

**Careful capitalism:
Children, residential kinship, and live-in domestic work in Costa Rica**

by
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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfilment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Public Issues Anthropology

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2024

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Limited publications address structures of residential kinship and live-in domestic work in Central America. Informed by participant observation fieldwork with three families, and open-ended interviews with employers (6) and domestic workers (5), this thesis discusses how kin relationships are created and sidelined through the industry of live-in domestic work in Costa Rica. Employers understand the industry of domestic work as a tradition to be upheld for proper societal standing. These relations of labour and kinship are sites of patronal benevolence that encourage the workers to limit their involvement with their families through poverty wages and patriarchal employment practices, and thus reproduce nationalist and gendered social orders that erase interdependence between employer's tradition and worker's paid labour. Furthermore, as a project of philanthropic social reproduction, selective kinship embeddedness of the worker and their child in the employer's kin structures does not guarantee financial citizenship for the live-in domestic worker. Social mobility for the children of domestic workers is framed as depending on the worker's present labour and on continued patronal investment. Furthermore, this thesis recognizes how workers, their children, and employers learn to understand structures of difference and navigate their shifting roles across social groups according to Marian ideologies of age and gender. This thesis offers a critical approach towards public issues anthropology as a social practice, and contributes to linguistic anthropological theorization on kinship, gender ideologies, and labour.

Acknowledgements

When I entered the master's program for Public Issues Anthropology at the University of Waterloo I was welcomed again to a caring and stimulating intellectual space where I felt encouraged to engage the theorizing happening inside our formal and informal classroom spaces with the many actors that appear as characters in this thesis. This work I present is indebted to the people, experiences, and multiple encounters that shaped and sustained my life and thinking as I completed this project.

Families in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, including my own, allowed me to participate in their everyday lives for the duration of fieldwork and continue to stay in contact with me through online communications. Thank you for your time, your trust, your insights, and your openness. I especially thank all the children who bravely asked questions, and excitedly invited me to play with them. This work is dedicated to you! May all your dreams come true.

This project would be nothing without my dear mentors and advisors Seçil Dağtaş and Adrienne Lo. How many times have you taken the time to think with me, provided me with intellectual tools to navigate through wretched worlds, opened your door to soothe my uneasy thoughts, and created platforms to sustain me as a scholar? Thank you for reading with me, thank you for sharing your courage. Thank you for carefully reading through so many of my silly thoughts and encouraging me to develop them. My notebooks are full of admiration towards you, thank you for existing in this world and making space for me! You are brilliant, thank you for teaching me! I couldn't have even started this without you.

Thank you to Jennifer Liu for being a caring friend, a wickedly smart and kind professor, for celebrating life with me, and for being in my committee.

My cohort Evengeline Strickland, Aparajita Bhattacharya, Shannon Brandreth, Isabel Clasen, Robyn Wood, Wynne Manning, and Tasha Mughal: thank you for showing up, for showing me courage, and for sitting (and Dancing! Stretching! Reaching! Walking!) with me. I hope that you continue seeing your dreams as worth your while.

Bill Kern, who I worked for at Columbia Icefield since my first year of undergraduate studies at Waterloo, has been an immense source of emotional support and wisdom throughout my studies, encouraging me to "look around!"

Many friends and colleagues offered their feedback, thoughts, support, and presence that was precious at different moments. James Quesada, Nikolina Zenovic, and Jessica Story-Nagey: thank you for the opportunities to discuss this work, for asking questions, inviting me to ask, and encouraging compassion.

My linganth classmates: Angel, Keanna, Clio and Christine! I loved sharing a classroom with you! You are so smart, funny and courageous readers.

Thank you to Tim Ireland who so many times helped me by pulling articles from the library when my cantankerous electronic devices would refuse to allow me to do so. Jennifer Doucet and Miljana Kovacevic, thank you for all your work for the department and your kind encouragements. Thank you to everyone that works with the AnthSoc making a community nest in our little department, you are so precious. Thank you to Maria Liston, Chris Watts, Alexis Dolphin, Mark Dolson, Nic Hayes, and Jamie Sewell for having been excellent professors generous with their advice throughout my time at UW. Prior to Waterloo, Jayne Hutchcroft was a mentor to me through high school and forever changed my life through the unveiling of paradigms in socio-cultural anthropology. Thank you for having taken me in as a student Ms. Hutch. Thank you to so many of my many teachers, infinite.

My dear roommates in Waterloo: Karthik, Shyam, Nimish, and Anand were kind, brilliant theorists, and often made sure that I had eaten. Katie Fry made sure I had a place to live and a friend to count on when existence seemed absurd. Marna Wal lovingly offered critical feedback on my language and insisted that I never cease to think about coloniality, care, and community. Hannah Clark offered advice to resist my impossible perfectionist tendencies, encouraged excitement about doing anthropology, and many times was perfectly cheeky company. Mar Sanabria always challenged me from afar and motivated me to do my work by doing her own work. Jorge Zeledón and Ignacio Barboza hold me with so much love. Amy Salvador and Vanessa Montoya helped me thaw out of a difficult winter. Christina Saoud created space for expansive feeling and thinking, and daringly asked me to look in the mirror. Cha, Babsi, Noldy, Jairo, Edu, Leo, Shel, Spenny, Melly, Luis, Rahully, Clau, Santi, Isa and Colleen: thank you for your friendship through all these years of uni. My friends who I've met at Jane and La Mut: Love dares you to care for the people on the edge of the night. Thank you for the music! Thank you for the dancing!

My parents Sharon and Fernán, I couldn't be here without you. Thank you for my life, thank you for keeping me in your prayers, and caring for me from afar. Cynthia and Chicho love me as a daughter, thank you for the feeling of safety. Mile and Mapi, thank you for the sisterhood. My infinitely loving grandparents Vicky, Jorge Arturo, Fred, Lourdes, Ana and Paco, my aunts, uncles, cousins, Xime, Juan, Juli, Jime, Ura, and Gaby: I love you, thank you for always making me want to come back home. I'm sorry for all the birthdays I have missed. My wonderful brother Antonio, your support, motivation, and sensible wisdom is such a treasure, thank you for being in cahoots with me. My Pandilla cousins, and my Nugget and Golden friends who at times became my research assistants and lively companions whose keen observations and well-timed jokes never failed to make bleakness appear less dreary. Thank you for your love and encouragement. Thank you to Véronique Herselin who, after an initial extended stay given a stolen passport, continues opening her home and heart to me, and reminding me about nurturing communities with *joie de vivre*, *vous êtes mega cool!* Camille Le Fric, thank you for sharing the love for adventure with me, and for sincerely reading through infinite drafts and encouraging me to continue. I love knowing you, thank you for understanding me a bird in spring. And Enrique Villacis, thank you for rooting for me since that first day we met. Thank you for being my champion, challenging and encouraging me to be, and insisting on seeing me as better than I actually am. I am so grateful for your life.

This research was supported by generous funding from the University of Waterloo Anthropology Department, and the Iris Yuzdepski family, thank you for your continued support of anthropology students! This project also received funding through the University of Waterloo Graduate Scholarship, the Connect 4 Success Research and Travel Grant, the International Master's Award of Excellence, and the David Johnston International Experience Awards - McCall MacBain.

Every remaining fault in this project is my own.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration _____	ii
Abstract _____	iii
Acknowledgements _____	iv
Introduction: Kinship Made and Unmade _____	1
Study of kinship in anthropology _____	1
Methodology and Researcher Positionality _____	7
Who built this house? A brief history of the development of domestic servitude in Costa Rica _____	10
Careful (:) capitalism _____	17
Tracing Frames: Ethnographic Background _____	23
On employers of paid live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica _____	23
Public Issues Interlude _____	26
On paid live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica _____	28
Family hiring family works for family _____	33
Practical(ly) kin for practical purposes in a hopelessly practical world? _____	34
Having a baby _____	38
Love laws and children _____	41
Doctor dress up _____	42
Working through contradictions _____	46
Different tables mark different families _____	48
You're old and she's older too! _____	50
Not a conclusion, but: Beyond polite fictions, children become adults _____	53
References _____	55

Introduction: Kinship Made and Unmade

“Pookie! I want to go to the playground!” Mariela asked her mother’s employer.

*“Ask your mom if you can go, but I can’t take you now. Maybe Don Mauri can go with you?”
[Don Mauri is Pookie’s husband. Mariela’s mom calls Pookie ‘Doña Sandra’].*

“He’s busy, I already asked.”

“Well, go and ask your mom.”

Mariela came in through the swinging kitchen door and walked up to her mom who was busy cooking lunch for seven people.

“Mama! I want to go to the playground!”

“I can’t take you. Ask Camila.”

I was chatting in the kitchen with Estella, Mariela’s mom. Mariela glanced over at me.

“Sure, let’s go!”

“Yay!” Mariela exclaimed.

Mariela is a child of a live-in domestic worker in Costa Rica who lives with her mother in her house of employment. While the literature on domestic work discusses how kinship ties are made and unmade in these labour contexts, these works usually focus on the dyad formed between the worker and their employer (Constable 1997; Blofield 2012), or the worker and their children and other relatives (Yarris 2017a; Parreñas 2005, 2015; Constable 2014). I look at how live-in domestic work entails a more complex constellation of relationships relating the employers’ and employee’s extended family systems in a context of globalization, coloniality, and nationalism, including how children of live-in domestic workers live with their parent(s) at their place of employment.

Study of kinship in anthropology

As the study of relations and kinship is a relevant anthropological tool to map social ecologies of continuity and disjuncture which inform political action, how do structures of live-in domestic

work relate to the study of kinship? In some ways, kinship is about recognizing variability in relatedness, the (im)possibility for one to exist without another, and the assertion that humans are social creatures. Janet Carsten (2004) argues that the many processes of living together also make kinship, while Anna Tsing writes about how “alienation obviates living-space entanglement” (Tsing 2017, 5).

I am understanding kinship as multifaceted, polyvalent, holonic, interdependent relationships ideologically entangled with organizing grids of recognition where coloniality and capitalism represent regimes of power. Marilyn Strathern (2020) discusses relations as appearing conceptually elusive at times, and sometimes as appearing to be the only thing one can hold on to. Marshall Sahlins (2013) famously calls his understanding of kinship as “mutuality of being” in dying each other’s deaths and living each other’s heartbreaks, placing the experience of kinship on the same ontological realm as magic, gifting, sorcery, and witchcraft. From one perspective, kinship is about care and embedding through attachment and the creation of bonds where loyalty is expected through the circulation of energy and dedication of time, across time.

Anthropological inquiry about kinship has changed since the 1800s, when anthropologists invented bounded societies, deemed them wholes, (LH Morgan in Trautmann 1987, Durkheim and Mauss 1963), and ranked them as civilized or primitive (Levi-Strauss 1992). Anthropological studies of kinship once debated whether theories of descent or alliance should be considered the nexus of elementary structures of kinship (Levi-Strauss 1969, Radcliffe-Brown 1940). A major insight from alliance theory, brought forward by Claude Levi-Strauss, questions the origin of categories through which culture becomes naturalized. Pierre Bourdieu refers to these naturalized categories as doxa (1977). Through critiques framing descent theory as too bounded by nested units that were too different from lived experiences (Weiner 1983, 1992); alliance theory as

ignoring social life (Bourdieu 1978, Bloch 1985); and phenomenological accounts informing different perspectives towards gender, residence, and emotions (Carsten 2004; Weiner 1992; Collier and Yanagisako 1987), studies of kinship then shifted towards Marxist, feminist, culturalist, and historically grounded lenses (Peletz 1995). A Marxist account foregrounds the instrumental uses of kinship in the service of advancing personal goals and reproducing systems of capitalism, drawing on historical materialist accounts to interpret precapitalist societies (Bloch 1985). However, as Bourdieu (1977) highlights, while habitus is demonstrable as durable dispositions in practical experience, it is unproductive and impossible to separate feeling from instrumentality as there are limits to the awareness of actors (see also Silverstein 2009).

