



# Conceptualizing the Latina Experience in Care Work

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In this essay I compare and contrast the frameworks that social science researchers select for their analysis of Latina women employed in domestic service. Academics' approaches to labor and immigration relate to the ongoing debate over explaining the Latino population as an immigrant population – thus focusing on ethnicity, culture, assimilation, and acculturation – rather than racial conceptualizations that identify forms of domination, subordination, and privilege. One approach takes European immigration as the point of comparison; the other centers on the racialized experiences of non-whites, including Blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and American Indians, as their point of comparison. This essay investigates how each of these paradigms affects the theoretical understanding of Mexican American, Mexican, and Latina immigrant women employed as private household workers, nannies, caregivers and maids.

First, I begin my critique with a discussion of two opposing models of domestic service – bridging v. ghetto occupation – each of which corresponds to specific characterizations of the workers employed. Earlier research examined Latinas' experience in paid care work through the lens of structural discrimination theories of racial inequality using socialist feminist, colonial labor, or labor segmentation theories (Romero 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Ruiz 1987; Solorzano-Torres 1988). Recent research on Latina immigrant women employed in care work has shifted ground to theories of immigration rather than race (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002; Ibarra 1996, 2000; Mattingly 1999a, 1999b; Richardson 1999). Secondly, I provide an overview of the social construction of racialized gender versus gendered cultural differences in framing the interaction between Latina employees and their employers. Thirdly, I will critique the transition away from racialized analysis and towards an ethnic model. Unlike the earlier view, the new assimilation and acculturation paradigm discusses the economic independence from male wage earners and patriarchal families gained through employment (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). However, the analysis of women's independence



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often links their experiences to static conceptions of their culture of origin, suggesting a binary choice: either low-wage economic independence or traditional patriarchal domination. I argue that a better approach would be to recognize home culture as fluid and open to change in gender relations, and raising the possibility of political action to change the oppressive working conditions of caregivers in the countries where they find employment.

### Bridging Occupation or Ghetto Occupation

The emerging scholarship on the globalization of care work has not clearly articulated the differences (or similarities) to previous historical periods in the US that relied on immigrant and migrant labor to fulfill reproductive labor needs. While women immigrate for various reasons and under specific historical and political circumstances, recent scholars investigating “global care chains” – a term coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2000) – have avoided comparisons with previous periods of heavy employment demands for domestic labor. Extensive research has unearthed the experiences of European immigrant women who were employed as domestic servants in Victorian America (Cott 1977; Dudden 1983); comparisons to earlier forms of the use of immigrant workers for paid reproductive labor have been ignored in the discourse on “global care chains.” This is unfortunate since similar discussions of the migration process and the isolation and long hours of live-in working conditions are found in the research on immigrant European women at the turn of the last century and could greatly inform recent research on Latina immigrants. Comparative research could clarify important questions about the differences and similarities in transitions to other sectors of the economy and the relationship between work histories in domestic service, patriarchy, and family status. Consequently, the claims of a new domestic labor or a different global care chain have not been accompanied by an articulation of specific differences to previous immigration patterns used to fulfill the reproductive labor needs, and have not led to better theory.

Important contributions to labor history arose from the social sciences and were grounded in the experiences of immigrant and native-born white women (Addams 1896; Katzman 1981; Salmon 1972; Sutherland 1981). A second distinct field of study emerged documenting black women’s unpaid reproductive labor under slavery. This field continued to investigate black women’s underpaid toil after emancipation in the South, and later their experiences migrating to the North to eventually dominate the care occupations as white women moved into factories and office work (Clark-Lewis 1994; Fox-Genovese 1988; Rollins 1985; Tucker 1988). Research on European women domestic workers in the US came to be framed by an immigration discourse which emphasized the assimilation process spurred by the cult of domesticity, the impact of home economics on strategies to standardize housework and childcare using scientific and efficiency models, and employees’ ethnic and class differences to employers (Dudden 1983;



