URBAN NUMBNESS TOWARD MEXICAN DOMESTIC WORKERS FROM THE 1970S TO PRESENT DAY: A SPIRAL OF INSTABILITY IN *ROMA*, *HILDA*, AND "ESPERANZA NÚMERO EQUIVOCADO"

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In March of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic, provoking uncertainty around the world. The emergence of the COVID-19 virus led to an imbalance in various sectors of daily life, directly affecting employment—cuts, layoffs, and business closures, among other problems. In particular, the pandemic produced instability in domestic workers' employment in Mexico. During the surge of COVID-19, such instability revealed the marginal importance that Mexican society has placed on the lives of domestic workers, especially on their health, independence, and labor rights. This insensible attitude and impassivity triggered a spiral of instability where the domestic workers' emotional and socioeconomic state fluctuated in the face of historical events. The domestic workers' spiral of instability phenomenon is confirmed in unfavorable situations demonstrated in literature and film. I will elaborate on this spiral phenomenon through The Corpus Christi Massacre in 1971, evidenced in Alfonso Cuaron's *Roma* (2018), returning the domestic worker to everyday life, revealed in Elena Poniatowska's "Esperanza número equivocado" (1979) and Andres Clariond Rangel's *Hilda* (2014) and, again, placing the domestic worker in a state of instability during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 explained through press report interviews. I will compare the aforementioned works to the current situation of domestic workers in Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify the oppressive conditions described in literature and film and to highlight the urban numbness that has lessened solidarity.

The velocity present in modern-day capitalism has led to an urban numbness. According to Richard Sennett, "People travel today at speeds our forbears [*sic*] could not at all conceive" (17). Such speed triggers an urban numbness: "the sensory deprivation which seems to curse most modern building; the dullness, the monotony, and the tactile sterility which afflicts the urban environment" (15). Due to this dullness and monotony, as Sennett explains, "the body moves passively, desensitized into space" (18), society stands numb to the physical senses, naturalizes this numbness, and ignores social inequality. This inability to perceive social injustice comes from living without instability, where individuals face monotonous routines that fail to provide any sort of uncertainty. However, Sennett explains that "The body comes to life when coping with difficulty" (310). Through difficulties or, rather, instability, individuals have the opportunity to wake up from the urban numbness to face the inequities of this world.

Alfonso Cuaron's *Roma* follows the life of Cleo, an Indigenous woman working as a domestic worker in Mexico City's Roma neighborhood. The scenes show the daily life of her work and the clear social class division between the employer, Sofia, and the employee, Cleo. In one scene, as Sofia is arguing with her husband on the phone, she starts yelling at Cleo, transferring her marital anger and making Cleo feel responsible. The class distinction is evident in Sofia and Cleo's employment relationship, where the middle-class environment imposes rules toward the subordinate, represented by a lower-class Indigenous woman.

In addition to the aggressions evident in numerous scenes, Roma voices another concern of greater magnitude regarding domestic work. The problems established between Mexican society and the labor sector relate to sociopolitical issues that occur throughout history. As Sergio de la Mora explains, "[h]owever much it is a domestic view of familial drama, Roma keeps politics in its peripheral vision, showing how domestic and personal politics reverberates with the public and exterior" (46). One of the key scenes occurs in the midst of the Corpus Christi Massacre [1] named after the Corpus Christi celebration in the Catholic church in June.

