To Raise, To Teach, To Love:
Cross-Cultural Exchange and the Politics of Childcare

by

Elsa Julien Hardy
Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in African American Studies

Middletown, Connecticut
April, 2014
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: The Work of Childcare: In Theory and In Practice</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: “I Learn From Them, They Learn From Me”:</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Exchange Between Employers and Caretakers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 “I Don’t Know What to Do With a Baby”: Learning to Care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Navigating Different Styles of Childrearing: Employers’ Perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Navigating Different Styles of Childrearing: Caretakers’ Perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 “Just So Much That I’ve Learned From Her”: Information Exchange</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: “Just Like How I Grow My Son”: Relation and Relativism in Childcare</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 “It Didn’t Work For My Heart”: Choosing Caretakers Over Daycare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Parenting and Social Class: Engaging with Lareau</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 “We don’t do that in Jamaica”: Is There an <em>American</em> Script of Parenting?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 “I wanted someone who…”: Expectations of Employees and Employers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 “I love her and she loves me”: Love and Emotional Labor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 “They Were Always Part of Our Family”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 “I couldn’t have given her enough”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I would first like to extend my gratitude to everyone who has given me roots. To my parents, Jenny and Jonathan, who have instilled in me a love of learning, supported me in all of my academic endeavors, and whose sacrifices made it possible for me to study at Wesleyan. To my brother, Jeremy, who encouraged me and talked me through the blue days. To Katherine and Rachel, who led me to the question that inspired this project and to whom I look up for guidance and wisdom. To the Brooklyn New School, my home away from home, where I first learned how to pick a seed and nurture it.

I am also indebted to my community at Wesleyan. Thank you to Krishna Winston for carefully editing draft after draft and reminding me to sleep. To Dean Renee and the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellows, my Wesleyan family. To my thesis advisor Daniel Long, whose support and guidance enabled me to imagine and complete this project. I owe my gratitude to Hannah, Kerry, and Tory, who encouraged and stood behind me through a difficult year; to Emma, who held my hand through each phase of my research and writing process; to Emily, Hayley, Khalif, Maurice, and Jay, whose friendship has kept me strong. Thank you to the African American Studies department, which has provided me with an intellectual home that I hope to continue to inhabit long after I graduate from Wesleyan.

Sarah Mahurin, my mentor, advisor, professor, role model, confidant, and friend: I don’t think I will ever have the words to adequately thank you for everything you have done and been for me during the past three years. You mean the world to me.

Above all, this project would not have been possible without the generous involvement of all of the women who participated. To Linda, Elena, Jess, Eleanor, Sugar, Zerina, Georgia, Aria, Nicole, Lydia, Abigail, Rosie, Sean, Sariah and Tamy: thank you for courageously sharing your stories, and for inspiring me to complete this project.
This thesis considers a great paradox in the contemporary childcare landscape: while organizations such as the Baby College are teaching working- and lower-class minority parents how to raise their children as middle- and upper-middle class parents do, middle- and upper-middle class parents are hiring working- and lower-class minority women to care for their children during the day. I call attention the historical resonances of racialized domestic work and establish connections between this labor in different historical moments. Using the testimonies of six caretakers and nine employers, I explore the cross-cultural exchange of information and feeling that integral to care work. I argue that this process of exchange adds more nuance to understandings of hierarchical relationships between care workers and families and complicates institutionalized beliefs about the “best” or “right” way to parent.
Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), the novel about black maids working in white households in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s, has won considerable acclaim. More than ten million copies of the book have been sold in the United States. It has been translated into more than forty-one languages and was on the New York Times Best Seller list for over thirty weeks (Suddath 2009). *The Help* was featured on Oprah’s winter reading list and was read by book clubs all over the country. Two years after it was released, it was adapted into a film, which was also incredibly successful, grossing $26,639,112 during its opening weekend and $169,708,112 in total. The film was nominated for four Oscars and won one for Octavia Spencer’s supporting role as Minny Jackson. Since its publication in 2009, *The Help* has developed into a cultural phenomenon, captivating diverse audiences throughout the world.

*The Help* is centered on the fictional narratives of three women—one white and two black—who inhabit different worlds within Jackson but come together in the white domestic sphere. The reader is first introduced to Aibileen Clark, a middle-aged black woman who “done raised seventeen kids” in her lifetime, including one of her own whom she lost tragically. The novel’s white protagonist is Skeeter Phelan, a young aspiring writer who grows increasingly impatient with her privileged bridge-playing friends, and yearns for her family’s former maid, Constantine, whom she credits with raising her. The third narrative voice is that of Minny Jackson, the outspoken maid, wife, and mother of five. Each chapter is narrated from the perspective of one of these women, offering the reader insight into their intersecting realities as they move through a racially segregated world.
Both the novel and the film explore many of the painful, uncomfortable, guilt-inducing aspects of the historical relationships between white and black women. Stockett and Tate Taylor draw attention to the long legacy of black female domestic workers raising white children, cleaning white homes, and cooking meals for white families. These same women, Stockett and Taylor remind us, earned dismal wages and had few opportunities for advancement or escape. They were ushered into separate bathrooms, accused wrongfully of stealing silver and fine china, and made to feel invisible in their places of work.

But Stockett and Taylor also underline the loving, familial, and emotional connection many white southerners shared with the black women who worked in their homes. Aibileen directly expresses this love in an exchange with Mae Mobley, Aibileen’s “special baby,” who is just learning to talk:

I say, “Aibileen.”
She say, “Aib-ee.”
I say, “Love.”
She say, “Love.”
I say, “Mae Mobley” (2009:5).

Aibileen and Mae Mobley share quiet, affectionate moments, as well, and experience a heartbreaking goodbye when Aibileen is fired at the end of the novel. Miss Skeeter’s former maid, Constantine, provides her with the support and unconditional love that Miss Skeeter never got from her own mother: “It was having someone look at you after your mother has nearly fretted herself to death because you are so freakishly tall and frizzy and odd. Someone whose eyes simply said, without words, You are fine with me” (2009:76). Even Minny, who is continuously described as rough and temperamentally unsentimental, shares tender moments with her employer, Miss Celia, who depends on her for emotional support as she struggles with miscarriages, loneliness, and anxiety.
The Help (2009) illuminates various ways in which hierarchical relationships between maids and employers were subverted. The most obvious rebellion, which is not fully revealed to the reader until late in the novel, is that of Minny’s chocolate pie, which she makes using her own feces before feeding it to Miss Hilly, her former employer’s vindictive daughter. But there are other, less extreme examples in which employer/employee, white/black hierarchies are subverted. The maids in The Help are skilled in ways that their employers are not and possess information that their employers do not. We see this most obviously with Aibileen, effectively cares for and soothes Mae Mobley, and Miss Leefolt, who is clueless when it comes to interacting with her daughter. The hierarchy between black maid and white woman is also subverted in many of Aibileen’s conversations with Miss Skeeter, during which Aibileen shares a great deal of practical advice and general wisdom.

Though The Help is a great literary and cultural source that can help 21st Century readers better understand the lived realities of black maids and white women in the Jim Crow South, it has also been the source of great controversy. Most recently, Kathryn Stockett was accused of masquerading the true story of her brother’s maid, Abilene Cooper, as fiction without offering her credit or compensation. Some popular articles and blog posts have also called attention to the question of authorship—can a white woman adopt the voices of black women to talk about hardships and realities that she, herself, never experienced? The Association of Black Women Historians issued a particularly fiery statement criticizing The Help for distorting and trivializing the experiences of black domestic worker, perpetuating stereotypes of the mammy, misrepresenting black “speech and culture,” and ignoring the sexual harassment and civil rights activism that were pervasive during Jim Crow (“An Open Statement”).
These questions of authorship, accuracy, and representation are by no means limited to *The Help*. Similar discussions have arisen surrounding other popular representations of black historical and contemporary realities, such as the films *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), *The Butler* (2013), and *Fruitvale Station* (2013). However, Stockett herself acknowledges these questions in the novel’s afterword. She states: “I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature” (2009:529). She continues, “I don’t presume to think that I know what it really felt like to be black woman in Mississippi, especially in the 1960s. I don’t think it’s something any white woman on the other end of black woman’s paycheck could ever truly understand. But trying to understand is vital to our humanity” (2009:529). With these words, Stockett reveals an awareness of her shortcomings and of the impossibility to accurate depict historical realities she did not experience.

*The Help* cannot be considered a primary source, an irrefutable account of the experiences of black maids living in Jim Crow Mississippi. But as one black student in a predominantly white classroom at Wesleyan University shared during an overwhelmingly critical discussion of the novel, “I loved it. My grandmother was a maid and Aibileen reminded me of her.” There are elements of truth in Stockett’s words, even if they are not entirely accurate. *The Help* is significant because it has inspired an increased awareness and consideration of the experience of black domestic workers in the segregated South among an international audience. In a historical moment where domestic work continues to be highly gendered and racialized, the novel encourages contemporary viewers to look for themselves in the characters of *The Help*. 
While the days of *The Help*'s segregated bathrooms and white uniforms feel like something from the distant past—distant enough, anyway, that we can talk and read about them with relative comfort—a stroll through a playground in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, feels eerily similar to passages from *The Help*. Brown nannies feed white children, lather them with sunscreen, and bandage their scraped knees while their parents are at work. All of these nannies are women, and most are working-class immigrants with little formal education who speak English as a second language. But how do these women’s relationships with their employers compare to that of *The Help*'s Aibileen and Miss Leefolt? How has the dynamic between employer and child caretaker evolved since the days of Jim Crow? In the next three chapters I explore the threads that connect historical and contemporary domestic work from a theoretical perspective, as well as from the perspectives of individual caretakers and employers.

*The Help* exposes one particularly interesting aspect of domestic work that continues to be relevant today. Although Aibileen is subordinate to Miss Leefolt (by virtue of being her employee as well as because of her race and social class), in many ways she and Miss Leefolt are sharing in the responsibilities of raising Mae Mobley and, later, Li’l Man. Aibileen bathes, feeds, changes, and tends to the children, and then passes the baton to Miss Leefolt at the end of her shift each day. Yet, Aibileen and Miss Leefolt have very different ideas about how best to care for these babies. Although Aibileen cannot openly express her opinions because of her social position, she remarks to herself that Miss Leefolt is negligent (“I go on to the back, so mad I’m stomping. Baby Girl been in that bed since eight o’clock last night, a course she need changing! Miss Leefolt try to sit in twelve hours worth a backthroom mess without getting up!”), cold (“I reckon she don’t get too many good hugs like this after I go home.”), and
uninterested (2009:18; 5). Miss Leefolt, on the other hand, criticizes Aibileen for spoiling Mae Mobley. Though Miss Leefolt gives Aibileen direction and has clear expectations for her, Aibileen finds various ways to reconcile her own caretaking style with that of her employer. This process of navigating different logics of childrearing is one is built into the work that domestic workers did and continue to do.

There has long been extensive disagreement as to the “best” way or the “right” way to raise children. The sociologist Annette Lareau argues that these ideas are heavily influenced by a family’s social class (2003). The middle class philosophy of parenting that Lareau identifies, the philosophy of concerted cultivation, is promoted by parenting books, daycare centers, schools, and parenting programs as the way to parent. However, there is a great paradox in the contemporary childcare landscape: while programs such as Harlem Children’s Zone’s Baby College are teaching working- and lower-class minority parents how to raise their children as middle- and upper-middle class parents do, middle- and upper-middle class parents are hiring working- and lower-class minority women to care for their children during the day. While many scholars have written about how social class influences parenting styles (Lareau 2003; Wrigley 1995) and the relationship between middle-class women and the women who care for their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Colen 2005; Kaylin 2007), very little has been written about what mothers and caretakers learn from one another about childrearing. This topic is not the focus of any of the studies I have read but rather is written about anecdotally, as a small subsection within larger studies.

Many employers and childcare providers Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) and other scholars have interviewed expressed that they were co-raising children alongside one another. But if the two figures involved in raising one child come from different
socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, do they also have different cultural logics of childrearing? If so, how do caretakers and employers reconcile these different logics? Does exposure to a different cultural logic of childrearing change the way mothers and caretakers think about child rearing? These are among the questions that are central to my study. The answers to these questions can contribute meaningfully to contemporary discussions about “best” parenting practice and challenge some of the professional guidelines about how children “should” be raised.

Methods

I was brainstorming ideas for my thesis on a scorching summer day while looking after Ellison and Una, four-year-olds I babysit frequently, at the newly renovated Vanderbilt playground in Brooklyn, New York. I exchanged glances with the woman sitting next to me, a heavy-set Jamaican woman—whose name I later learned was Alice—who had claimed a whole park bench with diaper bags, a double stroller, and assorted toys. The children under her care, pink from running around in the sun, ran over to her every few minutes, asking questions, signaling for her attention, demonstrating newly acquired tricks, searching for snacks. She broke the silence between us, asking if Ellison was my son. I laughed and replied that, despite the physical resemblance, he was not. From there our conversation unfolded in a way I had never experienced with a complete stranger. She told me about emigrating from Jamaica, her daughter who refused to stay in school, the night classes she was taking to complete her nursing degree, the tuition she was struggling to afford, and the family for which she had spent the last four years working. She demanded repeatedly that I stay in school and discouraged me from working as a nanny, even temporarily, after graduation.
It was during this conversation that I first noticed the paradox that inspired this project: A short train ride uptown, instructors at the Baby College are teaching women like Alice to parent as her middle-class employers do. Meanwhile, Alice, who is silenced and subjugated in so many ways, is playing a tremendous role in raising two children whose social realities are drastically different from her own. The home that Alice reports to every day, like many other middle-class homes in Brooklyn and across the country, is a space marked by hierarchical relationships and cultural collision. Our conversation offered me a taste of Alice’s experience with these dynamics. It also inspired me to pursue similar conversations with other women like Alice, as well as with the women who employ them.

My conversation with Alice also informed the three questions that have guided my research: What do parents and caretakers learn from one another? How does this learning process happen? How can this relationship influence how we think about best parenting practices? The objective of this study is to better understand the relationship between parents and the individuals who care for their children. This information contributes to academic and non-academic understandings of best parenting practices, or the “right” way to parent, as well as to how early-childhood intervention and parenting programs are conceptualized. There is no shortage of information about the relationship between caretakers and their employers. In fact, I was overwhelmed at various points by the number of books and articles that have been written about the subject. There is very little that has been written about my research questions, however. As such, my study offers new and important insight into the nature of care work and the caretaker-employer relationship.
The central research for this study consisted of six formal interviews with child
caretakers and nine formal interviews with women who employ others to care for their
children. Seven of the fifteen participants are matches. In other words, of the six
participants in the caretaker sample, I was able to interview three of them and their
employers (or in one woman’s case, two of her former employers). I relied largely on
snowball sampling to connect with participants; that is, most were individuals I know
directly or recruited through other participants. In a few instances, I approached
caretakers I had seen picking up children from dismissal at the Brooklyn New School,
the public elementary school Ellison attends. I interviewed one woman who responded
to an advertisement I had listed on the Flatbush Family Network, a listserv that connects
mothers and families in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

I informed participants of the purpose of my study and offered to supply them
with the interview questions beforehand. I made it clear that all responses would be kept
confidential and that participation was voluntary. Participants also understood that they
could ask to skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering or end the interview
at any point. In accordance with the Wesleyan sociology department’s Ethics Committee
protocol, I obtained written consent from all participants. I asked permission to tape
record our conversations, which I informed them would be transcribed. I also assured
participants that I would assign pseudonyms to protect their identities and the identities
of any family members, colleagues, employers, or employees mentioned.

All of the quotations in this chapter come directly from interview transcripts. I
transcribed roughly half of the conversations myself and used Rev, a professional service,
to transcribe the other half. Regardless of the transcription method, no changes were
made to the participants’ dialect or syntax. Although I am highly proficient in Spanish, I
solicited the help of a native speaker to transcribe and translate Elena’s interview. It was extremely important to me that I accurately capture and communicate the meaning behind Elena’s words given the language barrier.

I intended to supplement my conversations with a brief written questionnaire to gather specific information from participants about race, income, and education. I thought that participants would feel more comfortable sharing this information in writing rather than face-to-face. I abandoned this idea after finding that most participants were fairly forthcoming during our conversations. I also worried that additional paperwork made the interviews feel more formal and thus more off-putting to participants—especially participants in the caretaker sample—who I sensed were already uneasy about speaking to me. I did not feel comfortable asking participants directly for information such as income, which complicates my ability to make conclusive claims about the correlation between social class and parenting. I was able to glean information about participants’ social class backgrounds in other ways. For example, one participant shared that she had grown up in poverty so abject that she and her four siblings often had to split one hardboiled egg for dinner, and that her daughter had qualified for full financial aid at her school. Although I do not know precisely how much money this participant earns in a year, I can conclude that she comes from a lower-class background. The participant who mentioned that she owned two homes and recently vacationed in Scotland, on the other hand, belongs to the middle- or upper-middle class.

The participants in the parent sample are predominantly educated middle- and upper-middle class women. All are either white or black, and all are in heterosexual partnerships or marriages. The participants in the caretaker sample are more diverse with respect to socioeconomic status, nationality, age, and race. Half are American-born while
the other half immigrated from Mexico and the Caribbean. Many have limited formal education and one has limited English proficiency. Most come from lower- and working-class backgrounds.

Although none of my interviews were as casual or spontaneous as my conversation with Alice, our initial experience served as a model on which I based my subsequent discussions with participants. Interviews lasted from thirty minutes to two hours. I conducted them wherever participants felt most comfortable—in their homes, in their places of work, in coffee shops, and, in one case, over the phone. In the case of Elena, the Mexican woman with limited English proficiency, I conducted the interview in Spanish to ensure clarity. I asked a variety of open and yes-no questions to develop a comprehensive picture of the interviewee’s background, attitudes, and actions. Although I tried to ask the same general set of questions to each participant, I allowed the conversation to flow in a way that felt natural. I indulged participants in the topics they seemed most excited about, even if they were not immediately relevant to my work, to help participants feel relaxed and engaged. I did not always ask questions in the same order and I phrased them differently depending on the context of the conversation. My questions also evolved as I completed more interviews. For example, I did not intend to ask participants about love—a theme to which I devote several pages in Chapter Three—but I began incorporating questions about this aspect of care work after realizing how important it was to the first few women I interviewed. This constant unfolding and evolution of ideas was what made this qualitative interview-based sociology the most exciting.

It is important to discuss the limitations of my research methods. With the exception of a handful of participants based in California, Massachusetts, and
Pennsylvania, I drew largely from my own New York-based social network. Thus, my sample is not necessarily representative of the full population. My limited sample size does not allow me to make generalizations beyond the sample population. As such, my research is primarily descriptive and anecdotal. The goal of my research, however, is not to make generalizations about care work and the relationships associated with it but rather to use the voices of individual women to expand our understanding of two key aspects of this relationship: information exchange and cross-cultural communication.