Bourdieu places domesticity as not insulated from the wider social sphere, and child socialization and gender relations occurring in a socially structured world. Furthermore, Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier (1987, in Carsten 2004, 75-77) argue how kinship and gender are not biologically determined and are culturally produced as “symbolic construction of persons and relations.” A perspective of language socialization examines how language novices, sometimes framed as children, interact with and around a wide array of actors to understand and act across their unfolding life contexts (Duranti, Ochs, and Schieffelin 2012). However, Elise Berman and Benjamin Smith (2021) have critiqued the “novice” as a naturalized concept by discussing it as an ideological construct which is socio-politically mediated through the semiotic process of language socialization. Language socialization is happening as children friction social norms through recognizing, narrating, and questioning disjunctures in the continuity of relating. As one of the sites of interest of this project is the interactions between the children of the domestic workers and the employing families, I am interested in how children figure out how social orders of kinship

and gender are clumsily organized through a labour hegemony, and relations are restricted and facilitated through a neoliberal labour agreement.

For some live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica who have migrated from Nicaragua, as Estella did 10 years before Mariela was born, kinship networks also represent solidary structures allowing workers to migrate through practices of care and the security of a place to return. In turn, kinship networks act as an agent encouraging migration through the socially tensed promise of remittances and social mobility under structures of capitalism. Across the brief literature on domestic work and Costa Rica, Kristin Yarris (2017) has written about the networks of care in Nicaragua where grandmothers care for their grandchildren as their daughters migrate, often to Costa Rica, to labour as domestic workers. In this sense, Caitlin Fouratt (2022) writes about flexibility as a characteristic emerging in Nicaraguan families to maintain social cohesion. Employers sometimes discuss worker's flexibility as a point of affinity towards Nicaraguan workers. Thematically, Yarris writes about the embodied distress of grandmothers in worrying about their transnational daughters and remittances that do not add up, solidarity as a culturally relevant value that emerges to mobilize intergenerational care, and the sacrifice involved in creating strong ties with their grandchildren through years of care against the prospect of letting them go with their mother.

Across ethnographic literature on domestic work, domestic workers are discussed as becoming 'like' kin to their employing family, emphasizing how in capitalist extractive societies this is a type of disposable, shifting, and transactional kinship. It is often up to the liberal individual discretion of the employer the extent to which they are willing to recognize their employee as a person with a life beyond their place of employment (Parreñas 2021, Amrith and Coe 2022). While relational intimacy can be refused, a devoted extension of the self and an intimate coexistence

[*convivencia*] is always demanded of live-in domestic workers given the tension of sharing domesticity, and the experience of cloistered labouring conditions (Ahmad 2017, Parreñas 2021, Constable 2014). These bonds of kinship are held but are selectively ruptured, severed, or perforated (Bakker Kellogg 2019) ultimately revealing the status of long-term live-in domestic workers as traditional tokenized commodities to their employers. On a different layer, employers reproduce a fractally recursive patriarchal power structure and Marian mirrors¹ by framing themselves as kin-provider patrons of their employees and of their extended family as emic projects of exceptional solidarity. In Costa Rica, these layers of kinship are further complicated through labour and patronal duty enactments of care and love, nationalism in hiring practices,² and the entanglement of the constellations of relationships that employers and employees bring into their relationship.

In being a kinship relation created through a capitalist structure, the employer-employee relationship of live-in domestic work presents contradictions tensing emic understandings of gendered duty, reciprocity and loyalty against capitalist extractivist logics which are structurally sustained through poverty minimum wages. On one hand, these are relationships of care and practices of co-parenting as live-in domestic workers and their employers engage in the raising of each other's children. On another, care and loyalty mask how these are also relationships that seek

¹ While not everyone in Costa Rica and Nicaragua is Catholic, Catholic imagery including saints, crucifixion and resurrection scenes, and different virgin iterations permeate the cultural landscape in the major cities of Managua and San José. National festivities celebrating the Virgin Mary are yearly happenings across transnational borders. While not deterministic, Marian ideals influence gendered perceptions of self-sacrificing motherhood and national identity. The Nicaraguan Sandinista National Liberation Front [*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)*]'s revolutionary ideals drew heavily from Christian socialism, liberation theology and political Catholicism.

² While most domestic workers in Costa Rica hold Costa Rican citizenship, most live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica are Nicaraguan. Of all employers of domestic workers, only around 2% report employing *live-in* domestic workers, and this becomes a marked status of distinction. (*Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2009*). Between 2017 and 2023, the *Consejo Nacional de Salarios* 'National Salary Advisory Board' raised the domestic work minimum wage by an hourly ₡301 (≈\$.78CAD) for a 48-hour workweek (MTSS)

to maximize the possibility of extracting personable labour for a minimum cost through benevolent paternalist employment practices that rarely extend beyond the time and space of the labour relationship. The relations between the child of the worker and the employers become sites to seemingly suspend and further anchor the labour relationship. In sum, these relationships become about the selective making and unmaking of kin ties and labour contracts.

In what follows, I will first present my methodology and researcher positionality, followed by a section further describing the ethnographic context. Following, I show how fluid layers of kinship are framed as ultimately tied to a labour relationship in irregularly shifting manners, analyze how these are further entangled through invitations of a child of the worker into residential kinship with their parent and their employers, and examine how these different parent-type relations are navigated as careful capitalism. Next, I evaluate vignettes illustrating how children navigate their daily scenarios of likeness and marked difference through nationality, eating, and notions of age. I openly close with a reflection on the implications of interdependence.

Methodology and Research Positionality

This study focuses on the dynamic tensions occurring in live-in domestic work in Costa Rica. Contrary to live-out domestic work, live-in domestic work is a paid labour arrangement requiring the worker to live in the house where they also labour. In a Costa Rican context, these workers are usually expected to stay in the house where they work and leave on Sunday, and every other Saturday. Daily, workers usually prepare meals, clean, wash, organize, anticipate needs and care for children, pets, visits, and adult employers. They usually work for over 8 daily hours with workdays beginning at 6 am and ending at or after dinner.³

Identifying as a Costa Rican researcher studying at a Canadian university, I anonymously recruited participants for an ethnographic research project on “families hiring live-in domestic workers” through a popular Costa Rican Facebook group in March 2023. This group with over 50,000 members, most posting members being women, functions as a community to ask for advice and services, as well as a non-place norming moralities. Revealing my identity through private messaging, three adult women who interacted with my post accepted me for fieldwork from May to June 2023. I would visit their homes during mealtimes and coffee, for overnight periods, and was invited to tag along during weekend trips. I struggled to balance my research time with spending time with my family and friends, and remotely working as a teaching assistant.

Like most employers of live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica, their primary residences were inside gated communities or gated houses, in the western, eastern, and northern Greater Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica’s Central Valley. This was practical as my parents live in the area, and I usually stay at their house while in Costa Rica.

³ Feelings of loneliness and isolation were usually reported by the workers.

The women who agreed to have their households participate were of different ages (from mid-thirties to mid-sixties) and in heterosexual marriages. Their partners were in similar-to-them age ranges. They had children, some were adults and had children of their own. They encouraged my interactions with their extended families and hired at least one person as a live-in domestic worker. I am aware that while consent was granted individually by each person living in the house, this was not free from unbalanced dynamics of power. Workers granted their verbal consent, yet I understood my research as yet another task assigned to them by their employers. I have since deleted the recruitment post for the privacy of my participants, and written names are pseudonyms.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 people: 6 of them employers of domestic workers (4 women and 2 men), 5 of them employed as domestic workers (4 women and 1 man). These interviews of differing lengths were framed as conversations with a researcher, with flexibility for my participants to discuss their areas of interest related to my work. I was allowed to audio record 7 of them, and to take notes for all. I engaged in conversation with anyone who would engage with me as a student researcher interested in kinship and domestic work across a series of relevant sociable spaces including parks, playgrounds, plazas, bars, cafés, diner-type restaurants, private residences, benevolent community organizations, Facebook groups, and country clubs, and social spaces including beauty salons, organized city walking tours, and liquor tasting events. At times, this did include personal relations I held before fieldwork. I would sometimes attempt to reconstruct my field notes as voice notes.

Perhaps given a feeling of native positionality, I often felt conflicted during my interactions with employers, and perhaps my militant flame was misdirected. Employers, probably reflecting a desire to be understood as enacting Christian faith, were keen on being portrayed as benevolent, charitable, and providing invaluable opportunities for their workers and children.

When attempting to illustrate how I was allegedly misunderstanding how employing domestic workers is a complicated affair, employers would reflect their understanding of my native positionality and deterministically project me as a would-be employer sometime in my proper adulthood: married, home-owning, expecting children. Of this projection of a mode of relating, Sahlins writes against the notion of kinship as emerging through birth as a human genetic process, rather as kinship emerging before birth, with birth materializing a “destiny as social beings (which) was present from the creation” (2013, 68). While this projection extended towards hope that their current employee would stay with them into their old age, this projection often became aphasic upon asking the employers about their employee’s life after retirement and their contributions towards their employees’ pension, placing the responsibility on the worker. According to data from the *Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social* (CCSS), only 1000 domestic workers gained access to their pension fund between 2012 and 2022 (Céspedes 2022). This number is low compared to the total number of domestic workers, reported at over 116,000 people during the time of fieldwork.

Being interpellated as a person with family ties in Costa Rica’s Central Valley, employer interlocutors attempted to tie my life history with their own. “Wasn’t your uncle in the basketball team of St. Lazarus’ school in 1974? He must’ve played with my brother!” During the time of fieldwork and writing, family members would insist upon reading my work in search of the “scientific method.” I interpret the misunderstanding of ethnographic work, and the push for following a “scientific method” and a “proper job” as a neoliberal discourse of commodification. Some of my older relatives posed doubt upon my legitimacy as an ethnographic fieldworker to be present in spaces where they believed I was posing a threat to my sanctity: “You could be raped!” As discussed by Hilary Parsons Dick (2018), this attitude of despair, and discourse of emergent danger at every corner, is characteristic and reflective of a gendered morality encouraging me,

socialized as a “respectable woman fluent in Marian,” to remain at home or an otherwise respectable enclosed institution like church, school, the country club, or the shopping mall. Marianismo is a colonial understanding of a Catholic gendered figure of moral personhood where people interpellated as women are supposed as subordinate to their husband, abstinent until marriage, pious, and nobly suffering (Dick 2018). Undesirable, sexually dominating utterances towards me in front of overhearers were mostly made by men who were at least 30 years older than me, usually unknown men in public spaces or employers who acknowledged how they were transgressing a boundary of inappropriateness. I was not groped during fieldwork.

My identities were more variedly understood among workers: sometimes I was understood as the potential friend or relative of potential employers before I was understood as a researcher. I think that this uncertainty made it difficult for employees to feel as if they could be candid with me. “Where are you from?” I was often asked, and I would first offer “from San José.” Sometimes I would add how I have been living in Canada, and sometimes I would add how my maternal grandmother’s family comes from Nicaragua. Unsure of the reaction it would elicit, I never explained how my great-grandfather and his father held different positions in political office for the Somoza’s authoritarian, conservative, right-wing Nationalist Liberal Party.

“Auto-anthropology” is limited (Strathern 1987) and complex, and checking my projections has been difficult, I conclude!

Who built this house? A brief history of the development of domestic servitude in Costa Rica

“Oh! So you’re basically researching slavery!” My schoolfriend Naomi last April when I was telling her about my research before heading to Costa Rica.