According to Alberto Nájar, on Thursday, June 10, 1971, a group of college students prepared a march asking for a budget increase in their education, among various other demands. This was the first protest during Luis Echeverría Alvarez's presidency; he was sworn into office a few months prior on December 1, 1970. Kate Doyle explains that prior to becoming president, Echeverría served as the Secretary of Interior during Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's presidency. Thus, "Echeverría had been at the helm of internal security when the massacre at Tlatelolco exploded in 1968, leaving dozens of students dead at the hands of Mexican police and military forces." On October 2, 1968, a student movement gathered at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City protesting the authoritarian government. The protest ended in a bloodbath where the Mexican army stormed in and began shooting unarmed students. When the shooting ceased, hundreds were dead, injured, arrested, or had disappeared. Despite President Díaz Ordaz's unsettling relationship with student protests that preceded the demonstration on October 2, at that time the Mexican government refused to acknowledge and disclose the true cause of what ended in a massacre; instead, "the government pointed back, claiming that extremists and Communist agitators had initiated the violence" (Doyle). As a result, Echeverría's reputation as a violent leader under Ordaz's presidency brewed hostility from the younger generations when he ran for president two years later. Nonetheless, "Echeverría promised a kinder, gentler government and reached out to the constituency most affected by the tough tactics of the Díaz Ordaz regime: Mexico's young people" (Doyle). In doing so, Echeverría was able to mend his reputation during his presidential campaign. Six months after being sworn into the presidency, however, Echeverría faced his first test when the Autonomous University of Nuevo León in Monterrey, "long torn by political differences, was shut down by angry demonstrators on May 1, 1971, after the conservative state congress changed the university's bylaws, greatly reducing its autonomy" (Doyle). Thus, Echeverria came under scrutiny as the first conflict involving the youth arose. To maintain his promise of a "kinder" government, as opposed to Díaz Ordaz, "President Echeverría intervened to annul the offending law and restore full autonomy to the university" (Doyle). Months later, in solidarity with the students from Monterrey, students in Mexico City planned a march on June 10, 1971, scheduled to begin at the National Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico Nacional, IPN). Afterall, Echeverría had promised a gentler approach to the student population during his campaign. As a result, it must be noted that this march was "the first major student demonstration since Tlatelolco, and many hoped it would revive the student movement, hard hit by the repression of 1968" (Doyle). The march had a great turnout with about 10,000 demonstrators. Despite the peaceful march, another group with dozens of young people arrived in buses and trucks and headed toward the demonstrators. It should be emphasized that these young men who arrived later in the protest, all dressed in civilian clothing, "were armed with wooden poles, chains and truncheons. They attacked the students as scores of police stood idly by and watched" (Doyle). In response, the demonstrators tried to protect themselves with stones or sticks, but when the opposition pulled out firearms, the demonstration, yet again, turned into a massacre. Fifty years later, the exact number of deaths and injuries is still unknown.

The Corpus Christi massacre is also known as the Halconazo after the attackers, who belonged to a paramilitary group called the Halcones, the Falcons. It should be highlighted that through their use of violence and aggression toward the demonstrators on June 10, the Halcones tried to instill fear in Mexican society. They were "thugs-for-hire enlisted, trained and armed by the Federal District government to carry out the dirty work of suppressing the student movement in Mexico City" (Doyle). Rodríguez Munguía adds that the group was built in collaboration with the Mexican army.

After recruitment, these young men were trained in martial arts and self-defense tactics. Among these tactics was kendo, a martial art of Japanese origin that uses bamboo poles. These poles were the same ones used to attack the protesters during the Corpus Christi massacre. Although there are various eyewitness accounts and the Halcones were directly created by the government, to this day, the Mexican government, including former president Echeverría, has not confessed the truth behind the attack.

The Halcones were the government's tactic to combat student protesters and control Mexican society during Echeverria's presidency. Despite his denial regarding his involvement in the Corpus Christi massacre, US documents provide convincing evidence of the government's connection with the formation of the Halcones. As Kate Doyle suggests, the use of the Halcones to combat a student group in Mexico City while trying to improve his relationship with students in Monterrey suggests that he was "playing a double[1] game." Thus, "[p]ossibly out of anger over the fact that the students insisted on demonstrating even after he had gone to such great lengths to meet their aspirations, Echeverría may well have given his blessing to the use of the group against the IPN demonstrations" (Doyle). Despite its origin, it is crucial to contextualize the Halcones with the government. Some researchers point out that the Halcones also participated in the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre that occurred in Mexico City. However, it is worth mentioning that the protest of June 10, 1971, three years after the Tlatelolco massacre, was the first demonstration organized after 1968, according to Rodríguez Munguía. He explains that the Federal Security Agency (Dirección Federal de Seguridad) "detectó una creciente disconformidad hacia el gobierno de Echeverría, [. . .] y por eso la respuesta a la protesta del Jueves de Corpus, a la que oficialmente se le ubicaba como una subversión" (Nájar) [detected a growing nonconformity toward Echeverria's government [. . .] hence the response to the Corpus Christi Massacre, which was officially classified as a subversion].[2] Additionally, the response from the government towards the protesters was a clear message from president Echeverría: any type of demonstration was prohibited and there would be harsh consequences. Rodríguez concludes that after the massacre, there was very little open social mobilization and the Halconazo served as a warning to the Mexican society declaring that public manifestation was forbidden.