I already had relationships with many of the employers (usually because I had worked for them in some capacity previously or knew their children) whereas, with the exception of one woman, I met all of the caretakers for the first time the day of the interview. This factor may have affected how much information and what kind of information caretakers were willing to share with me. My interviews with caretakers were generally much shorter than my interviews with employers and I found that I had to prompt caretakers and ask follow up questions more than I did when speaking with employers. It is possible that these conversations would have been less inhibited had I been able to develop a rapport with caretakers prior to interviewing them.

I was very conscious of my own identity and my role as a researcher in my interactions with participants. Culturally, I identified more strongly with the women in the employer sample. Much like their children, I was cared for by women in my neighborhood until I was old enough to go to school. Although my relationships with many of these employers were, in some moments, hierarchical—several of them had employed me at various points—this hierarchy was mitigated by the fact that we shared socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. As one employer stated, “nobody with my education or your education would do this job permanently.” I interpreted this comment
to mean, “Although you do the same work as the woman I employ permanently, you are more like me.” I suspect that this level of identification affected my interactions with employers and the information they were willing to share with me. I also noticed that I felt much more comfortable speaking to employers, which undoubtedly affected the nature of our conversations.

Sociologists Tamara Mose Brown and Tasha Blaine discuss the distinction between career nannies—women who work as caretakers their whole lives—and temporary nannies—college graduates and other women looking for supplementary or short-term work. These scholars observe that career nannies are often women of color, immigrant women, and women from lower-class backgrounds, whereas temporary nannies are more likely to be white, educated, and middle-class. During my conversation with Alice, she called attention to the fact that she belonged to one category of nanny and I to the other. Nevertheless, our shared experiences as nannies created enough common ground that she felt comfortable sharing information I imagine she would not have shared had I, in fact, been Ellison’s mother. Although all of the caretakers I interviewed knew that I work as a nanny when I am not in school, our relationship was very much defined by my status as a student and as a researcher. This dynamic was further influenced by the fact that I came into contact with many of them through their employers. I suspect that my status as a student, a cultural outsider, and as someone who was in some way connected to participants’ employers affected the conversation as a whole.

It is also important to consider the role that selection bias may have played in my findings. Selection bias raises the question as to whether the women featured in this project held different views about parenting, care work, and their professional
relationships than those who chose not to participate. It is possible that the women who agreed to speak with me were willing to do so because they had positive relationships with their employers and employees. Women who have strained relationships with their employers or employees might have drastically different perspectives to offer. Selection bias may play a role whenever data is gathered from voluntary participants. I am aware that this bias may have influenced my findings and I will reiterate that I draw conclusions solely within the context of my sample.

I made a concerted effort to minimize potential employment risks to caretaker participants by maintaining confidentiality and protecting identifiable information. It is also possible that their perception of potential risks influenced their responses. One caretaker informed me that she had signed a confidentiality agreement with her employer and stipulated that she would not answer any questions that she felt breached this agreement. Another caretaker, the mother of my good friend, declined to participate because she did not want to risk exacerbating the already precarious relationship she had with her employer. I sensed that caretakers—with the exception of one woman, who was quite verbose—worried about sharing information with me that might get back to their employers.

I thought very critically about the terminology I use to refer to the participants in both samples. I specifically asked caretakers about their preferred titles. Some women preferred “nanny” or “babysitter,” while others found these titles offensive. I chose to use “caretaker” to accommodate these different preferences. I also resisted the term “nanny” because of its historical resonances. In earlier drafts, I referred to employers as “parents” or as “mothers” but I revised this terminology for two reasons: with the exception of one woman, all of the participants in the caretaker sample were also
mothers and parents. I did not want to take this identity away from them by only using these terms to describe participants in one sample. I also chose to use the term “employer” to emphasize the professional and hierarchical nature of these relationships. I use the terms “domestic work,” “domestic labor,” and “care work” interchangeably throughout my work.

Below are two tables with relevant information about participants in both samples.

Table 1: Caretaker Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Years as a Caretaker</th>
<th>Years with Current Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Cooper</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>“since I was 13”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena Flores</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jess Frances</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>College—working on completing bachelor's degree</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>“2 years formally”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Graham</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>Did not discuss</td>
<td>Trinidadian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar Lenox</td>
<td>Former caretaker</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Retired, but worked 5 years for the same family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zerina Lucas</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>Did not discuss</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>7, on and off</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Employer Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occ.</th>
<th>Ed.</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Caretaker</th>
<th>Caretaker race/nationality</th>
<th>Years with Caretaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia Carter</td>
<td>Elementary school teacher</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria Cole</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Forester</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>Black/Hispanic</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamy Kensington</td>
<td>Nonprofit board member</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lorena</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mariana</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia Logan</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Eve/Olivia</td>
<td>Chinese/Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail Miller</td>
<td>Hedge fund manager</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ada/Penelope</td>
<td>Congolese/Honduran</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie Parker</td>
<td>College professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Martina</td>
<td>Colombian</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean Seneca</td>
<td>Retired regional vice president for LensCrafter s</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>White American</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sariah Willis</td>
<td>College professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Zerina</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following participants in my samples were matches. That is, I was able to speak to both the employer and the employee about their professional relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caretaker</th>
<th>Employer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Cooper</td>
<td>Sean Seneca</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I began preparing for these interviews after immersing myself in contemporary sociological and historical literature about care work and domestic labor. This research provided me with a conceptual framework that informed my interview questions. I was curious to see how the theories relating to cultural capital, maternalism, and cultural logics of parenting held up in light of my participants’ lived experiences. I devised a list of questions that prompted participants to engage with these theories. My questions were loosely grouped into four categories: general biographic information; participant’s family background and parenting style; general information about participant’s experience with care work and the employer-employee relationship; and learning, information exchange, and navigating different styles (see appendix for full list of questions).

After the interviews were transcribed, I developed a list of themes that appeared continuously in my conversations. This list included the following themes: race, parenting and social class, communication, expectations, cultural differences, learning or information exchange, employer-employee relationship, love, family or “just like family,” and navigating or reconciling different logics of childrearing. I coded the interviews using this list as a guide. As I read, reread, and coded each transcript, it became clear that certain themes resonated more significantly across different experiences than others. I also found that certain themes that I had considered peripheral were in fact quite relevant to my research questions.
The themes I ultimately chose to include in my analysis are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>Learning to care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navigating different styles of caretaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>Daycare vs. caretakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parenting and social class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love and emotional labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gift giving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The themes in Chapter Two are central to my analysis and speak directly to my research questions. Chapter Three is devoted to supplementary themes—themes I was not explicitly looking for but that came up continuously in interviews and factored prominently in participants’ discussions of their employment relationships. The themes in this latter group are not related to one another in the way that the themes in Chapter Two are but collectively they offer a more complete narrative of the complex relationships participants described.

Outline

In Chapter One, I begin with a discussion of the Baby College, a program in whose mission underlies the assumption that the middle-class logic of childrearing is the best logic of childrearing. Using this program as an entrée, I discuss contemporary theories regarding the correlation between parenting and social class. Drawing on the work of the sociologist Annette Lareau, I demonstrate that the parenting style of middle-class families is privileged over that of the lower- and working-class families. I transition
to discussing the contemporary childcare landscape and argue that because of social and economic shifts and the increasing racialization and globalization of care work, the middle-class home is a space defined by socioeconomic and racial hierarchies. I discuss how these hierarchies are subverted and mitigated by the emotional aspect of care work and by processes of cross-cultural exchange. I discuss connections between domestic work during slavery and Jim Crow and contemporary domestic work. I offer the distinction between the theories of maternalism and personalism as a means by which we can understand relationships between employers and domestic workers. Finally, I discuss pre-existing literature on the challenge of developing relationships between employers and domestic workers and navigating different cultural logics of childrearing.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the three central themes of my study from the perspectives of the fifteen caretakers and employers who participated. I explore how these women learned to parent and conclude that though employers were more likely to have consulted parenting literature, both samples described learning primarily from experience. I transition to discussing how employers conceived of the differences between their parenting styles and those of their caretakers. I explore the various ways in which employers reconciled these differences. I then explore how caretakers conceived of and reconciled these differences. I go on to discuss the information participants exchanged with their employers/employees. This transmission of information, I argue, upsets and even subverts the hierarchical relationship between employers and caretakers and challenges widely held beliefs about best parenting practice.

Chapter Three focuses on the supplementary themes that factored prominently in participants’ discussions of the nature of care work and their professional relationships. I explore why participants chose in-home, nonrelative care for their kids rather than
daycare. I use participants’ voices to engage with Lareau’s findings about the correlation between social class and parenting. Given the globalization of care work, I discuss how participants conceived of the relationship between caretaking style and national and cultural identities. I then explore participants’ expectations of their employers/employees given differing beliefs about best parenting practice. Finally, I discuss my participants’ understandings of and experiences with three aspects of care work that resonate across different historical moments: love, family, and gift giving. I use Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (2001) theories of maternalism and personalism to understand my findings and situate them within the larger body of work on domestic labor relationships.

My thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of contemporary care work—an understanding that considers the information exchanged between caretakers and their employers, the processes by which these women navigate different cultural logics of childrearing, as well as the deep emotional connections develop to the families for which they work. These aspects of care work complicate the hierarchical relationships between caretakers and employers—hierarchies that are already muddied by the intimate, immensely personal nature of this work. My findings challenge the work of organizations such as the Baby College, which value the childrearing knowledge of middle-class parents, as well as dominant beliefs about best parenting practice.
“It was so clear that there was this body of information out there,’ Canada recalled. ‘Everybody agreed on the best practices. If you have a child who is three months old, we know exactly what you ought to be doing with that child. When your kid is nine months old, we know that, too—no debate, we don’t need any more research, we don’t need any more studies. But in our community, no one was talking to our parents about this body of knowledge”’ (58).

— Paul Tough, Whatever it Takes

In 1990, Geoffrey Canada founded the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), a network of social and educational programs that serve a 97-block radius in Central Harlem plagued with poverty, violence, and academic underachievement. According to its mission statement, HCZ aims to “rebuild” the community in which it is based “so that its children can stay on track through college and go on to the job market.” Ten years later, Canada incorporated the Baby College—a program that now serves as the anchor of HCZ and represents the “cradle” in HCZ’s unofficial motto, “from cradle to college.”

The Baby College is not a college for babies as its name suggests, but rather a program that offers a series of parenting workshops to expecting parents and parents of children ages 0-3. These parents are almost all black or Hispanic, come from low-income backgrounds, and have varying levels of education. Many are very young. Some have criminal records, are on welfare, are homeless, or have histories of substance abuse.

The Baby College holds workshops on nine consecutive Saturday mornings. In these classes, Baby College instructors share what Canada describes as the universally agreed upon “body of information” about “best parenting practices” with parents. These workshops, which Geoffrey Canada developed in collaboration with Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, a prominent pediatrician and a “ubiquitous presence in the world of child-
rearing,” address topics such as discipline, literacy, nutrition, immunization, asthma, and prevention of lead paint contamination (Lewin 2001: 1).

Geoffrey Canada and Dr. Brazelton believe that parenting and social class are intimately connected and sought to give Harlem’s lower-class parents the information and the tools that middle-class parents have. In 2008, the writer and journalist Paul Tough published a book about Geoffrey Canada and HCZ entitled Whatever it Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America, a chapter of which focuses on the Baby College. In a 2008 interview with Tough on “This American Life,” host Ira Glass states that Canada “wants [parents] to rethink how to raise their kids, to show them what middle class parents are doing.” Glass elaborates, saying that Canada is “essentially telling poor parents that there’s a better way to raise their kids and we’re going to tell you how.” In Tough’s chapter on the Baby College, he explicitly discusses the program’s emphasis on middle-class child-rearing techniques: “The middle-class style of discipline—negotiation, explanation, impulse control—was intertwined with the middle-class style of brain development… If you follow that path, the instructors told the parents, your child will be smarter and happier and will make better decisions later on” (2008: 81).

The Baby College is not the only program of its kind in the country. Tough identifies three others that “seek to improve the parenting skills of low-income parents”: Early Head Start, Avance, and the Nurse-Family Partnership (Tough 2008:93). The Northside Child Development Center and the Ounce of Prevention Fund, based in Harlem and Chicago respectively, can also be added to this list. While academic and popular discussions of these programs often revolve around accusations of cultural imperialism, what is most interesting to me is the assumption underlying the Baby College mission
that there is an inherently middle-class logic of parenting and that this logic better prepares children to be successful in school and beyond.

**Parenting and Social Class: What is the “Right” Way to Parent?**

In her book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Annette Lareau (2003) argues that social class significantly influences family life, and is one of many elements that form a “cultural logic of child rearing” (3). Based on her extensive interviews with and observations of a racially and socioeconomically diverse sample of families, Lareau concluded that middle class parents adopt a cultural logic of child rearing that emphasizes concerted cultivation, whereas lower- and working-class parents focus on the accomplishment of natural growth (Lareau 2003).

The former model of parenting is very child-centered. Lareau observed that children from middle-class families were engaged in a number of in-school and extracurricular activities, which their parents arranged, and to and from which their parents shuttled them. Children and parents talked openly and at length about school and other activities. Alternatively, the latter model of parenting is characterized by long stretches of child-initiated play, clear boundaries between children and adults, and frequent interactions between kin. A child raised according to this model, Lareau found, might participate in one extracurricular activity, viewed by the parents as a privilege rather than a given or a necessity. Parents recognize a clear boundary between themselves and their child’s school (Lareau 2003).

These differing models transmit “differential advantages” to children (Lareau 2003: 5). Children raised according to the concerted cultivation model, or the cultural logic of the middle class, acquire institutional advantages. They are more comfortable
engaging with figures of authority, tend to feel more entitled, and are able to advocate for themselves in institutional settings (Lareau 2003). Children raised according to the accomplishment of natural growth model of parenting are at a disadvantage in that they do not have the cultural capital that middle-class children have—the cultural capital that institutions such as schools value—but have stronger relationships with kin and autonomy from, yet respect for, the adults in their lives (Lareau 2003).

Lareau’s discussion of cultural capital draws on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who invented and wrote extensively about this theory. Whereas economic capital—money—is material, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is symbolic and refers to such things as language, physical appearance, and dress. In Bourdieu’s article “The Forms of Capital” he outlines several fundamental aspects of capital:

- Cultural goods (such as a collection of paintings) represent both economic capital (the amount of money they are worth) and cultural capital (non-financial assets that promote social mobility) (Bourdieu 1986: 87).
- Cultural capital is acquired unconsciously (Bourdieu 1986: 86).
- Cultural capital can be transmitted through the family and “starts at the onset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986: 86).
- Institutions recognize cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986: 88).
- Economic capital can be converted into cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986: 88).

Bourdieu offers cultural capital as a theoretical framework that allows us to consider the customs, speech, “tastes, appreciations, and understandings” associated with different cultures in a relative, nonhierarchical way (Carter 2005: 50). Lisa Delpit (1995) and Prudence Carter (2005) expand on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and make the
essential argument that there are different forms of cultural capital. In the United States, these scholars argue signal the distinction between nondominant cultural capital and nondominant cultural capital, or, as Delpit describes it, “the culture of power” (Delpit 1995).

Although neither Geoffrey Canada nor Paul Tough overtly use the term cultural capital to describe the Baby College’s mission, Bourdieu’s theory is foundational to the work this program does. In teaching poor minority parents the middle-class logic of parenting, Baby College instructors are attempting to transmit a different form of cultural capital—dominant cultural capital—which these parents will in turn transmit to their children.

As Lareau (2003) points out in the first chapter of her book, professionals’ advice regarding best parenting practice has changed dramatically and continuously over the past two centuries (4). In this historical moment, however, there is little disagreement among professionals regarding the broad principles for “promoting educational development in children through proper parenting” (Lareau 2003: 4). These standards emphasize the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling (Lareau 2003). Similarly, parenting books “typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation rather than with physical force” (Lareau 2003: 4). These guidelines are widely accepted and form a “dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised” (Lareau 2003: 4). In other words, a relatively small group of “experts” shape the behavior of a significant number of parents, and the recommendations of these “experts” have become the standards against which parents are measured. The epigraph that begins this chapter demonstrates the pervasiveness of
professionals’ recommendations regarding the “best” way or the “right” way to raise children. These guidelines are regarded as the way to parent rather than as one way to parent.

**The Shift to In-Home Care**

Social and economic shifts in the past century have created a need for childcare, which in turn has led to an increase in in-home childcare. As Arlie Hochschild (1989) and Julia Wrigley (1995) have pointed out, the number of women working outside of the home has risen significantly since the 1950s. In 1950, 23 percent of married women with children under the age of six worked outside of the home (Hochschild 1989). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, this number had risen to 53 percent in 2011 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). The same report found that 62.9 percent of mothers in married-couple families with older children—children between the ages of six and eighteen—worked in 2011 (“Employment Status of Parents” 2011). The data from the most recent Census reflects this increase in the number of working mothers: of the 32.7 million children in consistent, daily arrangements, 88% had employed mothers (“Employment Status of Parents” 2011).

But if mothers, who have historically shouldered the responsibility of caring for children and homes while their partners worked, are joining the workforce in huge numbers, who is minding the kids? The 2010 Census reveals that of the 32.7 million children in regular childcare arrangements, 27 percent were cared for by relatives, 25 percent by organized facilities such as daycare centers, 22 percent by parents, 13 percent were cared for at home by nonrelatives such as nannies, neighbors, babysitters, or friends, and 13 percent had other arrangements or had no regular arrangement (Laughlin 2011).
This project will be concerned specifically with the 13 percent of children who are cared for in their homes by nonrelatives.

Although 13 percent is a relatively small percentage, this group of children is disproportionately from middle- and upper-middle class homes (Wrigley 1995). Working parents who can afford to are increasingly opting for in-home, nonrelative care rather than sending their children to organized daycare facilities. The most recent report published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on childcare and early education arrangements found that 40 percent of parents with family incomes over $75,000 had hired caregivers to look after their children (Mulligan, Brimhall, and West 2005). Middle- and upper-middle class parents are choosing to hire in-home caretakers because 1. they believe that this arrangement will afford their children more individual attention, 2. they have more control over the care their child gets, 3. paying an individual to come to your house can be much more affordable for families with more than one child, and 4. the arrangement is more flexible, which is appealing to working parents with demanding schedules (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Colen 1995; Wrigley 1995).

Moreover, Wrigley argues that day care centers, which have historically been considered an option for “‘poor, inadequate families,’” are still highly stigmatized in the United States (Wrigley 1995). The NCES data confirms that families that report higher income and education levels are more likely to choose nonrelative in-home care but increasingly opt for daycare centers when their children are older.

**In-Home Child Care: Who is Minding the Kids?**

But who are the “nonrelatives” to whom these reports refer? Scholars such as Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), Julia Wrigley (1995), Shellee Colen (2005), and
Barbarah Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002) have written extensively about an increasingly popular phenomenon in which heterosexual middle- and upper-middle families hire Latina and Caribbean women to care for their children. Hondagneu-Sotelo, Ehrenreich and Hochschild describe this as the racialization and globalization of domestic work in the United States (2001: xix; 2002: 9). These caretakers often have limited formal education, limited English, come from working- and lower-class backgrounds, and have children and families of their own.

