledge that social relationships surrounding paid household labor and care work are ideal places to investigate social inequality.³ If we adjust the kaleidoscope to include the employees’ children, we can see the impact that these inequalities have on the workers’ children and how the division of household labor and care work reproduces social hierarchies in society. Frequently negotiated informally behind closed doors, the less appealing work ascribed to mothers and wives is commodified as low-wage unskilled labor. Household labor remains largely the job of women and is structured around class, race, ethnic, and citizenship inequalities.

DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN COSTS

My intellectual journey into domestic work from the perspective of workers’ children began in El Paso, Texas, in 1986 when I met Olivia María Gomez Salazar.⁴ Olivia was an attractive twenty-three-year-old Chicana who could easily blend in with other Latina students. Her dark hair and brown eyes were highlighted by her light complexion. At five foot three, she did not draw attention with her physical appearance, but rather her assertive speech and posture commanded one’s undivided attention. Her wit, humor, and expressive storytelling are marked by her competence in focusing her entire attention on you. As she approached me after a panel discussion and we talked about my research and similar writings on domestic workers, I got a glimpse of her magnetic personality. It was
not until a year later that we actually sat down together and she told me about her experiences.

With a great deal of emotion, she told me that her mother, Carmen, was a live-in maid in Los Angeles and that she had lived with her mother in her employers’ home from the age of three to eighteen, when she left for college. She lived in the maid’s quarters with her mother in “Liberty Place,” a gated and extremely wealthy community, for fifteen years. Most of this time was spent in the Smiths’ household, which consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Smith and their four children: two daughters, Jane and Rosalyn, and two sons, David and Ted—all older than Olivia. Mr. Smith was an agent in the entertainment business, and Mrs. Smith was a traditional stay-at-home mom. When financial circumstances prohibited the Smiths from hiring Carmen full-time, their work arrangement changed, allowing her to work for other employers in the neighborhood during the week. Although Olivia’s entry into the employers’ household was first restricted to the maid’s quarters, the Smiths moved her out of the maid’s quarters and into one of the spare bedrooms when she was ten. Although her mother was relegated to the maid’s quarters and she was roomed alongside the employers’ family, Olivia was never completely integrated into the Smith family or all their community activities. In Olivia’s case, the old adage “just like one of the family” becomes particularly confusing as the social boundaries between “being like one of the family” and “the maid’s daughter” became blurred and in constant flux. Each social position demanded completely different expectations. These changes frequently placed Olivia at odds with her mother, even though the only real and legal status within the household was the mother-daughter relationship between Olivia and Carmen. Rising to the surface are the stories highlighting Carmen’s fear that she would lose her child to the Smith family and Olivia’s fear that she would lose her mother to the employers.

Olivia confided that she rarely revealed her background to other Latinos because her complex circumstances could raise issues of ethnic and class authenticity. I sensed an urgent need in Olivia to talk about her childhood, spending the school year in the Smith household in the gated community and summers in Mexico with her extended family. On reflection, I understand that the process of talking about her experiences...
and emotions allowed her to contextualize her identity as a proud Chicana. I am confident that she viewed me as a Chicana academic who would empathize with her complicated relationships and mixed emotions toward her mother’s employers and with her concerns for her mother’s health and future. At the end of our first conversation, Olivia was not finished talking, and I was not finished listening. Not yet having a clear research focus, I asked Olivia if she was interested in engaging in a life-history project with me. She immediately agreed and expressed enthusiasm and commitment to the project. I explained that I wanted to tape-record her stories and then analyze and write about her experiences. As a university graduate, she had no problem interpreting my request and gladly gave informed consent to the interviews. She expressed as much excitement about starting the project as I felt about conducting the research. We exchanged contact information, and I agreed to call her in the next few months to work out the logistics for a long visit before the year was over.

Shortly after this first interview, I was approached by another adult child of a domestic worker. Following my presentation at a northern California university, several students approached me. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched a Latina holding back in the line. After speaking to several people, I turned to her, and before she was able to say more than a sentence, the tears ran down her face. I suggested we talk in a more private corner in the room. She immediately apologized and explained that she had never heard a professor frame domestic service as legitimate employment, that is, as work worthy of study or of any importance. As a student at an elite university, she always concealed the fact that her mother worked as a private household worker in the Bay Area. While expressing pride for all the hard labor that her mother did to help her pursue a college education, she also internalized shame over her mother’s low-status employment of cleaning other people’s dirt. This shame was intensified by sitting in classes each day with the children of employers. Sensing a willingness to share her experiences, I asked her if she felt comfortable about meeting the next day for an interview. She was thrilled. Like Olivia, she had held a secret about her background and wanted to talk to someone who framed private household labor as “real work” with dignity. Encountering an academic researching domestic
service validated her experiences and gave her legitimation in a social place where she had felt as an outsider and tried to fit in by concealing her mother’s employment.  

