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**Identity Projects at Home and Labor from Abroad:  
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and Santiago, Chile**

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**Identity Projects at Home and Labor from Abroad:  
The Market for Foreign Domestic Workers in Southern California and  
Santiago, Chile**

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*Abstract.* What kinds of perceptions, attitudes and cultural logics underlie the growing markets for foreign domestic workers in industrializing and post-industrial states? Drawing from field research in both Southern California and in Santiago, Chile, this presentation examines the growing popularity of migrant women as household workers in these two regions. Despite their vast differences in the histories of migration and domestic service, their markets for foreign domestic workers share a number of critical similarities. Maher focuses particularly on common narratives about "the Mexican maid" and "la nana Peruana" among employers and job placement agencies and argues that there are a series of identity projects or ideological agendas that are served when women from less developed states provide domestic labor.

TEXT OF CCIS PRESENTATION, APRIL 8, 2003

Before I begin, I need to acknowledge my silent partners. The Chilean portion of this project was conducted in collaboration with Silke Staab of the University of Cologne in Germany, and Carolina Stefoni of the FLACSO research institute in Santiago. While they cannot be here today, their work is very present in this paper, and I hope to do it justice.

Let me start with the big picture. Most of you are probably aware that there are more women migrating internationally now than ever before, not only as refugees, but also as labor migrants. Female workers have become internationally mobile in a globalizing economy, and women from less developed states regularly land in some very gendered places, such as in the sex industry, in correspondence marriages, or in domestic service. Internationally, we are seeing growing numbers of women migrating not only to the most advanced economies in the world

such as the U.S. or Europe but also to newly industrializing states that have historically sent more migrants than they have received, such as Korea and Chile.

One of the projects I've been engaged in this year is to begin to examine the demand for female migrants in receiving states in comparative perspective, to look for some of the recurring patterns among states that import women for gendered roles or jobs. So far, all my empirical work has focused on domestic service, so that is what I'll be talking about today.

I have always been suspicious that the demand for foreign nannies, housecleaners, or maids was not as simple as a liberal economic model would predict. I just didn't believe that household employers wanted to hire foreign women only because their labor was the cheapest. The segmentation of the labor market was my first tip-off. Here in Southern California, there are plenty of immigrant men working in the fields or as day laborers who make as little as a woman who cleans houses, but you find virtually no male housecleaners, and particularly not male housecleaners that work on a full-time basis for a single employer. There are also women from different immigrant groups such as Vietnamese or Somalis who earn very little money in textile manufacturing or in the informal economy, but virtually all of those working as nannies and housecleaners in Southern California are Latina, mostly from Mexico but also from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and other Latin American countries of origin.

Looking at these patterns, we might conclude one of two things: Either Latina immigrants have developed a virtually impenetrable ethnic and gendered niche in which all hiring is done through social networks that exclude both men and other ethnicities, or employers have preferences specifically for Latina immigrant women as housekeepers and nannies. Both may be true to some extent. Much of the hiring in domestic service *is* in fact done informally through social networks, but these networks do not exclude men, and they do not often cross

national lines. That is, Mexicans and Salvadorans are more likely to feel competitive or socially distant from each other than they are to give each other job tips.

In the late 1990s, I conducted fieldwork in Southern California that confirmed my sense that the kinds of perceptions and beliefs that employers hold about immigrant Latinas do seem to inform their hiring patterns. This past year, I had the opportunity to expand this study in a comparative direction by doing work on a second case – that of Peruvian migrant women doing household work in Santiago, Chile. The domestic service labor market in Santiago makes for a very interesting comparison with that in Southern California. Contextually, the labor markets in these two sites have so little in common that they approximate what Przeworski and Teune have called the “most different” ideal for comparison: that is, the more contextual differences there are between two cases, the more likely it is that any similarities found between them have broad theoretical significance.

And in fact, we did find some intriguing parallels between the two cases. As the title of this talk suggests, some of the most interesting similarities between the cases were of a somewhat “soft” or squishy nature, such as the kinds of discourses employers used in talking about foreign domestic workers that suggested that their hiring choices served to help define their own social position in terms of class, race, and even nationality.

### **Research Questions and Case Selection**

Let me give you my research questions and tell you more about why these two cases make for a productive comparison.

1. Why have growing numbers of employers begun hiring foreign household workers in Southern California and Santiago de Chile?

2. What kinds of perceptions, attitudes and cultural logics underlie these labor markets?

In both Southern California and Santiago, Chile, there are growing numbers of foreign women serving as nannies and housekeepers in private households. In Southern California, this phenomenon has become common among middle-class employers only since the 1980s, relying primarily upon female migrant labor from Central America, and especially from Mexico. In Santiago, many employers of domestic workers who had formerly hired rural women from Southern Chile have begun to hire Peruvian migrants instead. The popular image of “the Peruvian nanny,” or “la nana peruana” is now as common there as that of “the Mexican maid” in Southern California.