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Matthews 1987). Having always maintained Southern homes and cared for white families, assimilation to the cult of domesticity was not the focus of research on African American domestics. Instead, researchers examined how their labor provided the privileges of white womanhood. Black women migrated to the North in search of higher paying live-in positions in domestic service and eventually moved to day work (Clark-Lewis 1994). Social science research on women of color domestic workers in the 1980s and 1990s argued that Japanese American (Glenn 1986), Caribbean (Colen 1986, 1990), and Mexican American women (Romero 1988a, 1988b, 1992) shared a racialized trajectory with black women in the US. These scholars conceptualized the experiences of women of color from a labor and/or race relations framework rather than assimilation to middle-class white culture. Clearly, the researcher's choice to emphasize race or immigration as central to the experience of Latina domestics either places these workers on a continuum with black women or along the same trajectory as European immigrant women employed as domestics at the turn of the twentieth century.

## Transitions in Domestic Service and Workers

The history of domestic service in the US has followed racial hierarchical hiring patterns in the labor force (Martin and Segrave 1985; Romero 1992). Only the most vulnerable workers, excluded from most other occupations, were employed as domestics. Domestic service, primarily live-in positions, was shunned by workers with other employment opportunities. Only the most vulnerable workers in the labor force sought positions as private household workers, nannies, and maids because of poor working conditions, low wages, and the lack of benefits and job security (Katzman 1981). Consequently, when jobs outside domestic service become available to any marginalized group of workers, they quickly choose to leave. European immigrant women dominated the occupation in the North until native-born white women moved out of factory jobs and into clerical positions, opening positions for immigrant women to escape the long hours and poor working conditions of live-in positions. During slavery and after emancipation, black women labored in the households of whites (Fox-Genovese 1988; Rollins 1985). As a consequence of the shortage of domestic workers in the North, black women were recruited and eventually became the majority in the occupation in the North as well (Clark-Lewis 1994; Palmer 1989; Rollins 1985). Domestic service, alongside agricultural work, was a primary source of employment for Mexican American and Mexican immigrant women in the Southwest. However, during recessions, both black and Mexican women were frequently replaced by white women who were unemployed. By the 1980s and 1990s, Caribbean and Latina immigrant (primarily Mexican) women began to dominate the occupation (Romero 1992).

Throughout this history, there have always been regional racial preferences that employers had for the women they imagined were best suited for cleaning,



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childcare, and live-in positions (Glenn 1986). The hierarchy of racialized preferences sorted workers by race and ethnicity, as well as pay scale and better working conditions. Employers' preferences were also constrained by the economy, including unemployment rates (e.g., the last hired, first fired rule) and immigration flows (Clark-Lewis 1994; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002). During periods of labor shortage, workers were able to negotiate day work instead of live-in conditions, better pay, and limit the hours and work tasks (Glenn 1986). In response to these observed demographic patterns, Lewis Coser (1974), David Chaplin (1978), and Aaron Levenstein (1962) concluded that the Victorian aristocratic servant role and the mistress–maid hierarchical relationship was inconsistent with America's democratic society. They developed a “changing character” thesis as an explanation for native-born white women's absence among domestic workers and the overrepresentation of immigrant and black women. Levenstein (1962: 38), for instance, noted the significance of immigration in maintaining a labor pool for domestic service because “the servant class was never native American; even in colonial days domestics came as indentured servants who ultimately moved up to higher status jobs once their service was over.” Coser (1974: 31) asserted that “only persons suffering from marked inferiorities and peculiar stigmas can be induced to enter it.” He further argued that even if wages, benefits, and working conditions were improved, the work would remain stigmatized as servile, and workers would continue to leave at the first opportunity. These social scientists claimed that domestic service was positioned at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy because personal service is inherently degrading.

