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Different Shades of Domesticity: Representations of Intersecting Power
Relations in Latin American Literary and Visual Culture

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Spanish

by

Raquel Román-Morfín

Dissertation Committee:
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2015

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DEDICATION

Para ti, mamá.

Tu fuerza de voluntad y valor para seguir adelante
siempre han sido mi inspiración.

Te doy las gracias por ser, a la vez, mamá y amiga
y por ser una persona tan admirable.

Eres la persona más fuerte que he conocido.

¡Te amo!

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Different Shades of Domesticity: Representations of Intersecting Power Relations in
Latin American Literary and Visual Culture

By

Raquel Román-Morfin

Doctor of Philosophy in Spanish

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Advisor: Professor Viviane Mahieux, Ph.D.

This dissertation engages in the politics of representation and aims to contribute to the discourse on differences among women in terms of class, race, and other social divides. It also interrogates and challenges the social construction of domestic labor as ‘women’s work.’ As I examine a number of Latin American literary, testimonial, photographic, and cinematic representations of mistress and servant relationships, I draw on an intersectional approach, as well as a postcolonial feminist framework. I suggest that through various representational strategies, these texts grant visibility to domestic laborers while also presenting interesting ways to unsettle, destabilize, and subvert hegemonic cultural values and norms.

In chapter one, I analyze Rosario Castellanos’ journalism with specific emphasis on her autobiographical essays written in 1973, where she chronicles her personal experience with domestic workers. In chapter two, I focus on Ana Gutierrez’s ethnographic project, titled Se necesita muchacha (1983), which

includes her introduction, the testimony of twenty-three indigenous domestic workers from Peru, and a lengthy 79-page prologue by Elena Poniatowska, titled “Presentación al lector mexicano.” In chapter three, I examine Daniela Rossell’s *Ricas y famosas* (2002) as an artist’s book that, while showcasing wealthy women as the title suggests, also strategically places at least 41 domestic workers in various photographs. Lastly, in chapter four, I analyze Sebastián Silva’s *La Nana* (2009) as a film that explores the ambiguous, uncertain, and marginal terrain of mothering in which nannies are often located.

INTRODUCTION

“It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting”

-Simone de Beauvoir¹
“The Ethics of Ambiguity”

There are many assumptions concerning women and the domestic sphere. While some women may break free from the strictures of domesticity to pursue political, professional or artistic careers, or simply to enjoy leisure, the tasks of housekeeping, cooking, and child-rearing are largely considered “women’s work.” Yet, there is no biological basis from which to determine domesticity as gendered—domesticity is socially constructed. Nevertheless, as women strive to participate in public arenas, they are confronted with a firm contradiction: the sexual division of labor in the domestic sphere remains invisible, leaving many women with limited options. Among these, one can include the experience of ‘double-duty’ or the choice of sharing and/ or relegating domestic duties to other women.

This dissertation engages in the politics of representation and aims to contribute to the discourse on differences among women. It also interrogates and challenges the social construction of domestic labor as ‘women’s work.’ As a broad range of scholars have noted, without consideration for differences among women in

¹ Qtd in Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Mater’s House,” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983. Print.

terms of class, race, age and other social divides, a push for women's liberation and freedom becomes a narrow agenda addressing the needs and desires of dominant hegemonic groups.²

As a departure from this analytical trap, many feminists turn to examine women's multiple intersecting subject positions. Catherine Orr suggests that this change in feminist perspective materialized in the United States during the 1980s and 90s, as ethnically diverse women began to challenge prevailing feminist discourse. The advent of this discourse is often catalogued as part of a 'third wave' feminist movement:

[T]he contradictory character of the third wave emerged not from the generational divides between second wavers and their daughters, but from critiques by Cherríe Morraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston and many other feminist of color who called for a "new subjectivity" in what was, up to that point, white, middle-class, first world feminism (37).

Prior to this paradigm shift, many second wave feminists in the U.S. adhered to homogenous notions of 'women' as a cohesive group with coherent needs.³ Such ideas often resulted in discursive practices that led to concepts of 'sisterhood' and 'women's shared oppression'—universalizing principles of analysis objectifying

² For instance, in the essay "The Personal is Not Political Enough," *Marxist Perspectives* (Winter 1979-1980) pp. 94-113, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese discusses the limitations of discursive practices that lead to concepts of "women's shared oppression," arguing that this framework can perpetuate a bourgeoisie focus by excluding, ignoring or de-emphasizing the experiences of lower working-class women or women of color.

³ In "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies*. (Summer 2002) pp. 336-360, Becky Thompson warns against what she determines as 'normative accounts' of second wave feminism. She further notes that a complex understanding of second wave history would take a multiracial feminist vantage point. As such, it "would emphasize that second wave feminism drew on the civil rights movement, the New Left, and the Black Power movement which, together, helped to produce three groups of 'radical' women" (346).

women into categories of powerlessness in relation to men. As Katie Roiphe suggests, such essentialist notions of women's subordination, fragility and weakness can be described as infantilization (65-69).

These universalizing concepts of womanhood were ultimately disrupted by a new feminist consciousness that developed into an ethics of the Other. As Margrit Shildrick notes⁴, "the figure of 'woman' to whom the second wave directed its attention takes her place as just one marker among a multiplicity of significant differences" (69). Shildrick maintains that this new theoretical framework allowed feminist projects to increase attention to global concerns, non-normative sexualities, the discourses of race and ethnicity, postcolonialism, and the cultural imaginary.

This tendency enhanced feminism both politically and ethically (Shildrick 70). As a result, issues concerning sex and gender do not merge into the background. Rather, recognition exists that "they are fully imbricated with all other quasi-structural and discursive inequalities that are at work in our lives" (Shildrick 71).

Several feminist scholars attend to the social construction of difference through an intersectional approach.⁵ As Bonnie Thornton Dill describes, "politically we must fight the segmentation of oppression into categories such as 'racial issues,'

⁴ Margrit Shildrick "Introduction: Sex and Gender," *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. Ed. Gillis, Stacy, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

⁵ See Berger, Michele T, and Kathleen Guidroz. *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class, and Gender*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Print.

‘feminist issues,’ and ‘class issues’ ” (41). A focus on intersectionality highlights the ways multiple social divisions are connected with each other. As Nira Yuval-Davis affirms, central to this new perspective is an understanding of an interlocking grid of differing positionings. They are dynamic, shifting, and multifaceted constructions of categories that arise in specific historic, cultural, and economic contexts. Likewise, she notes⁶:

What is important is to analyze how specific positionings and (not necessarily corresponding) identities and political values are constructed and interrelate and affect each other in particular locations and contexts. Similarly important would be an examination of the particular ways in which the different divisions are intermeshed. One cannot assume the same effect or constellation each time and, hence, the investigation of the specific, political, and economic process involved in each historical instance is important (52).

Attention to specificity in the manner described by Yuval-Davis stands in contention with additive models of identity politics, which homogenize and, therefore, essentialize identity categories. This creates a correspondence between positionings and social groupings (54). Still, the analysis of specific social positionings is insufficient. Politically, it is crucial to examine the relations of power that are deployed, maintained, and reinforced through “multiple axes of inequality” (Berger & Guidroz 1). These developments in feminist theory, which partially evolved from poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches, have inhabited the discursive space of cultural studies in which issues of representation and questions of cultural domination, resistance, and subversion are central concerns.

⁶ Ibid.

This terrain of knowledge and push for feminist politics is also significant in the discipline of postcolonial feminism. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park note⁷:

Postcolonial feminism cannot be regarded simply as a subset of postcolonial studies, or, alternatively, as another variety of feminism. Rather it is an intervention that is changing the configurations of both postcolonial and feminist studies. Postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights (53).

Thus, postcolonial feminism emerges as an endeavor to understand colonialism (and its legacy) and neocolonialism, thereby revealing the effects of colonization in decolonized countries. As Ato Quayson describes⁸, "The term [postcolonialism] is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism" (94). In addition, postcolonial feminists stress the relevance of the colonial past in relation to the present lives of women from these regions. Indeed, alongside the effort to uncover and contest global power relations (whether economic, political, military, or cultural-hegemonic), there has been a rise in interest for the international division of labor. This has been a concern that illustrates links between First and Third World locations, and exposes sites of exploitation such as in-home based labor (Rajan & Park 58-59).

⁷ See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

⁸ Ibid.

Interestingly, whether or not explicitly identifying themselves as postcolonialists, the issue of paid and unpaid domestic labor has been touched upon by numerous feminist scholars such as, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Nira Yuval-Davis. For instance, in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” (1979) Audre Lorde contends with a feminist leaning that is exclusionary, and therefore inefficient. As she states, “What do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor and third world women?” (100).

In “Rethinking the Nature of Work⁹,” bell hooks discusses the stigma of housework, noting that concerns regarding this type of labor transcend wages. Specifically, she contends: “Were women to receive wages for housework, it is unlikely that it would ever cease to be designated ‘woman’s work,’ and it is unlikely that it would be regarded as valuable labor” (104).¹⁰

Moreover, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay “Under Western Eyes” (1988) raises a feminist perspective instrumental to the deconstruction of essentialist notions of womanhood by challenging the production of the “Third World Woman” as a singular monolithic subject in various (western) feminist texts (196). This discursive process, she notes, “[...] colonizes the constitutive complexities which

⁹ This essay can be found in bell hooks’ Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (1984). London: Routledge, 2015.

¹⁰ bell hooks also cites further studies concerning domestic labor, including Ann Oakley’s *The Sociology of Housework* (1975), Rae André’s *Homemakers: The Forgotten Workers* (1981), and the anthology *The Politics of Housework* (1980), edited by Ellen Malos, which I will discuss in chapter four.

characterize the lives of women in these countries” (198). She further argues that the analytical strategies employed by many Western feminists—including third world scholars writing about their own cultures—often assumed middle-class culture as the norm, while codifying peasant and working-class histories and cultures as Other. An assumption in this homogenizing process is that, “all third-world women have similar problems and needs. Thus, they must have similar interests and goals. However, the interests of urban, middle-class, educated Egyptian housewives, to take only one instance, could surely not be seen as being the same as those of their uneducated, poor maids” (206).

Yuval-Davis expresses a similar reasoning in Gender and Nation (1997), criticizing many feminist perspectives that obscure class difference in a Third World context. Hidden and rarely discussed, she affirms, is the more common use of domestic servants in the homes of Third World women than western feminists. Yet, Yuval-Davis quickly adds that there is a growing tendency for Western middle-class professionals to hire au pairs, nannies, and housekeepers who often originate from subjugated ethnic and migrant collectivities (120).

Despite the observations made by these and other theorists, there has been limited critical attention on the discursive and/or visual representation of maids in the fields of Latin American literary or visual studies. As such, I situate this dissertation on the interface of the aforementioned fields, in order to enrich a contemporary discussion on the politics of representation affecting women in the domestic service industry. In the following chapters, I analyze a selection of literary,

testimonial, photographic, and cinematic texts that explore the power dynamics informing mistress and servant relationships. Although my focus is limited to a Latin American socio-historical context (specifically that of Mexico, Peru, and Chile), my interests here are similar to the outlooks proposed by bell hooks. Indeed, bell hooks points to the tendency among white middle-class feminists to universalize their experiences, effectively erasing the experience of most women; yet, her observations appear to be as applicable to Latin America as they are to North America¹¹:

When white women's liberation emphasized work as a path to liberation, they did not concentrate their attention on those women who are most exploited in the American labor force. Had they emphasized the plight of working class women, attention would have shifted away from the college-educated suburban housewife who wanted entrance into the middle and upper class work force. Had attention focused on women who were already working and exploited as cheap surplus labor in American society, it would have de-romanticized the middle class white woman's quest for "meaningful" employment. While it does not in any way diminish the importance of women resisting sexist oppression by entering the labor force, work has not been a liberating force for masses of American women (146).

As previously noted, domestic service has been an institution long adopted in many Latin-American households, making it a significant part of contemporary social experience. In this study, I suggest that while the selected textual representations make private life public, they do more than reveal the relations of power—they present several ways to interrogate and challenge the social norms that reinforce the construction of alterity. Central to this investigation, then, is a focus on the ways these texts grant visibility to domestic servants, or reframe,

¹¹ *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press, 2000. Print.

interrogate, and challenge existing belief systems and thought structures that socially sanction the exploitation of maids.

Feminisms in Latin America

While speaking of, and attending to, a Latin American context as the present dissertation does, it is critical to note that feminist movements in Latin America and the Caribbean do not simply mimic western agendas. Over the last three decades, feminist tendencies in these regions have grown in significantly new dimensions, opening numerous debates concerning the differences characterizing the lives of Latin American women. Virginia Vargas, a Peruvian feminist theorist, traces the various lines of concern and action that have stemmed from a series of Feminist *Encuentros*, or Encounters, that initiated in Bogotá, Colombia in 1981. These Encounters were in response to the United Nations declaring 1975-85 the Decade of the Woman. Although there is a broad range of complex political struggles and cultural specificities in Latin America, these biannual, and at times, triennial meetings have been viewed by some scholars as “historical markers, highlighting the key strategic, organizational, and theoretical debates that have characterized the political trajectory of contemporary Latin American feminisms” (Sternbach 395).¹² To date, there have been thirteen Encounters, with the most recent taking place in Lima, Peru.

¹² The essay “Feminisms in Latin America: From Bogotá to San Bernardo,” can be found in *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*. Eds. Arturo Escobar & Sonia E. Alvarez. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992. pp. 207–39.

Although an in-depth investigation of the details and significance of each of these meetings will not be undertaken here,¹³ it is important to note some of the ways the debate concerning inclusionary and exclusionary practices in feminism unfurled within a Latin American context. For Vargas, the various women's social movements in these countries cannot be understood as currents with exclusive dynamics, for they intersect, permanently speaking to and contradicting one another (212). Vargas suggests that the scope and limitations of the feminist movement in Latin America were made visible and crystallized in the spaces of these feminist Encounters (196).

The first initial gathering, she informs, created a wide and generous recognition of 'sisterhood' (203). It also prompted a desire for autonomy that developed as a confrontation between feminists and women from political parties, leading to a tension surrounding the question of whether class or gender was the ultimate cause of women's subordination (205). She notes that with each passing Encounter, there was a greater desire to shed light on women's difference—an appeal that brought new arguments for interpreting women's lives and the movement (205). As Sonia E. Alvarez informs, these later meetings would question feminism's commitment to inclusion—that is, to a broad based feminist movement, especially along the lines of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality (11).

By the Third Encounter in Bertioga, Brazil (1985), organizers secured numerous scholarships to enable working-class women to attend and participate.

¹³ For more on these *Encuentros* also see Sonia E. Alvarez, et al. "Encountering Latin American and Caribbean feminisms." *Revista Estudos Feministas*. 2003, vol.11, n.2, pp. 541-575.

However, the difficulty in creating equal access for all women interested in participating remained unresolved. In fact, it appeared even more salient that year as a group of women from a Rio de Janeiro *favela* (shantytown) asked to take part in the feminist dialogue despite their inability to pay the registration fee (Alvarez 11).

By contrast, the Fourth Encounter held in Taxco, Guerrero, Mexico (1987) increased the inclusion of non-white, working-class women in these feminist meetings. However, it also brought to fore the tension many long-standing feminists felt towards the mass attendance of women new to feminism. As Alvarez details, “many expressed impatience at rehearsing the ‘basics’ when they wished to further feminist debate” (12). Given these and other numerous tensions and conflicts, the political contours of these Encounters continue to adjust in response to issues specifically confronting the diverse women of Latin American regions. Hence, the evolution of feminism in Latin America involves growing debates on women’s difference and a changing Latin American political landscape.

Along with an understanding of feminist politics in Latin America, it is also important to situate the texts analyzed in this dissertation within particular historical and political Latin American contexts. The texts studied in chapters one, two, and three, for instance, emphasize a view of mistress and servant relationships in Mexican culture and urban society from the 1970s to the late 1990s. Furthermore, the testimonials in chapter two offer a glimpse into the experiences of a number of rural Peruvian domestic workers in the early 1980s. Chapter four,

which examines Sebastian Silva's film *La Nana* (2009), provides a contemporary lens of domestic relationships within a Chilean context. As I proceed to detail these chapters, I consider numerous social circumstances unique to these regions at each respective time period.

Mexico's Economic Rise and Decline, 1970s-1980s

Cynthia Steele¹⁴ examines the surge of class inequality and exploitation in Mexico brought on by the effects of globalization and neo-liberalist campaigns from the 1970s to the 1990s. For Steele, the central problem stirring social unrest, economic crisis, and frustration within Mexican society hinged on the PRI's monopolization of political power at the national, state, and local levels.

Since the Revolution, the PRI had effectively suppressed all opposition and maintained political hegemony by appealing to a desire for modernization and social justice, while simultaneously pursuing economic policies that exacerbated class differences and made the nation profoundly dependent on the United States (Steele 6). In the 1970s, however, this rhetoric intensified as numerous oil fields were discovered in Mexico, making it one of the largest producers of "black gold" in the world. This moment of economic prosperity enabled the entrance of numerous women writers into the cultural arena, which created a period often referred to as the Feminine Boom. Yet, as was often the case with campaigns for economic

¹⁴ See *Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968-1988: Beyond the Pyramid*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992. Print.

modernization by the PRI, the social and economic benefits of the oil boom were short-lived.

Under José López Portillo's presidency (1976-1982), substantial profits reaped from Mexico's oil industry were funneled into the hands of government officials. By 1981, the oil prices of petroleum descended rapidly, and by 1982, Mexico's economic standing declined. This plunged the nation into a financial crisis that rendered it incapable of paying its foreign debt interest. Thus, by the early 1980s, Mexico faced a stock market crash, high levels of inflation and unemployment, and a major monetary devaluation that plunged the peso from 22 to 70 per dollar with continuing decline (Krauze 760)¹⁵.

The rectification of the nation's financial matters included the dismantling of benefits and subsidies that, for many, represented the fundamental advances and changes brought about by the Revolution of 1910. In addition to lowering the standard of living of many, the crisis also curtailed the limited social mobility opportunities for the vast majority of Mexicans belonging to the lower and middle classes (Steele 7). An onslaught of problems emerged with neoliberal policies, including, but not limited to, worker displacement, emigration trends, drug trafficking, and associated violence.

These effects intensified the harm to individuals inhabiting the periphery, and precipitated a tremendous change in work practices for women. Male migration

¹⁵ For more on Lopez-Portillo's politics see Enrique Krauze's "The Gambler," in his book titled *Mexico, Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico 1810-1996*. Trans. Hank Heifetz. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997. Print.

to the U.S. increased during this period, and women were forced to sustain their families by entering the unstable informal sector or working in low-wage positions. Thus, as Irma M. López¹⁶ points out, though many women in the 1970s were gradually gaining access to a public or political life through their insertion in the literary sphere, the impact of Mexico's economic crisis in the 1980s created widespread social and economic instability. She proceeds by explaining how this prompted many women writers to critical reflection, leading several to bring the contradictions of private life to public attention (35).

It is under this light that chapter one examines Castellanos' journalism with specific emphasis on the autobiographical essays chronicling her experience with domestic workers. As many critics have noted, Castellanos' journalistic writing style calls to mind an improvised, inconsequential conversation. I suggest that this style allows for a friendly, diplomatic register from which to subtly and slyly unearth the power dynamics in mistress and servant relationships in a manner that appears less threatening. Instead of directly challenging or denouncing her readers' habits and customs, Castellanos, I contend, crafts an insidious personal exposé. She stages her own ambivalent sentiments, portraying a tendency to waver between impulses to nurture and exploit her maid in order to provoke further reflection in her audience. It is in this manner of deflection that her texts perform a cunning act of subversion, facilitating a public space from which to destabilize and unsettle prevalent cultural values and norms.

¹⁶ López' essay "The Will to Be: Mexican Woman Novelists From the Late 1960s to the 1990s," can be found in the book titled, *The Boom Femenino in Mexico: Reading Contemporary Women's Writing*. Eds. Nuala Finnegan and Jane E. Lavery. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010. Print.

Chapter two examines Ana Gutierrez's ethnographic project titled *Se necesita muchacha* (1983), which includes her introduction, the testimony of twenty-three indigenous domestic workers from Peru, and a lengthy 79-page prologue by Elena Poniatowska, titled "Presentación al lector mexicano." As I turn to examine the Peruvian worker's testimonies, I find certain relations and dynamics of power that do not fall neatly into an oppositional paradigm of race, class, and gender. For example, there are instances in which women report working in the domestic space of extended family or family friends who are only slightly more financially advantaged—in other words, employers who are not necessarily positioned in a status of privilege.

Therefore, I argue, it is important to recognize the full diversity of women's experience. The boundaries of oppression in women's lives shift, leading to complex dynamics of power relations. It is thus critical to account for this complexity to avoid essentializing gender and race by treating these categories as static, fixed, eternal, and natural. Because race and gender are socially constructed, they arise at specific moments in particular circumstances, and power changes as these circumstances change (Yuval-Davis 55). The understanding of different, but also provisional subject positions, I contend, serves to counter universalizing tendencies that construct monolithic identities.

In this chapter, I also examine Poniatowska's prologue of this project, suggesting that although she attends to the lives of domestic workers, her discourse often favors generalizations that portray these women's experience as universal.

Moreover, while Poniatowska brings to bear issues regarding domestic labor, she also delineates sharp boundaries of racial oppression: non/indigenous or *mestiza* middle-class women exploit indigenous women. Thus, I discuss Elena Poniatowska's approach and tone towards the testimonies of Peruvian domestic workers to explore some of the developments and contributions made by her investigations, while also critiquing some of the problematic ways she tended to interpret and portray these women's lives.

In chapter three, I examine Daniela Rossell's *Ricas y famosas* as an artist's book. In my analysis, the structure of the work—along with the representational strategies that determine the spatial location and poses of wealthy women in relation to domestic workers—reveals a degree of staging that is disconcerting in its exaggeration. It heightens the subjects' bodies as the performance of roles, thus stimulating several questions about housekeeping as an institution. By drawing from a post-colonial feminist perspective, I argue that the work exposes the production of invisibility in the intersection between the 'male' and 'imperial' gaze, demonstrating how each may collude with one another. In addition, I suggest that the work allows for a new reading of the domestic sphere as a Foucauldian 'house of certainty,' in which the subjugation of the other is achieved through panoptic visual mastery. By doing so, the work allows viewers to understand the experience of invisibility as discipline over the body.

Chapter four aims to explore the ambiguous, uncertain terrain of mothering in which nanny's are often located. I analyze Sebastian Silva's *La Nana* (2009) as a film that presents mothering as a practice that is problematized by culture and socio-economic factors. As more women integrate into the public work force, they often choose or are compelled to consign partial motherhood to another woman. In which case, the task of mothering is inevitably challenged, with different aspects of mothering often assigned to different groups of underprivileged women. This brings to light the existence of marginal and largely invisible constructions of mothering that coexist with dominant models of motherhood.

In addition, I analyze the relational dynamics of power in the film in light of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn determines as 'the illusion of the private haven.' Following Glenn's criticism closely, I contend that the film opens a space from which to critique the unchallenged social construction of mothering as 'women's work' by exposing the delegation of reproductive labor to women as a system that benefit and buttress patriarchal structures.

CHAPTER ONE

Relationships of Ambivalence

“Yo andaba como Quetzlcoatl por montes y collados mientras junto a mí alguien se consumía de ignorancia.”

-Rosario Castellanos, “Herlinda se va” (1973)

By 1973, Rosario Castellanos was a prolific journalist writing hundreds of articles on a wide array of social and cultural issues. For more than a decade she published as many as two essays per week,¹ and among these articles she produced a number of autobiographical sketches chronicling her experience with domestic workers. Like many other privileged women, Castellanos relied on the services of maids. As a journalist, however, she had an unusual penchant for the topic. Unlike the vast majority of her colleagues, Castellanos’ writing was self-reflective, meditating on her life as a renowned author, columnist, and diplomat given to a leisured existence.

Several of these essays, published only months before her tragic death, seem to take measure of women’s intersecting social positions. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, for Castellanos the concept of ‘sisterhood’ and women’s ‘shared

¹ Shortly after her death, many of Castellanos’ articles were neglected and obscured. Many can currently be found in several anthologies. However, not all essays initially found their way into these compilations. In 1978, Maureen Ahern’s research recovered approximately ninety articles for her annotated bibliography, *Homenaje a Rosario Castellanos*. Likewise, in 2004, Andrea Reyes published *Mujer de palabras*—a three-volume compilation that inventoried hundreds more that had been neglected. For Reyes, the sheer number of essays rescued from oblivion was nothing short of astonishing. In her introduction, she notes: “Encontré no 100 ensayos no recopilados, sino 338. Si se añaden los 179 publicados en las antologías, su producción total en este género suma por lo menos 517 ensayos.”

oppression' was intuitively a source of bewilderment. Through metaphor, she draws attention to the irony enveloping her life as an intellectual. She calls to mind the peaks and valleys of her successful career while also lamenting, as she says, the "ignorant" state of existence that consumed the maid dwelling beside her. According to Castellanos, she had a close relationship with her maid since childhood. In particular, Castellanos stated the two had been playmates before the woman became her maid, a situation that was often customary between privileged families and indigenous children.

Moreover, as Castellanos reflects upon this circumstance, she seems compelled to ridicule the qualities that served to establish her fame and recognition: her long-standing efforts to uphold justice for indigenous peoples. How could she embody the civilizing Aztec hero "Quetzalcoatl,"² the divine messiah of Nahuatl and Mixtec myths who brought to the earthly world the benefits of civilization, when her domestic habits contradicted any effort to integrate indigenous peoples into national life?

One could say that these concerns placed Castellanos ahead of her time. At this juncture in feminist history, many feminists held fast to homogenous notions of "women" as a cohesive group with coherent needs. Such notions often resulted in discursive practices that determined a priority of issues and needs around which all women were expected to organize. It was a principle of analysis that objectified

² For more on the significance of Quetzalcoatl, see Enrique Florescano's [The Myth of Quetzalcoatl](#). This text provides a comprehensive study on the multiplicity of interpretations that surround the worship of the Plumed Serpent by comparing the Palanque Inscriptions, the Vienna Codex, the Historia de los Mexicanos, the Popul Vuh, and numerous other works. Florescano also consults and reproduces archeological evidence from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, demonstrating how the myth of Quetzalcoatl extends throughout Mesoamerica.

women into a universal category of powerlessness, attributing to them a generalized idea of subordination without regard for cultural and historical specificities or divisions of difference such as class and race. It was often unclear how women could be, and indeed were, often implicated in the formation of systems of oppression. In this respect, Castellanos' writing represents an intriguing change. Given her commitment to push for all forms of human freedom, she begins to question the dynamics of power in these mistress/ servant relationships in an unprecedented fashion.

To be clear, an interest in servants as characters in fiction is not, in itself, an innovative concern. Juan José Sebreli briefly traces some of the varying representations of servants in western literature, theater, and portraiture since classical times. According to Sebreli, since Greek antiquity the servant has, to a large extent, appeared in comedies as a farcical character or a figure of astute perceptiveness and intrigue, with rare appearances in dramas or tragedies. The numerous depictions of servants appearing in Baroque theater and in Spanish Golden Age literature focused mostly on male attendants or pages, rendering the portrayal of the maid in *La Celestina* (1499) an exception. Providing a review with a strong lens for Argentina, Sebreli also identifies other servant motifs in Octave Mirbeau's The Diary of a Chambermaid³ (1900); Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time (1913); Armando Discépolo's play *Babilonia, Una hora entre criados* (1925); and Roberto Arlt's play *Trescientos millones* (1927), among several others.