The strategies used by the government to silence the voices of the Mexican people can be identified in *Roma* within the context of domestic workers. Although Cleo is not a student, like those who participated in the protest of June 10, 1971, there is a parallel oppression between the students and the domestic workers who have equally been silenced. Echeverria's oppression of the students, through the violence organized by the Halcones toward the protesters, is directly connected with Cleo's life during the massacre scene. This scene occurs when Cleo enters a furniture store looking for a crib, and she encounters Fermín, her ex-boyfriend, an active participant of the Halcones who abandons her after discovering she is pregnant.

With this scene in mind, it is essential to recognize the suffering that women in the film encounter. Just like Cleo's boyfriend abandons her after informing him of her pregnancy, Sofia's husband also abandons his family. Amelie Hastie suggests that Fermín "is typical of the primary men of the film" (58). In fact, just as Cleo prepares to notify Sofia that she is pregnant, "Sofia sits with her mother discussing her own husband's disappearance from the family" (Hastie 58). Fortunately, Sofia does not fire Cleo when she tells her about her pregnancy. Rather, she supports her and says, "Claro que no, Cleo, no seas tonta, hay que llevarte al doctor ya" [Of course not, Cleo, don't be silly, we have to take you to the doctor now]. Hastie points out that "Sofia instead accepts her news and announces that she will bring her to a doctor (and one, the film soon shows, who is also a woman)" (58). This moment offers a solidarity model from Sofia toward Cleo. Sofia not only pities her out of goodwill when she sees Cleo as a single mother, she also shows a resignification where Sofia begins to understand Cleo's pain when she sees herself faced with her husband's abandonment. In other words, Sofia becomes what Michel de Certeau identifies as a "shifter" (143). Rossana Reguillo further explains that shifters are defined for their capacity to change the direction or meaning of social situations in unorthodox ways. These "shifters" provide an alternative way, a different lens, to view a situation—they become individuals capable of changing and altering the stereotypes (7). For this reason, Sofia, as a

middle-class woman, changes the direction in which she treats Cleo and becomes a shifter in this scene when she recognizes Cleo's pain.

Everything goes well during the medical visit. As Cleo is leaving, she goes down to the third floor of the hospital to see the newborns when, suddenly, an earthquake strikes. This scene is particularly crucial because it foreshadows the future of Cleo's baby. While Cleo is looking at the newborns, the earthquake hits and a small piece of ceiling material falls on top of a premature baby's incubator. The nurses panic and one can hear the babies crying. At the end of the scene, just as the ceiling material falls on top of the incubator, the camera does a closeup on the baby. The scene concludes in a rather ambiguous form because it is unknown if the baby survives. However, this scene is symbolic for one particular reason: the piece of ceiling that falls and injures the baby in the incubator represents the same emotional injury that Fermín will give to Cleo when she encounters him later[1] in the Corpus Christi massacre, provoking her preterm labor and, eventually, her baby's death.

After visiting the doctor, Cleo searches for Fermín in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Mexico City, but she finds him with a large group of young people training kendo martial arts. Amelie Hastie reveals that Cleo finds Fermín "at a training camp where hordes of men train in martial arts at the base of a hill inscribed with the initials of the current president: LEA" (58). Therefore, LEA refers to the president Luis Echeverría Álvarez and to the relationship that Fermín has with the Halcones. As mentioned before, the martial arts practiced by these young people were the same martial arts used to attack the students during the Corpus Christi massacre scene. In this same scene, the violence initiated during the demonstrations between the students and the Halcones begins right when Cleo is looking for cribs at the furniture store. Suddenly, Fermín enters the store with a gun and meets Cleo; he looks at her, takes aim, and upon recognizing her, slowly walks away with his gun still pointed at her. When he walks away, Cleo looks down and finds the floor wet because the fear incited by the confrontation of the Halcones makes her water break. At the hospital, despite all of the doctors' attempts, the baby does not survive, thus fulfilling the anticipated omen.

