I ran into Xiomara recently at the worker center in Austin. We embraced warmly with the customary kiss on the cheek and exchanged pleasantries. I asked her what good fortune had brought her out to the meeting that evening. She was an infrequent visitor these days to the weekly meetings where we had first met while serving as volunteers years before.

She said that she was there to recruit new members for her housecleaning cooperative. “We have so much work now, we are having to turn away jobs!” she said and laughed. “Imagine it. Before, we were worried that we didn’t have enough work. Now we need more workers.”

A warm woman with a cherubic face, Xiomara has light brown skin and naturally curly hair. While always well-groomed, she is no-nonsense about her appearance—the exact opposite of her oldest daughter, Annabel, whom she describes as having “alta paciencia para pintarse [so much patience for making herself up].” Xiomara always pulls her hair back in a ponytail and generally wears some combination of jeans and a T-shirt or pullover. Though I have seen her dressed up with full makeup (usually her daughter’s doing), she “doesn’t see the point” of going to all the trouble.

Whether due to the absence of makeup or the determined positivity with which she approaches life, Xiomara looks much younger than her thirty-eight years. The second of six children, she assumed charge of most of the household responsibilities at twelve years old, when her father passed away, so that her mother and older sister could work. She followed her husband from Mexico to Austin twelve years ago, and, despite early isolation and hardship, she has started her own cooperative business, making a life for her family in the city she now calls home.
“Thank God we didn’t suffer”

The first thing Xiomara said when I asked her about crossing the border from Mexico was “thank God it wasn’t sad. We didn’t suffer, thank God. . . . So many stories I’ve heard where people had a really hard time. Thankfully, we were just fine.” In the nonchalant and unassuming tone that I’ve come to realize is not just her customary way of speaking, but rather indicative of the humility with which she speaks about her life—as though it were somehow unremarkable—Xiomara continued. She described a journey that included spending four freezing November nights in the Sonoran desert. Though saved from the cold by discarded blankets that they had found during the day, they barely slept for fear of the rattlesnakes whose lethal music cut through the night air.

“I remember we came by Arizona,” she said. “They told us we would walk for about five hours and when we arrived at . . . I can’t remember what mile, a truck would pick us up. Well, we arrived there at 11:00 p.m., but they didn’t pick us up.” It was rumored that someone had been killed by immigration officials, resulting in extra vigilance that had made it difficult for the truck to arrive. So they had to wait, which meant sleeping in the desert. They had come with very little. Xiomara, her then nine-year-old daughter, Annabel, and the oldest of
her younger brothers had joined a group of fourteen others destined to try their luck in El Norte. It was 2002, just a year after the World Trade Center towers had fallen in New York, an event with ripple effects that would reshape not only border life and border passages in the name of national security but also the daily lives of those who crossed the border clandestinely.

Luckily they were on an American Indian reservation, she said, and the seventeen-year-old boy who was guiding them on their journey knew Indians who would sell them food. During the day they waited, and in the afternoon they had to move. Recalling the landscape, Xiomara exclaimed to me, “There were too many clothes!” Picturing the Arizona desert as a closet floor with clothes strewn about, I listened to her describe how the blankets and bedspreads—discarded by the migrants in whose footsteps they followed—saved them during the freezing nights. On the fourth night the van finally arrived and carried them to Tucson.

As I listened to Xiomara tell this story I glanced over at a nearby table, overhearing a seemingly heated discussion. A young white woman with large glasses and a full sleeve tattoo was telling her companions about her participation in a recent rally for equality in women’s health care at the state capitol building. We were seated at a picnic table under the live oak trees at a hip new cafe in the part of town that realty ads now describe as Austin’s “hot East Side.” This rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, located north of the Colorado River and east of Interstate 35, is where Latino families have historically lived, due in part to the intentional and then de facto segregation of the city. We chose this place for a number of our meetings because it was near a house Xiomara cleaned at that time and midway between our homes.

Turning back to Xiomara, I listened as she told me how they stayed for a week with the man in Tucson who was originally supposed to drive them to Austin. He had been picked up by police the week before their arrival, though, and his papers had been taken from him. This meant they had to wait. After a week he found them a spot in a car that would drop them off in Austin on its way to North Carolina. Though a potentially unnerving scenario, Xiomara told me she felt instantly at ease once she found out that she and the driver were actually “conocidos [acquaintances].” The man’s wife was from her hometown and had gone to school with her brother, though they hadn’t known each other back home. Next thing they knew, they were on her husband’s doorstep in Austin.
Risking It All for Love

Xiomara decided to come to the United States by accident—or, more accurately, by way of an accident. When I asked her about the decision, she said, “I never even thought about coming here to this country.” Even when her husband immigrated, it seemed natural for her to stay behind; she had been uninterested in moving and confident that he would return to live with her in her hometown. An accident happened though, and all of a sudden she was faced with the realization that her love and companion of almost nine years was “here [in the United States] alone, by himself.”