³ The novel was later adapted into the play *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* by André de Lorde, and into film by Jean Renoir (1946) and Luis Buñuel (1964).

In Mexico, there are also numerous novels and narratives featuring maids and caretakers. Many were written prior to, and certainly since, the publication of Castellanos' essays. Among these stands Castellanos' famed novel Balún Canán (1957), which presents the character of *la nana*, an indigenous woman from the Tzeltal Maya community in Chiapas. In the novel, a vision of provincial Mexican society in 1930s unfolds through the eyes of an unnamed seven-year-old girl who forms part of a sector of Ladino landowners that dominate the region. With the enforcement of laws of agrarian reform issued under the presidency of Lázaro Cardenas, the conflict and tension between Ladinos and the indigenous community is exacerbated, leading many of the characters in the narrative to struggle with contradictory loyalties and allegiances. Among those caught in the tension is the young narrator.

With an awareness of the child's precarious position at the center of multiple discourses, *la nana* attempts to impart an alternative set of values to contend with notions of prejudice. In this manner, *la nana* functions much like a Virgilian guide, leading the child protectively "by the hand" through the concentric circles of a hostile social order, though her influence does not prove to be sufficient in the ultimate destruction of the girl's innocence.

In addition to Balún Canán, Castellanos presents another nanny/master relationship in the novella El viudo Román (1964). The story is narrated from a third-person point of view with the focus of perception shifting to various characters in contact with Don Carlos Román, a landowning medical doctor who is widowed for

several years. In the opening scene, we are introduced to Doña Castula, his maid in confidence or *ama de llaves*. Her charge is to attend to Don Carlos personally while also acting in a managerial role with the other servants.

As Doña Castula brings Don Carlos' routine nighttime coffee, a brief exchange between the two prompts a moment of reflection. In their bout of nostalgia emerges the topic of transgression and revenge. Doña Castula begins to recapitulate her youth, describing how she once escaped the confines of her world as a maid to venture into new horizons with a young man. The plan, however, was foiled by the man's incarceration for unpaid debts. In his absence, Castula was left to face the complications of a critical miscarriage alone. Eventually, the man found his way to freedom shortly after Castula's crisis. However, he moved forward with his life in an alternate direction as though she were long buried and dead.

After listening to Castula's account, Don Carlos perceives the events in the only terms he can operate: patriarchal honor. As such, he becomes irritated by her lack of anger and resentment, "¿No te has fijado, grandísima bruta, en lo que ese hombre te hizo?" (184) However, in the weight of his acerbic remark, he makes a misstep. Don Carlos' understanding of her circumstance is limited to a question of gender. His poor perception, therefore, ironically highlights his own place in Castula's fate. In his harsh judgment, Don Carlos fails to recognize her condition as a life shaped by an interlocking system of oppression, for in her misfortune she was not just *any* woman, but a woman of a specific race and class.

Among other Mexican representations of master/servant relationships is the character of Damiana Cisneros in Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo (1955). In the novel she is Don Pedro's *nana* and loyal accomplice. As the fragment below illustrates, she eagerly predisposes herself as a comrade ready to facilitate Don Pedro's violent endeavors:

Ah, qué Don Pedro, no se le quita lo gatero. Lo que no entiendo es por qué le gusta hacer las cosas tan escondidas; con habérmelo avisado, yo le hubiera dicho a la Margarita que el patrón la necesitaba para esta noche, y él no hubiera tenido ni la molestia de levantarse de su cama (161).

The power relation depicted between the two is, therefore, symbiotic. Don Pedro finds an incomparable source of support in her until the very end. As the last scene of the novel shows through metaphor, she is the only individual left to buttress the full weight of his body, the stature of his power, before he crumbles to pieces in her arms.

Notwithstanding this enduring interest for the servant motif, it is important to note that there appears to be no other writer before Castellanos who chronicled a mistress/servant relationship as an autobiographical experience. In light of this, Castellanos' vanguard portrayal of intersecting power relations can be considered provocative and admirable. However, the ambivalence she portrays towards the topic raises several questions about her approach. Although she boldly brings her personal relationships with maids to public attention, she does not explicitly condemn or denounce the problematic points of friction in this system of relations. Instead, at various moments she appears indecisive regarding her position of

dominance, as though she is reluctant to part ways with such deep-seated customs. As a result, this attitude of ambivalence seems out of character for Castellanos, contradicting her legacy as an activist.

As many critics such as Maureen Ahern, Martha LaFollete Miller and Alexandra Burk suggest, Castellanos' journalistic style often calls to mind an improvised, inconsequential conversation of stereotypical feminine concern—a trivial domestic affair. This strategy is problematic given that this would likely summon what is apolitical and dismissible. This being the case, the seriousness and effectiveness of Castellanos' criticism becomes ambiguous. This feature of her writing leads to the following questions: What factors determine Castellanos' colloquial tone and style? And, is it possible to narrate a serious social issue as a commonplace banality while eliciting a meaningful and effective response from readers? In other words, did Castellanos have an opportunity to be persuasive and effect change in the status quo despite the "trivial" nature of these articles?

This chapter addresses these questions by examining Castellanos' essays closely, and attending to the ambivalent stance she appears to take in her work. It is likely that, as Castellanos advanced through uncharted territory with this subject, she kept her readers' receptiveness in mind. In which case, I argue, Castellanos' texts present various rhetorical strategies to subtly, if not slyly, unearth the power dynamics in mistress/servant relationships as a contemporary issue. In these texts she crafts an insidious personal exposé, as I deem it, to explore the issue with her readers in a manner that appeared less threatening. As such, her

approach softens her readers' guard as she furtively unravels the multiple shifting boundaries of oppression within the domestic sphere.

More importantly, Castellanos' personalized representation of mistress and servant relationships sheds light on the issue of *ambivalence*, which as explored through Homi Bhabha's critical framework⁴, can expose the contradictions embedded in cultural structures of domination. Thus, rather than directly challenge or denounce her readers' habits and customs, Castellanos stages her own ambivalent sentiments, portraying a tendency to waver between impulses to nurture and exploit her maid, so as to provoke further reflection in her audience. It is precisely in this manner of deflection, in which she presents this social dilemma as a mere personal quandary, that her texts perform a cunning act of subversion. As a result, Castellanos' work facilitates a public space to destabilize and unsettle prevalent cultural values and norms.

Rosario Castellanos' Journalistic Style: A Dissimulating Prose

Castellanos' autobiographical essays, written in the tradition of the *crónica*, were initially published in the Mexican daily newspaper Excelsior while she was abroad as Mexico's ambassador to Israel. Shortly after her untimely death, José Emilio Pacheco classified these articles as "Notas autobiográficas" in a compilation titled El uso de la palabra. From 1963 to 1974, these essays received wide circulation every Saturday in Excelsior's editorial page, and on occasion in the

⁴ See the essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Sunday supplement Diorama de la cultura. During this time, the prestigious newspaper was an institution at its height, acting as a conduit to national dialogue and connecting with large audiences throughout Mexico and beyond. As Elena Urrutia affirms, it was a privilege to collaborate in such a wide circulating forum “tan leído como fue el Excelsior de la época dorada de Julio Scherer.”⁵

For Castellanos, Excelsior offered broad access to the public sphere and provided an opportunity to craft a unique relationship with her readers in a fashion different from any prior model she had as a novelist. As she explains in the essay titled “El escritor como periodista,” written in 1972, she wanted to reconcile the two distinct genres. Each mode of writing required a unique skill set and distinct approach. In order to adjust to the new profession, she asserted an alternative strategy: “iba a escribir para que me leyeran” (17). As a result, Castellanos’ interlocutors—or “chucha,” as she addresses them—engage with a voice far different from the one associated with the lofty discourses of her master’s thesis, or the technical refinement in the novels often classified as “El ciclo de Chiapas.” Castellanos’ new approach forged a public persona that hinged on accessibility. This frequently revealed a congenial style that elicited thoughts of vacations and leisure, or a tone more suitable for conversations over coffee.

In the essay “Aplastada por la injusticia del mundo,” for instance, Castellanos appeals to her audience with a rhetorical question, claiming to side step academic

⁵ For more on the ‘Golden Era’ of Excelsior under the direction of Julio Scherer, see Arno Burkholder de la Rosa. “El olimpo fracturado. La dirección de Julio Scherer García en Excelsior (1968-1976)”. *Historia Mexicana* 4 (2010): 1339-1399.

prescriptions for a mode of writing characterized by loose constructs and spontaneity:

¿Por qué no aprovechamos esta temporada de vacaciones, ustedes, lectores, y yo, para descansar un poco y charlar de frivolidades? ¿Se vale la autobiografía? Porque de pronto se me ha aparecido en la memoria un episodio ocurrido en mi infancia hace muchos, muchos años (185).

The verb *charlar* in this introduction serves to establish an informal dialogue with her readers. Here, the idea of chatting denies distance and disavows intellectual hierarchies while also invoking a space of intimacy and unifying camaraderie. It shapes the identity of both Castellanos and her readers, defining one another simply as fellow companions prepared to join in a frivolous moment of nostalgia. Still, considered from another perspective, Castellanos' light-hearted writing also appears misleading. If only by virtue of Castellanos' legacy, it is unlikely that she turns away from issues of political importance to engage in ordinary, seemingly improvised topics. Her style, therefore, gives way to alternative possibilities, as several underlying factors may contribute to her frivolous tone.

Indeed, several critics have examined Castellanos' journalistic writing style as a defense mechanism against the pressures of a gender biased society. Although Castellanos was not the first woman to have a regular column in the prestigious pages of Excelsior, journalism was undoubtedly a male-dominated world throughout her time in the profession, especially when she first gained significant access to it. As Joanna O'Connell asserts, Castellanos' work as a columnist appeared when the active participation of women in journalism had greatly diminished:

The pattern of publishing activity in Mexico parallels that of Latin America as a whole in that the most intense periods occur in the mid-nineteenth century and from 1921 to 1940; between 1941 and 1960, publication of women's periodicals drops off dramatically all over Latin America (210).

Under such conditions, Castellanos' opportunities were rare. Yet, to add to her already unique status in the profession, Castellanos infused her prose with a popular flare, often using Mexican idiomatic phrases common to everyday language such as: *mala pata, ni modo* and *ni mandado a hacer*. This choice contrasted dramatically with other male journalists of the period. As Elvira Hernandez Carballido notes:

Rosario se distinguió entre ellos, no solamente por ser la única mujer, sino por su estilo sencillo y cálido, porque su ironía y honestidad contrastaba con la solemnidad y objetividad de esos prestigiados periodistas intelectuales (qtd in Burke 45).

This simple and warm style certainly made Castellanos' work more conspicuous—an outcome any new columnist would appreciate.

However, as much as it served to set her apart from others, it did little to establish her work as a cut above the rest. Martha LaFollete Miller, for example, notes the apparent contrast this posed between Castellanos and other contemporary male writers such as Pablo Neruda. As ambassador to France, Neruda engaged in international concerns, addressing political issues in his memoirs. By contrast, Castellanos' column resonates as an exercise in self-disparagement—a discourse often shaped by a preoccupation devoted to personal quandaries, self-reflections and the life of maids. Miller suggests that this may have reflected an unconscious effort by Castellanos to avoid conflict as she continued to operate within male-dominated

spheres. According to Miller, as one of very few women participating in a public forum in Mexico, it was imperative that Castellanos craft an irreproachable public persona that could avoid posing a threat to her audience's sense of masculinity (175).

Alexandra Burk, who writes extensively on Castellanos' range of style, offers a similar perspective. She examines Castellanos' tendency towards self-mockery as a strategy that helped her generate a signature persona in the field. Though Castellanos often appeared to be 'one with the people,' her efforts seemed extreme, as though she projected not necessarily a genuine simplicity, but rather a caricature of herself—a projection that was almost too absurd to believe. To understand this, it is of particular interest to examine Castellanos' repeated efforts to diminish her talent and insist on her weaknesses. This can be noted in the following fragment:

¿Cómo voy a presentarme por primera vez? ¿Pedante? Muy bien, me encantaría serlo y presumir que mis insomnios se deben a que cierto pasaje de Aristóteles... ¿Cuál pasaje? Si me tomo la molestia de buscarlo tengo tan mala pata que seguramente es el único que se considera equívoco. Ni modo. Hasta para hacer el ridículo se necesita preparación especial. ¿Solemne? Ah, no, eso sí que no. Ese es el monopolio del estado de ánimo poético espontaneidad. Eso nunca falla. Y mi primer artículo fue tan espontáneo que parecía grabado a cincel en una piedra volcánica (17).

As these lines suggest, Castellanos often engaged in self-deprecating humor, scrutinizing her writing abilities by qualifying her articles as crude and rudimentary pieces etched in volcanic rock. Certainly, at first glance, her opinions might ring true. The basic structure and simplicity of her essays seem fit for a novice and inexperienced writer, but given her well-established career as an author,

Castellanos' public assessments also evoke a sense of doublespeak for those familiar with her work.

Hence, her bouts with self-ridicule become ironic, while her distaste for issues of importance seem contradictory. Indeed, as Burke well notes, this type of literary 'performance' harks back to the sly tactics once assumed by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. As Josefina Ludmer's analysis of Sor Juana reveals, placing the idea of 'not knowing' and 'not knowing what to say' in contradictory relationships camouflages forbidden practices. In Sor Juana's case, the need to reproach her rival, Sor Filotea, without provoking repercussions, led to a writing style that undercut humility with passive aggressiveness.

Castellanos' efforts, in this respect, echo similar transformations. With the lack of women in journalism, Castellanos may have found it necessary to prescribe to modes of femininity or risk persecution. In this manner, by making her work meet dominant cultural expectations, she could remain innocuous in the public eye and stave off threats to the status quo. As Ludmer's analysis of Sor Juana would suggest, engaging in 'tricks of the weak' could easily be a measure of self-defense for a woman writer.

Interestingly, an example of this fear of oppression takes shape as an allegory in Castellanos' essay, "Aplastada por la injusticia del mundo." In the anecdote, Castellanos describes a childhood episode in which her attempt at subversion is stifled. As a young girl, she witnesses a political protest in Chiapas that inspires her to action. Believing that she, as well as anyone, could engage in community

activism, she is quick to be aggressive, choosing to run off in search of her father's gun in order to assist in a riot. Nevertheless, to her dismay, her naive intentions backfire leaving her confined to the domestic sphere and violently forced to resign from public affairs: "Entré en la casa, de la que ya no me dejaron salir. Me regañaron, me abofetearon y terminaron por encerrarme en un cuarto oscuro" (188).

To her readers the narrative may, on one level, speak to Castellanos' triumphant defiance. The humiliating defeat she experienced as a child did little to hinder her desire for a public life. After all, she was a successful writer. On the other hand, the anecdote also alludes to the paradox determining her career as a journalist, for Castellanos seems free to write as long as she subscribes to acceptable feminine codes.

Cultural constraints such as these could have likely urged Castellanos to operate through a process of negotiation. As Francine Masiello explains, women pioneering in an intellectual realm or a political arena were oftentimes forced to comply with dominant expectations:

Women, as unnamed subjects of philosophical or political debate, can only enter the public arena in their capacity as double agents, always speaking in two tongues, always wearing a mask, one determined by the state's demands and another marked by a syntax of private desires (62).

Given this cultural burden, Castellanos seems to offer her readers humorous gestures of exaggeration. In turn, the gestures heighten her visibility and elicit the curiosity of those who detect the artifice of her *framing*; in other words, the act of both 'being for' and 'being against' that which she attempts to assume. Her comical displays of excess play on both being recognized and disavowed, creating an

ambivalence that prompts a lust for looking at what lies beneath her pose, for it hints at adjustments that tend in her favor. She is, in this sense, an *imposture* strategically eluding suspicion by feigning inadequacy, while simultaneously manipulating those very same cultural norms that police her.

It is precisely through this process of negotiation—in which her career as a journalist was potentially at stake—that I suggest Castellanos’ writing also relates to mistress and servant relationships. Specifically, she crafted a friendly, diplomatic, and less threatening register from which to subtly and slyly unearth the power dynamics in such relationships. Many critics have suggested that her frivolous and congenial style of writing may have, on one level, detracted potential critics and professional adversaries eager to reproach her position as a woman journalist.

However, as I attempt to demonstrate later in this chapter, her writing style also allowed her to engage in issues of controversy, such as mistress and servant relationships, without turning readers away. In this regard, we come to understand that Castellanos never dismissed the unique and privileged platform the editorial column afforded her. To bring this point to light, the following section explores Castellanos’ pioneering reflections on the issue of ambivalence in mistress and servant relationships, before returning to examine the ways her writing style appears to take measure of reader reception.

A Matter of Ambivalence

As with her tone and style, Castellanos' preference for domestic tropes was an opportunity to shift the place from which the political was spoken. It was a mode of discourse attesting to yet another 'trick of the weak,' as Ludmer describes it:

[T]hose regional spaces that the dominant culture has extracted from the realms of the daily and the personal and has constituted as separate fields (politics, science, philosophy) exist for women precisely in the realm of the personal and are indissociable from it. And if the personal, the private, the quotidian are included as points of departure and perspectives in other discourses and practices, they cease to be merely personal, private, and quotidian: such is one possible result of the tricks of the weak (93).

Through this tactic, Castellanos carefully framed her voice within the aspects of women's private life by challenging its marginal status in the repertoire of affairs traditionally viewed and accepted as worthy news. In this fashion, her column evokes what Homi Bhabha terms as "*an unhomely stir*." For Bhabha, the unhomely is a moment wherein "The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the world" (142)⁶.

This dual nature of her writing was not obscured to her readers. In "Hora de la verdad," Castellanos is forthright about the purpose behind her choice of subject matter, explaining: "Mi estilo ya lo conoce usted, consiste en tomar un hecho a todas luces insignificante y tratar de relacionarlo con una verdad transcendente" (256).

This disclosure assured her readers that her topics of choice are at once inconsequential and tantamount, ordinary and political, and simultaneously

⁶ Bhabha's essay "The World in the Home" is in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.

pertinent to both private and public domains. Through this system, Castellanos discards traditional cultural categories that determine the domestic realm and the activities within it, opening a space for the unexpected. Indeed, as Maureen Ahern well notes, Castellanos addresses domesticity, as though she were just another woman—a friend having casual conversation—to gain entry into controversy:

By using communication elements from areas of human activity that are intrinsically domestic or feminine, that is, supposedly innocuous, Castellanos enables the reader to initially perceive them to be harmless and non-threatening. But in Castellanos' prose they function either as springboards for a dive into the deep water of controversy that immediately follows or to hold up a mirror to our faces—and follies. In other words, the author uses referents, images, or structures from areas that, because they are domestic, have been stereotyped as safe, discountable, or insignificant, articulating dialogues or monologues that are just the opposite (52).

But if, as Ahern specifies, Castellanos hides an agenda, what exactly does Castellanos find to be contentious and polemic? What becomes “the deep water of controversy?”

To consider this inquiry, one can begin by examining the anecdote, “El frente doméstico.” The title of this anecdote draws a parallel between the domestic realm and a place of war. For Castellanos' readership it was likely that conventional divisions of space demarcated private quarters, such as the home, as a place devoted to leisure, but Castellanos undermines these expectations, infusing the idea of domesticity with hostility.

Beyond the scheme of the title, perceptions are defied even further as Castellanos' anecdote becomes a type of war memoir. In the narrative, she relates a series of confrontations with her maid, Herlinda, documenting the ways her

‘antagonist’ required an arsenal of stealthy tactics. At one moment, Castellanos discloses her personal defense mechanisms against her maid by explaining: “Yo la dejo hablar, hablar. (Es parte del trato. Mínimo dos horas diarias de conversación en español)” (251). Such comments reveal a puzzling contradiction. Clearly, Herlinda does not qualify as the most conventional or predictable rival; yet, for Castellanos, she is a force to be reckoned with—an opponent she must appease. To that end, Castellanos exhibits her knack for diplomacy, feigning interest in what Herlinda has to say to avert a crisis. But what exactly is at stake here? Why does Castellanos portray Herlinda as a potential threat?

These questions become increasingly pertinent when considering Castellanos’ initial description of her maid. The first time she introduces Herlinda to her readers, Castellanos suggests she is only of minor consequence. Clinging to a hazy memory, Castellanos struggles to recollect her maid’s face, eventually preferring to describe her as an indiscriminate figure: “No sé si alguna vez se la he descrito. Hace tantos años que vivimos juntas y próximas que es muy posible que no me haya fijado nunca en sus facciones.” Therefore, despite the years of interdependence, Herlinda comes to mind as a body. Her face becomes one like many, and like no one at all, casting an impression of Herlinda as a trace of the masses.

This perspective reduces Herlinda to an indiscriminate body, thus producing the invisibility of her subjectivity. As Hannah Arendt notes⁷, and which I discuss further in chapter three, laborers remain hidden and invisible because they are primarily associated with the body. Arendt further articulates:

⁷ *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. Print.

[...] it is striking that from the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy, all things connected with the life process itself, which prior to the modern age comprehended all activities serving the subsistence of the individual and the survival of the species. Hidden away were the laborers who “with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,” and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was “laborious,” devoted to bodily functions (72).

Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses, Castellanos gradually re-works this representation of Herlinda by performing a strategic inversion. The essay, which at first seemed to provide a spotlight into Castellanos’ daily home life, suddenly privileges Herlinda by highlighting her challenges and struggles. Castellanos, on the other hand, recedes into the shadows of the anecdote as a subdued character. Therefore, much like a *relieve*, it is Herlinda’s personality and actions that gain prominence through the art of contrast. As a result, the once ‘inconsequential’ maid not only surfaces as a protagonist in the narrative, she begins to take shape as a public presence. Her domestic existence, largely removed from public scrutiny, becomes a social reality transferred to print.

In “Herlinda se va,” this role reversal becomes apparent once again as Castellanos reconfigures Herlinda’s status of power. Contrary to expectations, Castellanos suggests the power structure in their relationship is a mutable situation yielding to a question of perspective:

Yo he tenido hasta ahora dos largas servidumbres. Y uso la palabra con la plena deliberación de su ambivalencia. Porque ambas me sirvieron exactamente en la proporción en que yo consentí en volverme una criatura dependiente de sus cuidados, remitida a su eficiencia, obediente a sus rutinas, plegable a sus caprichos, conforme con sus limitaciones. ¿Quién

de las dos estaba más sujeta: la sierva o el ama? Eso queda para discutirse (261).

The numerous concessions Castellanos lists in this fragment depict her as a woman relinquishing control to another in a self-debasing manner. Evidently, to avoid the daily barrage of mundane chores, Castellanos must be cared for as a *criatura*, but whether an alternative option to this practice exists is unclear. This situation emerges as an unavoidable trap: Castellanos must succumb to the humiliating routine to preserve her own agency, in other words, the time she devotes to intellectual pursuits.

Castellanos' point of view here not only sheds light on the underlying irony of this lifestyle, it also underscores the changeable and uncertain condition of an imagined mistress/servant dichotomy. The entire conceptual apparatus is challenged as Castellanos' inquiry reverses the hierarchy in the relationship: "¿Quién de las dos estaba más sujeta: la sierva o el ama?" By blurring the boundaries between the two, Castellanos undermines a structure of knowledge determined by fixed and stable meanings neatly divided into mutually exclusive categories of opposition. She therefore deconstructs absolutes, suggesting instead a slippage in binary oppositions. We can see this as she reflects upon her role as a mistress—a seemingly powerful position—not as an absolute truth, but as a mere illusion or a play on language. The question of whether she was the mistress ultimately did not matter. It did not, for instance, imply control, for the experience of the relationship between she and her maid was a much more complex and continuously shifting condition.

This idea of uncertainty is reflected throughout Castellanos' representations of Herlinda. In each portrait, Castellanos avoids any attempt to capture an authentic or complete picture of her maid by demonstrating no reciprocal engagement. Castellanos observes Herlinda at a distance, excluding any dialogue between the two. This lack of reciprocity is left to manifest itself as curiosity, desire, fear, and wonder—all one-way attitudes which do not reduce distance, but only compound Herlinda's status as alien and impregnable. Consequently, this lack of connection dramatizes the impossibility of capturing Herlinda in writing. Castellanos' point of view on Herlinda does not bridge their social divide. Instead, any condition of truly reciprocal understanding of Herlinda becomes the unrealized horizon Castellanos' text points to but does not reach. Therefore, one of the ambivalent 'visions' of Herlinda that Castellanos imparts to her readers is a representation that oscillates between affirming and denying the possibility of understanding Herlinda.

Furthermore, as a result of this strategy, Herlinda's behavior seems bewildering, mysterious, and frightening. Castellanos repeatedly speaks to the complexity of Herlinda's temperament by sharing with readers Herlinda's bouts with depression, or in other instances, her tensions and quarrels with others. In every account, Herlinda's malicious nature appears calculated and cunning. As Castellanos describes, it was a kind of insidious, sophisticated malice: "penetraba poco a poco" (250).

However, for Castellanos, the petty social conflicts Herlinda provokes with

others, given her inscrutable nature and moodiness, seem to pale in comparison with what Castellanos identifies as a much more significant and life altering source of grief. As Castellanos sees it, the greatest danger between she and her maid rests in the idea of Herlinda's departure. Indeed, the title of the article, "Herlinda se va," forebodes this event; and in many respects, Castellanos' series of essays merely serve as accounts leading towards this outcome.

The irony, however, is that it is precisely Herlinda's autonomy which becomes threatening to Castellanos. At this juncture of her career, Castellanos was a renown feminist eager to push for women's independence. Yet, the more Herlinda gathered with fellow domestic workers and joined in discussions for alternative conditions of employment, the more Castellanos and Herlinda's relationship became unsettled. As Castellanos portrays it, Herlinda's desire to control her work schedule and finances became distressing. Herlinda was developing a desire to attain an improved, and possibly more privileged lifestyle, provoking sentiments of ambivalence in Castellanos regarding Herlinda's growing self-determination.

The development of this ambivalence, moreover, could be considered from two perspectives. The term ambivalence, first developed within psychoanalytic theory at the turn of the 20th century, refers in general to a range of conflicting emotions: from a moment of uncertainty and hesitance, to the simultaneous existence of contradictory attitudes.

In post-colonial discourse theory, however, Homi Bhabha appropriates this term, adding another dimension to its conceptualization. For Bhabha, ambivalence

serves to disclose the role of mimicry as a colonial mechanism of control. As he sees it, colonial relationships are not antithetical but rather analogous, for both the colonized subject and the colonizer can possess striking similarities, bringing to bear a resemblance in appearance or behavior. This condition of likeness—or mimicry—is prompted by dominant colonial discourse, which seeks to appropriate the colonized subject to reproduce the assumptions, habits, and values of the colonizer. As such, it is often the colonized subject whom imitates or ‘mimics’ the colonizer, making mimicry emerge as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge (122).

Yet this mimetic condition, he contends, is subject to an inherent weakness. Although mimicry fulfills an essential role in the colonial process, it is based upon an ironic compromise. In order to be an effective strategy, the colonized subject is expected to mimic the colonizer *to a limited degree*:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce a slippage, its excess, its difference (122).

Colonial discourse, therefore, treads a slippery slope, attempting to maintain its legitimacy by continuously promoting a contradiction: “*be almost the same, but not quite*.” Given these circumstances the relationship between colonizer and colonized is often characterized by sentiments of *ambivalence*, fluctuating between a mix of attraction and repulsion, or an urge to nurture and exploit. At times the demeanor, actions, or behaviors of the colonized Other may seem to be an ‘appropriate’ level of

mimicry; at other moments, gestures of ‘sameness’ appear to be an appalling sense of mockery that assails the authority of colonial dominance.