In the next several years, my encounters with the adult children of domestic workers at conferences and invited lectures increased. Given the venues, the adult children I met were graduate and undergraduate students, law students, faculty, and university administrators. Although they are clearly not representative of all children of maids, nannies, and private household workers, I found them ideal interviewees. Few adults in academia are the sons or daughters of domestic workers, nor are those who are likely to find themselves in the same social space with employers and their children. My presenting research in an audience including employers and children of employers allowed these children of domestic workers to hear uncensored views and attitudes toward workers like their mothers, aunts, and neighbors. After hearing classmates or colleagues make condescending remarks about how workers should be grateful for the opportunity to work and learn skills applicable to moving into the formal labor market, many of these adult children approached me to share their own experiences.

I began recording recollections of their mothers’ work experiences from their perspective. Their stories added a dimension to domestic service that I had not found by interviewing domestics or nannies. I shifted the focus of analysis from the employer’s home to the worker’s family. In my first book, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, the focus of analysis had been the employer’s home, without a comparable examination of employees’ families. I did compare and contrast the differences in the division of household labor between wives and husbands. Working-class men engaged in more repairs, cooking, and other household activities than did middle-class men, who were more likely to purchase the labor of others. Framing domestic and care work from the perspective of the maid’s child provides an important view into the family-work dilemmas that shape working women’s lives. Rarely has the dilemma of “women’s work” been seen from the child’s viewpoint. What does it mean when working mothers are too tired to spend quality time with their children at the end of day? How does the child interpret “work obligations” that extend into family time? How do children make sense out of receiving gifts from their
mother’s employers instead of employers paying their mothers enough money to improve their standard of living? How do the children of care workers feel about their mother’s relationship with other children? And does their mother’s occupation shape the way that children are treated by their employers and the larger community?

**OLIVIA’S NARRATIVE**

I met Olivia in Texas shortly after she agreed to participate in the research project. I arrived at her home with recorder in hand. Without much casual conversation we sat on the floor in front of a fireplace, and I turned on the tape recorder. Without an introduction or question, she immediately began her story.

My mom was born in a place called Piedras Negras—not the border Piedras Negras but a small town in Aguascalientes, Mexico. Her father was from the state of Chihuahua. She grew up with my paternal grandfather’s relatives and spent a lot of time with her aunts and grew up with them.

I understand that my grandmother’s parents were very wealthy and had disowned her when she married my grandfather because of the class issue. My mother had very little to do with her mother’s relatives. They were very wealthy and had a very large family, about eight children. There was a plague that killed almost all of the family in the early 1890s. My grandmother, whose name is Cristina Hurtado, was one of two survivors, and the other was her brother, Guillermo. He was born with no arms and worked in the circus. He was very talented. He could eat with his feet and worked in the rodeo and did these things with his feet.

My mother spent a lot of time with her father’s aunts and uncles in Aguascalientes. They grew up poor—very poor. He later began working for the railroad, laying tracks in Mexico. I guess it was in 1960 when he had a horrible accident. Evidently he was on one of those miniature cars used in the railroad to carry work supplies and had an accident in a tunnel. He came head-on with the train, which cut off his legs from his knees down. He died of gangrene.

I understand that at the time he had the accident, my grandmother and grandfather were already separating because there had been rumors that he had been with other women. So the family had already split up, and my grandmother had moved to a small town about a hundred miles outside Ciudad Juárez in a place
called Moctezuma. My grandfather was still giving my grandmother money, but they were pretty much independent.

My mother’s older sister was shy and wouldn’t do any work activity outside the home. She was kind of wimpy. She cried all the time and didn’t take responsibility for the family. I guess it was just my mother’s very strong personality, but she began working. My mother got ideas of things to do to make a living from my father’s sisters. Her aunts used to make asaderos and enchiladas. My mother put them in a basket and waited for the trains at the stations to sell to the passengers. Working with her aunts was how she began to travel. She was the first one to get a job and move to Ciudad Juárez. My mother’s sisters stayed and did things in the house.

