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## The Immigrant Nannies of New York City: An Examination of The Friendships Between Nannies and Mother-Employers

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The Immigrant Nannies of New York City:  
An Examination of The Friendships Between Nannies and Mother-Employers

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022



To my parents, who not only shaped me into the person that I am today but, against all odds,  
gifted me over a decade of private education.

To the children of immigrant care workers, we have much to be proud of.



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## Introduction

### *Mission*

This ethnography focuses on the emotions of the women of color who elaborated on their experiences working for wealthy, white families in ethnographic interviews. This project is interested in the connections formed between nannies and mother-employers with the goal of better understanding the positionalities of female domestic workers of color. Immigrant populations are frequently depicted by news outlets as overworked, underpaid, and poor. When interacting with nannies, I realized that these women did not consider themselves impoverished despite working in a role that is identifiable with servanthood. The labor that nannies perform calls back to a long tradition of women of color acting as servants in the homes of wealthier, white families. The most obvious example would perhaps be the role of black female slaves during the Antebellum period. These black women were forced to care for the white children who would one day grow up to inherit them.

Today, the women of color who nanny for white families are placed in a similar position as many feel that their social and financial circumstances cause them to *have* to nanny. The relationships that exist between these women of color and white, mother-employers are defined by an inherent power imbalance. Nannies and their families have had limited access to the resources abundant to mother-employers and their children and it is no coincidence that the nanny's presence within the mother-employer's home allows the mother-employer to continue securing these assets for herself and her children. At first glance, this power imbalance appears insurmountable yet the nanny is able to gain a position of power within the mother-employer's home by becoming an authoritative figure for her children and, remarkably, even for the

mother-employer herself. This occurs when nannies become emotionally involved in the mother-employer's home. This emotional investment can be noticed in the nanny's continued interest in the well-being of the mother-employer and her family. I have come to understand this bond as the product of nannies spending nearly fifty hours a week in the mother-employer's home as nannies characterized this emotional bond as unexpected. Interestingly enough, some nannies were clear about disliking mother-employers but still recognized that they had an emotional investment within her home as they had grown close with her and with her children.

In my portrayal of nannies and the bonds that they share with mother-employers, I hope to go against the damaging stereotypes that bound these underrepresented workers to their material conditions, denying them autonomy as individuals. By drawing a clear distinction between belonging to an underrepresented group and existing in the world as an individual actor, I hope to go against the misconception that people who lack agency in the government and media also lack agency in their daily lives. The women of color who serve as nannies in downtown Manhattan are categorized as an oppressed group yet gain an exceptional amount of power over mother-employers by being emotionally present within the workplace.

When relationships between mother-employers and nannies turn intimate, meaning that they transform from a strictly transactional exchange into an emotional exchange of personal information, nannies become advisors and confidants. After mother-employers realize that they share a goal in common with nannies, the well-being of the mother-employer's children, nannies and mother-employers begin to make joint decisions regarding the children's daily routines. This results in a free exchange of ideas between nannies and mother-employers regarding how to best care for the children. These topics might include how to discipline the children, what activities the children should be enrolled in, how to properly balance the children's meals, and which

medicines to administer to the children when they fall ill. Nannies even have the final say in some of these matters. After observing the high quality of care that a nanny might provide, the mother-employer can become comfortable taking instruction from her. Nannies take this opportunity to educate mother-employers on how to mother *correctly*. Well-seasoned nannies have practical tips on how to get children to socialize better, reach developmental milestones faster, and better follow the instructions of parents and schoolteachers. Mother-employers come to think of nannies as childcare experts. Within these scenarios, the lines between employer and employee blur as this “co-mothering” approach results in the formation of trust between the two parties. The relationship between nannies and mother-employers transitions from one where nannies and mother-employers must coexist because of the job at hand, to a personal one that warrants the label of friendship.

After any trust is established, mother-employers might have a hard time keeping boundaries as the details of marital, familial, or financial problems become fair game for sharing with nannies. This type of open dialogue does allow for a deeper relationship to blossom between nannies and mother-employers but can also exhaust nannies as they feel obligated to perform an extensive amount of additional and uncompensated emotional labor. These relationships might go awry as mother-employers can grow too dependent on nannies for emotional stability and prove unable to make decisions concerning their children on their own. This leaves the nanny in an awkward position. Some of my interlocutors confessed to becoming so involved in the lives of mother-employers that they worried about them and their children while off the clock or even after leaving the job altogether.

The nanny’s status as a secondary mother makes her a viable partner for mother-employers and an alternative to heavily involving fathers in child-rearing. In a world that

still favors men as financial providers and women as homemakers, it is no surprise that mother-employers sometimes find more common ground with nannies than with their own male partners. Mother-employers might even see the nanny as a more competent caregiver than her male partner. To explain why this occurs, I engage a rich literature on contemporary motherhood, women's work, feminism, and the dual-earner family model.

I consider my decision to classify nanny, mother-employer relationships as friendships, despite the substantial racial and class differences between the two, my most important contribution to the discourse on domestic work. Ideals rooted in American individualism preach a model of friendship where friends who impart amusement and happiness are most desirable. Yet, anyone who has nurtured a close friendship knows how hard maintaining a good rapport may be. Sentiments such as judgment, jealousy, pity, and gossip are typically viewed as enough to break a friendship. Coincidentally, these are the emotions that nannies habitually cast onto mother-employers. In the nanny's case, these emotions are capable of giving way to love and community. For example, when nannies get together and gossip about their employers, they broaden their network; nannies grow closer to one another and also learn practical insights about other employers within the neighborhood. If nannies find themselves in a position where they need to change jobs but want to continue working in the same zone, possessing these insider scoops becomes imperative. Knowing everything about everyone within this circle is an effective way of avoiding the wrong employers, or those which other nannies warn are cruel and exploitative. In this sense, the judgments that nannies impose on their employers when gossiping amongst themselves foster community. I also found that my interlocutors pitied their employers when watching them face domestic ordeals. Nannies might decide to intervene and offer mother-employers care. These are the moments where I have witnessed love blossom, not only

between nannies and the children they keep but between nannies and mother-employers. The importance of analyzing the emotions nannies experience within the mother-employer's home is most obvious when considering that underprivileged groups have historically been denied an emotional landscape and a concrete voice within their own narratives.

Learning to diversify our conception of friendship is beneficial for tearing down outdated notions surrounding class and race which dictate who can interact with who. If we can read the tension that nannies and mother-employers experience within their daily interactions to be the product of dismantling class stratification, we can perceive certain aspects of the relationship as complex instead of inherently negative. Reworking our ideas of what modern friendships look like will help in understanding why mother-employers can maintain such strong connections with their nannies while simultaneously managing to overlook, overwork, and aggravate them. By "strong connections," I mean to signify relationships where both women have clearly shown through action that they care about each other's well-being to some degree. During the holidays, my mother's current employer gave her a gift certificate for a spa in downtown Manhattan. My mother ultimately relinquished the gift to me stressing that she did not feel comfortable going. Still, the employer's gesture showed that she was thinking about my mother's comfort and wellness to a certain degree regardless of whether or not her usual actions as an employer reflected the same concern. Reworking our understanding of friendship is also helpful for grasping that mother-employers are not personally responsible for "oppressing nannies" as there are other axes of power at play. The three which I have identified are race, gender, and status.

*Positionality*

This ethnography finds itself situated within the tradition of “native anthropology.” The term “native ethnography” emerged in Delmos Jones’s 1970 publication “Towards a Native Anthropology.” Delmos, an African American anthropologist, felt that anthropology’s troublesome origins needed to be addressed and that introducing another vantage point within the discipline was necessary for doing so<sup>1</sup>. For Delmos, native anthropology makes the decolonization of anthropology possible as an insider’s perspective offers more accurate information on populations of color. Delmos reasoned that someone who already forms part of the community that he or she will be studying can more easily gain the trust of his or her interlocutors and is less likely to make damaging, wrongful assumptions about his or her own culture<sup>2</sup>. Like the early, racist history of anthropology shows, erroneous opinions made by anthropologists which are presented to an audience as the truth can do significant harm to communities of color. To borrow an example from anthropology’s canonical history, the reputation of Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* was greatly damaged by the insinuation that her description of the sexual practices carried out by Samoan teenagers was a result of lies told to her by Samoans skeptical of her identity<sup>3</sup>. Mead’s work also reinforced notions about the primitiveness of native Samoans that, today, we consider to be problematic and outdated.

Although traditional anthropology has its risks, Delmos does not argue for its elimination<sup>4</sup>. He

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<sup>1</sup> Delmos Jones (1936-99) was an American anthropologist who identified with the socioeconomic and political struggles of his interlocutors. Jones sought out new ways to use anthropology to fight social injustices. He is most remembered for his work on anthropology’s set of ethics.

<sup>2</sup> Delmos Jones, “Towards a Native Anthropology,” *Human Organization* 29, no. 4 (January 1970): pp. 251-259, <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.29.4.717764244331m4qv>.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Mead (1901-78) was an American anthropologist most active in the field during the 1960s and 70s. Her book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which chronicles the practices of Samoan teenagers caused controversy in the field at the time of its publication but is now treated as a canonical work within anthropology.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 252.

instead envisions a world where the two methodologies can exist together. Further, these two methodologies must appear side by side as what might be overlooked by the traditional anthropologist can be corrected by the native anthropologist and vice versa.

I am exceedingly familiar with the world of nannying because I have observed my mother perform this labor since I was nine years old. My private education, the very reason why I now conduct this research, was financed by the care industry. Moreover, it was financed by my mother's presence in various white homes. I am carrying out this project to uncover the effects these experiences have had on her, me, and our relationship. Writing this ethnography has allowed me to explore the intricacy of my identity as a first-generation American attending a predominantly white college. It has caused me to confront the fact that I will probably go on to lead a life more similar to that of my mother's employers, who struggle to juggle children and competitive careers, than to my mother's. This investigation was born out of a need to acknowledge that without my mother's self-sacrifice, I would not have received an education of the same pedigree.

### *Personal History*

I was born on April 25th of the year 2000 to two Dominican immigrants. I was raised in Washington Heights, a Spanish-speaking, working-class neighborhood in New York City. Throughout my childhood, my parents felt an incredible responsibility to ensure that I surpass them in education and status. My parents quickly became involved in the care industry to earn quick and, sometimes, under-the-table money. Since my father held a medical license in the Dominican Republic, he had more career paths to choose from than my mother did. Although his title was not officially recognized in the United States, his medical background allowed him a



career as a health counselor where his primary responsibility was to monitor the health of patients who were unable to manage their conditions alone. He acted as a liaison between clients and doctors, providing translation, scheduling, and in-house visits. His job was more similar to that of a social worker than that of a doctor and this caused him certain frustrations.

My mother was less lucky in the care industry. Her first job as a home help aid mostly consisted of working with elderly patients. Her cases would change unpredictably; this meant becoming accustomed to a new client and a new transportation route every few months. Despite barely earning enough, the families of clients expected other housework services like cooking and cleaning to be provided as well. My mother learned that she liked working with the elderly and took a job at a nursing home in Westchester, New York soon after. The nursing home had wealthy residents and, for the first time, my mother felt she was being paid fairly. She enjoyed the work but the long commute from Washington Heights to Westchester was unbearable. Before nannying, my mother had also attempted maid work. She lasted about a month, calling the work “back-breaking.” She thought it was more reasonable to clean on the weekends for extra money and spent a few years cleaning a taxi dispatcher’s office across the street from our apartment.