Apart from their mutual dependence on foreign domestic workers, these cases have little in common. Here I’ll outline the contextual differences that help make the comparison productive. (See Table One)

First, the migration of Peruvian workers into Chile is a fairly recent phenomenon without strong historical precedent, unlike the long history of migration from Mexico to the U.S. Chile is not among the top destinations for migrants in Latin America (Argentina, Venezuela, Paraguay, and Brazil all have larger immigration populations), and according to government records, there are currently more Chilenos living abroad than there are immigrants in Chile. Available records show that significant Peruvian migration into Chile did not occur until the early 1990s, after the Fujimori liberal economic reforms had begun to take effect in Peru, and after the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. This migration flow is largely female: 64% of those from Peru applying for residence visas are women.

In contrast, the U.S. truly is a “country of immigration,” particularly in California, where more than a quarter of the population is foreign-born. Mexican labor migration into the

Southwest has occurred for more than a century, and there is a long historical precedent for Mexican and Chicana women to be channeled into domestic service, particularly during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Mexican labor migration began in earnest during and after the Bracero Program, the agricultural guestworker program in the post-war era. While this labor migration began with male migrants, growing numbers of women have been migrating to the U.S. in the past couple decades, such that some estimates show the current gender ratio as nearly equal.

Second, while both migration flows are between neighboring states, Mexican migration into California is what might be called a South to North migration, from the so-called “Third World” into the First World, comparable to most labor migrations into Europe. In contrast, the labor migration from Peru to Santiago is intra-regional, a South to South migration. We know much less about migration between Southern states, but it would be fair to expect that the demographics of migrants and the attitudes of those in the receiving state may differ significantly from those in the U.S. context.

A related issue is that of language. Whereas Mexican migrants face a significant language obstacle in the labor market in Southern California, Peruvians and Chileans share a language, such that there would hypothetically be a wider range of job opportunities available to Peruvian migrants and potentially greater job mobility.

Finally, domestic service is a veritable institution in Chile that has been continuously present since the colonial era. It has become institutionalized not only in culture but also in law. Labor standards and the contractual basis for employment are enforced by the state, and there is an active domestic worker union. Most current employers in metropolitan areas like Santiago grew up in homes with at least one domestic worker, so the foreign women who are being

employed in Santiago are replacing native-born workers who had formerly been employed in this industry.

In contrast, the employment of foreign workers in Southern California is not generally replacing a native-born workforce, given that few native-born workers have been employed in domestic service in the past sixty years. Although there was a history of racialized service in the Southwest at the turn of the Century, this practice became relatively uncommon by 1940, such that most current middle-class employers of domestic workers did not have nannies or housekeepers when they were growing up. In addition, the industry remains largely informal and unregulated in practice, despite the existence of labor and tax laws. The relations of domestic service in Southern California are therefore less comfortable, less institutionalized, and more varied between households than they are in Chile.

For all these reasons, one might expect to find very different kinds of attitudes and logics underlying the labor market in California than in Santiago, and the common patterns we identified are therefore quite striking.

### **Methods**

A few general words about methods. Domestic service labor markets are notoriously hard to document on any large scale – particularly in the US! – given that so much of the market is informal and the workers tend to be the kinds of people who are socially marginalized and often overlooked by census studies. We have therefore adopted qualitative methods grounded in small, local geographies, an approach that is pretty typical for the domestic service literature. To get at general local hiring patterns, we focused on job placement agencies that connected individual workers with employers. In each case study, we conducted extended participant observations at a single placement agency, and then interviewed the heads of other agencies to



situate these observations in the local market. We also conducted in-depth interviews with workers, employers, and local elites, and draw upon popular media representations, government and UN statistics, and secondary literatures.

These kinds of methods cannot supply statistically representative information about employer perceptions. However, the kinds of perceptions, stereotypes and narratives articulated by employers and agency personnel reflect some of the available cultural discourses about migrant domestic workers, and we believe they reflect some of the larger cultural logics underlying the patterns evident in the labor market.

### **Santiago, Chile Case**

In Santiago, the main agency placing Peruvian domestic workers in jobs was operated by the Catholic Church and was officially non-profit. (See Table 2)

We conducted observations there for about two months, three times a week, and were given excellent access to workers' application forms. We created a database of hundreds of these "fichas," and so have good data on the migrants. We were not permitted to actually observe employers as they interviewed domestic workers, but we spoke with employers as they arrived and left, and chatted with both workers and agency volunteers.

Virtually all of the women seeking work at this organization had migrated since 1996, and most had arrived in the previous two years, entering Chile on tourist visas. 82% of the workers were younger than 40, and as a group, they were well educated: 90% had at least a secondary education, and more than 40% of these had some technical or university training.

The employers hiring workers at this agency were middle to upper class, looking for full-time, live-in workers to care for children and do housecleaning.

In this research site, interviews with employers were an important source of information since we had less contact with them during observations. We conducted a total of 38 in-depth interviews, including those with employers, workers, agency heads, and relevant elites.