When she was around fifteen or sixteen, she got a job as a domestic in Juárez. Her family still lived in this town that was about seventy or eighty miles from Ciudad Juárez. She got on the train and went to work in Ciudad Juárez during the week. She told me that once when they worked in El Paso, there was a Chicano who didn’t like immigrants, and he called the INS on them. So they had to leave. Their employers hid them when the INS came to the door. They got caught by the INS when taking the bus to the Country Club area.

Later my mother had a passport and was able to go across the border to work for different families in what is now called the Country Club area—the wealthy area of El Paso.13

My mom got her papers when she was in El Paso, and she was really young. She told me that back then it wasn’t hard. All she needed was a Mexican passport, a job, or someone to sign for you. She was in her twenties at the time.

One of the first families she worked for was a family named McLaughlin. They had a couple of kids, and my mother took care of the kids, as well as cooked and cleaned. She had a really good relationship with the kids. Evidently, they were very wealthy, because they had a driver, a chauffeur, and one other woman who worked there—I am not sure in what capacity. My mom stayed there during the week, and on Fridays she’d get on the bus in El Paso and went to Moctezuma to see her family.

Later she worked with this family in El Paso who was very wealthy—upper-class Mexicanos living near the country club. They now own one of the maquiladora plants in Juárez.13 The family had two twin daughters. One was named Olivia, and the other was named Marí a. My mother decided that they had such pretty
names, she decided to name me after them. That is how I got my name, Olivia María.

My mother and her sister met some people in Ciudad Juárez, and they got an apartment. My mother had an outgoing personality, and that was how they met people and developed a network. She met somebody living there that had a restaurant. This person brought her friends from Moctezuma to live in Ciudad Juárez and to work at the restaurant. Instead of going out and working as a domestic, my aunt worked at the restaurant. She cooked, cleaned, and waitressed. My mom was the only one in the group that went out and worked as a live-in domestic. She came home sometimes during the week and stayed with them in the apartment. 

By this time, her father had already passed away, and she was making most of the money in the family. My mother describes the family situation as never having counted on him for much. I am sure she was already supporting the family when he died. My mother was making eight dollars a week, and most of it went to supporting her family. My mom had already moved all of the family to Juárez and had bought a small little house in Juárez. Then her other brothers and sisters got jobs in Juárez. The house and everything were under my mom’s name.

When she was working in El Paso, she met other women working in the Country Club area. She made friends with them, and they later became my godparents. She went with them to Los Angeles after they got caught by the INS and decided to leave El Paso. They convinced my mom to leave with them. One of them had a car, and they drove to Los Angeles. She and her friends rented an apartment in the San Fernando Valley, and they all lived together. There were five of them. There was only one man, Mr. Cordova, his sister, and another two females, and my mother. They were all from Juárez. At the time, my mother was probably about thirty-one. I don’t know how traumatic it was for my mom to pick up and leave her family.

Initially my mom worked in the garment industry with the other women. She worked there a short time, about six months to a year. My mother decided that she didn’t want to work in the garment industry because she wasn’t making enough money and never had inclinations to sew. I don’t think she knew anything about sewing, and she decided she wanted to clean houses. That was the kind of work she had originally done in El Paso and found it a lot easier. My mother is a really hard worker. She will work a fourteen-hour day without thinking about it.

She then went to a domestic agency. None of her friends did domestic work. She went to this agency, and she got placed in an area called Liberty Place. It is a
private neighborhood with the streets blocked off. She started working there with a family, the Dillards. They had a huge six-bedrooms home. There was another lady working there, Delia. Mrs. Dillard wanted two people to help her. They had eight kids, and my mother had the best relationship with them. My mother always had strong relationships and interacted with the kids.

She lived at the Dillards’ house in an apartment above the garage. The houses in the neighborhood were all structured that way for their help. The apartment had a refrigerator, a little kitchen, a bedroom, and bathroom. That is where my mother lived. She lived alone in the apartment. Inside the house there was another room where Delia lived when they were both working there. I think my mother worked there for two years. After Delia quit and went back to Mexico, my mother worked alone in the house.