My mother discovered that there was serious money to be made in the childcare industry during the summer of 2009. My mother was able to become part of a larger network of Latina nannies that congregated in the neighborhood park. One of these nannies took my mother under her wing and encouraged her to solicit white families who could pay her higher wages than the family members and friends that my mother had been working for at the time. A few weeks later, my mother got her first gig providing shared childcare<sup>5</sup> for two white families.

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<sup>5</sup> A “sharing” is a gig where one nanny takes care of two children from different families during the same weekly shifts. A “sharing” is convenient for parents since the two families can split the cost of childcare.

Nannies experience fairly similar conditions to those characteristic of the other care jobs which my mother tried and disliked. Like maid work, the work which nannies do can also be described as “back-breaking” since nannies have to carry the babies or toddlers whom they care for in their arms or on their backs. Like home help aide work, nannying positions are semi-permanent as nannies can only realistically envision themselves retaining the same position for a period of three years. When children enter school at the age of three, nannies must decide whether they want to continue working for the same family as a part-time nanny or look for a new full-time position. Securing the full three years is also a best-case scenario as some nannies might not have had the opportunity to begin working with a child in his or her infancy. For nannies, ending a job can cause months of unemployment until another arrangement becomes available. Arguably, nannying is just as physical as maid work and just as unpredictable as home help aide work. So, what made nannying the right fit for my mother?

Firstly, my mother defines nannying as instinctive. For her, nannying is not rocket science, it is a matter of channeling maternal energy, instincts, and the knowledge of parenthood that she possesses through being a mother herself. She likes to remind me that “children are always manageable” and that “it is the *parents* who are not.” In other terms, children can be disciplined but getting employers to change their behavior is trickier. Secondly, my mother has found nannying to be most fulfilling as she has established many long-term relationships with the families she has worked for. Thirdly, despite the shortness of contracts, my mother does find freedom in the self-reliant nature of nannying. Unlike other care paths, where workers work under an agency, nannies have the final say over what families and conditions they are willing to work under. Finally, my mother is confident in her ability to care for children and sticks firmly to the methods that she used on me while I was growing up. When the children that she cares for

make cognitive or behavioral improvements, she can feel proud of their achievements. When my mother nannies, she imagines herself extending the same kindness, affection, patience, and discipline that characterized my upbringing to other children.

My childhood was marked by my mother's commitment to instilling a love of learning within me so that I would always strive to excel in school. Subsequently, my mother holds that being skilled at her job means taking an interest in advancing the minds of the children that she cares for. To ensure my success, my mother had to become the mother *she* never had. The mothering I received was largely motivated by our family's financial reality. My parents committed to sustaining my academic endeavors so that I can one day break the cycle of poverty within our family. They also hope that I will be financially successful and repay this gift by helping them retire. The white children that my mother nannies for are able to reap the rewards of her care without experiencing the financial and social barriers that pertain to the experience of being a first-generation American. Unlike in my case, where my mother's "competitive mothering"<sup>6</sup> served as a mechanism for generating a new tradition of education and professional excellence in our family, these children already have the resources that will guarantee them success such as generational wealth.

Despite my mother believing that nannying is the best care job for her, she still emphasizes that her search for a respectable profession in America was doomed from the start. My mother has a complicated relationship with nannying, feeling forced to make the most of the job on account of never having amounted to anything in the professional world. My mother believes that her lack of formal, American education is the reason for which she is working such a "second-rate" job. My mother still dreams of becoming a nurse, something which she first

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<sup>6</sup> "Competitive mothering" is a term offered by sociologist Cameron Lynne MacDonald in *Shadow Mothers*. "Competitive mothering" is an approach to mothering that intends to preserve and reproduce generational and cultural wealth.

attempted in her twenties after earning a GED. My mother dropped out of high school in the 90s but later joined the Job Corps program where she attempted a degree in nursing. Unfortunately, severe depression impeded her from finishing the degree. My mother recognizes that the odds were stacked against her but wishes she had been able to do things differently. She claims that she should have endured the circumstances or fought harder to rise above them. I interpret her self-criticism to be a product of idealism which immigrants commonly fall prey to.

A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018 found that Latinos are more likely to believe in the American dream than other U.S. populations<sup>7</sup>. Even though the Latinos involved in the survey admitted that they did not find the American dream easily attainable, they heavily subscribed to the belief that hard work equals social mobility. Latin American immigrants often presume that the quality of education in America is preferable to that offered in their native countries and assume that an American education means a higher chance of a successful career. One of the most famous lines from the United States' constitution preaches that "all men are created equal" and have a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is no mystery why some immigrants assume that the opportunities in the United States are also "created equal." Even if they recognize that their status as immigrants or non-citizens disallows them this so-called *American* privilege, they continue to believe that hard work can trump this status.

This sentiment is apparent in the way in which my mother describes her trajectory. My mother holds that she did everything wrong when, in fact, she did everything exactly right. My mother harps on the fact that she did not finish high school *traditionally* as she *does* hold the

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Hugo Lopez, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "Latinos Are More Likely to Believe in the American Dream, but Most Say It Is Hard to Achieve," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, July 27, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/11/latinos-are-more-likely-to-believe-in-the-american-dream-but-most-say-it-is-hard-to-achieve/>.

equivalent of a high school diploma (a GED). Her decision to drop out of school was in part motivated by the fact that she felt the education she was receiving to be lacking. She remembers attending an underfunded high school where other students made it difficult to learn. At this point in her life, she was a lonely teenager learning a new language and a new way of life while haunted by a past characterized by material poverty and sexual violence. While I was in elementary school, my mother took it upon herself to attempt and finish her education. She enrolled at our local CUNY where was once again dissatisfied with the quality of the education. She recalls that students and professors alike were uninterested in the material. This, in addition to having a small child to care for, caused my mother to have some doubts about the degree and my mother found herself dropping out again. My mother does not ascribe blame to the institutions that failed her, and instead blames herself.

### *Framing*

I have taken the time to describe the professional journeys that my parents embarked on in their early adulthoods to emphasize that I am a product of the care industry. From an early age, I was taught that I needed to work hard to avoid *this type* of work in the future. Both my parents undertook jobs that they disliked to finance tuition for the private schools that I have attended from pre-k to college. During my elementary school years, there came a time when my parents paid for private school while on food stamps. Why did my parents consider it necessary to sacrifice their desires and comfort to send me to private school? My mother states that she could not, in good conscience, send me to the very New York public schools that had so thoroughly disappointed her in her own education. My parents gave up on the American dream because their financial situation disallowed them the time to pursue their dream professions. My father

abandoned the idea of studying for the medical exams that would have granted him licensure in the U.S. and my mother gave up on going back to school to become a nurse to put food on the table.

Many of the nannies whom I interviewed for this ethnography had been or were in similar situations. Some had dropped out of American high schools due to becoming pregnant and others had attended university in their home countries but found it too difficult to attain American certification. It is not unreasonable to think of nannies as a population that has given up attaining the American dream themselves but hopes that their self-sacrifice, through nannying, will secure the American dream for their children. I further explore this within the section of this project dedicated to analyzing modern notions of childhood rearing in dual-earner families. I consider what occurs when low-income black and brown families undertake a sort of “competitive parenting” approach that proves above their pay grade, a concept which I borrow from Cameron Lynne MacDonald’s *Shadow Mothers*. To take this a step further, I also examine what occurs when white mother-employers expect nannies of color to adopt and carry out their vision of mothering.

### *Accountability*

When I think about why my mother is so hesitant to blame the state for her station, I believe it to be because turning a more critical lens on American democracy calls into question the quality of my future within the country and whether it will be like the future she imagines for me. I sometimes feel that my mother spends so much energy ensuring that I “make it” that she does not take the time to realize what “making it” could mean for someone like me. In an age where diversity counts for businesses, it is difficult to judge the sincerity of employers. There is a

fear among my generation of black and brown students that we will become tomorrow's diversity hires; that we will be thrust into environments where white employees are the norm and only asked our opinions when the company or institution needs to look equitable in the eyes of its consumers. My mother set out to disrupt the cycle of material poverty in our family. She continues to work taxing care roles for two reasons so that I can receive a private collegiate education and will never have to work her job. Receiving a higher education has put a lot of distance between my mother and me.

The way in which I see the world has been highly influenced by the liberal arts education that I have received. My mother and I do not always see eye to eye. She views me as a more radical and liberal woman than herself. My mother does not fully grasp the reality of being American alongside another identity. It is strange to attend a college where many white students are simply born into the financial and familial stability that I have had to envision will be the reward for being hard-working and career-driven. My parents can be dismissive of my experiences as a first-generation American, believing that I have had things handed to me as a result of their hard work. All that I have been expected to do is earn good grades. My parents remind me that they have done and continue to do more than their parents ever did for them and tend to react poorly to any critique of the path that they have put me on. My mother purposely created a gap between herself and me. I now find myself in a place where it is very difficult to relate to my mother as my interests have more to do with a white, academic world than topics that might be more familiar to her. By ensuring I receive an education superior to her own, my mother purposely created space between me and herself so that I would never have to face the harsh realities of her world. This ethnography is a direct rebellion against my mother's claims

that her job as a nanny is not legitimate, interesting, respectable, or intricate. It is also in direct disobedience to my mother's wish that I never become too involved in her world.

### *Blame*

As I do not intend for this project to become an exercise in assigning blame, I hope that readers can find a balance between trusting that the incidents of mistreatment reported by interlocutors are true and granting employers the benefit of the doubt. Lastly, it is imperative that the judgments I recorded be thought of as definitively true simply because they are definitively true for the nannies I encountered. This is their reality and if we are to be conscious of their realities, we must adopt some of their thinking.

This project's subject matter made me consider past and modern feminist perceptions of care work. An article by John R. Bowman and Alyson M. Cole on the subject of the Swedish maid debacle that took place in the mid-1990 was highly influential in formulating my approach. Bowman and Cole notice a gender bias within the Swedish government's decision to deny families tax for maid services. They posit that the Swedish government's decision is a perfect example of how Western have not yet abandoned the idea of "women's work" and act discriminatory toward female-dominated industries<sup>8</sup>. Their point is made stronger by the fact that Sweden already offers tax relief for other service professions such as carpenters, painters, and construction workers<sup>9</sup>. The only difference is that these are male professions. One of the main arguments used by Swedish politicians to oppose the policy was the claim that women who hired maids were perpetuating an outdated, oppressive, and unfeminist model. Bowman and Cole

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<sup>8</sup> Bowman, John R., and Alyson M. Cole. "Do Working Mothers Oppress Other Women? the Swedish 'Maid Debate' and the Welfare State Politics of Gender Equality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 1 (2009): 157–84. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599289>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 163.



counter this argument by instead placing the blame on absent husbands and an unfair labor market that expects women to juggle childcare, housework, and employment<sup>10</sup>.