In their book *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (2002), Ehrenreich and Hochschild explore the effect of capitalism on the private sector. They argue that American women’s increased participation in the work force has prompted a global transfer of the services traditionally associated with a wife’s role—namely childcare and homemaking (2002: 4). Domestic and care work have become industries in the global capitalist economy that connect poor countries and rich ones.

Ehrenreich and Hochschild write:

> In an earlier phase of imperialism, northern countries extracted natural resources and agricultural products—rubber, metals, and sugar, for example—from lands they conquered and colonized. Today, while still relying on Third World countries for agricultural and industrial labor, the wealthy countries also seek to extract something much harder to measure and quantify, something that can look very much like love (2002: 4).

Unlike many of the global industries that deal with tangible goods, the domestic labor industry is largely unregulated. Ehrenreich and Hochschild offer several explanations for this: women who migrate to perform care work in the United States do so illegally. Furthermore, this work, unlike the agricultural and industrial labor to which these scholars refer, is inherently solitary, which makes it more difficult for workers to organize. Ehrenreich and Hochschild also comment that in “the Western culture of individualism … servants are no longer displayed as status symbols … but often remain
in the background, or disappear when company comes” (2005: 4). Not only is their work invisible, because of their social class, ethnic backgrounds and immigrant status, these migrant women are voiceless. Yet, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild point out, this labor is unique in that many of these women are providing an intimate service: care and love.

In their most recent book, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (2009), Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum argue that the home is a site infused with class relations (188). Servant-employing households reflect and reproduce the inequalities of society at large, and normalize “relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality” (2009: 188). Children within these households learn class and gender domination and inequality at home and then practice them in the world (2009: 188). Mary Romero found this claim to be true in the United States, as well. In her book *The Maid’s Daughter: Living Inside and Outside the American Dream* (2011), Romero argues that the close relationship care workers experience with families perpetuates these hierarchies. “Child-centered homes with full time nannies will tend to raise children to be consumers of care. Privilege is learned as children acquire a sense of entitlement to have a domestic worker always on call to meet their needs” (23).

This unequal class dynamic in the home is complicated by what Ray and Qayum (2009) call the “familial rhetoric” or the “rhetoric of love.” Many employers in Ray and Qayum’s sample expressed that the domestic workers in their homes were “part of the family” and are thus bound to it by ties of affection, loyalty, and dependence. Ray and Qayum point out that this is by no means limited to their sample: “scholarship from around the world has revealed that ‘part of the family’ is an almost automatic refrain about servants in many cultures of servitude” (2009: 195). The familial rhetoric, these
scholars argue, masks the inherently unequal relationship between employers and domestic workers.

In her book *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983), Arlie Russell Hochschild argues that the element of love that Ray and Qayum (2009) refer discuss distinguishes *physical labor*—the labor one might perform in a factory, for example, labor that utilizes the body—from other forms of work. The caretaker does physical labor when she lifts a child, pushes a stroller, and prepares a meal. She does mental labor when she schedules naps and feedings, plans a child’s daily activities, and evaluates a child’s needs given his or her behavior. But Hochschild argues that in the course of doing physical and mental work, the caretaker—like the flight attendant, the waiter or waitress, or the home health aid, to name a few examples—is also doing something more: *emotional labor.*

Emotional labor, Hochschild writes, “Requires one to induce or suppress feeling on order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (1983: 7). Emotional labor is unique in that it calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, the body and the self. In the process of performing this labor, however, the worker “can become estranged from the self … that is *used* to do the work” (1983: 7). In other words, caretakers and other emotional laborers are paid to respond emotionally to their clients. This response becomes the commodity for which the client is paying. But this response is often performative and separated from the self.

**Relationships between Caretakers and Employers: A Historical Perspective**
Many scholars have highlighted the connection between contemporary domestic work and slavery (van Wormer, et. al. 2012; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Sharpless 2010; Jones 2010; Rollins 1985). Jacqueline Jones (1985) writes extensively about the sexual division of labor that characterized American slavery. That is, many female slaves served as cooks and maids for the white families that owned them. Many of these women, referred to as “mammies,” also raised and cared for their masters’ children. These women often had children of their own, though as many scholars have noted, plantation owners and slave merchants went to great lengths to separate slave families (Jones 1985; Reid 2012). In her book *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, Rebecca Sharpless (2010) comments that enslaved women also served as wet nurses and “suckled white infants with the breast milk that they produced for their own babies” (xv).

In her article “My Mother Was Much of a Woman: Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery,” Jacqueline Jones argues that labor performed within the family context was “distinct from labor carried out under the lash in the field” (1982: 238). Jones signals the aspect of supervision as one significant difference between these different forms of slave labor. Whereas field slaves were constantly watched and monitored by an overseer, work within the home, while supervised, was inherently more private. Another significant difference to which Jones alludes is the power dynamic between slaves performing these distinct forms of labor and the people making demands of them. The plantation was a patriarchal system that “involved the subordination of all women, both black and white, the master-husbands” (1985: 25). However, because the domestic sphere was seen as the women’s sphere, within the home the mistress reigned.
Despite the intimate nature of the labor enslaved women performed within the home, they, like slaves who worked in the fields, were subject to extreme violence and abuse. Jones argues that because “whites often displaced their anger at particularly unruly blacks onto the most vulnerable member of the slave community,” women (and children)—especially those who worked in the home and were thus in closer proximity to their white masters—often experienced an even greater amount of violence (Jones 1985: 21). Jones speculates that “mistresses lashed out at slave women not only to punish them, but also to vent their anger on victims even more wronged than themselves … in the female slave, the white woman saw the source of her own misery, subject to the whims of an egotistical man” (1985: 25). The violence mistresses committed against female slaves was in many cases exacerbated by jealousy of (nonconsensual) sexual relationships between these women and their husbands.

The domestic labor performed within the plantation household was inherently paradoxical. Enslaved women tenderly cared for and in some cases nursed white children, yet these women physically abused and were believed to be socially and biologically inferior. Furthermore, despite the intimate, maternal connection these women and children shared, white children grew up to perpetuate the same system of slavery and violence that oppressed their former caretakers. White families also depended entirely on the enslaved women who ran their households, just as their livelihood depended on the labor slaves performed in the field.

Even after slavery was abolished, black women continued to serve as domestic workers in white homes. As Mildred, the domestic employee in Alice Childress’ *Like One of the Family* states: “It’s a rare thing for anybody to find a colored family in this land that can’t trace a domestic worker somewhere in their history” (1956: 36). Like the
relationships between female slaves working in the plantation household and white mistresses, these relationships were unequal. Not only were black women subordinate to white women as their employees, their subordination was exacerbated by their intersecting racial, gendered, and social class identities.

The unequal nature of the relationships between servants, maids, cooks, nannies and their employers was underlined by the very terms these women used to refer to one another. Domestic workers were expected to show their employers deference by addressing them as “ma’am,” “Miss,” “Mrs.,” and “Miz” (van Wormer, et. al 2012). Servants, on the other hand, were addressed by their first names and were often referred to as “aunt” or “mammy,” which was used as a standard form of address until as late as the 1930s (van Wormer, et. al 2012). White women were “ladies” while their subordinate black employees were “women” and “girls” (van Wormer, et. al 2012).

The sociologist Patricia Hill Collins writes about the “mammy” figure in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). She argues that the term, which, as Van Wormer, Jackson, and Sudduth (2012) note, became the standard form of address, referred to “the faithful, obedient domestic servant” (1990: 71). Collins argues that the term “mammy” was “created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (1990: 71). Because of its endearing implications, the term muddied the socio-political hierarchies that subjugated and economically exploited the black women to whom it referred. Collins further argues,

> By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white “family, the mammy still knows her “place” as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination (1990: 71).
For these reasons, Collins suggests that the “mammy” is a controlling image that is applied to black women. This image—which, I would argue, persists in 21st Century New York City, for example, and is also applied to other women of color—promotes an understanding of black women as inherently nurturing and as contended to do work associated with the domestic sphere.

Collins’ discussion of the term “mammy” returns to the familial and loving aspects of the black domestic worker’s relationship to the family that employed her. Van Wormer, Jackson, and Sudduth (2012) point to these aspects as two of the great paradoxes of this relationship. They state: “The maid who invariably was seen by whites as part of the white family was in no sense truly a member of their family” (2012: 15). As I note later in this chapter and explore in depth in Chapter Three, this rhetoric of “just like family” was and continues to be a powerful one that, like the term “mammy,” concealed the uncomfortable power dynamic implicit in domestic work. Furthermore, Van Wormer, Jackson, and Sudduth (2012) identify two additional paradoxes related to love: 1. “Small white children sometimes felt closer to their black caretakers than they did to their mother, a love that often was not acknowledged by others” and 2. “While the domestic servants gave such dutiful care to the white children in the family, their own children were often necessarily neglected (2012: 15). The black domestic worker during Jim Crow, like the contemporary child caretaker, was also performing emotional labor.

Tucker (1988) notes that just as during slavery, black domestic workers served as “mother surrogates” who were paid to care for white children, but they were also biological mothers who worked to support their own children. In The Help, Stockett
explores this dynamic through the character Minny, whose oldest daughter cares for Minny's other children while she and her husband are at work, and through the character Constantine, who raises Miss Skeeter after sending her own daughter to Chicago. As both the *The Help* and the oral histories featured in *Telling Memories Among Southern Women* attest, the relationships between domestic workers and white children were immensely loving. Leigh Campbell, a white woman who grew up Tucker interviewed recounted,

> And Mammy… Oh, she had the sweetest cheeks, and we used to crawl up in her lap and just pat her and pat her and just love and kiss her. And after I was grown, we lived down the street, and Mammy would ride the streetcar out to see us. I’d see Mammy coming, and she was coming to spend the day with us, and we were just thrilled (1988: 48).

This interviewee also speaks to the fact these relationships were often long-lasting and extended beyond the duration of a domestic worker’s employment with a family.

Stockett describes similar moments of affection and long-lasting love between Aibileen and Mae Mobley and between Constantine and Miss Skeeter in *The Help*. Tucker argues that white southerner’s relationship with the black domestic worker was defined by the duality of hate—fueled by racial and political tension—and the love that Tucker and Stockett describe.

Black female domestic workers were expected to conceal their intelligence, thus reinforcing their employers’ sense of white supremacy. Not only would an uneducated domestic worker be easier to control, she would also be less marketable professionally and would thus be more tolerant of low wages and poor treatment, as well as less likely to quit (van Wormer, et. al 2012). Black domestic workers were also infantilized. They were “scolded, expected to be obedient and to suppress defiant reactions to orders (van Wormer, et. al 2012). This dynamic, Van Wormer, Jackson, and Sudduth argue, points to the final paradox of domestic work during Jim Crow: “Black women servants were
sometimes treated like children by the ‘lady of the house,’ but during tough times the white women looked to them for strength and comfort” (2012:15). The relationship between white women and their domestic workers was characterized by mutual dependency. White women relied on their maids and nannies to perform necessary household tasks, to cook for the family, and to care for the children. The domestic worker, in turn, depended on her employer for income and help with practical problems (van Wormer, et. al 2012).

Several scholars have noted the dramatic decrease in the number of black American women working as domestic workers since Reconstruction. Black American women had always dominated domestic work and by 1920 constituted the single largest group in the field. As late as 1940, 60 percent of black American women worked as domestics (Wrigley 1995). By 1980, however, the proportion of black American women in domestic work had fallen to 3.5 percent (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). This decrease can be attributed in part to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it possible for black American women to leave domestic service and pursue jobs in other fields. Women in the last generation of domestic workers also described, however, that they had come from a long line of maids, servants and nannies and would make sure that their daughters did not follow the same path (van Wormer, et. al. 2012; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Wrigley 1995).

While many scholars have characterized the relationship between masters and their slaves—and, later, whites and their black servants and employees—which, in many cases, combined love, duty, protection, and exploitation, as paternalistic—scholars such as Judith Rollins and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo suggest that the term “maternalistic,”
which goes beyond the masculine concept of paternalism, more accurately describes the mistress-servant relationship.

**Paternalism, Maternalism, and Personalism**

Maternalism, as Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) describes it, is the “unilateral positioning of employer as benefactor who receives personal thanks, recognition, and validation of self from the domestic worker” (172). In the maternalistic relationship, the employee, or the caretaker, is subordinate to the employer. It is also a one-way relationship, defined primarily by the employers’ gestures of charity, unsolicited advice, assistance, and gifts. The domestic employee is obligated to respond with extra hours of service, personal loyalty, and job commitment. Maternalism underlines the deep class inequalities between employers and employees. More problematically, because employer maternalism positions the employee as needy, deficient, and childlike, it does not allow the employee any dignity and respect (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001:208).

Employer maternalism is exploitative, and leaves employees feeling ignored, invisible, and disrespected. However, the maternalistic employer views herself as altruistic and kind, from which she derives pleasure (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

One woman Hondagneu-Sotelo interviewed expressed this maternalistic attitude. Hondagneu-Sotelo writes: “She told me about how her friend Diane, ‘who is very, I mean, really very wealthy,’ had through her church befriended a single black mother and begun helping her. ‘Diane has almost adopted them,’ she pouted, ‘and I’m just so envious! Don’t you know of a little family that I could get to know, that I could visit?’” (2001). Similarly, many employers in her study described doing favors for and giving gifts and money to their children’s caretakers because it made them feel generous and kind. These maternalistic acts ensure better job performance and loyalty from employees, who feel indebted to the women who employ them.
Personalism, on the other hand, is a bi-lateral relationship in which individuals do not recognize each other solely in terms of their role but rather as people “embedded in a unique set of social relations” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001: 172). While this relationship is still asymmetrical, the employer recognizes the employee as a particular person, “the recognition and consideración [consideration] necessary for dignity and respect to be realized” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001: 208).

Developing Relationships

Several scholars have called attention to the varying levels of emphasis contemporary employers and caretakers place on developing relationships with one another. While many employers and caretakers agree that it is important to develop open, trusting relationships, others go out of their way to avoid conversation entirely (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). When the domestic worker is caring for a child as opposed to solely cleaning or cooking, the employer is more inclined to get to know her. The motivation for forming this relationship can be maternalistic if the employer is only making an effort to get to know her child’s caretaker for personal gain. For example, many employers in Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study described developing relationships with their caretaker in the hope that doing so would ensure better quality work or adherence to directions. Some mothers enjoyed talking to caretakers about their personal lives, and then giving unsolicited advice.

Many employers and caretakers described the difficulty of finding time to form relationships. As one woman described, “When she [the nanny/housekeeper] comes [to work], I’m ready to get going with my own work. When I’m taking over from her, she’s ready to get on with her own life, and so whose time do you spend developing the
relationship?” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Developing a relationship with a one’s employer or employee becomes a third shift (after the first shift at the workplace and the second shift at home) (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) argues that developing a relationship with a caregiver is one way to transmit information and expectations relating to mothers’ cultural logics of childrearing: “Parents who hire someone to provide child care also want assurances that their model for disciplining, stimulating, and nurturing children will be followed, assurances they can receive only by getting to know the caregiver” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Employers in Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study also describe the relationship as being useful for following up with caregivers at the end of the day to make sure that certain expectations have been met.

Navigating Different Cultural Logics of Childrearing

Employers and caretakers often have divergent views on childrearing methods. My research explores how these two figures in a child’s life reconcile their different views. I hypothesize that although literature on best parenting practice and organizations such as the Baby College suggest that the middle-class approach to parenting is the best, there is a great deal of information regarding effective parenting exchanged mutually between mothers and childcare providers.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), Colen (2005), and Wrigley (1995) have documented that employers and caretakers disagree about decisions such as what a child eats, how a child is disciplined, how warmly a child should be dressed, how to quiet a crying baby, how much time a child should spend with his or her parents, what kinds of activities should fill a child’s day, and how involved adults should be in those activities. Some
caretakers admire middle-class parents for setting limits on television and punishing their children with time outs rather than spanking, and are eager to learn these strategies (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Others criticize middle-class parents for what they perceive as over indulgence, coddling, and, in some cases, emotional neglect of children. Some of these critics, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) describes, “try to follow their employers’ example because it is their job to do so, while others attempt to establish their own authority as professional care providers, instructing parents on how to properly raise children” (154).

One caretaker Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) interviewed described secretly subverting her employer’s wishes by feeding the child under her care healthy, unprocessed foods instead of the macaroni and cheese and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that his mother prepared for him every day. Most caretakers in this sample were at least willing to try the discipline method their employers preferred.

Colen (2005), whose study focused exclusively on West Indian caretakers and the families they worked for, observed that parents wanted different things from their child’s caretaker depending on the age of the child. Parents with infants and younger children sought loving, nurturing, attentive caretakers. As children grew older, however, parents were more concerned with the enculturation and socialization of their child and worried that caretakers would not be able to provide this.

As children grew, many wanted workers to read to and provide other intellectual stimulation for children; take them to parks, playgrounds, and play dates where they could socialize with other children; engage in interactive play; and enculturate them in particular ways. Although employers appreciated when workers read to children and provided sociability, often through sitters’ networks, several thought West Indian sitters might not engage ‘enough’ in interactive play or ‘get down on the floor and play with’ children at home or at playgrounds (2005: 94).

Parents also expressed concern about their caretaker’s English proficiency or command of standard English as their children grew older. Parents of older children who shared
these concerns chose to enroll their kids in part-time day care, supplementing the nurturance and care of their in-home caretakers with the additional stimulation, educational activity, and interaction with other children and adults (Colen 2005).

In her study of 26 West Indian child caretakers and how they interact with public space in Brooklyn, NY, Tamara Mose Brown (2011) briefly addresses “cultural clashes in perceptions of childrearing.” On the one hand, parents and other caretakers Mose Brown interviewed complained that West Indian caretakers were disengaged and did not interact enough with the children under their care. One of the most common criticisms was that West Indian caretakers take their charges to playgrounds and parks and spend their time sitting and talking to one another instead of engaging with the children. Mose Brown dissects these criticisms and offers several compelling explanations for them. She found that many of the West Indian caretakers in her sample spent much of their time at playgrounds sitting on benches to claim space. With their arms full of strollers, diaper bags, lunch boxes and toys, these caretakers sought a home base at the playground where their many belongings would be safe and where the children under their care knew to find them. In addition, on hot days these caretakers sought shaded refuge from the heat. They spent a great deal of time talking to one another because, Mose Brown and others have found, there is a complex, tight-knit social network of caretakers. These social networks mitigate the isolation than many caretakers feel on the job and allow them to exchange information about child-friendly activities, employers, and salaries. These networks also benefit the children whom the caretakers are watching: many of the participants in Mose Brown’s study remarked that when they were at the playground sitting among five other caretakers, there were six sets of eyes on each child instead of one.
Mose Brown also found that parents’ complaints about childcare providers’ inattentiveness at playgrounds reflect differing cultural ideas regarding appropriate parenting. West Indian sitters, as she refers to them, did not feel any need to be like “helicopter moms” and instead allowed children to explore independently (2011: 54). They did not expect to develop relationships with parents watching their own kids by demonstrating how attentive they were to the children under their care, nor did they feel pressure to demonstrate that they were “good parents” (2011: 54). Overall, West Indian childcare providers had very different ideas about how to interact with children, with each other, and with public spaces than did parents.