My mother helped Mr. Cordova find jobs in the neighborhood where she worked.17 The people who lived there asked my mother if she knew someone to paint, and she would get him jobs. Mrs. Dillard asked my mother to find people to work for her friends. Many of my mother’s friends worked in the area. I can’t imagine how my mother and Mrs. Dillard communicated, because my mother did not speak English.

Somewhere along the line my mother met my father. He was a construction worker. My father was from Tampalitas. I have never made any attempt to find him. I don’t think my mother knew him for a very long time, because she doesn’t know very much about his family. She never really talks much about that relationship at all, except that she was never really in love with him and there wasn’t much of a relationship. They met at this restaurant, and they saw each other for about a month—not very long. His name was Alejandro Salazar. She never really talks about him. They talked, and they went out. He picked her up on a Sunday, and they went out. Afterwards, he took her back to the house where she worked.

My mother describes it as though she knew that he was leaving. He had a car. My mother made a statement to him about having a flashlight, a map, and certain travel things in the glove compartment of the car. She asked him if he was leaving her or going on a trip. My mother said it sarcastically because she already knew he was going somewhere. He didn’t say anything about it, and the next week he didn’t come back. I don’t know how far along her pregnancy was or whether her pregnancy had anything to do with his leaving. My sense is that he never even knew she was pregnant.
My mother said that she was crying and that is how the Dillards found out that she was pregnant. My mother was really worried about losing her job because she was pregnant. Evidently she had been very small, and you could not tell she was pregnant. She just looked a little overweight. She continued to work up until a week before I was born. She had a really good relationship with Mrs. Dillard. She asked my mom what she planned to do after she had the baby. My mother said, “Just continue working or maybe go back to Mexico for some time.” Mrs. Dillard told her about St. Ann’s, which is a hospital for unwed mothers. My mom went to St. Ann’s, and that is where I was born. It was a Catholic hospital. I was born on June 7, 1963. My birth certificate says my mother was thirty-six.

My mother was still very close with the five friends she came with from El Paso. She had been living with them on the weekends. My godmother and godfather picked my mom and me up at the hospital and took us back to their place. We stayed in Los Angeles till I was about six months, and I was baptized in Los Angeles by Mr. Cordova and his sister. My mom was still working. Mr. Cordova’s sister, Maria Rosa, did not have a job, and she took care of me. I was there probably three to six months, until my mother decided that we were going to leave and go to El Paso. She decided she needed somebody to take care of me. My godfather was driving back to Juárez, so we got a ride with him.

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My mother didn’t tell my grandmother that she was pregnant. She just arrived at the door with this child in her arms.

I asked my mom, “Did my grandmother ever say anything to you or ask you anything?”

“No, we never talked about it.”

I don’t know what my grandmother’s reaction was. My grandmother had a different relationship with my mother than with any of her other kids. My mother had been supporting her and the family while she was in Los Angeles. My mother got away with doing certain things because she was the one who supported the family. Nobody ever said anything—not “How did you get pregnant?” or “How did this all come from?” or “Why?” My mother supported the family. So if she wanted to come home with her baby, that was her business.

By then, my mother was not the only single parent in the family. My mother’s oldest sister had gotten married and had two children. The first child died of some illness. After she had her second child, her husband was murdered. She was a single parent with a son, who is ten years older than I am. My mother’s other sister
is named Ofelia. I am not sure if she ever got married or was living with somebody. He was an Asian Mexicano. Somehow he had Asian ancestry, because his last name was Wong. My aunt had moved in with his parents, as was the custom among the Asians. Evidently her mother-in-law didn’t like her. She finally took her baby and left the family and her husband. So when my mother came back to her house in Juárez, her two sisters had children living there as well.²⁸ So my grandmother wasn’t really going to say much, because that was pretty much the way things were. There were five in my mother’s family. Her younger brother and sister were not married—so three of them were single parents.

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My mother immediately started working in El Paso once again. She left me with my grandmother and her sisters who weren’t working. I stayed there until I was two. My mom crossed the border into El Paso and worked as a domestic. This time she worked as a day worker. My aunt, my mother’s older sister, Ofelia, spent a lot of time with me.

One thing I remember from my childhood is going to Aguascalientes on the train with mi tía Ofelia. She wanted to take me with her to Aguascalientes for a month or two because my mother’s younger and only brother, Ricardo, was getting married. He lived in Aguascalientes and worked as a taxi driver. My aunt was going to go and help prepare for the wedding. She wanted to take me with her. I was about a year and a half.