The Halconazo and Cleo's personal life, including her pregnancy, are intertwined, and they represent the future of domestic workers and what Mexican society has to offer. Citing Carla Marcantonio, the scene where Fermín and Cleo meet during the Halconazo "is significant because it clearly fuses the personal with the political and demonstrates their inextricability" (40). The oppression from the Halcones and the government in hopes of silencing the voice of the people and, above all, the students, becomes the same way that many families oppress their employees. Their future of creating a family is almost impossible with the life they have as domestic workers. It is important to note that this type of oppression dates back many centuries. Sergio de la Mora explains, "The structure of domestic work is a legacy of the caste system of New Spain (the colonial term for what is now Mexico), which encoded a system of racial classification tied to social status, whereby Indigenous people were obliged to work for criollos and mestizos for no compensation other than room and board" (47). Nonetheless, beyond the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker, the emotional pain that Cleo experiences represents the pain that society has inflicted on domestic workers. Marcantonio reveals a relationship between the personal sphere and the political sphere in Cleo's life. In other words, Fermin's abandonment after Cleo conveys her pregnancy and the Halconazo are strongly related. Marcantonio explains that "absent and violent patriarchs are to blame for the disintegration of the nuclear family, while failed and violent patriarchal institutions are responsible for the massacre of a nation's young citizens" (40). The entire country suffers due to the political conflicts. Nevertheless, those who are excluded, the least privileged, such as domestic workers, are the most affected in these types of conflicts. The film voices a crucial message during the scene when Cleo's baby dies. On one hand, the death of Cleo's baby represents the losses of these women whose lives, in one way or another, were affected by violent historical events. On the other hand, Cleo's baby represents the voice of Mexico's youth and their future, and the baby's passing poses the question on whether there is a future for the young leaders. Perhaps Mexico has no future if this type of violence persists. Deborah Shaw declares the oppression of domestic workers and states:

> *Roma* is the result of Cuarón's acknowledgement that the lives that he and other middle-class Mexicans enjoy are built on the exploitation of poor indigenous or mestiza women. Oppression is naturalised by oppressors, and the labour of domestic servants is rendered invisible by those who believe that Mexico's indigenous and mestizo class exist to serve them. *Roma* denaturalises this system and presents an anatomy of power relations between domestic workers and their employer-families. (Shaw)

In Cleo's case, if this type of treatment persists with her employer's family, with Fermín, who abandons her, or with the same society who incites violence and fear during the Halconazo, she will not obtain the same type of freedom and opportunities as the rest of the society. Thus, the violence that sparks in 1971 provokes a large sense of instability for Cleo, the domestic employee who is affected more than the family who employs her. Fortunately, because of this instability, Sofia manages to feel a bit of compassion for Cleo's pain, shifting away from the urban numbness and supporting her during several moments in the film.

The subject of domestic employees is a recurring topic in Mexico. The exclusion and the privileges allow for classism to occur, which is evidenced in many cities in Mexico, and, as a result, impedes the ability to recognize the needs of the domestic worker. This matter, as it is contemplated in Roma, provokes emotional instability among the domestic workers such as Cleo. Years after the Corpus Christi massacre, Elena Poniatowska published her work De noche vienes (1979). One of her short stories titled "Esperanza número equivocado" returns the domestic worker to her typical normalcy where her everyday life becomes, once again, a paternalistic or maternalistic relationship with her employer and where aggression arises once again.

Poniatowska begins her short story: "Esperanza siempre abre el periódico en la sección de sociales y se pone a ver las novias" (507) [Esperanza always turns to the section on social events in the newspaper and peruses the brides]. Esperanza, the family's maid, transforms the wedding and bride's section into part of her daily routine. As Esperanza reads through the newspaper, she talks to Diana, her employer's daughter, who asks why Esperanza never got married. The answer is quite simple—she is a domestic worker, and, if we delve into the situation, we can identify various reasons established in the system that hinder this group of women from advancing in their employment. For example, if they become a maid at a young age, it is likely they will remain that for most of their life due to the limited opportunities that this sector has to offer. One of the most obvious explanations behind this occurs because the employee spends the majority of her time inside her employer's house, obligated to fulfill her job responsibilities, coinciding with what can be observed in *Roma*. For this reason, this type of employment becomes overwhelming and detrimental to their mental and emotional health.