*The Servant Problem.* One of the things we discovered from these interviews is that employers often complain about how hard it is to find good household servants these days, a classic “servant problem.” Employers have begun to turn to foreign workers in part because of a number of recent legal and economic shifts that have decreased the native-born supply of workers, made domestic service more expensive for employers, and limited the extent of employer control over workers.

Historically, the demand for and supply of domestic service labor in Chile has been heavily dependent on economic cycles. In times of economic expansion, the demand for domestic workers rises, and the supply of women who are likely to work in this sector declines due to other, more preferable job opportunities for lower-class women. This kind of scenario occurred during the 1990s, when the Chilean economy experienced a period of steady and sustained growth. According to a leader of the national domestic worker organization (ANECAP), women from the Southern regions of Chile that have traditionally supplied Santiago with domestic workers have begun to have seasonal job opportunities in export agriculture, such that they only migrate for domestic work during the off-season.

The supply of native-born domestic workers also reflects patterns in women’s employment. More women continue to join the paid labor force in Chile, many of them in professional positions. The growing numbers of women professionals puts a squeeze on social reproduction in two ways: fewer women stay at home to take care of home and children, and at the same time, fewer women offer personal household help.

Finally, the shifting landscape for domestic employment also rests on changes in labor law and in the development of a greater sense of entitlement among native-born, working-class women. After the 1989 plebiscite, new labor laws were implemented to require that domestic work be regulated with mandatory employment contracts that stipulate the agreed-upon salary, the hours, the concrete tasks expected (cleaning, child care, cooking, etc.), the space granted to the worker within the household, and the duration of employment. They also obligate employers to provide social benefits for workers such as unemployment insurance, health care, and pension contributions. Since 1998, national maternity laws prohibiting a layoff during pregnancy or within a year of birth have also applied to domestic workers, a right that had been abolished during the Pinochet regime. These legal changes have made it more expensive to hire domestic workers and have equipped native-born workers who do domestic service with a much greater capacity to defend their rights. Native-born domestic workers still suffer abuses and have their labor undervalued in relation to other occupations – they report many of the same kinds of problems that domestic workers everywhere experience; however, legal changes have begun to transform the traditional *patrona-empleada* relationship. As one employer explained, Chilean women know their rights “*al revés*” (inside out) and demand them.

The employers with whom we spoke did not accept these changes happily. They complained about Chilean workers who “demand more things every time, who become more and more precious.” They critiqued workers for negotiating salaries, inquiring about working conditions, and refusing to do certain tasks like windows and floors:

The people that you’d call for interviews, Chileans, would ask you: Do you have a washing machine? Do you have a drier? Do you have a juicer? Who comes to clean your windows? Who comes to wax your floors? They’d ask you. They’d ask you the conditions instead of you asking them the conditions. I think that the Chileans don’t want to cover the area of the domestic worker.(Maite)

On the other hand, employers criticized Chilean domestics for the “resentment” with which they did their jobs, performing work “with anger and not with love.” All these comments illustrate the contemporary “servant problem,” in which employers are discontent when domestic workers do not accept their place as a traditional servant.

Much like in other contexts in which employers have complained of a servant problem, these criticisms implied a contrast to a nostalgic (and partially illusory) ideal of servitude in the good old days. Both employers and agencies often mentioned “*las nanas antiguas*” (nannies in the old days), the domestic workers of their childhoods that had come to their families as young girls and lived with them all their lives, not having any further aspirations and sacrificing families of their own.

The nostalgia expressed in “servant problem” stories tends to obscure the extent to which there were always conflicts in the relationships between patronas and household servants, but interviews with employment agencies and elites did confirm a general transformation from an era in which domestic workers had lower salaries, few rights, specialized tasks in multi-servant households, and lifetime employment with a single family, to a time when the labor became regulated by contracts and workers changed employers when they were not satisfied with work conditions. This transformation has been accompanied by workers asserting labor rights and being less willing to perform the kinds of ingratiation and subservience expected in the traditional patrona-empleada relationship. To maintain this traditional structure of submission and dominance, some santiaguinos have begun to turn to Peruvian immigrant women, who employers say “assume their role as a nanny.”

Las Nanas Peruanas. The new migration flow from Peru into Santiago has been shaped by a number of conditions. On one hand, the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile ended at roughly the same time as the Fujimori regime in Peru began displacing its citizens with neo-liberal economic restructuring policies. The strong growth of the Chilean economy in the 1990s (5.6%) also increased the gap in economic development between Peru and Chile. Finally, we have seen a lot of anecdotal evidence that some women are migrating in order to escape abusive relationships in a context in which they cannot easily leave a bad marriage. On the whole, Chile is not a haven of female emancipation compared to Peru but migrating internationally for plentiful domestic service jobs in Santiago does give abused women an economically viable and socially acceptable alternative.

Entering Chile and gaining permission to work are both easy in Chile compared to the U.S.. Peruvian labor migrants generally enter Chile on a tourist visa, valid for three months. Once a migrant finds a job and has a work contract, she can apply for a work permit that is valid as long as she stays in that job. The mandatory work contract enforces the same labor rights and benefits for migrants as for native-born workers. And perhaps for this reason, we did not find that Peruvian migrants earned lower average salaries than their Chilean counterparts.