Childcare providers in Mose Brown’s sample had similar criticisms of the parents who employed them and of those whom they observed in playgrounds, parks, bookstores, and museums. One common criticism was regarding cleanliness. They expressed surprise that parents and certain caretakers would get down on the floor and interact with children; they themselves refrained from doing the same out of concern for cleanliness. They criticized their employers’ own cleanliness and described them as “dirty,” “filthy,” “nasty,” and “disgusting” (2011: 54). Many caretakers “didn’t understand how families in the United States could have dogs indoors, especially when there were children around” (2011: 55).

Just as parents at the playground criticized caretakers’ level of engagement with children, caretakers often criticized their employers’ level of engagement with their children. Mose Brown identifies the “common sentiment among West Indian childcare providers that employers didn’t enjoy spending time with their kids and that white middle-class working women simply ‘had children in order to say that they had children’” (2011: 55). One caretaker Mose Brown interviewed believed that black women, and,
more specifically, Caribbean women like herself, are generally more nurturing and attentive to children’s needs because, in her words, “it’s something that’s really in us and in the Caribbean, women, girls, are trained at a very young age almost from the time they pop out, to be mothers. To be the nurturing… you know, that’s part of our culture” (2011: 55).

Mose Brown also found that caretakers and their employers often had different ideas about what constitutes a “real” mother.

According to the childcare providers I studied, a “real mother” was someone who took care of the meals for her family regardless of work hours, someone who prided herself in personally caring for her children by bathing them, ensuring their good citizenship through discipline, and showing them love when it was the right time. Watching over a child constantly was not considered part of being a “real mother” (2011: 56).

Many caretakers in the study described their attempts to “teach” their employers how to be “real” mothers through their work, “although many of them complained that these ‘lessons’ went unnoticed or at least their employers did not connect them to any concept of motherhood” (2011: 56). Although Mose Brown only devotes one paragraph to this dynamic between caretakers and their employers, it is evident that caretakers often see themselves as knowing the “right” or the “best” way to parent, even if their style of parenting is markedly different from that of their employers. Furthermore, caretakers and their employers often disagree fundamentally about who is a “real” mother and what “real” motherhood looks like, although they may never discuss this openly.

**Conclusion**

While the social and economic landscape has transformed significantly since the era of slavery, there are several threads that connect domestic work pre-Emancipation to that of the Jim Crow South and that of 21st century United States. In each of these cases,
the home has been a political space in which women of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and nationalities—women who might not otherwise cross paths—interact. Furthermore, regardless of the historical moment in which it has been performed, this work can be characterized as emotional labor—labor that is paradoxically hierarchical and intimate. The relationships women female employers have shared with their domestic employees across these cases were and continue to be complex.

As I have argued in this chapter, there is a historical legacy of black and brown women maintaining white households and raising white children. However, the relationship these women experienced with their mistresses and employers has shifted across these varying social and political climates. During slavery and Jim Crow, white women depended on their domestic workers, yet abused and silenced them. Despite this treatment, female house slaves and, years later, black domestic workers, were extremely knowledgeable about the nuanced tasks their work entailed. Although their work was undervalued and largely unrecognized, they managed entire homes and families, cooking elaborate meals, efficiently cleaning homes, and carefully raising children. Lower-class black and brown women continue to do this work today and although hierarchical relationships between these women and their middle-class employers persist, I argue that there is a great deal of conversation and information exchange that takes place between employer and employee. This dynamic, I offer, subverts and continues to complicate the hierarchical nature of this work.

An examination of the relationships contemporary domestic and care workers share with their employers and, specifically, what these two women learn from one another in the process of working together, also speaks to the work that Geoffrey Canada and organizations such as the Baby College are doing. In the following chapters I
demonstrate that domestic workers, who, in many cases, share socioeconomic and racial backgrounds with parents who might attend Baby College workshops, indeed possess a great deal of cultural capital, which they share with their employers and with the children under their care. Considering this dynamic of such relationships, I argue, can dramatically affect the way we conceptualize “good parenting” and the value of domestic work in academic and popular spheres.
“I learn from them, they learn from me”: Information Exchange Among Employers and Caretakers

“I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning” (1).

“‘Dear Miss Myrna,’” I read, ‘“how do I remove the rings from my fat, slovenly husband’s shirt collar when he is such a pig and… sweats like one too…”’

Wonderful. A column on cleaning and relationships. Two things I know absolutely nothing about.

‘Which one she want to get rid of?’ Aibileen asks. ‘The rings or the husband?’

I stare at the page. I wouldn’t know how to instruct her to do either one.

‘Tell her vinegar and Pine-Sol soak. Then let it set in the sun a little while.’

I write quickly on my pad. ‘Sit in the sun for how long?’

‘Bout an hour. Let it dry.’

I pull out the next letter and, just as quickly, she answers it. After four or five, I exhale, relieved.

‘Thank you, Aibileen. You have no idea how much this helps”’ (93).

—Kathryn Stockett, The Help

Despite the questions of historical accuracy and authorship I discuss in the introduction with respect to The Help, Kathryn Stockett exposes a significant paradox in the historical relationship between black domestic workers and their white employers: while this relationship was fundamentally unequal and black women were often powerless and voiceless within it, white women learned a great deal from their help and deferred to them in some instances. Stockett calls attention to this paradox in the relationships between several of the white and black characters in the novel. The epigraph comes from one of the first conversations between Miss Skeeter, a white woman who has recently graduated from the University of Mississippi, and Aibileen, an older black woman with considerably less education working as a maid in the home of one of Miss Skeeter’s friends. Miss Skeeter has just landed her first job writing the Miss Myrna column—a column about housekeeping—for the Jackson Journal. Realizing how
little she knows about the subject, Miss Skeeter approaches Aibileen for help. Similarly, Aibileen’s friend Minny, one of the novel’s three protagonists, gives her employer, Miss Celia, regular cooking lessons, teaching her about the utility of Crisco and how to fry chicken perfectly.

These conversations between white and black women, employers and employees, suggest that employer/employee relationship in the Jim Crow South was more complex than knowledge-holder/knowledge-receiver or instruction-giver/instruction-follower. These two moments in *The Help* reveal that black domestic workers were skilled in ways that their white employers were not and, despite the social hierarchy that subjugated and silenced them in their work environments, there were instances of exchange and instances in which this hierarchy was subtly subverted.

In this chapter I will explore how the employers and caretakers in my samples learn from one another in their working relationships. In what ways do employers both bestow information on and learn from the women who work for them? How can this process of information exchange affect the way we think about parenting practices and the value of domestic labor? In discussing these questions through my conversations with individual caretakers and employers, I hope to illuminate the shortcomings of organizations such as The Baby College that operate according to a deficit model or, in other words, view lower-class minority parents as lacking the insight necessary to raise a child.

2.1 “I Don’t Know What to Do With a Baby”: Learning to Care

I was first curious to explore the differences in how employers and caretakers had learned to raise, parent, or care for children. I hypothesized that the employers, who
were generally more educated and occupied higher socioeconomic positions, would have relied more heavily on books and institutionally-informed standards of child rearing. I was surprised to find that the women in both samples described learning processes that were primarily experience- and observation-based.

Elena perceived reliance on parenting books to be distinctly American. She commented that she and other Hispanic women “don’t learn from books or anything like that, not like those Americans that say, ‘Well this book says that and this book says this’” (Elena 3). A few employers in my study did rely on books at one point or another while raising their children. Rosie, who was very concerned about the effect her newborn would have on her sleep schedule, asked her husband to read books on sleeping. Abigail briefly mentioned the book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*, which she read but did not consider a major influence on her raising of her sons. Nicole found most useful books that focused on development and “what’s happening to your baby this week,” rather than childrearing strategies (Nicole 5). Tamy, now a veteran mother with four grown children, relied the most on parenting literature, to the point that it became a joke among her children: “I read a ton of books … my kids made fun of me … they’d go, ‘Oh, Mom are you reading a new book today about what to say to us?’ Or, ‘Oh, she has to read a book to know how to be a mother?’” (Tamy 4). Tamy was so inspired by one book, *The Biggest Job You’ll Ever Have: The Hyde School Program for Character-Based Education and Parenting*, that she and her husband formed a group of parents that met weekly to discuss its methodology and how they could implement it in their own families.

In this regard, Tamy was an anomaly in the employer sample. Most women had read a few books but found them unhelpful. Georgia ignored the books she had read
because she found them limiting: “It’s really hard because you read the books that make you think that there’s one way to do something” (Georgia 3). Similarly, Nicole dismissed the parenting books because she found their prescriptions limited and unrealistic:

So there have been some books that I’ve started reading or I’ve kind of skimmed them or I know what their approach is but partly because I’m busy and partly because no one approach is going to be completely compatible with how I feel, I’ve never been like “I’m going to commit to Ferber and I’m going to read the Ferber books and then I’m going to implement Ferber.” We’re just not that regimented (Nicole 5).

Lydia also commented that she had read several books but none of them worked for her and her husband. These women initially bought into what has become a parent education industry, but ultimately strayed from the advice the parenting books offered.

Most employers learned either from observing and speaking to other parents or from experience. Nicole and Abigail relied on peers and friends for advice relating to practical issues, such as how to swaddle a baby, how to make a baby stop crying, and what toys and books are most entertaining and educational. Sariah and Nicole both drew on their own childhood experiences and tried to replicate their parents’ styles and strategies. All of the employers, especially those with more than one child, described learning and re-learning to parent as a process of trial and error. As Abigail phrased it, “The first thing I learned about being a parent was that the kids teach you” (Abigail 5).

The employers’ comments reveal a unanimous perception that even among parents who share racial, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds, there is no one right way to parent, and every parent has to discover the style that works best for him or her.

The caretakers, all of whom, with the exception of Jess, were also parents, spoke similarly about their processes of learning to raise and care for children. The most prominent difference in how caretakers described this learning process was with respect to parenting books. While many employers had read and subsequently discarded books,
only two caretakers had read any parenting literature. Linda commented that she hadn’t read “too many books” and instead “learned kind of on my own” (Linda 4). Sugar, who had tremendous anxiety about her ability to parent, given her own abusive childhood, read a few books. Like Tamy, Sugar reported that her oldest daughter enjoyed calling her out on the strategies and techniques she derived from reading. Sugar had gained confidence by the time she adopted her second child and stopped relying on books at all.

The six caretakers unanimously agreed that their previous experiences with caring for others’ children were most useful when it came to learning to parent or learning to care for children professionally. Jess started babysitting as a young teenager, took a babysitting class at a local youth organization, and gained experience teaching preschool for credit through her high school. Linda, Sugar, Eleanor, and Zerina all had experience caring for children in their own families. Linda, whose parents adopted and fostered several children, was among the oldest of her twelve siblings. Caring for one child—whether it was her own daughter or her employer’s daughter, May—felt like second nature. Sugar, who was expected to feed, change, and look after her niece as a ten-year-old, agreed that her first caretaking job felt “instinctive” (Sugar 5). Eleanor and Zerina described similar experiences, which they strongly identified with Caribbean culture:

So you learn, and I think that goes for most of the nannies that come from the Caribbean that are here now; we learned how to care for kids from observing. Some of us learned because we were the older girls in the family and we had to watch out for the younger brothers and sisters … they took care of their brothers and sisters while their parents went to work. So we didn’t go to nanny school or anything like that—we learned from experience and from observation (Eleanor 3).

The lifelong experience of caring for children that all the women described differed significantly from the way the employers and caretakers learned to parent or care for
children. Most of the employers remarked that they had never so much as held a baby until their own was born. The differences in experience levels that participants reported can, perhaps, speak to the “controlling image” of the black woman as inherently nurturing and caring that Patricia Hill Collins address in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990).

### 2.2 Navigating Different Styles of Childrearing: Employers’ Perspectives

Though employers and caretakers reported similar processes through which they had learned to parent, they often held different views as to how children should be cared for, day-to-day and in general. In her best-selling memoir, *Bossypants* (2011), the comedian, writer, and actress Tina Fey describes an instance in which she strongly disagrees with her daughter’s babysitter’s choices but suppresses her feelings:

> When my daughter was about two, I was convinced that our babysitter was cutting her fingernails too short. They looked red sometimes, and she was going below the white part; it was all wrong, in my opinion. I know you’re thinking that the obvious thing to do would be to point this out to the babysitter. Hear me out… I couldn’t tell the woman who so lovingly and devotedly watches my kid every day that I didn’t like how she did this one thing… And here’s the next layer of truth: As someone who grew up middle-class with no nannies or housekeepers of any kind, I didn’t know how to handle it. I was not just a first-time mother, I was a first-time cross-cultural nanny-communicator and I was broken (2011: 256).

While Fey pokes fun at herself for obsessing about something as seemingly insignificant as the length of her daughter’s fingernails, she calls attention to a dilemma that many caretakers and employers in my sample described facing: how to navigate different styles of caretaking, or, to use Fey’s language, how to be cross-cultural nanny-communicators.

As I discuss in the previous section, Abigail and Nicole expected that their children’s caretakers would follow their directions and defer to them in decisions regarding their children. Inevitably employers experience times when their child’s caretaker is handling a situation differently than they would.
As a new mother, Tamy described deferring entirely to Lorena, the first of four caretakers she and her husband employed. Tamy commented: “And especially because Lorena was older … she almost knew more than I did. So there was this power dynamic where she was like, ‘This is how it’s done.’ And I’m like, ‘Okay, whatever you say, I don’t know what I’m doing’” (Tamy 11). The question of power came up in my conversations with participants in both samples. A power dynamic exists in every employer-caretaker relationship by virtue of the fact that the employer is paying the caretaker to perform a service and therefore has a say in how that service is performed. Tamy’s comment suggests, however, that Lorena’s experience and knowledge about childrearing subverted this power dynamic entirely. This subversion is interesting, given that institutions such as the Harlem Children’s Zone’s Baby College favor what they identify as the middle-class logic of childrearing. Although Tamy is wealthy and highly educated—the poster woman for white upper-middle-class motherhood—while Lorena, although trained as a lawyer in Brazil, was lower-class in the United States and an immigrant still learning English, Lorena maintained the upper hand in matters pertaining to the care of Tamy’s child.

Nicole, who had worked with two caretakers before her son’s first birthday, also described deferring to these women in certain instances but always had the final say. Nicole commented: “[Julia will] tell me like … oh, if he rolls over on his stomach you can let him stay on his stomach because he already practiced that, or whatever. So both of them sort of educate me about some things. But if I tell Julia, ‘put him on his back because back is best,’ she will do that” (Nicole 10). Several participants in the employer sample mentioned the “back is best” principle. Lydia specifically identified this motto as one of the generational differences between her parents’ childrearing practices and her own. Indeed, the belief that babies should sleep on their backs is relatively new to the
parenting landscape. In 1994, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development launched “Back to Sleep,” a national public health campaign recommending back-sleeping to decrease the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) (Kendall). For Nicole, Julia offered her “folk education”—intuitive or experience-based beliefs about the practical nuances of caring for children—but this folk wisdom was trumped by institutionalized beliefs about best practices in parenting.

Several participants in the employer sample expressed feeling frustrated by or dissatisfied with their caretakers’ decisions and actions. Rosie, whose daughter was teething at the time of the interview, took issue with the objects her caretaker, Martina, would allow her to put in her mouth: “She’ll let her chew on particular plastics that I’m dubious about or lets her chew on things that I’m like ‘Ehh, I don’t know if I’d let her chew on that’ (Rosie 14). I asked Rosie if she was able to articulate her uncertainty to Martina, and she responded: “I do. Yes, I am mildly reserved in doing that for some reason because I understand the difficulty of keeping a child happy all day, so I don’t really want to provide a lot of constraints for her based on my superstitions about toxic plastics. So I don’t do it as much as my head does” (Rosie 14). Like Fey, Rosie stifles her criticism—which, like “back is best,” is informed by institutional health standards—because of the nature of the job her caretaker does.

Abigail—who described herself as a demanding boss and bashfully admitted that she had prepared a ten-page handbook to inform her nannies of expectations, routines, and other relevant information—also described offering feedback selectively. For her, this reticence had less to do with acknowledging the difficulty of her nannies’ jobs than with ensuring that when she did speak up, she would be taken seriously. She
commented: “I treat my nannies with respect and try to give them some flexibility so that they’ll listen to me when I’m trying to express the things that I really care about” (Abigail 13). Nevertheless, Abigail recalled two instances in which she disagreed with her caretakers’ choices, voiced an opinion, and expected that her nanny would adjust accordingly:

There are some things that they do that I disagree with, like I had been frustrated with Ada because I thought she had been too harsh with my older son and … she took that feedback and dealt with it. And there have been other times that I’ve been frustrated with my other nanny because she’s been too soft, and I’m like, “You’ve got to be kidding me” (Abigail 13).

While there were some stylistic differences she was able to overlook, there was a point at which she drew the line and confronted her caretakers about the inconsistencies in how they were treating her children and how she wanted her children to be treated.

Abigail referred to these stylistic differences again later in our conversation and elaborated, stating that beyond differences in opinions about how harsh or lenient to be with a child, she and her caretakers had different definitions of family (Abigail 14). These differences were less significant to her, however, than her caretakers’ fundamental attitudes about motherhood: “But I think that, in general, how both of them work, as mothers, might do things differently than like… they’re both mothers that 100% support their kids … But I think, while they do things differently, like the way that they are trying to raise their own kids is the reason they are in my house” (Abigail 14). Although Abigail and her caretakers come from different countries, speak different languages, make drastically different amounts of money, and have different ideas about how children should be raised and households should be run, these many differences are ultimately superseded by their shared commitment to their children.
Georgia, not always pleased with how her son’s caretaker chose to fill his day, made subversive attempts to control their daily activities. While she said she felt “fine” when Elena took Ellison to Chuckie Cheese and “[didn’t] really care,” she guessed that she would have said something had their trips become more frequent (Georgia 12). To prevent this from happening, she signed Ellison up for music classes and attempted to “orchestrate the other days of the week according to what [she] felt was important. And then it was like, ‘That’s fine if you do things like Chuckie Cheese on your days’” (Georgia 12). Although Georgia never expressed her unease about certain activities outright, she found indirect ways to ensure that her son was spending his week doing activities with which she felt comfortable.

Georgia and Aria, friends from Sunset Park, Brooklyn, who worked with the same caretaker, both described instances in which they acknowledged and accepted that Elena did things differently than they would. For Aria, the main difference between her style and Elena’s lay in their respective attitudes toward gender:

Her sense of gender norms is very fixed. One time I brought nail polish over to the house, to Ellison’s house. At the end of the day, I think Una had the nail polish on and I said something and she said something, like … big boys don’t wear nail polish. Something like that. Clearly that was part of her parenting of these kids. Kind of gender norms. I don’t think she liked it when Ellison went into the bathroom when Una was using the bathroom. Even when they were little. I don’t think she could see them taking a bath together, which they still do to this day (Aria 13).