Rhacel Parreñas (2021) writes about how many studies on unfree labour abide by Marxist or liberal understandings of freedom which foreground individualism. These understandings frame freedom as autonomy which is impossible in social understandings of kinship where a person is not only accountable to their notion of “self,” but is also always accountable to an “other.” A Marxist understanding of unfreedom reflects how in a condition of capitalism, wage workers remain unfree through being compelled to sell their labour because of alienation from means of production. Parreñas writes about Marx’s understanding of systems of feudalism and slavery as “the ultimate socio-economic systems of exploitation that result in labor alienation” (Parreñas 2021, 8), and understanding a republican notion of freedom foregrounding societal membership and non-domination as more relevant to her analysis concerning authority and domestic work. Anna Tsing writes about alienation as a fetishistic quality which inspires the imaginary that people and things have the “ability to stand alone, as if the entanglements of living did not matter” (Tsing 2017, 5). She further writes about alienation as producing ruins which sprawl global landscapes, posing the reader with the duty of looking for life in these ruins.

Recognizing alienation and entanglement as facets of an intervened gem, in this section I trace notions of domestic labour in what has become known as Costa Rica’s Greater Metropolitan Area. I write about the history of domestic labour from the time following the Spanish conquest of what became known as Mesoamerica.

Prior to Spanish conquest in the 15th century, people were living in the land that, through colonial baptism, became Costa Rica and Nicaragua. These people are discussed as predominantly living through the order of stratified *cacicazgos* [which is a colonial term understood in the social and cultural evolutionism anthropology literature as 'chiefdom'] as subsistence economies with relatively sparse settlement patterns. The Central American isthmus was subjected to Conquista

violence and colonial orders starting in 1501, and indigenous resistance prevented the conquest of what became the province of Costa Rica until 1561. Settlers established Cartago as the colonial capital of Costa Rica in 1563.⁴ Upon conquest, settlers modified Iberian codes legislating domestic slavery to regulate enslaved plantation labourers. At this point, these forced labourers were indigenous to different parts of Mesoamerica, or had been sequestered from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade.⁵

16th century Spanish settlers reported difficulty capturing enslaved labourers to develop colonial Costa Rica. One of these reported reasons is how indigenous populations became entangled in globalized slave trade, as there are records of dense indigenous populations in the northern Pacific region that were captured and displaced towards Peru, Guatemala, and Mexico: places which settlers considered to have a higher density of exploitable natural resources (Cáceres Gómez 1999). This difficulty of securing (un)free labour given the resistance and displacement of indigenous populations is associated with reports of Costa Rica as an impoverished colonial province, failing to produce magnanimous profits to the crown.

Post-conquest labour in the province of Costa Rica was organized following colonial schemas imposed across Mesoamerica. Through these colonial schemas, settlers established legislature that would frame indigenous populations as indebted to the Spanish crown. Thus, colonial wealth in Costa Rica from the mid 16th to the early 17th centuries came mostly through the export of tributes acquired through a tribute collection system imposed on indigenous populations. These debts were demanded and expected to be paid in kind, and through labour in the construction of edifications including houses, churches, councils, agricultural labour, and

⁴ Cartago remained the capital of Costa Rica until 1824— three years after independence as a colony of the kingdom of Spain.

domestic services (Cáceres Gómez 1999). Tithings of payment-in-kind to the Spanish crown were commodities such as maize, cacao, granite, wood, beans, honey, salt, animal meat and fat, and *zarzaparrilla* root (Klein and Vinson 2013). People refused and resisted to pay these tithings, which is reflected on a note from republican revolutionary José Santos Lombardo informing the bishop that tributes evaded paying “with little fear of God, and contempt towards established laws” (AECM 1815 in Cabezas Bolaños and Espinoza Esquivel 1999).

I will discuss this history following threads pertaining to domestic servitude in the central valley of Costa Rica, stemming in Cartago. Servitude in Costa Rica prior to the 1700’s is discussed as being organized through racialized ideologies of *mestizaje* which privilege national homogenization and whiteness through ‘mixture’ (Wade 2006, 2017). *Mestizaje* continues informing local folk ideologies of racialization and supremacist thought. Domestic slavery and manumission were practiced through the 1700’s by wealthy “traditional” families (Gudmunson 1976), and amongst this group, employing maids and servants was considered as an aristocratic trait and a sign of eliteness. There are reports dating to the 17th and 18th centuries of slaveholders gifting enslaved people to each other as a sign of goodwill and to cancel debts (Klein and Vinson 2013). This practice was taken by employers as a sign of utmost nobility and solidarity amongst the employing class (Moya Gutierrez 1992).

Domestic labourers would reportedly act as wet nurses for the children of their employers, as family cooks, and in miscellaneous service (Moya Gutierrez 1992). Understanding the marriage institution as taxing women’s labour, domestic labourers were often considered by employers as a fundamental aspect of dowry. Parents often provided their daughters with at least one female labourer as help to sustain the model of marriage (Cáceres Gomez 1997). In the 18th century, domestic labourers were mostly women (although people understood as men were also employed

as domestics!) understood through colonial racializing ideologies of miscegenation as *mestizo*, *negro*, or *mulato*,⁶ and indigeneity was erased through the ideological exercise of *mestizaje* (Lerussi 2008, *Archivo Nacional* [National Archive]).

By 1778, around 122 families of a provincial population of around 34,000 people are reported as employing the labour of an average of four to eight remunerated enslaved domestic labourers. Mestizo servants are noted as sometimes being in biological kinship with their employers (Moya Gutierrez 1992). These labour bonds are discussed as a charitable paternal disposition of wealthier biological kin towards their relatives who were understood as impoverished. Much like contemporary employers who offer payment-in-kind for live-in domestic workers, employers in the 18th century. provided their labourers with “*techo, comida, ropa, y trabajo*” [a roof, food, clothing, and work]. Colonial laws also criminalized divestment from colonial frameworks of work and labour through penalizing construct of vagrancy (Sánchez Lovell 2016).

In documents reflecting the practice of buying and selling enslaved people in Costa Rica from 1648 to 1824, employers wrote of their relationships with people they employed as slaves in terms of parentage. These terms included an enslaved mother and daughter dyad, (aged 28 and 12 respectively) being referred to not as slaves, but as “good daughters [*buenas hijas*]” in a document of manumission (Gudmunson 1976). These kin terms, or terms otherwise signaling an affectionate relationship, are prevalent in documents punctuating transitions in the relationship.

Slaveholders sometimes freed selected servants through living wills that became effective at the moment of the employer’s death. For example, the married couple of José Antonio de

⁶ In this context, the biocultural racializing category *mestizo* broadly translates to mixed, and signals a mixing of indigenous and Spaniard. *Negro* translates to Black, and *mulatto* is a category of *mestizaje* signaling a mixture with Black.

Oreamuno and María Catalina de Ibarra y Moya wrote a joint will stating that once they passed, freedom from bondage would be granted to only two of the 18 people they employed as slaves. In these post mortem intentions of manumission, the couple wrote of freeing Casimira, justifying their reasoning by listing her being of age, being married, and having served them with significant love and loyalty. They would free Mónica after their death as she was “disabled of the throat and sick most of the time,” and had become a liability to the slaveholding family (Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica 1779 in Moya Gutierrez 1992). The 16 people besides Casimira and Mónica that the couple held as property would be passed down to the couple’s children, to serve as part of their dowry. Practices of manumission were exceptional and more commonly people labouring in bondage paid for their release. The right to purchase one’s freedom from slavery was formally admitted by the crown in the 18th century and quickly gained traditional status through its ritualized proceedings (Klein and Vinson 2013).

Slavery was abolished in Costa Rica in 1824. The Costa Rican *Código Civil* 'Civil Code' was approved during the 1888 presidential term of Bernardo Soto Alfaro, and is still in governance as of 2024. Erasing the figure of the slave as unconstitutional, this *Código Civil* presents norms regulating the figures of *criado*, *sirviente*, *amo* and *señor* 'maid, servant, master, lord' in the colonial *encomienda* labor system, thus scripting the seizing of labour. In this Civil Code, people are separated into groups: one is referred to as those who have the right to *servidumbre* 'servitude' and the means to exercise such power, and the other as those who are owned as *predios sirvientes* 'property servants' (Lerussi 2008). This legal distinction sought to transform the figure of the slave to a conveniently salaried servant.

Contemporary slavery apologists who write heartbreaking research articles treacherously perch on constitutional codes, legal jargon, and statistical analyses to stipulate land ownership as

a feudal right to servitude. Lamenting how the *servidumbre* becomes inseparable from property, thus becoming part and parcel of the land, these calloused researchers mourn the physiological needs and presence of the people employed in service as cost to be deducted from capital profits (Anchía Rodríguez and Montero 2016). This discourse is otherwise spectred as benevolent paternalism.

In the early 20th century, there is greater legislative separation between domestic, agricultural and industrial labourers. The juridical figures of patron and salary appear in 1902. The 1943 *Código de Trabajo* 'Labour Code' defines the labour of remunerated domestic servants as employment in a residence providing “reproductive” labour by cooking, cleaning, and engaging in social and emotional assistance that through this framework is considered as separate from “productive” labour creating a profit or business for the employing patron. From 1962 until 1972, the *Asociación de Servidoras Domésticas* 'Association of Domestic Servants' was counseled by the labour union wing of the Catholic church and were able to produce regulations stipulating a maximum of 12hours of labour per day (as of 2024, 8hours of labour per day is the *de jure* norm), regulations for the employment of minors, weekly rest days and holidays, and 15 days of paid vacation time.

In the late 20th century, the imperial powers of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United States Agency for International Development introduced structural adjustment policies and neoliberal and economic reforms. These transformations have been influential in reconfiguring sociopolitical relationships between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, with the World Bank framing Costa Rica in their website as a “development success story” and an “upper middle-income country.” The World Bank frames itself as supporting Nicaragua’s “most pressing needs” through financing and technical assistance “driven by robust private consumption

fueled by remittances and net exports” (World Bank 2024), although most remittances sent through transnational care chains are used to cover basic survival elements as food and housing which have been commodified and alienated through capitalist and neoliberal developments.

In 1991, the Asociación de Trabajadoras Domésticas 'Association of Domestic Workers' (ASTRADOMES) was founded. Its members are politically active in modifying the labour code regarding the above-mentioned rights, as well as to the right of access to social insurance, non-dismissal due to pregnancy, and compensation in case of dismissal without cause while decrying live-in domestic work as an institution that should disappear given its origins in colonial labour orders of enslavement (Lerussi 2008). Costa Rican employers demonstrate an affinity towards employing Nicaraguan women as live-in domestic workers, or imagining the figure of the domestic worker in Costa Rica as a Nicaraguan woman given how neoliberal governance supranational scripts of dependence between the countries interacts with shared colonial histories and Marian grids of recognition. Furthermore, employers sometimes discuss how Nicaraguan workers are more familiar with Costa Rican labour expectations and would be more willing to extend their selves into service.

Careful (:) capitalism

Doña Rita walks through the main door with an empty aluminum serving tray that once held goodies made by her worker. She had dropped off cheese and bean empanadas at the gate of the gated community she lives in for each guard working a shift that day. Is this payment-in-kind?

As a rising trend, remittances represent around 20% of Nicaragua’s GDP (World Bank 2022, Baumeister 2006, Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012; Programa Estado de la Nación-Región 2008). According to a report produced for Diálogo Interamericano (Orozco 2022), the four largest labour niches represented by Nicaraguans in Costa Rica after 2018 include: paid and unpaid domestic labour (35.4%, with a 2023 minimum monthly wage of ₡236,655 plus payment in kind),

construction (22.4%, with a minimum hourly wage of ¢11,953), sales and commerce (11.2%, with a minimum hourly wage of ¢12,998), and food, agriculture, and restaurant related industry (11.2%, with a minimum hourly wage of ¢11.953 for agriculture labourers).⁷ Minimum wage in Costa Rica is regimented by type of job, with the minimum wage for a domestic worker being lower than that of an agricultural worker,⁸ for example.