Bowman and Cole helped me move away from a model where accountability means assigning the roles of perpetrator and victim, especially when I can think of several instances where mother-employers and nannies team up to combat the father's absence. To avoid falling into the "accountability trap," it is helpful to view the nanny and mother-employer relationship as perpetuated by an axis of power that has been removed from its original context and reapplied to these women. A positionality where men get to take their parental responsibilities more lightly and can be less present within the home. Arlie Hochschild's work was also highly influential in the reframing of this narrative. Hochschild's *The Second Shift* was particularly enlightening on this point<sup>11</sup>. I ask my audience to view the stories presented in the following two chapters as existent within a microcosm, the employer's home, and as motivated by gender biases put forth by American society. Quantitatively, nannies might even be performing more co-parenting duties than fathers. While a few nannies I interviewed insisted that fathers played somewhat of a role in their management, the consensus was that fathers did not interact with nannies as much as mothers. They seemed more a part of the background. Is the nanny's presence synonymous with the father's absence?

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

*Sample and Methods*

For this study, I interviewed six Latin American women between the ages of twenty and fifty. All of my interlocutors currently work or have worked in white households. Most of my interlocutors, besides one, have exclusively nannied for heterosexual couples. Three of my interlocutors were first-generation Americans whose mothers had also worked care roles in the US., while the other three were immigrants. Each interview was conducted on zoom in light of covid-19 regulations and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Two of my interlocutors reported having young children in elementary school, while one mentioned providing for her twenty-year-old autistic son. Two of these women are biologically related to me, one being my mother and the other being my cousin.

The other women whom I interviewed are friends of my mother's and were recruited by her for the project. Asking my mother to search for my interlocutors allowed me to gain more prompt access to the nanny community through her network but also actively involved her in the ethnographic process. I felt that she could better discern which nannies were in a position to elaborate on their experiences as some nannies ran the risk of being fired if their employers found out about their involvement. I must disclose that the group of nannies which I interviewed for this project, from what I can discern, were not being repressed by their employers. I mean to recognize that there are nannies within this same network that are repeatedly put in physical, mental, emotional, and legal harm by their employers. Through my mother, I have heard of women who live in the homes of their employers and are more formerly known as their servants. Some of these women are known to be the victims of labor trafficking. I did not seek these women out for many reasons.

Firstly, I am aware that my study is not large enough to gain productive attention for these women. It would only cause them unnecessary risk without providing any type of larger-scale awareness as compensation. Secondly, my project focuses on discouraging people from making universal assumptions about what nanny-ing looks like. I have found that many people are under the impression that these more serious experiences are the norm. Thirdly, I would like to showcase a different perspective where nannies and mother-employers have disputes but do not harbor bad intentions. Finally, working with a subset of nannies that is not in any danger has allowed me to make more liberal claims about the relationship between nannies and mother-employers, going so far as to call them unconventional friendships.

The previously established trust between my mother and the women I interviewed proved indispensable in the beginning stages. In most of my interviews, I could sense that the women were feeding me the answers I wanted to hear. Many were resistant to candidly complaining about their jobs and became apologetic as soon as they began to open up. Later on, my mother became curious about how the interviews had gone. When I relayed the information that I had been told my mother was incredulous about how much had been left out. In particular, a woman named Tracey had repeatedly praised her employers during the interview, saying how fortunate she was to have landed one of the more equitable gigs. My mother's experience of Tracey was the opposite; Tracey had many complaints about the post which she would often tell her about. My mother was shocked to hear that none of these details had come up in my interview with Tracey.

I do not blame my interlocutors for the way they presented their experiences but it proved advantageous to compare and contrast what I had been told to what my mother knew. I would not go as far as to say that my interlocutors were purposefully lying to me. Instead, I

found their hesitation in making certain claims about the treatment they received from employers to be a testament to the large degree of uncertainty present in the field of nannying. Moreover, unless the instances of abuse were clear nannies had a hard time deciding whether something their employers did was appropriate or inappropriate. To provide an example, my mother will ask me to read the texts sent to her by her current mother-employer so that I can determine whether or not they are presumptuous. Since my mother is not a native speaker of English, she is aware that she might register casual language as passive-aggressive or ill-mannered. It is often difficult for nannies to determine what is acceptable because of the cultural gap existent between nannies and employers. Many of my interlocutors admitted to staying in unhappy arrangements because they did not realize what was out of the ordinary. For many women, their saving grace was having found a larger community of nannies who were able to confirm that the conditions of their employment were inexcusable. At the given time of the interview, two of my interlocutors were in between gigs and unsure if they wanted to continue nannying. Both these women felt abused in their former jobs. Three of the six women are mothers and have children that warrant a great deal of attention.

Some of the questions that I posed in the interviews were: Did you study in your home country? If so, what did you study? Would you say that you have to be somewhat educated to be a nanny? When did you begin working as a nanny and why? How did you find your job? How long is your commute? What is your philosophy for taking care of children? What rules would you say you implement? What is your opinion of your employers? Do you feel that your employers do a good job raising their children? How much are you paid hourly? Do you think this is a good rate considering the amount of work you do? Do your employers respect you? Do you feel that your employers treat you as an equal? How would you describe your typical day at

work? What are some challenges you face daily? What experiences do you feel prepared you for this work? What are the best aspects of the job and what are the worst? Would you say that you have a maternal relationship with the children that you care for? Would you say there is a strong sense of community among nannies?

I noticed an important trend in my interlocutors' responses. All of the women claimed that looking after children was the easier and more enjoyable part of the work in comparison to dealing with employers. They explained that creating emotional bonds with the children came naturally to them. When I questioned the nannies about the more difficult parts of the role, I was met with answers that implicated employers and, more often than not, mother-employers specifically. The two issues that continued to come up were employers' demand for additional chores and the impolite treatment that employers extended to nannies. Alongside these complaints, nannies also mentioned feeling that their hard work within their employers' homes typically went unnoticed, unvalued, and unhelped. For instance, many nannies attested to employers treating them like housekeepers. Nannies spoke of being expected to provide extra, uncompensated cleaning despite this not being within their contracts. Nannies felt that their employers' assumption that they were also cleaners was probably motivated by their race and status as Latin American immigrants. They believed that employers had mistaken them for cleaners on account of their being a substantial population of Latin American maids in the states. The nannies that related having to clean up after their employers were also dismayed at how quickly the spaces they had worked so hard to tidy would become dirty again.

*Why This Project is Anthropological*

I find one of anthropology's greatest strengths to be its insistence on analyzing all aspects of complex human relationships no matter how seemingly small. Anthropologists set out to study what might appear as given, familiar, mundane, or insignificant. Anthropologists can show how moments that take place within the microcosm, or in the case of domestic work, the home, are reflections of the societal structures and values existing in the macrocosm. Anthropology thinks critically about why certain values are held in certain cultural contexts and whether or not these values prove universal to mankind, or across certain hemispheres. When anthropology has focused on human connection, it has often set out to delineate the various practices which communities rely on to foster a sense of belonging, family, or community. The study of kinship within anthropology can be traced back to 1871 when American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan published *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*. After spending time with the Seneca people<sup>12</sup>, Morgan discovered that the European way of relating to family was not universally applicable as the Iroquois utilized a kinship system where all-male relatives on a person's father's side were referred to by the term father and all-female relatives on a person's mother's side were referred to by the term mother. Within his book, Morgan was the first to claim that kinship was the predominant social organization within preindustrial societies. Other thinkers like Malinowski<sup>13</sup> and Radcliffe-Brown<sup>14</sup> expanded on Morgan's notion of kinship. Malinowski took the position that kinship was fictively constructed and in opposition to biological notions of genealogy while Radcliffe-Brown defined kinship as a system of dynamic relations between two individuals that is somewhat regulated by society.

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<sup>12</sup> The Seneca people are a part of the Iroquois league.

<sup>13</sup> Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942) was a Polish-British anthropologist.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) was an English anthropologist responsible for the theory of structural functionalism and co-adaptation.

Anthropology has had less of an interest in friendship. Perhaps this is because anthropology's forefathers discussed kinship in relation to biological ties. By defining the relationship between nannies and mother-employers as a distinct friendship, but a friendship nonetheless, I am challenging American ideals about class, race, gender, and hierarchy. This project speaks to intersectional themes about the American dream, the connotations of black and brown women caring for white children, the stigma around women's work, the inequalities produced by the American education system, and my perspective as a child of two care workers.

## **Chapter I: An Examination of the Conditions that Make for Complex Relationships Between Nannies and Mother-Employers**

### *Overview*

This chapter addresses the many conditions that make for complex relationships between nannies and mother-employers. Although this first chapter does not delve into the friendship model in-depth, it focuses on outlining the factors within the nanny's world that trigger the very emotions that push the nanny, mother-employer relationship into the familiar realm of friendship. The circumstances laid out within this chapter are exactly what make these friendships so particular. Within this chapter, I point out the contexts that cause nannies to feel misunderstood and uncomfortable around the mother-employer and within her home. In doing so, the employer's home, or the nanny's worksite, is described at length to flesh out the world in which this relationship lives. I also provide a more comprehensive picture of how transactions are carried out in the nanny's world. I address logistics such as the hiring process, typical salaries and hours, under-the-table arrangements, and the nanny's network. This chapter expands on my interlocutors' own opinions of mother-employer, nanny relationships, and, most importantly, whether or not they would call these relationships *friendships*.



### *Motivations*

The sight of white children accompanied by black and brown women during traditional American business hours is a common sight in Manhattan. I find it hard to look away from these scenes which I regularly witness in parks, subways, and downtown boulevards. They are hard to take in for a few reasons. For one, they remind me of my mother and her long-standing desire to do something other than being a nanny. They also conjure up a problematic history where women of color, specifically black, slave women, were forced to care for white children. My choice to classify the relationships between nannies and mother-employers as unlikely friendships is not ignorant of this history. This context is impossible to ignore, especially when confronted with the fact that so many women of color continue to feel forced into undertaking domestic work by their material and financial needs. We have learned to think of these women as brave and resilient on account of them sacrificing their own comfort for the benefit of their families. Yet, these labels are equally constraining as they dictate that brown and black women must neglect themselves to appear as good mothers in the eyes of society.

As a brown woman about to embark on her own professional journey, it felt crucial to question why brown and black women have to go to such extremes for their children to rise above their family's collective circumstances. I could not help but wonder why my mother was expected to go *so* far in abandoning her dreams, hopes, and ambitions so that I could have a chance at success in America. Many of the nannies of color I encountered admitted that their need to provide for their families is the main reason why they nanny. As I have shown through my mother's frustrations with the American education system, American society continuously fails immigrant women and their children. Many of these children are in fact natural-born-citizens, like me.

When I was old enough to become aware of our financial situation, I asked my mother why I needed to continue to attend a private school. At the time, we all shared a bedroom and I thought it might be more practical to allocate the money spent towards my private education to renting a larger apartment. My mother explained to me that the public schools in our area were no place for me as they are kept underfunded to make people who look like us fail. She asked me to imagine what an America where everyone could access a “good,” or Western, collegiate, education would look like. She quickly added that no one in America would willingly take on service roles like picking trash off the street or trimming the grass in public parks. She pointed out that if the government did not strategically keep certain people at the bottom of the heap then the country would not run successfully.