If we take a post-colonial view of Castellanos’ texts, we can note the way her dilemma illustrates the implications of this condition in a concrete fashion. In these essays, Castellanos appears to be uncomfortable with Herlinda’s rising demands. Thus, with conflicted feelings, she thwarts her maid’s ambition by offering Herlinda an alternative. Castellanos encourages Herlinda’s mimicry so that, just like Castellanos, she could be yet another privileged woman with subordinates:

En Israel [Herlinda] adquirió plena conciencia de su importancia. Y eso, he de confesarlo, no fue gracias a mí sino a la frecuentación de un grupo de latinoamericanos que trabajaban en Tel Aviv. A medida que esa conciencia crecía, crecían también sus demandas. Menos trabajo, más sueldo, vacaciones pagadas, seguro contra enfermedad, pensión de retiro. Yo estaba de acuerdo...en principio. Pero en la práctica procuraba convertirla en mi cómplice. Le di autoridad para que mandara a otros y ambas comentábamos—como lo hacen siempre las señoras—la ineptitud total de sus subordinados (264).

With this gesture, Castellanos brings to light the ambivalent behavior that makes her complicit in this system of power. Castellanos strikes a compromise, leading Herlinda to ‘*be the same, but not quite.*’ With Herlinda as an accomplice, as opposed to a rival, Castellanos maintains her personal status quo.

This mode of conduct, however, unmasks the dynamics of power in this relationship, for as these ambivalent sentiments emerge in Castellanos, they give way to a corrosive effect on the colonial system. The need and desire for mimicry—so inherent in the civilizing mission of the colonial process—acts as a double-edged sword, potentially undermining the authority of colonial domination from within. As

Bhabha describes it: “The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (126). As such, there is the chance that Castellanos’ flexibility—her push for mimicry—could backfire, leading Herlinda to desire more rights and authority. This, perhaps, would evolve into yet another similar sequence of events leading to more compromise. Ultimately, it is the sentiments of ambivalence in this pattern of behavior that attest to the deceit and fraud maintained in the preservation of the status quo.

Diplomatic Friendships

Although the aforementioned anecdote features Castellanos struggling to keep her maid, Herlinda, by her side, despite acknowledging the oppressive conditions this outcome would represent, this circumstance is questionable upon closer examination. Is Castellanos sincerely debating this issue publicly? Is she indeed ambivalent about what to do, or does she simply portay this to be so?

As previously discussed, Castellanos’ style of writing made her innocuous in a male-dominated profession, but for her readers it also established her public persona as a safe and trustworthy friend. Castellanos’ autobiographical essays resonate as ‘friendly conversations’ in which narratives, crafted as confessions, reveal ‘truths’ about herself. This self-representation, however, can be viewed as misleading. At the heart of Castellanos’ narratives stand two elements: the ambivalence regarding Herlinda’s freedom, and the ambivalent relationship Castellanos establishes with her own readers. Castellanos made herself appear

accessible as an average, everyday woman, who was vulnerable to vices even when the trajectory of her career proved otherwise.

Readers inclined to follow Castellanos' column likely recognized her as a prominent advocate of indigenous causes. Since 1951, she had a long-standing connection with numerous cultural programs for Chiapas, her state of origin. While there, she worked for the National Indigenous Institute in San Cristóbal de las Casas (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, or INI) directing programs such as *El Teatro Petul*, a puppet theater that traveled to isolated indigenous villages hidden in the Chiapan mountains.

This connection to INI's cultural campaigns sharpened Castellanos' interest for the province of her childhood, and heightened her awareness of the region's social ills. Her early works, including Balún Canán (1957), Ciudad Real (1960), and Oficio de tinieblas (1962), attest to this affinity for the southern state. The Chiapas series allowed her to break into the public spotlight, receiving national recognition and prestigious accolades, including the Mexican Critics award for the best novel in 1957 and the Chiapas prize in 1958. This success not only granted her widespread attention and prestige as a writer, but also positioned her within an *indigenista* literary current.

Nevertheless, by openly debating her role as a mistress, Castellanos exposes a critical grey area: to uphold domestic conventions would mean wrestling with the vestiges left by colonial rule. As such, her personal dilemma concerning Herlinda

put into question Castellanos' greatest efforts to criticize and debunk the social structures that devalue, limit and oppress women, as well as indigenous people.

It is crucial to remember that during the publication of her column, Castellanos' legacy as a feminist had already been well established. As Elena Poniatowska confirms in "¡Vida nada te debo!"⁸, Castellanos often openly condemned the limitations placed on women, especially with regards to the domestic sphere:

Rosario denuncia la injusticia en contra de la mujer y declara que no es equitativo ni legítimo que uno pueda educarse y el otro no; que uno pueda trabajar y el otro sólo cumple con una labor que no amerita remuneración, el trabajo doméstico; que uno es dueño de su cuerpo y dispone de él como se le da la real gana mientras que el otro reserva ese cuerpo no para sus propios fines sino para que en él se cumplan procesos ajenos a su voluntad (46).

With this history in mind, a portrait of Castellanos as someone so obviously complacent and complicit in the demise of another woman would likely seem incongruent and disingenuous.

Therefore, rather than assume that Castellanos could be obtuse, it is possible that she elaborated upon real life events in order to craft a 'fiction' that could speak of the oppression of women by other women without antagonizing her interlocutors. Castellanos' tactic, in this sense, softens the rhetorical blow of novel ideas that several of her readers may have resisted. By befriending them and garnering their sympathy, she could influence their perceptions. Underneath every presumed autobiographical "I" in Castellanos speech, lay the subtle idea of a shared

⁸ The essay is included in *¡Ay vida, no me mereces!: Carlos Fuentes, Rosario Castellanos, Juan Rulfo, La Literatura De La Onda*. México, D.F: J. Mortiz, 1985. Print.

experience—an inherent “we.” Her private confidences both held and withheld distance, and this ambivalence towards her readers served to remove moments of doubt from them. As a result, this left little room to wonder, question or be defensive against Castellanos’ arguments. Her personal quandaries were thus simultaneously private and public, personal and shared. Her narratives functioned, in this fashion, as an insidious exposé of deep-seeded social ills, while first seemingly appearing as pieces of trivial gossip.

We can note this stylistic pattern reinforced and magnified in “Herlinda se va,” where Castellanos brings her role as a mistress into focus by attesting to a call to conscience, and describing a shift in attitude towards her maid, María Escandón:

Yo no creo haber sido excepcionalmente caprichosa, arbitraria y cruel. Pero ninguno me había enseñado a respetar más que a mis iguales y, desde luego mucho más mis mayores. Así es que me dejaba llevar por la corriente. El día en que, de una manera fulminante, se me reveló que esa cosa de la que yo hacía uso era una persona, tomé una desición instantánea; pedir perdón a quien yo había ofendido. Y otra para el resto de la vida: no aprovechar mi posición de privilegio para humillar a otro (262).

Here, the organizing element of her argument rests on sentiments of remorse and regret, fashioning its contents into a confession. Yet, she does not necessarily claim sole responsibility for her actions. Rather, she prefaces the admission of guilt by clarifying her ignorance: “Me dejaba llevar por la corriente.” Thus, it would seem as though her comment serves to diffuse blame, suggesting that she was not entirely responsible, nor entirely alone in her predicament; she was merely a compliant subject impelled by tradition.

The reference to a cultural tradition strategically positions this domestic dilemma as an ambivalent matter: her experience as a mistress is at once a singular phenomenon—a personal demon—as well as a common social ill, rooted in an extricable network of deep, long-standing cultural assumptions, habits, and values. Moreover, when Castellanos refers to “una decisión instantánea,” she not only claims to exonerate herself by making amends with her maid, but also elicits a mechanism of interrogation—for whether or not her readers heed to a similar course of enlightenment is open to speculation.

As a result, these self-portraits function as both a model and a mirror. Moments of self-reflection emerge as a dialogue with a target audience, producing an echo with the lives of other women sustained by the subservience of indigenous domestic workers. In this manner, Castellanos’ articles begin to broach a weighty topic wherein the freedom enjoyed by women of privilege is, or has been, predicated upon services provided by the institution of gender and racial disparity. Maid service—although rarely, if ever, addressed in the work of other writers of the period—was undoubtedly a pervasive social practice throughout the urban fabric of modern Mexico. Therefore, by offering her personal testimony in the matter, Castellanos pushed the boundaries of tradition and convention by making the issue break silence. As Elena Poniatowska notes in Luz y luna, las lunitas, “Ninguna escritora Mexicana le ha rendido mayor homenaje a las “nanas,” esta institución que supongo es propia de América Latina, que Rosario Castellanos.” (162)

Maureen Ahern often characterizes Castellanos' rhetorical tactic as a sleight of hand; this strategy is perhaps one of the most important components of Castellanos' essay style. Specifically, she relies on the use of misdirection to accomplish her objective. Likewise, Castellanos takes great measure not to make a larger action or intention so big as to become suspect. Instead, she foregrounds 'trivial' information with the contextualization of shocking knowledge thereby protecting readers from a sudden confrontation with an unpleasant reality they may not want to debate, while simultaneously provoking the desire to know more.

Castellanos' journalism, therefore, becomes a deliberate rhetorical tool—a means of diplomacy. By self-reflecting on so-called “personal quandaries,” her essays have an opportunity to covertly inject an agenda condemning the socially sanctioned exploitation of maids. In this sense, Castellanos has a platform for a soft policy initiative whereby a social intervention is discreet. With veiled motivations she persuades her readership, opening a space from which to contest old narratives and imagine the possibility of new social relations.

This process unfolds toward the end of “Herlinda se va,” in which Castellanos models for her readers a solution to her personal dilemma. She finds solace by aligning herself with a Marxist view, describing the tensions she and Herlinda share as a war of classes: “Ay, Herlinda y yo estamos en plena guerra de clases, cada una en su respectiva trinchera. Y yo sé que la razón histórica es suya” (264). This statement acknowledges the weight of social, political, and historical elements that serve as constraining forces in both of their lives. For Castellanos,

there was no denying that Herlinda's freedom would entail the destruction of customs. Living without Herlinda, as she well notes, meant facing unforeseeable consequences: "Misión cumplida, diríamos. ¿Y yo? ¿Y Gabriel? ¿Y todo? Es verano y, como la cigarra, canto la canción de Soiveig que dice que la tierra está ceñida de caminos" (264).

Despite this fear, however, Castellanos pinpoints a sense of satisfaction with her decision to set Herlinda free. Even if what remained to be born was left to the imagination, seeing Herlinda acquire agency ultimately fulfilled the exemplary nature of "la cigarra." To her readers, "la cigarra" would have likely called to mind the nature of "*un bicho raro*," which in turn figuratively speaks to a position of dissent. Castellanos was thus willing to be the strange creature at odds with the comforts of conventions. As the traditional Mexican song with the same title, "La cigarra," explains, she preferred to die singing—or in her case, professing her convictions. In these last comments, she models a path from which to disrupt social norms.

These self-portraits announce more than a secret shared; they represent a silence broken, a void filled, and an injustice finally articulated. Castellanos presents Herlinda as a convenient cultural illusion, a practice that is first desensitized and then accepted. Still, to bring this matter to bare, the weight of Castellanos' inquiry lay delicately on a calculated rendition of herself as vulnerable. This 'fiction' divulges the issue with charm in order to evade any resistance to her

discourse. With Castellanos' agreeableness and appeal, there could be no stonewalling behind 'sealed houses.'

Thus, for Castellanos it appears that a reader's potential resistance has to be taken into consideration. As such, she mitigates the social issue. In this respect, it becomes clear that her measured approach anticipates certain behaviors and perceptions of readers as they engage with her work. Indeed, she evinces an interest in this receptiveness by discussing the idea of self-reflection in the 1965 essay titled "Del alma humana el infierno son los demás," which was classified in José Emilio Pacheco's compilation under the heading: *Todas las edades, Todos los climas*. The title of the essay references Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*, calling to mind the (in)famous line "Hell is other people," an idea that posits true self-knowledge as an impossibility. For Sartre, the self is tied to the perception of an Other, thus inevitably dependent and reliant on exterior sources for self-awareness.

Castellanos' essay, however, appears to have a multi-faceted concern for this dilemma. She pursues a discussion regarding the impossibility of genuine self-knowledge while also examining the nature of cognitive dissonance and personal defense mechanisms. As she sees it, self-reflection is not the customary habit of most people, especially not when it comes to everyday activities.

Moreover, when a person attempts to define and determine the self as searching for harmony, reality creates an opposition to this endeavor, defying a person's intentions to avoid contradictions. As Castellanos states, "El mundo está allí, sólido, inamovible, indiferente a nuestros estados de ánimo, sin misericordia"

(80). Individuals might raise buffers, shields and various means of protection for the kind of 'self' they intend to construct. According to Castellanos, it is this reason why people may have a "horror of the light;" that is to say, a horror of reality and the Other in all its raw and unaltered nature. When confronted with this external source, an individual defensively filters the environment, welcoming elements that uphold habit and convenience while dismissing elements that contend with personal desires, predilections and caprices:

Todo lo que nos ayude a evadirnos de un enfrentamiento con lo que se nos impone con el peso de una existencia independiente de nuestras necesidades, de nuestras predilecciones y, lo que es más grave aún, de nuestras conveniencias y de nuestros caprichos, es bienvenido y cultivado (80).

Castellanos' opinion here offers insight into her work on mistress and servant relationships, for it allows us to consider her writing strategy. As the fragment suggests, Castellanos anticipates her readers' reluctance to change. If she is to unsettle her audience, persuading them towards an inconvenience and more importantly towards genuine introspection, Castellanos must do so without raising suspicion; that is, without challenging or altering their sense of self and becoming that very hell—or crude reality—her readers would try to avoid.

Interestingly, Castellanos illustrates the discussion of this dilemma by describing the life of a maid. She refers to a narrative by Marcel Proust, creating a two-fold distance between the character and her readers. She tells of the life of Francisca, a maid with a duplicitous existence who is beloved by her employer's family (by whom she is regarded as loyal and affectionate) but resented by the

entire household staff with whom she is harsh and cruel. As Castellanos explains, her behavior presents ambivalence, demonstrating a great deal of sympathy for anyone who she can regard in abstraction while disdaining the individuals she encounters concretely:

Los torrentes de lágrimas que Francisca vertía leyendo en el periódico los infortunios de desconocidos, se secaban pronto si ella podía contemplar más cerca las facciones del protagonista (81).

In the essay, Castellanos proceeds to examine Francisca's behavior as she is abruptly confronted by her co-worker's agonizing experience while giving birth. Despite the woman's physical distress, Francisca fails to sympathize with the woman. Moreover, Francisca is quick to assume that the woman is making a scene and attempting to "hacerse la señora," so as to gain importance that she does or should not have. Yet, when the lady of the house sends Francisca to search for the doctor's notes and instructions concerning the woman's diagnosis, Francisca becomes distracted and anguished while reading the case study pertaining to the illness. The moment she is confronted by a *description* of a stranger's painful symptoms, Francisca becomes extremely overwhelmed:

Ay, Virgen Santísima, ¿es posible que Dios permita que sufra así una desventurada criatura humana? Ay, pobrecita." Pero en cuanto Francisca estuvo de nuevo a la cabecera de la doliente real, sus lagrimas se secaron. Era incapaz de establecer ninguna relación entre el espectáculo que contemplaba y la sensación de piedad y de enternecimiento que le eran tan familiares y que la lectura de periódicos le suscitaba tan a menudo (81).

In many respects, the reference to newspapers here is no mere coincidence. Castellanos presents this scenario with a didactic tone in which she problematizes what Francisca represents: a reader, like many, whose sympathy is easily won over

by abstraction but lost in true concrete actions. This type of phenomenon frequently undermines the political impetus in discourse. Issues of political importance and significance in these instances become cathartic, a means by which individuals lament social conditions, only to later move on and continue with customs and habits as usual. It is therefore easier, if not comfortable, to deal with a narrative than to confront reality and gaze introspectively upon the self.

Evidently aware of this phenomenon, Castellanos criticizes this habit of conformity—the ‘inhospitable realm’, as she puts it, wherein the status quo is maintained. In this mental space of defense, readers learn to evade ‘the truth’—that is, the embedded contradiction about their behavior—which is fatal, or at least painful and disturbing to the self or ego.

Francisca, obviamente, no es ni un caso clínico ni siquiera un caso excepcional. Actúa en legítima defensa al situar su sensibilidad no a la merced de lo verdadero, cuyo contacto podría ser mortal o, por lo menos, doloroso o perturbador, sino en un plano en el que únicamente la tocan los hechos después de haber sido convertidos en abstracciones, en palabras (82).

Castellanos’ writing, therefore, adjusts for this expected outcome, creating a series of essays that attempt to strike a balance between what is comfortable and disconcerting. Indeed, it is worth noting that in this particular essay, which focuses on the concept of self-reflection, she once again deflects the issue in two ways: by choosing the character of a maid to illustrate this problematic behavior, and by employing a collective voice that inserts her own experience in the discussion.

By doing so, her readers can comfortably gaze and meditate upon the truth she exposes: ‘people tend to be duplicitous’, without immediately assuming its

disturbing implications. This tactic becomes insidious because it furtively brings controversial issues to attention, prompting meditation without provoking sudden shock and disdain. By anticipating her readers' reactions, Castellanos creates an exposé in which, at first glance, she alone unmasks her less than perfect behavior. In reality, however, her confessions also implicate her audience.

Castellanos' work thus negotiates a tenuous space between that which is calculated and provocative, and that which is innocuous and inoffensive so as to slip past her readers' guards. For Castellanos, the unarmed reader could be a malleable subject, acting at a level that could calmly accept the challenge of change, provided they are not directly assaulted with the demand:

En este nivel actuamos siempre con mayor desenvoltura y con mayor seguridad. Alguien ha despojado al objeto de su peso y de su densidad, ha limado sus aristas y nos ha entregado algo perfectamente inofensivo, asimilable por nuestra conciencia y compatible con nuestra tranquilidad (82).

Notwithstanding this particular approach by Castellanos, her efforts in these autobiographical essays undoubtedly marked an important specificity in the discourse generated by contemporary women writers who have since addressed gender, racial, and class tensions. As María Elena Valdés well notes, "No one in Mexican letters has been more lucid in understanding and putting into practice a social feminist critique than Rosario Castellanos. She gave Mexican feminism the direction and sense of purpose it required to survive in the 1970s" (16).

Still, one may determine that Castellanos' work failed to be holistically compelling. By modern standards this may be true, depending on what particular

issue her writing is being evaluated on. Yet, there is also a need to understand the emergent value of her endeavor, to examine its capacity to address the question of domestic service and the relations of power between employer and employee. At this juncture in time, Castellanos' work may not have pursued an aggressive agenda but it set the discourse in motion when the discourse concerning women's intersecting social positions was not fully established in a broader, legitimate form. As a nascent project—necessary at a time when little was understood regarding power dynamics between women—her conservative work was a pioneering effort. It served to expose relationships as relations that are not instinctively determined but culturally mediated, thus problematizing this feature of the dominant social structure.

Castellanos' efforts opened this key space for discussion; however, the issue of race is one of many aspects her work did not necessarily question with much scrutiny. Although Castellanos mentions the indigenous background of her maids, she does not make this subject a priority. It is much later, by the 1980s, when women writers began to flesh out and delve deeper into the racialization of domestic labor. As such, the rising awareness concerning women's intersecting subject positions prompted projects by women from various fields, including the collaborative work of Ana Gutierrez and Elena Poniatowska. Unlike Castellanos, these women's interests center on the conditions of hostility and violence that emerge in mistress and servant relationships—a set of dynamics that are examined further in chapter two.

CHAPTER TWO

UNRAVELING RACE RELATIONS

Over the course of three years, Ana Gutierrez¹ conducted field research collecting the oral testimonies of twenty-three indigenous domestic workers from Peru, and subsequently published this ethnographic project in 1983 with the title Se necesita muchacha. All of the testimonies included in the work resulted from recorded interviews that were later transcribed. The ethnographic method employed by Gutierrez, therefore, aims to be ‘actor-oriented,’ emphasizing the researcher’s ability to allow people to ‘speak for themselves’ (Scheyvens 65). The work is divided into two undefined parts, with testimonies in each section titled with a fictitious name so as not to disclose the women’s true identities.

In addition to the testimonies, Se necesita muchacha includes a brief introduction by Gutierrez and a lengthy 79-page prologue titled “Presentación al lector mexicano,” by Elena Poniatowska. In the introduction, Gutierrez suggests that minimal interventions were made to the personal accounts, indicating that the only difference between the recordings and the text lies in the substitution of names and places. The interviews, she explains, were structured with two biographical questions in mind: how did each woman become a domestic worker? And how did

¹ Rocío Silva Santisteban, an acclaimed Peruvian poet, journalist and political activist, clarifies key elements in the publication of Se necesita muchacha (1983). She explains that the first edition carried the title Basta, and that Cristina Goutet, advisor to the Union of Household Workers, used the name “Ana Gutierrez” as a pseudonym.

each woman come into contact with the domestic worker's union or *el Sindicato*² in Cusco? Furthermore, while Gutierrez admits that the testimonies may disclose a number of contradictions and discontinuities, she insists that together they reflect the voice of a collectivity. The work's true author, she affirms, is *el Sindicato*, and the similarities found in the numerous stories can be considered a "prototypical" narrative of the worker's struggle (94). It also important to note that, at present, it appears that there has been no critical attention on these testimonies and very limited attention on Elena Poniatowska's essay.

Given that this chapter focuses on the representations of domestic workers while also aiming to unravel issues concerning race relations, I begin by examining the discourse on race and racism in Mexico and in Latin America in general as presented by scholars such as Rosario Aguilar, Olivia Gall, Alicia Castellanos, Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, Francisco Pineda, Edward Telles, and Tanya Katerí Hernández, among others. From this point, I proceed to analyze the Peruvian worker's testimonies. In my analysis, I find that various relations and dynamics of power between mistress and servants do not fall neatly into an oppositional paradigm of race and class difference. For example, there are testimonies in which women report working in the domestic space of extended family or family friends who are only slightly more financially advantaged—in other words, employers who are not necessarily positioned in a status of privilege. As such, I argue it is important to recognize the full diversity of women's experience. The boundaries of oppression in women's lives shift, leading to complex and dynamic power relations. It is critical,

² Egidia Laime initiated the domestic worker's union in Cusco in 1972.

then, to account for this complexity to avoid essentializing gender and race—for instance, by treating these categories as static, fixed, eternal, and natural. Because race and gender are socially constructed, they arise at specific moments in particular circumstances; moreover, power changes as these circumstances change (Yuval-Davis 55). The understanding of different, but also provisional subject positions, I contend, counters universalizing tendencies that construct monolithic identities.

In this chapter I also turn to examine Poniatowska's prologue as a text that constructs a portrait of these domestic workers in an unprecedented fashion, shedding light on the adversities and hardships confronted by many women who work in domestic labor. Poniatowska examines the women's testimonies comparatively, exploring common threads in the development of in-home labor in Mexico and Peru. Throughout her essay, she denounces the oppressive and exploitative social relations that affect indigenous women.

Indeed, it can be said that Poniatowska's interest in recuperating marginalized perspectives has been one of the characteristic qualities of her career as a novelist and journalist. Giving 'voice' to those who have been historically silenced has led her to meditate on the lives of indigenous women in many ways. For instance, in 1994, over a decade after the publication of Se necesita muchacha, Poniatowska republished the prologue in another compilation of essays titled Luz y luna, las lunitas. This work includes photographs of indigenous women, and essays such as *El último guajolote*, *Vida y muerte de Jesusa*, and *Juchitán de las mujeres*,

which focus on a number of indigenous groups and their everyday lives and activities.

As figures involved in the structure and form of Se necesita muchacha, it is clear that Gutierrez and Poniadowska express a form of solidarity with women who confront abuse and exploitation as domestic workers. However, their efforts raise further questions: do Gutierrez and Poniadowska succeed in representing ‘other voices’? How do their interventions aid and/or hinder the representation of indigenous women who work in domestic labor?

As John Beverly reminds us in *Subalternity and Representation* (1999), the subaltern is a subordinated particularity within a specific social context marked by a lack or absence in public representation. To clarify, he explains, “When Gayatri Spivak makes the claim that the subaltern cannot speak she means that the subaltern cannot speak in a way that would carry any sort of authority or meaning for us without altering the relation of power/knowledge that constitute it as subaltern in the first place” (29). A study of the subaltern or the marginalized, he argues, should register knowledge as a system structured by the absence, difficulty, or impossibility of representing subaltern subjects, who, as he points out, should just as well be understood as “peasants and workers” (12).

Thus, for Beverly, there is a need to register ethical limits to representation because intellectuals and writers are implicated in institutions of knowledge and privilege. As he says, “we have to admit that there is a limit to what we can or should do in relation to the subaltern, a limit that is not only epistemological but

also ethical” (38). Although he regards all identities as decentered, plural, contingent, and performative, the subaltern subject presents the elusive heterogeneity for which a new project of the left or a new form of radical democratic politics should be rehabilitated.

Therefore I analyze Ana Gutierrez and Elena Poniatowska’s approach and tone towards the testimonies as, at times, problematic, given their tendency to universalize and essentialize indigenous groups of women. However, their work still stands (it needs to be stressed) as an important contribution to this area of research. They both worked to make the racialization of domestic labor visible.

Race and Racism in Mexico

Race, like gender, is not a biological concept, but a social construct used to draw distinctions between groups based on perceived differences. Usually there are phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, hair color, eye color, height, and facial features used by some as racial markers to assist in differentiating among groups. With specific attention to Mexico, Rosario Aguilar suggests that the construction of the *mestizo/a* (with both Indigenous and European ancestry) has muddled the perception of racism. As she says, “ By creating this broad racial group that includes most people in society, Mexico gave the impression of overcoming the problem of racism. The implication was that if everybody belongs to the same racial group, no one can be a racist” (2).

Though Aguilar focuses on Mexico, one could argue that the notion of the *mestizo/a*, and the problematic it presents, extends to Latin America at large. Crucial to this argument is the idea that, given phenotypic variability, conflict and discrimination has shifted from a colonial cast system of European versus indigenous dichotomy to include a system whereby mestizos discriminate against indigenous peoples or other mestizos who are more indigenous-looking. Olivia Gall notes, for example, that in Mexico the indigenous race is valued as part of a discourse on national history and devalued as a segment of the population that has not assimilated to the rest of Mexican society, which is now defined as mestizo (253).

After the Mexican Revolution (1920), the prevailing discourses on national identity began to overlap with notions of race, for which *mestizaje* came to reflect a cultural process. In which case, “being a Mexican became synonymous with being a *Mestizo*” (Massey & Denton 238). Aguilar argues that out of this discourse the indigenous race remained disparaged—a situation that has complicated the measurement of racial prejudice since it is not often based on race but on phenotype. Furthermore, as Alicia Castellanos, Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, and Francisco Pineda note, it is through the continuous denial of racism that structures of inequality are strengthened:

The trivialization and denial of racism has been a resource of power, and its concealment and use has been a form of ideological domination. Racism is historically and logically taboo in societies that have searched for symbols of national identity in the great pre-Hispanic cultures and that find their legitimacy in their supposed biological and cultural *mestizaje* (221).

Michel Wieviorka³ believes it is possible to conceptualize racism while at the same time recognizing its varied historical expressions and its relation to modernity. Prior to the adscription of individuals as citizens of a nation with equal protection and opportunities under the law, racial hierarchies in socio-economic and political arenas were considered inevitable. The social structure, in this case, was understood in terms of racial superiority and inferiority. For Wieviorka, the current desire to explain and justify social disparities in modern society when it is a culture founded by discourses of ‘equal opportunity’ also generates a masked racism. Whereas in the past social hierarchies were explained as biological and natural, it is often the present trend to speak of ‘cultural differences’ that cannot be reconciled. Alternatively, as Mary R. Jackman maintains, social prejudice is often divorced from racism and construed as mere classism.