Another reason, less evident, is founded in the classism that creates a division between the men that domestic workers could potentially marry. Esperanza tells Diana that she had several boyfriends, but she stayed single and could never marry. She explains, "—uno era decente, un señor ingeniero, fíjese usted. Nos sentábamos el uno al lado del otro en una banca del parque y a mí me daba vergüenza decirle que era criada y me quedé silencia" (508) [—one was polite, an engineer, you see. We sat next to each other on a bench at the park and I would get embarrassed telling him that I was a maid, so I remained silent]. As a result, Esperanza expresses the embarrassment that is placed on these women who work as maids, simply because of their employment, as if it was an indecent job that should be hidden for fear of judgment.

Society has transformed the way domestic workers are viewed in such a way that maids feel embarrassed about the labor that contributes day after day to privileged families. During a typical day, families expect their maid to complete various duties, from cleaning their rooms to picking up the family's children from school. We do not realize, however,

that through this daily life a naturalization is established toward the maid's work so that her work commitment is seen as a completely normal activity without considering the exploitation and lack of labor rights. This is the everyday nature, or rather, *la vida cotidiana*, that Rossana Reguillo explains, where the daily life is converted into a space that becomes a transforming stage for social normalization (2). This type of normalization excludes the rights of domestic workers. In Esperanza's case, her job as a domestic worker and the naturalization of converting her job into something that provokes embarrassment forces her to lie about her job whenever she dates a man.

Esperanza's desire to find a husband is reflected in the peculiar way she answers the phone and the way she dials random numbers hoping she will find a husband. She meets an engineer, for example, through a long phone conversation when he calls the wrong number, which happens to be the residence where Esperanza works. Esperanza's typical answers to men who mistakenly call her work residence include, "—No señor, está usted equivocado. Esta no es la familia que usted busca, pero ojalá y fuera [. . .] No, es una casa particular pero qué fortuna…." (508) [No, sir, you are mistaken. This is not the family that you are looking for, but how I wish this were true [. . .] No, this is a private home, but how lucky I am….]. The author, thus, extrapolates the title's name with the maid's name and its double function—Esperanza's persistence in finding a husband through the calls she receives and the random calls she makes at her job is not a coincidence. Sometimes she will get frustrated with a few, but after some time, "allí está nuevamente en servicio dándole vuelta al disco, metiendo el dedo en todos los números, componiendo cifras al azar a ver si de pronto alguien le contesta y le dice como Pedro Infante: '¿Quiere usted casarse conmigo?'" (508) [there she is again turning the numbers on the rotary dial, putting her fingers on all the numbers, making up random figures to see if someone answers her call and asks her like Pedro Infante: Would you like to marry me?]. Her hopes persist and she finds a creative dialogue to interact with the men who call the residence where she works. Nonetheless, Sunday is her only day off and, as a result, this is the only day that she can go out. While she is out, she describes the people she sees as "aquella gente que tiene su casa y su ir y venir" (508) [those people who have their home and their coming and going]. In other words, property belongs to "them," people like Esperanza's employer, but not to "them" as in people like Esperanza. The houses, the lives, the liberty, and, above all, the attempt to appropriate the agency of the domestic workers is linked to the employers, the privileged, but it is not linked to the employees themselves.

To further illustrate this idea, the short story explains that "durante treinta años, los mejores de su vida, Esperanza ha trabajado de recamarera [. . .] Ahora ya de grande y como le dicen tanto que es de la familia, se ha endurecido" (508) [for thirty years, the best years of her life, Esperanza has worked as a housekeeper [. . .] Now, much older and being told that she is part of the family, she has hardened]. Thirty years working Monday through Saturday for a privileged family limits Esperanza's ability to go out and socialize—so much so that she is chained to the family she works for, and domestic work becomes her life.

At the end of the short story, the name Esperanza, which means hope in Spanish, represents a play on words because Esperanza is hopeless in finding a husband; this is why toward the end, she responds badly to a man who mistakenly calls the residence where she works. She replies, "No señor, no, yo no soy Isabel Sánchez, y por favor, se me va a ir usted mucho a la chingada" (508) [No, sir, no, I am not Isabel Sánchez, and please, go to hell]. This short story reveals the routinization that has been naturalized throughout the thirty years working for the same family. Her free time is limited, and she is poorly paid and overworked; however, all of this is acceptable to society, so much so that the domestic workers' situation develops into an urban numbness. This is the reality for domestic workers in Mexican society that has been going on for decades.