She had been fifteen years old and living on a military base with her family when a young man from the military school began paying attention to her as she walked her younger brother to and from school. Their courtship moved swiftly from walks in the neighborhood park and rejections of his advances, to her becoming his girlfriend, to a marriage proposal. As she remembered, “We had been boyfriend/girlfriend no more than six months. It was only a little time, but I was very much in love with him. So I told him yes.” After dating for a total of nine months they were married in her hometown. She had just turned sixteen, and he was eighteen.

The first years of her marriage were perhaps unsurprisingly tumultuous, considering not only the couple’s youth but also the fact that they became parents within the year. Her eyes flashed as she told me how she felt disrespected by the doctor who attended her during the birth of Annabel, because she was just sixteen and, in her words, “just a little girl [bien chamaca].” She said she yelled at him, saying, “Hey, I’m married, and my husband is outside waiting for me,” and then she called for her husband, who was waiting outside the door, so that he would answer back and prove her point.

Their young relationship also weathered a number of early separations (his family lived in another town), several bouts of unemployment and underemployment, and multiple moves between three cities. They finally settled down in her hometown, where her husband, Eduardo, eventually got a job as a police officer. His job not only provided steady work but also contacts for plumbing jobs that allowed him to continue working in the career he had begun in Mexico City. He made enough money to support them, but Xiomara would sometimes supplement their income by helping her mother clean at the hacienda where the latter worked. They were doing all right, as she told me: “We didn’t have
a lot of luxury, but we lived well. We weren’t lacking for anything. We lived with the necessary.” Her husband, however, in his constant search for different opportunities and better work, had developed a penchant for adventure. And so, when he was offered the opportunity to travel to the United States to work in construction, he took it.

When Eduardo first came to the United States he worked for about a year and a half in roofing, keeping steady communication with Xiomara and sending her money for herself and their daughter. Then all of a sudden there was nothing. She didn’t hear from him for over a week. Terrified and completely unsure of how to find out what happened, she finally got a call from him. He was at a hospital in Austin. He had been working on the roof of a two-story house without a harness while it was raining and had fallen. He told her that his back was broken, but his spinal cord was intact, and that he was scheduled to have an operation in two days’ time.

The only state in the country that doesn’t mandate that employers carry workers’ compensation insurance, Texas—and its construction industry in particular—is notorious for its poor and often dangerous working conditions. The state ranks highest in the number of construction-related deaths, twice that of the state with the next highest number, California, which has a bigger industry. Following a too familiar pattern of construction employers, her husband’s boss (and his principal connection in the United States) told him that when he entered the hospital he had to use a different name, and that if he told them who he was he would be deported. Terrified that he was going to be paralyzed and feeling like he was in no position to argue, he obliged. “Had I called and asked for him,” she said, “they wouldn’t have told me anything, because he was there under another name.”

Thankfully he didn’t end up paralyzed, nor did he need an operation. He wanted to return home—and his employer was all too eager to finance his trip back to Mexico—but the doctors warned him that travel with his twisted spine would leave him paralyzed. “And so I came here,” she said. “He didn’t want this. He didn’t want me to come, but I told him I was coming. And within about a week I had everything arranged.”

Learning to Drive

“I like my work,” Xiomara said one day as we sat at the café that we had taken up as our semi-usual meeting spot. “Even though I get really
tired, I like when people like it—when they see that [my work] is good. I take a lot of pride in it.” When I asked her how she got started cleaning, she began by first telling me how she learned to drive.

For the first year or so, Xiomara managed fine using Austin’s public transportation, but after her second daughter, Alex, was born (within a year of her arrival in the United States) things got more complicated. One day Alex fell ill, and Xiomara was stranded trying to get back from the clinic. It was then that she decided it was time to learn to drive. She had mentioned this to her husband, and although she had practiced driving a few times with her neighbor, it was the night he came home and declared “I’m going to teach you to drive” that set her on a new course. They got in the car and started out in her neighborhood. There weren’t many cars on the road, and she felt okay until they came to the entrance ramp of a highway near their home. Not understanding what he was asking her to do, she followed his instructions to get onto the highway. She then immediately realized where they were and started trembling with fear—the cars were going by fast. She managed to get them to the next exit and off the highway, but the experience stayed with her. “It was the first and last time I let my husband teach me,” she said.

After mastering driving, she began to look for reasons to get out of the house. Initially, “it didn’t really get to a point where I had to go to work,” she said, “but as I got really bored I began to do catalogs and sell things to the neighbors. I would sell them for a period of time.” Work at first wasn’t about the money, but rather more about the distraction. When Alex finally entered elementary school Xiomara had had enough of feeling confined within her house and told her husband she was getting a job. Ignoring his lack of enthusiasm for the idea, she spent the next six months filling out applications for restaurants, hotels, cleaning companies—anywhere she thought might give her a job—only to receive the dismissive response of “we’ll call you back.” (“Never, never did they talk to me.”) Getting nowhere, she and Annabel, then fifteen, decided to take matters into their own hands.