Despite state regulations, however, we did find migrant women to be relatively disempowered compared to native-born workers. The Peruvian women we interviewed did not stress a low salary as one of the problems they experienced at work, but they did complain about the non-payment of their salary, sometimes for more than a month's work. Migrant workers also reported inadequate food, verbal abuses, violations of personal privacy, and working hours long beyond those stipulated by labor laws or agreed upon in the work contract.

Many migrants appeared to tolerate poor working conditions in part because of circumstances that were a product of international migration itself. For instance, in a foreign legal and political system, they didn't know their rights as well as their Chilean counterparts and did not know where to turn in case of abuse or violation.

Also, Peruvian workers were much more likely than Chileans to work without the legally mandated contract, given that informal employment permitted employers to avoid the costs of social benefits. Without a work contract, foreign workers cannot apply for a work permit, and so Peruvian workers who enter Chile on a tourist visa but then work without a contract become "illegal" workers, a position much more vulnerable in terms of their capacity to claim or defend their rights. The disempowerment that employers tended to mistake for subservience is not something inherently Peruvian, as some employers suggested, but a trait created by political, social and legal circumstances.

The growing employer demand for Peruvian workers in Santiago also appeared to be strongly related to issues of identity, to widespread beliefs or narratives about Peruvian women. When we began this study, we were really quite puzzled by employers' narratives about Peruvians. On one hand, they said Peruvians were superior to Chilean employees in that they were more hardworking, educated, and clean; that they speak better Spanish; that they cook well; and that they are more devoted, caring, submissive, and service oriented. On the other hand, there was also a broad discourse among these same employers (as well as in the media and among placement agencies) stereotyping Peruvian women as dirty, criminal, lazy, backward, uncivilized, uneducated, slow, or childlike. That is, Peruvian workers were simultaneously praised and stigmatized, sometimes in the same breath by the same person.

As we have examined these narratives more closely, we have come to believe that both the negative and the positive stories shape or at least rationalize hiring patterns, at the same time as they serve as a foil against which Chilean identities can be constructed.

In part, these narratives suggested contrasts to Chilean workers, critiquing those who had become empowered enough to demand labor rights and some degree of social equality. The praise for Peruvians who have a “more submissive attitude” (Andres), who “aren’t resentful” and “don’t feel that they are exploited” (Ximena), and who “never put on a bad face” when you ask them to do something (Maria Angelica) appears to be part of the servant problem narrative. That is, the message of such narratives is not just that Peruvians are desirable workers, but also that the Chilean working class no longer knows its place.

At the same time, many of the negative stereotypes about Peruvian domestic workers implied a contrast to Chileans as a national group, particularly in cases when the criticisms of Peruvian workers or Peruvian society were expressed in opposition to “us” in Chile. Such comparisons were especially evident in narratives about Peruvian poverty or backwardness. Some employers said quite explicitly that Peruvians “are less developed” (Maite) and uniformly poor; they “have very little education” and “different customs – they are accustomed to eating a lot on the street.” This critique extended particularly to other issues of hygiene and health, like “the other one I had, you had to force her to shower” (Isabel). Or, as a woman who worked at a health center articulated:

[Peruvian] people are of little financial means, which stems from the poverty there, they have a very low level of culture in their habits, in their attitudes, in everything. They carry diseases, there is a lot of tuberculosis, they bring infections that Chilenos here do not have, vaginal infections, syphilis, sexually transmitted diseases.

These discourses serve to differentiate between Chileans and Peruvians, affirming Chile as more advanced and more civilized, and locating Peru as the source not only of poverty but also infectious diseases. Rhetoric that focuses on issues of poor hygiene and disease among immigrant populations is a classic nativist formulation, one that demarcates social and political boundaries with narratives about the potential for contamination.

Some of the stereotypes that employers expressed about Peruvians were explicitly gendered, such as those who found Peruvian women culturally “backward” and less worldly than Chilean women, and more accustomed to a subordinated gender role: “Peruvians have internalized machismo much more, they are more degraded than Chilean women. Chilean women are respected, they have a certain education. It is another style of life.” This employer explained that this difference is a potential advantage for the gendered subordination of domestic service employment, “because the people who suffer machismo are used to it” (Maite). The contrast of a traditional gender order in Peru, in which women are used to machismo, and a more gender-liberated society in Chile, where women are educated and respected, serves not only to “explain” why Peruvian women would more happily occupy a demeaned or subordinated feminine role in the household, but also to construct Chilean women (and hence Chilean society) as more modern.

Interestingly, we found that negative racial and national stereotypes about Peruvians were expressed both by those who hired Peruvians (and considered them appropriate servants/subordinates) and by those who refused to hire them out of an anti-immigrant sentiment. That is, such discourses could simultaneously promote the labor demand for Peruvian workers and be used to argue that Peruvians have no place in Chile. In either case – whether the discourse rationalizes anti-immigrant sentiment or whether it rationalizes hiring them for



demeaning work – it reinforces the social distinction between Chileans and Peruvians, between whites and indigenous peoples, between a developed, “civilized” state that claims to be more European than Latin American and another that is represented as backwards and truly part of the less developed world.