What can be clear to many is that, historically speaking, a long-standing trend of racial discrimination had a concrete impact on the Latin American population, leaving in its tracks mostly dark-skinned women toiling in menial labor as domestic workers. Edward Telles notes in his sociological study, Pigmentocracies, that skin color is an overlooked dimension of inequality in Latin America. As he states, “[skin] color differences may reveal more inequality than the categorical ethn racial identities. This suggests that ethn racial categories used by national census hide important color distinctions, which are popularly made and cognitively assessed but are often not named in ethn racial categories” (226).

³ Olivia Gall comments on Michel Wieviorka in “Identidad, exclusion y racismo: reflexiones teóricas y sobre México” *Revista Mexicana De Sociología*. 66.2 (2004): 221-259. Print.

Social perceptions and differential treatment based on phenotype—attitudes that are not necessarily predictable or constant—create shifting boundaries of oppression. This would mean that in some instances, a *mestiza* could be subject to discrimination while at other moments, the same woman—under differing circumstances and contexts—is also the oppressor of yet another *mestiza*. As Telles notes, attention to skin color creates entirely new dimensions of discrimination. Likewise, he says, “members of the same mixed family might have quite different experiences based on their own appearance even if they share the same racial ancestry” (230).

A number of testimonies presented in Se necesita muchacha seem to substantiate these arguments—demonstrating the ways abuse, exploitation, and even violent subjugation and humiliation are also perpetuated between women, who by standard classifications, are from the same class and race.

The Limits of Representation: A Look at the Testimonies of Peruvian Domestic Workers

As mentioned previously in this chapter, Ana Gutierrez recorded and transcribed the interviews she conducted with twenty-three Peruvian domestic workers. The transcriptions of these testimonies, however, reveal no signs of a dialogue, leaving Gutierrez’s intervention in the creative construction of the narratives omitted. Whether she participates in the interview as a mere listener, or as a speaker and listener, is simply unclear. The introduction to the project, for

instance, may serve to document Gutierrez’s intentions to capture the voices and memories of the workers—a claim that speaks to the authenticity of the testimonies—but Gutierrez’s need to shape the accounts is also present throughout the work in the presence of numerous footnotes.

It is thus important to be mindful that Gutierrez figures as an authority, a collaborator, a possible editor, and perhaps a friend in the interviews. As such, her participation in any manner—perhaps even through body language—may be encouraging, shaping, and animating the personal narratives. Thus, the relationship between the writer, Gutierrez, and the informant mediates the stories in a significant fashion. It is an exchange structured within a hierarchical dimension. Consequently, there are ethical limits to consider in the representation of and by these women.

In the first testimony in Se necesita muchacha, titled “Aurelia,” a woman recalls her journey to Urcos, a small town in eastern Peru in the region of Cusco. She had been fleeing from her brother, whom she thought would severely reprimand her after losing a *q’eperina*, a versatile cloth used to carry items such as firewood or crops. Determined to fend for herself and survive on her own, she decides to collect firewood to sell in the town plaza. However, upon crossing a bridge en route to her destination, she encounters an elderly lady selling coca leaves:

Entonces recogí leña y pasé el puente. Allí una señora ya viejita estaba vendiendo coca. ‘Ven, ven. ¿De dónde estás viniendo?’ Se habría notado por mi vestido. ‘¿Por qué no te apuraste?’ Mi hija trabaja en Juliaca y ahorita mismo se ha ido en el tren, y quería una chiquita para que críe los bebitos. Entonces no vendí nada y le regalé mi leña a esa viejita. Me hizo quedar, no llegué ni hasta la plaza (103).

Aurelia proceeds to explain that the elderly woman's daughter had a family consisting of five children and a husband, whom worked as a professor in a nearby town, Juliaca. As such, the large family perhaps benefited from a slightly better standard of living than the elderly woman, but it is clear that their household income did not differ by much due to various expenditures.

Given that Aurelia's account is the narration of a memory, her story presents us with a split-subjectivity, vacillating between a 'narrating self' and the 'self as protagonist.' For instance, there are moments she becomes reflective, putting into play both the past and present in order to draw conclusions that gauge missteps and assess accomplishments. In the following fragment, we can note how she describes the repeated physical assaults she suffered at the hands of her mistress, while also remembering the way she developed resistance to that abuse. For Aurelia, it is clear that the experience and confidence she acquired with her coming of age was central to this transition:

Pero después de 3, 4 días vino mi señora: "Vamos nomás, ya no te voy a pegar nada, te voy a regalar ropa." Y yo pensaba: "Será verdad?" Pero siempre era lo mismo. "Me voy a ir siempre". Pero ya no me soltaba esa señora. Y cuando estaba yendo a Urcos, la señora otra vez me alcanzó: "Quédate nomás, ahora ya no te voy a pegar, y tu indemnización te voy a pagar". Pero ya no, ya no, nunca más, ya estaba grande (104-105).

Though Aurelia cites maturation as a significant influence on her decisions, it is also true that there are no absolute contrasts made between Aurelia's perception of her younger and older self. Aurelia describes a relatively consistent personality, recalling rebellious, headstrong, and determined occasions as a young girl. There is

also a moment when, given the opportunity to return home and become dependent upon her family, she realizes a desire to be autonomous, independent and self-reliant:

Después de un mes nomás tarde. Entonces le dije, ‘ Mejor voy a trabajar, voy a comprar coca, voy a vender aquí, voy a trabajar en negocio.’ Así nomás diciendo me vine, y hasta ahora no he regresado, porque no me había hallado en mi casa, pues (106).

Aurelia’s narrative pivots around her desire for self-creation. Her search for employment and experience as a domestic worker is punctuated by her relentless struggle to escape structures of oppression in a patriarchal society. Though she maps the precarious nature of her own past and future (which as she reveals towards the end of the account, includes a daughter), she insists on treading forward despite the numerous setbacks. As can be noted below, her position as an optimist never waivers, demonstrating her claim to agency. For Aurelia, participation in the public sphere or *negocio*, as she phrases it, depends on the assistance of her child’s father. Otherwise, she would be forced into domestic labor:

Ahora quisiera entrarme a la escuela, entonces estoy pensando en conseguir un cuarto para el otro año y voy a trabajar. Estoy pensando, si el hombre me pasa alimentación de mi chiquita, yo trabajaría aunque sea en negocio. En el mercado también puedo trabajar y si no me pasa manutención, lo mismo de empleada trabajaría nomás (110-111).

The personal accounts, like the one just examined, derive from Peruvian workers. This is a detail that was not necessarily scrutinized in-depth by Poniatowska. In her essay, she takes a brief moment to evaluate Peruvian society as a social structure and culture that was by far more discriminatory than many Mexican regions, “Si México es colonial, Perú es feudal” (Luz y luna 124). However,

in order to avoid broad assumptions and generalizations, it is important to recognize socio-historical specificities when attempting to understand the numerous narratives in this ethnographic project. The urban culture of Mexico City and Peru may share significant similarities, but the political unrest experienced in Peru, especially with the tensions between military campaigns and the insurgency produced by *Sendero luminoso* or The Shining Path, made the region particularly unique from roughly 1974 to 1992.

Peter Winn describes the Shining Path as a highly propagandistic and violent movement that sought to act as a “revolutionary vanguard *for* the masses” (538), staking its claim on indigenous support in order to legitimize its leaders’ desire and ascent to power. Throughout this time, the Shining Path and its rigidly Maoist ideology manipulated the resentments and aspirations of Peru’s poor and largely indigenous majority, giving way to violent military backlashes by armed forces, which often erupted in massacres and disappearances of indigenous people (541). As such, many indigenous women were caught in the crossfire of these human rights violations. Many families, fleeing both of these repressive campaigns, moved and relocated to the relative security of coastal cities (541).

The women in this project are therefore connected in various ways to this intense social unrest. Interestingly, given their confinement to the domestic sphere, their narratives serve to explore the development of power dynamics in these closed quarters. Moreover, their narratives may allow us to see the ways extensive

violence and abuse experienced by Peruvian men in the public sphere translated into the lives of women in private arenas.

The account of Tomasa, for example, recalls the life of uncertainty that began for her at the age of fourteen when she was left in the care of a female friend of the family from Puno. At the time, her mother had been appealing the loss of her family's land alone, and without the support of her husband or anyone else. Tomasa's caretaker agreed to take her in and pay her 40 *soles* for the domestic assistance she provided in the home—an income that she reports was never paid. Instead, she was met with treacherous treatment, including corporal punishment and starvation while being subjected to humiliating practices:

Me pegaba, me jaloneaba de los cabellos, sus hijos no hacían caso, se revolcaban en el suelo y ensuciaban sus faldas y entonces tenía que estar parada de un pie por una hora como castigo. De cualquier cosa tenía que estar arrodillada o parada de un pie nomás. Así me hacía, y me pegaba y por castigo no me daba de comer (133).

Likewise for Sara, the physical abuse she experienced began in childhood by the hands of a woman whom, as she notes, had at some point in her life also been a domestic worker (172). Sara had been under this mistress's care since she was a toddler, and was therefore unable to recall with certainty how or why she came to be under her guardianship. In her account, she tells of the solitude and abandonment that permeated her everyday life, sharing the messages that were shaping her world at a young age:

Cuando no podía hacer bien alguna cosa, cocinar o cuidar a la criatura, como era chiquilla pues, ella me decía: "Tú no tienes a nadie, yo te puedo matar y te boto al campo, a mí no me interesa tu vida (174).

One of Sara's early memories as an eight-year-old girl centers on an incidence of theft. She had learned to "steal" *soles* from her caretaker, she says, out of hunger. Once she was caught, she was taken to the police station where the woman had hoped to meet a friend who would charge her. However, a guard thwarted her intentions and turned her away. In retaliation, the caretaker undressed Sara at home, placed her in a bath of cold water, and proceeded to beat her, leaving her entire body covered in blood.

Honorata, who at the time of the interview had just turned fourteen, describes her relationship with a mistress within a similar framework of torture, brutal attacks and cruelty:

Siempre me pegaba cuando estábamos en campo. Me ha pelado mi mano y mi brazo con agua hervida. Mira, está todo pelado. Después otra vez me he tardado cogiendo agua, no podía llenar: "¿Toda la mañana has tardado para llenar agua?", diciendo. Cerró la puerta e hizo calentar el cuchillo sobre el primus harto rato hasta que esté rojo, rojo. "¡No me metas!" grité, pero estaba cerrada la puerta pues, y me metió el cuchillo en el muslo. Eso después solito ha sanado (204).

It was only due to another incident on Christmas Day, she recalls, when the woman struck her with an electric iron across the face that Honorata discovered an opportunity to escape. Honorata was rushed to the hospital where she was told that she was in danger of losing her sight. The woman came searching for her, begging her to return home. It was in this convalescent state that Honorata, feeling support from the nurses and doctors, refused. A doctor, she reports, proceeded to contact el *Sindicato* or the domestic worker's union. Honorata had been out of the hospital for only two days before participating in the interview.

As the series of testimonies explored above show, the women never explicitly delineate sharp differences in race, or even class, between themselves and their mistresses. Instead, it often appears that open conflict and friction, or even overt physical coercion and violence, is produced on a basis of opportunity. These deleterious actions are fundamentally grounded on the women's lack of representation and provisional position of vulnerability.

However, this does not mean that the nature of interlocking subject positions of gender, race, and class are irrelevant here. On the contrary, the details of these relationships from Peru demonstrate that power relations are also developed in instances that transcend these three important identity categories. Many of the testimonies, for example, include the position of age in these oppressive dynamics. As such, a process of 'othering' is contextualized, relational, and consequently in flux. A subject's experience as a victim of oppression, in this case, is not essentialized.

Gutierrez includes a footnote in Honorata's testimony that begins to explore women's multiple subject positions and their possible implications:

¿A qué se debe la saña que la patrona demuestra hacia su empleada? Se podría emitir como hipótesis que se debe a un triple complejo. En primer lugar, por el machismo imperante, la mujer se siente poco segura de su esposo ante otra mujer casi siempre más joven, que ella ve como una rival potencial. En segundo lugar, dentro de una sociedad jerarquizada, la patrona intenta afirmar su status por todos los medios y en particular mediante la distancia que la separa de su empleada. Conviene entonces humillarla, tenerla 'baja.' Y finalmente, al no sentirse muy segura de ser reconocida como 'blanca,' de 'sangre azul,' 'descendiente de los españoles,' la mejor forma de afirmarse como tal, es tener a su lado a otra persona que, por contraste, sea chola, india. Se le puede

llegar a tener un verdadero odio étnico. En el fondo, resulta cómodo tener a su lado a una persona en quien desfogarse (204).

Gutierrez's hypothesis proposes stimulating ideas regarding mistress attitudes.

Among these, the question of dehumanization resonates profoundly. In this manner, domination reflects a subject's ability to exert a form of control over another. Gone unchecked, this exercise can gravitate toward absolute tyranny.

Further, given the hierarchy that these scenarios present in the home, it is possible that mistresses of a more ambiguous, perhaps *mestiza*, background may seek to dominate an indigenous woman more explicitly and overtly. The subjugation of an indigenous woman to such a humiliating extent would confirm a difference between the two that would perhaps be less visible and perceptible to the indigenous woman and to others in society. In this sense, the indigenous and dark-skinned workers not only serve as a labor force, they also fulfill a role.

Elena Poniatowska: Between Empowerment and Appropriation

Elena Poniatowska begins her essay "Presentación al lector mexicano" by citing Simone Weil, a French philosopher and social activist (1909-1943). According to Poniatowska, Weil understood the end of starvation and hunger as one of humanity's eternal obligations: "una de las obligaciones eternas a favor del ser humano es no dejarlo sufrir de hambre" (7). Indeed, as Jorgenson notes, Weil's philosophy regarding compassion for the poor and downtrodden was a "decisive influence on the Mexican's writers social thought" (55). Through a degree of influence from Weil, who spoke of ways to look at others and attend to them "in

their concrete specificity” (Teuber 223), Poniatowska forges an interest for social justice and equality. Rather than avoiding, turning away, and ignoring the afflictions of the exploited—acts which, as Weil contends, the privileged are at liberty to do⁴—Poniatowska engages with poverty, attempting to bring critical attention to the injustices that occur mundanely and without consequence. In this quest to ‘speak for’ the other, however, Poniatowska seems to encounter a slippery slope where social commitment crosses a patronizing threshold.

Clearly inspired by the numerous testimonies presented in Ana Gutierrez’s ethnographic project, Poniatowska speaks about indigenous women with a concern for the hardships many face as domestic workers. However, while quoting fragments of the women’s interviews, she often defines all indigenous women’s personalities and experiences as indistinct, “El miedo los tulle, los balda, les impide hacerse oír. Lo contraen desde que abandonan el campo y llegan a la ciudad” (9). In this case, the ‘them’ she uses is also masculine, implying yet another abstraction: indigenous men share in the same experiences. Thus, she not only homogenizes indigenous women—she creates a racial category as well.

The timidity and fear that Poniatowska ascribes to indigenous people is intriguing considering her personal relationships with maids. As Jorgenson notes, Poniatowska was raised with a Mexican nanny and several servants with whom she

⁴ In her essay “Creative Confusion,” Beth E. Jorgenson examines this point by citing the following fragment from Weil’s essay “Human Personality:” “Thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death. A stag advancing voluntarily step by step to offer itself to the teeth of a pack of hounds is about as probable as an act of attention directed towards a real affliction, which is close at hand, on the part of a mind which is free to avoid it” (85).

formed close emotional bonds, and learned regional Spanish from. In this manner, Jorgensen states:

Indigenous or *mestiza* women, recently displaced from the countryside to the urban environment, Magdalena Castillo and her cohorts taught Elena Poniatowska her first Spanish, their own popular Mexican Spanish with its grammatical deviations and regional vocabulary. These bonds—emotional and linguistic—have trained Elena Poniatowska’s ear to detect familiar, telling tones in voices others hear as noise, nuisance, or nothing (57).

Here, Jorgensen highlights Poniatowska’s contact with subaltern practices, given Poniatowska’s intimate relationships with nannies and servants. But does this level of rapport allow us to understand Poniatowska as a cultural or linguistic intermediary? And, at what point does Poniatowska’s search to ‘fill the silence’ for those she considers ‘afraid’ and ‘timid’ become a silencing effect?

To explore these questions, it is perhaps helpful to revisit the style of representation chosen by Rosario Castellanos. As discussed in chapter one, Castellanos also forged relationships with servants and brought those experiences to public attention. But unlike Poniatowska, Castellanos developed her discourse within an introspective framework. In Castellanos’ approach, the representation of indigenous women in domestic labor was structured in a limited fashion with attention to specificity.

Moreover, she frequently highlighted her inability to fully understand or reach a level of identification with the maids that had been by her side since childhood. For Castellanos, the distance between she and her maids was never reconciled. Instead, she emphasized the subjugation of maids as a situation concretely anchored by her personal life of privilege. As I contended in chapter one,

it is precisely by doing so in such a candid manner that her work becomes subversive, slyly disrupting social norms. It is also from this foundation that her work serves to reveal the differing relationships women have to domestic work, and draws forth socio-economic standing as another basis for assigning domestic labor.

Still, although I suggest that Castellanos is keen to uncover women's multiple subject positions—bringing to bear tensions between privileged and underprivileged women—it is also true that her autobiographical essays do not dwell on the intersecting experience of race. Poniatowska, in contrast, frequently stresses the compounding connection between poverty, indigenous women, and *el servicio* or servanthood. This is evident in the following fragment:

Los pobres son simplemente “los otros”, la carne de cañón, los pelados, los perros que se meten entre las piernas y les impiden caminar, los accidentes del camino, los condenados de antemano, los indios, la plebe, los “jodidos”, el coro oscuro y mugriento de esclavos, “el servicio.” Porque de esa masa prieta, chaparra y anónima salen los criados, peones acasillados, hombres y mujeres, ancianos y niños sobre quien descansa el buen funcionamiento de la hacienda, hombres encorvados, manos y pies amaestrados, trotecito indio, cabeza gacha, ojos taimados, panzas hinchadas, que los dueños en su infinita miopía confunden con masedumbre y quietud. Los grandes latifundistas cavan en esta arcilla lodos que no puede ser más que doméstica. Con la mano la aplanan, le dan forma y la ponen a secar al sol. Cuando se resquebraja la tiran. ¿Que otro destino pueden tener los cántaros rotos? (9)

For Poniatowska, domestic labor is not only gendered or a question of class privilege, it is also a private labor sector that tends to construct racial hierarchies.

Although she focuses on this significant point, which was not comprehensively explored by Castellanos, Poniatowska's approach produces a number of ambiguous effects. It could be argued, for instance, that the extensive list

of pejorative terms she uses in the fragment performs a verbal assault on indifference towards racial discrimination. Or, one could say her strategy presents an irony by expressing concern within a register that reinforces hierarchical race relations. In this fashion, the text signals the perpetuation of racial prejudice through popular Mexican oral culture, given that words such as “la plebe” and “jodido” are slang references that do not normally circulate in print.

Poniatowska’s writing, therefore, addresses the unguarded and unattended practice of everyday conversation. In this regard, her criticism becomes counter-hegemonic on at least two levels: it attacks the public’s indifference to racial discrimination, and it points to the ways intellectuals may disengage with the oral culture of the masses. Thus, Poniatowska amplifies the sordid nature of thoughts that have paradoxically become both familiar and invisible, since the lack of attention to popular stereotypes allows for their circulation with a large degree of impunity. Therefore, we can consider Poniatowska’s diatribe as an effort to desensitize readers to these negative perceptions. As can be noted by her last rhetorical phrase “¿Que otro destino pueden tener los cántaros rotos?” Poniatowska mockingly implies the existence of a consensus in her readers who, knowingly or unknowingly, have become complicit to the social order.

Interestingly, Poniatowska returns to edit this particular section of her essay in her second publication of the text, Luz y luna, las lunitas (1994). She includes several additional paragraphs that continue to emphasize racial discrimination. As noted below, she does not mince words as she affirms that *all* maids are indigenous:

Todas son totonacas, mazahuas, mixtecas, Chontales, otomíes, mazatecas, choles, purepechas. Todas son indígenas. Hay pocas tarahumras porque Chihuahua está lejos. México, Bolivia, Perú, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, los países de población indígena son surtidores de sirvientes y de artesanía popular (Luz y luna 119).

This particular addition to her original essay appears to display a desire to solidify her central argument. However, one can still consider that although it may be fair to suggest that domestic labor is largely racialized, given that indigenous minorities occupy the vast majority of these domestic positions, it is also important to acknowledge that *mestizas* and non-indigenous women form part of this laboring body.

We witness this strategy once again as Poniatowska proceeds to describe social divisions in terms of those “above” and “below.” This description begins by referencing the *Le Mexique pays a trois etages* (1955) or Mexico, a Country with Three Floors by the Belgian writer, Albert t'Serstevens, and the portrait of society rendered by Carlos Fuentes in La región más transparente and Artemio Cruz.

Poniatowska suggests that the three texts reveal noteworthy representations of Mexican society as a racially stratified reality:

Un escritor francés, A. de tsertevens, escribió *Le Mexique, pays à trois étages* y colocó a los indígenas en el sótano. En el piso alto estaban los alemanistas (era el sexenio de Miguel Alemán) y los iniciativas privados, águilas descalzas en hacer fortuna en nuestro cuerno de la abundancia. ¡Y claro está, también los mil millonarios que produjo la Revolución Mexicana y que Carlos Fuentes retrata en sus dos mejores novelas: *La región más transparente* y *La muerte de Artemio cruz*. En el segundo piso se encontraban estirando la cabeza todos los que aspiraban al primero, la clase media balbuciente que quería vivir como en Estados Unidos y en el tercero, el pueblo, la pura raza. Este México del sótano es el de los esclavos, el de la carne de cañón, carne de presidio, el que no produce y por lo tanto sólo sirve para servir a los demás (119).

Through this lens, society is perceived in terms of types, with each “floor,” as phrased here, representing its own homogenous community. Thus, it proposes a way to read reality as a system neatly catalogued into inviolable categories of assumptions. Thus, the “othering” expressed here is dialectal, leaving the descriptions of marginalized and dominant groups to conform to a logic of simple, unvarying contrasts. Therefore, the representation of race relations finds a strong basis in exclusion.

In what can be perceived as an attempt to lend greater specificity to her argument, Poniatowska intersperses seventeen photographs of indigenous women and children throughout the 1994 republication of her essay. In fact, it is a strategy she takes with all the essays included in Luz y luna, las lunitas. This measure affords the compilation with a unique visual resonance. It should be noted that while many of the photographs included in the compilation are taken by Graciela Iturbide, most of the images found in Poniatowska’s essay are from the archives of *El Día*, a Mexico City newspaper, with the exception of the last image, which is from El *Instituto Nacional de Protección a la Infancia* or the National Institute of Child Protection.

The images undoubtedly serve to complement Poniatowska’s criticism; however, none of them identify a maid or relate to either the domestic sphere or domestic duties. For example, five snapshots are simply close-ups of indigenous women’s faces, and underneath each of these portraits are titles that consist of two names. In one case, there is the title *Ascención o Romanita*, in another *Emilia o*

Isabel. As such, Poniatowska's gesture, which plausibly aims to put a face behind a name, becomes ironic. The dual names not only produce a distancing effect, leaving the women to remain simply anonymous, it also allows the image to become text. Because it is situated in a blended space of image/essay, the anonymity becomes a reductive sign suggesting that these women could represent any and all indigenous domestic workers.

Other images inserted in the essay depict indigenous women dressed in provincial clothing, at times swaddling children or otherwise walking in groups with children throughout the streets of Mexico City. Thus, while the content of the portraits alone fails to reference domesticity, their insertion in the essay serves to capture the migrant experience and the tense adjustment from rural to urban spaces. In relation to the essay, the portraits convey domestic labor as an allusion—a looming outcome for newly migrated indigenous women in the midst of a transition.

At one point, Poniatowska describes the air of condescension that can often define countryside manners in relation to urban culture, calling attention to the way Mexico's rural tradition in popular imagination is simultaneously signified as 'backwards' and indigenous:

Están acostumbrados al bueno días, buenas tardes del pasito menudo y cabizbajo de los que cruzan en la brecha en el campo, el buenas noches murmurado al atardecer cuando regresan de la parcela, y de pronto se encuentran con la ciudad rota en todas partes, la gente también rota, la gesticulación. "Yo no voy a salir porque todos me testerean." En el Defe alguien que saluda no mueve a respeto sino a risa, es un payo, un provinciano, un indio al que bajaron del cerro a tamborazos (114).

The last line of this fragment may, in some ways, seem autobiographical. As a fellow urban dweller in “*El Defe*” and as a non-indigenous woman, the passive construction of the sentence includes and implicates Poniatowska in the disparaging beliefs she brings to light. As such, she would appear to reveal these notions as though they were confessions.

However, if examined further, it is evident that Poniatowska situates herself somewhere in between these assertions. She appears to straddle both high and low cultural spheres as a privileged ‘insider’ with unique insight. In which case, she fashions herself as a transparent mediator, assessing and merging a confluence of voices.

With this approach, Mexico City becomes another object of study in Poniatowska’s essay. She paints a grim picture of the urban metropolis, describing its deceptive allure as individuals are uprooted from rural corners of the nation and drawn to the city’s hub in search of employment. Mexico City, she suggests, renders its own antithesis: posh locales, upscale shops, and segregated bureaus lurch forward into modernity, leaving the trace of racial stratification in their headway. Indeed, she creates a portrait of urban culture that shares a common thread with many metropolitan areas both in and outside of Latin America. Poniatowska’s attention focuses specifically on the contradictions present in places such as el Perisur, portraying it as a synecdoche of Mexico City. She notes how the urban metropolis becomes both a lure and a trap for those who believe that a *Capitalino* lifestyle is fascinating and tantalizing. As such, she highlights the way urban life is

imbued with sentiments of superiority. It is commonly understood as a better life from which notions of modernity and sophistication are derived.

What is missed in the definition, however, is the construction of polarities. A racial divide remains hidden in the rural-urban dichotomy. Poniatowska touches upon this, suggesting that rural indigenous women are seduced by the idea of being able to partake in this “improved experience,” regardless of any possible job prospects that would improve their socio-economic status, “La ilusión de una muchacha es salir de su pueblo y una vez que ha conocido al Defe, vivir en él, aunque sea de sirvienta” (Luz y luna 134).

Poniatowska also carefully demarcates the demand for domestic labor as a condition that works in harmony with the influx of specifically *young* women into the city. As the job announcement Se necesita muchacha implies, youth becomes a standard requisite, a phenomenon that gives way to terms such as: *muchacha or chacha, criada, niña, gata*—all pejorative labels widely recognized by the cultural mainstream in Mexico, as well as other Latin American countries. The term *gata*, in particular, suggests that a maid may not be much more than a pet and/or otherwise sexual prey, as mentioned by a popular saying in Mexico, “Para carne buena y barata, la gata.” This imagery in popular imagination affirms the reality of rape as an open secret. Numerous domestic workers are subject to sexual violations, and the majority of these incidents go unreported and uncharged.

Also, given that the nature of these domestic positions usually span numerous years, female employees remain under a status of dependency long past

any state of maturation. Consequently, regardless of age, in popular imagination these women are characterized as subjects eluding adulthood. A maid is perpetually regarded as a young adolescent or a *criada*—that is, permanently under another’s tutelage, and continuously trained to assimilate and comply with codes of conduct enforced by their mistresses. Therefore, these expressions that infantilize women speak directly to the expectations of obedience placed upon new hires.