They printed over one thousand business cards advertising their cleaning services, and, with the help of her brother and one of Annabel’s friends, they distributed them all throughout the nearby neighborhoods where they thought they might find work. No one called them.

Then their break came at H-E-B, a local grocery store. Xiomara noticed a cleaning van and, with little to lose, decided to talk to the driver. She asked the woman for work and was told that she was too late—they had just hired someone. The woman took her number and promised to
call if something opened up, and though she smiled and nodded, Xiomara said she remembers thinking, “Okay, that’s never happening.” Yet two weeks later the woman called. She asked her to go that day for an “interview” and gave her directions to a house in one of the wealthiest Austin neighborhoods on the western edge of town.

Xiomara arrived at the house, which she described, wide-eyed, as “enormous,” and was instructed to clean all of the wood trim throughout the five-thousand-square-foot home. The woman was impressed with her work and offered her a job on the spot. She would earn ten dollars an hour to clean the house three times a week for five hours each time. Going from nothing to $150 a week felt to Xiomara like a windfall, especially coupled with the stories she had heard from others about earning only seven dollars an hour or thirty dollars a house. Additionally, it turned out that, despite the detailed instructions about how carefully the upkeep should be handled, her new patrona wasn’t overly demanding. Setting the tone for the loyalty that would characterize her relationships with employers, she continued cleaning this home until it was sold by the owners over a year later.

It wasn’t until after she began this job that she received the only two phone calls that would result from the distribution of the thousand business cards. Those two calls would, however, lay the foundation for her cleaning career. The first call was from a man who requested a price estimate for cleaning his house. As she recounted this first experience of providing an estimate for a cleaning job, Xiomara interrupted herself to tell me that she was sad because this same man was now moving to California. Indeed, she had seen him at his home just the day before, as he had hired her to help him pack for the move. That first estimate had turned into a six-year employment relationship, over the course of which she cleaned four different houses as her boss (a real estate enthusiast) moved from home to home. The second call was from a man whose house she continues to clean as a side contract separate from the houses she services for her cleaning cooperative. Although she was in fact already working for the patrona before receiving these calls, it is these two men whom she refers to as her first employers.

Cleaning as Service Work

Once, in the winter of 2013, when we were at Xiomara’s home, I noticed a child’s rocking chair that, though it fit Alex perfectly, had the name
Franklin written on it. When I inquired as to who owned the chair with the unfamiliar name, she said it was a gift from her boss. She then pointed to a large picture (still in its box on the floor) and several other things in the living room that she had received as gifts from employers who were moving, downsizing, or simply redecorating. Such patronage is effective in encouraging employees to continue working, even without improvements in wages. Xiomara said it was not altogether uncommon that she would receive “gifts” from employers for whom she had worked for awhile. Indeed, it was one of her favorite aspects of the job. “What I like is that my bosses, the owners, treat me well and have always been nice to me. It [the work] makes me tired, but they always like it.”

The benevolent _patrón_ that Xiomara describes is a common archetype of the domestic service sector and reflective of the intimate nature of the work. While certainly better than outright abuse, and often well-intended and even sincerely nice, benevolence on the part of the employer does little to change the existing income inequality that places one person in the service of another. According to a national survey of domestic workers, the median wage for housecleaners is still $10 an hour (though $12 hourly for whites), a rate that, while above the federal minimum wage of $7.25, is below the city living wage rate of $11 an hour and far below the $16.04 hourly rate considered to be a living wage for a family in Austin (based on 2013 fair market rent). At $20,800 annually (if the work is consistent and full-time) a $10 an hour wage is still below the $23,850 annual income threshold that defines a family of four as living in poverty according to the 2014 federal poverty guidelines.

The expectation of often unquestioned subservience, occurring even under the best of working conditions marked by real kindness, is reflected in what Xiomara described as her worst experience with an employer. While Xiomara situates the episode as relatively benign in comparison to the experiences of many of her colleagues in domestic work, in its subtlety it illustrates the centrality of the power hierarchy in the lives of domestic laborers.

Xiomara had been cleaning the house of a woman for about a year. Her boss, a little eccentric, had been exponentially increasing the collection of knickknacks and ornamental pieces that Xiomara was required to remove and replace while dusting. As a result, the hours required to do the job began increasing, yet there was no simultaneous increase in pay. Deciding that it was only reasonable to receive more money for more work, Xiomara asked for a raise. A little put out, her
boss agreed. But the next week when Xiomara showed up for work, the woman fired her, claiming that she had found someone who would do the job and even more for the same rate. “Me dió coraje [I was angry],” said Xiomara, “because it was such little extra money, and it was just because I had asked her to give me a raise.” When Xiomara complained to one of her boss’s other employees, the woman explained it plainly to her: “La patrona has to be the one to decide to give you a raise, Xiomara. It has to be her idea. You can’t ask her for one. You can’t make demands.”