### *Relevance*

Rethinking the relationship between nannies and mother-employers is imperative as continuing to buy into a model where the mother-employer is perceived to be the oppressor and the nanny is perceived as oppressed harms the public perception of the black and brown women who work service roles in our contemporary America. Although the information that will be presented in this study chronicles instances where nannies felt mistreated or felt inferior to their white employers, I did not find it helpful to define nannies as an oppressed group within my own vocabulary. The determining factor in this decision is that I know my mother to be a strong-willed individual who never fails to set boundaries with employers. Whether it be an issue with the employer’s tone or the expectation of free housekeeping, my mother is always prompt in reminding her employers that if they want her as their nanny they need to be respectful of her and her time. Appearing as oppressed in our contemporary society comes with the public’s

expectation that you are suffering, under abuse, or poor. I got a strong sense that the women I interviewed did not consider themselves any of the above. Even if they held that they should be paid higher wages or be treated more equitably in their places of work, they did not consider themselves desperate for money. Many of these women would even hit the nearby shops after work. My mother, who complains about earnings regularly, turned down half of a Christmas bonus this past year. The mother-employer had set apart \$1,400 to thank my mother for all the work she had done with her two boys. My mother accepted only half, insisting that she had no use for such a large sum. These are not the actions of someone who perceives herself to be oppressed.

I am willing to accept that nannies have been denied certain opportunities and, in turn, have less mobility within our society. Similarly, I am willing to accept that there are financial and social limitations to a nanny's freedom since our society does not offer them the lucrative opportunities awarded to Westerners who are "learned." Yet, nannies do experience freedom in their personal lives. I intend to focus on the various ways in which nannies gain power over their employers through their emotional presence within the employer's home. This emotional presence takes many shapes and forms. It might be most discernible in the clear expression of certain emotions like frustration, love, pity, envy, and judgment that nannies exhibit within the workplace. It might also be notable in situations where nannies help mother-employers to solve some of the problems within their household by looking after them in a friendly way. Nannies who share emotional bonds with mother-employers might do a fair amount of caring for them through the sharing of advice, home-cooked meals, or offering to run their errands all free of charge. The lines between what is contractual and what is complementary blur. This might come at the nanny's expense as she may begin to feel too involved in the mother-employer's household

as providing frequent comfort to mother-employers can become emotionally exhausting for nannies. This is especially taxing when nannies discern that the problems that their mother-employers experience are not as severe since they can be easily solved by her wealth. In my second chapter, I expand on how the aforementioned sentiments serve as substantial proof of the nanny's friendship with their mother-employers.

### *The Friendship Model*

The friendship model is one where the social and class differences between nannies and mother-employers are understood to be the true reasons for the relationship's complexity. The supposition of there existing any underlying bad faith on the side of either party is avoided. The friendship model does not intend to sugarcoat how difficult navigating this relationship is for both women. It is no secret that these women come from vastly different backgrounds and, as a result, tend to overlook the needs of one another. Nannies hold that mother-employers take and take without reciprocation as nannies can easily end up caring for the entire family and not just the mother-employer's children. I will provide concrete examples of this trend shortly. For now, we must comprehend that the friendship model's value lies in its power to force us to consider the uglier aspects of this relationship without letting these details overshadow the emotional complexity of the situation. In such a manner, the traditional American conception of friendship is challenged.

Namely, the idea that friends need to enjoy each other's company all the time to *actually* be friends is challenged. The idea that friendship is consensual is also challenged as nannying is not the only form of work that requires people to get along with their employers and co-workers regardless of personal feelings. Finally, the friendship model uniquely approaches the question of

accountability, defending the validity of the relationship between nannies and mother-employers while going against the notion that mother-employers are women who participate in an “outdated and unfeminist” tradition of “forcing” underprivileged women into servitude. Instead, the friendship model acknowledges the rich exchange of notions and stories that naturally arises as nannies and mother-employers spend time in proximity. It finds great value within this dialogue as these women would not be likely to have access to each other in the real world, or outside of the mother-employer’s home. Relationships between nannies and mother-employers are trans-social and violate a Western hierarchical structure that usually prevents white, upper-class women, and working-class women of color from crossing paths in quotidian settings. The notion that women hurt women is a patriarchal cop-out. The friendship model forces us to have to spend the same amount of time that we do talking about inequality as a society, discussing “the windows of equality” that arise within the mother-employer, nanny relationship. These are instances where nannies and mother-employers converse freely and enjoy each other’s company even if only for a moment. These glimpses of friendship matter as they embody a spirit of feminist and maternal solidarity.

### *The Move Downtown*

Among Latina nannies, listings downtown are synonymous with white, wealthy employers who do not always pay fair wages but are certainly in a position to. Up until 2018, my mother preferred to work in Fort Tryon, a predominantly white neighborhood in Washington Heights located about twenty minutes away from our apartment. My mother has fond memories of the two boys she looked after in Fort Tryon, recalling that their playful misbehavior always managed to put a smile on her face. Still, my mother is confident in claiming that this position

has been her best to date not solely because of the children's demeanors but because the employers proved respectful and appreciative of the time and effort that went into caring for their children. From my mother's point of view, this recognition and gratitude manifested through the employers' respect for her boundaries. These employers were especially adept at sticking to the terms of my mother's contract which stated that her duties within their home only revolved around their children's needs and not their own. These employers also refrained from disclosing any more personal information than necessary for performing the job. Before working downtown, my mother had already worked for white families; therefore, the real curve was learning to work with *wealthy*, white families.

The critiques I heard most often about white, wealthy, downtown employers from nannies were that these employers lacked tact in the manner in which they treated nannies within their homes and unapologetically continued to confuse nannies with housekeepers. The universal understanding among nannies is that their work responsibilities should only line up with the needs of the children. Charges such as organizing the children's rooms, cleaning up after children, washing the children's clothes, and cooking for the children are within the realm of what is normal. What was unacceptable for nannies was when employers did not refrain from keeping their chores apart from their children's. Then again, some nannies willingly take on this double role within the employers' household for more money. These nannies simultaneously exist as a family's nanny and housekeeper and come into said family's household with that in mind. Opposingly, the nannies that I interviewed had only agreed to join the household as nannies and were surprised to find that their employers expected free maintenance.

### *Racialization*

The nannies that I spoke to drew a parallel between appearing as Latin American women in American society and their employers' wrongful assumption that their presence within their home as caretakers equated to free cleaning services for the entire family. How racialization has historically worked against communities of color supports their claim. The concept of racialization posits that race is socially constructed. Racialization occurs when a dominant group imposes a certain identity onto another to gain power over the said group. A racial identity emerges when what the group in power has said to be true becomes accepted by mainstream society over time. The "truths" set forth by the dominant group might have little to do with the actual identity of the people targeted but still, come to define them as a race. Racialization is behind many of the harmful stereotypes that nannies of color encounter within the white, mother-employer's home.

Within the United States, people of Latin American descent are heavily associated with the service industry. The Department of Labor states that the occupations with the highest concentrations of Hispanic workers, in order of popularity, are farming, fishing, forestry, building and grounds, cleaning and maintenance, construction and extraction, food preparation and serving, and transportation and material moving. Nannies inferred that their employers mistook them for housekeepers because of the many Latin American women working this exact role in today's America. They sensed that their employers' confusion was a product of the stereotype that Latin American women are inherently service workers or housekeepers.

Nannies recognized scenarios where mother-employers were noticeably skeptical of their character due to stereotypes that portray Latin American women as overbearing, overly strict in their childrearing, uneducated, or incapable of raising *Western* children. My mother disclosed

instances where a mother-employer repeatedly policed her language during the first few months of her employment. This appeared somewhat ridiculous as the mother-employer did not speak any Spanish but was adamant in making sure my mother was using correct terminology around her children instead of an improper dialect. My mother recalls the mother-employer interrupting her while she was bathing one of the children to ask if she was using the right names to refer to the child's body parts. My mother stressed that she did understand the mother-employer's concern as allowing a stranger access to your home and children can be a stressor for parents but she also recognized that this would not have been happening to her were it not for her status as a Latina nanny. My mother quickly reassured the mother-employer that she was aware of the value of teaching children to refer to their body parts with the correct phrasing as she had done an extensive amount of research on how to raise a child when she became pregnant with me in her late 20s. Within these preliminary months, the mother-employer went so far as to memorize a few of the phrases that my mother was using around the children and bring them to her Spanish-speaking doorman to verify their appropriateness. Much of my mother's job as a nanny is to prove herself to white women who constantly worry that their children are not going to be the very best in the room. This might seem silly as nannies predominantly work with babies and toddlers but my mother stresses that the mother-employer's state is one of constant worry.

My mother also disclosed that, during hiring interviews, some white parents stressed that they did not want her to act *too* authoritarian with their children. The topic of feeding has come up a few times when employers broach this topic. Some employers surmise that ethnic nannies force children to finish everything on their plates. Whether employers observed this behavior from their former nannies or were drawing from stereotypes that tarnish the importance placed on food and nutrition within certain ethnicities is unclear to me. Regardless of intention, these



episodes chronicle clear microaggressions seeing that these concerns are rooted in the assumption that all Latin American women have a skewed understanding of what is appropriate to subject children to. Further, this sentiment conveys that there are inappropriate and ineffective aspects of ethnic mothering that should be filtered or dialed back for the benefit and social advancement of white children.

### *Hover-Moms*

In *Shadow Mothers*, Cameron Lynne MacDonald defines modern motherhood as a combination of the memories women possess of their own mothers and a recently established genre of parenting self-help books.<sup>15</sup> MacDonald nicknames the women who fall prey to the popularized myth that a child's early years are crucial for his or her development "book moms." This literature insists that children are negatively influenced by being away from their mothers for long periods and that this neglect is irreversible. MacDonald clarifies that these "facts" are merely a marketing strategy for selling materials that are said to be beneficial for children's development.<sup>16</sup> MacDonald critiques the "U.S.'s long-standing emphasis on individualism" that assigns each family, and specifically women, the task of equipping children with certain "economic, social, and cultural" resources that will allow them to create and, or further wealth and status.<sup>17</sup>

MacDonald is right in pointing out that, nowadays, raising a child has been made to seem an intimate matter whilst statistics show that the number of stay-at-home parents has been

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<sup>15</sup> Cameron Lynne Macdonald, *Shadow Mothers: Nannies, AU Pairs, and the Micropolitics of Mothering* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 19.

continually decreasing since the 90s. In reality, child-rearing has become more and more of a public affair as summer camps, after-school programs, and nannies now fill the gap which parents leave behind on their way to work each morning. Moreover, just as MacDonald posits, differing parties like teachers, extended family members, politicians, and psychologists all seem to have increasing tips, tricks, and opinions about how children *ought* to be raised. MacDonald is also correct in identifying this as predominantly a women's issue as the image of the beaming mom who has never been better all while juggling marriage, motherhood, and work produces feelings of guilt and failure in young mothers.