Although Aria disagrees with this “fixed” sense of gender, she never shared these feelings with Elena but rather acknowledged that when the kids were with Elena, they would receive different messages about gender than they did when they were with her.

Georgia likewise recounted instances in which she recognized and appreciated that Elena’s style was different from her own. She described remarking to herself: ““Oh,
that didn’t occur to me.’ That’s something else you can do. But I think I felt like oh, that’s Elena’s style, which is fine … that’s a good style. And that’s different from my style and that’s sort of nice that he’s getting more than one way of doing things” (Georgia 9). While the Chuckie Cheese example suggests that there were specific aspects of Elena’s caretaking with which Georgia did take issue and about which she intended to speak up, she generally viewed their differences in opinion as a positive aspect of their professional relationship and of Elena’s relationship with her son.

The conversations and deliberations participants describe are an inevitable byproduct of the cultural conversion that occurs when middle-class women employ caretakers to work in their homes. The employee in this relationship is performing physical, mental, and emotional labor that is intimately connected to the self. Employers, as my participants’ testimonies demonstrate, experience an awareness of this self and find various ways to reconcile caretakers’ feelings and ideas with their own.

2.3 Navigating Different Styles of Childrearing: Caretakers’ Perspectives

Fey’s narrative offers readers little information about the nail-clipping babysitter’s perspective. The reader is left wondering whether she picked up on her Tina Fey’s anxiety about the child’s fingernails, if there were things her boss did that she disagreed with, and how she handled cross-cultural communicating. My conversations with the caretakers in my study revealed their often nuanced awareness of their employers’ expectations and concerns. While I had to prompt employers to talk about the ways in which their styles differed from their caretakers’, several participants in the caretaker sample spoke about these differences without being asked. As difficult as it may be for mothers to communicate with their caretakers across cultural and
socioeconomic lines, the caretakers seem to think more actively and urgently about the
task of reconciling different styles and attitudes toward childrearing. While employers
had to stop to articulate differences in their styles and their caretakers’, caretakers could
relay their observations about these differences without hesitation. I concluded that
while some caretakers had give-and-take relationships with their employers, others
sought to find common ground, and still others conformed their style to match that of
their employers and, like Tina Fey, kept their opinions to themselves. All, however,
developed a form of double consciousness, to borrow from DuBois (1903). That is, in
any given moment they were aware of how they would handle a situation on their own as
well as how their employers expected them to handle it.

For Sugar, the dynamic between her and her employer was much like the
dynamic Tamy described: “In a number of ways, Sally deferred to my experience as a
caregiver when it came to questions about Felicia” (Sugar 5). Linda, who has been
working as a nanny for over twenty years, also observed ways in which her employer
defered to her: “Actually, my boss now … she probably thought I could do a better job
in rearing her children, so she just took my word for just about anything I wanted to do
with them … she lets me do what I feel is necessary for the child. She knows I’m not
going to put her child in danger” (Linda 16). These two comments are particularly
poignant because although Sugar is college-educated, Linda is not, and both come from
lower-class backgrounds. Moreover, both worked for middle- and upper-middle-class
families and described differences between their general styles and those of their
employers. Sugar, for example, placed enormous emphasis on manners and etiquette,
while her employers had little concern for either. Linda emphasized frugality and
discipline above all else, values she attributed to her upbringing in a large, poor family
but did not share with her employer. Despite these differences, both women had reciprocal, supportive relationships with their employers and were given a great deal of freedom to care for the children as they saw fit.

Eleanor described the process of finding common ground between her own standards and style and those of her employer: “In coming here, it was basically, okay, this is what I learned, and try to apply it, but very early on I realized, okay, this is not working. So I tried to find a common ground where I can instill some of the things that I learned in raising my son, I try to incorporate that with the parents that I work with” (Eleanor 2). For Eleanor, the challenge of reconciling these two, sometimes conflicting, styles was closely connected to her own cultural beliefs about how children should be raised. Ignoring these beliefs entirely to accommodate her employers did not work for her, but she had to find a middle ground with which both she and her employers felt comfortable. She had to anticipate how her employers would handle situations involving their kids and how they would expect her to handle them. Eleanor describes the difficulty of communicating expectations and of navigating different styles:

Not all of them understand what it means to have somebody working in your home from a different background, a different country…. people who say this is the way I want things done, and then it’s done this way and then they’re like, “Well, no, I thought you understood what I meant.” “Okay, you said this, so I understood that as what you meant” (Eleanor 4).

Her former employers did not acknowledge that Eleanor might have different ideas about how to do things.

Jess and Linda clearly distinguished between their employers’ styles and their own styles, but, like Georgia, instead of trying to find common ground between them, they acknowledged that the children would be held to different standards depending on which adults they were with. Linda informed me almost immediately after introducing
herself that she refuses to care for children if their parents are at home. When I asked why she had this rule, she explained that parents have different rules and expectations for children than she does. As long as she is caring for them, she wants children to behave according to her standards. Linda even takes this a step further: she almost exclusively cares for children in her own home rather than in her employers’ homes.

Linda offered her employer’s attitude toward electronics as an example. When we spoke shortly after the holiday season, the three children Linda cares for had just received iPads and other “electronic things” for Christmas. Because Linda “[doesn’t] believe a child needs to have this stuff” and thinks “they need to learn how to play with each other and learn how to give and all of that kind of stuff,” she does not allow them to play with electronic games when they are under her care (Linda 9). She acknowledges, however, that their mother does not share these views and allows the children to indulge in these activities when they are at home.

Jess, a young woman who has been working as a nanny while finishing her bachelor’s degree, took issue with a lot of choices her employer made but, like Linda, recognized that they had different styles and did not try to find common ground. Jess observed that her employer is much more lenient than she finds appropriate: “They’re not very … strict when it comes to how the kids act with them and other adults. They’re very relaxed, in that aspect. And it’s not that they don’t know, they’ll be like, ‘Oh, stop doing that,’ ‘You can’t do that,’ blah blah blah—they’re not enforcing it. They’re not disciplinary” (Jess 4). Jess commented that she has a “different way of handling situations”: “I’m definitely more structured and I am the adult; you are going to respect me, you’re not going to talk to me in rude tones. If I ask you to do something, you need to do it, regardless of whether you understand why you need to or not … you need to
take a bath because you’re dirty and you stink” (Jess 4). Jess had never spoken to her employers about the differences in their styles of discipline. While she appreciated that her employers “back [her] up” when they are home together, she did not intend to change her methods in any way to accommodate theirs, nor did she expect that her employers would change their methods.

Discipline was not the only aspect of her employers’ childrearing style of which Jess disapproved. She also commented: “The kids sleep in the bed with them still. Like both kids, in the bed, with the parents, like every single night. And to me that’s just insane” (Jess 5). While Jess was very clear that she would never stand for that in her own house and speculated openly about the effect this prolonged co-sleeping would have on her employers’ marriage, she acknowledged that this practice was ultimately coming from a loving place and accepted it as a difference in how she and her employers conceived of family life.

Elena and Zerina also described instances in which they disapproved of or disagreed with their employers but did not share these opinions. Elena mentioned parents who “just work, work, work, and they leave, leaving their children with their nannies for most of the day, ninety percent of the time” (Elena 7). Although she “just [didn’t] think that [was] right,” she would never openly voice this opinion to her employer. She accepted that they had different priorities and managed their time differently. Zerina described her former employer as being too loose: “They want this, he want the juice and you give him the juice and he just throw it out. And throw the cereal and stuff like that. And then the mother just say, okay, never mind, I’ll give you something else” (Zerina 7). These interactions were difficult for Zerina to watch, but she stifled her urge to speak to her employer about her tolerance for bad behavior. She
refused to use the same standards for the children when she was caring for them, however: “And I couldn’t … When I’m alone with them I just say, ‘No, this is not your mother, I’m not going to give it to you’” (Zerina 7).

Elena was the only caretaker who openly voiced disagreement with her employer. She noted that she and her employer have different cultural ideas about how to raise children:

We [Hispanics] raise them a certain way and they [Americans] raise them another way. We have a few more restrictions … and they don’t because, for example, if the child is … they give him everything he wants and they let him do as he pleases. I don’t agree with that because I believe children need restrictions. They need rules (Elena 8).

Elena is not shy about sharing this opinion with her employer. For example, she commented:

I go to the street with him and … the entire time, he has to walk holding my hand if he wants to walk. His mom lets him run around everywhere. She is very different. I tell her, “No, because he can cross the street, he can’t…” She has to be more careful with this … and I tell her things that she has to do (Elena 8).

Given the language barrier that exists between Elena, who speaks very little English, and her employer, who attempts to communicate with Elena in broken Italian, it is interesting that while Elena was not the only participant in the caretaker sample who took issue with her employer’s style, she was the only one to express her opinions. I did not speak with Elena’s current employer and thus do not know how she responded to Elena’s advice. But the fact that Elena, who grew up in an extremely poor family in Mexico, where she received only an elementary-school education before immigrating illegally to the United States, is having conversations such as this one with her employer, a highly educated middle-class American woman working as an architect, suggests that
relationships between employers and domestic workers are complex and challenges the idea that middle-class parents have all of the answers.

Eleanor described having to remind herself that although she and her employers had different cultural logics of childrearing, neither style was inherently better:

The way I look at it is, the way I'm doing it is not necessarily the way someone else is doing it. Because it's a different culture. It took me a while to realize, you know what, people in America do things differently. It doesn't mean it’s wrong, it just means it’s different. I had to more or less work with that. Okay, we can do this your way, we can do this my way, but it wasn’t like your way is wrong and my way is right, because I guess people would be looking at it the same way too, how it’s different but it works. Our way is different, but it works for us (Eleanor 6).

This attitude helped Eleanor perform her work in the way her employer expected of her. She also touches on the question that many parents, childcare workers, pediatricians, educators, and early childhood education specialists confront: What is the “right” or the “best” way to parent? Although for many educational institutions like the Baby College, “best-practice parenting” is aligned with middle-class American parenting, Eleanor suggests that the women who are raising middle-class American children while their parents are at work do not always agree.

Child caretakers face the unique challenge of reconciling their own cultural and experience-based beliefs about childrearing with those of their employers. The caretakers in my sample found different ways to handle this challenge: some, like Linda and Sugar, were given complete freedom to care for children as they saw fit. Others, like Eleanor, sought common ground between their styles and those of their employers. Most of the caretakers had strong opinions about how their employers parented but did not voice them. Instead, they accepted that children would be held to different standards and that households would run differently depending on which adult was the primary caregiver at
a given moment. Only one caretaker had ever openly criticized an employer’s parenting style. While these women handled cross-cultural nanny-communicating differently, all were acutely aware of the discrepancies between their styles and their employers’. Caretakers thought more analytically about this aspect of the employer-employee relationship than participants in the employer sample did.

Caretakers, like employees in any other professional setting, are paid to perform a service. However, the uniquely personal nature of this service makes their relationship to their work and to their employers complicated. Many women who work as caretakers have raised multiple children and have deeply rooted cultural beliefs about how children should be treated, how children’s time should be structured, how adults should relate to children, and how households should run. Caretakers bring these beliefs with them to their places of work and in many cases find them to be in conflict with their employers’ beliefs. Although caretakers often spend more time with children than parents do, because of the inherently hierarchical relationship between employer and employee, the imperative to reconcile different logics of childrearing is built into the work that these women do.

2.4 “Just So Much That I’ve Learned From Her”: Information Exchange

“You know, the time that she swept the floor by putting Ellison in a highchair. That had never occurred to me, that a highchair could be a place to hold your child so that you could actually accomplish something… That you could put toys in the highchair… you know, or when I couldn’t get him to eat and she could get him to eat and I asked her how and she said, ‘well, I read books to him when he’s eating and that way he keeps eating.’”

—Georgia

Although employers and caretakers often have different ideas about how children should be raised and find various ways to reconcile these differences, they also learn a great deal from one another. This project grew out of a conversation I had with
Georgia on her stoop in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, while we watched her son, Ellison, doodle on the sidewalk with chalk. A close family friend, Georgia often hired me to take care of Ellison, her cats, and her home during the summer months. That day, she had been telling me about Elena, the Mexican woman who cared for her son while she worked part-time at a public elementary school. Georgia, who is fiercely intelligent and an admirably committed mother, rattled off a list of tricks and strategies Elena had taught her.

Although Elena and Georgia share a close relationship, it is one that is inherently hierarchical, both in the sense that Georgia is Elena’s boss and in the sense that Georgia is privileged in ways that Elena is not because of her race, socioeconomic status, education, and citizenship. As I argue throughout this study, these are factors that collectively inform a cultural logic of childrearing. If we consider the work of organizations such as the Baby College and the political rhetoric involving the negligent minority mother/welfare queen, the institutions that govern our lives—schools, hospitals, governments—value Georgia’s logic of childrearing over Elena’s. Yet my initial conversation with Georgia revealed that she has learned quite a lot from Elena. This conversation prompted me to explore what other employers and caretakers learn from one another in their professional relationships.

My hypothesis—that employers and caretakers exchange a great deal of information and advice—proved true. I found, however, that employers and caretakers do not exchange the same kinds of information. In talking with these participants about what they had learned in their professional care relationships, I identified four kinds of knowledge: practical, detail-oriented knowledge related to childrearing; knowledge related to general parenting attitudes; knowledge related to navigating institutions; and
knowledge related to day-to-day life. In many cases, these different kinds of knowledge were connected to participants’ cultural backgrounds. Overall, caretakers offered their employers “folk education,” to borrow the words of one participant—practical advice related to childrearing that they had accumulated over years of experience. In many cases, employers reported that their caretaker had fundamentally changed their overall attitudes toward parenting. Employers, on the other hand, transmitted information unrelated to childrearing that better enabled caretakers to navigate institutions.

Employers spoke most emphatically about the practical information they had learned from their caretakers. Sariah bashfully confessed that their caretaker had taught them how to change diapers after their son, Charlie, was born. Tamy, who admitted that she “didn’t know what the hell [she] was doing,” credited Lorena, the first of four caretakers with whom she worked, with helping her raise her first child. And she continued to learn from Lorena even after her fourth child was born. Specifically, she absorbed Lorena’s tricks for efficiently getting the kids out of the house and into the car, as well as strategies to make them “do what you want them to do” (Tamy 15). Nicole often overreacted to her son’s temper tantrums and reported learning ways to handle them better by observing her caretaker. Georgia, Rosie, and Aria all described learning new ways to fill their children’s days from their caretakers. Georgia commented:

[Elena] would go to Barnes and Noble on a winter afternoon and that would be a hang out place. It wouldn’t have occurred to me that that’s an outing. And you know, she … she’d take him to Dunkin’ Donuts … It was just sort of like, oh, anything can be an outing (Georgia 9).

Aria, who also worked with Elena, agreed that she “had a very nice way to kind of set up a day for a kid” (Aria 11). Aria was particularly inspired by the way Elena found ways to provide structure—with regular meal times, for example—in a way that did not feel rigid. On days she did not work, Aria used Elena’s structure as a model for herself. Similarly,
Sean recalled marveling at Linda’s organizational skills and how efficiently Linda managed her daughter, May’s, extracurricular activities. She described the homework station Linda had set up for May in their kitchen, and commented that this idea would never have occurred to her.

Nicole and Sariah reported that their caretakers were teaching them to cook, and both women described these lessons as moments of meaningful cultural exchange. Nicole’s caretaker, Julia, had taught her to make several Dominican dishes that Nicole’s son had grown to love. Nicole, who identifies as half-Latina but does not have a cultural connection to her Caribbean-Panamanian roots, appreciated that Julia was fostering such a connection for her and for her family through food. Sariah’s cooking lessons were more basic initially; she commented that she had never learned to cook and often resorted to making grilled cheese sandwiches in the microwave. Zerina taught her the basics—rice, pasta, chicken—and then moved on to more involved Jamaican dishes such as stew chicken and curry goat. These lessons were especially important to Sariah because of her husband’s Caribbean background. She wanted their son to grow up eating Caribbean food so that he would feel connected to his Caribbean heritage and she relied on Zerina to help her provide that connection.

Rosie was the most effusive in talking about the practical knowledge her caretaker, Martina, had shared with her. As was the case with the other employers, Rosie learned a great deal from observing, but she also asked questions and engaged in open conversation with Martina. A new mother, Rosie commented that Martina was attuned to her daughter, Layla. Like Aria, Rosie referred specifically to how Martina structured Layla’s days:

She’s so incredibly responsive to Layla in a way that I even sometime struggle to be. She’ll say ‘Oh Layla! ... Oh no, she’s bored by this, we need to move on.’
She’ll then sit down and read books with her and then they’ll move to the next thing and then they’ll play with blocks... oh, no, Layla’s not liking this, we’re going to go walk into town (Rosie 9).

Rosie, who felt she was “not nearly as broad in [her] thinking about how to entertain [Layla], or what [she] should expect of her,” challenged herself to think as creatively as Martina did. Rosie also commented that she and her husband were having a difficult time weaning Layla; they had tried in vain to switch to bottle-feeding and were beginning to get very frustrated. Not only was Martina able to encourage Layla to take the bottle, she also introduced solid food: “I’ll come home and be like, ‘Oh my god, she eats banana now! That’s amazing, how did you get her to do that?’ And she’ll tell me, ‘Oh, I mixed it with, you know, the rice cereal’” (Rosie 9). Most impressive to Rosie were the little strategies like these that Martina employed. She described a similar instance in which she and her husband came home and found Martina reading to Layla, who at the time was barely seven months old:

I came home and Layla was laying back on her, just kind of lounging back on her, with a blanket over her and Martina was reading her a book. And this was a period in which this child would not have anything within a foot of it that it wasn’t going to put in its mouth and she couldn’t sit still. And here she was completely lounging, totally chilled out on her, having a book read to her (Rosie 10).

This experience was informative for two reasons: It had never occurred to Rosie that a read aloud could be an age-appropriate activity for a child as young as Layla. Furthermore, she learned to calm Layla down in a way that she had never been able to do. She reported that she “sat there in awe” and said, “‘I could never get her to do that!’ You know, there’s no way!” Martina taught Rosie to tuck the blanket around Layla to restrict her flailing arms the way she had done. When Rose tried it herself, Layla calmed down immediately, and she remarked, “‘Oh my god, that’s brilliant!’” (Rosie 12). Aside
from these specific strategies, Rosie commented that she has learned a tremendous amount overall from Martina “about how to think about what Layla can do” (Rosie 10).