### **Southern California, U.S. Case**

Let me turn now to the Southern Californian case, which has a different history of domestic service than Chile and has turned to foreign workers under different circumstances.

*Context.* As I mentioned earlier, household service among the middle class in this region had largely disappeared during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and then began to reappear in the past several decades. (See Table 3) Census figures are notoriously bad for measuring household employment, particularly when workers are undocumented or when they live with their employers. However, they do indicate general trends over time, as this chart does. I haven’t had a chance to update it with 2000 data, but it shows exponential growth between 1970 and 1990 in the number of female household workers AND in the proportion of those workers who are Latina. What happened during this period of time?

First, women entered the paid labor force in growing numbers, generating a sort of crisis in social reproduction at home. Child care, elderly care, cooking, and housecleaning still needed to get done, even when there was not someone home full time to do it. There has been growth in the consumption of all sorts of commodified reproduction, such as restaurant food, cleaning services, laundry services, child care centers, and elderly care facilities. In-home service is just one of many forms this takes – it is a form of commodified social reproduction that is very

flexible, and that maintains the most continuity with the traditional female gender role in the household, replacing one woman with another.

At the same time, California was experiencing a lot of new immigration after the 1965 reform that ended national quotas. Like in other times and places with significant immigration, the middle class has more access to household service when there are large numbers of marginalized women available to do work that many people spurn not only because the salaries tend to be quite low, but also because of the stigma of servitude, the lack of independence, and the personalistic nature of the relationship with one's boss.

Finally, during this same period of time, we have also seen some shifts in the norms of the middle-class lifestyle: houses have gotten bigger, landscaping norms more complex, and childcare standards more rigorous. These norms among the middle class are extremely labor-intensive, and can hardly be maintained without hired services. Within this context, we have seen the development of a large household service sector that is populated largely by Latino immigrants.

The contemporary domestic service industry in Southern California divides loosely into four tiers, with those at the top having the most success defining themselves as professionals, making the most money, and working under regulated, contractual terms. There is a significant racial division between the top two tiers populated by white women, and the bottom two populated by both native-born and immigrant women of color. The lowest tier comprises immigrant women who lack some key resources like social networks, English skills, independent transportation, or legal documentation.

The placement agency where I conducted observations operated in this bottom-most tier of the market. (See Table 4.) It was located in Santa Ana, a major Latino immigrant enclave in

the region, and was owned and operated by Mexican immigrants. We conducted eleven months of observations in this agency, during which time we observed 85 employers as they each interviewed a series of potential domestic workers, a process that could take anywhere from fifteen minutes to four hours, and in this site, these observations were the primary source of data, supplemented by in-depth interviews with workers. This agency placed some of the lowest-paid workers in the region with employers of relatively modest means. Employers hiring there were mostly middle or lower-middle class, and roughly one-fifth of them were themselves immigrants. Most were seeking full-time workers to serve either on a live-in or a live-out basis.

Like in Santiago, all of the job applicants in Santa Ana were women, most of whom were under 40. Many had migrated within the past five years, although in this case, there were also some applicants who had lived in the U.S. for a long time. About 90% of them were from Latin America, the vast majority from Mexico. They had quite a range of educational experience, from those with only a few years of primary education to those with university degrees and job experience as teachers or nurses.

*The Mexican maid as a 'traditional woman.* Why were employers coming to this agency to hire Latina immigrants as domestic workers? This is a complex question that has no definitive answer, given how hard it is to get inside people's heads. There was also variation among employers, such that no statement would be true for everyone. However, there were some general patterns that emerged that I'll mention briefly here.

Compared to the Santiago site, we found more mixed evidence for the "cheap labor" hypothesis, perhaps in part because we chose a field site at the bottom of the market that charged employers no placement fees. In this field site, salaries for full-time work ranged from \$110 to

\$250 per week, which translates into \$2.75 to \$6.25 per hour, if you assume only a 40 hour workweek. Certainly, there were employers who pushed to get the best deal possible, and others who had limited finances and could not have hired full-time help if it had been any more expensive. However, the best-paid women being placed through this agency made no less than what some native-born women of color make doing similar work. Also, more prestigious agencies placing immigrant women with more resources indicated much higher salary ranges (from \$7-12 per hour) that don't illustrate any "immigrant discount."

So, although I do think that some employers were economizing, I don't think that was the only thing going on, particularly if you take into consideration some of the things these employers had to say.