MacDonald offers an important critique of modern childcare as working women are aware that they have no choice but to leave their children in the care of other women if they want to have flourishing careers but still struggle to accept this as a normal form of parenthood. Mother-employers have come to view the nanny as an extension of themselves to regain a sense of control over the domestic sphere. The act of hovering over or over-instructing the nanny on how things should be done properly comes from a place of deep insecurity regarding the significant amount of time mother-employers spend away from their children during the workweek. MacDonald reminds us that the reproduction of social class and capital is a task that has historically been left to women<sup>18</sup>. MacDonald offers up sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus to illustrate how social capital can be cultivated and passed on. Bourdieu's theory of habitus sets forth that the degree of cultural cultivation one possesses is a form of capital. This capital belongs to single individuals and can facilitate one's access to resources like wealth and privilege. This type of cultural capital can help one get far in life as it is a form of power that can be exerted on others. MacDonald relates habitus to the pressure that modern parents now face

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 26.

to recognize the gifts and talents of their young children and enroll them in hobbies accordingly. This cultural training is an attempt to make children “perfect” and have them excel above their peers<sup>19</sup>. Mother-employers are most pleased by nannies who back their interest in having their children become excellent.

Just as mother-employers are affected by false rhetoric that dictates that they are inadequate mothers on account of the time they spend at work away from their children, nannies are affected by the popular myth that “women’s work” is not intellectually stimulating or challenging as it comes from a “natural” or “instinctual” place and is motivated by spousal and maternal love. The nannies whom I conversed with knew better than anyone how mentally and physically taxing nannying can be but were still the victims of this mentality. These nannies claimed that nannying was an easy undertaking since they were “simply” capitalizing on what they had learned about motherhood when raising their own children and re-using these basics on other people’s children.

I deeply disagree with my interlocutors on this point as the years that I have spent observing my mother perform this role have led me to conclude that caring for other people’s children is not as simple as caring for your own. For nannying to prove beneficial in children’s development, mother-employers and nannies need to learn to work together with the common goal of doing what is best for the children. If a child is restless, mother-employers and nannies might discuss how to give the child more opportunities during the day for play or exercise. If a child is prone to accidents, mother-employers and nannies might try and get serious about enforcing rules for potty training. Admittedly, my mother can become frustrated when she deems that mother-employers are failing to do what is best for their children. This is certainly one of the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 26.

risks of becoming emotionally involved in the work. To better understand how nannies are implicated in the lives of their employers, it will be beneficial to first discuss the details of the nanny's employment.

### *Logistics*

The nannies I interviewed are all self-employed, meaning that they are not involved with an agency or workers' union. Instead of being assigned to cases by an agency, these nannies find work opportunities independently online. Nannies post their advertisements on websites that specialize in matching childcare providers and parents. During this process, nannies have no choice but to heavily rely on mother-employers as some sites only allow for mother-employers to make the listings. I speculate that sites adhere to this rule as they believe mother-employers to be best capable of policing their platforms with the reasoning that mother-employers would never list or speak highly of someone who put their child in danger. Certain sites cater to specific communities and often pay attention to the varying degrees of wealth belonging to potential employers. For instance, my mother was matched to a previous employer through a website for Jewish families.

During the job search, nannies might be selective about who they want to work for. In a best-case scenario, nannies that have received multiple offers will interview with the different families and then decide on the best fit for them. Nannies who work downtown have a clear preference for white, wealthy employers since they assume these employers will pay more for childcare. Yet, nannies might have reservations about what degree of wealth they want to encounter. Uber wealthy employers are understood to be more demanding of a nanny's time. They prefer live-in nannies who are available around the clock and free for international and

domestic travel plans. The aforementioned websites play a key role in the nanny's search for her "happy medium." Nannies try to be as amiable as possible when leaving an arrangement as they heavily rely on ex-mother-employers for help when seeking new employment. Even though nannies change jobs every three years or so, they will have less to worry about if they are well-liked by their ex-mother-employers. The nanny is able to create stability through maintaining stable relationships with people from the community in which she works.

When attempting to find a compatible employer or, in the case of the mother-employer, a compatible nanny, both women rely on their connections to ensure that they end up in positive situations. Even within a large borough like Manhattan, the nanny's world appears like a bubble. Because nannies congregate at specific locations like parks, sports lessons, libraries, and the children's schools, nannies become familiar with the employers, children, and fellow nannies that also visit those spaces habitually. Mother-employers are aware of this immersion and can utilize their nannies as an extra set of eyes and ears. Transitioning from one nanny to another is known to be a stressful time for mother-employers. Some of my interlocutors expressed feeling responsible for "walking out" on their ex-mother-employers even though they knew that leaving was the best thing for them. If the mother-employer has a trusting relationship with her previous nanny, she can ask her former nanny what she thinks of the nannies who are to be her replacement. The nanny might go out of her way to refer some of her friends who nanny to the employer and the employer could return the favor by referring the nanny to any of her friends that need a nanny.

When parents are interested in a nanny, they will contact her and set up a time to talk. The nanny is immediately immersed in the employers' space as the interview takes place within their home. The nanny is shown around and the job's responsibilities are described to her. The

questions asked within the interview pertain to the nanny's degree of expertise and her approach to care. While an older, more experienced nanny is certainly more desirable, first-time nannies can capitalize on their own experiences with motherhood when dealing with the question of experience. All of the nannies that I spoke to were mothers and admitted to drawing on their own experiences with motherhood when nannying.

The hardest topic to approach during the interview is probably discipline. During the interview, my mother makes an effort to describe to her employers how she intends to discipline their children. She asks that they allow her to put their children in time-outs if they refuse to listen to her instructions. If my mother perceives employers to be hesitant about her disciplining their children, she might reconsider the offer altogether. My mother insists that she will not be able to do her job correctly if the parents do not permit her to discipline their children as she sees fit. My mother has told me that working with a child that does not listen to instructions and whose parents do not allow nannies to introduce them to certain rules can become a liability for nannies. When bringing children outside in a busy city, they must learn to follow the nanny's lead as if they wander out too far on their own they might easily find themselves in harm's way. Many of my interlocutors thought of their white employers as too lenient with their children and were frustrated to find the children falling back into old habits after spending a weekend or taking a vacation with only their parents. Nannies felt discouraged to see their hard work coming undone because of the employers' lack of cooperation.

In many cases, the discussion regarding the employment's logistics, or what the nanny is to do within the home, serves as the "contract." A written contract is never drawn up and nannies must recall the employer's verbal agreement to know their rights within the workplace. Within my interviews, my interlocutors continued to call these verbal agreements "contracts."

When I asked if a physical contract existed, those who could not refer to any physical copy of the agreement changed their phrasing from “contract” to “what was said in the interview.”

Discussions regarding a breach of contract were most relevant when nannies spoke of feeling taken advantage of in regards to being asked to do the family’s chores.

### *The Obligation to Do More*

Nannies communicated feeling coaxed into cleaning the homes of their employers. They specified that employers made zero effort to clean up the messes they had made during the weekends. On Monday mornings, nannies would come back to work to find messy conditions that impeded them from doing their jobs correctly. If the employers had left piles of laundry or dirty dishes out, it would be incredibly difficult to try and pick out the articles that only the children had sullied. To save themselves the hassle, nannies reverted to cleaning the entire mess. Nannies interpreted these actions from employers as clear signs that they were demanding complimentary housekeeping. Although some employers never verbally ordered nannies to complete these chores, nannies held that their actions spoke louder than words. Some nannies did try and abstain from picking up their employers’ slack but realized that if *they* did not get around to cleaning, *no one* would. Nannies added that these messes were enough to ruin their overall mood. On days where things were out of place, the employers’ home was harder to navigate, more uncomfortable to spend the day in, and the children proved more frenzied and prone to distraction. Just as nannies felt that their employers were uncompromising about disciplining their children, nannies found that employers could be uncooperative on this front as well. These families trusted that nannies would quite literally alleviate their loads. Some of my interlocutors talked about how paranoid this treatment from employers made them. They did not want to

comply but felt that speaking up could put their jobs in jeopardy. Those who reminded employers that cleaning was not a part of their job did not notice much of a change in their employers' behavior. Because I did not engage with employers, I cannot speak to their point of view on the situation but it could very well be that employers have trouble realizing that their homes are places of work for nannies and should be kept up with to accommodate them.

My interlocutors were the most vocal about this topic in particular. Two of my interlocutors were actually in between jobs at the time of our interviews because they had left their previous jobs after feeling physically exploited by employers and their many cleaning-related tasks. Still, many admitted that they did not generally mind taking on the extra tasks under certain circumstances. I found that my interlocutors were happy to do some light cleaning as long as employers showed them an appreciation for their work. A simple thank you went a long way but what was considered even better was when employers maintained the cleanliness of the spaces that nannies had made proper. The nannies for whom cleaning had become a sore subject later blamed themselves for having taken the initiative to clean in the first place. They came to understand that their efforts to impress employers had backfired when these complementary tasks became mandated. It took me a while to uncover why nannies were willingly taking on these responsibilities. Many of my interlocutors complained at length about the very employers they were actively going out of their way to assist by picking up around their homes. My mother is actually among this group of nannies. It was not until my mother listed her justifications for implementing light cleaning that things began to click.

Taking charge of the order of certain spaces has helped my mother to feel more at ease within her employers' home. Knowing exactly where the items that she needs to access every day for facilitating the children's care is a massive relief. For instance, doing something like



voluntarily putting the groceries away for her employers *does* help her in the long run. Being in control of an employer's refrigerator layout does not seem like a remarkable feat but does become convenient when my mother is meal prepping for the children as she will know exactly which ingredients are available to her and where to find them. My mother also stated that she viewed light cleaning as integral to her role as a nanny since she felt responsible for the upkeep of the home while employers were away. Even though she did not sign on to be a housekeeper, she understood what it was like to be a working parent and knew how cathartic it felt to arrive home to a pristine and comfortable home after a long day at work. Through this attentiveness to the ongoing events in her employers' lives, my mother demonstrates a high level of emotional intelligence. She can notice a change in her employer's physique, such as a loss of weight or dark circles, or attitude, and take it as a sign that she should do more to facilitate their comfort regardless of whether she likes them as people or not. This is a concrete example of how nannies are able to put aside their personal feelings and relate to employers under the universal understanding of what it means to parents. Despite a difference in race and class, I found that nannies and mother-employers related the most on this front.

## **Chapter II: The Women Behind The Terms “Nanny” and “Mother-Employer”**

### *Overview*

This section is an intentional break within this ethnography. It presents a less filtered version of the stories that my interlocutors recounted. I found this to be an effective way to decolonize the material, or tone down the presence of academic jargon, even if only within a section. The placement of this material in the middle of this ethnography is strategic as the first chapter equips readers with a working knowledge of the nanny’s opinions and the general world and the second presents the emotional landscape of nannies. This chapter includes the moments that shaped the friendship model.

I found that presenting these stories in a fuller context allowed me to grant more agency to my interlocutors as I attempted to tone down my analysis within this section to make my voice appear secondary to their own. This is not something that I always have the privilege of doing as my place as an anthropologist requires me to make my own contributions. It is also beneficial to note that the women who I flesh out within this chapter are recurring characters in the final chapter. I found that there was no better way to illustrate the high level of involvement, advice, labor, and emotional support that nannies bring to the mother-employer’s home than to lay it all out on the following pages.