One caretaker, Jess, guessed that her employer had absorbed similar practical tools from observing her. When Jess first started working for the Shaw family, the youngest son, Luke, had hysterical temper tantrums, “throwing things, wrecking rooms, tearing everything down; up the stairs, down the stairs, [and] hitting people” (Jess 6). Her employer found this behavior unacceptable but struggled to respond effectively: “The mom would just chase him up and down the stairs, ‘stop doing this, stop doing that, you need to talk to me, why are you so frustrated?’” (Jess 6). One day, Jess intervened. She took him into the empty spare bedroom and left him there until the tantrum had run its course. From then on, her employer followed her example: “From what I gathered after that, whenever he would throw a tempter tantrum … she would do the same thing I did” (Jess 6).

The transmission of practical knowledge was certainly not one-sided—Zerina spoke extensively about what she had learned from her employer, Sariah, about children’s sleep schedules. When Zerina first started working for Sariah, Sariah’s infant son, Charlie, insisted on sleeping with her and her husband, never slept through the night, and napped irregularly during the day. Sariah and her husband were miserable and sleep deprived, and Charlie was always cranky. They decided to hire a sleep specialist, who suggested that they implement a rigid sleep schedule that they now follow religiously. Zerina—and everyone else who cares for Charlie—had to learn and adhere to the schedule, which was posted in several different places around the house. Zerina, who had raised a son of her own and had cared for many children before Charlie, found the sleep schedule fascinating. Although she admitted that some aspects of the new routine
were jarring to her—“They just put him by himself … let him have him own privacy … like stay by himself in the room, you understand, because he’s very young, which I was scared to. I would never leave my baby so young, you know?”—she also recognized and appreciated the difference it made in Charlie’s behavior (Zerina 6). She was so excited about the idea of a sleep schedule that she mentioned it to other caretakers she knew so they might implement it with their own children or share it with their employers.

This was the only instance in which a caretaker described learning practical information from her employer. It is worth noting that this was information Sariah had not learned from experience but rather from a paid professional. This distinction is important in that it highlights the different means by which employers and caretakers acquire about caring for a child.

Several employers commented that their caretakers had influenced their general attitudes toward parenting in addition to offering practical advice or “folk education.” Tamy “learned the power of warmth and hugging and compliments” from Lorena, and she carried that lesson with her twenty-one years later. Similarly, Sariah observed Zerina’s patience with her son and resolved to follow suit. On difficult, sleep-deprived days when she felt exasperated by her son’s behavior, she reminded herself of Zerina’s words: “‘He is growing, he’s changing. He changes every day’” (Sariah 21). Zerina’s perspective helped Sariah conceptualize her son, his behavior, and her role as a mother in a new way.

Georgia, Aria and Rosie reported that their caretakers had taught them meaningful lessons that changed the ways in which they thought about motherhood. Georgia, who had tried unsuccessfully to conceive a child for years before adopting her son, Ellison, was anxious as a new mother and often agonized over inconsequential
decisions. Working with Elena transformed her attitude. Georgia told me that Elena had taught her to do “whatever works” rather than relying on parenting books, and to “stop worrying about things so much.”

Aria also learned larger lessons about “letting go” from Elena. She sensed how painful it was for Elena when she sent her youngest daughter to the prestigious boarding school that had granted her a full-tuition scholarship. Aria knew that Elena “desperately wanted Jasmine at home, near her. But she had a sense that this was a really good opportunity for Jasmine and she shouldn’t stand in the way of it” (Aria 11). Although Aria had not yet had to face difficult decisions such as this one with her five-year-old, she commented that Elena taught her the importance of “putting your kid’s needs in front of your own,” a lesson that subsequently informed her general outlook on parenting (Aria 11).

Rosie commented that Martina had transformed the way she thought about how parenting affected her day-to-day life. When their daughter, Layla, was born, Rosie and her husband stopped going to restaurants and socialized less frequently. She observed, however, that Martina found ways to incorporate Layla into her daily activities rather than the other way around: “It’s not like, she’s an infant, we do infant things. It’s like, I’m a person, I want to go walk around, I want to go to Dunkin’ Donuts, she goes with me, she kind of integrates into my schedule” (Rosie 11). Rosie described this as an eye-opening moment that changed her understanding of parenthood.

In many cases, the caretakers knew these lessons were being transmitted. While some caretakers humbly replied “no” when I asked whether they thought they had taught their employers anything about raising or caring for a child, others guessed that they had influenced their employers’ logics of childrearing in meaningful ways. Eleanor
commented that she had noticed changes in her employers’ expectations for their children. They were placing greater emphasis on discipline, she observed, and were less tolerant when their children misbehaved. She also believed she had influenced how her employers thought about hygiene. She had established a routine with the kids under her care:

You come in from the street, you come from school, you go to the refrigerator and you start pulling out snacks. You go to the sink, you wash your hands, and then you get something to eat. Take your shoes off at the front door, because you’re walking through the house with everything that you had outside, that you walked on outside. Brush your teeth before you go to bed (Eleanor 5).

Her employers had begun to follow this routine and continued to hold their children to the standards Eleanor had set, even when she was not around. Similarly, Sugar believed she had influenced her employers’ expectations for their children’s behavior. Sugar noticed that her employers rationalized their daughter’s misbehavior with comments such as “Oh, she’s just cranky.” Such excuses were unacceptable to Sugar and she would retort, “No, that’s just rude” (Sugar 8). She guessed that over time her employers adopted her standards and grew less tolerant of impoliteness.

Just as with practical advice, the transmission of information about general parenting attitudes was reciprocal. Several caretakers commented that their relationships with their employers had transformed their own attitudes about parenting and caretaking. Elena decided to limit her own children’s access to television and other electronics after working with several families that imposed strict rules about such activities. Instead of handing her daughter an iPad when she returned home from school, Elena challenged herself to spend more time interacting and playing with her as she had observed her employers do. Jess, who did yet not have kids of her own, learned the importance of self-sacrifice and patience in parenting. She admired her employers for committing
themselves so fully to their children and intends to follow their example when she decides to start a family. Sugar’s employers influenced her views on parenting tremendously. She commented that because she had grown up under “unfortunate circumstances,” until she worked for the Pearsons she doubted whether she “had the capacity to be a parent” (Sugar 7). “I learned through them that I could do it,” she remarked tearfully (Sugar 7).

Caretakers also imparted a great deal of information unrelated to children or childrearing to their employers. Linda guessed that she had taught her employer budgeting and money-saving tricks. Tamy learned about the importance of transparency and communication in professional relationships from Lorena, the first caretaker she had employed, when Lorena brought a contract to her first day on the job. In so doing, Lorena transformed the way Tamy thought about domestic work as a form of regulated, professional work. Years later, Tamy learned about nutrition, food, cooking, exercise, and yoga from Lindsey, the last of four caretakers she employed (Tamy 15). Aria commented that she had learned “larger human lessons” about bravery and perseverance, especially after hearing Elena’s immigration story.

She left, I think, two kids behind? The older two kids … to come here, to cross the border illegally. Just that in and of itself is like, oh my God … Created this really nice life for herself here and then she went back because her mother was dying. She crossed the border again (Aria 11).

Aria was extremely inspired by Elena’s “integrity,” “strength of character,” and “intelligence” and was overjoyed that her daughter would have the opportunity to spend time with a person who embodied these characteristics.

Several participants commented that employers had shared similar kinds of information with their caretakers. Sariah, a professor of African American Studies and
history at a prestigious university, enjoyed talking to her caretaker, Zerina, about her lectures. These conversations were very informative for Zerina, who did not go to college and joked that before she met Sariah she had never heard of the Harlem Renaissance. Nicole believed that she had helped her caretaker, Julia, be more confident and authoritative in all aspects of her life. Abigail taught Ada, one of two caretakers she employed, how to operate a washing machine, how to swim, how to drive, and how to perform CPR (Abigail 8).

Several employers discussed the knowledge they had imparted to their caretakers that better enabled them to navigate institutional settings. Nicole, who is a successful lawyer, offered her caretaker, Julia, legal advice when she was involved in a dispute over her property in the Dominican Republic. Nicole reported that someone had stolen the deed to Julia’s house and then sold it to someone else. Julia was prepared to buy the house back from the new owners until Nicole intervened, informed her of her legal rights, and encouraged her to “be less gratuitous” (Nicole 18). Julia heeded her advice and ultimately reached a settlement. Nicole also helped Julia practice speaking English in anticipation of her citizenship exam. Abigail was very forthright about the institutional knowledge she shared with her caretakers: “They use me a lot to help them navigate systems, like helping dealing with financial aid or helping with community college for their daughter, or figuring out how to transfer money to the Congo, or things like that” (Abigail 14). Abigail, who works in finance, also helped one of her caretakers, Penelope, set up an Individual Retirement Account and worked with Penelope’s daughter to make sure that Penelope understood the value and function of such a resource. Sariah similarly reported that Zerina had learned a lot about insurance from Sariah’s husband, Ian, who works in the insurance business.
This institutional knowledge was the only kind of information that was not exchanged reciprocally. It is quite possible that employers were more apt to share information related to navigating institutions because they worked in those institutions—the lawyer offered legal advice, the hedge-fund manager offered financial advice, and the Aetna employee offered insurance advice—just as caretakers shared information related to their professions with their employers. But the distinction between these two kinds of information underlines the class differences between middle- and upper-middle-class employers and their working-class caretakers and reinforces the connection many scholars have established between knowledge and social class. Nicole, the Harvard graduate and legal expert, possesses different cultural capital than Elena, the creative and organized professional caretaker who risked her life twice to cross the Mexican-American border. Sociologists such as Annette Lareau and Prudence Carter argue that institutions ranging from the local public school to the Department of Motor Vehicles value the cultural capital of the middle class.

My research demonstrates that the home, the site of domestic labor relationships, is a space where women who possess different forms of cultural capital engage in a process of exchange. In these spaces, minority, lower-class women with little formal education offer crucial services and transmit valuable knowledge to their middle- and upper-middle-class employers. These findings have important implications for the work of the Baby College and similar organizations that view class-stratified logics and styles of parenting according to a specific hierarchy. The Baby College’s clients are not unlike many of the caretakers I interviewed—they are immigrants, they are black and Hispanic, they are lower class, and they have limited formal education. Yet, my research reveals
that they are often the educators—not the students—in contemporary domestic care relationships.
“Baby Girl hug on my legs all afternoon to where I bout fall over a few times. I don’t mind. Miss Leefolt ain’t said nothing to me or Mae Mobley since this morning. Been working so busy on that sewing machine in her bedroom. Trying to cover up something else she don’t like the look of in the house. After while me and Mae Mobley go in the regular living room. I got a load a Mister Leefolt’s shirts to iron and after this I’m on get a pot roast going. I cleaned the bathrooms already, got the sheets changed, the rugs vacuumed. I always try to finish up early so me and Baby Girl can set together and play. Miss Leefolt come in and watch me ironing. She do that sometimes. Frown and look. Then she smile real quick when I glance up. Pat up the back a her hair, trying to make it look puffy. ‘Aibileen, I have a surprise for you’” (34).

—The Help, Kathryn Stockett

These few moments in Aibileen’s day signal several significant aspects of the relationship between domestic workers and the families that employ them. Aibileen’s relationship with Mae Mobley is loving and endlessly affectionate. This is even more apparent in the paragraph that precedes this one when Aibileen describes: “I smooth her hair down over and over till she practically purring, feeling the love in my hand” (33). But Aibileen and Miss Leefolt, who occupy the same space—the Leefolt home—for most of the day, also observe each other’s behavior and monitor (silently, in Aibileen’s case, and aloud, in Miss Leefolt’s case) how the other handles day-to-day tasks. Furthermore, this scene in the novel is one of many that explore Miss Leefolt’s expectations of her maid and how she communicates (or does not communicate) these expectations. Finally, the “surprise” to which Miss Leefolt refers is not, in fact, a gift in the conventional sense, but this language signals the phenomenon of gift giving in unequal domestic labor relationships.

In this chapter I explore these themes—expectations, love, gift giving—from the perspectives of the caretakers and employers I interviewed. Before launching into this
discussion, I discuss how participants conceive of in-home, nonrelative childcare; the connection Lareau and Canada underline between parenting and social class; and the idea of a national-cultural script of parenting. My participants’ understandings of and experiences with these aspects of childcare speak to parallels scholars have drawn between historical and contemporary domestic work.

3.1 “It Didn’t Work For My Heart”: Choosing Caretakers Over Daycare

I was curious to learn why the participants in my employer sample chose to work with individual caretakers in the first place. They had a multitude of childcare options, and daycare seemed popular; among the women I approached about participating in my study, two out of every three declined, informing me that their children went to daycare. I had also heard my own former employers lament about the long waiting list at Beansprouts Nursery School, and I wondered if Julia Wrigley’s (1995) claim about the stigma of daycare centers still held true.

None of my participants perceived daycare centers to be an option for “poor, inadequate families,” as Wrigley describes, but both Nicole and Sean expressed distrust of daycare centers, mentioning that children there are often neglected and get sick (1995: 1). Explaining her decision to hire Julia, the woman who currently cares for her two sons while Nicole and her husband are at work, Nicole comments: “There are definitely advantages to having someone in the home as opposed to taking the kid to daycare centers where they’re just going to get croup all the time” (Nicole 9). Sean described exploring daycare options with her husband when her maternity leave was nearing an end: “Eric and I visited a few daycare centers and we'd go in one door and out the other and drive out of the lot” (Sean 6). When prompted to elaborate, Sean explained: “I
worked so hard to get her. It was like, ‘This is not going to happen.’ I’m not taking my
daughter and sticking her in a crib, not knowing that they may say to me. ‘We’ll take her
out, play with this and that’” (Sean 6). Sean took a moment to note that she “[didn’t]
mean that in a negative way about the industry by any stretch” and explained that it just
“didn’t work for [her] heart” (Sean 6).

Nicole’s decision to hire an individual caretaker was also informed by her
personal work schedule: “Both Ryan and I work pretty long hours and also kind of
irregular hours. When Jackson was one I worked at a law firm, which was like, who
knows, I could be there until 6:00, I could be there until 11:00, and I might not know
that until 5:00. So it just never made sense to put myself on a daycare schedule where I
had to be somewhere … at 6:00” (Nicole 9). Sariah and her husband, Ian, liked the idea
that their nanny could take care of their son, Charlie, and also take care of their house.

Both Sariah and Georgia did acknowledge advantages of the daycare option.
While Sariah felt the individual caretaker was a better choice for her one-year-old son,
she added that she might consider daycare if “he needs it for social development” (Sariah
15). Georgia commented that she would have considered daycare had she been working
fulltime: “I think I would have felt so resentful that … someone else was being the
primary educator of my child who perhaps wasn’t … who wasn’t educated themselves in
childcare” (Georgia 11). Because Georgia only worked two and a half days a week, she
saw herself as her son’s primary educator and thus felt more comfortable employing a
caretaker with limited formal education. Georgia’s comment suggests a desire to control
how and by whom her son is educated. It also highlights an interesting dynamic in many
employer-caretaker relationships: caretakers and employers often have different racial,
socioeconomic, linguistic, national, and educational backgrounds. But how much do these factors influence one’s parenting or caretaking style?

3.2. Parenting and Social Class: Engaging with Lareau

While in Unequal Childhoods Annette Lareau presents a thoroughly crafted argument about the correlation between parenting style and social class, and organizations such as The Baby College are premised on similar ideas about class-based parenting, there is little scholarship that supports or refutes these claims. Thus, before I discuss how the participants in my study navigate questions of culture, race, and class in their own relationships, it is necessary to examine the question that is central to Lareau’s work: is parenting influenced by social class? How? What does “middle-class parenting” look like? I am not looking to answer these questions definitively but rather to examine how they play out in the context of my study.

Several of my respondents expressed an awareness of class-based parenting or class-based values consistent with Lareau’s findings. One employer, Tamy, described her own childhood as “a typical kind of middle-class/upper-middle class suburban upbringing” (Tamy 18). When I asked her to describe how she has raised her own children, she described her approach as child-centered: “We always tried to let each kid kind of follow their own passion and their own dream but sometimes that made for craziness because you’re going in a lot of different directions and with four kids I would say it was hectic, a lot of times. You know, we let them go to different schools” (Tamy 3). Tamy recognized that her approach to parenting was related to her social class: “We could afford to do that, too … it’s a luxury that we had, to be able to provide what we thought was the right approach” (Tamy 3). This description is consistent with the model
of *concerted cultivation* in which children and their many interests and activities form the focal point of the family’s day-to-day life. According to Lareau, middle-class families are “committed to child-rearing strategies that favor the individual development of each child, even at the expense of family time and group needs” (Lareau 39).

Georgia, a Harvard graduate and public-school educator, also acknowledged that her parenting style reflects her social class. She commented: “I do feel like there’s a certain way that things are sort of done in my milieu, but I also feel like some things about my own parenting I feel are different” (4). Georgia went on to identify one of the qualities in her own parenting that that she believes deviates from the standard of her “milieu”: “I try to establish a little more of a sense of authority and wanting Ellison to respect authority. I’m really appalled when I hear children order adults around” (4). This emphasis on authority and on respect for elders does, indeed, correspond more closely to accomplishment of natural growth, the model of lower- and working-class parents, who “receive automatic respect and deference from … children” (Lareau 2003: 71). Georgia’s and Tamy’s comments support Lareau’s argument that there is a cultural logic of childrearing informed by social class.

Another employer, Sariah, suggested that class influences parenting style as much as one’s national identity does. When talking about the differences in the way she, an upper-middle-class black American woman, and her husband, a first-generation Haitian man from a lower-class immigrant family, were raised, she described her in-laws as “third world … They have a different way of doing things” (12). Sariah points to elements of their respective childhoods that differed, such as the amount of television they were allowed to watch, how they spent free time and how they interacted with their friends.
She ascribes these differences to the “third world”-ness of her in-laws—highlighting both their socioeconomic status and their nationality.

3.3 “We don’t do that in Jamaica”: Is There an American Parenting Script?

Sariah’s comment raises the question of whether an American parenting script exists. This is an especially important question to consider given how significantly the face of domestic labor in the United States has changed over the past century. As I discuss in Chapter One, while black American women used to dominate this field of work, they now make up a small percentage of the work force compared to women who have immigrated from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Popular parenting books such as Parenting Across Borders: Surprising Lessons Parents Around the World Can Teach Us (2013) and Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting (2012) suggest that there is, in fact, an inherently American style of parenting that transcends the lines of race and class that Lareau draws in her research.

Of the six participants in the caretaker sample, three immigrated to the United States from other countries—Elena from Mexico, Zerina from Jamaica, and Eleanor from Trinidad. I asked Eleanor, who has worked for over ten families of all different races since she arrived twenty-four years ago, if she thought there was a distinctly American way of parenting. She quickly responded that she did not. However, she continuously referenced a Caribbean logic of parenting—“We come from the Caribbean and we generally have the same basic understanding of how things are done”—and distinguished this style from what she had observed about American families (Eleanor 7).

For both Eleanor and Zerina, the most significant way in which Caribbean parenting differed from American parenting had to do with discipline. Early on in my
conversation with Eleanor, she stated: “Coming from the Caribbean, we have a different sense of discipline. We gave leeway to a certain amount of craziness, but … we maintain that control. Control, I don’t mean like on a leash or anything like that, but our kids know how far to go” (Eleanor 1). She raised her own sons with this emphasis on discipline and control, but after moving to the United States observed that this “Caribbean” style was inconsistent with the way her sons’ American friends were being raised.