Unlike most jobs in the United States, domestic work is almost universally excluded from the protection of most federal labor laws. Characterized by low pay (often even less than the state minimum wage), mostly nonexistent employment benefits, the high likelihood of work-related injury, and little to no control over working conditions because contracts are almost nonexistent, domestic work falls in the category of what some scholars have referred to as “precarious employment.” At the same time, domestic work is also intimate and, by nature, intensely personal. Workers labor in close contact with the most private aspects of families’ personal lives—they have keys to their homes and often know their relatives and children, if not in person then by photograph.

While this leads to almost familial interactions—like the friendly reprimand Xiomara received once for showing up to work on Christmas Eve—being treated as a member of the family can be far from being treated as an equal.
Better to Not Work at All

When she first came to the United States Xiomara didn’t work, because she didn’t have to. As she recalls, the family was able to make ends meet on just the income her husband brought home from construction. “When we arrived here my husband had a stable job, and we did well,” she said. “Every fifteen days he would get paid, earning around $1,000 or $1,200, so we had enough to pay all the bills and to go out.” The good life was hard earned: ten-hour workdays, Monday through Saturday, initially for just $55 a day. When he became an independent contractor, though, things changed.

Though the money was better and the work was the same, the nature of his responsibilities changed in ways for which the family was unprepared. Things began to go wrong the first time he did a job and his employer refused to pay him. He was out over $5,000. Though not receiving his own salary was hard enough, what was even more devastating to the family was the fact that he employed other workers and had to come up with their wages.

The first time it happened the family lost his truck, which he used for work. Having already paid off nearly $14,000, he owed just under $3,000. They had to use all of their money and savings to pay his workers, leaving nothing to cover their own bills, including the payments on the truck. There was little they could do. The truck was repossessed, and they lost all the money they had put into it. This, she said, became a pattern.

“He would get one [a truck] and be paying for a year, and then after a year a boss would refuse to pay him. We would have to get money to pay the workers and the bills, and then they would repossess the car.” It happened twice more, each time leaving them worse off. “I tell him, ‘Don’t work for people you don’t know,’” said Xiomara. “‘You know it’s better you don’t work than let this happen to you.’”

This practice is so rampant in industries like construction and domestic service that employ a large contingent (and immigrant) workforce that it follows a seemingly textbook pattern. As Xiomara explained, “You begin to work, and they begin to pay you. It’s fine initially, but then after that they don’t pay.”

Known as “wage theft,” the practice is completely illegal; all people who work in the United States are entitled to be paid the promised wage (and in most cases at least the minimum wage) for any work performed, regardless of their eligibility to work or the quality of the work performed. Legal action against employers, however, is rare and
requires the initiation of processes through the state bureaucracy that are largely unknown and difficult to access for even the most highly educated English-speaking citizens. Pressures to meet impossible bottom lines in order to secure the highest profit, working in tandem with an easy mechanism of ensuring employee subjugation—threatening them with deportation should they complain or report—provide employers with both the incentives and the tools that enable worker exploitation.

With the truck gone and no means to pay the bills, Xiomara turned to a resource used almost exclusively by individuals denied access to more mainstream financial services like credit cards and bank loans: the cash store or pawn shop. “I had acquired a number of pieces of gold jewelry,” said Xiomara, “and what I had to do was sell all of it so that we could pay the bills, like the rent, and go on paying the bills of the house.” Emotional, Xiomara went on to tell me that she pawned all of her jewelry at a rate that required her to pay $600 in interest monthly if she intended to keep it. Not wanting to let it go, she paid for three months. Then, realizing that she could pay every month and would still never have enough to pay it off, she gave it all up.

Ironically, it was a claim against her husband for wage theft that set her on the path to establishing her cleaning cooperative. The claim was the result of the second time her husband’s wages had been stolen—he had negotiated and completed a construction job, but once it was complete his employer refused to pay him. He was owed a total of $4,000. While it was bad enough that he did not receive his own wages or the money to cover the cost of the materials, what further complicated the situation was the fact that the amount he was owed included money he needed to pay the wages of the workers he had hired to complete the job. Obligated to pay them, regardless of whether or not he himself was paid, the family was left scrambling to come up with the money. Then there was a knock on their door.

Xiomara answered to find herself confronted by one of her husband’s workers. The man, irate, told her that if he wasn’t paid what he was owed, he was going to bring a bunch of people from his organization to picket on their lawn to show their neighbors that her husband was the kind of man who didn’t pay his workers. Determined to avoid such a scandal at her home and convinced that she just needed to explain to someone that her husband was also a victim in this situation, Xiomara did some investigating to find the organization that the worker had mentioned.