A subset of employers indicated that they expected Latina immigrants to be fairly undemanding as employees, given that "most of the workers here are very illegal," and some explicitly tested workers during their interviews for a willing submissiveness. One woman asked each worker how she would spend her salary, and dismissed her if she said she would spend it on herself rather than sending it all back to a family in Mexico that was dependent on her earnings. In another very painful interaction, I watched an employer ask workers "*Que pasa?*" and dismiss them if they answered only "*bien*" rather than something more perky and effusive. (In fact, she pushed one of them by saying, "*un poco bien o mucho mucho bien?*" at which the employee answered, "*o, mucho.*") This employer explained to me afterwards, "I always try to watch the body language – usually they try to please you, to sell themselves when you first meet." Others dismissed women they perceived as "aggressive." Although few American employers articulated what Chileans did about wanting someone who knows her place, their selection process reflected a similar desire.

In addition, and perhaps more important, the selection process at this agency reflected issues of identity. That is, most employers were looking not just for a body to perform some tasks, but instead were looking for a particular kind of person that they thought would be appropriate for the role of a household worker. Latina immigrants fit the bill on a number of fronts.

For instance, a lot of employers seemed to hold some common cultural stereotypes about Latinas as natural and prolific mothers, who were skilled not only in childcare but all sorts of traditionally female household tasks. The most common question employers asked was not whether job applicants had training or experience, but whether they had children. In fact, not a single employer asked about training and remarkably few asked about experience, something that indicated that they believed that this kind of work does not entail learned skills but rather emerges naturally out of feminine nature, out of motherhood, and perhaps out of a traditional upbringing in a patriarchal culture. Most employers appeared to be seeking someone who could step right in as a substitute for the woman of the house, and who would have an appropriate sense of her feminine role within it. In several cases, employers dismissed women they said appeared to be in it just for the money – as if a good household worker should perform labor in a total strangers’ home out of love, domestic devotion, or a caring disposition. This kind of comment illustrates the extent to which the role being filled by paid domestic workers is still imagined in a very gendered way. Employers resisted thinking about paid domestic work as contracted labor, preferring to frame it in private, familial terms. They tended to resist establishing a set schedule or tasks to be performed, and said things like “she should not look at it as if it were a job. Of course it is a job and we will pay her, but she should treat it like her own home.”

In this sense, there was evidence of a kind of nostalgia among So Cal employers for a “traditional femininity.” Again, the content of this nostalgia was not harkening to pre-modern forms of servitude, since few employers had had any experience of it. Instead, it seemed to be more a discourse about times and places where ‘women were women,’ satisfied with their subordinate role in the household and happy to perform the varied kinds of nurturing roles and tasks that stay-at-home women have traditionally been expected to perform out of love and maternal devotion.

So, on one hand, employers appeared to be looking for a traditional woman to fill a traditional woman’s role, and seemed to hold beliefs about Latina immigrants that made them especially appropriate for this role.

On the other hand, like in Chile, there was a sense that household work is a demeaning, dirty job that would be inappropriate for a social equal. That is, there were a few women that employers found very appealing, but were not comfortable hiring. As one employer put it, “it would be too hard to ask her to clean the bathtub.” In Southern California, the racialized overtones about Latina immigrants were much more muted than in Santiago. No one said out loud that these immigrants were dirty or backward or stupid. However, they made frequent mention of how “desperate” these immigrants were, even in situations when it was clear to me that the job applicants felt no particular pressure to find work right away. A couple employers told me that they always felt bad about coming to a place like this without actually hiring someone, a sentiment that one might feel upon visiting an animal shelter without adopting a pet. Employers tended to exaggerate not only the desperation of the women looking for work, but also the uniform poverty from they were assumedly escaping. They did not seem to differentiate between the women who – to my eye – were in fact very poor and those who had a much more

middle-class background and who were working in the States in order to put their kids through college. This apparent belief in the uniform poverty and desperation among Mexican immigrants reflected a sense that an immigrant from a less-developed state like Mexico would not expect to be the social equal of a U.S. citizen, and that they would be (or should be) grateful for any job.

I have also found myself speculating about whether assuming uniform, structural poverty among Mexican immigrants serves to make them more trustworthy than the native-born working class. That is, the poor in the U.S. have long been incriminated by classic liberal beliefs about the opportunities for mobility in America – if wealth is proof of merit, then poverty must be evidence of an individual moral failing. There were not enough native-born workers applying for jobs at this agency for me to test this idea, but it was striking to me that none of the native-born workers ever got a job. One white woman from Long Island waited for three weeks and was eventually hired by the agency to answer the phone. I can only imagine what employers were thinking when they looked her over and dismissed her – I suspect they may have been thinking, “what is wrong with you that you want to do a job like this? Are you on drugs?” One woman did say, “Americans don’t care for other people’s children.” In contrast, no employer ever seemed to question why a Mexican woman wanted to work a bad job, and some narrated the familiar story that “these are just people who want to make a better life for themselves.”

So, in sum, both the praise of Latina immigrants as traditional, natural mothers and the conviction about their “desperate” life circumstances appeared to frame them as ideal to fill a feminized, private, subordinated role in the household.

## **Analysis and Findings**

Despite all the contextual differences between Santiago and Southern California, we did find some common threads running through both cases. I will briefly discuss three issues here.