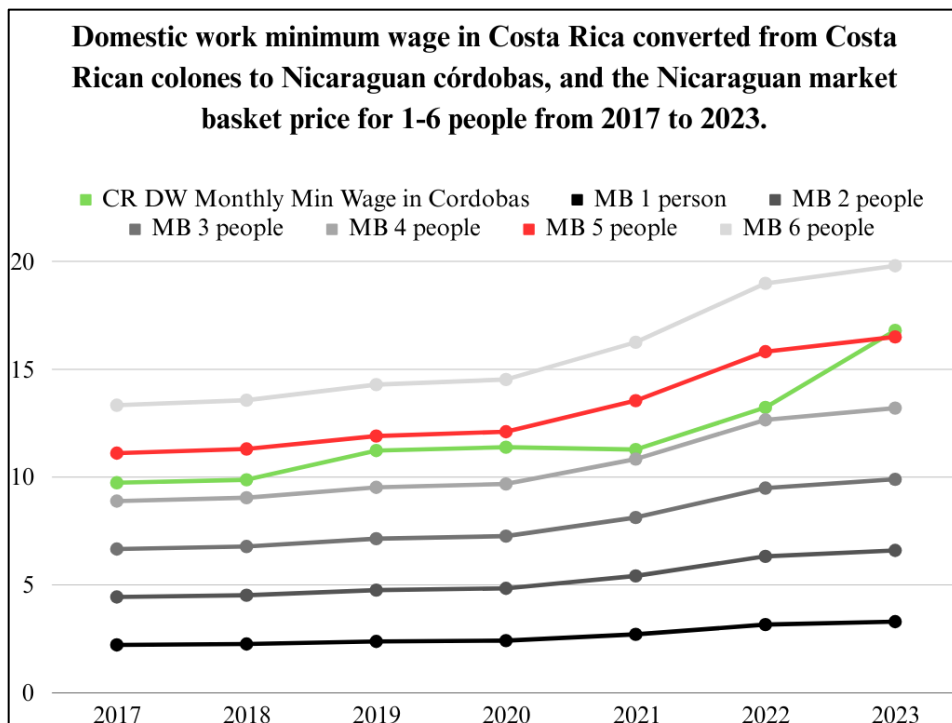


Figure 2. This figure illustrates how the monthly market basket (MB) price per person in Nicaragua compares to the minimum monthly wage for a live-in domestic worker (DW) in Costa Rica (CR) sending their salary in Costa Rica to Nicaragua as remittances. Numbers on the Y-axis are in thousands of córdobas. The rate of exchange from Costa Rican to Nicaraguan currencies was calculated by year.

Receiving remittances is reported by developmental economics research as associated with social mobility, encouraging a perception that it is relatively wealthier households that receive

⁷ All minimum wages taken from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security of Costa Rica [*Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social*] (MTSS).

⁸ Except for coffee picking which has a 2023 minimum wage of ¢1117.69 per *cajuela*. Each *cajuela* weighs approximately 13 kilos. People working in coffee fields can expect to pick the equivalent of 10 to 20 *cajuelas* per day of labour, depending on the season.

remittances and have migrating family members (Andersen and Christensen 2009). However, ethnographic research (Yarris 2017a) backed by data on market basket prices (see Figure 2) and a perspective critical of World Bank development indicators illustrate how these remittances do not translate to affluence. As migration becomes a way to enact a community of care unsettling the idea of what a solidary society could be, remittances are discussed as transforming livelihoods, forms of consumption, and local understandings of love for the land and the institution of the family (Fouratt 2017). As minimum wage straddles the poverty line and transregional domestic workers support transregional family with remittances, live-in domestic work becomes a strategy to survive double poverty and neoliberal transformation in Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Domestic workers in Costa Rica are legally entitled to “payment-in-kind” which encompasses food, housing, clothing, and any other articles that the working person or their family receives for their immediate personal consumption (MTSS, Guía Trabajo Doméstico). According to the Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, salary-in-kind is a minimum addition of half of the regular salary. However, employers sometimes instead interpret this as a license to subtract half of the cash salary, or understand payment-in-kind as a maximum, not a minimum, of half of received wages. Moreover, according to the MTSS, salary-in-kind is to be paid as cash for vacation pay, the 13th month, and severance pay. Many employers do not pay the cash conversion of salary-in-kind, citing that the salary-in-kind in the form of housing, meals, clothes, childcare and residential sponsorship exceeds the value of the money they are obligated to pay. While payment-in-kind is mandatory for live-in domestic workers, many employers in Costa Rica frame their patronal duties through a moral framework, saying that they do not want to *fregar más* (screw over more) people who are already in a *situación fregada* (screwed-up situation). Employers also frame

payment-in-kind as a gift, and if sentimentality is attached to the object given, then returning the object is often expected.

The convening for payment-in-kind is also a site of articulating and negotiating power. As suggested by Salazar Parreñas' work on unfreedom, employment standards in domestic work are not mediated solely by arbitrary domination, but also by moral mediation (Parreñas 2021). Through her work with Philippina domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates, Parreñas argues for labour migration as a story of immobility, as domestic workers often remain in the unfreedom of poverty⁹ that motivated their migration in the first place. Work on intergenerational social mobility and structural harm suggests that high levels of inequality extend to low levels of social and economic mobility (Enríquez 2022, 7). In Costa Rica, transnational migrant women working as domestic workers are often subjected to different citizenship regimes and precarious employment practices. This precarity translates as food and housing insecurity, and uncertainty about access to patronal responsibilities of employment.¹⁰ In a job interview, the interviewed worker asked the employing couple if she would be paid the 13th month because her previous employer cheated her out of it saying that they had not signed a contract. The interviewing employers, voicing shock, gave the interviewed employer a list of benefits she would receive if she were hired by them and ensured her that she would be treated with care and respect.

As a screening mechanism for possible candidates, a potential employer might ask their employer relatives to ask their domestic workers if they know of someone looking for a job. Workers therefore act as security, screening jobs that promise decency and directing known relations towards known employers, extending the employer's relational logic where a person's

⁹ In the country where they send remittances from, and in the country where remittances are received.

¹⁰ Patronal responsibilities include fifteen days of paid vacation time, a thirteenth-month of wages, enrollment into the social insurance and healthcare systems, and payment of the minimum monthly wage.

relations are iconic of who they are. This proposes closeness and the potential to discuss better labour conditions with employers through speculation of what the relations of the employee earn as salary with the relations of the employer. Employers sometimes agree to salary raises for the long-term worker who facilitates placements for them.

However, familiarity between employers does not guarantee the possibility for the worker to organize their time to engage in additional paid labour. Melvin, a Nicaraguan man working and living with his wife and child on his employer's farm-type property, was paid as a domestic worker (with a minimum monthly salary of ¢236,655), while his job was more akin to that of a *peón de jardín* (with a minimum hourly salary of ¢12,756). When he asked the employer about this situation, the employer explained through a moral economic framework: they provide Melvin and his family with a salary, a house, electricity and healthcare, thus make up for the salary difference. The employer was angered when Melvin found a second job with their neighbour who paid a salary but did not share the cost of patronal duties of paying for health insurance and housing. As a second point of tension, the employer was angered that Melvin was physically leaving their property, as they said that his job was also guarding their land. This is representative of an articulation of a feudal, pre-capitalist moral economy that, as discussed by Gupta and Ferguson (1997), is then pierced and transformed by global capitalism. In tending to what the employer understands as the worker and their family's basic survival needs through their financial capital and their understandings of patronal obligations, the employer comes to understand a sense of ownership over the labour and presence of their live-in employee and expects a demonstration of exceptional loyalty through severing other relations of production, capitalist and otherwise, beyond the immediacy of their property.

Employers sometimes deny raises on the premise that other employing families are “better off” and can afford to pay a better salary, thus creating a kin economy in which raises are not associated with performance, but with the purported possibilities of the family. However, this rationalization is also a social explanation for sustained inequalities which interrupt the kin economy, as increases in the financial capital of the employing family are usually not associated with salary raises for the domestic worker as according to the employers, “their work hasn’t changed, am I forced to reward them for my dedication?” Workers reported sometimes receiving a raise if their employers moved to a bigger house, or additional pay if they were tasked with cleaning secondary properties.

Considering Maussian moral conclusions about labour and reciprocity where the worker’s life has been dedicated as a gift to the collectivity and their employers, reciprocity would call for an indisputable, “certain level of security in life, against unemployment, against illness, against old age, and death” (Mauss 2016, 294). Sometimes employers hire employees without the adequate documentation for several years, and then sponsor their documented status after years of not paying for their health insurance and pension. The employers then expect the employee to work until they can retire, but do not retroactively pay for the years that they did not contribute towards their employee’s pension. In these circumstances, employers of live-in domestic workers exploit systems of structural vulnerability by paying legally ratified poverty wages to workers whose poverty and loyalty they do not question by understanding it as tradition and doxa.

Tracing Frames: Ethnographic Background

On employers of paid live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica

“But, capitalism has worked for me!” José Luis, a 38-year-old male employer of 8 years.

Who employs a live-in domestic worker? According to employers, people attached to the tradition. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1989) argue that tradition is invented to socialize beliefs, establish institutions, symbolize social cohesion, and serve political ends. This tradition is often one of patronal and paternal employment practices which while veiled with care, as a structure makes live-in domestic workers susceptible to the unfreedom of poverty and infantilization (Parreñas 2022). What else does this tradition hold?

Employers are described as the grown-up children of people who have employed live-in domestic workers at their house. They usually engage in heterosexual marriage, and have children of different ages, from babies to adults that have left the family home. The search for a live-in domestic worker usually occurs upon leaving the family home after marriage, and employing a live-in worker is considered as vital to their family functioning upon having children. Employers usually socialize in their homes, workspace, church, school, and in leisure areas such as country clubs. Employers usually aspire to silently signal holding considerable social capital and generational wealth, and to be recognized as a prosperous always-emerging middle-class.¹¹

Most employers report paying at or slightly above the minimum, and mock potential employees who seek more substantial living wages by understanding them through the figure of personhood of the *viva*, someone who is simultaneously perceived as advocating for their own

¹¹ Many people who could not afford to hire a live-in domestic worker when tradition would call them to tended to frame the absence of the worker as a chosen alternative. “It’s too complicated to have someone sleeping in your space...” “Some of them leave their parents so young, and then they become depressed because they miss their families. Then it becomes a liability...” Considering hiring a live-in domestic worker as aspirational and expected turns employing a visible domestic worker into a commodity where the absence of the figure is conspicuously grieved.

value while taking advantage of the goodness of others.¹² I was mocked by employers holding meritocratic myths that erased their compounded privilege and discrepancies between opportunities to access different types of capital. An employer told me that in Costa Rica everyone should be able to complete their education as it is “free,” thus “a CEO who had advanced university studies should of course be paid more than someone who had not completed school.” Tradition!