*Ivy*

Ivy is a forty-two-year-old Dominican-American born and raised in New York City. Ivy left school in the 11th grade but insists that the only form of education necessary for nannying is motherhood. Ivy has two adult children in their twenties. As a young woman, Ivy grew up participating in a form of black and brown mothering that is community-based. Because some black and brown women do not have the financial resources to pay a nanny or a sitter, they might enlist the help of a neighbor. Black and brown mothers usually seek out other mothers within their community whom they feel comfortable trusting with their children. These women might also take turns watching each other's children. Ivy recalls discovering her love for children while watching her children in her neighborhood while their parents were working.

Ivy said that, initially, she had been interested in nannying after having too much idle time spent lounging around at home. When I spoke with Ivy, she had quit nannying altogether. Her final experience had been nothing short of a nightmare. This chapter of her life had ended with her employers firing her for having taken "too many days off from work" due to her having contracted COVID-19. Ivy's employers had used a written contract that stated that she only had ten sick days against her. Ivy recalls that the mother-employer treated her as if she did not have her own life or her own family. She wanted Ivy there all the time. Within this particular household, Ivy nannied for four children. Ivy worked part-time, from two pm to six pm, and made twenty-five dollars an hour. The fair wage for working a part-time job with four children is between thirty-five and forty dollars an hour. When I asked Ivy if she felt treated as an equal by these employers, she did not hesitate to respond with no.

Ivy was treated as a housekeeper. Under her contract, she was only supposed to provide care and meals for the youngest two children, instead of the entire four. Ivy stated that her

employers had no respect for her and that this was conveyed through their habits. Ivy's Monday mornings were plagued with six to seven loads of laundry that had been left over the weekend for her to fold. The kitchen would also be left in disarray. Ivy never confronted her employers about their behavior. Ivy complained that the mother-employer, an OBGYN, had been rude to her on multiple occasions. Ivy spoke of instances where she would ask to be shown how to do things around the house like work certain appliances and the mother-employer would respond with "figure it out."

Despite the situation with the employers, Ivy spoke well of the children who she described as well-behaved. Since my conversation with Ivy had mostly been about this negative experience, I asked her if she could elaborate on any positive experiences within the field. Ivy lit up and began to tell me about the decade she had spent working for two gay men. Ivy began the job when their daughter was five years old and would continue to work for them until their daughter turned fifteen. Ivy said that the relationship she established with these employers during ten years was one filled with love and familial care. She had been moved by her employers' decision to keep her on even after their daughter had outgrown the need for a nanny. Her role changed to housekeeper but her employers continued to pay her fairly and treat her well. Ivy had worked for this family up until the pandemic caused them to relocate. These employers paid Ivy's salary for the entire year that she spent in quarantine. These employers still maintain a friendly relationship with Ivy. They text her to check in with her about her needs and encourage their daughter to continue seeing Ivy.

*Lulu*

Lulu is a twenty-five-year-old nanny native of New Jersey. She is of Mexican and Ecuadorian descent. Lulu's formal education ended by the time Lulu reached the 11th grade after she became pregnant with her son. Lulu felt that not finishing school had caused her to have to nanny. The first job that Lulu held as a nanny was first offered to her mother, a housekeeper working in various parts of the city. Lulu's mother had passed on the job to Lulu thinking she would be a better fit since her experience as a young woman raising a child in elementary school would be more relevant to the position. Lulu did not have anything negative to say about this first job as it was short-lived. This first family kindly acted as a reference for Lulu's next job, where she would spend the next four years.

The job, located on 5th avenue and 19th, was an hour and forty minutes away from Lulu's home. Lucy, the mother-employer, was a freelance artist while her husband, Spencer, worked in business. Lulu signed on when their eldest son was only two months old. The eldest boy was never an issue for Lulu. She described him as well behaved and attentive to her instruction. Lulu was delighted to see that Lucy made efforts to foster a healthy relationship between Lulu and her son, noticing that she would often tell him that he needed to respect Lulu as if she was his "second mother."

During her employment, Lulu failed to make certain requests that nannies typically make to assuage the cost of commuting to and from the employer's home. Lulu regretted not having requested a paid MetroCard from her employer as, at the time, she did not know this was the norm among nannies. Lulu also did not realize that some nannies even expected dinner and an Uber ride back home to be included on nights when they had to stay late at the employer's home. As a general rule, Lulu's mother-employer did allow her to "take anything she wanted from the

fridge.” Lulu still felt that having a customized meal would have been preferential. Lulu worked for fifty hours a week within Lucy’s home. After the birth of Lucy’s second child, Lulu’s salary was only increased from \$16.50 an hour to \$18.50. My interlocutors informed me that the standard hourly rate for one child should be twenty-three to twenty-five dollars an hour. They admitted that it was hard to have employers honor this amount and instead paid anywhere from eighteen to twenty dollars an hour. Nannies held that the rate for two children should be anywhere from thirty to thirty-five dollars. Then again, employers would try to offer twenty-five dollars an hour.

Lulu felt a significant shift in her relationship with Lucy after the birth of Lucy’s second child. She had had a high opinion of Lucy up until this point. Lulu reminisced about how Lucy would treat her to breakfasts and lunches within her home and made the time to chat with Lulu about her day. The relationship was pleasant and fun. The issues that ultimately caused Lulu to quit on Lucy began within what Lulu described as an “in-between” period where Lulu’s typical responsibilities within Lucy’s home reached stagnation. While awaiting the birth of Lucy’s second child, Lulu recalls that there was little to be done within Lucy’s home. The eldest boy spent most of the day in school and Lulu only had to drop him off and pick him up. The hours from 8 am to 3 pm were slow for Lulu. Lulu felt uncomfortable accepting pay for these hours when she did nothing more than lounge around. Lulu did not want her employers to get the wrong impression about her work ethic so she began assisting Lucy in her domestic chores.

Lulu was attentive enough to infer that there were certain tasks that Lucy could not do given her state. While Lucy’s pregnancy ran its course, Lulu ran her errands and did her cleaning. When Lucy’s second child was born, Lulu stopped doing these things, shifting her focus back to caring for the children. What Lulu found was that she was being asked to care for

the eldest boy in addition to a newborn while continuing to do Lucy's errands and cleaning. Lulu's anger was only made worse by the fact that Lucy had failed to give her a substantial raise. Lulu told me that she spent too much time trying to make things right with Lucy because she had grown to love Lucy and her children. The treatment Lucy was giving her did not seem right given that they had spent so much quality time together. Lulu had a hard time realizing that things were not in her head but that she was being mistreated. Before calling it quits, Lulu had several talks with Lucy in an attempt to redraw boundaries. She would remind Lucy that her job was *childcare*, not *housekeeping*. Lucy would nod her head in agreement and change her pattern for a week or two. To Lulu's dismay, Lucy's change felt more performative than genuine as, after some time, chores and errands would reappear on the to-do lists that Lucy drew up for Lulu.

Another stressor for Lulu was Lucy's private communication with her eldest son. Lulu was experiencing more frequent pushback from the eldest boy. When Lulu instructed him to do everyday things like eat his vegetables or comply with her when getting dressed and ready for school, the boy would regurgitate Lucy's private sayings. He would tell Lulu "no" on account of his mother telling him that "he was his own person" and that "no one could force him to do something that he did not want to do." Lulu claimed that this made caring for the child impossible and was also an insult to her capabilities as a nanny. If Lucy had an issue with how Lulu was managing her son's care, it was Lucy's responsibility to communicate her grievances directly to Lulu. Bringing up these concerns to her toddler, undermined Lulu's authority in his eyes. Lulu is not the first nanny that I have heard complaints about the things that parents tell their children in private that can interfere with their work. These actions speak negatively of employers in the eyes of nannies. They reinforce the employer's privileged positions by reiterating that the nanny's care is a commodity and thus secondary to their own. This can

interrupt blossoming connections between nannies and mother-employers as actions like these on the part of mother-employers remind nannies of “their place.” Lulu stressed that she sometimes felt equal to Lucy but other times did not. Lulu maintained that Lucy did sometimes make an effort to accommodate her within her home. Lulu mentioned how Lucy would ask her for a personal grocery list so that Lulu could have a few things to eat while at work. Lulu could not reconcile this side of Lucy with the side that blindly ordered her around.

### *Lucy*

Lucy has earned herself quite a reputation among the cohort of 5th avenue nannies that Lulu belonged to. Lulu’s complaints reached several ears, and when it was time for Lucy to hire a new nanny, many of these nannies did not want to step forward. Lucy handled Lulu’s resignation like a bad breakup. My mother told me that after Lulu quit, Lucy hounded her with texts and phone calls asking her to come back. Lucy would get on the phone with Lulu while in tears, practically begging her to come back. Lucy would tell Lulu that she did not know what had gone wrong between them and that Lulu was family. Lulu was not pleased with Lucy’s failure to take responsibility for the fact that her actions caused Lulu to feel uncomfortable working for her. Lucy’s anxiety was on display for everyone to see. Lucy was terrified of ending up with a nanny that did not embrace the vision of perfectibility that she imposed on her children. The nannies viewed Lucy’s desperation to have Lulu back as “hysterical,” “unhinged,” and “crazy.”

Ironically, my mother very hesitantly stepped in to care for Lucy’s children. My mother had been equally put off by Lucy’s cautionary tale but had recently lost her job to her ex-employers relocating. My mother offered Lucy temporary services. Because they were both in a tough situation, my mother figured that working for Lucy would allow her to make some



money while searching for another job and would allow for Lucy to have immediate childcare while continuing her search for another nanny. Now a year later, my mother states that she has learned to work with Lucy and around her ticks. There are moments when my mother has felt that Lucy's demeanor does encourage her to find another arrangement, but, despite these claims, my mother stays in Lucy's home.

Lucy is the first employer that has not allowed my mother to dress the children for school. Lucy prides herself on being a fashion expert and understands that clothes can say a lot about someone. My mother does not allow my mother to dress her children because she wants to make sure that her children are taken seriously at school. Further, Lucy wants to make sure that *she* is taken seriously by the school teachers and parents who interact with her children. She feels that how her children dress is a reflection of her capabilities as a mother. Lucy's desire that her children, who, might I add, are mere toddlers, look a certain way is identifiable with MacDonald's suggestion that modern mothers are heavily concerned with curating an existence for their children that prioritizes securing cultural currency. By disallowing my mother to dress the children, Lucy reminds her that she fits outside American norms. She is not Western enough or wealthy enough to be "in with the trends." Regardless of whether or not this is Lucy's intention, my mother feels that this message is loud and clear.

Lucy consumes much of the literature which MacDonald constitutes typical of a "book mom." Lucy keeps a list of developmental goals which are deemed appropriate for children to accomplish before they turn one, copied from a parental manual, and focuses on teaching her baby a new skill every week. In a similar vein, Lucy has a chart of all the foods which her baby will consume during his first year. She prioritizes serving her children a varied menu so that the children will not get bored of certain foods. This would perhaps be an alright choice if Lucy were

the one cooking these meals. From my mother's point of view, this request is too time-consuming. Past employers had allowed my mother to cook Dominican recipes for the children and were not as fixated on variety. They only asked that their children not consume sugary treats and left the rest up to my mother's interpretation.