Poniatowska describes the hiring of domestic workers as a practice in Mexico that traditionally involved agreements of guardianship. A rural family that wished to improve their young daughter’s prospects would be enticed to entrust their daughter to a well-to-do family as a housekeeper. The guardian family in turn would agree to educate and instruct her. Thus understood as a system of patronage, young women relinquished control and autonomy to the authority exerted by the head of household, which in most instances fell upon *la señora* or the lady of the house.

The benefits of such arrangements were, and have been, notoriously one-sided. Given the exigencies placed on live-in maids, there is often little or no time for education and the acquisition of skills that could lead to alternative job prospects. Instead, conditions of exploitation are forged under the guise of protection and guidance. In a system of patronage, there is a sense of ‘ownership’ and absolute authority that infringes upon the worker’s personal space. This leads to a breakdown in divisions between the private and public realm of life.

By virtue of this erasure domestic labor remains in a tenuous front, a subject I explore further in chapter four. Poniatowska points to this phenomenon as she contrasts between a live-in and live-out maid, noting that regardless of the flexibility in a domestic worker's schedule, the idea that a maid can somehow transition out of this field of work is deceptive:

En México, las muchachas de “entrada por salida” poco a poco se han especializado; son la lavandera, la “señora que guisa,” es decir, vienen a la casa por unas horas a desempeñar un trabajo que si no necesita estudios superiores requiere de conocimiento y de eficacia. A las cuatro o cinco horas, según su competencia, cobran “sus horas,” se despiden y se van a su casa o a bailar si les de gana. En cambio la muchacha “de planta” lo mismo sirve para un barrido que para un fregado, su competencia sólo le es reconocida por el núcleo familiar y languidece frente a la estufa o el lavado siempre desesperantes, siempre monótonos, el llamado “quehacer” que sólo es tomado en cuenta cuando no se hace (Luz y luna 134-135).

With the lack of mobility made invisible, an individual's permanence in a domestic line of work carries a social stigma. Since housework is understood as unskilled and menial, the women who perform these tasks are often viewed as intellectually deficient as well. In these circumstances, a subject's potential remains in the realm of the unknown, and consequently misconstrued as nonexistent—except perhaps to those who are cognizant of their individual subjectivity. As Poniatowska notes “su competencia sólo le es reconocida por el núcleo familiar.” (Luz y luna 118)

Another large part of this social stigma develops from the social construction of domestic labor as gendered and, for the most part, unpaid. As Bridget Anderson notes, the social and economic contribution generated by the practice is downgraded when society understands domestic work as unproductive (12). In this sense,

housework becomes a non-job, and as such, it generates the devaluation of the task itself and those who perform it.

Therefore, it is important to consider how domestic work, in relation to capital, is reproductive labor—that is, labor that is part and parcel to a capitalistic system, and not outside of it. Friedrich Engels interprets such a relation by stating:

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of substance, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species (71-72).

Although not easily discernable, the domestic service industry generates a surplus of value for the State by masking its inadequate supply of social services. Ana Gutierrez notes this well in the following fragment:

Gracias a la trabajadora del hogar, el Estado minimiza los servicios colectivos (especialmente en lo que se refiere a guarderías infantiles, comedores, lavanderías). Su presencia permite a una parte de las mujeres trabajar, ganando un sueldo sin proporción con el que dan a la empleada, y a la otra parte descansar. ¡Tremendo potencial improductivo y reaccionario! (Se necesita 91)

Instead, in the current system, indigenous women subsist as commodities. They buttress other non-indigenous women's leisure and freedom from domestic chores. This leads to precarious relations whereby everyday interactions between mistresses and workers can evoke dehumanizing effects in the creation of racial stereotypes. In several occasions, Poniatowska portrays this issue in her essay by assuming the voice of an everyday housewife, "Ay, no sabes cómo traigo las manos porque se me fue mi chichimeca un mes y tengo las uñas hechas un verdadero asco,

qué desastre, me urge un manicure pero a gritos, ahora que tengo una voy a ir al salón” (Luz y luna 118).

Poniatowska ties this phenomenon to a lack of citizenship experienced by indigenous people. In her opinion, the existence and presence of *campesinos*, domestic employees, and in general all service workers, points to a history of oppression, or *un México oscuro*. This expression conveys their obscurity due to a lack of political representation, and their inherent similarities as communities born from neglected southern indigenous regions in Mexico. For Poniatowska, indigenous peoples across Mexico are often disenfranchised, social pariahs that are forcefully and chaotically tossed into the future by chance—a matter for which she sardonically remarks: ¿México para los mexicanos? (Luz y luna 173).

As workers largely relegated to an informal labor sector, these individuals subsist as though they were out of place and time: “Aún sin salir de México, han sido moralmente desarraigados, exiliados y admitidos de nuevo dentro de su propio geografía, tolerados a título de carne de cañón, carne de trabajo” (Luz y luna 174). They are a sector of society roughly “reinstated,” as Poniatowska states, because they are out-of-sync with what became the process of nation building—the ‘imagined community’ of *mestizos*, which continued to perpetuate the notion of a racial problem, *el problema indio*. In this respect indigenous groups appear to be “tolerated,” for they did not form part of the new paradigm of nation, united under a notion of common origin, customs and language.

Instead, given the equation of *Lo mexicano* with *el mestizo*, indigenous groups were confronted with the choice to assimilate to the dominant culture in a process viewed as *blanqueamiento*, or whitening in both a racial and cultural sense (Katerí Hernández 20). It was precisely in the effort to homogenize the Mexican population under the premise of an all-encompassing race that the political representation of these minority groups was forfeited.

Ultimately, Poniatowska reveals intriguing points concerning the construction of race and nation. Her writing pioneers an endeavor that broadens the terms of political debate by unraveling the ways gender, race, and class are relationally constructed in the domestic sphere through domestic labor. Her work sheds light on these workers' lives and experiences, for they are often subject to invisibility—a concept I continue to explore and develop in chapter three.

CHAPTER THREE

SUBJECT TO INVISIBILITY

“Recuerdo que una tarde, como oyera un leve ruido en el cuarto vecino al mío, pregunté en voz alta: “¿Quién anda por ahí?”. Y la voz de una criada recién llegada de su pueblo contestó: “No es nadie señor, soy yo.”

-Octavio Paz, “Máscaras mexicanas”
(1950)

In 2002, Daniela Rossell’s collection of photographs titled *Ricas y famosas* is published for the first time in book form¹. The work consists of nearly 80 photographs in high gloss and vibrant color. None of these photographs include titles or pagination, and the images range in dimension with the largest size being an 11x17 inch centerfold. As the title of the work suggests, several of the photographs in the series appear to feature portraits of wealthy and famous women.

However, upon closer examination, it is also evident that approximately 41 domestic workers are deliberately and strategically placed within the camera frame. In many instances, there is a woman occupying the center of the image while a domestic worker appears off angle but within focus. For instance, roughly one quarter into the book there is a portrait of a woman and a butler in a living room, seemingly enacting everyday activities (Figure 1). The position and pose of the woman in relation to the butler speaks to an

¹ The work is published through Madrid: Turner Publicaciones

interaction in progress: the woman lounges on a sofa while the butler is prepared to hand her an item. Under this premise, it seems as though the camera captures a familiar, mundane scene. Certainly any audience would agree: a domestic worker provides their employer with many forms of assistance. Nevertheless, the representation of this act creates an interesting visual tension.



Figure 1: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosas** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

It is clear that the moment captured in the image is far from candid. The woman is fastidiously groomed, a great deal of attention and effort has been given to her hair and make-up, and her wardrobe consists of a long red gown with silver heels. Her appearance is, thus, hardly a reflection of ordinary, daily attire. In addition, she fixes her gaze intently into the camera,

slightly puckering her lips with her mouth half open, and tilting her head to the right, just above her shoulder, revealing a seductive stare. With her right leg tucked up behind her, elongating her torso, her right arm embraces the length of her thigh, highlighting the feminine curvature of her physique.

It is clear that her pose mimics the portrait behind her. As such, she does nothing to address the domestic worker standing to her left only a few feet away. He, in turn, appears disconnected from her. The small item he presents is awkwardly placed on a silver platter while his face conveys no emotional expressiveness. Indeed, no actual interaction is taking place between the two. Instead, I suggest the image may reveal a degree of staging that is disconcerting in its exaggeration. It heightens the subjects' bodies as the performance of roles, thus stimulating several questions about housekeeping as an institution: if domestic workers are so vital to the everyday operations of a grand, luxurious household, why do they seem so 'out of place' in these photographs? What do the images tell us about these workers in relation to these women of privilege? And what does the spatial location of their bodies—coupled with their gestures, poses, and uniforms—signal to viewers with regard to their general space of employment?

This chapter begins to address these questions by first contextualizing *Ricas y famosas*. I review the critical attention surrounding the work since its public debut. In my findings, it appears that criticism in Mexico and the United States has often focused on the representations of the privileged

women, leaving the representations of the domestic staff as a marginal point of discussion, if examined at all. In response to this tendency, I proceed to establish *Ricas y famosos* as an artist's book in order to expound on Rossell's representational strategies.

In my analysis, I suggest that the structural elements of Rossell's work achieve multiple effects. By drawing from a post-colonial feminist perspective, I argue that the work exposes the production of invisibility in the intersection between the 'male' and 'imperial' gaze, demonstrating how each may collude with one another. In addition, I suggest that the work allows for a new reading of the domestic sphere as a Foucauldian 'house of certainty' in which the subjugation of the other is achieved through panoptic visual mastery. By doing so, the work allows viewers to understand the experience of invisibility as discipline over the body.

Finally, to conclude this chapter, I situate the publication of *Ricas y famosos* in the context of other similar works. From Octavio Paz to José Joaquín Blanco and Ramiro Gómez, there have been several literary and visual portraits speaking to a notion of invisibility regarding domestic workers in Mexico and the United States. I briefly survey these works to establish my reading of *Ricas y famosos* as a contribution to this broader discourse.

Hidden in Plain Sight

Before publishing *Ricas y famosos*, Daniela Rossell presented a select number of these portraits as art exhibits. In fact, several of the photographs shared at these exhibits were not included in the final book form. It is possible, then, that this particular style of presentation may have influenced initial public reaction and interpretation of Rossell's work. Still, it is also true that many of the photographs featured at these exhibits included images of domestic workers. Despite this fact, the vast majority of critics that attended to the representation of domestic workers since the work's debut did so in a limited fashion.

In 2000, Rossell's photographs were presented for the first time as a solo art exhibit at the Green Naftali Gallery in New York with the title, *All the Best Names Are Taken*. Her photographs appeared again at the same gallery in 2002 as *Ricas y famosos* under the theme *Third World Blondes Have More Fun*. Following these exhibits, critics from magazines such as *Art Nexus*, *ArtNews*, *Artext*, *Flash Art International*, *Art US*, *Art in America*, and *Art on Paper* reviewed her work with moderate interest (Gambis 73).

David Hunt, a New York correspondent for *Artext*, offers an example of this initial attention. In his article, he suggests that the photographs reflect "the lurid sets for a Telemundo soap opera crossed with the sprawling tchotchkes [trinkets] of an East Village bric-a-brac store" (21). For Hunt, the images convey the status of "the global nouveau riche." He views the portraits

of these women as the embodiment of excess and over-consumption. They are, as he says, “sandwiched between the luxury of trophies of an aspiring upper class.” He proceeds to insist that amid the clutter, their bodies read as “another inanimate, if seductive fixture in a highly arranged tableau of objects [...]” (22).

After *Ricas y famosas* was published in 2002, the mistresses of these households would remain a dominant point of interest. Juan Villoro, a Mexican critic and writer for *El país semanal*, for instance, focused on the women’s garish outfits, excessive make-up, and gaudy décor, defining the collection as “a fairy tale drenched in lysergic acid” or an “apotheosis of bad taste.”² For many other critics, questions regarding the working class emerged only in relation to the palatial interior of these homes. These extravagant spaces formed an obvious, nonetheless, disturbing contrast with the poverty burdening a significant number of people dwelling in Mexico City.

Over time, as information regarding the women’s identity was revealed by various sources, the attention to this egregious social disparity grew in intensity throughout Mexico and the United States. Many of the women were linked to high officials in the PRI. Several were the wives and daughters of politicians in the notorious party that had amassed fortunes while running ‘unopposed’ for 71 years. With these facts made public, the work (at least in part) reflected a lamentable reality. For many, it represented the proverbial

² Juan Villoro, “Ricas, famosas y excesivas,” *El país semanal*, no. 1,341, June 9, 2002: pp.42-43, qtd. in Gallo 49.

insult to injury, showcasing the political corruption that reigned at the expense of the masses. Cuahtémoc Medina notes the “singular interpretation” that seemed to reign with the work’s debut, especially through popular Mexican television news shows:

It was as if every time a journalist referred to the growing gap in the distribution of national wealth, government corruption, or the ill-fated rescue of the Mexican bank system and the huge public debt that it generated, the programmers felt compelled to rub Rossell’s images into the audience’s collective eyes, as if they had achieved status of an universally accepted signifier with respect to the moral dimension of Mexico’s social and economic crisis (311).

Lorenzo Meyer, a political analyst and columnist of *Reforma*, a Mexico City based newspaper, combines this argument with statistical analysis. *Ricas y famosas*, he insists, “is one of the most eloquent accounts of the rich Mexicans’ irresponsible and irrelevant behavior towards their nation,” a statement he follows with numerous statistics such as, “43 percent of the total population lives under the poverty level” (qtd in Gallo 51). Juan Villoro echoes this sentiment in his own critique, suggesting that the work frames “the family portrait of the great revolutionary family, the oligarchy that turned the country into a corporation while mouthing social-hypocritical slogans” (qtd in Gallo 49).

Reviews similar to Meyer and Villoro’s point of view undoubtedly raised valid points regarding Mexico’s culture of corruption characterization. However, these often emotionally charged arguments fail to engage the technical aspects of Rossell’s work. Among these aspects lies Rossell’s connection to the governing elite as a critical factor in the project’s execution.

She began shooting these photographs in 1994 through a network of friends and relatives. In time, with the success of delighted customers, her operations expanded beyond Mexico City to include Acapulco, Monterrey, and New York. This process was certainly a rare opportunity to explore a private and exclusive world. As a trusted photographer, Rossell established a valuable rapport with clients—a condition that most likely provided her with creative freedom and compliant subjects. As such, these images could potentially reflect not only Rossell’s photographic techniques, but also the genuine behavior of her models.

In New Tendencies in Mexican Art, Ruben Gallo relies on the ideas of authenticity and transparency in his own interpretation of the photographs. For Gallo, the images offer a window into these women’s true state of mind. In his opinion, the models—so visibly ignorant of their surroundings—appear to suffer from “cultural amnesia.” In several portraits, the women are posed in rooms filled with references to the last hundred years of Mexican history, politics and art; yet, they seemingly ignore the significance of these objects.

In one photograph, for example, a large portrait of Emiliano Zapata serves as a backdrop for a woman whom, while sitting on top of a saddle placed upon a desk, appears to blend signs of masculinity and femininity (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosos** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

Her revealing attire marks a drastic contrast with the stern, masculine qualities evoked in the face of the revolutionary hero. By alluding to the visual archetype of a *charro*,³ however, she seems to bridge that difference with a sense of irony. In an evident parody of the frequent imagery of nationhood as a ‘virile’ institution⁴ (a conceptualization that emerged during and after the Mexican Revolution), she drops the ash of a cigarette in what appears to be a

³ John Mraz provides a careful study of the *charro* in Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity (134-142).

⁴ For more on the construction of virility and machismo in Mexico, see Mathew C. Gutmann’s The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City (240-242).

sign of complete irreverence to that historical conflict. Furthermore, the uncertain identity of the man in the portrait sitting below her functions as yet another challenge to the rhetoric of that rebellion. Although not certain, it is possible that either her husband or father helped sabotage some of the ideals formulated after the Revolution. Thus, by sitting brazenly between these two images, she appears apathetic or naïve to her possible connection with that political process. As Gallo explains, it is as if these women are “blissfully ignorant of the degree to which their own family is responsible for the political, economic, and perhaps even artistic disasters that have plagued the country in the last century” (65).

Throughout his analysis, Gallo relies heavily on the identity of these models, even despite the absence of their names in the work. In this fashion, one of his primary grievances against the collection is its lack of textual references. For Gallo, had the work altered its format and indicated the model’s names and their connection with the government, the photographs might have evoked greater respect and authority among critics. Without the explanatory texts, he insists, the entire collection simply becomes a “tragically missed opportunity:”

If the photographs in “Ricas y famosas” had been carefully organized into thematic sections, if they had been accompanied by texts identifying the models and their links to Mexican history, if the artist would have been more forthcoming about her goals in the project, and if she had chosen a more enlightened title—in short if she had produced an artist’s book and not a coffee-table book—the project could have become one of the most important work of political art in Mexican history (68).

With Gallo's assessment, the collection of photographs would become a frivolous, inconsequential object of leisure—or, as he puts it, a “coffee-book.” However, this perspective diminishes the structural elements of the work, neglecting many significant nuances such as the snapshots of men and the presence of domestic workers. Indeed, although these domestic employees are in plain sight, most critics have elided their presence, inevitably designating these individuals as superfluous and negligible details.

Only recently have a few critics explored the representation of servants with greater interest. For example, Deborah S. Gambs takes note of the positioning of domestic workers as bookends in Rossell's book, questioning (if only briefly) how these subjects may or may not represent themselves (81). David William Foster also considers the representation of servants, suggesting a ‘sexual edge’ discernable in images where we find a mistress positioned in close proximity to a manservant (68). Notwithstanding Foster's comments about a tone of eroticism in some of the photographs, his critical stance regarding certain domestic laborers could be perceived as ambiguous. Though noting a worker's presence in one of the images, for example, he describes the man in question as “the sort of Mexican specimen” that one could expect “to do well with the foreign tourists in any one of the city's many pickup bars” (68). The ambiguity of this description raises conflicting questions of whether it suggests, discloses, or perhaps even criticizes a tendency to homogenize individuals in Mexican society.

Indeed, this chapter responds to the challenge of breaking from tendencies to homogenize or invisibilize subjectivity. Features in Rossell's representational techniques, as I aim to demonstrate, allow us to consider the limits of self-representation available to domestic workers.

Ricas y famosas as an Artist's Book

By considering Rossell's collection of photographs as an artist's book, there is an opportunity to discern the works' capacity to provide a much more sophisticated viewing and reading experience. Though the series is not organized by titles or themes, Rossell's images collectively operate as a complete visual text. Consequently, several features associated with an artist's book genre⁵ are produced, as understood by the field's largest proponents: Johanna Drucker, Keith Smith, and Ulises Carrión. To be clear, there are no concrete definitions provided for the artist's book genre but rather approximations.

As Drucker affirms⁶, the genre is avant-garde in nature, thus intended to be "a highly malleable, versatile form of expression" (Drucker 36). This standard renders the artist's book as an object that, in and of itself, is defined without a formulaic definition. To establish a set of parameters in this artistic

⁵ For more on artist's books in Latin America, see Martha Hellion, Libros de artista. New York: DAP, 2003.

⁶ Drucker's book, The Century of Artists' Books, describes the origin and conceptualization of the Artist's book. However, she notes that South America, as well as other countries, were underrepresented in her field research.

field, the aforementioned artists delineate a set of qualities and characteristics that make the artist's book more identifiable. For these artists, the artist's book is an object that reflects a deconstruction and transformation of the book form into a repository of visual significations that not only redefine what it means to be a book, but also what it means to create, read, and understand it.

The artist's book, therefore, speaks to a new kind of reading experience. In this paradigm, the book complicates what is visual and verbal within a concrete structural space by laying bare the devices of literary or visual strategies, thus forging a "new type of reader." This new point of focus increases awareness of the spectator's role in the creation of meaning—a notion familiar to Carrión,⁷ who puts this dynamic nicely as he compares and contrasts the old art of reading with the new:

One might read old art in the belief that one understands it, and be wrong. [But] Such a misunderstanding is impossible in the new art. You can read only if you understand. In the new art you often do NOT need to read the whole book. The reading may stop at the moment you have understood the total structure of the book. The new art appeals to the ability every man possesses for understanding and creating signs and system of signs (322-23).

Though the names and identities of the models do not appear in Rossell's work, the existing format is all that is essential for a close

⁷ Qtd in Martha Hellion. *Libros de artista*. New York: DAP, 2003. Carrion worked with visual and concrete poetry, which expanded the use of the book as a medium for artistic expression. As he defines Artist's books, he also clarifies that, unlike in the United States, in Latin America Artist's books tend to move away from mass produced art.

examination. What is important, in this case, is that the work appears in book form, bound at one or two points or along one or more edges, thus referencing a codex (Smith 6). According to Keith Smith, a leading authority in the genre of artist's books, it is this binding feature—and not the inclusion of textual references—which determines a fundamental experience of an artist's book. Smith's seminal work regarding this genre, Structure of the Visual Book, provides an excellent technical perspective on artist's books. It offers a wealth of detail describing the reading dynamics created by components including, but not limited to, end sheets, structure, space, imaging, and color.

For Smith, every structural element of an artist's book becomes significant, providing various levels of meaning derived through a personal and temporal kind of interaction. He states, "The book, as object, is intimate, it insists on a one-to-one confrontation: the bookmaker and the viewer" (28). In each instance, the experience is personalized. Individuals may speed through the work, glancing through pages inattentively, or dwell and focus on a select few that pique greater interest. In this way, an artist's book primarily becomes a performed experience where even a basic action, such as turning a page, crafts new associations and can be understood as a "physical sculptural element rather than an incidental activity" (28).

Smith also describes the assorted potential viewing experiences or "readings" an artist's book can provide by and through its images. The images and pictures on display engage the work with a relationship constructed

within it. He explains, “There are no single pictures. A picture does not exist in isolation. Every picture is a compound, or an implied compound picture” (41). Each picture, therefore, reacts upon any other in the work to display its totality. Likewise, through repetition and random referral, an artist’s book can provide a viewer with numerous variations to that totality. Repetition, for example, allows a person to gain clarity of certain aspects that may not be fully comprehensible or appreciated in a single viewing. Random referral, on the other hand, can allow a person to create free associations whereby a “relationship or interaction might appear in the pictures which was not specifically exploited or intended by the picture maker.” (45)

What is apparent from these descriptions is that each aspect within Rossell’s work contributes to its function and establishes the experience of the book as a whole. The subjects’ identities should not register as *missing*, but rather as non-essential elements to the work’s construction. The photographs themselves reveal a plethora of suggestive references to catalyze viewer imagination and deduce information. In this fashion, one of the photographs boasts a view of New York’s Central Park and the famous San Remo apartment buildings. Another presents the Mexican flag in a stained glass window, while others evoke a connection to Mexican culture through symbolic imagery and various choices of wall décor. For example, intriguing references to aspects of Mexican culture are expressed through portraits of Mexican

indigenous peoples, displays of their traditional attire, religious objects, and a large mural featuring a family tree with Spanish surnames.

Moreover, Rossell includes a colophon in her book as a textual reference. It appears after the title-leaf and describes the production notes relevant to the edition. With it, Rossell suggests that an element of authenticity exists in the production of the work, stating: “Las siguientes imágenes muestran escenarios reales. Los sujetos fotografiados están representándose a sí mismos. Cualquier semejanza con la realidad no es un coincidencia.” Consequently, this text sets a tone within the work to prepare the reader and clarify the nature of the photographs. As Smith notes, “The writing is then revealed by the act of experiencing the book and the book becomes part of the writing” (78).

Since the text suggests a sense of authenticity, viewers are directed to a notion of transparency. According to Rossell, the photographed women were not manipulated or compromised, thereby reflecting ‘genuine’ representations. Notwithstanding her statement, the perception of any artist’s book’s image and subject authenticity depends on innumerable factors that culminate in a reader’s overall experience. The fact remains: multiple signs, symbols, and other ingredients within the work remain open to interpretation. As Juan García Ponce explains in his article “La aparición de lo invisible,” an artist may intend to convey a specific message through their work, and yet the structure and order of elements in the composition contain their own potential for communication. He further states:

La verdadera obra de arte no es una suma de elementos formales ordenados de la manera más adecuada para que alcancen la expresión o, por lo menos, no es solamente eso. Lo que la hace posible es algo que nace como resultado de esa paciente o instintiva labor de ordenación; es la presencia del espíritu, la capacidad de esas formas para llevarnos a un más allá contenido en ellas mismas y revelárnoslo (205).

As such, the multitude of significations in a work transcend artist intention because the elements, in and of themselves, often communicate unpredictable or even unimaginable interpretations. This is not to say, however, that the collection of photographs offers an infinite series of interpretations. Rather, as a work proliferates reading experiences, the images also signal what Umberto Eco refers to as “controlled disorder” (65). This controlled system of signs are set into play in such a way that increase or decrease a “quotient of imagination” (59). As Eco explains, a work of art—that is, a work of signs—is an *opera aperta*. As an experience, the *opera aperta* remains incomplete unless, and until, an interaction occurs between the work and a reader.

Furthermore, this interaction is a controlled exchange between the particular signs provided in the work and a person’s point of view. The interpretation of signs are held within these boundaries and avoid what Eco determines to be “no longer a field of possibilities but rather the indistinct, the primary, the inderterminate at its wildest—at once everything and nothing” (91). Smith also alludes to this by stating that, “One type of book will allow

better development over an idea than another” (9). In that sense, a work’s overall thematic scheme provides sufficient limitations to its viewer.

Roland Barthes, who has theorized on semiotics, also dismisses the idea of a “knowable text” (5). Much like Eco, his poststructuralist work sees no originating anchor of meaning behind language or signs, but rather potential for a variety of interpretations. With this in mind, Barthes’ evolving perspective moves away from universal constants hidden behind a sign; instead, it moves to expose a kind of relativism that makes the greatest variety of interpretations the characteristic of an ideal work. Barthes, therefore, positions himself in favor of a work’s revision and reinterpretation. This poststructuralist split between sign and referent (referred to here by Eco and Barthes) appeals to an analogous separation between an author’s intention and the meaning(s) of the text—a break that, in this case, also represents a postmodernist push to vigorously undermine and subvert a systemic and dominant mode of understanding.

Indeed, when *Ricas y famosos* is considered an artist’s book, we can focus on this process of disruption or decentering of systems from two angles. *Ricas y famosos*, on the one hand, challenges certain traditional definitions of a book and the perception of “reading a text.” At the same time, the work’s representational strategies, I argue, opens a space for a postcolonial critique. Beginning with the work’s title, viewers are invited to ‘revise’ the dominant focus of these photographs from the world of affluent women, to the

perspective of the marginalized worker. It is by questioning the function of margin and center that *Ricas y famosas* attends to the experience and developments of colonialism in terms of its past and present effects.

The Colluding Imperial and Male Gaze

Among the most salient features in the structure of *Ricas y famosas* are the images of the domestic staff that bookend the work. The arrangement reveals a visual construction that sets contingency between subjects. To view the work in sequential order, and see the women for which the work was titled, a viewer must first flip past the first photograph of a maid. The arrangement also establishes a symbolic margin. The domestic workers are firmly located in this peripheral space as figures reflecting a fundamental counterpoint from which the nature of privilege is constituted and determined.