Social scientists then turned their attention to the declining use of domestic service in middle-class homes and the peculiar gendered racialized workforce in which European immigrant women experienced upward mobility to other occupations, whereas black women and their daughters found their work opportunities limited to domestic service. Framed as an entry level occupation, domestic service came to be praised for providing rural, traditional immigrant women with exposure to the modern world which offered opportunities to learn middle-class values and skills in a protected and supervised environment. In describing domestic service as an “occupational ghetto,” Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1996) captured the lack of intergenerational mobility of women of color in the US. While intergenerational mobility among European immigrant women had previously led theorists to conceptualize domestic service as a “bridging occupation,” even educated black women were relegated to domestic service in order to obtain lodging for schooling or were expected to include domestic work when employed as nurses (Hine 1989).

Sociological studies conducted by women of color feminists in the 1980s changed the paradigm; they rejected immigration, framing the mistress–maid relationship within the Americanization process, or casting domestic service as a path towards assimilation. Instead, they analyzed domestic service as a reflection of national race relations; they argued that the personal subordination embedded



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in employee–employer relationships was grounded in race relations (Coley 1981; Dill 1981, 1988; Glenn 1986; Rollins 1985; Romero 1988a, 1988b). This new generation of sociologists noted the perception of domestic work as black women’s work in the South, Mexican women’s work in the Southwest, and Japanese women’s work in California. They exposed how racial preferences were rationalized on the basis of “natural” or “cultural” qualities of specific groups, disguising racial hierarchies under the veil of maternal benevolence. Research on the employment of women of color in domestic service conducted by Cock (1980), Dill (1981, 1988, 1994), Rollins (1985), Glenn (1986), Romero (1992), and Colen (1986, 1990) challenged notions characterizing blacks (in South Africa), African American, Japanese, Mexican American and Mexicanas and other immigrant women of color in the US as finding their “natural” or cultural niche in the labor market. Given highly segregated neighborhoods and workplaces, women from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds rarely share the intimate space of the other. They also recognized domestic service as an ideal setting for investigating larger theoretical issues, including the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. In the household’s intimate space several factors come together simultaneously: gender relations, interracial and interclass interaction, and location with women’s primary unrecognized workplace. Furthermore, the research setting highlighted significant differences among women in the location of the home that had previously been conceptualized by feminists as one that united all women with common experiences (Romero 1992). Rather than analyzing the labor process and employers’ attempts to control the work as an Americanization process, these scholars attended to race relations between employer and employee and/or the dynamics of labor process to uncover levels and types of personal subordination embedded in the work and social interaction.

## Socially Constructed Racialized Gender v. Gendered Cultural Differences

In Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2002) introduction to their edited collection *Global Women*, they describe a link between First and Third World families and argue that global inequalities are producing a division of household labor that forces one mother to leave her children in order to work abroad caring for the children and family of an affluent woman. Rather than simply extracting natural resources from poor countries, the First World’s “care deficit” has led to the extraction of low-wage caretakers as well. Male workers no longer lead the immigration waves; the current trend is a “feminization of migration”; women are now sending the remittance checks home. They shift focus from labor relations to emotional relations. Rather than defining reproductive labor as a scarce resource, Hochschild identified love as a scarce commodity, contrasting the paid love purchased for First World children at the expense of Third World children. Instead of conceptualizing emotional labor as paid





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or unpaid labor extracted from the employee to benefit the employer, recent globalization studies conceptualize “love” as the essential component of the work, particularly among nannies, childcare workers, and nurses.

Several assumptions are embedded within this framework that links this analysis to the ethnic model of the bridging occupation rather than the racial model that characterizes women of color experiences in domestic service as a ghetto occupation. First, cultural differences between employer and employee, as well as differences between immigrant and non-immigrant labor pools, are emphasized to once again identify particular cultural values and norms as increasing the worth of certain ethnic groups over others. Second, the preference for the analysis of agency over structure is more likely to identify individual characteristics that contribute to social mobility. Whereas a structural analysis identifies changes in the market and overall economy that limit or expand opportunities, a focus on individual agency over structural concerns overemphasizes the personal rewards that Latina domestics and caregivers gain from their low-paid jobs. Third, rather than their framing agency in terms of resistance and coping strategies aimed at oppressive working conditions, the global care paradigm emphasizes accommodation.