Unlike the obedient Esperanza who comes to accept her reality as a domestic worker for a wealthy family, Andres Clariond's *Hilda* presents the power dynamics that continue to harass domestic workers. However, in the case of *Hilda*, the audience is presen-

ted with a rebellious domestic worker whose emotions make it clear that she despises her work. The film portrays a wealthy Mexican woman and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. LeMarchand living in Mexico City. Their son will soon return to Mexico with his wife and baby son. As a result, Mrs. LeMarchand goes searching for a nanny that could potentially take care of her grandson. During the first minutes of the film, classism becomes evident as she boasts about her husband's French ancestry to Indigenous women who come to interview for the job. After failing to find an appropriate nanny for her grandson, she asks her former gardener if his wife, Hilda, would be interested in the job. Uncertain about the position but willing to try, he convinces his wife.

Mrs. LeMarchand's condescending beliefs about domestic workers are apparent when she tells her husband about Hilda and says, "la muchacha va a ser de ellos," [the girl is going to be theirs], implying that the maid will belong to her son and daughter-in-law. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that in Spanish the term *muchacha* translates to young girl or teenager, but it is potentially offensive and condescending when referring to a maid or a cleaner. Far worse, Mrs. LeMarchand goes on and tells her husband "se la pueden llevar" [they can take her], referring to the fact that her son and daughter-in-law can eventually take Hilda with them, as if Hilda did not have a family of her own, and thus eliminating her agency.

Hilda catches on to Mrs. LeMarchand's condescending mentality and is immediately irritated. Hilda begins replying with short answers to Mrs. LeMarchand's questions, and even when she tries to engage in a conversation with Hilda, Hilda refuses. It is important to note that Hilda is originally hired to take care of the grandson, but she ends up completing various other chores that convert her into a domestic worker for Mrs. LeMarchand. For this reason, Paul Julian Smith explains that "Power relations are exacerbated or highlighted in this exquisitely formal domestic space (the house is recognized as an architectural landmark), which is by no means a site of solidarity between women of different classes but rather one that brutally enforces further inequality" (170). Moreover, Mrs. LeMarchand begins to treat Hilda as her possession. She forces her to work weekends without letting her go to her family or take days off. She makes Hilda spend time with her, as if they are friends, while drinking wine and eating caviar and foie gras, sleeping in the same bed, and even forcing her to dress in identical traditional Mexican dresses, pretending they are Fridas.[3] Mrs. LeMarchand seems to be seeking a friend, but as Smith proposes, "This is clearly a strategy of dominance that allows the mistresses to feel morally superior through their generosity while the maids are infantilized: the mistress will even cut and color her maid's flowing black hair in an attempt to match her own" (170). In a later scene, both women pose in front of a mirror wearing a huipil, an embroidered blouse, that Mrs. LeMarchand has selected for both to wear and says, "las dos Fridas" [the two Fridas].

Smith's point about the feeling of moral superiority is evident as Mrs. LeMarchand attempts to befriend Hilda while exploiting her as her employee. Ironically, Mrs. LeMarchand's past reveals that she was an active student in the protest of Tlatelolco. Nonetheless, it seems as though her yearning for social activism, as it was during college, is far gone. One day, as Hilda is cleaning the house, she finds a box with several items from Mrs. LeMarchand's past, including a book by Karl Marx. Hilda returns the box to Mrs. LeMarchand for inspection and Mrs. LeMarchand looks at it with great interest and even begins perusing the book. From this moment on, she delves into Marxist theories and invites college students to interview her about the Tlatelolco massacre. However, to her surprise, these college students quickly realize Mrs. LeMarchand's incongruent life—a woman who sought social justice during her college years but now lives an extravagant life completely detached from contemporary social justice. In other words, she idealizes Marx, social justice, and political activism, but exploits her maid Hilda at home, thus contradicting her words with her actions. Hilda, too, quickly recognizes Mrs. LeMarchand's hypocrisy given that she continues to manipulate her own maid, banning her from seeing her husband and children for weeks, while lecturing her on Marxist theories.

Hilda manages to escape this inferno with the help of various college students who protest outside Mrs. LeMarchand's home and Hilda's husband who desperately goes on looking for her. In an attempt to

voice their concerns to Mr. LeMarchand's business affiliates during a dinner party, the college students protest outside and eventually enter the LeMarchand residence along with Hilda's husband, who happens to join in during the chaos. However, not all maids are as fortunate as Hilda—rescued and set free from exploitative employers. Many are trapped in a spiral of abuse, especially if they come from a rural or Indigenous background. As a result, the classism that governs many upper- and middle-class families who employ maids is the catalyst that produces urban numbness toward them in Mexican society. The lack of empathy generates oppressive work conditions that persist throughout history, and, just like Cleo in *Roma*, maids become some of the most affected individuals in society.