Recalling a Univision commercial advertising a meeting for people
who hadn’t been paid for their work, she found the organization’s contact information and called. To her dismay they were not wholly welcoming. When she explained the situation and admitted that her husband had not yet paid his workers, she was told that they could not help, despite the fact that the reason her husband hadn’t paid was because he himself had not yet been paid. If they wanted help recovering what her husband was owed, he would have to pay his workers first. Explaining this to her husband, Xiomara declared, “Vamanos [we’re going], and we’re going to pay him in front of them so they know we pay. Then we’re getting them to help us.” They pieced the money together and paid his workers. Then, with the organization’s support and advocacy, they eventually recovered the $4,000 her husband was owed.

After the case was closed, Xiomara continued to participate in the organization, attending meetings where she assisted other unpaid workers in filling out wage claim paperwork. She and her husband ended up using the organization’s services again, this time recovering $1,500 in back wages. After participating on and off for a few years, she was presented with an opportunity to become a business owner. Some of the organization’s advocates had been working with a partner organization that supports workers in organizing worker cooperatives. They thought Xiomara and some of the other women might be interested in the idea. More than a little skeptical that the idea would go anywhere but intrigued by the possibility of steady clients and a more stable income, Xiomara said, “Okay, we’ll see,” and agreed to attend a meeting.

Cooperative Accounts

“Now that I am in the cooperative, I can tell you that it is much better than having a standard job, and, at the very least, I have learned many things” Xiomara said. “One of the things is about working in a team, which at the beginning was really, really difficult, and we had many conflicts, but now we are more or less going and adapting ourselves.” After about eight years of cleaning houses on her own or with her daughter Annabel, Xiomara took an opportunity to establish a cooperative cleaning business.

The cooperative business model is unique in that it allows each worker to become an equal owner of the business, each earning an equal share of the profit in addition to their wages. For Xiomara, however, the cooperative was not just an opportunity to move forward and grow
in her work by becoming an official business owner; it was also a response to the real insecurity of her work. When clients moved or their needs for cleaning services changed, she was left without income, often for significant periods of time. Talking about her decision to participate in forming the cooperative, she said, “I had lost two clients, and my monthly income changed a lot. This was about six months before the project of the cooperative. And so when the idea about a co-op came up I needed work, and through it I thought I would get more work; so it seemed like a good idea.”

Establishing the cooperative took just under a year. She and her colleagues took a six-month course from a local organization, during which they learned about running a cooperative business. They attended the two-hour class twice a week and discussed everything from administration to the business model and cleaning practices. It was hard, this period, she recalls. The class time was unpaid, and she completed it in addition to her existing cleaning job and family responsibilities.

What was promised in the long run, though, was stability. As Xiomara said, “The thing is, you know how much you are going to earn. It’s what you work, and if you work more, you get more, and if you work less, less.” Each participant is a business owner instead of an employee, and decisions that impact the business, and in turn the owners’ lives, are made by consensus. This leaves them with few surprises. Houses are scheduled out weeks in advance for fixed rates paid to the cooperative, and they pay themselves an hourly wage of fifteen dollars for all the hours they work. The earnings beyond their wages fund first their business expenses (from cleaning products to the business taxes and gasoline) and then become profits that they distribute evenly at the end of the year.

This stability is important. However, while she appreciates the knowledge she has acquired about cooperative businesses, what really excites her, career-wise, is accounting. In one of our last meetings at her favorite restaurant, a taquería near her home, she arrived animated, excited to tell me about a new system she had devised for managing the cooperative’s earnings.

She was trying to find a way to direct more of their earnings into the collective account so that they would have more profit to distribute at the end of the year. She had come up with two ideas that she was going to present to the others in their meeting the next day. I asked her how she had come up with them, and she said, “Since I was little, I have always liked doing the accounts. I would always keep lists of everything I earned and everything I spent.” She has tried her best to instill this in
Annabel as well and proudly told me how, by being disciplined, Annabel would pay off the car she had bought the previous year in half the expected time frame, saving a lot of money in the long term.

The women in the cooperative have established a structure that, now that their client base is large enough, provides them all with full-time work if they want it. That means they each now earn just under $600 a week (before taxes) at their set wage rate of fifteen dollars an hour. One of the members acts as part-time administrator and handles all of the client communication and scheduling, dedicating her other hours to cleaning. The houses are set up ahead of time and distributed amongst the members according to the hours estimated to be needed for each home. The business has grown to the point that it is now over capacity; each member is working full-time, and they are having to turn away houses. The hardest part, however, has been figuring out how to work together and deal with internal conflicts in a way that supports their business. As Xiomara puts it, they have developed a “system of communication” to encourage direct communication among members. “So that’s what we’re doing, knowing that we can get along better, and [we’re] always trying to get along and support each other.”

Querido México

While Xiomara takes pride in the cooperative and in doing her work well, to hear her tell stories of her life in Mexico, you’d think it was heaven on earth. As she explains, she had never wanted to leave, and the desire to come to the United States had never entered her mind. She came because she had to, and, having done so, she misses home. Her hometown in southern Mexico, it seems, always had perfect weather. Though Xiomara’s father was very strict and didn’t permit the children to play outside, she has fond memories of playing volleyball in the streets when he was at work or away. Indeed, the family had chosen to settle there even after living for a short time in Mexico City after her father died. Though Xiomara and her husband met and began their life together in Mexico City, before moving to the United States they had returned to live in her hometown. They moved into a house next door to her mother, and her whole family lived nearby. In stark contrast to her early years in the United States, when she often found herself stuck in her house, in Mexico she would often go on her own to the city center or to Mexico City to visit her siblings.