First, in both cases, the turn towards foreign women to provide social reproduction labor in private households is taking place in the context of shifting gender roles in the public sphere without substantial shifts within the private sphere. In both cases, the demand for foreign workers correlated to the growing economic opportunities of both middle-class and working-class women. That is, more middle-class women were entering the paid labor force, and job opportunities for working-class women had developed in other sectors of the economy. At the same time, private households remained organized around a gendered division of labor, in which the traditional feminine role in the household was alive and well. The turn towards in-home domestic service (rather than other forms of commodified social reproduction) maintains this gendered division of labor and the female role in the household, simply shifting responsibilities from one set of women to another. The persistence of this gendered division was apparent not only from the labor market generally, but also from the kinds of expectations that employers had for the attitude and behavior of workers that would fill a traditional woman's role in the household: in both research sites, employers still apparently hoped to hire a woman who would nurture, care for, and sacrifice for their families as if it were her own family; someone who would not assert her own will or individuality; and who would perform this labor out of a caring nature rather than for material interests.

Second (and related to the first), we found that employers in both cases tended to prefer migrant women as household workers because they saw migrants as relatively disempowered and submissive. That is, the turn towards foreign workers appears to be in part a means to secure



a labor force for household services that is unlikely either to demand the labor rights available to them under law or to make other kinds of demands of their employers. Migration itself legally and socially disadvantages migrant women. This is most true of those working without documentation who fear deportation, but it is also true of noncitizens who are displaced from their networks of support or who are unfamiliar with the legal environment and labor law of the receiving state. In addition, a segmented labor market channels unskilled foreign women into a limited number of occupations. Foreign women therefore have fewer occupational options than their native-born counterparts, in effect, limiting the extent to which they can bargain for better work conditions or opt out of bad jobs.

For all these reasons, the migration process itself produces a relatively submissive labor force whose behavior resembles the female servant ideal in both Southern California and Santiago. However, there were differences between the cases in the manner in which the hope for a submissive workforce was articulated. In Santiago, employers were engaged in an active discussion of a servant problem that held up a nostalgic ideal of pre-modern servitude as a foil against which to critique contemporary household workers. In their minds, the “ideal” worker was still a traditional, rural woman from Southern Chile, but the actual workers available from this region no longer matched that ideal (if they ever did). Peruvians entering this labor market are not idealized as “traditional rural women” in the same way, but they are commonly found to be the best option among the alternatives available, given that employers find them to be “more submissive” and to have an appropriately deferent attitude. In contrast, employers in Southern California did not often articulate “servant problem” critiques of the native-born, apparently because few native-born women have been performing domestic service in recent years. However, employers in Southern California – like those in Chile – idealized household

employees they saw as traditionally feminine or rural, and seemed to find Mexican migrants to resemble this ideal, particularly insofar as the migrants were unlikely to assert demands.

Finally, the growing labor markets for foreign domestic workers in both cases reflect identity issues that are most visible in the discourse of employers and placement agencies about why foreign workers are especially appropriate for this kind of work. In both research sites, we saw evidence of a dual discourse among employers and placement agency personnel that simultaneously praised foreign women as superior domestics and held them in contempt as social inferiors. This discourse represented foreign women as nationally homogeneous and fundamentally different than the native-born, ascribing qualities to Peruvians and Mexicans that legitimated their prominence as household servants.

We were most surprised by this last similarity and are working to make sense of it. We suspect that this kind of discourse is a remnant of the colonial era. As you know, Europeans tended to idealize those in the colonies as noble savages who were more innocent or perhaps less “corrupted” than people in more civilized societies. At the same time, they also disparaged those in the colonies (particularly indigenous groups) as barbarians who lacked the intelligence or cultural refinement of civilized peoples. While such stories were invented long ago, they have a long half-life as cultural constructions, and – according to Etienne Balibar – they continue to inform notions of race and nation in contemporary societies.

In both research sites, employers engaged in a dual discourse about foreign women to explain why they were appropriate or desirable as domestic workers, but the particular stories they told differed somewhat. In Chile, employers more commonly critiqued Peruvians as culturally backwards or uncivilized, whereas in California, the story about the inferior social position of Latin American women was posed more in terms of the assumed uniform desperation

and poverty in their countries of origin. Peruvian women in Chile were praised more often as “submissive” and willing workers, whereas Mexican women in the U.S. were praised as “natural mothers” and traditional women who were apparently not suspected of having the kinds of failings that the working class of a more developed society are suspected of having.

What are the functions and implications of such a dual discourse? At one level, it legitimates the segmentation of the labor market. That is, both the positive and the negative stories about foreign domestic workers served to “explain” why there is an identity-based division of labor; it also “explains” why certain groups are especially suited for jobs widely considered dirty, dangerous, demeaning, or undesirable. It may also rationalize working conditions that would not otherwise be considered acceptable, much as the common narratives about the nimble fingers and patience of young Asian women are used to explain why they are “ideal” for repetitive, painstaking, poorly paid labor in electronics manufacturing, or historical narratives about the Mexican, Chinese, or Japanese physique and mentality explained why such groups were more appropriate than whites for stoop labor in the fields.