Employers labour as entrepreneurs, as administrators for “the family company,” as administrators for transnational companies, as land-holding agriculturalists, and in political office and liberal professions. Labour distribution within these couples is usually gendered, as men who engage with the domestic work of cleaning, nourishing, and caring are marked. Within the employer habitus, adulthood means that people gendered as men become tasked with gainful employment, while for people gendered as women the traditional expectation is to tend to domesticity. Women usually act as managing patron of the paid domestic worker, absorbing their labour through enacting mutuality in acts of sustenance. “*We* cooked lasagna for lunch!” said a woman employer as the worker had cooked, and she had purchased the groceries. As employers sometimes voice an explicit preference for Nicaraguan workers who become racialized as other

¹² Scripting people as types of workers, a son of an employer told me “My grandma’s new maid is not very smart. She’s 33 and a grandma... you know the type.” “I don’t think I do?” “You know: humble people [*gente humilde*].” Age produced relative to birthing events and “*humilde*” become qualities acting as emblems ideologically anchoring a postcolonial non-elite type (Reyes 2021). People similarly positioned to my interlocutor understood “*gente humilde*” as “low-class, hardworking and simple people with scarce resources but without need, humble because they have less.” *Humilde* is not a quality inherent to the sign but is a product of the of the “perceiving subject” (Inoue 2006). Through their gaze and expected interaction with who they are recognizing as a type, the perceiver scripts a submissive type, tokenized here as “not very smart” and “33 and a grandma” through which a grid of intelligibility for the known type of “*humilde*” emerges. Through a Bourdieuan understanding of distinction, power as classed norms of interaction emerge through indexicality creating an elite type (the one who knows the type of *gente humilde*) and a non-elite type (*gente humilde*), recursive across axes of differentiation. The *viva* type is a foil to *humilde*, and employers sometimes complain that their employee is “*muy viva*” (too alive) when the employee is asking their employer to meet their labour expectations in terms of salary, time off, and refusal to regularly work overtime without extra pay. This contributes to an understanding of how feedback from regimes of perception (Lo and Choi 2021) constrains the possibilities for people to act as free agents after their own interests.

through the post-colonial ideology of Costa Rican exceptionalism¹³, the woman employer's ascribed double day is to an extent absolved by the labour of the domestic worker, following a pattern where "reproductive" labour is deferred to a racialized and gendered other.

Narratives of traditional gendered roles animated by men projected ideal wives and framed men as global heroes, benevolent patriarchs and family providers. As a foil, women are framed as companions mediating morality and motivating philanthropy.¹⁴ "Look Cami," I was told by a 28-year-old single man who works as a manager after studying business administration at the University of Costa Rica, and lives in his parents' house with a live-in domestic worker, "I respect all forms of thinking, but I am very traditional. It's what's natural. I want for my wife to have the possibility of taking care of the children, the house... all that you know? And then I can provide... Guided by God and the Mater,¹⁵ of course. I got promoted at my job, and in a few years, I will be able to help my dad with the company..." This passage points to how gendered figures of morality are circulated as tradition but are enregistered as naturally occurring, therefore becoming depoliticised.

Gendered tradition was also enacted by women "with the unofficial power of the *éminence grise*, a dominated power" (Bourdieu 1977, 41) deferring ultimate authority for their exceptional philanthropic and business ventures to their husbands. A married woman told me, "There is this girl in Aserrí. Her mother has died and she's the eldest of five... she needs help buying food and

¹³ Exceptionalism gains its value through processes of distinction. A series of processes have been enregistered into the Costa Rican historical consciousness to iconize the Costa Rican exceptional as a symbol of the nation, hence the citizen as a figure of the exceptional in the Costa Rican imaginary, and an interest in creating an elusive and exclusive citizen category as a project of the nation. Sandoval García (2004) argues that these are processes of historical inversion (Bakhtin 1981) that project desired political aspects onto the past and interpellate them into the "today," promoting a sense of national narcissism (Azofeifa 1971,115; Cersósimo 1978,61). In relation to kinship and exceptionalism, employers understand the actions of their kin as being reflective of their position in the world.

¹⁴ See also Tebaldi (2024).

¹⁵ The Virgin Mary, according to a Catholic Marian apostolic movement founded in Germany that is popular amongst employers in Costa Rica. Women are encouraged to be like her.

university supplies. She was accepted to study medicine at the University of Costa Rica. I need to talk to Fernando to see how much we can give.”

Employing a visible domestic worker who is enregistered as an ethnoclassed figure of personhood stabilizes ideas of what being white, modern, and elite is imagined as. Extending residential kinship to the domestic worker’s kin is a way for employers to perform the moral figure of personhood of the neoliberal philanthropist and benevolent patriarch, thus embodying exceptionalism.

Public Issues Interlude

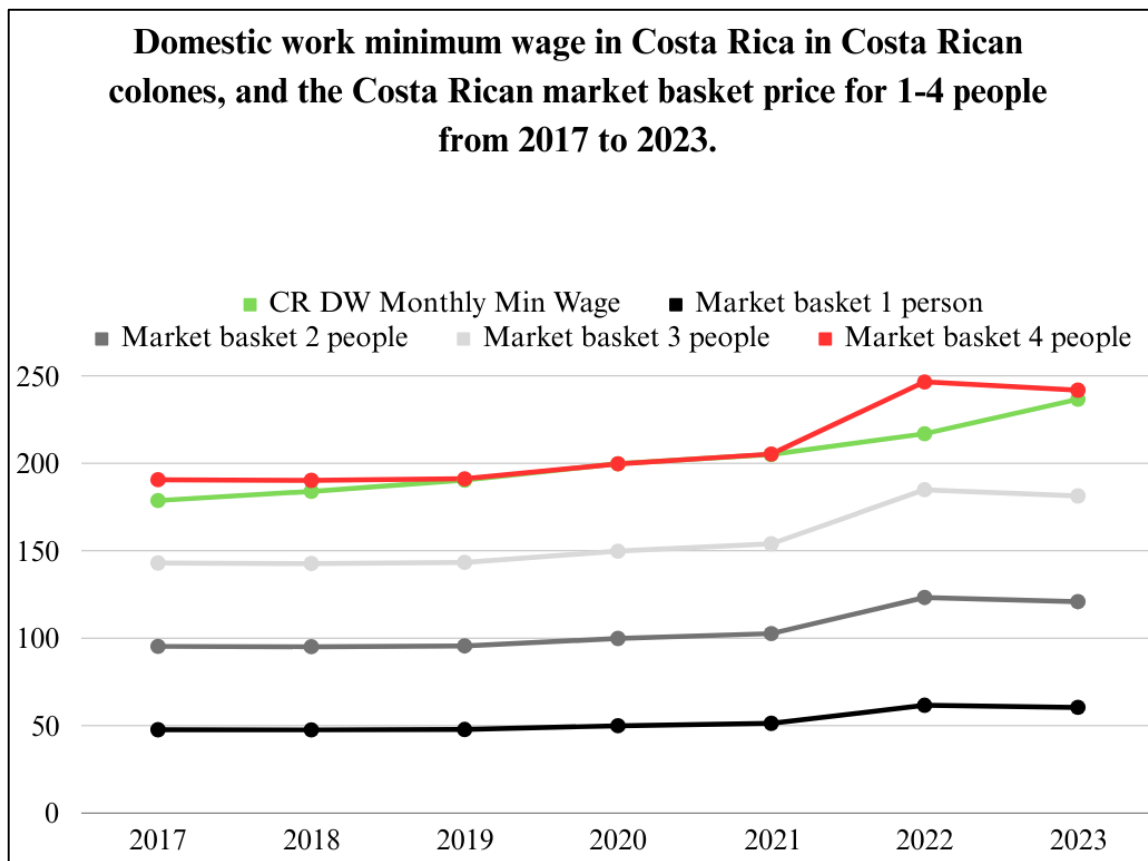


Figure 1. Juxtaposition of yearly market basket price against minimum monthly wage for a domestic worker (ENAH0, MTSS). The market basket is a fixed bundle of commodities supposed to represent what a person in a household would consume per month, not including housing nor health insurance. The numbers along the Y axis are in thousands of colones, along the X axis are years. The minimum monthly wage in 2023 was ¢236.655,44, approximately \$618CAD, \$461USD.

If a point of engaging in theoretical work is to scrutinize power disparities, I attended to the public issues anthropology paradigm during my interactions with employers by using questions to create moments of reflexivity on the wages they pay against their reliance on their employees to encourage solidarity. While I do not think that liberation will be delivered through capitalism as it exists through structures of exploitation, the low wages of existing patchy capitalist structures make it possible for employers to exploit the present time of their workers while framing their employment practices through the dominating structure of patronal benevolence.

Framed through a feminist argument, Isabelle Guérin, Santosh Kumar, and G. Venkatasubramanian (2023) discuss how kinship, sexuality, and debt in interdependence create a womanly figure of personhood through the ascription of guilt to debt and indebtedness. A framing of financial citizenship addresses how neoliberal and colonial citizenship regimes of capital exclude people subjectified as other through the projection of a hegemonic perceiver who deems the “other” as somehow always incompetent. Addressing access to financial capital, I emphasized domestic workers’ rights related to salary and patronal enrollment in the national health insurance plan.

This is a weak liberal approach that could fall in with Vine Deloria’s critique of white liberal anthropology. The Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social (MTSS) could reword the statement on payment-in-kind, thus enhancing clarity for labourers to get remunerated as promised, yet this does not undo the unfreedom of racialized capitalism and poverty wages. Perhaps I was not supposed to be covering this sensitive ground, and perhaps I ran with “undoing appropriateness” (Flores and Rosa 2015). Employers understood me as a naïve, curious, and somewhat overstepping younger person. Modeling our conversations pedagogically, we were giving lessons on employment practices, gender, and morality. I was sometimes thought of as

asking questions that I should know “the answer” to. “*No te hagas, Cami,*” don’t pretend. Get socialized, feral creature!

Employers sometimes encourage or agree with domestic workers to have their family members also live with them in their place of employment. These family members are usually children, a heterosexual partner, or a sister. When these family members are considered adults, they are sometimes paid for their labour. Employers seek to increase their symbolic capital through framing their gifting of these relationships as pious benevolence that provides invaluable opportunities for the employee and their child to succeed, even though this neoliberal promise remains suspended on a miraged horizon. Paying poverty wages subsidized with payment-in-kind framed as a gift further obscures and highlights the employee’s precarity while framing their employee’s attachment to them as the key to living a good life today while deferring the uncertain possibility of retirement. At the same time, the conspicuous appearance of loyal domestic work(ers) and their token children helps cement the employer’s symbolic elite status.

On paid live-in domestic workers in Costa Rica

The industry of live-in domestic work in Costa Rica is entangled with transnational migration and the reproduction of social class (Lorente 2018, Parreñas 2015, Constable 2014, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, Delpierre 2022, Yarris 2017a). Live-in domestic workers who attach their family members to the kin networks of their employers usually begin working for their long-term employers in their early to mid-twenties, after having had one or two short-term jobs. While most domestic workers in Costa Rica are reported as Costa Rican, reproducing a global trend where only 17% of the world’s 67 million domestic workers are reported as transnational migrants (Patterson and Zhuo 2018). However, most *live-in* domestic workers in Costa Rica are reported as

Nicaraguan, and most live-in domestic workers have dynamic and flexible transnational family networks across nation-states.

19th century Nicaraguan male campesinos migrated to Costa Rica as their livelihoods became uncertain upon the expansion of coffee plantations. In Costa Rica, they laboured constructing the railroad to the Atlantic and on banana plantations.¹⁶ Memory of Nicaraguan communities establishing migratory pathways to Costa Rica dates to the 1970's revolutionary times, peaking with women's migration in the 90's during the post-revolutionary Chamorro government that ushered neoliberal politics into Nicaragua, and again in 2018 in the wake of violence against protests towards Ortega's increasingly authoritarian government, which had cut social services and increased taxes (Yarris 2017b, Quesada 2022). Since 2000, about 40,000 people have been migrating annually from Nicaragua. As of 2009, one out of ten people born in Nicaragua were living beyond the border delimitations of the nation-state (Andersen and Christensen 2009).