Decades after *De Noche Vienes* was published and a few years after *Hilda* was released, both portraying how the life of a domestic worker is naturalized, the WHO declared a global pandemic in March 2020. In Mexico City, the virus generated great concern among female employees who had to choose between their job or their family. According to an article published by AP in the *Los Angeles Times (LAT)* about domestic workers in Mexico City, some employers have required their employees to continue working, many times putting more work on them and preventing them from visiting their own families. One employee stated, according to *LAT*, "Hoy me sentí muy mal y pedí permiso para ir al hospital, [. . .] Mi patrón me dijo que no podía salir. Pero ellos sí tienen visitas" [Today I felt very bad and I asked for permission to go to the hospital, [. . .] My boss told me that I could not leave, but they do have visitors at home]. The harsh reality allows us to see the lack of empathy of employers toward their domestic workers who also have families to care for and support. Having a maid in the house has become very common among families in Mexico City, *LAT* indicates, even lower-middle class families hire a maid either to clean the house or to take care of their children. The *Los Angeles Times* notes that domestic workers earn low incomes despite the long hours, some receiving as little as $4 per day.

The employer-employee relationship between domestic workers and their employers generates economic instability for domestic workers' families in a time of crisis. Interviewed for the *LAT* article, an employee who works in Mexico City explains that she is a single mother with two children to care for. However, given the global pandemic with COVID-19, the family who employed her for seven years fired her in March 2020. Worried, she says, "Me pagaron la última semana de trabajo y ahora no tengo recursos para las necesidades más básicas de mis dos hijos pequeños. El salario que percibía solo me alcanzaba para vivir al día" [They paid me the last week of work and now I don't have the means for the most basic needs for my two young children. The salary I received was only enough to live day by day]. Given the situation with unemployment and the spread of COVID-19, she feels trapped in this dilemma because, as *LAT* points out, there was never an employment contract or some type of structured compensation with benefits such as health insurance.

Another domestic worker shares that her employers and their family left their home as soon as the stay-at-home order began in Mexico City. As a result, they do not answer the domestic worker's calls that she has made to inquire about her payment. Uncertain, she says, "No sé si regresen en cuanto termine la cuarentena, [. . .] Lo que sí sé es que me quedé sin ingresos, soy madre soltera, pago renta y por el momento estoy haciendo gelatinas y salsas para vender a mis vecinos. Pero no he tenido mucho éxito porque muchos se fueron a sus pueblos" [I am not sure if they will return when quarantine is over, [. . .] What I do know is that I am left without an income, I am a single mother, I pay rent, and for the time being, I am making Jell-O and salsas to sell to my neighbors. But I have not had much luck because many of them went back to their hometowns]. These shocking anecdotes remind us of stories in the literary and film productions that have been studied in this work, since Cuarón, Clariond, and Poniatowska project, through their characters, the lack of awareness and concern toward domestic workers.

Laura Gómez Flores and Bertha Teresa Ramírez from the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* announced on March 31, 2020, that it is the duty of employers to pay domestic workers despite the stay-at-home order

and the pandemic. According to this source, the Human Rights Commission (Comisión de Derechos Humanos, CDH) in Mexico City and the Department of Labor (Secretaría de Trabajo y Fomento al Empleo, STFE) reminded those who use domestic services about the importance to continue a punctual and complete salary during the pandemic due to COVID-19. Additionally, the STFE added that employers cover the wages of domestic workers despite the current social distancing and stay-at-home order, even when they do not go to work. Regarding the state of uncertainty, STFE also took the opportunity to provide free assistance and guidance to workers in the domestic sector and grant labor rights. Nonetheless, despite all of this support, STFE has not been clear about what would proceed if, for example, employers got COVID-19 and were unable to pay their domestic workers.