Furthermore, the staging of subjects within the photographs themselves illuminates a visual regime of power relations. Several portraits in the book feature female patrons in close proximity to a domestic worker who appears secondary, but nevertheless ‘portrayed.’ As I explore this characteristic, my analysis draws closely from Peter Erickson’s investigation, which plots a relation between the genre of portraiture and the emergence of black identity from the vantage point of a cross-historical perspective. In *Invisibility Speaks: Servants and Portraits in Early Modern Visual Culture*, Erickson discusses the long-term development of black figures in portraiture, providing special attention to Northern Renaissance art and the servant motif. Although the

work focuses on black identity, his approach remains relevant to this study by offering valuable insight into various forms of representation techniques.

In his research, Erickson finds that portraits exhibiting a servant motif are often shaped by paradoxical interrelations of visibility and invisibility (24). In *Ricas y famosas*, this interrelation can be noted in Figure 3. In the photograph, a maid with her back to the viewer is dusting bookshelves in an area that could be described as ‘behind the scenes.’ As such, she yields a “seen-but-not-heard subservience,” thereby appearing invisible as a subject (Erickson 24). The portrait reveals an awkward imbalance, as the maid is simultaneously conspicuous and unobtrusive.

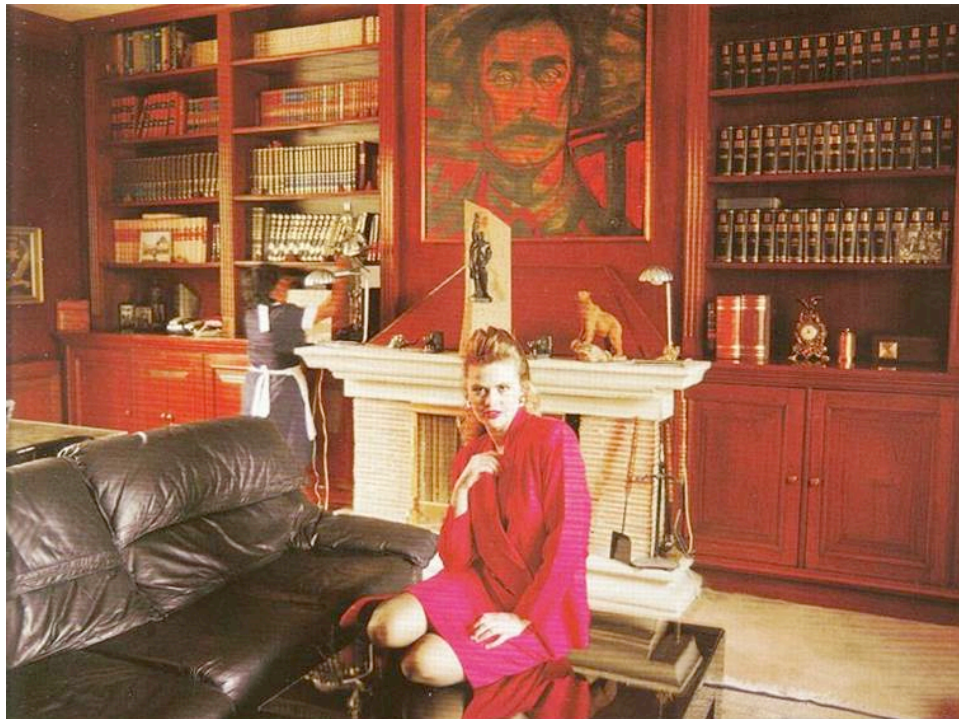


Figure 3: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosas** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

The maid's anomalous position, along with her reduced physical size in contrast to that of the mistress, points to a selective visibility that promotes an acceptance of the maid's status as "visible yet not visible" (Erickson 24). This visual element not only reveals the manner in which the mistress dominates the maid, it demonstrates the way she is defined by that difference. It is as though the display of the maid's body functions as the mistress's antithesis, thus playing an integral role in the imagined community of the wealthy, blond woman.

This relation of power is then made contentious by the strong dissonance displayed in the juxtaposition of the blond woman and the portrait of Zapata in the same color palette. In post-revolutionary Mexico, the image of Zapata garnered numerous significations. Among the ideas diffused through his persona and legacy was the official rhetoric of *mestizaje*, which was employed to ease racial tensions and unify the Mexican nation. Therefore, the relation between Zapata and the contrasts displayed in the women's bodies and positions stresses the failure of those ideals.

Based on the display of subject positions portrayed in these images, we can consider Spivak's theory of *Othering*, especially with regard to the process of definition by exclusion. It bears remembering that Spivak's notion of *Othering* draws from several philosophical and theoretical traditions, including the following: Hegel's master-slave dialectic as developed in The Phenomenology of Spirit; Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex with regard to

gender and other hierarchical differences; Edward Said's research with respect to the Orient; and Jacques Lacan's theory on identity formation, which stresses subjectivity as a construct developed through language and fundamentally gained in the gaze of the powerful (Gingrich 11).

From these theoretical traditions, Spivak develops the concept of *Othering* as a dialectical process enforced by an *imperial gaze*. The *gaze* corresponds to colonial structures of power that, through various discourses, identify, objectify, and subject 'others' to a position of inferiority, thus sustaining prevailing power relations. Dominant identities, in this case, are forged through a system of exclusion and marginalization. In this manner, they are inextricable from those 'others' who serve as a point of contrast or *alterity*. This process is a multidimensional system, touching upon several forms of social differentiation including gender, class, and race.

Hinging on this theoretical framework, I suggest that the inclusion of the domestic staff in Rossell's portraits opens a space to examine the imperial gaze and its intersecting visual structures of dominance. In Figure 4, for example, viewers can explore the collusion of these systems as a woman manipulates her body in an absurd pose. Dressed in a zebra leotard and surrounded by kitschy zebra figurines, she poses on all fours from a zebra themed bed.



Figure 4: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosas** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

Clearly, the imagery attempts to present a cross between a woman and animal. In this respect, the portrait appears to unmask an envy of the wild and untamed. The desire to be ‘animalized’ can be viewed as a defensive move attempting to undermine the male gaze and challenge the strictures of domesticity. In this manner, we bear witness to the surfacing of the repressed. The irony in this act, however, is that the woman manages to reinscribe the dominant male gaze.

Though her pose presents a tongue-in-cheek defiance of patriarchy by presenting a departure from most traditional images of housewives, it falls prey to other conventional trappings. Her bid to escape a position of subordination to men as a ‘subdued, prudent housewife’ slips into other

clichés. Given the bedroom setting and her demeanor, she embodies one particular aspect of the femme fatale: an unbridled sexual appetite.

However, in the peculiar presentation of her transgression, she fails to subversively destabilize male and female power relations. Instead, it is precisely through the male gaze that she becomes eroticized and ultimately controlled. Moreover, the portrait reveals an interesting role reversal by staging a male (it is unclear if he is a domestic worker, a lover, or her husband) towards the edge of the photograph as an active observer. Although in a seated position outside the center of the frame, the man exerts a dominant male gaze into the room, while remaining unconfined to any definitive role.

What we appear to have, then, is the effects of an imperial gaze whereby two subjects enact asymmetries of power (Erickson 27). As Ann Kaplan suggests, there are colonial habits of thought that underlie the imperial gaze. It is a gaze that “reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central, as much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject” (78). The two subjects in the image collaborate to present invisibility as an altered existence where visual pressures that act in collusion can be clearly traced (Erickson 27). In the end, an opportunity emerges from these pictorial elements to behold a visual structure that considers notions of center and periphery.

Discipline and the Laboring Body

In *Ricas y famosas*, the domestic sphere appears as a space where the body conforms to mechanics of power that are both subtle and calculated. The images connote domesticity as a spatial, functional, and hierarchical situation—a scheme that unfolds well beginning with the photograph on the work's cover. The image offers spectators a panoramic view of space, positioning the viewer beyond a grand crystal chandelier, as though observing from the ceiling high above (Figure 5). This position allows the viewer to gaze down into an extravagant room resembling the grandeur of Versailles' corridors. The entire portrait is tinged in a gold hue, and a young, blond woman with an aureate metallic dress sits on a couch in an effortless repose, evoking a gilded rendition of Frederic Leighton's *Flaming June*. Beyond this, obvious signposts in the visual narrative are scarce. Daniela Rossell's name, not much larger than an inch and a half across, appears in white print on the lower right hand corner. Immediately next to it, and almost fading seamlessly into this palatial background, emerges the small title *Ricas y famosas*. Aside from this text, there is no identification of the subject; the young woman, fair in complexion, could be from any number of places around the world.



Figure 5: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosas** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

At first glance, it would seem that the aforementioned descriptions are the only elements determining the image. Yet the photograph, which binds both the front and back cover of the book, maintains an interesting particularity. Rossell employs a method of chiaroscuro lighting in this image, making the totality of the composition elusive. Her technique creates contrast, giving way to an area of shadow that recedes into the margin of the book spine and spills over onto the back cover. Hidden in this shadow appears the mysterious blonde woman's employee (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosos** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

It is only by turning to the book's back cover that we see the woman standing at attention as though on military duty—ready to move if beckoned.

A semiotics of clothing emerges from her mode of dress. The traditional maid uniform is recognized as such precisely because it disseminates a visual history of domestic labor that can be traced to the 19th century. The well-dressed maid in Victorian London, for example, wore a style of uniform intended to signal the institution of domestic labor and her station in a social hierarchy. The uniform was designed for a distinctness that would hinder a so-called 'shameful' confusion between a maid and the mistress of the household or a guest. This policy of dress was not simply a question of preference or taste by a few mistresses in London, but a norm established and propagated through

the widespread use of Etiquette and Household Advice Manuals published in the 19th century, such as Cassell's Household Guide⁸ and Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management⁹. These books of conduct campaigned as the 'ideal' housewives source of instruction, advising women to impart uniformity and conspicuousness among all her employees.

Similar publications were also common in Latin America. As these nations were experiencing an impetus towards economic progress at the turn of the 19th century, and by extension the modernization of family dynamics, there were numerous loose-leaf pamphlets, manuals and magazines such as, "Artes especiales para la mujer,"¹⁰ being published. The works were naturally limited to the literate public, which at the time were comprised of only a minute facet of society.

During this period, the press played a key role in the diffusion of norms in both public and private spheres, for within an emerging industrial and capitalist society, these spaces were experiencing consolidation and understood as complimentary. As such, women were urged to incorporate themselves in the progress of the nation by bringing the qualities of the domestic domain into

⁸ *Cassell's Household Guide: Being a Complete Encyclopedia of Domestic and Social Economy, and Forming a Guide to Every Department of Practical Life*. London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1869. Print.

⁹ See Beeton and Nicola Humble. *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print. And "The Housewife's Treasury of Domestic Information." forming a companion volume to *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management, Etc.* London: Ward, Lock & Co, 1884. Print.

¹⁰ "Álbum para Damas," *Revista Quincenal*, año IV, núm. 1, México, enero de 1907

the sexual contract. Under a strategic campaign for a ‘decent home,’ women were persuaded to remove themselves from the public workforce (and indeed all types and forms of labor) to seek a position of management within their homes. Women fulfilling these roles did not emerge as a source of production, but rather as agents of reproduction and consumption. A sense of purpose and value for a woman, in this case, relied upon the translation of her husband’s income into the objects and personnel comprising the household.

As a result, domestic culture became steadily codified. The constitution of the household, including the nature of its objects and the order and cleanliness of tables, were heavily regulated operations. This custom inevitably increased the attention on the number and kinds of servants and the style of their attire, a feature perhaps best evinced in Cassell’s Household Guide:

A housemaid's dress is of some importance. When engaged in her morning work, washable materials are the best; a wide Holland apron should always be worn over one of white material whenever house cleaning is going on. If the servant be required to appear at the front door, or wait upon the family whilst at dirty work, by casting aside the outer apron she is able to appear at a moment's notice in a presentable manner. For afternoon wear in the winter, very dark or black French twill dresses are suitable, inexpensive, and easily washed. In the summer light cotton materials look best. At all seasons a neat white crochet cap is the best headgear.¹¹

The persistence of this traditional maid uniform in Rossell’s photograph questions the system of codification that, set in modern day, contradicts logical practicality. Given that these employees are expected to serve and clean—a

¹¹ See “Servants of the House.IV –The Housemaid”

duty that calls for strenuous physical labor such as bending and kneeling—the use of pants would seem more sensible and dignified. Instead, traditional uniforms consist of neutral colored dresses, draped with a customary white apron—a design that seems impervious to the passage of time and the advances made in sexual politics. Thus, what is evident through this recognizable uniform is that the requirement to remain in a dress serves to create a fixed gender role. Similarly, signs of class distinction represented by the uniform compound this effect, making the domestic employee in Rossell’s portrait appear as though she were a relic of the past.

As Michel Foucault has amply shown, the possibilities in the act of looking sheds light on the location of power. Likewise, the physical location of the maid on Rossell’s cover elicits the structure of surveillance examined by Foucault. While discussing the operations and techniques of power and the objectification of subjects, he referred to Bentham’s *Panopticon* as an architectural design exemplifying an ideal disciplinary model. According to Foucault, various institutions ranging from state prisons to mental asylums resort to a segmentation of space designed to improve surveillance. Consequently, what is otherwise considered ‘chaos’ or mixed bodies is sorted out between subjects of authority and subjects to be controlled. In this regard, the *Panopticon* represents the perfect execution of this measure, dividing the center from the periphery by virtue of a watchtower:

All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker

or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible (200).

Interestingly, as though following a model from this spatial layout, the cover of *Ricas y famosas* appears to illustrate this disciplinary mechanism.

Rossell's photograph functions on basic principles of segmentation, juxtaposing a maid, alone in the shadows of the periphery, with a mistress at the center of the photograph. However, it is not the mistress who exhibits the power of supervision; she does not gaze at the maid. Rather, with the effect of backlighting, it is the camera eye that acts as a tower, placing the viewer at the center of the portrait looking down from above.

Under these conditions, the public eye becomes the tower of observation that brings the details of domestic operations into focus. The public eye, in this case, takes on a position of inspector or guard. As Foucault notes, an inspector exercises a unique privilege in that surveillance can be achieved intermittently: "An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning" (204).

Therefore, the strategic visual structure in Rossell's photograph can be representative of what Foucault identifies as "a house of certainty." Gone are the bars, chains, or heavy locks that once constituted a fortress-like architecture; the domestic sphere emerges as a symbolic location of

confinement and enclosure in which individuals are constantly located. As such, it is an institution that imprisons subjects without the more explicit or obvious techniques used for control and oppression. The apparatus of surveillance governing its domain is reduced to inconspicuous supervision, or as Foucault states, “eyes that must see without being seen.” From this feature, the public eye is placed in a decentralized position of power that is both omniscient and omnipresent, and more importantly, anonymous. Nevertheless, if the visual structure in Rossell’s photograph alludes to the Panoptic organization of subjects in a ‘house of certainty,’ how are these women (if only symbolically) imprisoned? And how is the public implicated in this process?

We can begin to explore by considering the nature of these women’s behavior. The photograph reveals not only an arrangement of their bodies, but also compliance to this order. But are these women truly amenable to this circumstance? To what extent might they not be exercising their will, but rather demonstrating an imposed discipline? It is likely, for instance, that the mistress in the image volunteered her pose and gestures. Yet, given the artistic intention behind the portrait, Rossell probably exerted a degree of control over the creative process—a factor that would have made the women’s behavior somewhat collaborative.

We can also surmise a similar possibility for the maid. Like the mistress, the maid could have complied with the scheme of the image, perhaps agreeing to the snapshot, use of her uniform, physical pose, and position

within the frame (which was off angle and at the margin of the portrait)—all things that could have been modified.

Coercion, however, is another possibility. Did the maid have the freedom from her employer to deny participation in the session? Indeed, it is quite possible she did not. Additionally, it is likely that any coercion, if occurring, was unknown to Rossell. Domestic employees functioning outside a formal economy undoubtedly struggle to maintain job security. Such a scenario would suggest that their compliance stems from necessity. As such, one might suppose that domestic employees are conflicted, but also willing to compromise with their employers, regardless of how demeaning their requests might be. The subject placement and representational strategies of the front cover image plausibly suggests a coercive regulation of the maid's behavior—an element displaying the degree to which she is disciplined and trained to reduce her subjectivity to a mere function: a maid.

Furthermore, it is in Rossell's representation of this disciplinary panoptic model that a domestic worker's ability to be simultaneously visible and invisible comes into question, for in the discipline of their bodies and behavior, they are generating a public and private identity—a notion similar to Judith Butler's theory on gender and performance. For Butler, an individual's social identity emerges not as a condition that is predefined or pre-existing, but as a social construct crafted tenuously over time and instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. The experience of the self, then, is

continuously developing and often molding to social norms. These social norms reflect only an example of cultural and historical possibilities, which are both conditioned and circumscribed by social convention and cultural traditions. As such, the body becomes a pliable situation responding to various structures of power, and given these circumstances, the body is often compelled to reproduce dominant styles of 'being.'

If we consider this phenomenon in Rossell's cover photograph, we can see that the visual relations portrayed informs a subject of their place in spatial and cultural terms. The public eye serves as a symbolic guard and inspector. In addition, it facilitates the opportunity to gaze into this space, bearing witness to the regulation of movement and the calculated distribution of the worker's body. In this act, the viewer becomes complicit in the perpetuation of the maid's confinement and captivity, sustaining a power that can objectify these workers. More importantly, the subject in question may very well internalize this gaze.

For instance, if we imagine the maid's full, unquestioned consent, we can speculate as to her eagerness to please, and consider what Erving Goffman¹² determines as a condition of 'conversion'. In other words, under the pressure of constant *surveillance* or scrutiny, a subject may eventually mold to dominant views and values by their own volition. Unfortunately, the individual may then be viewed as agreeable or, as Goffman describes, "as

¹² In "Characteristics of Total Institutions." *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1961. Print.

someone whose institutional enthusiasm is always at the disposal of the staff” (63). To have “institutional enthusiasm” in these scenarios—without internal turmoil and resistance to conditions of objectification—implies a process of self-degradation. In such cases, it could connote that individuals willingly and without protest perform a self-effacing act. If viewed in this respect, the images captured by Rossell could reflect the damaging effects of this behavior—a deleterious way of “being” exists behind a worker’s consent to discipline and transform their body and self into an object.

Subversive Effects or The Reinforcement of Negative Stereotypes?

The element of ambiguity in *Ricas y famosas* may cause viewers to wonder whether or not this work performs an act of subversion. It may seem that these photographs outline the stability of a compliant labor force, locked in a marginal position. However, by focusing on these individuals’ return of the gaze and their varied poses, the rigid power relation between mistress and worker becomes less certain. A fragile level of agency is expressed in these elements. The looking back counts as an assertion; it is a resistance to norms despite the visual conventions in place to contain and control the body. This resistance initiates a shift in the visual dynamic, thereby enabling the perception of their subjectivity to take different forms.

For instance, a viewer may decide to peruse *Ricas y famosas*, voyeuristically flipping through the photographs to sustain a privileged

distance as an undetected spectator. However, the return of the gaze draws forth an exchange. The workers' eyes create a point of contact making the viewer both subject and object of the gaze of another. Indeed, it is through this shifting nature of the gaze (where one is simultaneously seen and unseen) that these portraits disclose an irony. The work highlights the reversal of the gaze as an exception, thus exposing the repression of this look. When the subjects would otherwise fade seamlessly into the background of domestic operations, the reversal of the gaze creates a visual break allowing the spectator to view these individuals' agency, and their limited power, vis-à-vis the cultural conditions circumscribed to them. In this manner, *Ricas y famosas* appears to subversively disrupt the visual boundaries from which the 'other' is imagined.

For instance, a photograph shown early in Rossell's collection is provocative on multiple levels by exposing a contradiction. It reveals a domestic worker at the bottom center of a portrait striking a feminine, flirtatious pose (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosas** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

Although the impressive height of the home dwarfs the woman's size, she commands the photograph, standing alone beneath a large archway that frames the picture. Her confident pose resembles those adopted by the mistresses shown in subsequent pages of the work. Still, although being featured alone could appear to enhance her profile, limits on her freedom of self remain, thus exposing the dignity accorded to her as temporary and unstable.

Interestingly, Rossell also displays her own position in these looking relations in a subtle and strategic fashion. She includes two photographs of herself in the work, and like the domestic staff, her image bookends the

collection. In her first self-portrait, Rossell's face is not much larger than a thumbprint. The entire photograph is only 4 x 3 inches large, and located in an obscure position on the inner fold of the book cover (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosos** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

With nearly half of her face left out of the frame, it is clear that Rossell gestures at a calculated desire to remain inconspicuous. Her version of self-portrait operates as a model of concealment, a deliberate staging of withholding.

Indeed, the large PRI emblem crowning her head makes her impulse all the more mocking. It is as though she concedes to the potential controversy she may stir while attempting to only mildly implicate herself in that polemic. Her dark sunglasses, in this case, serve to create distance, closing herself off to the public. As such, she both vows and disavows the expression of her subjectivity. In this ambiguity, she cleverly inserts a brief biography beneath her photo,

bidding her viewers to see and read the artifice surrounding her identity. By representing herself in this sunglasses wearing self-portrait, Rossell demonstrates a willful surrender of her own gaze, which would contest popular scrutiny. In this fashion, she implies that the public persona being formulated through this body of work constitutes nothing more than a surface of projections.

Serving as a counterpoint to this first self-portrait is the second to last photograph of the series, in which Rossell nestles herself cozily at the center of a crew of domestic employees (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Daniela Rossell, Untitled, **Ricas y famosos** 2002, Courtesy of the artist

In this photograph, approximately 36 individuals either sit or stand on a grand stage of marble steps, intently gazing into the camera. With so many people apparently dressed in full uniform (including chef hats), it would initially seem

as though everyone was hastily interrupted from their duties to participate in the photo shoot. Yet, as so many of Rossell's photographs have shown, this portrait only alludes to reality, re-presenting it. Rossell has carefully directed and arranged everyone's body in such a manner that they appear to be an extension of an apparatus. With a raised hand, they clench an appliance, a gadget, or an object representing their line of work. Rossell, for that matter, presents viewers with a glimpse of her camera.

In this peculiar scene, there are a number of ways one can perceive of these instruments. There is no denying that the iron and the cell phone, even the broom and the mop, are objects that facilitate and enhance our world, reshaping our way of living. Though certainly unremarkable to most people today, these tools reflect technological advances deeply rooted in cultural progress. They have allowed for improved communication and time for leisure. In this respect, these objects are signs of a civilization intent on propelling itself forward.

Indeed, the improvement of these tools is often a point glamorized in consumer culture. Commercials praise these devices, repeatedly emphasizing the cutting edge innovation that helps determine their place in modernity. The Teflon pans, the newly reformulated Windex, and the cordless phone seem to usher in a new age, interminably pushing the envelope. These gadgets have, to no small degree, been the basis by which many have measured humanity's state of cultural sophistication.

However, in the appraisal of these objects' significance, an essential component of their functionality is overlooked. Mops and brooms, whatever their style, do not accomplish tasks alone. Cleaning detergents, regardless of their effectiveness, do not take charge in the management of laundry. The understanding of these inventions as innovation, therefore, obstructs the visibility of an oppressive status quo. It elides the subject behind these operations, thus affording the tool with a greater dignity for the duty accomplished.

This condition, moreover, has not gone unexamined by other critics. In Luz, luna y lunitas, Elena Poniatowska assesses the construction of invisibility in these situations with a dose of dark humor:

También es impoluta la cocina en la que todo refulge de contento; allí no hay más que sonreír y ser feliz mientras los panqués se hinchan en el honro y salen esponjaditos, esponjaditos como el mejor sol de la mañana, al menos así lo pregonan la caja con la harina que anuncia el milagro: la masa es una nube, la limpieza se hace sola, la ropa queda suave y muy blanco con sólo verter unas cuantas gotas, nada hay que hacer salvo esperar sentada encremándose las manos con Ponds mientras las escobas, las jergas, los trapeadores y el recogedor trabajan afanosamente, ligeros, modernos, cómodos, aerodinámicos, impulsados por el Espíritu Santo, el mejor robot de todos los tiempos (118).

In many ways, Rossell's portrait seems to echo Poniatowska's sardonic diatribe against "the miracle." The photograph allows viewers to visually connect with the gaze of these laborers, whose bodies have ceased to move with these instruments, as though they were the tool's appendage.

In this shift of terms where these individuals pause to return a gaze, there is an interruption in the construction of their invisibility. The act

fractures a visual norm, albeit a small and tenuous change, since they are still attached to their respective domestic gadget. As such, it is not the dramatic overturning of convention, but the visual slip, the slight difference in the position of their bodies, which serves to stress the power of variability. It speaks to a performance of norms at a skew.

It is precisely in the parody, as Judith Butler has amply noted, where the disruption to an idea of essence can be formed. What is revealed here, then, is not a stereotypical portrait, but a portrait depicting individuals subjected to, borrowing here Erickson's apt description, the iron mask of stereotype. This makes the construction of invisibility a process that is recognizable, and therefore, an aspect of culture that can be contested.

Furthermore, by placing herself in this photograph, Rossell appears to generate a similar thread of thought concerning photography. With her inclusion in the frame, her selfhood has also ceased to be muted behind a camera. But like the workers, the relation between her body and the instrument is interrupted. Her gaze bids for another understanding of her selfhood that is not tethered to the camera, but instead independent from her craft. In this fashion, it becomes clear that any attempt to register her personal background, viewpoint or intention as critical elements defining this work, is a means to grossly delimit her subjectivity while reducing the dignity that could be afforded to her artistry.

Other Portraits of Invisibility

As previously stated, there have been several literary and visual portraits speaking to a notion of invisibility regarding domestic workers in Mexico and the United States. In his 1950 essay “Máscaras mexicanas,” Octavio Paz examined a notion of invisibility by analyzing the behavior of his maid. As the epigraph in this chapter suggests, Paz is intrigued by his maid’s desire to be imperceptible when his casual inquiry: “Who’s there?” is met with her timid reply: “It’s nobody, sir, it’s me.” Though the maid’s response was perhaps familiar to Paz, close attention to the semantics of her statement set forth an unsettling premise.

To understand the implications of her words, Paz proceeds to explore the idea of *el ninguneo*—a psychological defense mechanism he claims is unique to Mexicans. This system of nullification, he insists, allows individuals to mask their authentic self, while also denying the existence of another. In the following fragment, he offers his readers a description of the phenomenon as he personally identifies with the practice:

No sólo disimulamos a nosotros mismos y nos hacemos transparentes y fantasmales; también disimulamos la existencia de nuestros semejantes. No quiero decir que lo ignoremos o los hagamos menos, actos deliberados y soberbios. Los disimulamos de manera mas definitiva y radical: los ninguneamos. El ninguneo es una operación que consiste en hacer de Alguien, Ninguno. La nada de pronto se individualiza, se hace cuerpo y ojos (74).

From these thoughts, it is clear that Paz considers these operations as interpersonal in nature.

However, his theory becomes problematic on several points. On the one hand, he attributes the issue to Mexicans as a collective, an idea that becomes limited in scope. In addition, he presents the act of *ningunear* as a neurotic compulsion without remedy, in which case individuals nullify themselves and others on the basis of unconscious choice. With these assumptions, Paz neglects the categories of race, class, and gender as social constructs that profoundly shape a subject's experience of invisibility. For Paz, invisibility rests entirely on a subject's conflicted internal psychology—a theory that fails to recognize, much less challenge, the social norms and structures of power that foment and sustain this phenomenon.

In 2002, José Joaquín Blanco published “Chapultepec y las criadas,”¹³ a chronicle providing a textual snapshot of the lives of maids. Whereas the photographs in *Ricas y famosas* provide a glimpse into the world of maids inside a domestic domain, documenting the spaces inhabited by domestic workers, Blanco's chronicle sheds light on the life of maids within the public sphere.