While children born in Costa Rica are granted citizenship on the principle of *jus soli*, frequent legal reforms, time-costly bureaucratic obscurity, and temporary immigration measures create liminal citizenship statuses for migrants who are not wealthy or do not have access to sponsorship (Fouratt 2016). Fouratt discusses how temporary measures, high fees and fines act as barriers to claiming residency in Costa Rica based on first degree family relations. This citizenship liminality is politically encouraged through porosity at the national border and remunerated labour opportunities for undocumented workers.¹⁷ Disciplinary mechanisms including deportation for workers, and economic sanctions for employers *and* employees create a system in which it is in

¹⁶ For further reading on racialized capitalism and railroads, plantations, and great landed estates [*latifundios*] see Voss 2018, Zaglul Ruiz 2022, Edelman 1992.

¹⁷ For further discussion on borderland porosities and how these context-specific fluid processes influence migrant politics, see Ilcan, Dağtaş and Gonzalez (2023).

the interest of both parties to maintain discretion regarding undocumented statuses. Nicaraguan families sometimes pool their resources to prioritize norming the residency status of working men, as their gendered labour in agriculture and construction is considered as more publicly visible and their status is thus understood as more vulnerable.

Domestic work in Costa Rica is gendered, with over 90% of hired domestic workers understood as women. Potential employers of domestic workers sometimes express a preference, but not a requirement, for work visas and residency papers as these are required for enrollment in public healthcare. As domestic workers are thought of as less vulnerable to deportation, they are often the last of their family network to receive pooled resources towards work permits and residency visas. This creates a space of subjection to the gendered disciplinary power of Marianism as cloistered womanhood, which contributes to the experienced isolation of live-in domestic work. Workers sometimes experience this isolation as an existential boredom that defers the subjective lived experience of poverty to a space outside of the laboured-in home to an uncertain retirement.

We consider seduction as a discourse that confuses consent and coercion, violence and reciprocity (Hartman 1997), then for domestic workers the seduction of work as kinship works in at least the following ways. First as a strategy to navigate poverty, framing work as kinship acquiesces to an ideology of stability reinforced through discourses of Costa Rican exceptionalism. For transregional domestic workers, employers chronotopically frame Costa Rica's Central Valley as safe, wealthy, modern, upwardly mobile, peaceful (not pacified) space, vs. Nicaragua as chaotic, poor, non-modern, bare-life, belligerent space. Considering the minimum wage for domestic work in Costa Rica is three times that of Nicaragua, many migrating workers experience the transnational move as ambivalent social mobility. This framing is overwhelmed upon experiencing life in Costa Rica where it is difficult to purchase life-sustaining commodities such as food and

housing on a live-out domestic worker salary. Live-in domestic labour becomes appealing as a strategy for sustenance and the possibility for greater remittances. Second, work as kinship affirms employer's classed gender ideologies of adequate parenting and reduces anxieties about the whereabouts and wellbeing of one's child. These institutions could be the house, school, an academy otherwise, or public places such as shopping centres. This labour of supervision is usually relegated to women. By asking to bring a child to their place of labour, domestic workers are asserting their role as women according to gender ideologies sustained by their employers where the child best belongs with their mother. If denied, these requests then risk destabilizing rigid conceptions of mothering. Furthermore, a denial could require the employer to engage in a face risking behaviour addressing their privileged role to supervise and enjoy leisure with their children while denying the same opportunities to their workers (Goffman 1982). In intergenerational employing contexts, this tension is sometimes smoothed by older employers by telling younger employers that the awkward tension is just something they go through and deal with, thus favouring a socialization of selective empathy towards their domestic workers.

The relationship between live-in employees and their employers usually follows a predictable life trajectory. Interfamilial relationships can span generations, where sometimes the daughter of the working mother will grow up to be employed by the employer's daughter. These interfamilial relationships might engage in kinning for years that can become decades, up until a point of severance of labour. These attachments might become severed into oblivion or might continue in the form of gifts that are no longer framed as payment-in-kind, but as tokens of patronal benevolence.

While sometimes class reproduction works in a way where the parent generation reproduces class for the child generation, this is not always the case. Across generations, the

mother's labour is speculated to provide the child a different realm of choices to survive capitalism through different employment opportunities, and recognized competence in navigating health and educational systems.

Family hiring family works for family

“It really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much.”

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

The practice of employing and working for “known” people affirms disciplinary Marian gender ideologies through the practical reason of extending a network of surveillance and patronal embeddedness.

Furthermore, long-term live-in domestic workers usually know their employers’ children across life stages, seeing them go from children to young adults who have left the family home, formed relations elsewhere, and now are received with favourite foods when they come to visit. Workers are usually affectionate and caring towards the children of their employers, asking the children about how their life is going and about who they are dating, and these relations are sometimes characterized by reciprocal teasing as could be seen in the same context between an aunt and a niece or nephew. Domestic workers sometimes come to consider their employers’ children as their own, although this is usually a relationship that they do not make public with kin beyond the place of labour. The employer’s children, in turn, sometimes believe that the worker considers them as their children, while they do not always consider the worker as they would an older relative. As follows, workers are sometimes invited to the weddings of the children they have cared for and sit at a table reserved for relatives of the spouses. This is usually a gendered invitation from the daughter, and not so much the son, as wedding rituals are usually matrilineal. This creates a socially accepted space of indifference between the son of the employing family and the domestic worker, but a continuation and deepening of kin relations with the daughter. Marriage rituals are also a site of blending, although these usually do not cross employee-employer lines. For example,

Mariana and Margarita had worked together at their employer's house for over a decade. Mariana married Margarita's brother Martín. The ceremony was performed by their thrilled employer, and Mariana was delivered at the altar by the employer's eldest son. Martín runs a security company, where a man he hires works as the street guard in the neighborhood where Mariana and Margarita work.

Baptismal rituals index blended family systems as workers ask employers to become the godparents of their children, and employers sometimes accept. These become relationships of social exchange with employers provide gifts, such as silver jewelry, for major Catholic events in exchange for lifelong preferential service.

Practical(ly) kin for practical purposes in a hopelessly practical world?

“When I have more money, I will go with my mother to live at the finca in Nicaragua with my sister and my grandparents!” said Mariela, aged 6.

Employers extend relationships of patronal benevolence with live-in domestic workers which extend to some of the worker's kin. However, there are limits to the solidarity project of kinship as it renders workers unfree through structural poverty and the patronal tradition of infantilization. In the ethnographic landscape I participated in, employers would enact the tradition of patronal employment by reframing the employee's relationships and ways of living as undesirable, morally suspect, or irrelevant. According to nationalist regimes of Costa Rican exceptionalism, Nicaraguans are viewed as morally suspect, and Nicaraguan men are viewed as threatening to Marian values from the perspective of Costa Rican employers. This is relevant to a discussion on kinship, as severing of employees from their relationships occurs as employers encourage employees to reconsider their relationships through moral frameworks, which in turn serve to legitimate the social order held by employer's notion of tradition.

As live-in domestic workers are subjected to their employer's gendered norms of morality regulating their conditions of labour, sexuality, and relating, they are vulnerable to employer scrutiny. In line with this moral suspicion, employers install cameras inside and around the perimeter of their houses. These cameras are justified by the employers 1) to confirm suspected moral corruption inside the house, 2) to regulate the behaviour of those they consider themselves responsible for through panopticon surveillance, and 3) to establish mechanisms of security to guard the area of residence from unwanted visitors.

Magdalena had been working as a live-in domestic worker for over a decade for a couple entering their 80's. Ramón, Magdalena's husband, was hired by the couple as a driver and to help the retired employer execute his home improvement visions, to the employing wife's disdain. Some of the employer's adult children believed that Ramón was swindling the employing couple and urged their parents to fire both, while also not directly addressing their father's comments about his sexual advances towards Magdalena. The employer's children installed cameras in every room including the employer's bedroom, except inside bathrooms, the kitchen, and the service area where laundry was done, and the room where the employed family slept. The employer's children who could access the cameras were monitoring their parents at least as much as they were monitoring the employees. The eldest daughter told me that they¹⁸ had "a serious conversation" with Magdalena encouraging her to reconsider her relationship with Ramón, as she was the one with a stable job and income, and that covering for him could result in heartbreak. After my fieldwork, I learnt that both Magdalena and Ramón had been fired.

From the employer's ideological perspective, the worker is framed as in conditional kinship with the employing family. Weakening of the worker's relations with their kin is encouraged

¹⁸ When I asked about who the "they" the daughter is mentioning is, she said "you know, 'us,' the family!"

through incorporating the worker, and sometimes their family, as a sometimes part of the employing family.

Leidy had been told by her employer of more than 10 years that she was spending her money incorrectly by sending remittances to her kin in Nicaragua. Leidy said her adult son should get a stable job in Nicaragua even if it did not pay enough. She imagined quitting her job given feelings of intense loneliness and boredom as her family in Nicaragua seemed to be living “one big party,” and she felt uneasy with the thought that her family might not miss her. Her feelings highlight how the engagement between the employee and the employing family, despite co-residing, are tensed through a limited recognition of Leidy’s extended self as part of her understanding of kinship. Furthermore, the employer’s perspective on remittances as inappropriate ideologically severs Leidy’s role towards her kin. Her employer incentivized Leidy to stay by saying that Pamela, Leidy’s sister, could be hired to work for the eldest son of the employing family upon his marriage and pending matrilocal relocation. Through this further embedding of kin in labour relations, Leidy’s sister was recognized as a relation through labouring for her salary and sending but not receiving remittances. According to the employer’s ideological perspective, this creates class mobility for Leidy and indexically marks the employer as a patron, thus recognizing themselves as part of each other’s kin through a relationship of social exchange and residential kinship.

Employers extend kin relations to their employees and their employee’s family depending on their understanding of supposed cultural differences that employers believe determine present and future behaviour. These understandings of kinship are extended based on the employee acting grateful, producing forms of subalternity and compliance within a naturalized cisheteropatriarchal power structure led by God. One of these relationships of patronal benevolence understood as

kinship is a daughterly relationship extended towards the live-in domestic worker, and a granddaughterly relationship extended towards the worker's daughter. Kinning also happens as employers extend relations of residential kinship to a child of the employee.

While employers often voiced a desire for the worker to be “a/part of the family,” employees expressed how before migration they desired to work for a given time to save enough money to return, and did not necessarily want to establish kin relations with employers. Plans for returning are adjusted given changing hopes, aspirations, expectations, and needs of other migrating family members. As employers often hold the moral expectation that live-in worker's relations with their family will be limited, kinship with employers is then often understood pragmatically. Sometimes employees develop a sense of attachment towards the house and family they work for, while employers usually negatively evaluate intimate relations that the worker might develop with other workers or family members. “These door visits of the maid's boyfriend...” a woman employer told another, “I can't stand them. Close the door.”¹⁹ The Marian gendered employer is most frequently the perceiving subject whose habituated mode of thinking enacts ideological projects of what is acceptable.

As others have remarked, these relationships of residential kinship may appear loving, but also hold tension and are complicated through enduring affective regimes (Ramos-Zayas 2020). In these co-residential cases, relationships outside the place of labour are contested and sidelined as kin relationships between employers and employees are created. In the same way as the worker is not allowed to invite a romantic partner into the house of labour unless they are also employed and are actively working in the house, the worker's child is not allowed to invite their friends from school to the house. However, the child, but not their mother, is allowed to ludically participate

¹⁹ Accepted unmarried romantic partners of the employer's daughter are usually invited into the house with a chaperoning presence who is sometimes the worker. Accepted married partners are considered family.

in the sociable spaces reserved for the employing family and their guests while their parent is working, which points to how sometimes the child is invited at the exclusion of their parent.