At another level, this dual discourse reflects what we might call “identity projects” in the receiving state: that is, descriptions of foreign women invite contrasts to the women that employ them, to native-born labor pools, and more broadly to the nationality in the receiving state. Behind every description of a barbaric or backwards people is an implicit affirmation of “civilization.” Behind the conclusion that foreign women are appropriate for servitude and dirty work is an implicit claim that the native-born are above this kind of work. For instance, consider the popular claim in Southern California about immigrants performing jobs that “Americans won’t do.” This claim is both empirical description – on the whole, the native-born are not applying for these jobs – and also prescription: Americans ought to be doing higher-status work,

because to be American is to be First World, to live a life in which one can expect to consume services and amenities rather than to provide them for others.

In Chile, this identity project was particularly striking in the discursive contrast often made between Peruvians as an uncivilized, “tropical,” racially mixed people, and a self-image among Chileans as white, European, and modern. This contrast may be part of a larger effort among Chileans to distinguish themselves from the international reputation of Latin America as inefficient and economically underdeveloped, in part in order to continue to attract foreign capital.

Historically, household service has been one of the key places where class identity and race have been defined – middle-class respectability defined by the presence of lower-class servants, and whiteness defined in relation to servants of color. And indeed, we found that the dynamics of household employment in contemporary settings still reflect projects of race and class definition. However, we also found that when household work is provided by foreign women, there are other kinds of identity projects that can come into play, such as the definition of national identity or even modernity against a subservient foreign other.

What we don't want to do with this analysis is to implicitly label all employers of foreign domestic workers as racists and nationalists. There are a wide variety of reasons that any single employer might hire a particular worker, and (as the saying goes) most of my best friends hire Mexican nannies. What we do want to do is to begin to raise the question of what general cultural constructions and ideological projects shape and get shaped by an international division of household labor.

**TABLE ONE**

**“MOST DIFFERENT” CASE COMPARISON**

<b>Contextual Factor</b>	<b>Santiago, Chile</b>	<b>Southern California</b>
Migration History	More emigration than immigration; Significant migration from Peru only since early 1990s, predominantly female	Major immigrant destination; More than a century of migration from Mexico, beginning with male migrants
Migration Type	South to South	South to North
Language Barriers Facing Migrants	None	Significant
History of Domestic Service	Continuous presence of domestic workers among the middle class during past century	Few domestic workers among middle-class employers from 1940s to early 1980s
Institutionalization of Domestic Service	Active state regulation of labor standards; Active national domestic worker labor union	Wild variations in salaries and work conditions, which are regulated by law but rarely enforced

**TABLE TWO**

**SANTIAGO OBSERVATION SITE (June – August 2002)**

<b>Placement Agency Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Operated by Catholic Church</li><li>▪ Lower fees than other agencies, similar salary range for workers</li><li>▪ All live-in placements</li></ul>
<b>Characteristics of Workers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ All women</li><li>▪ Virtually all Peruvian</li><li>▪ All immigrant, most arrived in previous two years</li><li>▪ More urban than rural</li><li>▪ Most entered on tourist visas; some now undocumented</li><li>▪ 82% under 40</li><li>▪ 90% with at least secondary education</li></ul>
<b>Characteristics of Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Virtually all native-born</li><li>▪ Middle to upper-middle class</li><li>▪ Most seeking a combination of caring labor and housecleaning</li></ul>

**TABLE THREE**

**WOMEN EMPLOYED IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS  
Orange and Los Angeles Counties, 1970-1990 (Census)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Orange County</b>	<b>% Latina*</b>	<b>Los Angeles County</b>	<b>% Latina*</b>
1970	703	19%	5283	19%
1980	1,347	38%	14,095	57%
1990	5,024	69%	33,770	80%

\*The methods and terminology for measuring the Latino or Hispanic origin population have changed from year to year: 1970, “Spanish language or Spanish surname”; 1980, self-identification as “Spanish origin”; 1990, self-identification as “Hispanic origin.”

**TABLE FOUR**

**SANTA ANA OBSERVATION SITE (May 1996 – April 1997)**

<b>Placement Agency Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Owned by immigrant entrepreneurs</li><li>▪ No fees to employers; lower salary ranges than most other local agencies</li><li>▪ Half live-in, half live-out placements</li></ul>
<b>Characteristics of Workers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ All women</li><li>▪ Approx 75% Mexican; 20% other Latin American</li><li>▪ Most immigrant, most arrived in previous five years</li><li>▪ More urban than rural</li><li>▪ Many apparently undocumented</li><li>▪ Approx 80% under 40</li><li>▪ Wide educational range, primary to post-graduate</li></ul>
<b>Characteristics of Employers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ 80% native-born, 20% immigrant</li><li>▪ 64% white, 14% Asian</li><li>▪ Lower-middle to upper-middle class</li><li>▪ Most seeking a combination of caring labor and housecleaning</li></ul>