My grandmother was very much against it. She told my mother, “Carmen, si se lleva a esa niña, no te va a conocer ni va a tener nada contigo.” [Carmen, if she takes the child, she will not know you, nor will she want anything to do with you.]

I don’t know why my mother decided to let me go, but she went against my grandmother’s advice.

She said, “Go ahead. Take her.”

I went with my aunt. I remember we went on the train. The train derailed and tipped over. We had to walk a great distance before we were out of danger of an explosion.

Aguascalientes was a really small town at the time. It had maybe ten thousand people. We stayed there for about three months. I was always with my tía Ofelia, and I called her “Mama.” To me she was my mom.

Right before the wedding they kept telling me that “Your mother is coming. Your mother is coming.” I didn’t understand, because my mother was right here.
I remember that my mother came on the train. It was so strange because she had a hat box. She was a completely different image to me. I remember the hat box because it was so significant. She was so cosmopolitan, so different, so worldly. My aunt was so traditional, with her little dresses and skirts. She looked like all the other señoritas. But my mother had this whole different appearance to her. It was really strange.

I didn't want to sleep with my mother. I cried and cried and cried because my aunt made me sleep in the same bed with my mother. I felt her at night and realized that my mother was skinnier than my aunt. I would say, "¡No con esta no me duermo! ¡Con esta no me duermo!" [No, I am not sleeping with her! I won't sleep with her!] I didn't want anything to do with her. I didn't let her hold me. I didn't let her touch me or do anything. I remember after the wedding, we all went back to Juárez.

My mother had some agreement with Mrs. Dillard. She had planned to leave for a short period of time and take me back to her family in Juárez, but she intended to return. They wrote to each other. I don't know how, because my mother only wrote in Spanish. My mother only had a third-grade education. I assume that somebody translated the letters. Mrs. Dillard wrote back that she had somebody else, but she could help her find a place to work.

My mother decided that since I was two now, we were going back to Los Angeles.

My grandmother said, "You are crazy. You shouldn't do this."

Everybody said, "You are going to freak the baby. The baby doesn't want to leave this house."

But she said, "I am going to go." And she did.

At the time, people put articles in the paper about sharing rides to Los Angeles. My mother found somebody who was going to Los Angeles in a car and took me with her.

Evidently, it was a horrible experience for my mother, because I cried the entire way. I was so sad. I just stared out the window. I was just heartbroken and cried all the way. I cried and cried and cried. (Interview, January 1988)

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After six hours of uninterrupted recording, Olivia leaned forward and turned off the tape recorder and announced that this was enough for the day. I still recall with amazement the first interview visit. I found myself changing tapes as quickly as possibly as her recollections poured forth.
The rest of the evening we talked about a variety of topics, from university life and local and national politics to the best margarita recipes. The following morning we took a long walk along the Colorado River. She was curious about my interpretations of her experiences, particularly her accounts of growing up with the Smith family. However, I actually said very little before she began reflecting on her stories and linking certain memories that might be key to understanding her feelings toward the Smiths and her relationship with her mother. She seemed to be searching to define the source of conflicts and justifications for the continued anger, hurt, and confused emotions attached to certain events. She had given her narrative so matter-of-factly, along with laughing at the way she has internalized upper-middle-class mannerisms and expectations, that I did not realize how cathartic our six-hour interview session had been. Now it was clear that the intense interviewing the day before had stirred a lot of memories, unresolved issues, and confusing feelings.

CONSTRUCTING THE STORY

This first interview session set the routine, tone, and pace for future interviews. Each of our meetings revolved around the “Olivia in charge” format. She began the interview, determined when to take a break, and announced when the day’s session was over. When we returned to work on the project, Olivia did not immediately pick up where she had left off in her narrative but engaged in a similar debriefing period as she did at the first interview. At first, I did not record the debriefing sessions because they were extremely emotional and private. I relied on extensive field notes written afterward. Gradually, as the period between the formal end of the interview and debriefing shortened, I became more comfortable with listening to her analyze emotions and struggle to make sense of her experiences. She also seemed less confused and hurt in the process of linking the present with the past. These debriefings frequently took place while we were walking, driving, or cooking. As our conversation always returned to her experiences as the maid’s daughter, I asked her permission to record. She agreed. I trained myself to always carry a tape recorder and plenty of blank tapes. Eventually, the tape recorder was often running as we took walks, cooked dinner, or drove in the car. However, I always
turned off my tape recorder when her friends or family members entered a room and asked her a question or when she took phone calls. As the tape recorder became as common as a cup of coffee, the tapes collected random conversations, and the quality was not at its best during activities. At the end of each day, I took extensive notes and transcribed the tapes as quickly as possible in order to capture details and accounts that were not clear and to prepare for our next meeting. When busy schedules and finances limited our visits for long periods of time, we had lengthy phone conversations. She agreed to have these calls recorded.