### *Lucy's Lifestyle*

Lucy's apartment located on 5th avenue is synonymous with luxury living. The building is equipped with a private elevator that opens directly into Lucy's apartment. The home is furnished with reupholstered antiques. Lucy's bathroom is filled with luxury scents from high-end aroma reeds to designer perfumes. Her hallway is lined with coffee books on the subject of haute couture. Lucy and my mother, who shows up to work every day in a comfortable sweatsuit, could not be any more different in their tastes. Lucy's high-end lifestyle is a constant reminder of her wealth and higher education. I must clarify that my mother's discomfort within Lucy's home has nothing to do with envy over Lucy's station. This ethnography was largely motivated by my curiosity to learn how my mother can tolerate encountering the wealth gap between her and employers like Lucy daily through the visual representations of wealth found in her employer's home. I almost could not believe that my mother had never felt any envy or resentment towards her employers over their wealth. Yet, I can confidently say that my mother has never wished for Lucy's life. From her perspective, that degree of wealth only attracts more problems.

My mother considers Lucy an insatiable consumer who buys a lot and ends up giving most of it away. My mother believes Lucy to be a cheapskate about anything that does not concern furthering her or her family's status. Earlier this year, my mother, an avid animal lover,

noticed that Lucy's dog was sick and underfed. My mother pleaded with Lucy multiple times to take her dog to the vet. She even offered to bring the dog into the vet's office in case Lucy did not have the time to do so herself. Lucy did not see any value in spending large amounts of money on medical bills for an old dog. This incident caused my mother to form a negative opinion of Lucy's character, exclaiming "you would not believe the amount of clothing and designer goods this woman purchases, I know that money is not the real issue. I even volunteered to bring the dog to the vet for her as long as she pays for the bill. She is letting her dog slowly rot because she is cheap."

The objects in Lucy's home are a constant reminder that she can afford to pay my mother more for childcare and that she has enough professional experience in fashion marketing to know that politeness can get you a long way. For this reason, my mother cannot comprehend how Lucy can sometimes underpay her and use an inappropriate, commanding tone when speaking to her. The objects within Lucy's home are physical reminders of Lucy's station, or in my mother's opinion, that Lucy is more than capable of treating her more equitably but sometimes misses the mark. My mother has also observed how Lucy interacts with others who she perceives to be of the same status. My mother's ex-mother-employer had described Lucy as "try-hard" or "kiss-ass." When it came to interacting with my mother, Lucy did not think it necessary to try as hard. The charm that she constantly put on, which others in her community had called "stifling," went out the window.

*Hannah*

Before working for Lucy, my mother had worked for an Israeli family that had also lived on 5th. During her first two years working downtown, my mother formed an exceptional bond with the mother in this family. The mother-employer, Hannah, was a computer scientist and had been very slow to trust my mother. Things shifted when Hannah witnessed her children grow to love my mother. This was a significant development for her eldest daughter as she would cry hysterically in the mornings when left in the care of her previous nanny. After Hannah grew to like my mother, the challenge became getting her to stop talking. My mother complained that Hannah's tendency to overshare was unprofessional and like nothing she had ever encountered with the middle-class employers in Fort Tryon. My mother believed Hannah to be an anxious woman who continually depended on her for moral support. My mother encouraged Hannah to take her problems to a therapist, pointing out that she had anxious tendencies. She tried to be relatable when delivering this news, confessing that therapy had helped her immensely in her own life.

My mother began having a hard time separating her work and her private life because of Hannah's actions. Hannah would often send my mother text messages about situations that she did not feel equipped to handle alone. If the children were sick, Hannah did not feel comfortable determining whether they should be taken to the doctor or given an over-the-counter drug. My mother stated that Hannah would overreact within these situations and picture the worst-case scenario. Hannah would enter an anxious state and be incapable of making *any* final decision. My mother was outraged that Hannah was not willing to take any days off to bring her sick children to the doctor. My mother, who stood in for Hannah at the doctor's office, described the

visits as painfully awkward as she had little knowledge of the children's medical history or family tree and could not answer the doctor's questions.

My mother believed she was doing too much of Hannah's emotional labor. Unlike other nannies, who were being asked to juggle too many things at once, my mother was happy with the job overall. Hannah was not underpaying my mother in any respect and did try her best to implement any changes that my mother requested intending to keep her in her home. My mother had had the dreaded "I am not your housekeeper" talk with Hannah but, unlike the other nannies I have discussed, did see a change. The one aspect that was causing my mother grief was Hannah's codependency. My mother put it this way,

I have been put in charge of the children's diets and activities. When the children are sick, it is up to me to decide whether or not they will take medicine and/or which type they will take. I decide if the baby needs to see a doctor or if his condition is less serious.

[Hannah] trusts me a lot because I have so much experience in childcare, but this is the first time I've undertaken a case where I have to make so many important decisions. I feel that she should be relying on *her* maternal instincts to parent instead of *mine*. I think her dependency on me is in part because she will not have to blame herself if anything goes wrong as she can place that burden on me. It pains me to have to go to such measures for children who are not my own.

My mother lectured Hannah on how to become a better mother. In particular, my mother requested that Hannah please make more of an effort to potty train her daughter. Hannah knew the severity of the situation as the school had complained to her since her daughter was enrolled in their program without meeting the requirements for potty training. My mother had been working independently to potty train Hannah's daughter but became frustrated when she received

little support from her employers. The weekends were enough to deter the little girl from habitually using her potty as her parents took the easy route, putting her in diapers when my mother was not around. My mother would question her efforts saying, “why should *I* care if the child’s *mother* does not?” One can begin to imagine how difficult it would be to bill employers for this type of labor, one that transcends the bounds of the workday and becomes emotionally exhausting.

It took my mother a long time to reciprocate the love and admiration that Hannah had so quickly developed for her. After spending a significant amount of time within Hannah’s home, my mother observed certain worrying dynamics between Hannah and her husband that Hannah later confirmed. Hannah and her husband’s relationship was in peril for several reasons. Their recent move to the United States had isolated them from their immediate family and Hannah’s husband resented her for having encouraged the relocation of their family. Additionally, Hannah and her husband’s second child had been the product of unwanted pregnancy and Hannah’s husband was consistently warmer to their eldest daughter. Finally, Hannah’s salary within the states was larger than her husband’s and this was a sore subject for him. Towards the end of their stay in the country, Hannah’s husband issued her an ultimatum, move back to Israel or get a divorce. My mother became very perceptive about Hannah’s moods. She could tell when things were getting particularly rough within Hannah’s marriage as, on these occasions, Hannah barely ate and looked tired. On Hannah’s worst days, my mother would cook her and her family a special meal, worrying that they would go hungry if she did not. Hannah and my mother faced some scary moments together, Hannah chose to confide in my mother after miscarrying her third pregnancy. Hannah did not feel that she could go to her husband about this given the state of their relationship.

While my mother worked for Hannah, I had no idea what was happening behind the scenes. My mother only complained about Hannah at home. When Hannah unexpectedly announced that she would be moving back home to Israel, everything came into perspective. My mother was shocked by her reaction to the news, she later told me, "I did not realize that I loved her until she had gone." My mother had never cried upon leaving a gig but could not help but get worked up while bidding farewell to Hannah's family. When I asked my mother why Hannah had tugged at her heartstrings she admitted to seeing some of me within Hannah. Hannah was a young mother who had not come from much. She was self-made and was the first within her family to receive a higher education, which she financed through scholarships and grants. Hannah had come to this country as a teenager to pursue a degree in computer science. Her adulthood was marked by a lack of family support. This in particular has always been my mother's greatest fear for me as I have no siblings and those within my extended family lack the resources to help me if I ever fall into financial peril. My mother worries about a future where my father and she are not around to look after me. Hannah's life within the states could have been a live reenactment of my mother's worries. My mother told me that she had helped Hannah out so much because she would have wanted someone else to do the same for me.

My mother and Hannah still facetime and text consistently. My mother continues to support Hannah. In a recent facetime call, my mother noticed that Hannah's youngest son was drooling more than usual. My mother pointed this out to Hannah, stressing that this type of behavior was abnormal for his age. My mother scolded Hannah, insisting that she learn to be more attentive. My mother instructed Hannah to research what developmental milestones children need to reach before a certain age. My mother also made Hannah promise to get rid of both the children's pacifiers. Hannah asked her how she should go about this as both her children

could act inconsolable when without it. My mother suggested she craft a fairytale to make them understand that the pacifier was gone. My mother told Hannah to hang the pacifier on a tree, bring her children out to witness, and explain that it was now too high for any of them to reach. My mother also told her to add that the pacifier would be picked up by a fairy, who would leave them a special gift under their pillow. This whimsical tale worked like a charm. Hannah profusely thanked my mother for catching that something was wrong with her youngest son. A doctor confirmed my mother's suspicions, the boy's drooling hinted at an underlying issue with his nose. He is awaiting surgery. The doctor also added that the pacifier was aggravating the issue and warping his teeth.



### Chapter III: The Nanny's Emotional Landscape

#### *Overview*

The serious instances of racialization, breach of contract, heavy micromanagement, and underpayment that nannies frequently face within the homes of mother-employers should not be dismissed or belittled. These are serious matters that do not have an easy fix; they are driven by the systematic discrimination that nannies face on account of their race, status, and gender. However, I acknowledge that I am inherently going against the perspective of nannies by categorizing these relationships as friendships as the consensus among my interlocutors was that they were unsure about whether or not mother-employers were treating them equitably, to begin with. There were times when mother-employers appeared to be more than generous, bringing the nanny out to lunch, giving her gifts during the holiday season, and so forth, while other times nannies were given the short end of the stick. One of my interlocutors remembered an ex-mother-employer barking orders at her and snapping at her unpredictably after having arguments with her husband.

I based the friendship model on small, but substantial, moments between nannies and mother-employers that I had a hard time putting in conversation with what I already knew to be true about the relationship between nannies and mother-employers. These were moments where mother-employers and nannies shared intimate details about their personal lives, listened to each other's problems attentively, and helped each other solve conflicts that sometimes had little to do with the children. These moments caused me to rethink the nature of these relationships entirely. What if nannies and mother-employers had been operating under a more familiar guise than I had expected? What if these women had been friends all along? Since nannies held that they were not

always treated equitably by mother-employers, these moments were like “windows of equality.” For an hour or two, nannies and mother-employers sat together on the couch, like friends, and talked about their lives. These were moments where nannies went out of their way to care for and comfort their employers, whom they had spent hours critiquing amongst each other.

The friendship model is concerned with the “windows of equality” that did not make sense with the many critiques and statements of dissatisfaction that nannies made about mother-employers. Friendship can take many forms. As the friendships between nannies and mother-employers and between nannies illustrate, friendships can be established for security and/or financial gain. Friendships in the workplace often follow this model as networking<sup>20</sup> can be key for climbing the corporate ladder. The friendships between nannies and mother-employers are “particular,” since neither party seems to realize the connection. Just because nannies encounter certain prejudices within the mother-employer’s treatment, this does not mean that they cannot be friends as many trans social or interracial friendships will also contain similar power dynamics. However, I knew that nannies still went on to critique these white, wealthy mother-employers for being too self-involved, vain, and impolite, even after having had a heart to heart with them. Nannies also labeled these women hysterical and unable to make important decisions regarding the lives of their children because of a deep fear that a wrong decision would ruin their children’s prospects in some way.