One of the major changes in recent research on Latina domestics and caregivers is defining the emotional labor involved in domestic service and childcare as “love” or “caring.” Moreover, naming emotional labor as love and caring is frequently linked to the worker’s own status as a mother or some perceived cultural propensity towards family, babies, and care work. The paradigm shift from the analysis of paid and unpaid emotional labor to the study of love and care, moves the analysis outside the conceptual framework of labor studies, and diminishes the significant economic inequalities between employer and employee in interpersonal relationships. Even though all forms of emotional labor do not need to be classified as unpaid or exploitative labor, the conditions under which the worker receives monetary or psychological compensation are seldom interrogated. Attention to the peculiar relationship that women employers and women employees experience over the transfer of work considered “labors of love” from poor to affluent and middle-class families moves the analysis away from the labor process to focus once again solely on the gender dynamics. This is not inevitable. Some recent structural analysis has directly examined immigration (Mattingly 1999a, 1999b) and welfare policy (Chang 1993, 2000) that influence and limit Latina immigrant women’s choices in regional labor markets.

Although many recent studies of Latina immigrant women report verbal and spacial deference similar to previous generations of women of color domestics and nannies, researchers conducting interviews with live-in Latina immigrant women are more likely to argue the positive aspects of personalism in the employer–employee relationship than researchers studying the work experiences of African American, Chicana, and other women of color. For instance, several chapters in *Global Women* ignore class to focus solely on gendered relationships between women employers and employees. The differences and similarities



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between women employers and their immigrant nannies acted out in the intimacy of home and family was emphasized by Susan Cheever (2002) in New York City, while Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's (2002) similar description is situated in Los Angeles. Without familiarity with Hondagneu-Sotelo's earlier (2001) research on the Domestic Workers Association in Los Angeles, the reader may easily conclude that domestic service is simply the configuration of "good" versus "bad" employers or a search for feminist employers. This is a logical conclusion to draw if the US employer-employee study is followed by Bridget Anderson's (2002: 114) article, which ends with the proposed solution: "Real sisterhood, then, should take concerned women beyond their own homes; it means campaigning and organizing around issues of migration and domestic labor, having as important first demand that domestic work be treated, in the best sense, like just another job."

Constructing emotional and domestic labor as love and caring also rationalizes the preference for immigrant women based on their traditional, ethnic cultures. This essentializes racialized gendered characteristics. For instance, in her description of Latina immigrant women engaged in care work as personal attendants, Lynn May Rivas (2002) argues that some workers seek invisibility. Based in California, Rivas's research uncovers the way that immigrants hired as personal attendants for people with disabilities engage in invisible labor to create the illusion that people under their care are independent and self-reliant. Traditionally, the prime example for treating individuals as non-persons or as invisible has been the domestic servant (Goffman 1959; Katzman 1981). Previous researchers interpreted workers' attempts at and preference for invisibility a strategy for maintaining their dignity (Dill 1994; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). Without identifying racialized, classed, gendered, and immigrant intersections, "invisibility" becomes constructed as a collaborative process that demonstrates workers' agency.

Research on women of color employed as private household workers identifies domestic service as an occupation encompassing a wide range of reproductive labor that recent researchers have separated into distinct occupations (e.g., house cleaning, childcare, elder care, etc.). While the distinctions are significant in comprehending domestic service as a continuum of differing work conditions, pay, and participation in the underground economy, many Latina immigrant women interviewed in recent studies report being hired for childcare and expected to do housework and cooking; while women hired to clean house find their employers expect additional chores (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Mattingly 1999a, 1999b). The ability to maintain boundaries identifying the range of tasks is still determined by the degree of vulnerability of worker status (including race, gender, ethnicity, age, citizenship, ability to drive and speak English) and working conditions (i.e., day work versus live-in positions). Without comparisons to the native-born women of color that Latina immigrants have replaced, the changes in the occupation remain vague.