Xiomara’s nostalgia for her homeland is interwoven with a deep long-
ing for her extended family. Generally positive and forward looking about both her past and her future, Xiomara has cried only twice in my presence, both times for the same reason. The first time she was telling me a story about her youth. Her eyes were wet, yet she skillfully managed to hold back tears as she interrupted herself, saying, “Can you believe it, Jen? It’s been twelve years since I have hugged my mother.”

For Xiomara, the sense of loss and separation from her family is both indefinite and insurmountable. For many immigrants, family separation is an inevitable reality as temporary stays turn into permanent relocations. The maintenance of ties through visits is often highly dependent on disposable income. For undocumented families, the separation is like the border wall; while migration between the United States and Mexico without legal immigration status was once more fluid, increases in border security have made it more expensive and dangerous to cross, making temporary visits a less than viable option. Families that would once have come to the United States to work and then eventually returned back home (to Mexico or further south) now choose to stay because of the difficulty of returning.

When she was younger, Xiomara was always “glued to her [mother’s] side.” They did everything together. Indeed, her mother was a major source of support to her as she became a young adult. She was there during her pregnancy when her husband could not be, she lived with them to take care of Annabel during her first years while they worked in the city, and it was on her land in Xiomara’s hometown that they had been building a house before the family left to come to Austin. And so she says, “It’s hard to spend so many years here. . . . I have my daughters, who are studying and maybe will get better work, but it is hard to stay so far from the family. Each year, it seems as though it’s been fine, but to have passed twelve years without seeing my mom—in November it will be twelve years . . . twelve years without seeing her or being able to hug her, it’s something sad.”

“We Skype now,” Xiomara said, again approaching tears, “but it’s not the same.”

The Craft of Cleaning

Though Xiomara was once an active participant and volunteer at the community worker center, assisting other families who had experienced problems like wage theft, since she and her colleagues launched the co-
operative, she has found that she no longer has the time to volunteer. Though she had several steady clients before, now she has enough to fill more than a full forty-hour workweek. Not only is each day consistently too full to fit in more meetings, the work itself is exhausting. The physicality of the tasks required—climbing up and down stairs, bending to scrub bathrooms, and pushing vacuums and heavy furniture—means that after over eight hours of work, and sometimes meetings of the cooperative, Xiomara arrives home with rarely enough energy left to cook an evening meal.

Xiomara begins her day around 6:00 a.m., when ten-year-old Alex wakes up and makes her way to her parents’ room—turning on all the lights along the way—before curling up in their bed to catch a few last minutes of sleep. After turning all the lights back off and getting herself ready, Xiomara makes breakfast for the two of them and then helps Alex finish getting ready for school. Her husband gets up as they are finishing, and the two of them walk Alex to school around seven fifteen. Some mornings she and her husband enjoy a brief cup of coffee together when they return home, before they each head off to work. At around eight Xiomara leaves for the first house on her schedule.

She cleans three to four houses a day, sometimes substituting an office space for a house. The schedule of houses is predetermined by the co-op member who handles the administration and depends upon whether Xiomara will be working with a partner, as well as on the size of the home to be cleaned, the frequency of the home’s cleaning, and the provision of special services like a deep clean or move out. Xiomara works until around 6:00 p.m., and on some days as late as 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. Most days this means that Annabel (or sometimes Xiomara’s husband) is charged with picking up Alex from school. Because the days are long, each of them figures out the evening meal on his or her own. After Xiomara returns home in the evening the family spends a little time together, often watching TV, before they each retire to begin the day’s routine again the next morning.

Xiomara has cleaned homes all over the city. Most often, the homes the cooperative cleans are located in west Austin, in the areas most associated with affluence. But she also regularly cleans homes on the East Side and in south Austin. The homes differ in size and style—the homes in the west typically fall into the category that she describes, wide eyed, as “enormous,” while homes on the East Side are typically smaller.

However, Xiomara noted no explicit differences based on area with regard to patterns of upkeep or cleanliness of the homes—the main dif-
ference between the various houses, she said, was really whether the co-
operative had cleaned the home before or whether it was a special cir-
cumstance, like a move in or move out, or if the owners had pets.

I joined Xiomara and Annabel one morning to assist them with a job
cleaning a home in West Lake Hills, one of the wealthiest neighbor-
hoods in the Austin area. As we pulled up the drive, it was hard not to be
impressed. The front yard, large enough to fit both of our own homes,
was shaded by several large live oak trees and home to a large gazebo
that looked like it must be used for a band stage. We pulled up to the
side of the three-story home and began unloading supplies.