“She’s like your granddaughter!” a friend of the employer remarked as the girl emerged from the room she shared with her mom wearing a frilly frock that was a hand me down from the employer’s daughter. “She will return the dress once she grows out of it...” the employing woman told me when I asked about the dress, thus indexing an expected returning of what has been exchanged as the child ages.

Having a baby

“They abandon their children to find work! Children need their mothers... and their mothers leave them for so little money, it doesn’t make sense.” [Mela, an employer, said to her family and guests dining on Sunday night.]

Deciding when and if to have a child is a moment when domestic workers experience a heightened sense of precarity given the uncertainty of their employers’ reactions. One major source of uncertainty relates to whether they will receive paid maternity leave and financial support beyond their kin network.

María is younger than 40 and has labored as a *doméstica* since she was 18, staying with a family friend from Nicaragua until she found a live-in job. “Some people are better to work for, but sometimes it’s like ‘Hello! Is it a slave that you want?!’, and they have no shame. Sometimes you care for their baby, their medicated little dog, and cook and clean... and, did you know that it takes three different *pasadas* to clean most floors? First you dry sweep, then you mop, and then you shine. Three times.”

She became pregnant with Andrea five years into working for a family in the northern part of San José. “The señora would yell for everything, and hit her daughter, he [the husband] would

hit her too. The daughter was always crying... But with me, they were okay. It was uncomfortable sometimes, I just stood there like a stone...” María was scared to talk about her pregnancy but was relieved when her employers said that she could continue working until she felt uncomfortable, and then come back to work for them once the baby was older. While she was paid for her labour through the first seven months of her pregnancy, Maria reported receiving no financial support from her employers after they sent her off with a baby shower. As she was not fired, she did not receive severance pay. She went to Nicaragua where she lived with her mom and sister. When Andrea was 18 months old, both left Nicaragua. Upon their return, her previous employers said they could no longer hire her, but that they had a gift for the baby. This narrative illustrates a racialized social tense (Rosa 2016, Povinelli 2011) in which marginalization of domestic workers in neoliberal times occurs through promising a future of societal inclusion that does not arrive as promised. Acknowledgment of the intimate labour relationship arrives as tokens of recognition of the event that has passed, as the employers have replaced Maria’s commoditized labour with the labour of another worker. Here, the new worker and Maria are interchangeable tokens, made different through the non-fungible token of a gift two sets of little clothes.

María spent over a year in a liminal employment state, and said she was so angry that she did not claim her unemployment benefits even if it was her previous employer’s responsibility. As a genre of complaint (Ahmed 2021), her narrative of anger reflects her understanding of moral injury on her employer’s behalf. While the employers did not recognize their patronal labour responsibilities by paying required payment in kind and unemployment benefits, they circumvented capitalism by instead presenting a benevolent gift under the guise of kinship. It was assumed that Maria had kin who would provide for her. Without state social infrastructure to

deliver the promises of labour such as maternity leave, Maria then had to remake the kinship ties which her employers, through their moral positions, had disintegrated.

Few employers are welcoming of hiring a worker with a newborn. Women who had been working as live-in domestic workers and have newborn babies are often tasked with finding childcare, and jobs that pay by the day or the hour come with wages that are substantially below that of a live-in domestic. More commonly, domestics leave their newborns with their mothers in Nicaragua and return to work for wages in Costa Rica without their children.

An employer who had negotiated a pregnancy with their live-in domestic told me that they needed someone who would work for them, and that “beyond (working for them) people get lost, and there’s only so much you can do.” By “losing” the relationship where the laboural promise was corrupted through neoliberal-capitalism, the employers rewrite their social contract with the domestic worker as she remakes the ties her employers had advised her to suspend.

María weighed the risk of losing a relationship she might need as an employment reference against her potential responses. While angry with her former employers for the withheld wages and failure to fulfil what they had promised Maria, she accepted the baby gift and did not claim her withheld wages. Talking about elegance as an attitude, María told me: “If you have God’s love in your heart, you will help others... but if money and power make you arrogant, then sickness and death will show you that you are nothing on this earth. There will always be another opportunity, another job, another friendship, another love... but this is the only life you have! And this is my princess, my reason for living...”

María showed me photos of Andrea sitting in a chair in the middle of the living room of the house where she now worked, and they both lived. She was hired by the older sister of her sister’s employer.

Love laws and children

The rest of this project focuses on how children of domestic workers who live with their mother in their house of labour engage in residential kinship with the employing family. Usually only one child comes to live with their mother. The initial invitation and request to bring children is usually made when the child in question is 1 to 3 years old. Another pathway is working for a family for several years, and then proposing the possibility of bringing a young child or baby.

Girls and/or younger children are preferred when there are multiple siblings as employers view them as more amenable to domesticity. These girls are encouraged to style themselves according to the taste of the employers, and when they are young, they can be seen wearing puffy headbands and flowery dresses. As they grow into older children and teenagers, they are encouraged to dress modestly and be studious, with sexuality and gender expression beyond Marian femininity actively discouraged by employers. Boys are considered by employers to be rambunctious and disastrous, and rarely live in the employer's house past puberty since they are framed as endangering the virtue of the cloistered girls. An employer told me about an occasion where they agreed to let their worker bring her son who was 7, while her daughter was 10 and her son was 6. She told me that the boy was not setting a good example for her son, and that her employee quit when she told her that her son could no longer live with them, placing the decision to leave on the worker's will.

At large, these interfamilial ties are made so the worker becomes more embedded in the labour relation, making it harder to leave without destabilizing what has become normal for their children. Employers adhering to patronal employment practices engage in structures of elite capture by mobilizing benevolent paternalism as limited extensions of kinship and reproduce structures of domination through discourses of "the good life" to convince their employees to

continue working with them.²⁰ Furthermore, through discourses of Marian womanhood of cloistering and noble suffering (Dick 2018), employers can frame the world beyond their house as ruthless and scary and unmake the relationships of the workers beyond their place of employment by discussing them as unreliable. Employers thus encourage their workers to perceive them as exceptional patrons providing forms of subsistence and sponsorship unavailable elsewhere. This reciprocity logic is akin to debt bondage: as the worker dedicates their lifetime to serving the family, the family extends their employing patronage. For example, an employer who offered to build a house for their employee expected this “gift” to be repaid through indefinite labour. This makes it more difficult for the employee to leave, despite sometimes so desiring.

Doctor dress up

Employers and their extended family often extend relations of care to the worker and their child through co-parenting, although these practices are not free from tension and dynamics of patronal power. For example, one set of employers decked Mariela, a 6-year-old girl, in doctor attire for a school project where she had to dress as her future profession. The employers found a tiny stethoscope, lab coat, and created a name tag for the child to be a doctor. “That’s not my name!” said Mariela. Her name on the tag was misspelled and not reprinted. The employers encouraged Mariela’s life path by telling her she would become a doctor, and that they would

²⁰ The following vignette illustrates how this embeddedness attaches the daughter while circumventing inclusion of the mother and keeping boundaries for “separate” groups. A girl that lives in the house where her mom works is turning six years old. She is excited about the birthday party her mom’s employers are throwing for her– it is unicorn themed. The guests at this party are her mom’s employers, their parents, their siblings, the children of their siblings, and friends of the children of their siblings. The birthday girl’s friends from school and her cousins, however, are not invited. When I asked her why they were not coming, the girl said that they lived too far away, despite also living in Costa Rica’s Central Valley, and her schoolmates going to the same municipality public school. During the party, her mom emerges from the kitchen in time to sing her daughter “happy birthday,” and then retreats to her room again while her daughter continues playing.

support her as long as her mom worked for them, thus placing Estella's waged labour as the price for the relationships of care and sustenance extended towards Mariela's projected future.

The employing couple engages in the parenting of their worker's child in gendered ways. The employing family, including older children, usually helps the worker's child with their homework, extracurricular activities, and accessing the computer. The woman employer also sometimes helps by toilet training and preparing meals for young kids. The man employer more sporadically takes the child to the pool or playground, prints homework for school, and serves as an audience to recite school presentations. Sometimes women employers are retired teachers who comment to their friends about being happy to use their skills. Employers sometimes pay for extracurricular classes such as swimming, framed through a survival lens, as it would be a liability if the child were to fall into the swimming pool while unsupervised.

The child usually feels like it is okay to ask their parents, the employers, or the older children in the house for help or attention. The older employing children's care towards the worker's child is similarly gendered, although they are liminal figures of care and authority. For example, while the young girl must ask her working mother if she can go out to play with the older children of the employer, the employer's children do not have to ask their parents. The older girl of the employer checks in with the domestic worker before taking her daughter out to play, while the older boy does not. This points towards a larger overarching patriarchal power structure where boys take their supervisory power for granted.

Sometimes employers will also take their employee's children out on fun outings without their mothers, such as the beach and the movie theatre; this allows for the creation of the employers as indulgent, fun grandparents. However, the children are sometimes confused by moments of severance where the employer does not allow them to participate in moments of familial

conviviality, reinforcing how hierarchy is established through systems legitimating unity in division (Bourdieu 1977).

These daily acts of parenting, while sometimes considered with tenderness, are also met with protest from the child's mom. When employers engage in the disciplining of the employee's children or disengage the parent by telling them they are being too stern, this is met with discontent. "If I am disciplining my kid, and they (the employer) are around, I want them to please keep their opinions to their self and let *me* handle *my* child. I don't need them to convince me to let it go, or to tell me that I'm being too severe. They are confused sometimes because this is their house, but I am who is working and making sure that my kid has eaten, is dressed... I am the one who is paying. It is difficult when I am not taken seriously as a parent because then my kid thinks that they can just do whatever and get away with it." Estella said, pointing to how, socio-politically, she understands employer's notions of parenting towards her child as overbearing of her own authority towards parenting her kid. Furthermore, this points toward an articulation model of coloniality which contests how hierarchical power relations exist and are contested in a given space.

Employers' understandings of adequate class relationships mark a difference between the school enrollment of the children of their domestic workers, versus the school enrollment of their own biological children and grandchildren. While employers often believe that private education means prestige schooling, and they sometimes encourage the enrollment of worker's children in a private school by going on school visits, employers rarely pay for worker's children tuition as they would for their biological children or grandchildren. An employer who does not consider herself as a competent speaker of English was remarkably surprised that her employer friend was teaching

her worker's daughter English, as the linguistic repertoire of "English" is indexically understood as reflecting a classed position. "You're teaching *her!*?" the shocked employer said.

Working through contradictions

Girls ages 4 to 6 get socialized into becoming future domestic workers and demonstrating care towards their moms by helping their moms through framings of play. Young girls are often tasked by employers and by their moms to help with sweeping and cooking, to deliver messages across rooms (“Dinner is ready!”), or to fetch items around the house. They sometimes enact alignment with their mother’s employers by pointing to tasks assigned to their mother that she has not completed.

“Would you like to eat some pasta?” “Yes please! With bread!” Mariela (6) answered her mom, Estella, who works at the house they both live in during the week. Estella came out with a bowl of pasta in one of the plastic plates reserved for her and Mariela, which were different than the tableware the employing family used. When I asked the woman employer about this, she said that Mariela used plastic as she was a clumsy child and could break the earthenware, leaving out how Mariela’s adult mother was also asked to use the plastic “for hygiene”.

Estella went back in the kitchen and came out to hang a basket of damp clothes. “Mama!” Mariela pointed imperatively to the garden, “You still need to pick up those poops! Here, and there!” “Ah, thank you. I’ll get to them later.” Estella replied. There is rhetorical ambivalence in Mariela’s utterance, whether as an offer of help towards her mom, or as an indication of alignment with the employer. This is not a statement a biological child of an employer would say to their mom, certainly not their dad, and Mariela would not say this to any employing adult. Following Bakhtin’s perspective on heteroglossia that rejects an either/or binary of relations, this is maybe an instance where Mariela navigates the tension of being “not neither” (Esteves 1984 in Woolard 1998), while also understanding the self as “both/and”: daughter and mother, child and adult, employer-aligned and employee-aligned. While complying with the separateness of eating from a

different set of plates than the rest of the family. Estella's response of a generous "thank you," recognizes Mariela as being in sincere help in accordance with her age.