Since we never lived in the same state, I usually made arrangements to visit her for a few days, or we tried to match our travel schedules to meet in the same city at the same time. She visited and stayed in my home a few times as well. Our arrangements were always made over the telephone, at which point Olivia gave me the updates of stories to add to the project. At times, these stories were recollections she had since our last interview, but more often they were linked to a recent visit, event, or phone call that provided updates on employers and domestic workers in Liberty Place. Sometimes she had phone conversations with Mr. and Mrs. Smith, her mother, or relatives in Mexico. Contact with relatives in Mexico also stimulated memories, particularly reminders of her mother’s position as the breadwinner and their constant obligation to respond to family crises. Depending on our travel arrangements, interviews were conducted over one to three days, usually intense and emotionally draining sessions. I also accompanied her on a visit to Liberty Place.

The visit to Liberty Place took place in the late ’90s. Although the Smiths were no longer living there, she called another resident who had been one of her mother’s employers to gain access into the gated community. After a short visit with this elderly widow, we drove around the neighborhood, and Olivia pointed out the houses of various families she had discussed over the years. Then we went to the Smiths’ former home, where she grew up. This was probably the smallest house in the community and sat alongside a tall chain fence. With her engaging and disarming charm, Olivia convinced the current owners to walk us through the house. I saw the kitchen, her mother’s bedroom, and Olivia’s bedroom and was able to actually “see” many of the incidents she had already vividly described.
After the first decade of interview sessions, we fell into a rhythm. When Olivia experienced pauses in her own story, she turned to me and asked, “What else?” I was always prepared for these moments with a handy list of items assembled from my field notes. Only after a crisis did she pour forth without allowing interruptions for questions of clarity or detail. In these moments, she frequently recalled an event that she had mentioned in numerous interviews before and either added details previously not shared or placed the story in a context that called for additional interpretation—not necessarily a different interpretation but rather identifying the event as symbolic of an overarching tension or contradiction in her life between maids and mistresses. However, she never failed to surprise me by mentioning an event that placed her emotions in an entirely different context. On reflection, I think that some of these family “secrets” were revealed as she became more comfortable with me or as she had resolved and dealt with painful memories. A few were obviously new revelations from conversations with her mother, or an event may have challenged her previous assumptions; and aspects of the experience that was previously perceived as trivial now became more significant. Certain events took on special defining moments, and she reflected back on these many times in the course of our interviews. After years of interviewing, Olivia reflected on many of the family stories she had shared:

I can identify turning points. For a while I was really upset at how I felt that I was put in a really tough position with my family. I remember how angry I was at myself and at my mother that I was put in an unrealistic position with my family and with the Smiths, that it was a no-win situation. (Interview, July 1997)

After two decades of interviewing, I no longer found myself listening to an angry voice but rather the expressed emotions of a woman who had gained perspective on her life, even wisdom. She had no regrets but had become very content with her life as a consultant, daughter, and mother. And of course I was hearing her from my own changing perspective. Perhaps most important, as she and I grew up, we came to see and understand our own childhood experiences from different vantage points in the life process. When I began interviewing Olivia, I was an untenured assistant professor. Olivia grew from a college student to become a married, successful career woman with two children; I moved from college
to college, got married, and was a dean at Yale and then a full professor. Mr. Smith died. Olivia’s mom moved in with her. Lifetimes passed while we talked.