Though the houses vary, the practice of cleaning follows a standard
script. Upon arrival, Xiomara selects the tools of her trade—bucket,
mop, vacuum, bag of rags of assorted colors, and the crate of cleaning
products (all certified environmentally friendly)—unloads them from
the trunk of her car, and brings them into the house. This chore is par-
ticularly cumbersome when one works alone, as it requires carrying
all the equipment not just inside but often up one, and sometimes two,
flights of stairs. Tasks are then divided. Xiomara typically assigns her-
sel the bathrooms and the kitchen, as, she explained, “These are the
rooms the owners always pay the most attention to.” She prefers to clean
them to ensure that the job is done to her satisfaction.

If Xiomara is working in a pair, her partner will take on the tasks
doing the dusting and changing the bedding and then will begin to clean the
floors. Whoever finishes first then joins the other to complete the rest
of the tasks. In closing, Xiomara returns the tools to the mobile office
that the trunk of her car has become, makes a final inspection to en-
sure that all is in order, pauses to retrieve the check from the table, and
locks up.

After dusting the top floor of the house with Annabel, I paused at
the window. From our vantage point the entire skyline of Austin was
visible over the trees. As I stood there I could hear Xiomara cough-
ing downstairs while she cleaned the bathroom. Finished with my first
job, I joined her and began to clean the sinks. “Use the yellow or white
rags,” she said, adding, “The white are the best for doing the mirror.”
She explained that they have a strict color-coding system for the rags,
to keep things sanitary—white and yellow rags are reserved for all the
bathroom tasks, while blue rags are used to dust everywhere else. As I
worked, I began coughing too, all of a sudden realizing that it was the
odor of the products causing my reaction.

Taking cues from Austin’s long history of environmental activism
and its internationally recognized programs like the green building program, Xiomara and her colleagues had decided to “go green” and distinguish their cooperative by exclusively using green cleaning products. I was thus surprised by my reaction to the products—in my mind, environment-friendly also meant people-friendly. Initially, the women had tried to make their own products, combining a secret recipe of non-toxic household products every week. But they discovered that not only were the products marginally effective (it would take nearly twice as long to get the bathroom sufficiently clean), they were also impossible to produce in a way that consistently provided enough product. So they switched to an eco-friendly corporate brand. Though the new products are effective, Xiomara still wishes they could use standard products for the deep cleans—the green products just aren’t as powerful, and so using them means extra physical effort.

While it probably can’t be said that green cleaning products are worse for individual health than conventional cleaning products, the physical reaction that our bodies have to their use is just another reminder of the risky nature of cleaning and domestic service work. In line with the trends of the sector, Xiomara does not have health insurance. Should she fall sick from any illness resulting from exposure to the chemicals or other work-related hazards, not to mention illness from any other cause, the burden is on her to cover the cost. While the cooperative is commit-
ted to purchasing and providing health insurance for all members and is researching a way to do so, at this point the members have not yet found a plan that is within their means.

Professional cleaning contains an element of art. Though my childhood chores had included cleaning my family’s home, working with Xiomara taught me that I missed the details—cleaning the water spots under the faucets and neatly folding the top sheet of paper on the toilet paper roll. Patiently, Xiomara pointed them out, waiting for me to redo the mirrors before we moved on to the bottom floor. She explained to me how these were key elements of the craft, the details that presented the home not only as clean, but as professionally clean. Though the owners were obviously most concerned about the overall cleanliness she said, confident in the cooperative’s skills, simple cleanliness was not a question. It was these details that she knew helped convince them that it was her business that should keep coming back.

“Hasta aquí no más”

When Xiomara came to the United States she found her relationship with her husband changed. Her husband had become accustomed to the bachelor life, going out with friends, often drinking, and Xiomara was accustomed to nothing that she found here. On top of that, she had to care for Annabel, who was then approaching ten years of age, and she became pregnant with Alex within a couple months of arrival. Not only unaccustomed to the new place and patterns of life here, as she tells it, she was also a bit afraid.

She couldn’t drive, she didn’t speak the language, she had no work or even the hope of obtaining any, and her brother—the only family she had here other than her husband and her daughter—soon left. She remembers feeling torn at this time:

“I missed my family, Mexico. I wanted to go back. I wanted to be here to take care of my husband, but I wanted to go back. It took me more than a year to adapt to here. My brother was here, but I was about eight months pregnant when he decided to go back to Mexico. And I stayed here alone. Alone with my little girl . . .”

What became increasingly apparent too was her near complete dependence upon her husband. When he went out after work or on the weekends and stayed away too long, she found herself constantly tracking him down, begging him to come home, imploring him to think of
her and the girls. More than just concerned about their relationship or his behavior per se, she was terrified of the consequences—that he would hurt himself or get arrested for driving drunk. “I would tell him, ‘You can’t do this, you’ll end up in the hospital or in jail,’” she told me. “‘They’ll pick you up and deport you.’”