In terms of her work, Eleanor commented: “I’ve been doing this for a lot of years, a lot of years, so I’ve worked with all types of kids. But one of the things that I’ve noticed is that kids here … things that they should be told, they are asked” (Eleanor 2). Zerina also mentioned differences between American and Caribbean attitudes toward discipline:

It's totally different because first thing Jamaican kids know, they beat them. If you hit a child [here] they may call the cops on you and stuff like that. We don’t do that in Jamaica, we don’t do that. I get a lot of beating from my mother and stuff like that…. Here it's different, you can't hit them and stuff like that (Zerina 11).

Discipline is a tremendous factor that differentiates the concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth models in Lareau’s work, and according to Paul Tough, The Baby College spends a significant amount of time steering parents away from corporal punishment and more toward the “middle-class style” that emphasizes time-outs and verbal reprimands. It is very possible that both Eleanor and Zerina have worked exclusively for middle- and upper-middle-class families—as these are the families that can afford to hire caretakers—and are conflating “American” parenting with “middle-class” parenting. However, Eleanor’s observations about American parenting were not rooted solely in her work experience; her comments about her sons’ friends, who were
not necessarily middle-class, suggest that for her, there is an American script valid across class lines.

Two other participants also alluded to perceived differences between American parenting and that of other countries. Rosie, a college professor, commented: “I spent a lot of time in France, so yes, I noticed that there was this big distinction between the behavior of French kids and American kids. I was definitely intrigued by it” (3). Rosie did not elaborate on these distinctions but seemed to have a general vision of American children and their behavior as compared with French children. Similarly, Elena constantly began statements with “we Hispanics” in distinction to the American families for whom she has worked. For example: “We Hispanics let our children use the television, use the computer, use the iPad, use everything. But not them. They try to have children interact less with electronics and more with them. And they give their children a lot more time than we do” (Elena 6). Like Eleanor’s comments about Caribbean parenting, Elena understands there to be a style of parenting informed by ethnic and national identities that contrasts with a distinctly American style of parenting.

3.4 “I wanted someone who…”: Expectations of Employees and Employers

Several participants express an awareness of different cultural logics of childrearing and discuss what they expected of their employers or employees in light of these differences. For Sariah and her husband, Ian, it was extremely important to hire a Caribbean caretaker because they wanted to work with someone who shared their values: “[Ian] still believes in the stern, hardworking, good work ethic. All these typical things … are like what it means to be Caribbean. He wanted somebody in our house who would be like that” (Sariah 18). They were also looking for someone who would connect their
son to other aspects of Caribbean culture such as food: “I wanted Charlie to grow up in a household where he was familiar with Caribbean food because I wasn’t going to cook it” (Sariah 19). While Sariah also mentioned wanting “someone who was comfortable around children, who had experience with children,” the cultural connection was the most important feature she and her husband were looking for.

Lydia and her husband, both children of Chinese immigrants, were looking for a caretaker who would provide their children with a cultural and linguistic connection to their Chinese heritage. They specifically wanted a Chinese caretaker and ultimately chose to hire two au pairs through a China-based agency. Lydia comments: “They speak Chinese. I wanted the language because we're Chinese and I speak Chinese. I speak it, not as well as the au pairs, obviously. My husband speaks it as well. We wanted that aspect of it” (Lydia 6). Several other participants mentioned language in discussing their expectations of caretakers. Aria, a Canadian woman who lived in Venezuela as a child and was subsequently raised by Dominican nannies in the United States, also expressed an emphasis on language: “Of course I wanted a Spanish-speaking woman in my child’s life. It felt so obvious to me. That was something I had been raised with” (Aria 7). Like Lydia, Aria was explicitly looking for someone who would serve as a cultural resource, someone who would connect her child to a culture and a language to which she herself felt connected. Language also figured prominently into Rosie’s search for a caretaker, but for educational rather than cultural reasons: “I knew the language thing, I had read the research that the earlier the better, you know, as early as two months, that these things matter, so it was a pretty easy decision for us” (Rosie 8).

For many participants in the employer sample, age was also an important factor in hiring a caretaker. For Lydia, the age of her caretaker had cultural significance: “I
didn’t want an older Chinese … Culturally, it would be harder for me to instruct an older Chinese grandma … because it may be seen as disrespectful or feel like a weird dynamic there … It just felt more awkward to me than having a young person” (Lydia 7). Rosie, too, was looking for a younger woman, but for practical rather than cultural reasons: “We knew we needed someone younger, someone who was gonna take her out, who would want to see stuff … She needed to be at least energetic” (Rosie 9). While age was not the most important factor for Rosie, it was still one that informed her hiring search.

Nicole, on the other hand, described wanting an older woman, or as she phrased it, “We were … looking for more mature women” (Nicole 10). Nicole explained that she expected an older woman would come to the job with “[her] own personal nurturing experience” (Nicole 10). Because Nicole and her husband live far from their parents, she also hoped that an older woman would fill the role of “community mother” “to help show us how to do things and give us some of the kind of folk education” (Nicole 10). When prompted to elaborate, Nicole defined “folk education:” “Like, ‘here's how to quiet a crying baby.’ You know, someone who had real life experience with that rather than someone who has a master’s in early childhood development, who knows from a book what you’re supposed to do but doesn’t necessarily have enough life experience” (Nicole 10). Nicole’s comments suggest that she was looking for someone who would play a maternal role in her family and who would offer skills that neither she nor her husband had.

To both Abigail and Nicole, it was important that their caretakers shared their fundamental values and that their styles were consistent with their own. Nicole explained, “We were looking for people who would parent in a way that we kind of felt like we would parent, which is mostly from a place of love but at some point you have to put
your foot down” (Nicole 10). While Abigail’s number-one qualification for a caretaker was someone who would keep her children safe, second to that was that the children “[see] people that have good … I want them to see people that work hard” and “treat them with respect” (Abigail 8).

Although both women hired caretakers who they felt shared their general values and their beliefs about parenting, they also wanted caretakers who would follow their directions: “I wanted someone who would listen to our instructions but also have something to bring to the table” (Nicole 10). Abigail expressed a similar expectation: “I hired people that at the end of the day were going to listen to what I was going to say, because that was important to me” (Abigail 13). Unlike her sister-in-laws’ nannies, whom she described as “very opinionated,” Abigail required that her child’s caretaker defer to her. This expectation calls attention to the dynamic of power between employers and caretakers. Caretakers are often much older than their employers, have more experience caring for children, and have their own style of childrearing. But when they are working with someone else’s children in someone else’s home, they must adapt to their employer’s expectations.

3.5 “I love her and she loves me”: Love and Emotional Labor

Returning for a moment to Bossypants and the dilemma of the fingernail-clipping, the irony of Tina Fey’s nervousness about confronting her babysitter is not lost on her. She writes: “I can tell twenty comedy writers what to do; I can argue with a cabdriver about 10th Avenue versus the West Side Highway; I will happily tell a joke about Osama bin Laden or the Ku Klux Klan on live television; but I could not talk to the babysitter about the fingernail clipping” (Fey 2011: 257). But how is giving direction to the
employees in her place of work different from giving direction to the employee in her
home? Fey suggests that these professional relationships are different because, unlike the
comedy writers she oversees, the babysitter “lovingly and devotedly watches [her] kid
every day” (Fey 2011: 256). The element of love, it seems, complicates the professional
relationship between employers and caretakers.

The love to which Fey refers is by no means exclusive to contemporary domestic
labor relationships. As I explore in Chapter Two, the element of love represents one of
the great paradoxes of historical relationships between black domestic workers and the
white families for which they worked. Many black women working as maids and as
nannies had loving relationships with white children who would grow up to enforce the
system of white supremacy that subjugated and disenfranchised them. Kathryn Stockett
also points to this paradox in The Help: “The colored women down here … they raise a
white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It’s that irony,
that we love them and they love us, yet … we don’t even allow them to use the toilet in
the house” (2009: 123). While the social and political context of this labor is different
than it was during Jim Crow, I found that love continues to be a salient aspect of
domestic workers’ relationships with their employers and with the children under their
care.

As I discuss in Chapter One, childcare providers are performing what the
sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes as “emotional labor.” That is, they are paid to
have an emotional response to the children under their care. Unlike flight attendants and
wait staff—other jobs that fall under the category of emotional labor—caretakers have
an emotional response that, in many cases, is more than just performative.
For Aria, a new mother facing the end of her maternity leave, love factored prominently in her expectations for her child’s caretaker. She explained that above all else, “[she] wanted someone who was going to love this baby” (Aria 8). Similarly, Nicole and Abigail both looked for “someone to love the baby” (Nicole 10). These comments, I would suggest, read very differently from Tina Fey’s when she writes that her babysitter “lovingly… watches [her] child” (2011: 256). “Lovingly” watching a child is concerned with a caretaker’s actions, a display or performance of affection, whereas Aria expected her daughter’s caretaker to develop a genuine, immediate feeling for the child as part of the job. Aria’s comment demonstrates the complexity of the nature of the work that caretakers do. Although they are employees, they are intimately connected to their employers and to their employers’ families. But how do employers, caretakers, and children actually experience this love?

For Tamy, the idea that it is a caretaker’s job to love the child for whom she is caring was wildly unsettling. While she admitted that she might have agreed with Aria, Nicole, and Abigail when she was a new mom, her perspective twenty years later was very different: “I’m not sure I was looking for someone to love my kids. I loved them. I was looking for somebody to care about them, to care about their well-being and protect them” (Tamy 13). When I asked if she thought her caretakers had loved her children, she replied: “Yeah, I think they loved them as much as you can love other people’s children” (Tamy 13). Tamy’s comments suggest that love was never a response she expected from her caretakers, but it was one that developed in the nature of their work. Tamy also suggests that the love caretakers experience as part of their job is limited and is different from the love they experience with their own children.
Georgia agreed that love is built into the work that caretakers do, but only to a certain extent. Georgia speculated that her caretaker, Elena, did love her son but understood this emotional connection to be part and parcel of her job: “I think that it would be hard to care for a child that … as a babysitter … that you didn’t love on some level. You know, love something about them or love some of your time with them” (Georgia 10). Georgia did not expect her caretaker to develop a genuine, deeply rooted love for her son but believed that some degree of love is essential in order to do the job well.

Despite Aria’s serious expectations regarding her caretaker’s emotional connection to her daughter, she acknowledged the complexity of the love that caretakers feel for the children under their care, given the temporary nature of their relationship: “I think love in the caregiver is really complicated, it seems to me. Because first of all, they come into these kids’ lives and then they leave these kids’ lives. So there’s this, ‘How much love am I going to give a kid?’” (Aria 9). Aria described a conversation she had with one former caretaker who found the time constraints placed on the emotional connection too upsetting to bear:

She said that she used to watch kids but she couldn’t do it anymore. Now she only did housecleaning because she was too heartbroken. She couldn’t say goodbye to them, she couldn’t develop these kinds of relationships. So she stopped doing this kind of work. It’s very interesting. For them, they love them but they can’t love them too much. They can’t get too invested (Aria 9).

_The Help_ also explores this dilemma. One of the most heart-wrenching moments in the novel is Aibileen’s parting from the three-year-old she has cared for since infancy:

“‘Please don’t leave, Aibee,’ she say, starting to cry again. ‘I got to, baby. I am so sorry.’ And that’s when I start to cry. I don’t want to, it’s just gone make it worse for her, but I can’t stop”’ (Stockett 2009: 520). Both Aria and Stockett gesture to the fact that while
care work is emotion work, it is also contractual and temporary by nature. Although a
great deal of this work is regimented—how many hours a week a caretaker works, how
long the employment relationship will last, and in some cases, how the caretaker should
discipline, entertain, feed, and speak to the child—love is one element that no contract
can govern.

Zerina, Linda, and Jess were the three caretakers who spoke most effusively
about love during our conversations. They all described experiencing love in their jobs
but did not believe love to be inherent to their work. When I asked Zerina if she loves
Charlie, the 15-month-old she cares for, she responded with a matter-of-fact “yes.” I
followed up, asking how the love she feels for Charlie differs from the love she feels for
her own son or for her siblings. “Same,” she answered. “It’s just the same, because I love
my brothers and sisters, I love them” (Zerina 9). Linda’s perspective on love was similar.
She had worked for one family from the day her former employer, Sean, returned to
work after maternity leave until Sean’s daughter, May, left for college. Because Linda’s
dughter, Noemi, and May were the same age, Linda came to think of them both as her
daughters. While she commented that she would put her life in front of any of the kids
she watches, if she had to, May was different: “I love May like she was my own child”
(Linda 6). Jess, too, commented that she had fallen in love with the kids currently under
her care, but admitted: “I’ve definitely worked for families where I have not fallen in
love with the kids” (Jess 8).

Jess reported that some aspects of the love she feels for the two boys she
watches were learned, a feeling that developed over time, but for the most part she
experienced this response automatically:

Part of it is learning to love them, but part of it does become just the feeling
of…like the feeling when a child falls down and he’s coming to you in tears;
you’re the one that’s going to make him feel better, it’s just something that kind of happens automatically. When they’re crawling into your lap, they want that affection from you, and you want to give it to them. It kind of happens (Jess 8).

Regardless of how this love developed, she described it as a genuine and intense feeling. Nevertheless, an aspect of performance still accompanies this feeling. Jess commented:

“There’s not a day now that I leave the house without telling them that I love them, and without meaning it. We’re very affectionate with each other, constantly giving them hugs and kisses, that’s how we roll. It’s one hundred percent real, not faked at all” (Jess 8). But if both are performative, what is the difference between a genuine feeling of love that Jess described and a display of loving affection? How do parents and children perceive this difference?

Jess suggests that love is a feeling she shares with the two boys under her care. It is a connection that all three of them experience and will continue to experience long after Jess’s contract ends, just as it did for The Help’s Miss Skeeter. While Sean described the love her caretaker, Linda, shared with her daughter in very performative terms—hugs, kisses, gifts—she also understood this love to transcend the performance. She commented: “Linda’s connection with May, I don’t own that. They own that” (Sean 7). Although Linda no longer works for Sean and they now live in two different states, both agreed that May, who is twenty-two, and Linda are still very much intertwined. Sean’s use of the word “own” in talking about love suggests that love, however genuine it becomes, is commodified and transactional. Although she, the consumer, does not own, control, or regulate “Linda’s connection with May,” this connection is the product she acquired.

3.6. “They Were Always Part of Our Family”
“I think just the consistency of love, the love that Linda showed May, that was above and beyond being a caregiver,” Sean commented. She went on to share that Linda’s role became converted from caretaker to family member during the seventeen years they worked together. As I explore in the previous section, although love is in many ways written into the work that child caretakers do, Sean and several other participants felt that this emotional connection redefined the relationship between caretakers and their employers. The “just like family” rhetoric is one that is considered in both popular and academic literature. As I discuss in Chapter One, in her nonfiction narrative Just Like Family: Inside the Lives of Nannies, The Parents They Work for, and the Children They Love (2010), Tasha Blaine argues that caretakers are “just like family” in some ways but professional and transactional in others. This rhetoric has historical resonance as well. In their book The Maid Narratives, Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson III, and Charletta Sudduth (2012) highlight the familial element as one of the great paradoxes of domestic work in the Jim Crow South. “The maid,” they write, “invariably was seen by whites as part of the white family” but, because of differences in race and class “was in no sense truly a member of their family” (2012: 15). Some scholars argue that employers create this “just like family” narrative as a way to mitigate any guilt they may feel about an unequal employment relationship.

Given this body of research on the question of family as it pertains to care work and domestic work, I was surprised by the variety in my participants’ perceptions of and experiences with a familial connection. A handful of participants in both samples used the word “family” in some way to describe their relationship to their employer or employee. Even without using the terms, most described family-like qualities of the relationship, or discussed the ways in which it transcended a contractual relationship.
The fact that both employers and caretakers experienced this family-like relationship suggests that is not merely a rhetorical strategy employed by employers to mitigate guilt or conceal inherently an uncomfortable hierarchy.

When Sean was looking to hire a caretaker for her six-month-old, she explicitly had in mind someone who would not only become integrated into her family but would also provide her daughter with an extended family. She and her husband had just moved to Yardley, Pennsylvania for her husband’s job and felt anxious about the fact that their siblings and parents still lived in Massachusetts and Michigan respectively. The babysitter Sean had hired temporarily told her about Linda, a friend of hers who was looking for work. She mentioned that Linda had grown up in a huge family a few towns over, and that was all Sean needed to hear:

I said, “That’s pretty cool.” She's not giving me references on Linda. She's giving me a network of people that are going to back us up. It was like, “I'm in”… Just the idea that Linda had backup was just very appealing to us, because we lived in Pennsylvania and we're not from there. We had no backup in Pennsylvania. I had no sisters or brothers or relatives. To have a backup system was a gift, a real gift (Sean 3).

Over twenty years later, Sean and Linda agreed that their families have become integrated. Both referred to Sean’s daughter, May, and Linda’s daughter, Noemi as “sister-like figures” and commented that May refers to Linda’s family members as her own cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Sean described how her husband greeted May and Noemi after work each day as though both were his daughters, and she mentioned her own love for Noemi at various points during our conversation.

Few participants in the employer sample spoke as explicitly about a familial connection as Sean, but many alluded to a family-like relationship in talking about how they interacted outside of the workday. Tamy and her children were so distraught after
their caretaker, Kelly, moved back to Ireland that they spent the following summer in her town and ultimately bought a house there. Many women described attending significant events in their caretakers’ lives: Rosie’s and Tamy’s families flew to their caretakers’ native countries for weddings, and Tamy mentioned that her oldest daughter was later the flower girl in her caretaker’s daughter’s wedding. Although none of Tamy’s children are married yet, their caretakers have attended school events and graduation ceremonies. Several participants mentioned holidays they had celebrated with their caretakers. Tamy’s family still spends Christmas Eve with Lorena, the caretaker who worked for her over fifteen years ago. Sariah always invites her caretaker, Zerina, to birthday parties and holiday dinners with her family. To demonstrate their closeness, Sariah described the time she and her family had spent with Zerina’s family. She seemed bothered by the fact that she had never met Zerina’s husband and did not know Zerina’s legal last name and jokingly pestered Zerina about both points several times during the day the three of us spent together.

Sariah also alluded to a connection that transcends a traditional employee-employer relationship in describing how she and her caretaker interacted during times of crisis. When Linda got in a car accident, Sariah and her husband, Ian, were the first people she called. Moreover, Sariah and Ian intervened when Zerina was experiencing problems in her romantic relationship; when Zerina threatened to call off her upcoming wedding (“He’s dead to me,” she announced—rashly, the couple thought), Ian “sat her down,” explained Sariah. “He was like, ‘You’re thinking impatiently’” (Sariah 22). And although Sariah never used the words “family” or “just like family” to describe her family’s relationship with Zerina, she offers further examples of an unspoken familial
connection. The fact that Zerina reached out to her employers in these moments suggests that this connection is also experienced mutually.