In his text, Blanco imparts an instructive tone as though to teach his audience how to read the city. As an urban chronicler, his approach echoes back to Salvador Novo's famed *Nueva grandeza Mexicana*, published in 1946. Like Novo, Blanco claims to hold privileged knowledge of urban life, casting him a reliable tour guide for his readership—but the similarities end here.

¹³ Qtd in Ruben Gallo. *The Mexico City Reader*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. Also in *Album De Pesadillas Mexicanas: Crónicas Reales E Imaginarias*. México, D.F: Ediciones Era, 2002. Print.

While Novo admires the institutions that once shaped the Mexican capital, Blanco breaks with this idealist gaze, focusing instead on the urban environment as a place repurposed or taken under “siege” (57). Indeed, the very first line of Blanco’s text features a dreary list of images describing the city as a place replete with: “crime, mobs of beggars, knickknack vendors and pollution” (56). Such initial remarks certainly crush any sense of allure to the Mexican metropolis. For Blanco, traditional sightseeing attractions, like Chapultepec Park, are sites of ruin.

Moreover, within this bleak portrait of Mexico City, Blanco includes a dose of satiric wit, which rests upon the lives and activities of domestic workers. The satire is evident as he informs his readers that (unbeknownst to many) crowds of maids now occupy Chapultepec Park:

No se ha dado la atención necesaria a esta expropiación del bosque por las sirvientas, ni al asombro de los turistas provincianos que vienen a pos de la bucólica calzada de los Poetas y de los manantiales o baños de Nezahualcóyotl y Moctezuma y se encuentran con un inesperado tumulto de criadas (57).

Blanco’s use of humor undoubtedly serves to disclose irony. While the park once performed a public service of national importance, the historical attractions no longer define the allure to the landscape by many of its local citizens. In modern day Chapultepec, it is the maids who circulate the premises seeking entertainment and repose, although the source of interest is no longer “la calzada de los Poetas,” but rather the latest pop hits from “Thalía, Luismi, and Los temerarios” emanating from their boomboxes.

Blanco's writing about Chapultepec Park reformulates its connection with the past. The imagery he evokes traces back towards a presumed "original condition" of the Park, to carefully build on the assumption of a before and after. In this way, Blanco establishes references to a temporal difference and a distinction of taste. For the maids, he claims, scoff at museums, instead preferring to enjoy a moment of leisure where they can relax in camaraderie:

Y no se andan con la culturita. Pasan de largo, desdeñosas frente al reiterativo esnobismo de los museos, que llevan décadas con su misma historia patria, su misma arqueología y sus mismos vanguardismos de "arte moderno" (58).

With these comments, Blanco's humor becomes a mocking spirit employed to draw on the idea of shame, for although he transforms the mundane experience of domestic workers into a spectacle, his opinion extends to encompass Mexico's tradition of "official art." As such, he brings to question the conditions determining the aesthetics of the city and its current "state of ruin" –a concern that also resonates with Francine Masiello's notion of *double time* regarding memory and place. As Masiello notes, "to see and think in *double time*, we find the moment to touch past and future, to enter the ethical moment of historical revision and move toward collective practice (30).

Thus, it is perhaps Blanco's attempt in this chronicle to establish Chapultepec's rather liminal position. For Blanco, it is a place that exists as an amalgamation of high and popular culture where memorials must be revised to include: "el monumento a la Criada Bien Criada, a María Isabel o a La India

Maria” (58). From such comments, it is evident that Blanco’s satire points to social criticism, but to what end does he invite his readers to laugh? What plan or objectives does he spur with this ridicule?

To explore these questions, we can look beyond the mockery and derision to see that Blanco’s humor takes measure of social inconsistencies that can lead to new possibilities. What he offers his readers is a new conceptualization of Chapultepec: it is no longer the grand elegant park fit for aristocratic endeavors. It is the current haven for hundreds of maids who comprise a new collective, typically hidden from other areas of the city.

As Blanco draws a portrait that re-semanticizes the park, granting visibility to these women’s experience, he also conceives of the space in postmodern terms. In such case, all fragments of experience in this space could be put into play, and Chapultepec’s visual field—once closed as a totality—can be pried open. Possibilities abound in this ethical revision of space and memory. As Masiello affirms, a ruin connects with infinity, for “Everything is available, ready for reconstruction” (29).

Therefore, it stands to reason that for Blanco, Chapultepec Park becomes a historical site in need of revision. In this sense, his suggestion for humorous statues begins to open a space to consider postmodern strategies that may align with a project of decolonization. From this premise, Chapultepec Park—and by extension the nation—could be reimagined beyond the scope of its colonial prime to illuminate the everyday habits of maids, and

the reality these women face as they cope with their socio-economic condition. In this effort, these women would gain representation as an integral part of national history.

In the United States, Ramiro Gomez presents another means by which to ‘read the city’ and reimagine modern art. Since 2011, Gomez, a young artist from Los Angeles, has ensnared public attention and notoriety through an ‘interventionist’ type of art that both interrogates and transforms representations of the domestic sphere and the urban cityscape. Inspired by his experience as a live-in nanny in the Hollywood Hills (from 2009-2011), and moved by the relationships and conversations he held with other domestic workers during that period, Gomez came to question domestic workers’ lack of visibility.

As he reports in an interview with Hrag Vartanian¹⁴ (Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of Hyperallergic, an online forum for art and culture), while browsing through the pages of magazines promoting luxurious lifestyles, fashion and entertainment, he became unsettled by the representation of spaces, décor, and style that did not account for the groups of laborers needed to sustain such aspirations of privilege. Gomez states:

When I worked for the family in the Hollywood Hills, they would have *Luxe* magazine and *Dwell* issues laying around the house that gave me a glimpse into how the world I was working in was shaped, but I did not see the people I was working with reflected in the images, so I decided to insert them. That decision was inspired by many things. I took it personally that the images presented an ideal devoid of the people working, as if we did not exist in that world. As I would turn the

¹⁴ See “The People Behind Your Images of Luxury” Hyperallergic, December 18, 2013

pages of these magazines, the feelings of a quiet rage at being excluded began to simmer and build-up. I realized I had an opportunity to respond to the image presented to me and so I did, in the only way I could at the time, with paint.

To interrupt these images that profess perfection, Gomez reappropriated these scenes, inserting in them the figures of housekeepers, nannies, gardeners, and maintenance men as people animated in spaces that otherwise appear to be austere, serene, and idle contexts.

For instance, one portrait of an immaculately white bathroom portrays a woman caressing her hair with both arms in a sign of complete relaxation. Gomez, however, contrasts the presumed airiness and ethereal quality of the image with the figure of a maid kneeling to create the spotless floor. In this fashion, Gomez redirects viewer attention to the labor that determines and informs conditions of leisure, comfort and 'high-living.' His technique reflects a counter-hegemonic gesture aimed to modify the advertisers selling strategy.

The measure of a worker's individuality is not a central focus in Gomez's work. Instead, he obscures facial features, directing a viewer's gaze upon the performance of a task, and the representation of the worker's body. It is only the detail of such things as hair length and attire that help distinguish gender in these roughly sketched and imprecise shapes. In the palette of muted colors of acrylic paint, the use of dark brown skin tones also elicits a level of phenotypic homogeneity.

Gomez suggests that the contrast generated between the digital image and the acrylic intervention speaks to the transient nature of the domestic

help. As he says, “If seen closely, the paint on the magazine interruptions is applied lightly and can be scratched off easily, referencing the instability of the worker.” The varying mediums also juxtapose contrasting art forms, with Gomez’s approach representing the intimate connection between the artist’s hand and the visual product—thus invariably framing the imprint and performance of his own body on the surface of the page.

Viewed in conjunction with Rossell’s photographs, Gomez’s disruptions of everyday domestic scenes offer an intriguing perspective on the experience of marginal, informal labor, and the issue of invisibility in a Los Angeles context. Both artists manage to be provocative in their own right regarding domestic workers, but Gomez’s work registers a different degree of denial in the public imaginary in the United States.

The power to overlook a reality based on sharp hierarchical divisions is one that is furnished by a discourse of citizenship. In which case, the effects of exploitation—and the mode of living and leisure it generates—is comfortably set aside from national narratives and national history. As undocumented workers, many individuals who experience injustice within the boundaries of what is constituted as a progressive and liberal culture endure the circumstances in silence. Gomez, nevertheless, casts a critical lens on the contradictions these calculated omissions produce on the moral fabric of the nation.

Gomez's interest in the daily experiences of employees in the service and domestic labor industries inspired his work with art installations as well. These pieces consist of figures drawn on cardboard with acrylic paint, which Gomez later cuts out and places strategically at various locations in and around Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. Given that most of these cutouts are taken from large television boxes, they achieve a notable stature as many stand nearly five feet tall. The figures, which strike a clear resemblance in shade and style to Gomez's magazine interventions, emerge as faceless structures that are no longer restrained to a canvass but, instead, are sculptural elements of real time and space.

Gomez's artwork is often a reconfiguration of space, and a reorientation of a spectator's relationship with the art piece. The art-object allows a person to recognize themselves and the location site as a critical part of the content and experience of the work itself. As a space-oriented work, the art piece can become a kinesthetic-visual signifying practice as opposed to a monument, complicating relations with viewers who are not 'privileged' and 'outside' the art piece, but are implicated as creative subjects put into play within the work.

Essential to its character is also an ephemeral, situational quality. As Gomez explains, the pieces are tactically situated in a chosen environment, for they exist in a lack of permanence. The structures are installed and are later (a day or two at the most) dismantled. Its future existence, then, becomes photographic, an image record that is also inscribed as memory.

As Michel de Certeau explained, a ‘tactic’ is reserved for the cunning subverter who produces without capitalizing. That is, without taking over time but seizing it. As he states, “a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities” (xix).

Whereas Gomez brings the representation of nannies to the attention of both casual viewers and loyal followers of his artwork, Sebastián Silva, whose film I discuss in chapter four, seizes an opportunity to meditate on a similar line of thought on the big screen. Chapter four touches upon invisibility, but also examines in greater depth the dynamics between mistress and servants as relations that foment the creation of shadow mothers.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARGINAL MOTHERHOOD

“Una escolta, al mando de un capitán con la espada desenvainada, había sacado de casa de Canales a *la Chabelona*, la infeliz sirvienta. El Auditor ya no pudo interrogarla. Veinticuatro horas antes, esta basura humana ahora agonizante era el alma de un hogar donde por toda política el canario urdió a sus intrigas de alpiste, el chorro en la pila sus círculos conceñtricos, el general sus interminables solitarios, y Camila sus caprichos.”

-Miguel Ángel Asturias
El señor Presidente (1946)

In the scene described above, Miguel A. Asturias’ narrator bemoans the end of an era that is abruptly punctuated by the violent death of a nanny, referred to as *la Chabelona*. Indeed, as Jorge Ruffinelli¹ argues, while the lament conveyed in these lines may highlight the violent oppression unleashed by dictatorial regimes, the scene also betrays an ideological assumption: the living conditions prior to this disruption constitute domestic bliss (877). The home, the narrator explains, represented an idyllic sanctuary—a peaceful place where canaries could rest, where the sound of water fountains reigned,

¹ “Las ‘traiciones’ textuales de El Señor Presidente” in *El Señor Presidente*. Ed. Gerald Martin. Nanterre: ALLCA XX, Université Paris X, 2000. Print.

where the general (the head of the household) could play solitaire and the young Camila, la Chabelona's charge, could give fancy to her capricious whims.

Nevertheless, despite this picturesque depiction of the home, the descriptions of la Chabelona's state of existence register an unsettling contrast. Her characterization reveals an oppressive system of values that remain subjugated, and therefore elusive in the idealized view of the bourgeoisie. In the eyes of the narrator, la Chabelona is *una infeliz* (an unhappy, pitiful woman) and *basura humana* (human trash)—descriptions that minimize the nanny's value as a person. Moreover, the name 'la Chabelona' in and of itself resonates with a demeaning, derisive tone. It is a coarse appropriation and transformation of the name Isabel or Isabella, and serves to undermine and efface any reference to the nanny's dignity.

It is from this disparaging perspective that the narrator defines the nanny's role in the home as a means to an end, effectively reducing the nanny's existence to a function. Her job, in this case, is to reproduce and protect the bourgeoisie structure. As a result, the narrator satisfies the assertion of the nanny as a superfluous, dispensable body—an object devoid of meaning—as la Chabelona acts in self-sacrifice, willing to die in agony to protect the young Camila from the Auditor's attendant.

While the fragment from the novel El Señor Presidente manages to disclose the narrator's disdain for the nanny, it also uncovers an interesting contradiction surrounding la Chabelona's sacrificial gesture. Though the

nanny's action of abnegation would certainly fall in line with the archetypal notion of a 'sacrificial mother,' the narrator does not associate the nanny's effort to care for and protect Camila with a dominant model of mothering. Instead, by distancing the nanny from hegemonic norms of femininity, the narrator deems her behavior as senseless. This locates her act outside traditional boundaries of motherhood. The narrator's attitude, therefore, prompts the following question: In what new ways can we look at mothering to understand a nanny's role in familial relations?

This chapter aims to explore the ambiguous, uncertain terrain of mothering, in which nanny's are often located. In the following pages, I focus on Sebastian Silva's film, *La Nana* (2009). I suggest it presents a representation of family dynamics that deconstructs mothering, thereby revealing how different aspects of mothering are often assigned to varying groups of underprivileged women.

In this fashion, the film works to expose the variety of actors who mother, allowing viewers to meditate on the problematic implications of these distinct roles. This brings to light the existence of marginal and largely invisible constructions of mothering, which coexist with dominant models of motherhood. By doing so, I argue, *La Nana* allows viewers to recognize mothering not as a universal, essentialist concept, but as a practice tied to differing cultural contexts and material conditions.

In addition, I analyze the film's relational dynamics of power in consideration of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn determines as 'the illusion of the private haven.' As she states:

Middle class men can keep the illusion of the home as a private haven, while enjoying the services of their wives or their wives' substitutes in maintaining that haven. Thus, the notion of mothering as women's responsibility is left unchallenged (7).

Following Glenn's criticism closely, I contend that *La Nana* opens a space from which to critique the unchallenged social construction of mothering as 'women's work,' by exposing the delegation of reproductive labor to women as a system that benefits and buttresses patriarchal structure. As Glenn notes, "Women's reproductive labor—that is, feeding, clothing, and psychologically supporting the male wage earner and nurturing and socializing the next generation—is seen as work on behalf of the family as a whole, rather than as work benefiting men in particular (192).

It is important to note that power structures creating systems of subjugation, including those within patriarchy, must be understood within specific socio-historical and cultural contexts. However, it bears remembering that in the vast diversity of experiences and customs leading to an exploitation of women working as nannies, there are a number of commonalities. In this respect, it is certainly not a new contemporary issue, nor limited to specific

regions. It is a practice with historical traces. In the following fragment, Suing C. Wong² provides an example:

Diverted mothering, as a historical, institutional reality, can be traced to at least slavery times, when the care of white plantation owner's children by black women took precedence over care of their own children, who were subject to sale and dispersion as soon as they were old enough to be economically valuable (71)

Like the previous chapters in this dissertation, the present study is situated in the nexus of discourses centered on gender inequality, racial domination, and economic exploitation. The analysis of the representation of familial dynamics in the film *La Nana* ultimately aims to emphasize a new way of looking at mothering—through the perspective of hired caretakers and working women. It is also worth noting that at the present moment, few critics have examined this film.

Discourses on Motherhood in Latin America

Before proceeding to analyze Silva's film, *La Nana*, it is important to establish the discursive construction of motherhood within a Latin American context. This section of the chapter begins to explore the specificities of these notions, as discussed by Sylvia Chant and Nikki Craske, before attending to discussions of mothering by other prominent feminist scholars, including Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Nancy Chodorow. The intent here is to ensconce the

² In Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda R. Forcey. *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

analysis of mothering in the film within a broader framework of theory and criticism.

Perspectives on motherhood in Latin America have not developed as one monolithic viewpoint, but rather as a set of diverse reflections among scholars and critics. As Chant and Craske well note, a changing discourse lies within the many representations and conceptual constructions of motherhood in Latin America. While motherhood can be imagined and understood as stripping women from power, subsuming them into the private sphere as passive and long-suffering individuals, it can also be construed as a position from which women gain a route into political participation. As was perhaps best evinced in 1977 by the actions taken in Argentina by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, which I will discuss ahead, motherhood can still be a position that allows women to politically mobilize.

Because Chant and Craske provide such an insightful overview concerning these varying perspectives among critics, I proceed to explore some of their observations. Motherhood in Latin America has a long-standing significance and public presence that is often expressed in the form of monuments and elaborate celebrations of 'Mother's Day.' These public veneration are often understood as the exaltation of private virtues that are "heavily essentialized as feminine virtues" (Chant & Craske 9). For many feminists, especially those situated in Euro-American perspectives that developed in the 1970s, the exaltation of the private sphere, domestic virtue,

and motherhood sat uneasily with agendas for women's liberation (ibid). The notion of children as 'gifts from God' (Bunster-Burotto 299) afforded women with a spiritual entitlement, but this authority was circumscribed to the family and home, a position that largely precluded women's access to public influence and power (Cubitt 111).

At the same time, other scholars take note of women who find entry into politics while remaining within the confines of a traditional gendered order. For instance, Molyneux focuses on this particular angle in Argentina with the life and activities of Eva Perón, who identified herself as 'the loyal wife of the great leader and mother of the 'great Peronist nation' (170). From this position, Eva encouraged other women's political participation by describing their roles as 'the heart' of greater social movements—an argument that Molyneux explains in the following fragment:

Eva's discourse invoked older arguments about women's special feminine attributes in an effort to direct them into the service of the state. She spoke of the need to moralize political life through women's participation—referring to her own role in politics as the heart, whereas Perón, in a predictable binary, was the head (58).

There is, still, other considerable attention to motherhood as a role that has conferred women with a certain degree of 'protection' to act collectively *against* the state (Chant & Craske 11). In the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, what began in 1977 as a small group of women protesting the disappearance of their children, gained a much broader impact that extended beyond their roles as caregivers. The mothers' struggle to obtain

information regarding their children's whereabouts and safely return them came to represent for their region, as well as others repressed by dictatorships in Latin American, an effort to demand democracy and human rights (Fisher 104). Indeed, given that their roles as mothers lent them a less political and therefore less threatening status, it was much easier for them to mobilize in this fashion than it was for their male relatives (Fisher 109).

Despite these advances into politics by women who managed to work within the boundaries of motherhood, the patriarchal construction of motherhood should be challenged to allow women to claim a space in the political arena, not as mothers, but simply as women. Chant and Craske describe this as a more general tendency among critics to examine the ways different aspects and constructions of motherhood aid women's struggles for gender equality in Latin America (12). It is thus important when considering motherhood to understand specific social contexts to reveal motherhood not as a reflection of biology, but rather as a social construct that develops in social relations.

Social Constructions of Mothering

As Evelyn Nakano Glenn points out, given that mothering so often appears to "flow inevitably from the division based on reproductive function, mothering—more than any other aspect of gender—has been subject to essentialist interpretation: seen as natural, universal, and unchanging" (3). As

such, the dominant and idealized model of motherhood presupposes a structure of relations that rests primary responsibilities of mothering, such as constant care and attention for children, almost exclusively on one woman, the biological mother (3).

Nancy Chodorow also looks at the ways mothering forms a central and constituting element in the social organization of gender by focusing specifically on mother-daughter relationships. She argues that daughters are socialized and prepared for a more affective role in their families than are sons, who are in contrast encouraged, and thus prepared for a public life. She states:

The sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother and are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than men produces in daughters and sons a division of psychological capacities which leads them to reproduce this sexual and familial division of labor (7).

Chodorow proceeds to question this structure, suggesting that this division of labor is certainly not anchored to women alone; men can occupy a nurturing or mothering role as well. Nevertheless, dominant gender ideologies, through the influence of socialization, have historically encouraged the sexual division of labor, endorsing women as primary caretakers, or mothers, and men as providers. This division of labor often facilitates a difference in valued productivity. If men are viewed as providers, they are understood as individuals constituting a labor force that serves the greater public, generating

material goods and commodities that are tangible. Women occupying a mothering role, on the other hand, are often understood as nonproductive.

This perceived lack of productivity, however, is misleading, for the task of mothering can be understood as both *affective* and *reproductive* labor. Through the act of mothering, a child may develop a secure attachment, which can mitigate mental or behavioral disorders. Therefore, mothering functions as affective labor by shaping a child's subjectivity. Moreover, it is a form of reproductive labor as it influences social organization and national life by helping to reproduce mentally sound, law-abiding citizens. In this fashion, mothering fulfills a critical social and national purpose that does not exist in isolation. Rather, it is structurally and causally related to the interests of other institutional arrangements (Chodorow 32).

Furthermore, while women traditionally occupy a mothering role, not all women fulfill this role equally. Mothering is a practice that is problematized by culture and socio-economic factors. For instance, as we can note from Silva's film *La Nana*, while more women integrate into the public workforce they often choose or are compelled to consign partial motherhood to another woman. As a result, the task of mothering in these situations is inevitably challenged.

Mothering from the Margins: A Look at Sebastián Silva's *La Nana*

Sebastian Silva's *La Nana* (2009) explores these concerns by presenting us with Pilar, a professor who shares mothering responsibilities with Raquel, a woman of a different socio-economic standing. As a live-in maid, Raquel is required to perform domestic duties and attend to the needs of Pilar's children—a task she accomplishes for more than 20 years. Raquel, however, begins to exhibit signs of anxiety and conflict, culminating in acute emotional distress. In this deterioration, the film begins to expose the institutionalized exploitation of affect in this mistress and nanny arrangement, for although a mothering role is shared between the women, the nanny's efforts are understood as mere duties.

Indeed, the tension produced by these circumstances can be devised in the first scene of the film. In this introduction of the nanny's character, viewers are quickly acquainted with Raquel's isolation from the family in both physical and emotional terms. The frame focuses on her living space, which consists of a bright white kitchen. The lack of color and décor evoke a reference to the stereotypical interior design of a hospital or psychiatric ward. This effect is compounded by Raquel's solitude in the room as she dines alone. While the voices of Pilar's family are audible, they are out of frame. What is clear, then, is that Raquel is confined to a space where communal contacts, and its comforting benefits, are removed.

By portraying this separation, the film captures an interesting perspective on Raquel's social invisibility. To the family, Raquel remains a hidden subject, appearing in the dining room only fleetingly to perform duties before vanishing 'behind the scenes.' The film, however, reworks this condition by presenting viewers with Raquel's perspective. The experience of invisibility is transposed in her moments of privacy. For Raquel, the family is hidden from a space of intimacy, thereby manifesting her solitude as alienating. She does not experience a sense of "self" on more intimate and humane terms.

In the same scene, Raquel's abrupt gaze into the camera produces two effects: It dispels a sense of invisibility by drawing forth an exchange with the viewer, and simultaneously calls into question the film's genre. As discussed in chapter three, direct visual contact between two subjects disrupts what can otherwise be determined as an act of voyeurism. In voyeurism, a person holds a position of privilege as a spectator that can intrude in another's privacy while remaining undetected. Like a fly on the wall, the inconspicuous spectator is made privy to candid moments. In these circumstances, the return of the gaze by the subject under scrutiny breaks the system. Thus, the subject is no longer the mere object of the spectator's gaze and attention. Rather, the full extent of the subject's humanity is made visible.

It is hardly a surprise to find a fictional film situating viewers in voyeuristic positions. In general, actors do not make eye contact with the camera. Instead, they usually perform as though no one is watching. For

viewers, the sensation of 'not watching' is also enhanced by steady camerawork, which makes the act of filming imperceptible. Silva's film, on the other hand, presents a stark contrast. The viewer is exposed to the aesthetic filming approach through the use of a handheld camera. As Raquel first walks into the frame, the shaky camera work encroaches upon her body; at which point, her objectification is brought to the viewer's attention. Raquel's abrupt gaze into the camera suddenly brings an unexpected connection with the viewer's reality. This gesture creates a point of contact, producing a shift in filming style that blurs the traditional boundaries between fiction and documentary.

This innovative filming technique is not unique to Silva. Rather, it forms part of a larger aesthetic movement in Latin American cinema from the 1980s to the 1990s (Wolf). During this period, there was an effort to steer away from historical allegories in which secondary characters had nothing to denounce. Instead, many filmmakers moved towards a realist tradition, centering their attention on present, everyday issues, as well as traditionally neglected points of view. This change of interest resulted in a corresponding focus on innovative filming techniques. Under this new development, the art of narration was questioned, making the representation of topics equitable to the film's subject matter. As Sergio Wolf explains:

In reality, what took place in Latin American cinema can be seen in terms of a restructuring not just of topics, but of narrative formats. The period drama seemed to be forgotten as new filmmakers looked to the contemporary as an escape from

suffocating panning shots—from journeys into the past as a way of avoiding the discomfort of depicting the present.³

Silva's film manifests a realist approach to viewer attention by molding *La Nana* into a composite of genres: fiction, documentary and autobiography. For instance, as the film credits role, viewers see that the narrative is a tribute to Silva's real childhood nannies: Jeanette and Marisol. Therefore, though the film's focus is on the fictional life of Raquel, it begins to echo reality.

This autobiographical context increases if, by chance, the viewer is aware that the film takes place in Silva's childhood home. With the knowledge of these combined facts, the home is transformed into another significant character. As viewers, we are drawn to the movement within its quarters, the tasks it requires, the people that inhabit it, and the upper-middle class lifestyle it represents.

In this unique way, we are reminded that the activities transpiring within the walls may have genuinely occurred in a similar fashion during Silva's childhood. As Silva explains in an interview about the film, fiction in *La Nana* is "contaminated by the material of everyday life." It is precisely from this element of plausibility, he insists, that fiction proceeds to "encounter the real." What we may conclude, then, is that these select autobiographical references by Silva help reveal the nature of customs and traditions within the domestic sphere, leading the film beyond the scope of the fictional narrative.

³ Wolf, Sergio. 'No Turning Back,' *Sight and Sound*. 20.9 (2010). Internet Source.

These elements of authenticity focus viewer attention on the domestic sphere as a concrete site of repeating practices in a widespread institution.

La Nana, however, does not simply feature this institution as a mere fact; it deconstructs its implications and exposes its contradictions. This is first captured as Pilar attempts to celebrate Raquel's 41st birthday. At first, it is evident that Pilar wishes to build rapport with Raquel by inviting her to join the family at the dinner table to receive gifts and enjoy cake. However, the gathering becomes listless once the husband, Don Mundo, quickly disengages from the dinner, retreating to his hobby of ship model construction. His departure puts an immediate end to their collective conversation, at which point, Raquel motions towards a sense of resignation, promptly collecting the family's dishes.

Close examination of Raquel's tension and disappointment in this particular moment lends a better understanding of Pilar and Raquel's conflicted positions in the family. Whereas Pilar strives to appreciate and recognize one distinct value in Raquel's labor, her dutiful service, Raquel desires a sense of integration with the family. What she values most is her relationship with the children, stressing the idea that life is unimaginable without them. In this respect, it is clear that Raquel's position in the family becomes deeply antagonistic to her expressed sentiments. While the party is an opportunity for Pilar to arrange a special occasion for a devoted employee, for Raquel it becomes a disconcerting experience where her desire for

increased familial integration is unrealized, and her instituted role of merely being an employee is cemented.

The nanny's perspective becomes an important feature in the film, revealing the hidden inequity in mistress and nanny arrangements. Though the task of mothering is negotiated between the two women, the family undermines Raquel's participation in a mothering role. Instead, all of her work, whether it involves caring for the children or tending to the home, is reduced to chores; it is precisely this attitude that exposes an underlying contradiction within the division of motherhood.