In all honesty, some nannies never achieved friendship with their employers as the nannies had felt from the beginning of their employment that the conditions of the arrangement were too severe to justify any friendly rapport. In instances such as Ivy’s, where employers were unusually cruel, having fired her for contracting COVID-19, mother-employers and nannies maintained a considerable amount of distance. Yet, in situations where the lines were less clear,

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<sup>20</sup> The act of exchanging information and making connections with others for professional advantages.

such as Lulu's, where the mother-employer could run hot and cold, the little moments that Lulu and Lucy shared, such as chatting over lunch, did warrant the label of friendship regardless of whether or not the relationship ended well. The friendships between nannies and mother-employers that I examined were imperfect. Human relationships are notoriously difficult, especially when money is involved. All things considered, the nannies and mother-employers who can transcend the boundaries of class and race must take a leap of faith and trust one another early on in the relationship if a collaborative approach to childcare is to be implemented within the home. These women can trust each other so early through their subscription to the belief that there is universality within the category of motherhood.

Nannies appeal to mother-employers by reminding them that they are not likely to harm their children because they are mothers themselves. Finally, the nannies were able to reach the hearts of mother-employers and also backed the mother-employers desire to better their children through competitive mothering to some degree. These nannies did things like reading to children, buying them gifts to celebrate important milestones, and bringing them to and from hobbies like sports. These nannies went above and beyond their contractual obligations with the reasoning that they too had a maternal obligation to these children, not because they were being paid to care for them, but because they had grown to love them.

### *Judgment*

The judgments that nannies make about mother-employers can resemble sexist language about a woman's place. Insinuating that mother-employers are bad mothers, wives, or employers can damage the reputations of these women. As I have documented, within these small communities that form around children made up of school teachers, parents, and other nannies, news travels fast. Yet, if we are to apply an intersectional approach, we must not judge nannies for judging. Nannies pick mother-employers apart because they believe they know better or can do things more effectively. This is eerily similar to the mentality of the mother-employers who over-manage their nannies. Nannies enter the home as childcare professionals. Just like professionals working in other fields, nannies feel compelled to problem solve and make improvements to the systems of parenting that their employers are using. It is worth mentioning that the term "judgment" can be used in two different ways that are relevant in this context. Nannies certainly pass judgment on mother-employers, meaning that they express criticism towards them. Yet, nannies are also capable of showing sound judgment. As illustrated in the relationship between my mother and Hannah, exhibiting sound judgment in the workplace can facilitate a profound friendship between mother-employers and nannies. Nannies who possess sound judgment are those that can become mentors to young mothers. I have discussed at length the many ways in which the care which nannies provide extends past children, generally improving the functionality of the home and the demeanors of employers. Nannies also get to witness a private side of the employer. Employers might not be on their best behavior when in the privacy of their own homes. Nannies witness domestic quarrels and breakdowns.

I noted that the second most common disagreement between mother-employers and nannies, behind disputes about logistics like treatment, pay, and extra, unpaid labor, are debates

concerning what the best courses of action for addressing the children's needs are. For Americans, the task of raising children has come to align itself more and more with the private sphere rather than with the public. Raising a child looks to be an intimate matter as biological parents reserve the right to regulate what their children watch, eat, learn, and do. Before contracting a nanny, parents rarely sit around and ponder what it would be like to share their parental responsibilities with a third party. Nannies are tasked with providing a version of motherhood that is commodified and, by default, needs to come off as "professional." A nanny cannot raise her voice at the child in the same way that the mother-employer can. If employers want their nannies to act as care experts, they need to be open to letting nannies form their own opinions about their approaches to parenting and be open to suggestions. Judgments are proof of the nanny's emotional investment within the mother-employer's home as they would not take such details to heart, or spend so much time discussing them if they did not have an active stake in the ongoing within the home. This fits in with the friendship model as, underneath the nanny's scathing judgments, is the desire to get along with or be treated better by mother-employers or the want to improve the home's functionality for the betterment of the employers and their children.

Nannies find solace in the judgments that they project onto their wealthy, white mother-employers. These judgments are a way for nannies to reassert that they are the "sane ones" within the nanny, mother-employer relationship. I found that judgments helped nannies to cope with the visual representations of luxury that they encountered every day, claiming that if being wealthy meant being as self-obsessed and impudent as mother-employers then they would prefer to stay themselves. When criticizing mother-employers my mother often ended her caveats with "at least it's not my life," "see how money isn't everything," or "a degree does not always

come with common sense.” This judgment also fosters community among nannies as they stop by the park every afternoon for the opportunity to chat amongst themselves.

The most scathing critique that nannies often gave to mother-employers, whilst among themselves, is that they were rash and hysterical. I gathered that the wealthier mother-employers were more particular about how things should be done within the home. These mothers want to ensure their children have the best resources available to them: Montessori schools, healthy food, knowledgeable teachers and nannies, and playdates with the right neighborhood children. These mothers took it very personally when something in their perfect plan had gone wrong. My mother described the breakdowns which she witnessed as over the top and unwarranted. She did not consider these mother-employers “women of action” as they were slow to resolve the issues their children faced. Instead, they interpreted any bumps along the road as proof that they were inadequate mothers.

In my mother’s eyes, this crippling self-doubt is what made them so. My mother described them as anxious mothers so scared of making certain decisions that they often accomplished nothing. A relevant example of this involves Lucy and her eldest son. While working for Lucy, both my mother and Lulu were convinced that her eldest son might have a neurological and developmental disorder. The boy’s school teacher was also in agreement, suggesting to Lucy that the boy have a psychiatric evaluation. My mother learned through Lulu that the first time that this was brought to Lucy’s attention, Lucy had quite an adverse reaction. My mother has avoided bringing the matter up to Lucy a second time, knowing that she will not take kindly to the suggestion that her son visit a psychiatrist. Lucy’s refusal to take the schoolteacher’s advice angered my mother as the boy’s behavioral issues have been taking a toll on her. My mother also recognizes that having the child assessed will only help him both

currently and in the future, as those around him might be able to learn how to support his development better.

### *Pity*

More often than not, relationships between nannies and employers are characterized by pity in some respect. I have observed that pity can build or bust nanny, mother-employer relationships. I derive my definition of pity from my mother's repeated use of the Spanish phrase "me da pena," or because "I feel sorry" in relation to the mother-employers that she has worked for. My mother usually feels some degree of pity for these women. The cause and scope of this pity fluctuate. Most frequently, my mother pities mother-employers because she views them as incompetent or because she witnesses a rough time in their lives. Pity is an emotion that grants nannies a significant amount of power over the mother-employer because, from the nanny's perspective, she is superior to the mother-employer due to her expertise in the childcare industry. Nannies are able to transcend the hierarchical power structure that places mother-employers above them in terms of status, wealth, and education by confidently stepping into their roles as childcare providers. Within the case of my mother and Hannah's relationship, my mother's pity for Hannah as a lonely immigrant was in part responsible for laying the groundwork for their friendship. When pity stems from nanny to mother-employer it makes way for friendship as nannies treat their expertise as enough of an asset to level the playing field. The case is not the same for any pity that might stem from mother-employers to their nannies.

Since wealthy, white mothers lead more comfortable lives than those led by their childcare workers, when mothers are unable to step down from a privileged position when interacting with nannies, real bonds fail to form. Despite my mother's initial annoyance with Hannah's tendency to overshare, Hannah's ability to share her emotions with my mother in a

genuine way, instead of a filtered or condescending one, transformed them into equals.

Hannah came to my mother with her worries and wants for the future, her greatest fears, and the intimate details of her crumbling marriage. Even further, after soliciting advice from my mother, Hannah listened and tried to implement her suggestions. This reassured my mother that Hannah respected her. Most importantly, Hannah did something which many employers forget to do with conversing with nannies. Hannah regularly asked my mother what was happening in her life and offered her support as well. When our family's dog grew sick, Hannah perceived that my mother's mental health took a hit. She even offered to assuage some of the medical bills that were incurred during my dog's treatment. A sick dog might come across as a trivial problem but Hannah awarded the issue the same importance that my mom did, making an effort to consistently ask my mother about our dog's progress.

### *Love*

Nannies were quick to fall in love with the children and slow to fall in love with their employers. The nannies that I observed all showered the children they cared for with boatloads of affection. Watching children awkwardly try and squirm away from their nanny's tight embraces when trying to return to their playing was quite a sight to see. The Latin American nannies that I came in contact with referred to the children with a speech that, within Hispanic traditions, delineates tenderness. These children had other identities when in the company of their nannies, they were called diminutives like "Gordo" and/or "Gordito" an endearing term for a chubby child, or "Güero" and/or "Güerito" the informal term for "whitey" in Spanish. To this day, some of the nicknames that my mother assigned to children are still used within their families as informal identifiers for them. One of Hannah's children still refers to himself as "Gordo." My mother sometimes rewatches a particular video that Hannah sent to her where the



boy enters a room dramatically exclaiming “Gordo is here!” Some nannies had even come up with certain songs for the children that spoke to a special skill or personality trait. The nannies often pressed their faces into the children's faces when singing these special tunes. These displays of affection do not go unnoticed by schoolteachers and other parents within the community who, in my mother’s case, have remarked to mother-employers how incredible the amount of love she showers the children with is to see. This has helped Lucy, in particular, to put my trust in my mother’s capabilities. The love which nannies show to children acts as a bridge between mother-employers and nannies, clearing a path for love to form between the women as well.

## Conclusion

### *The Chanel Bag*

I would like to close with an anecdote that, in my opinion, perfectly embodies the unpredictability of friendships between nannies and mother-employers. One afternoon, Hannah arrived home from work with an unusual dilemma. Her husband had offered to buy her a Chanel bag. Seemingly all of the women in Hannah's circle already owned Chanel bags. Hannah's potential bag would be a marker of her success and an indoctrination into said world. Hannah thought it appropriate to consult my mother on the matter. When my mother began telling me this story, I could only wonder what in the world Hannah had been thinking. I thought it an insensitive ask, within our family, the cost of a Chanel bag could efface many of our financial worries.

To my surprise, my mother did not mind advising Hannah on the matter. The way she saw it, Hannah should very much accept the gift from her husband. My mother thought that Hannah's husband had been treating her in a way that warranted some type of apology. My mother found that the bag was an adequate stand-in. My mother told Hannah that it was alright to spend some money on herself since this had been a particularly rough year for her. She also reminded Hannah that most of her family's income was thanks to her hard work and that she should not feel guilty for reaping the rewards of her efforts. I was completely shocked by my mother's reaction as I knew that she usually found high-end luxury goods to be a waste of money. So much so that my mother, today, interprets Lucy's consumption of the same items as vapid. Yet, Hannah was different, Hannah deserved a Chanel bag since Hannah was her *friend*.

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