As kids become older, they are sometimes recalcitrant to help their moms. Starting in late middle childhood, their helping is framed as a required chore and not as play. This is also a gendered expectation, where girls are supposed to help their mothers while boys are extended license to remain incompetent in daily household maintenance. Employers' children are held to similar gendered expectations.

In a different context, 5-year-old Jessica's mom Raquel²¹ informs her daughter that the employing couple and their adult children are leaving on a Miami cruise vacation. "We are staying alone, as you say," Raquel said as I was colouring with Jessica in the kitchen, "alone with the dogs." As the woman employer entered the kitchen, Jessica asked her how long they would be gone for. "One week..." the employer continued, "you need to behave now so when you're older you can ask for permission and come with us!" thus indexically linking the girl's actions now to a future that might become hers depending on the employer's perception of the girl's present behaviour. I have not witnessed this potentially promised projected future, other than for labour.

"And my mommy?" "It's more complicated to get her a visa..." The employer explained how the girl is Costa Rican, but her mom is Nicaraguan. According to her logic, it is complicated to get a US visa if you apply as Nicaraguan, but not if you apply as Costa Rican.²² What is framed

²¹ Raquel works as a live-in domestic six days a week at the house where she and Jessica reside.

²² This refusal of extending a future invitation to the mother indexes the employer's conceptions of how interaction with bureaucracy would vary between the mother, who has Nicaraguan citizenship, and the daughter who was born with Costa Rican citizenship given *jus soli* legislation. B1/B2 tourism visas costing \$185 are required for Nicaraguan or Costa Rican citizens to enter the United States by air. Through the employer's framing, what makes it difficult to obtain a visa is not financial cost, because it is not clear who would pay, but rather how she understands Nicaraguan citizenship to interact with Costa Rican and American bureaucracy. While 13% of USA tourism visas requested by Costa Rican applicants succeed, 51% of Nicaraguan applicants were refused. This discrepancy between the rates of refusal is speculated to arise given difficulty for a citizen of Nicaragua to establish capital attaching the person to the land considered Nicaragua. Furthermore, Costa Rican labyrinthine bureaucracy and public discourse of

by the worker as abandonment through animating their child's voice that they will be left "alone with the dogs", is resignified by the employer who indexically tethers the meaning of the exclusion by scaling it to a citizenship regime beyond the individual invitation of the employer. Framing the interaction between Nicaraguan citizenship and visa bureaucracy as a limit to the potential invitation to vacation tethers the choice not to bring the child along on this vacation to the structural limitations of bureaucracy and age, and not towards a disenchantment of kinship.

These limited parental extensions often include the child while circumventing the working parent, as the employing family creates borders around practices of adoptive kinship selectively including and excluding the child. For example, the child is sometimes invited to birthday parties and gatherings of the employer's family relations as a guest of the employers, but their working mother is not. While this could be interpreted as an assertion of the autonomy of the employee, the invitation is only extended to them in the form of granting permission for their child to participate.

Different tables mark different families

I was drawing at the dining table with Mariela and Cristina²³ when Estella started moving dishes from the kitchen to the dining area. We put the colouring materials away and helped set up lunch. Doña Sandra, her husband Don Mauri, and their son joined at the table, and Estella called Mariela into the kitchen while stroking her arm.

"Mama, I want to eat out here!"

"Better inside..." Estella told her daughter with a hush.

Mariela continued, "I want to eat out here! Tina, I want to eat here!" She looked at Cristina.

immigration law framing Nicaraguan migration as a threat to Costa Rican national security create a sense that immigration law in Costa Rica is too complex to successfully navigate, with financial cost, and the time required to navigate the systems as barriers of access (Fouratt 2014, 2016).

²³ Cristina/Tina is the employer's eldest daughter who lives with her parents, Mariela, Estella, and her younger brother Marco.

“Oh, really?” Cristina said, sitting back down.

“Yes! Tina, I want to eat here! Pookie, I want to eat here! Outside!”

Pookie is Estella’s employer. Estella calls her Doña Sandra, employing an honorific signifier, while Mariela calls her Pookie, her pet name used by sibling and grandchild generation family members.

“Come here, I’ll tell you something...” Mariela bopped over to Pookie. “One family eats here, and the other family eats inside, okay?”

“Come on,” said Estella from the doorway, “leave Doña Sandra.”

Mariela was unconvinced, “I want to eat here...”

“Look,” Pookie, who had now become Doña Sandra, continued, “go eat inside now, because Mommy will be eating all alone otherwise. Look! She’s already holding your plate!” Mariela looked, whimpered, and started crying. She lifted her arms to hug her mom, who kissed her cheek and carried her inside.

“Ah! Okay!” said Doña Sandra wiping her hands on her thighs “Let’s start! Sorry for the delay... Cami would you like for me to serve you, or would you like to serve yourself?”

Heartbreak made seem an inconvenient delay.

In the above narrated event, Doña Sandra, despite being called by the pet name ‘Pookie’ makes direct reference to there being two families living in this house, one that eats inside, and one that eats outside. One uses one set of plates that can break, and the other uses a separate plastic set. Mariela, in a confused complaint voices her desire to eat with the family outside. However, Pookie places Mariela in a situation where she is tasked with alleviating the solitude imposed on

her mom who, despite having prepared everyone's meal, is not invited to eat at the outside table. At this moment, Mariela's kinship with the employing family is suspended, and she is disheartened when she is not permitted to sit at the dining table as she often eats with her mom's employee's children. Mariela is upset by this abrupt severing, and is consoled by the open armed recognition of her mother's kinship who she reluctantly goes back to. Cristina/Tina defers to her mother and avoids being the person who refuses Mariela by phatically responding to Mariela's voicing of her desires. Estella does not offer explanations during this awkward interaction, but calls consolingly to her daughter.

Prior events of cuddling with Marco and Cristina, and sitting together for meals, might have intertextually configured Mariela's sitting at the outside table to eat with the employing family as a standard practice. This presumption is disjointed by Doña Sandra's making explicit that there are two families in this house, thus severing kinship in favour of patronal relations even as Estella's labour is intrinsic to the functioning of Doña Sandra's household. This is a reminder that closeness is restricted to acceptable publics, times and spaces, and that one's status as non-family can be done and undone according to the patronal chronotopic imaginary. My presence at the table, while not a family member, reveals how this heuristic of family points to a different structure of difference which is not about biological/adoptive family but rather patronal tradition.

You're old and she's older too!

As children grow, kin relationships with employers shift towards the background as labour is foregrounded. Catalina (16) and José David (18) are Magdalena and Ramón's children. During the decade-long period of Magdalena's employment for a couple entering their 80's, their two

children Catalina (16) and José David (18) lived at times with Magdalena where she worked. Catalina mostly lived with her mom, and José David mostly lived with his dad.

I was invited for afternoon coffee. There were not enough mugs at the table, so I excused myself to the kitchen to find another. “I’ll just call Magdalena, ‘Magdalena!’” Doña Lisa called with falling intonation: it was not a question. I was already getting up saying it was no problem and went to the kitchen where Magdalena was drying her hands, halting her washing the pile of accumulated dishes.

“I heard the *señora* calling, I was just heading over...”

“It’s no problem, I just came to find a mug!”

Magdalena’s mouth pointed to the drawer where the cups were stored.

“Thank you!” I looked around. “Is Catalina here? How is she doing?” I met Catalina the last time I visited.

“She’s at home! She is turning 16 on Sunday!” Magdalena smiled warmly, still drying her hands.

“Wow! Congratulations!”

She continued, chuckling, “yes, my two kids are so big now... the other one is 18.”

“Wow! What year is she in now? Has he finished school?”

“Fourth year, she got into the finance and accounting stream... You know, Doña Lisa and Don Pepe have this granddaughter, Clara. She must be around your age... She doesn’t visit too often; she doesn’t live in Costa Rica. Catalina always asks me ‘Mama do you remember Clara? She played with me...’ and I say ‘What is she going to play with you now? You’re old and she’s older too!’” She laughed and I joined. When meeting these days, Clara and Catalina exchange social niceties in the kitchen space. They invoke politeness: Clara asks Catalina about her studies, and Catalina smiles an answer.

Magdalena problematizes the social positions that Clara and Catalina used to be able to occupy as playmates through their being older. In this regard, Magdalena encourages her daughter to disregard her past relationship with Clara and focus on her studies so that she can work not as a domestic worker, but in finance or accounting, thus framing the ties of past kinship as decayed for a future. This move foregrounds labour and pragmatically presents different choices to survive capitalism away from the romance of kinship with employers, thus resignifying what once seemed promised as a stepped-on stone. After Ramón and Magdalena were fired and residential kinship was suspended, the man employer's attempts to send money to his unemployed former employees were met with criticism from his wife and daughters.

Not a conclusion, but: Beyond polite fictions, children become adults

Throughout this project, I have told narratives of ethnographic encounters that illustrate the complexity, tension, and lingering care of the relationships that spur from live-in domestic work labour arrangements. Through these narratives I do not intend to portray deterministic scripts of domestic work, but to highlight the fluidity in how stories differ, as well as how notions of kinship as likeness become interrupted when capitalist speculation is made legible as the reason for the relationship. As evident in the stories of Mariana, Martín, and Margarita; María and Andrea; Estella and Mariela; Leidy and Pamela; Melvin; Magdalena, Ramón, José David and Catarina; and Jessica and Raquel, the closeness between the employed and the employing families does not erase the hierarchical relationships between them, and employers' extensions of solidarity are often restricted to their favouring of hierarchies and sustaining of labour relationships. While the stories of Estella and Mariela show how employers sometimes engage in kin behaviours towards the children of their employees, the case of Magdalena and her children shows how kinships are let go of in favour of labour as children become older. At the same time, Leidy's experience of alienation from her family and conflict regarding her kin roles are proposed as remediated by her employer through the employment of Leidy's sister, Pamela. While this closeness helps to keep families attached it does not protect employees from the dissolution of the labour relationship in a neoliberal state with alienated social institutions, as is the case of María with her employers at the time of her pregnancy with Andrea. While the children of domestic workers sometimes reproduce the life of their parents, the relational labour of their parents creates a structure for them to project themselves otherwise. However, these possibilities are daunted by the cloudy promises of neoliberalism which, at least for mothers labouring as transnational domestic workers, remain

attached to fulfillment of gendered duty, to an uncertain retirement, and to the structural vulnerability of nationalist citizenship regimes sustaining under-waged labour.

Beyond an impossible republican idea of freedom as a life free of/from restraint given multiply exclusionary nation-state citizenship regimes, Rhacel Parreñas (2021) asks “how do we mitigate the susceptibility of unfree migrant domestic workers to abuse and domination?” How can structures legislating domestic work ensure solidary working conditions that free domestic workers to adequate recognition and compensation for their labour, as well as the possibility for workers to choose their parenthood and kinship arrangements? Recognizing inequalities across gendering, racialization, class, and citizenship, Guérin, Kumar and Venkatasubramanian (2023) argue that financial citizenship that is nonexploitative while providing dignity, respect, and belonging is a way to encourage more just, and less arbitrary, work and family policies. And, if neoliberalized states often ultimately favour capital over life, how can we encourage employers towards intergenerational solidarity with their employees beyond coping through scripts of indebtedness, labour, and polite fictions? How do we encourage practices of solidary kinship away from individualistic neoliberal paternalism towards structurally transformative agency?

Non finito.

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