Many of the caretakers I interviewed expressed similar understandings of a familial connection in describing how they interacted with their employers outside of the workday. Sugar explicitly used the word “family” to describe her relationship with her former employers, Sally and AJ: “When I started working for them, we became very close. To the extent that we felt like family, and we still feel like family” (Sugar 6). To support this claim, Sugar reported that her children’s heights are recorded on a wall in Sally and AJ’s home. Sally is also Sugar’s youngest daughter’s godmother, and although they now live in different states, Sally and AJ have attended Sugar’s three children’s christenings. Linda mentioned that May was the flower girl at her wedding and, like Sariah, mentioned that her employers had supported her through two difficult divorces. According to Linda, her employers helped her financially when she wanted to send her daughter to camp and have her do horseback-riding with their daughter during the summer.

Jess was hesitant to describe her employers and their children as her family. In some ways she considered them a “second family” but stipulated: “not to the full extent that, say, I would … my best friend and her family that I know, it’s a different dynamic” (Jess 8). Jess speculated that her answer might be different if she lived with her employers—a request they had made of her several times. This comment suggests that it was not the inherently hierarchical relationship between her and her employer that precluded them from having a familial connection. Nevertheless, she remarked that her employers had made efforts to include her in family events such as holiday celebrations, weekend activities, and birthday parties. Elena described her relationship with her former employers, Georgia and Aria, similarly. She acknowledged that they were “more than
employee-employer,” indicating that both women knew her husband and her children and had been to her home many times, but ultimately she described them as “friends” (Elena 9).

Only one participant explicitly denied the notion that the caretaker belonged to the family. Georgia considered such an idea ludicrous. “In terms of her being part of the family,” Georgia commented, “No. I mean, I could understand … she wasn’t part of the family. I don’t know, I can imagine someone saying that when their nanny lives with them or something, but it’s such a bizarre thing to say because obviously they’re not part of the family, they’re a paid employee” (Georgia 11). Elena, Georgia, and Georgia’s son, Ellison, shared a close relationship; Georgia knew details of Elena’s personal life, had met her family several times, and even drove over an hour to eat at her husband’s new restaurant months after Elena had stopped working for her. While for other participants, this closeness symbolized a familial connection, for Georgia it did not in any way disrupt the clear distinction she drew between family member and employee.

To the participants in the employer sample, calling their caretakers “just like family” was not a rhetorical strategy to alleviate guilt or conceal an unjust hierarchical relationship as it was for many white employers during Jim Crow. Very few participants actually used the word “family” to describe their relationship. Rather, in telling stories about their experiences with their caretakers they demonstrated how these relationships transcended traditional employer-employee relationships in a way that was unspoken but mutually experienced and understood. Half of the women in the caretaker sample agreed that their employers had become more than just employers during their time working together. There was not a simple explanation for the closeness these women described. In other words, they had worked with one another for different amounts of time, at
different moments in their children’s lives, and in different capacities. The fact that not all of the participants in my samples described such a relationship suggests that the familial connection many women experienced is not inherent in the work that caretakers do.

Perhaps my participants’ experiences with love and family reinforce the distinction many scholars have drawn between domestic work and employment (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 1992). Hondagneu-Sotelo and Romero found that because care work often takes place in private homes, it is regarded as something other than employment, or as work different from “real work.” Perhaps this differentiation, combined with the personal, emotional, and idiosyncratic nature of care work, allows employers and caretakers to form relationships that differ from traditional employer-employee relationships.

3.7 “I couldn’t have given her enough”

“She’s wearing a blue dress with big white buttons that I’ve never seen before. Aibileen has white lady clothes out the wazoo. White ladies love giving her their old stuff” (148). –Kathryn Stockett, The Help

At various points in The Help, Kathryn Stockett describes the hand-me-downs and other gifts given to black maids by their white employers. Whether it involved worn, poorly fitting dresses or tuition money, the act of giving underlined the hierarchical and unequal nature of employer-maid relationships. As I discuss in Chapter One, this practice of giving is by no means limited to the historical time period in which The Help is situated. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo discusses gifting as an element that differentiates maternalistic and personalistic relationships between employers and the domestic workers they employ (2001). She argues that many employers take great pleasure in
offering their employers hand-me-downs, monetary gifts, and services. These acts of charity are maternalistic, according to Hondagneu-Sotelo, in that they allow the givers “to experience personal recognition and validation of themselves as kind, superior, and altruistic” (2001:11). Gift-giving can also be manipulative; several employers in Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study gave used clothing or household items, or offered advice or guidance, as a means of compelling their employees to work harder and longer.

Three participants in my study mentioned gifts when discussing their professional relationships. For these women, these acts did not serve to reinforce or reinscribe racial and class inequality between them and the giver/recipient, nor were they attached to any expectations. Rather, they testified to the closeness of their relationships and expressed recognition of the personhood of the recipient. Abigail, who repeatedly described herself as a demanding boss, acknowledged that she has high expectations for the two women she employs to take care of her children and of her home. As a way of recognizing their hard work, Abigail gave her caretakers plane tickets for their birthdays so they could return to their native countries to visit the families they had left behind. These gifts did not come with any strings or expectations attached. Rather, she hoped they would express her appreciation for the work they do every day. Returning to the distinction between personalism and maternalism that I discuss in Chapter One, these gifts are personalistic in that Abigail recognized her caretakers as individuals with their own concerns and sorrows outside of their job.

Linda and Sean, one of the four matches I interviewed, both spoke extensively about gifts. I met with Linda first, and during our conversation, which took place in her home, she pointed out all the furniture that had come from Sean’s home. It would have been more efficient to point to what had not originally belonged to Sean; everything from
the stove to the piano to the chairs on which we were sitting had been handed down from Sean’s family. Linda had even been promised the car Sean’s daughter, May, had been driving since she was sixteen, but it was totaled in an accident. The only major appliance or piece of furniture that had been purchased new was the big silver microwave that sat obtrusively on the kitchen counter. Linda proudly remarked that her husband had given it to her for Christmas. She opened it, demonstrated its many special features, and told a lengthy story about how upset she was when her nephew carelessly spilled water on the revolving plate a few days before.

While this excessive gift-giving might strike an outside observer as maternalistic in that it underlines the class inequalities between Linda, a working-class woman who prided herself on knowing how to piece together the most cost-effective meals from the McDonald’s dollar menu, and Sean, a retired corporate vice president who lives comfortably and splits her time between two beautiful homes, neither woman described it in these terms. Sean commented that giving made her and her husband “feel good,” but for her it was rooted more in the loving, familial relationship Linda and her family shared after twenty years of working together. Linda delighted in her furnishings such as “the great big TV,” which were more luxurious than she would ordinarily be able to afford. Linda also took great pleasure in being connected to May and to her parents through their belongings, as she sees them less frequently now that she is working for another family. She joked that she was “holding [May’s] stuff until she needs them,” winking to imply that that day would never actually come.

But for Linda, the most significant gifts were those that were less tangible. She mentioned that the Senecas always invited her daughter, Noemi, to go boating and to spend weekends at their lake house—experiences her daughter would never have had
but for Linda’s professional relationship with their family. Linda commented that her employers extended these invitations not because it benefitted them in any way but because “they loved Noemi, too” (Linda 18).
Sittercity, a website that connects families, individuals, and corporate employees with local in-home caregivers, released a video in January, 2014 advertising its services. A young black woman appears on screen. “This is my office,” she says as she passes from the living room to the kitchen. Two white children, whose school bags she carries in with her and rests on the counter, follow in her wake. “This is my water cooler,” she continues, leaning over a plate of orange slices to help the brother and sister with their homework. She holds up a flashcard to one child, quizzing him on state capitals. “This is my brainstorm,” she says, smiling proudly when he identifies Lansing as the capital of Michigan. Her employer, a young white woman dressed in business casual attire, walks in and embraces her daughter. The oldest child asks his mother to join in the quizzing game and she challenges him with the state of Maine. “And this,”—the caretaker pauses as everyone applauds the child for correctly identifying the capital as Augusta—“is my motivation.” The caretaker, who at this point identifies herself as Megan, exchanges a heartfelt glance with her employer. “Being a Sittercity sitter isn’t just my job; it’s my passion.”

A few months after this video was released, Humans of New York (HONY)—a popular “photoblog” that juxtaposes portraits of New Yorkers with short excerpts from the photographer’s conversations with them—posted a photograph of a young woman. She is wearing an elegant red coat with shiny gold buttons and grips a black leather purse with one hand. In the other she holds what appears to be a notebook or a stack of papers. She has shiny hair and her radiant smile reveals a set of straight, white teeth. She
is standing in front of a doorman building on a street that could be situated in any upper-middle-class New York City neighborhood. The mind gravitates toward “student,” “tutor,” or “business woman” in an effort to place her. But the caption reads: “It’s difficult not to grow too attached when you’re a nanny. Not only are you bonding with the children, but you’re doing it in a home environment. It’s hard to not feel like family. But after crying so hard when I left my first family, I told myself I’d never grow that attached again.” The photographer asks, “How do you accomplish that?” She replies, “You just have to constantly remind yourself that you’re an employee.”

These are two of many contemporary representations of care work and care workers that appear casually before YouTube videos or on social media platforms. Such representations, along with the recent publication of books such as The Perfect Stranger: The Truth About Mothers and Nannies (2007) and The Nanny Diaries (2002), suggest that questions regarding the nature of care work, the relationships caretakers have to the families for which they work, the roles they play within these families, and the racial and socioeconomic dynamic of this professional relationship continue to be highly relevant today.

Both the video and the photograph speak to the question, who is doing this work? This question is one that I explore within my own study and, as I note in Chapter One, one that is the focus of many scholarly investigations. It is important to note that the Sittercity video, unlike the HONY photograph, was scripted. Actors were carefully selected to play the parts of Megan, the two children, and the mother/employer. But the video reflects the reality that Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002) explore that domestic labor is highly racialized and gendered; Megan is a black woman working for a white, professional family. The woman in the HONY photograph,
however, reminds us that there is no singular face that can represent all women who work as caretakers in the United States. Although for years domestic work in the United States was performed by women like *The Help’s* Minny and Aibileen, this is no longer the case.

The video does not reflect that, as Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), Colen (1995), and Mose Brown (2011) argue, contemporary care work is often performed by immigrant women who do not speak English as a first language and whose social class positions and education backgrounds are drastically different from those of their employers. Social class in particular is a salient factor that informs what Lareau (2003) describes as a cultural logic of childrearing. Participants in my samples confirm Lareau’s findings and suggest that the layers of difference that often separate caretakers and employers have important implications for their relationships with one another. Although these women share in the responsibility of raising children, they often have different culturally-informed ideas about how to go about this task. Thus, the home is not only a site infused with class relations, as Ray and Qayum (2009) argue, it is a site of cross-cultural exchange, a space where women who do not ordinarily interact collaborate in an intimate, highly personal way.

In the process of working with one another to raise and care for children, caretakers and employers often face the challenge of reconciling or navigating different cultural logics of childrearing, or, in the words of Tina Fey, the challenge of cross-cultural nanny communicating. Participants in my samples found various ways of going about doing this but it was a task caretakers thought more actively and critically about. Although caretakers often spend more time in a given week with the children under their care than employers do, they are subordinate to their employers and, in most cases, do
not have the freedom to care for these children as they would their own. The caretakers in my study expressed an awareness of their employers’ expectations and styles, against which they constantly weighed their own decisions. This is by no means a recent or contemporary phenomenon, either. *The Help* is a historical and literary case that attests to this double consciousness that caretakers develop in order to do their job well. Although there is an abundance of literature on the relationship between care workers and their employers, further investigation of this process of navigating different styles is necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of this relationship and of the nature of care work.

Returning to the contemporary representations of domestic workers, the woman in the HONY photograph explicitly names the aspects of her job that make it both painful and complex: love, attachment, and proximity to private space. The attachment to which she refers is not specific to her particular employment situation but rather, as participants in my study demonstrate, is experienced by many women who do this work. Love and attachment were likewise byproducts of care work that complicated relationships between black maids, mammies, and wet nurses and their white mistresses—women who were separated by a rigid legal hierarchy as well as by a professional one—during slavery and Jim Crow. Regardless of the time period in which the labor is performed, the HONY nanny’s words attest to the element of care work that, Hochschild (1983) argues, distinguishes it from other forms of labor. In constantly reminding herself that she is an employee, this woman demonstrates the difficulty of separating the expectations of the job—caring for a child and making the child feel safe and supported—from the self. Love, according to the nanny featured on the photoblog, confuses traditional employee/employer relationships. While scholars such as Ray and
Qayum (2009) argue that the “rhetoric of love” serves to obfuscate or conceal the hierarchical, oppressive nature of domestic work, the HONY nanny and the caretakers who participated in my study indicate that for them, love is not merely rhetorical but rather is a feeling they genuinely develop by nature of their work.

Although care work necessitates emotional labor as well as physical and mental labor and is performed in the private sphere, in drawing comparisons between the home and the office, the routine tasks of caring for children and the routine chatter with coworkers around a water cooler, the Sittercity video encourages 21st Century viewers to consider that care work is professional work. This message is a powerful one because as scholars such as Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) and Hochschild (1983) note, the same value is not typically attributed to care work as to other forms of work that require a suit or some form of higher education. Megan, like the caretakers I interviewed, possesses a unique set of skills that her employer does not necessarily have.

The advertisement recognizes and validates her cultural capital and the cultural capital of caretakers like her. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of the entire thirty-second video. Many of the women who work as caretakers are subordinated by intersecting racial, gender, national, and socioeconomic identities and, as such, are viewed by organizations such as the Baby College as ill equipped to raise children. However, my findings suggest that despite caretakers’ disadvantaged educational and class backgrounds, they know a great deal of information about childrearing—information they frequently share with their employers. Participants in my samples described information as reciprocal, though employers were more likely to share information related to their professions—information that, across the board, helped caretakers navigate institutions and systems. This process of information exchange is one
that has received little scholarly attention, but it is one that complicates and in some cases subverts the hierarchy that defines employer-employee relationships. The testimonies of the women I interviewed add important nuance that can help us better conceptualize the highly complex, paradoxical relationship between caretakers and the families for which they work.
APPENDIX

Interview Questions For Caretakers

- What is your name?
- Where are you originally from?
  - If you are from a country other than the United States, how long have you lived here?
- Can you tell me a little about how you were raised?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your family?
  - What is your marital status?
  - Do you have kids?
    - If so, can you describe your own parenting style?
    - How did you learn how to be a parent? (Experience, watching other parents, reading parenting books, etc.)
    - What has been the most difficult aspect of parenting?
- How would you define a “real” mother or a “good” mother?

- How long have you been a child caretaker?
  - Is there another term you prefer rather than “child caretaker?”
- How many families have you worked for in that time?
- How did you come to be a child caretaker?
- How did you learn how to care for children?
- How long have you been working with the _________ family?
- How did you come to work for the _________ family?
- How many days/week and hours/day do you work for the _______ family?
- Do you like working for the ________ family? Why or why not?
- Can you tell me a little about your interaction with (parents’ names)?
- How much time do you spend with (parents)?
- How much time do you spend alone with the child/children?
- Have you learned anything from (parents) about raising or caring for a child? If so, what have you learned?
- How, if at all, has working for the ______ family changed your approach to or attitudes about raising or caring for a child?
- Do you think you have changed/influenced the ______ family’s approach to or attitudes about raising or caring for a child? If so, how?
- Can you think of anything you have taught (parents’ names) about caring for and raising a child?

- Have you ever worked for a family you thought did a particularly good or bad job parenting? If so, can you tell me about why you felt that way?

- How, if at all, do you imagine that your own racial identity played into your work as a caretaker? Is it something you think/thought about?
• Do you interact with other caretakers on the job? If so, tell me about them.
  o How did you meet?
  o Who are they?
  o What connects you to them?

• Describe an average day with (child’s name). How do you spend the day?
  o If organized, planned activities are involved, who chooses/plans these activities?
  o How much agency do you have in choosing what you and the child do?
  o How do you find out about activities?

• If you have children of your own, how old are they?
  o If they are grown, were you working as a caretaker when they were young?

• If so, did your daily experiences with the family you were working for change the way you raised/disciplined/entertained your own children?

• Do/did your children ever interact with the kids for whom you babysat?
  o If so can you describe the relationship between your children and the children you watched?

• If you are from a country outside of the United States, how does the way the _______ family raise children differ from child rearing practices in your home country?

Interview Questions For Employers

• What is your name?
• What is your occupation?
• Where are you originally from?
• Can you tell me a little bit about your family? o How many kids do you have? o How old are they? o What is your marital status?
• How were you raised?
• How would you define a “real” mother? How would you define a “good” mother?
• Can you describe your parenting style?
• How did you learn how to be a parent? (Experience, watching other parents, reading parenting books, etc.)
• What has been the most difficult aspect of parenting?
• What is the name of your child’s caretaker?
• Where is he or she from?
• How would you describe his/her race and socioeconomic status?
• If he/she is from another country, is he/she first generation?
• How long have you been working with him or her?
• How long do you foresee working with him or her?
• How much time each week does he or she spend with your child/children?
• How much time each week does he or she spend with you?
• Did you work with any caretakers before you hired him or her? If so, how did that previous relationship end?
• How did you first connect/get in contact with him or her?
• How did you decide to hire a caretaker? Can you tell me a little about that process?
• What were you looking for in a caretaker?
• Can you tell me a little about your experience working with him or her? Are you happy with him or her? Is your spouse/partner happy with him or her? How do your kids feel about him or her?
• Does he or she speak a language other than English? If so:
  o What have been the biggest challenges in navigating the language barrier?
  o In what language do you communicate with him/her?
  o In what language does he/she communicate with your children?
• If he/she communicates with your children in a language other than English, how do you feel about that?
• Can you describe your caretaker’s style of work? How does he or she interact with your child/children? How does he or she interact with you and (if applicable) your spouse/partner?
• Have you learned anything about childrearing/mothering/etc. from your caretaker? If so, what have you learned?
• Has your child’s caretaker influenced the way you mother/father/parent/raise your children?
• Has your child’s caretaker influenced the way your spouse/partner mothers/fathers/parents/raises your children?
• Do you think your child’s caretaker has learned anything from you about caring for your child/children? If so, what has he/she learned?
• Do you think your child’s caretaker has learned anything from your spouse/partner about caring for your child/children? If so, what has he/she learned?
• Describe an average day for your child when he or she is with his or her caretaker.
• How often does your child have structured activities?
  o If so, what are some examples of these activities?
  o Who selected these activities?
  o How did he or she find out about them?
• Who determines what your child does each day?
• How much agency does your child’s caretaker have in planning a given day?
• Does your caretaker have children? If so…
  o How old are they?
  o Do your children ever spend time with your caretaker’s children?
  o Have you noticed any differences in your caretaker’s style of childrearing when he/she is with her own children vs. when he or she is with yours?