Over the years, Olivia joked with me that I was her therapist. On reflection, the role of a therapist probably does characterize our relationship at the beginning of the project. Although I do think we have become friends and have both enjoyed the project, we certainly do not share the same life experiences, nor have we made the same choices in our lives. As a consequence of the research process, our relationship became routinized in the research roles. As the researcher, I was the listener, the recorder, and my actions were primarily limited to asking questions and observing. Olivia was the focus of attention during both the formal interviews and the debriefing, and even other activities never completely moved away from the research project. I found myself observing her behavior with her mother, partners, friends, and children through the lens of the research project. Even our jokes and points of comparison were always based on her life story. In her conversations about daily activities, Olivia conceptualized her descriptions and accounts from the standpoint of the maid’s daughter, especially highlighting the influences her experiences with the Smith family have had on her mannerisms, expectations, and behavior.

After our first interview in Austin, Texas, I did not imagine decades of interviewing and writing about Olivia. She is an extremely engaging storyteller and frequently moves into the character in her story and imitates both voice and gestures. The more I interviewed, transcribed tapes, wrote research memos, and coded and analyzed the data, the more I found myself unable to establish an end point to the data collection and organize the final project as a book manuscript. Writing journal articles and book chapters for edited collections was easy. However, at the prospect of taking over five hundred pages of transcripts, field notes, and research notes to construct this life story of the maid’s daughter, I have written this book many times over the past decade, and each time I was dissatisfied with the direction and started the task over. Searching for a method, I read dozens of life stories conveying a smooth chronological sequence of events in storytelling. I was frustrated and marveled over an author’s ability to present a neatly constructed story.
Yet I know that a life narrative told over a period of time is never straightforward and is quite messy. In the end, I am glad that it took me almost two and half decades to finish the project because I would not have seen Olivia as a well-respected consultant who had blended the Mexican-immigrant community into her professional life and embraced her lessons as the maid’s daughter, establishing an unbreakable bond with her mother and blending parenting styles in raising her two children. However, to reach this stage of the project has been a long journey.

Early in the project, colleagues urged me to interview the Smith family; but such a project would have required Olivia to submerge herself back into the gated community, and that was the last place she wanted to be. Olivia and I agreed this was also not possible because her mother still worked there when we began the project. We also agreed that the master-mistress story had been told many times over the centuries. Other academics urged me to interview Olivia’s mother and compare and contrast their experiences and interpretation of events. I considered this and decided to attempt it in 1989. Olivia called her mother, and she agreed to be interviewed. The one and only interview I did with Carmen was one of my worst research experiences. At the time, Carmen was in her early sixties. She was shorter and darker than Olivia and extremely energetic. She met us for brunch wearing her work clothes—a tee-shirt, jeans, and expensive walking shoes. She spoke only in Spanish but clearly understood English, since Olivia spoke English when she talked to both of us, and Carmen had absolutely no problem responding back in Spanish.

I began the interview by asking her about her experiences working in the gated community. Each attempt to direct the interview to her relationship with the Smiths and working in Liberty Place quickly elicited an apology for placing Olivia in the employers’ household and having little time to care and raise her. Embedded in the apology were reasons why she thought she had made the best choices in raising Olivia. Her narrative was a familiar and emotional family story that Olivia and she had argued over for many years, and she could only respond to Olivia’s grievances as a child. I ended the interview as soon as I could. I had never intended to make Carmen feel guilty about the difficult choices she made as a mother or to validate Olivia’s grievances. The session was terribly painful. I never attempted to interview her again. When I do see
her at Olivia’s house, we never talk about the project. As uncomfortable as the interview was, the experience made me aware of the painful impact that living at the Smith household had in shaping their mother-daughter relationship. Carmen’s experience as a mother had almost always taken place within the confines of her employers’ household. I recognize that Carmen struggled to interpret the meaning of her employment as a financial necessity and wanting the best for Olivia’s future, but in the end Olivia constructs her own meaning from her standpoint as the maid’s daughter.

I also abandoned the idea of writing a traditional life story written in only Olivia’s voice and becoming as invisible as the faithful recorder. A narrative recorded over decades cannot be written without editing and selecting the transcript to include or delete. I chose to keep my sociological perspective at the forefront of the project and to develop the project around the issues that attracted my sociological interest in pursuing this narrative in the first place. I use my researcher’s voice to analyze Olivia’s stories, and her voice is overwhelmingly present in the many excerpts taken from the transcribed interviews. Thus, the two of us participate in a complex of hermeneutic circles—she interprets, I interpret, and over time the understandings being developed morphed and changed. I made the decisions to use the same formal and informal addresses that Olivia used, which are a reflection of the power dynamics of domestic service. Over the past two decades, I have only heard Olivia refer to Mr. and Mrs. Smith by their first name once. None of the employers or their children referred to Carmen as Ms. Sanchez. When I called Carmen to make arrangements for the interview, I asked to speak to Ms. Sanchez, and after a long pause, I got the following response: “Oh, you mean Carmen.”

