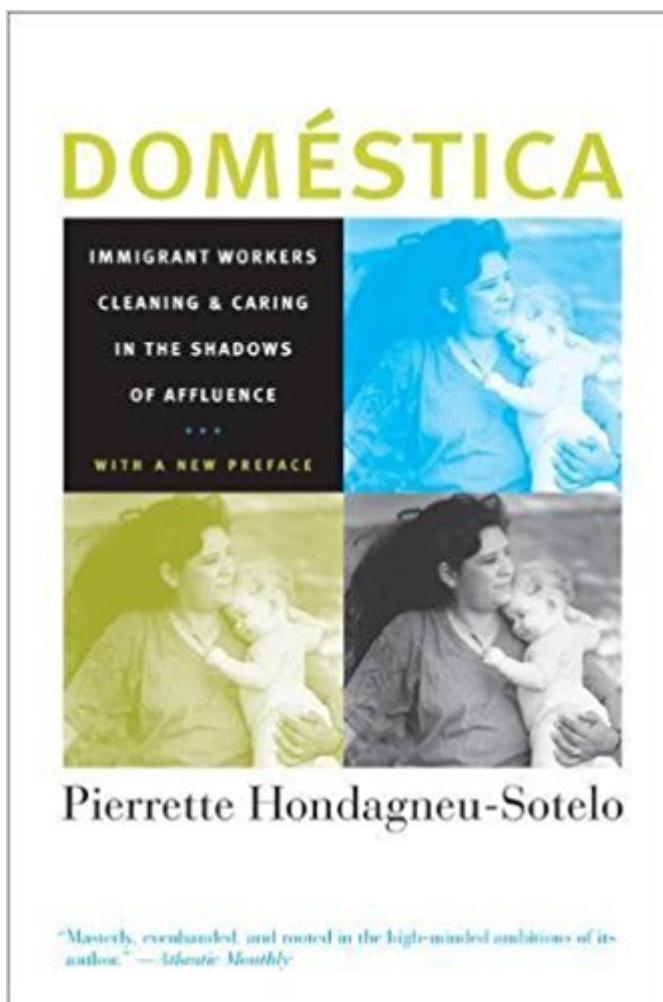


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# Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning And Caring In The Shadows Of Affluence



## **Synopsis**

In this enlightening and timely work, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo highlights the voices, experiences, and views of Mexican and Central American women who care for other people's children and homes, as well as the outlooks of the women who employ them in Los Angeles. The new preface looks at the current issues facing immigrant domestic workers in a global context.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"Opens a rare window into the lives of workers who often speak little English and seldom converse with their employers." -- Los Angeles Times "[A] thoughtful, nuanced account of a troubled world so close to home that it's become almost invisible." -- Mother Jones --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Domestic is a pathbreaking study. It opens our eyes to the hidden world of transnational care-work and calls on us to shape domestic and international policies that will bring basic principles of human rights and social justice into that world. Everyone who is concerned about care and equality should read it.">Lucie White, Professor, Harvard Law School "Hondagneu-Sotelo challenges the reader to rethink the organization of caring work, the roles of race and immigrant status in the structure of domestic work, the importance of regulations, and the need for legal and personal recognition of the rights and human dignity of each worker.">Bonnie Thornton Dill, author of Across the Boundaries of Race and Class

I keep reading this over & over again. I live on a street where not that far from me, up the hills...in the million dollar house range, I see many housekeepers, cleaners and nannies [primarily Latinas], going to work...I find this subject "FASINATING"!

I can't really review the book, as I purchased it for my wife to read. She was reading the book for research purposes for a project she is putting together on domestic help in the United States and the overall question of immigration, and she did find it very informative and very useful!

"Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence" is a perfect example of finding that little bit of lost knowledge that many push to the side or brush under the table. I would go so far as to call this a must read if you are interested in the inequalities that fellow humans face everyday and the struggles they go through.

thank you

I thought what this book had to offer was interesting, but it got redundant after a while, making it a long, tedious read.

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo provides a window into the often invisible lives of domestic workers in the US. In particular, she focuses on Latinas who work in the homes of the upper and middle class. Not only does she humanize individuals who may, at times, be considered a product of their service, but she also raises some concerns about how their work situations may be limited their ability to fully enjoy life. She does this without casting blame. Although many of the employers actually care about these women, they are unaware of how this discounted labor created personal barriers for the women and their family. I found this to be an interesting and important read. I would encourage anyone connected to the service industry or who may employ domestic service workers to read this book.

In Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadow of Affluence, readers explore, along with the researcher, an oft overlooked element of domestic labour in America. In examining this particular manifestation between the haves and have little, Hondagneu-Sotelo has provided a "scholarly" treatment where Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed

fell short. This is by no means an indictment of Ehrenreich's work, quite the contrary. Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* is approachable by the many levels of readers that seek to understand the phenomenon of the working poor and their interaction with affluent Americans (here, I speak specifically of Ehrenreich's chapter two titled "Scrubbing in Maine"). However, in *Domesticating*, Hondagneu-Sotelo has opted to focus her research on immigrant domestic workers, specifically Mexican and Central American women in Los Angeles. In so doing, her research provides insight into the minds and worlds of both parties who engage in what can easily be termed a "love hate" relationship; one where, out of necessity, both the employer and employees are in need of one another. In addition, *Domesticating* serves to highlight some of the struggles of members of America's largest "minority" population (be they documented or otherwise). While Hondagneu-Sotelo relegates her analysis and interviews to women in the Los Angeles area, this reviewer is of the opinion that her research may well be duplicated in other cities with similar populations and yield like outcomes. Reading this work, I began pondering the future of work and workers and four questions came to mind: (1) As America becomes more diverse, will the question of immigrants holding less than desirable positions along the socio-economic margins become of increasing interest to researchers and politicians such that worker-friendly policies emerge? (2) If so, what forms will later policy manifestations assume? (3) What will such a shift mean for the future of economic relations between these two disparate groups? (4) Also, will America continue to marginalize employees that hold the critical job of caring for our young such that we ensure a future of troubled youth due to attachments to caregivers and the familial realities of economic and social stratification? History has shown if we ignore questions not unlike these, problems are sure to result. Historically, "love labor" had been performed, initially, by captive African American women and later those under strict laws (Jim Crow) of mobility, both physical and social. With the relative ascension of African Americans into the socio-economic sphere of marginal acceptance in America, certain forms of work are left to the cheaper, and sometimes unpaid, labor force of immigrant women. Increasingly, such workers are admitted into affluent homes in America through informal networks. For this brief iteration, we consider Hondagneu-Sotelo's Part Two titled "Finding Hard Work Isn't Easy." Here, Hondagneu-Sotelo discusses the other worldly process where women in need of domestic workers and the women in need of domestic work come in contact with one another. This "whole other world" is highlighted when Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, "most prospective employers looking for paid domestic workers in Los Angeles bypass employment agencies, newspaper ads, or other formal job announcements, which they find expensive, slow, and unreliable. Instead the majority rely on their co-workers, neighbors, friends, and relatives when they

seek domestic help" (63). This in itself is telling in that it pulls from Granovetter's theory of the strength of weak ties as mentioned in Deirdre Royster's Race and the Invisible Hand. Applied to Hondagneu-Sotelo's work, there exist, in the domestic worker community, ties that allow for a potential employer in need of workers to gain access to a network of domestic workers with the ability to refer friends and/or family members to employers in need of domestic assistance. Additionally, such a process not only allows for a socially and economically unequal relationship to ensue and continue for years in some cases, it also provides the foundation for further entrenchment of unequal employee and employer relations rooted in economic exploitation. Whereas many of these workers are not earning a living wage, some employers exercise great pains not to flaunt their affluence. In one telling moment, Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, "some employers try to snip off the price tags on new clothing and home furnishings before the Latina domestic workers read them because they fear the women will compare the prices of those items with their wages - which they invariably do. While some employers often feel guilty about 'having so much' around someone who 'has so little,' the women who do the work resent not their affluence but the job arrangements, which generally afford the workers little in the way of respect and living wages" (xi-xii). In this instance, we witness the uneasy but, to the employer, necessary relationship between the affluent employer and the unaffluent worker. Additionally, we note how workers, through Hondagneu-Sotelo's in-depth interviews, indicate that they would rather that requests come not "as a symbol of servitude and a humiliating affront" to one's dignity, but that their work is seen for what it is, essential to the functioning of the household in which they are employed (145). In producing a work with statistical data on domestic labor in Los Angeles, coupled with the voices of women on both sides of the issue, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo has done an admirable job of broaching the subject of the uneasy relationship between affluent women who require domestic assistance and unaffluent immigrant employees that work and, in some cases, live among them. Of the many good points in this work, her in-depth interviews with employees and employers are most revealing. Not unlike the work of Ehrenreich in Nickel and Dimed and Katherine S. Newman in *No Shame in My Game*, Hondagneu-Sotelo allows readers to, as Newman suggested, gain a clearer understanding of the interconnections between people and networks that a purely quantitative work would not permit. That being said, this reviewer applauds Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and her effort to provide a clearer understanding of the women we see on train platforms and in bus terminals that dot American cities and suburbs of affluence.

Hondagneu-Sotelo's poignant look at the lives of Latina immigrants in *Domestica: Immigrant Workers*

Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence, can be a source of enlightenment as well as a sort of "how-to" manual for any employer or employee in the nanny/housekeeper and house cleaning fields. The author argues that the women in these types of work continually battle for basic employee rights: adequate pay and set hours free from discrimination, harassment, and substandard working conditions. She addresses issues of long hours, unreasonable demands, alienation, and the reasons that the workers stay in these situations; fear of retaliation from employers and deportation. Although a bit verbose, this book is packed with valuable information and resources that the reader is sure to use or be able to pass along to someone else. It is a meritable attempt at expressing the angst felt by Latina immigrants and the unresponsive attitude of the employer. It does tend to come across as a bit one-sided, due partly because not many employers or employees were willing to participate in her research efforts, but is still a great and easy read.

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