While the family desires a worker—a body they can reduce to pure labor power—what they obtain is a person. In this arrangement, whereby subjectivity is dismissed, affective labor becomes estranged for the nanny. Consequently, it turns into nothing more than an exchanged commodity, even if this trade is not explicitly recognized as such. This condition can be examined further by considering the length of the nanny's work shifts.

In Doing the Dirty Work?, Bridget Anderson provides original field research on the living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Europe. Although her attention does not center in Latin America, her insightful analysis has proven indispensable for this chapter by raising several key points and discussing various concepts from which to understand the institution of domestic labor. Anderson notes, for instance, that domestic workers in Europe often classify their employment not by the type of work

performed, but by whether it is live-in or live-out. In this case, the idea of “live-in” is often, though by no means always, associated with caring for children, the elderly or the disabled (28).

In recent times, this setup has become increasingly popular, and with it, the tendency to establish room and board as part of employee salaries (40). This constant proximity to an employer creates a heightened demand for availability. Maids in these conditions report a virtual twenty-four hour duty, regardless of whether they work for a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ employer. Anderson highlights an example of this viewpoint with the voice of a Filipina worker in Athens, Greece:

[Y]ou’re working the minute you open your eyes and the minute you close your eyes. You keep strength and your body going so that you will finish the work...you will keep on waiting to your employer till they get sleep because although you finish your work, example you finish ironing, everything, putting the children to bed or the elder person in bed, even you put the in bed at ten o’clock still there are other members of the family. So you keep on observing. ‘Oh, can I sleep or maybe they will call me to give them food or to them yoghurt’...And even if you are sleeping, if you are already sleeping still you can feel that you are still on duty, isn’t it (41).

Such a level of chronic preoccupation undoubtedly hinders a maid’s ability to develop or sustain a personal life. In *La Nana*, this condition is made evident as we realize Raquel has no family or children of her own, and has a strained relationship with her sole relative, her mother. At several points throughout the film, Raquel’s familial isolation and solitude are exhibited as

she rushes to withdraw from conversations with her mother to address the perceived needs of her employers.

At the same time, viewers are made aware that Raquel's haste is prompted by fantasy. No one, in fact, calls for her. As such, Raquel yearns to be needed by her employers when confronted with moments of intimacy. If the family consumes her time, Raquel can justify (perhaps to herself more than to others) the vast extent of her "unavailability" to forge a life outside the confines of work. Therefore, she conveys a degree of desperation over this situation. Given her feelings, Raquel appears convinced that it is not only she who cannot live without her employers' family, they cannot live without her.

A similar representation of pathos is conveyed when our attention shifts to the nanny's room and onto a collection of teddy bears propped up against her bed, which are likely presents from the children over the years. As an adult, Raquel's evident and unusual attachment to the bears connotes a degree of regression. As discussed in chapter two, Latin American maids often begin working prior to adulthood. This condition has given rise to the term 'criada,' meaning that the employee is still 'being raised.' Since most of these women do not marry or have children of their own due to the 'live-in' condition of their employment, the reference to 'la criada' in many places has grown customary.

The idea that maids are childlike figures who have not fully reached womanhood is implicit in the term. Thus, it suggests a notion of inadequacy; the 'criada' is somehow maladapted. In the film, the teddy bears strategically

placed on the nanny's bed serve to highlight this established perspective. They suggest the nanny is juvenile and unsophisticated, leaving us to wonder how a grown woman forms an illusion of comfort by clinging to these objects.

The seemingly incessant work hours are not the only factor to Raquel's bleak, troublesome state. The ambiguous, constant shifting of job duties and the lack of a formal job description also contribute to her despair. Raquel is responsible for the household upkeep and childcare, but these functions are not defined by objective standards such as defined work hours or specified tasks to be performed. Instead, as informal work, a nanny's duties are shaped and managed by an employer's individual predilection and taste. In this respect, employers have a wide range of preferences regarding cleanliness, tidiness, and child-rearing practices. Employer preferences are potentially ever-changing and capricious, resulting in undefined and often unreasonable job duties.

Given the lack of regulations and objective work standards, we can consider the demand for these workers as a condition stemming from a desire to sustain a high-status lifestyle. Cleanliness and order within the home are not essential for survival. The display of harmony and beauty in objects by washing windows, polishing silverware, dusting furniture, and ironing clothes is arguably superfluous. However, they are often viewed as interests tied to the elevation of status. With the effects of housekeeping made visible, a family employer can affirm its high socio-economic standing and its access to

resources. As a consequence, the employer develops impractical and unnecessary “needs,” resulting in their increased and often unreasonable expectations of the domestic worker.

The quest for grand, luxurious homes also demonstrates employer desires to showcase high-status. Given the enormous scale of such households, families must hire staff. As discussed in chapter three, hired staff becomes another feature of the family’s wealth, as staff presence completes a portrait of extravagant living. Moreover, this tendency to overreach and live far beyond necessity can breed the absurd. Since the job description and duties for hired help is not defined by objective standards, what was otherwise unimaginable—such as owning indoor pets while maintaining pristine, white carpets—becomes not only feasible, but a job requirement of the domestic worker.

At the same time, the desire to showcase an ever-increasing degree of organization, cleanliness, and neatness within the home creates a practice that animates discourses on civilization. The management and control of a household can be understood as an attempt to pursue distinction as ‘civil’ human beings. It would appear that surrendering to anything short of this pursuit points to a willingness to live ‘like animals.’

In this manner, housekeeping is valued not for what it produces, but for the dirt, grime, and indecency it eliminates. Thus, a domestic worker is often objectified as an asset to maintain appropriateness in a “civil” home, and ensure the perceived high-status that the employer expects to signify to others.

Hence, housekeeping is arguably not a task, but a role, and represents a social position from which to construct identity.

In *La Nana*, Pilar's attitude towards Raquel offers an opportunity to examine the reproduction of status. By hiring the nanny, Pilar manages to cope with the tensions and contradictions placed on women. In the vast majority of cases, and across cultures, (especially regarding middle-class living) women assume a house management role disproportionate to that assumed by men. In this position, women can preserve the house manager identity even if they choose to hire help.

Indeed, the presence of paid domestic workers has the effect of emphasizing and reinforcing women employers as competent 'mothers,' 'wives,' and household managers. Yet, domestic worker identities can be constructed as means for the preservation of women employers' standing and status as house manager. As such, the employers and domestic workers are woven into mutually dependent female stereotypes occupying their own sphere of influence in the home. It is in this way that the domestic worker can serve to foil the lady of the house (Anderson 21).

La Nana explores the contradictions rooted in this "foiling" role with Raquel's behavior. Though she normally wears a uniform during her everyday interactions with the family, on her day off she visits a department store to search for one of Pilar's sweaters. By gazing in the mirror and meditating on her resemblance to Pilar, Raquel reveals the tension built into their

relationship. As Pilar's name clearly suggests, she is defined as the foundational pillar of her family that no one can do without. However, it is the nanny who bolstered the value afforded to her. Indeed, Pilar, in many instances, functions as yet another dependent in need of constant care.

Therefore, Raquel's fixation with the sweater speaks to a desire to redress circumstances. As an object associated with Pilar, the sweater represents her identity as mother, wife, and lady of the house. In a symbolic turn of events, Raquel dons the sweater. This act of mimicry reveals the discontent she has for her position in Pilar's family, and unveils her eagerness to usurp her. As mentioned in chapter one, the urge to mimic those in power can also be subversive.

The film allows us to draw a parallel between Raquel's increasing frustration with her role in the family and her emotional turmoil. We often see her cede to the excessive use of painkillers to suppress severe headaches. In these scenes, the camera zooms in on Raquel's face, thereby encompassing the entire frame, a technique emphasizing a progressive disjuncture between her mind and body.

As she continues to deny frustrations and struggle with her discontent in silence, Raquel practices a form of self-denial that reaches a critical tipping point. Unable to restrain and bury her anguish deeper in her mind, she has a complete loss of consciousness. In this moment of absence, Raquel capitulates to an existence as a mere body, and has been defeated in the battle of

resistance waged to preserve a sense of self. She has succumbed to external pressures transforming her existence into a body that functions and operates around the call of domestic duty, as though she were reconfigured as a machine.

Betty Friedan's seminal book, The Feminine Mystique (1963), is one of the first works to delve deeply into the world of housewives and examine the discontent and anxiety that ensnared many women's lives. Friedan exposed the way self-fulfillment in the American culture of the 1950s and 60s was insidiously gendered: the vast majority of women were inclined to see their lives satisfied in feminine roles as mother and wife. The search for this uniquely 'feminine' purpose, however, divorced women from the ability to develop themselves as people, as human beings with a voice prepared to partake in a world of ideas. As Friedan notes, "It is precisely this unique human capacity to transcend the present, to live one's life by purposes stretching into the future—to live not at the mercy of the world, but as a builder and designer of that world—that is the distinction between animal and human behavior, or between the human being and the machine" (312).

Friedan proceeds to argue that an identity centered in the drudgery of everyday chores, or the banal happenings of domestic affairs, left many women to face the terror of "dailyness" where time—and with it, the possibilities open to existence—was curtailed to erode human freedom. Indeed, many women who were troubled by domesticity and the absurdity that can be ascribed to it,

had to face a dilemma: who, then, would take charge of the home and the interminable and demanding functions as housekeeper and mother? Who would fulfill this role when the duty remained gendered?

Friedan referred to these inquiries as “the servant problem”(184), but only in regards to middle-class women, not domestic workers. The fewer servants available, (as was the case during the Second World War when maids and cooks were in high demand in war plants), the more vulnerable women became to the feminine *mystique*. That is, the more likely women of higher socio-economic status would conform to social conventions and remain confined to domesticity. The problem Friedan poses, then, is the need for more servants, thereby skirting and euphemizing the more precise desire for women of less privileged status to supplant this domestic role.

As can be seen through the characters of Pilar and Raquel in the film, substitutions of this nature are not unblemished exchanges. The lady of the house did not sacrifice any value in the *mystique*. Instead, she remains esteemed, appreciated, and confident in the conventions of femininity with added glory. Not only is the lady of the house a triumphant mother and wife, she is also a career woman. She is a self-realized, accomplished, and exulted person who achieved success without disturbing or disrupting the sexual division of labor. As such, the status quo situating men outside of this role and its related responsibilities remains untouched.

Therefore, the domestic worker's condition worsens. While middle-class women define their identities and fulfill their lives with the illusion of 'professional' and 'expert' housewives, domestic workers are dehumanized without a significant ability of redemption. The only channels open to identity and fulfillment are filtered in relations of interdependence with a family who repeatedly arrests intimacy. Under these circumstances, a maid is not easily recognized as a human being with dignity, a person of value and worthy of affection. Rather, her job regularly lies in the mistress's shadow, encompassing the stigma and negativity often attributed to the feminine body.

Dominant chauvinistic perceptions historically positioned women as inferior overall to men, but various antithetical dualisms also exist between women, especially in relation to qualities deemed feminine. I suggest that the mistress/maid dichotomy works in continuity with the virgin/whore paradigm. The virgin archetype, for example, idealizes feminine qualities into concepts of chastity, purity and nurturance—all virtues implying moral superiority and closely associated with motherhood. In its opposition, women are often subject to notions of perversion and degeneracy.

In 1973, Evelyn Stevens brought further clarity to the virgin archetype in a Latin American context. For Stevens, idealized femininity, which she terms as *marianismo*, is linked to a tradition of assumptions stemming from movements in the Roman Catholic Church and the veneration of the Virgin Mary. These beliefs, she argues, provided a central figure from which to

construct legitimate notions concerning women's social roles. Thus, over time, the perceptions of women in religious practice began to have a strong secular expression. Stevens describes some of the characteristics of a *marianist* ideal that developed in Latin American culture as follows:

Among the characteristics of this ideal are semidivinity, moral superiority, and spiritual strength. This spiritual strength engenders abnegation, that is an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice. No self-denial is too great for the Latin American woman, no limit can be divined to her vast store of patience with the men of her world. Although she may be sharp with her daughters-in-law, she is and must be complaisant toward her own mother and her mother-in-law for they too, are reincarnations of the great mother. She is also submissive to the demands of men: husbands, sons, fathers, brothers (94).

Although nannies fulfill significant roles in families as nurturers and caretakers, the perception of women as 'sacrificed,' 'abnegated,' and semidivine mothers does not correspond to nannies. The nanny, therefore, presents an interesting ambiguity to idealized forms of femininity, especially motherhood. She is urged to fulfill a role somewhere in between the *marianist* framework and its opposition, wrestling with norms mandating a denial of self. At the same time, a nanny must endure her employers and their families, while being essentially characterized as inferior to a mother. This does not necessarily suggest that nannies are considered as sexually perverse and immoral (although the term *gata* often used in reference to maids in Latin America suggests a 'loose' woman that has been, or could be, sexually corrupted). Rather, given the demands of domestic labor, nannies are more closely associated to the material world of dirt and bodily functions, and with it,

notions of degradation. Therefore, when a mistress delegates domestic tasks to another woman, she manages to ‘transcend’ the limitations ascribed to her gender while leaving a maid or nanny to confront the unforgiving face of patriarchal feminine constructions.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that while women employers potentially create an oppressive situation by delegating ‘feminine’ duties to domestic workers, it is ultimately men who benefit most from these relations. This point is evident throughout Silva’s film, but it becomes particularly salient the moment Pilar joins her mother and daughter in a conversation that mulls over the conflicts they have experienced with *las nanas*.

As the women convene to share their domestic concerns, there are glimpses of Don Mundo in the background scurrying about and sneaking out of the house with his golf clubs. Don Mundo is not only oblivious to the friction and discord involving the maids, he takes advantage of the women’s distractions to enjoy his leisure. As Don Mundo’s name clearly suggests, his concerns are not limited to the confines of the home; his *world* is open to the possibilities of his unencumbered will. This unfettered freedom is characterized numerous times as he consumes himself to work on his model ship hobby, without regard for, or even consciousness of, assisting the women with domestic duties, resulting in such tasks being delegated to *las nanas*.

What is clear, then, is that Don Mundo and the patriarchal dominance he represents plays a central role in the relations between Pilar and Raquel. A

transformation away from the perception of the domestic sphere as a ‘feminine’ domain could lead to a greater, ungendered participation with domestic duties, an outcome that would alleviate mass demand for live-in maids. Otherwise left unchanged, the gendered construction of housework and the hierarchy among women that it builds within these relations could become a learned norm for the children and adolescents who witness these dynamics. As a result, an unfortunate and deleterious notion could be perpetuated to future generations—domestic duties are overwhelmingly the responsibility of women, and if feasible, such duties can be largely delegated to live-in maids.

In *La Nana*, we can glean the reproduction of these gendered and status relations in Camila. Her participation in the discussion of maids among the elder women implies the repetition of these meetings in her adult future. Indeed, her presence produces a mirroring effect with Pilar. As Camila protests Raquel’s offensive behavior towards the new maid, Mercedes, in a display of righteousness, her behavior connotes the possibility that Pilar had done the same for Raquel when she was Camila’s age. In this fashion, both mother and daughter have become defensive and protective over the maids they identify with the most in age.

However, despite each woman’s level of concern, they are unable to discern any positive solutions for the women they claim to defend. Instead, as the grandmother notes, the tension between themselves and the nannies is a cycle that continues indefinitely, “Qué lata, pelea de nanas he tenido millones

mijita.” Since the grandmother has the advantage of experience, her statement serves to warn the younger women, thus allowing them to foresee that nannies and their dilemmas will be part of their destinies as wives and mothers.

Camila’s hostility towards Raquel also points to her increased socialization. Although Raquel had a large role in rearing her, Camila perceives Raquel in a radically different way, in contrast to the behavior and attitudes of her younger siblings. She begins to draw social distinctions that lead her to rebel and separate from Raquel, making it apparent that she assumes a new position of power and authority in the coming of age process. Consequently, their relationship ceases to be one of nanny and child, and becomes an understanding between adolescent and subordinate. Faced with the change, Raquel attempts resistance by reasserting control. In this power struggle, however, Raquel is expected to submit to Camila. Unlike Pilar, who can manage the rebellious adolescent because of her leverage as a mother, Raquel must face the complete loss of deference and intimacy with the young girl.

Pilar, who can detect Raquel’s increased frustration, attempts to smooth tensions by hiring additional maids. Similar to the chapter one discussion regarding Rosario Castellanos and her maid, Herlinda, Pilar also takes measures to ‘promote’ Raquel into a position of authority by subordinating other maids to her. By doing so, Pilar avoids the need to address underlying dilemmas regarding Raquel’s relationship to the family, and dissuades her

from leaving employment. All three of the new hires contrast Raquel in distinct ways, thereby illuminating aspects of Raquel's past and future.

The first maid to come into the fray is the young Mercedes. As previously noted, the relationship between Mercedes and Camila appears to echo Pilar and Raquel's past. The young girls are roughly the same age, and they establish a bond centering on a cat. In this relationship, Mercedes embraces the responsibility of taking care of the cat, while Camila retains official ownership of it.

Within a short time, Raquel disrupts the girls' connection, and exhibits reservations towards Mercedes who is not Chilean, but rather an indigenous girl from Peru. Raquel's intolerance of others in this family network heightens an awareness of the home as a space that can be interpreted as a national metaphor. Although Raquel perceives all the new hires as an invasion into protected territory, the attitude and behavior she displays towards Mercedes is more intensely spiteful and antagonistic. Raquel's hostility takes a nationalistic overtone as she cautions and disciplines Mercedes by professing that she is not only a stranger in their home, but also a woman foreign to their customs and culture, "La Mercedes que no se confunda, aquí no estamos en Perú."

Raquel further alienates Mercedes by seeking to "disinfect" their shared shower stall after Mercedes occupied it. This compulsive behavior can be interpreted on at least two levels. On the one hand, her compulsion manifests

an internalization of her occupation as a maid, illustrating how it shapes and affects her life. In the act of cleaning, the subconscious aspect of her inner self that is ingrained in servitude admonishes her original, intrinsic identity. Thus, Raquel's preoccupation with cleanliness in relation to others can read as a projection, revealing her belief in someone else's undesirable qualities and inadequacies as symptoms of her own self-loathing.

On another note, her behavior also alludes to the concept of 'the stain' or *la mancha* of race as pure and impure, which dates to colonial times. The nanny, in this case, attempts to subjugate and humiliate the maid while defining her as a source of contamination. This attitude is further pronounced as Raquel attempts to lock Mercedes out of the home, therefore preventing her from 'ruining' or 'corrupting' the relations already established within the family.

Another new hire, Sonia, appears in the home after Mercedes is forced to surrender and retreat from the premises. Sonia is a seasoned maid that cautions Raquel, offering insight into her emotional qualms by sharing past work experiences involving various families. Sonia identifies with Raquel regarding their mutual insistence on defining themselves as "members of the family." Realizing how deceptive that notion is, Sonia advises Raquel to brace for the future when the children reach adulthood, and eventually disengage from the maids. Thus, Sonia attempts to dismantle Raquel's desire to gain gratification and fulfillment from her role as a motherly figure to the children.

Although Sonia has accepted similar situations in the past, and is aware of her perceived invisible status, she offers Raquel no alternative aside from bitterness.

In contrast, the film introduces Lucy into the home as a woman who presents alternative possibilities for the lives of maids. With a name that references light, she personifies a new perspective and vibrancy. She is a character with a loud, vivacious personality, intent on imprinting herself on her surroundings. In this manner, Lucy is first to recognize Raquel's emotional torment, noting the displacement of her pain hidden in cleaning rituals. As such, the film explores a resolution to Raquel's dilemma in Lucy's personality. Lucy approaches the space of that home without the intention or hope to become part of it. Therefore, she provides a fresh new outlook distanced from the customs and norms surrounding the position. Her lack of knowledge and complacency makes for a much more abstract consideration of the job description. In fact, completely unfamiliar with housekeeping, Lucy is unsure of when to wear a uniform, thus indicating the possibility of not wearing the uniform within the limitations of a schedule.

Lucy's inherent and uncorrupted freedom underscores the comfort she experiences in her own body and sexuality. Lucy's choice to exercise and jog, and the ease with which she carries herself in the nude, surprises and perhaps even shocks Raquel. Lucy's unconventional attitude allows Raquel to reconsider a new perspective on her identity as a woman without conceding

and accepting notions of purity and virtue, and by extension, notions of shame and guilt that are constructed around femininity.

The question remains, does the film simply proffer Raquel as a character that has an unusually tormented personality? Does Lucy's character serve as an example of a woman that has a significantly contrasting experience as a maid? As Anderson suggests through her field research on domestic workers in Europe, when considering the complexities of the relations between female workers and their employers, one must also acknowledge the differences in worker experiences. The research, she clarifies, is muddled and often ambivalent. While some maids report dismal experiences, others narrate satisfactory working relationships with their employers. Anderson further suggests that one must allow for the different psychobiographies of workers (6).

Silva's film, I propose, draws a contrast between Raquel and Lucy that transcends differences in their personalities. Notwithstanding being new at her job, Lucy draws a bold distinction between the sale of her labor power and personhood. Specifically, she preserves a distinct identity that is disconnected from her position as a maid. Likewise, Lucy retains power over her individuality by maintaining strong connections with her family, experiencing her body in contexts outside of housekeeping, and upholding the prerogative of expression as a person with complete ownership of self, not simply as a maid compliant to the orders of an employer. Still, it is important to note that the

film does not imply that Lucy is immune from a loss of these particular freedoms.

La Nana presents Raquel as a character whose history is imprecise. It is not evident whether, at some point, her disposition to Lucy was similar or if she faced more formidable economic pressures and obstacles. What is discernible is that Raquel began to work at a young age, and eventually felt that her entire existence, and consequently her happiness, was bound and enmeshed to the family that had employed her. This mystery allows room to speculate whether or not Lucy would be subject to the same outcome had she endured similar circumstances. Though she appears to have a strong personality and a firm sense of self, Lucy enters the home with abundantly more flexibility than Raquel, and at a much older age. We are also exposed to the robust support Lucy finds within a large family, an advantage that Raquel may not have, as she only references her mother.

The time Raquel spends away from her employers' home marks a transition in her demeanor. By accompanying Lucy to a family gathering in her town of origin, Raquel is placed within a rural setting that appears to awaken her senses. She is suddenly unbound to a middle-class lifestyle, and in the radically different environment, is free to explore camaraderie as well as romance. Although Raquel is drawn to Lucy's uncle, Eric, the physical relationship between them becomes tense and awkward as she denies him, confessing that she has never had a sexual encounter with a man before. The

scene confirms the significant extent that Raquel has remained detached from her own sense of humanity while working for her employers. It also allows viewers to note that, set away from her employer's home, Raquel is capable of developing a less limited and repressed sense of self.

Indeed, Raquel recovers the ability to shape her life through Lucy's influence. This improvement is largely enabled by Raquel's change in perspective regarding her body, and her perseverance to detach from the home to escape the banality of domesticity. The film suggests, therefore, a new interpretation of the female body—one that calls forth a resistance to women's 'urban invisibility.' As Flanagan and Valiulus affirm, the presence of women is usually minimized or altogether erased from public spaces:

The city is a gendered space and place where women must struggle to destroy the barriers that have been erected to keep them invisible; to claim their bodies and their bodies' needs as integral parts of the city, and to assert their rightful visibility as urban citizens. (Flanagan xiii)

Lucy inspired Raquel to attend to herself and her body by simply jogging out in the streets. On one level, the activity may seem banal or even trivial; however, Raquel's decision is critical to her transformation of self. It represents a break from the confines of domesticity to understand individuality and visualize her existence in the context of the city. The fact that Raquel has been enclosed and removed from urbanity is demonstrated throughout the film. Chile's urban landscape is not only absent from the screen, but obscured from Raquel.

As a result, she becomes invisible to the city until her desire to jog creates a new dimension in her life. This opens possibilities of appearing in, and exercising some influence on, the use of public space in a way that disrupts the city as a site of sexual difference. It is an act that begins to claim and control her place in the public sphere. Raquel asserts authority to circulate her body not as property or profit, but to move freely for her own benefit.

The freedom to break into the public sphere also relates to Pilar's experience. She managed to step away from the privacy of home to assert a new presence in the public sphere as a professor. Yet, Pilar's advancements were made possible largely because of Raquel's status as a 'good domestic worker.' The nanny's live-in state and ability to assume mothering responsibilities allowed Pilar to remain within 'good mothering' codes. Hence, Pilar's encroachment into the public sphere would likely be less acceptable if she broke from the cultural expectations of motherhood—expectations that are mostly shaped from, defined by, and beneficial to men.

Tenuous boundaries separate constructions of motherhood from the negative conceptions of 'working women.' The city remains coded as a potential threat to dominant, male-defined notions of femininity, which are redeemed by Raquel and Pilar's connections to domesticity and motherhood. Without these connections, women's work outside of the home for personal pleasure and gain elicits perceptions that conflict with culturally dominant notions of idealized

femininity. A public life for women forges contrasting conceptions between public and private women, with the former resonating as a stigma of social unacceptability—of fallen women (Nord 374).

Therefore, as subjects committed to being in and around the city, participating in some form or fashion in the public sphere, it appears that both women will have to overcome a framework that can easily exclude or otherwise cast them into precarious positions as transgressors (Nord 366). As such, the film's final scene speaks to a symbolic struggle of women to resist their objectification by taking pleasure in the city. Raquel, dressed for the first time in athletic attire, personifies this endeavor by strolling through the streets as an urban citizen, in search to get lost in a crowd with no restraints. There is, however, recognition that the assertion of additional freedoms, and assumption of a more public role, cannot endure unless limitations are challenged that perpetuate even one woman's status as an object.

CONCLUSION

With the questions this dissertation raises, explores, and answers, I have sought to shed light on women's multiple, intersecting subject positions. Moreover, I have attempted to expand the debate on some of the specific, ongoing systemic obstacles to equity and freedom that many women share. Thus, although I argue that women do not share an essential identity or a universal experience on which to anchor a 'sisterhood,' I do not attempt to suggest that feminist collective political action is impossible. Following what Alison Stone proposes as a "genealogical and coalitional rethinking of feminism," it is possible to rethink collective feminist activities as "predicated not upon any shared set of feminine concerns but, rather, on overlaps and indirect connections within women's historical and cultural experience" (90). As Stone proceeds to explain, because subjects (understood as 'women') are located in a chain of historically overlapping phenomenon, we can conceive of them as "infinitely varying while entangled together historically" (92).

In addition to this way of conceiving of women without yielding to essentialism, this dissertation also sought to broaden an understanding of how meaning and values are constructed and percolated through images and texts from a postcolonialist perspective. As Ato Quayson points out, postmodernists often consider the proliferation of images as empowering subjectivity, given the myriad of possible ways subjects can reimagine themselves. However, from a postcolonialist standpoint, the recognition of the proliferation of images and

representations, especially residual colonial ones, is by no means access to freedom. For Quayson, it is important to understand their social content and historic projects before they can be aligned potentially to the liberation of subjects from systems of oppression. As Quayson states:

[T]he key dimension that postcolonialism forces us to consider is that of agency, whilst the postmodernist angle would make us settle on the economy of the image and the potential for the proliferation of subject positions. For postcolonial theory, the question of agency is crucial because merely identifying the purview or ambit of the regulative parameters set up by images is not enough. The next step has to be how such images ought to be subverted for how, if at all, their effects are to be challenged with a view to setting up a better order of effects (101).

Ultimately, this dissertation engaged with the politics of representation.

I endeavored to expose the texts analyzed as subversive and counter-hegemonic. These representations of women work to transcend the limitations in dominant social relations of power, and undermine available cultural standards and norms.

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