In the end I have organized the book around the themes that emerged from stories told over the past decades. Olivia’s being the maid’s daughter as a child is quite different from her adolescent years, and both of those periods differ from her life as a working mother; these periods appear in separate chapters in this book. Her interaction with the Mexican maids employed in the gated community and her visits to Fernando Valley and Pico Union and to Mexico are all outside the presence of employers. Here, Olivia’s status is not so much as the maid’s daughter but as Carmen’s daughter—a single mom who has a steady job, is able to assist
other Mexican immigrants obtain jobs as household workers and landscapers, and is the primary supporter of her family in Mexico.

Olive's Story

As I reflected on the themes emerging from Olivia's narrative, the first interview session began to take on a crucial role in constructing this book. Olivia started with the family story you read earlier; she began with her grandparents and her mother's birth and identified the economic circumstances that initiated Carmen's entry into domestic service. She recounted stories transmitted down as family lore. Later her family stories included reminiscences of events she witnessed and sometimes incorporated details of the circumstances or explanations adopted in the retelling among family members. Rather than examining and researching the accuracy or "truth" of the stories, I treat them as cultural constructions of real individuals, as well as of mythical ancestry. As Olivia was positioned in the Smith household as "one of the family," her family stories are not limited to narratives of lineage and ancestral bloodlines, childhood and adolescent events in Mexico, but include significant events that mark turning points such as migration to the United States and later her journey away from the employers' gated community. Olivia's family stories are interwoven with her experiences growing up as the maid's daughter, particularly the conflict created by the employers' insistence that she assume the role and appropriate behavior of "being one of the family" when called upon. This is evident in many of the monumental events that involve the tenuous ties of fictitious kinship with the Smiths that exposed the economic basis for their relationship and Olivia and her mother's subordinate position.

By analyzing Olivia's family stories of the Smiths and her extended family in Mexico, I foreground the themes that frame Olivia's search for identity and belonging, as well as their significance in highlighting the contradictions in mainstream notions of social mobility and meritocracy. I organized her narrative around these turning points and the circumstances leading up to major family stories that explode the fragile homework boundary and highlight the embedded tensions and contradictions in maintaining the class-based racial and gender social order. I begin with
Olivia’s recollections of entering the world of employers at the age of three and learning the rituals and practices of being the Mexican-immigrant maid’s daughter. To a monolingual Spanish-speaking child raised in a female-dominated, Mexican household in Mexico, the employers’ homes and their English-speaking families in a gated community in Los Angeles were a complete contrast. Her live-in arrangement became more stable when her mother accepted a position with the Smith family. Next, I turn to the contrast that the migrant workers’ world posed for her. This social space includes the physical area within the employers’ gated community but does not include their physical presence. Along with maid’s social gatherings, I examine Olivia’s visits to immigrant families in California and summer trips to her extended family in Mexico. Next, I focus on her adolescent years, which were marked by stories of passing as one of the family, as well as her growing resistance to her employers’ values and norms and her struggle to embrace her Mexican identity. This discussion includes an examination of the consequences of exclusion and inclusion involved in the Smiths’ decisions about when Olivia is to assume her place “as one of the family” and when she is to revert to the appropriate behavior of the maid’s daughter. Here lie the recollections of significant events that threaten to tear the mother-daughter bond. I then analyze the unexpected barriers to Olivia’s moving away from Liberty Place, the challenges of being a first-generation working-class Mexican American with the cultural capital of an upper-middle-class student, and her pursuit of a career. The following chapter moves into her adult life, including her career and family choices. As Carmen gradually moved toward retirement, both mother and daughter developed different relationships with the Smiths and with each other. In the epilogue, I discuss my last visit with Olivia as I prepared to end the project.

Before turning to Olivia’s story, I begin with the question, “If the maid is caring for the employer’s children, who is caring for the maid’s children?” I review the literature on contemporary parenting models, highlighting the ways that inequalities between families are produced at home and rely on the low wages of women. This is followed by my research findings on the impact of domestic service on the maid’s children. Building from this foundation, I discuss the significance of Olivia’s story.