Nevertheless, on May 11, 2020, Jessica Xantomila from *La Jornada* published news about the petition from the Center for Support and Training for Household Employees (Centro de Apoyo y Capacitación para Empleadas de Hogar, CACEH) to the federal and state authorities to establish some type of unemployment insurance for domestic workers. Xantomila cites Marcelina Bautista, director of CACEH, who announced that they had received more than 200 complaints from workers claiming labor rights abuse. According to Bautista, between 50 and 60 percent were fired, had a salary cut, or were sent home without pay. The conditions during the global pandemic evidently caused an imbalance in the economy of domestic workers. Despite the pandemic, it is important to note that the domestic worker has been a victim of workplace abuse for decades—even traced back to servants who were also abused during colonial times. The lack of support provided to this labor sector is once again underscored during the crisis. Bautista indicates that the global pandemic puts us back in social inequality, as it is seen with domestic workers: "Simplemente no hay mucha consciencia de parte de los empleadores para que apoyen a las trabajadoras que tanto les han cuidado, que están cuando se enferman, cuando están solos, cuando necesitan comida, apoyo para su familia, pero hoy las abandonan" [There is simply not much awareness from the employers to support their workers who have cared so much for them, who are there when they get sick, when they are alone, when they need food, support for their family, but, today, they abandon them].

The social normalization of the abusive treatment of domestic workers is visible decade after decade, not only during the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, it is clear that historical events have a great impact on these women, so that normalization is interrupted and understanding for the others' suffering is welcomed. In *Roma*, Cleo's life is completely naturalized by society and her employer, among them, Sofia. The Corpus Christi massacre that occurred on Thursday, June 10, 1971, however, turns the story around to give Sofia an alternative sensibility that denaturalizes the way she relates to, and treats, Cleo. For example, Sofia comes to understand Cleo's pain and suffering during her pregnancy, and she helps her during the process. In one scene at the beach, one of Sofia's children almost drowns, but Cleo manages to save him. Alarmed by her son nearly drowning, Sofia is thankful to have everyone safe and she hugs all of her children, including Cleo. This poignant scene elicits an empathic energy that seeks to ease the pain of others. It is then when Sofia manages to offer a new meaning (resignify) to the everyday nature of domestic workers that in the past was naturalized and conducive to abusive or exploitative treatment. Nonetheless, even though Sofia suggests a slight empathetic change toward Cleo, it is important to note that such attitude is rather brief and her behavior at the end of the film returns to adopt an urban numbness toward domestic workers.

Decades later, it is evident that the domestic worker's situation is once again naturalized while reading "Esperanza número equivocado" or while watching *Hilda*. The everyday nature of a privileged family is quite established in Mexican society. To Esperanza's employers, her routine as a domestic worker and her lack of freedom are natural—so much so that Esperanza eventually loses hope of finding a husband, and she realizes that her situation will not change. To this day, this type of urban numbness is

present in Mexican society. Countless events have occurred over the last forty years in Mexico that could have given the employers the ability to embrace the pain of the employee—to offer a new meaning to their domestic employee's life, like the college students who protested in front of Mrs. LeMarchand's home and liberated Hilda. Nonetheless, many employers naturalize their domestic workers' lack of freedom, like Esperanza's case, while other employers offer a brief sense of care, like Sofia did with Cleo, but they adopt an urban numbness in the end.

Society has not offered a new meaning to the relationship and the labor of a domestic worker. Had employers challenged the status quo of employee-employer relationships, the increase in cases and complaints from domestic workers concerned about their work would not have been so evident during the global pandemic in 2020. One employee explains in the *Los Angeles Times*, "En México, y en todo el mundo, no hay una sola pandemia, hay dos: el COVID-19 y la desigualdad. Esa desigualdad que hoy me tiene más aislada que nunca" [In Mexico, and throughout the world, there is not one single pandemic, there are two: COVID-19 and inequality. The inequality that, today, has me more isolated than ever]. Today's reality reveals similar issues that are represented in literature and cinema. The oppression toward these workers persists in a spiral manner: stable and naturalized the majority of the time, but malleable in the face of any sociopolitical situation. Although these sociopolitical issues affect the entire Mexican society, even the most privileged citizens, the issues tend to harm domestic workers even more, provoking endless instability.

Notes

[1] In Spanish, known as La matanza del jueves de Corpus.
[2] All translations are my own.
[3] The term Fridas alludes to Frida Kahlo's famous painting "The Two Fridas." The painting shows a double self-portrait of Kahlo.

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