While they might seem overprotective or reactive, Xiomara’s fears were not ill founded. Though sometimes described as a sanctuary city, Austin is far from a sanctuary for undocumented families. Thanks to a program called Secure Communities, the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) has an information sharing partnership with the Travis County Sheriff’s Office. This allows the office to check the immigration status of anyone it detains, even if just for a minor offense, like a traffic violation or public intoxication. Despite the fact that the stated emphasis of the program is to target serious felons for deportation, according to a recent analysis of Travis County Jail and ICE data conducted by the *Austin American-Statesman*, almost twice as many people have been deported from Travis County after a misdemeanor arrest as have been deported after a felony arrest. Secure Communities has led to the current situation in which, on average, nineteen Travis County residents are deported and separated from their families each week.

This pattern of checking up on him, Xiomara told me, endured for the first few years she was living in Austin. Then, about five years ago, things changed. As I listened to her explanation, I thought back to what she had told me about her life at that time. Five years ago she was beginning to establish relationships with several loyal clients, to work with a community organization engaging other workers in learning about their rights, and to help her husband recover lost income. She remembers the moment when she let go. They were arguing, and she was again imploring him to see the grave consequences that could result from his behavior, and he told her to stop acting like his mother. And just like that she was done. “Okay,” she told him. “Hasta aquí no más. I am not going to worry about you anymore.” And she stopped following him.

She reflected on this, saying, “You know, I realized I was so scared about what he was doing because I didn’t know what would happen to me, to my girls. If something happened to him, we would have nothing and no way of surviving. I guess that stopped being a problem.”

Refocusing then on her goals and on taking care of her daughters appeared to shift everything. Her husband also began to refocus on the family, spending more time at home and going out less. “Of course he
still goes out some,” she said, but after several cycles of watching his friends disappear when things went awry, she suspected that he had begun to appreciate her support. Approaching their twenty-second year of marriage, she reflected on their journey, noting, “Now my husband and I take Alex to school every morning together. Before, it was never like this. But now, we go together everyday.” He has even become explicit in his recognition of the vital contribution her work has made to the family. Just that morning, she said that he had thanked her, saying, “Thanks to you, we’re gonna be okay.” She gave me a slight smile and said, “We’ll see.”

A Home of Our Own

The story of Xiomara’s life can be constructed around houses—the houses where she has lived, the houses in which she works, the houses built, owned, and lost by her family. As such, she thinks of her hopes for the future in terms of homes.

“Lo que quiero yo es volver a tener una casa mía [what I want is to have my own house again],” Xiomara explained. “I always think about something so that when we are older we don’t have to depend on our children.” She described her mother’s current situation of dependence. Sick and unable to continue working, Xiomara’s mother was now reliant on Xiomara’s siblings in Mexico and on money that Xiomara and Anna-bel sent her from the United States. “I just want us to have something so that we can be content when we are old.”

Xiomara spent her childhood with her family in a single-family home that her parents owned. In that home she and all of her brothers and sisters were born. When she and her family moved back to her hometown after living and working in Mexico City, they returned to live in that home. Shortly thereafter, she and her husband began to build their own home next door. It was a small home—two bedrooms and one bathroom, with an open kitchen-dining-living room. All they had had left to do before she left for the United States was install the doors and windows. She was sending money from the United States to finish it so that she could rent it out for income while they were gone.

Then the family lost it all. Her younger brother, the one who had originally accompanied her to the United States, had fallen in love with a woman who was being pursued by another man. Problems ensued, and he ended up on the wrong side of the law. Bailing him out and clear-
ing his name took all of the family’s assets. They lost everything. Both homes. Xiomara said that afterward she kept thinking about her childhood home and trying to figure out how to recover it. Though she tried to get some money together to buy the home back, the person who bought it would not sell.

Her mom had prepared for her future by planning to live on rent she earned from homes. Though she lost the house and thus her retirement plan, her plan to use real estate to support herself when she became too old to work has had a deep impact on Xiomara, whose major plans now revolve around trying to buy a home here in Austin. While she would like to return to Mexico, she and her family have made a life here. Generalizing about both her family and culture, she says, “We are accustomed to the idea that one makes their life in a place, and there they stay.” But in order to stay, she needs a place to call home.

Lacking access to conventional bank loans because she lacks a social security number, Xiomara knows the process will be difficult—and maybe impossible. Even if it does work, they couldn’t rent out and live in the same home, so she needs another source of income for when they can no longer work. She traces three squares on the table to indicate three land parcels as she tells me about her retirement plan. Over the years she has been paying toward three pieces of land in her hometown in Mexico. On these three plots she will construct three small homes to rent out, and the income will support them. That way, they will have both a place to go in Mexico and a way to live if they stay here. Most importantly, she says, they are leaving something for the girls.

**Recommended Readings**


Hondagneu-Sotelo deconstructs the nature of domestic service and caring work in the United States, focusing on the race- and class-based dynamics of the relationships between domestic workers and their employers.