Descriptions of the "new domestic labor" have not been clearly articulated in terms of the labor process or the continuum of work experiences (Ehrenreich and



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Hochschild 2002; Ibarra 2000). The labor process is rarely central to studies centering on immigration and gender. For instance, earlier researchers on Latina immigrant workers compared and contrasted the different ways that reproductive labor was structured to incorporate daily rituals and practices whereby the systems of gender, class, and race domination are reproduced. Thus Judith Rollins' (1985: 156) study highlighted two functions for employing women of color: "Affording the employers the self-enhancing satisfactions that emanate from having the presence of an inferior and validating the employer's lifestyle, ideology, and social world, from their familial interrelations to the economically and racially stratified system in which they lie" and their presence "makes the employers' status clear to neighbors because women of color function better as contrast figures for strengthening employers' egos and class and racial identities." Unlike the ethnographic study that Leslie Salzinger (1991) conducted on Central American immigrant women employed as domestics in the Bay Area, recent studies rarely compare and contrast distinct working conditions in order to identify segmentations of the labor process established by employers, agencies, or the labor market that shape employer–employee relationships and the working conditions.

### Conclusion

In this essay I identified ways that the new literature on domestic workers in Latina/o studies has repositioned itself in conservative traditional approaches to immigration studies and has moved analysis further away from questions of racial construction, race relations, and racial discrimination in the labor force. While the "new domestic labor" and the "global chain of love" perspectives seek to understand contemporary immigration trends and the globalization of care work, it is ahistorical and fails to examine similarities or differences to European immigrant women in domestic service at the turn of the century. Unfamiliar with the history of domestic service in the US, this recent attention on immigration – rather than racial – status, reproduces and perpetuates myths about social mobility and individual agency evident long ago in theorizing European immigrant women's experiences in domestic service as a bridging occupation. In place of the individualistic paradigm, I argue for a structural account of the experiences of Latinas employed in reproductive labor within a historical and political context that compares and contrasts immigrant European women with native-born women of color in the US and addresses the intersectionality of race, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and class. Emphasis on social and political structures, including employment, income, dual-career couples, single head of households, and so on, is essential to understanding the cultural construction of care work, the ethics of caregiving, and class-based, racialized and gendered identities. Recent analyses of Latina women based on immigration studies tend to gloss over culture, class, gender, marital status, years of education, age, race, and years of employment to attend only to face-to-face interaction between employees and





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employers, thus constructing a monolithic notion of Mexican/Latina culture and its gendered ethics of care.

Linking contemporary experiences of Latina immigrant women to the historic experiences of European immigrant women and native-born women of color is essential to theorizing domestic service, childcare, and caregiving occupations. Without a structural and historical paradigm, it will be impossible to comprehend how work structure and the social relations embedded in tasks are commonly considered gendered, racialized, and/or immigrant work. Many questions remain unanswered about the future of paid reproductive labor in the US and the ghettoization of Latina immigrant women in domestic service, particularly in positions with the lowest pay and less desirable working conditions. Researchers report that recent Latina immigrants tend to be more educated than previous waves and were more likely to have been skilled workers in their country of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). On the one hand, research suggests that Latina immigrants continue to experience domestic service as a ghetto rather than a bridging occupation. In her study of domestics in Los Angeles, Grace Rosales (2001: 185) found that Latinas did not consider “their lives had either improved or remained unchanged economically.” On the other hand, unlike previous generations of African American or Mexican American women, the daughters of Latinas living in the US do not appear to have their opportunities limited to domestic service. Additional research is required to investigate the plight of daughters that migrate after their mothers or that grow up in the US; are they limited by the low wages and job insecurity of domestic service?

Without analyzing how race matters in the globalized economy, researchers may unknowingly support domestic service as an ideal occupation for Americanizing traditional Latina immigrant women to middle-class values. Recognizing the links to previous generations of workers of color assists in coalition building, advocates for all workers’ rights (regardless of citizenship status), strengthens unionizing efforts, and supports immigration, welfare, and labor legislation that impact the lives of Latina immigrant care workers. This latter approach is consistent with LatCrit emphasis on immigration as a central civil rights issue in the twenty-first century (Johnson 2004).

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