

By Olivia Cosentino\*

This take on *Roma* avoids both hyperbolic latitudes and hyperbolic criticisms, with the following exception: *Roma* is not about you.<sup>[i]</sup> Personal nostalgia may be the draw, even the interpellation, but it is not the point. While Cuarón makes it easy for spectators to slip dreamily into Mexico City soundscapes and expertly curated 1970s memorabilia, *Roma* is about the missing parts of stories that are typically told by (privileged) people who have the platform and opportunity to tell them.

What fascinated me most about Cuarón's *Roma* was its engagement with Cleo's intimate and emotional labor, a framework which allows us to intersectionally critique domestic work and to consider how repressions and silences in the film indict the very nature of domestic work. Tying together previously discrete fields of "care, sex, and domestic work," Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2010) propose the term "intimate labor," characterized as "work assumed to be the unpaid responsibility of women, and consequently, [...] a non-market activity or an activity of low economic value that should be done by lower classes or racial outsiders" (2-3).<sup>[ii]</sup>

Unlike "affective" or "reproductive" labor, intimate labor implies a critique of power dynamics related to gender, race and class. Intimate labor is critical to understanding domestic work in Mexico, where it is typically indigenous, darker-skinned women who labor on behalf of phenotypically European, lighter-skinned women. Cuarón's use of black and white nods towards colorism and pigmentocracy. The tonal differences of skin color are exaggerated in grayscale, especially when Cleo and Sofía are positioned side by side. The intimate labor that Cleo performs (and the inescapability of this work) is hinged upon the legacy of the constructed racial hierarchy "invented" in colonial Latin America that continues on in the form of racism and classism in contemporary Mexico. An important casting choice, Yalitza Aparicio (Cleo) is not a whitewashed, telenovela-esque "made-up maid,"<sup>[iii]</sup> but rather, her dark skin and hair color correlate to lived realities.<sup>[iv]</sup>

Emotional labor, an aspect of intimate labor, is central to *Roma's* critique of domestic work.[v] Boris and Salazar Parreñas explain that emotional labor entails either exhibiting “certain emotions to induce particular feelings in the client or customer” (think a smiling customer service representative or a peppy flight attendant) or hiding other emotions that could potentially “make their employers uncomfortable” (6). Thus, it is not just about what we see Cleo feel (or perform), but rather the absences: what we do *not* see Cleo feel or express.

When Sofía uses Cleo as a verbal punching bag to vent frustrations over her crumbling marriage, Cleo is silent, controlling her reaction to avoid creating discomfort for her employer. Given that the film’s sound design is so rich, Cleo’s silence is jarring and gut-wrenching, offering spectators the opportunity to affectively process these recognizable gaps in emotion.

During the hospital sequence, we see the depth to which Cleo has internalized the systematic repression of feelings that emotional labor requires. The unflinching static camera denies us Cleo’s facial expressions as she looks away to watch doctors attempt to revive her lifeless baby. Cleo breathes heavily and occasionally whimpers in pain, but says nothing, curbing her emotions around the physicians. As both of the doctors remain headless, just outside the frame, spectators are cued to concentrate solely on Cleo and her emotional well-being.

When the complex mixture of grief, guilt and pain following her baby’s still birth renders her unable to perform happiness – the other side of emotional labor –, the children take notice of the collapse of the artifice that sustains their comfort: “¿Qué? ¿Te volviste muda? / What? Have you gone mute?” The climax of the film could be read as the sole moment where Cleo no longer represses her emotions for the sake of the family. For the first time, Sofía asks if Cleo is okay, to which she cries out, “No la quería / I didn’t want her.” Instead of addressing Cleo’s reference to her emotional state, all Sofía can muster is: “Te queremos mucho, Cleo,

¿verdad? / We love you so much, Cleo. Right?”

I appreciate that Cuarón avoids saccharine moments between Cleo and Sofía. *Roma* refuses the idea of “global sisterhood” so famously critiqued at the (First) World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975. Sofía, in many ways, represents the cold, self-serving first-wave feminism that so desperately lacked intersectional solidarity. When Sofía drunkenly tells Cleo that, “Estamos solas. No importa lo que te digan, siempre estamos solas / We are alone. No matter what they tell you, we women are always alone,” she speaks an important truth. *Roma* demonstrates the divisive results of a patriarchal system of labor that assumes all domestic work to be *naturally* women’s work. Privileged women hire (and oppress) other women to complete their domestic “duties” to be able to work outside the home, in essence, preventing cross-class female solidarity.[vi]

I wonder if the hype of *Roma* will translate into the political sphere like with *Una mujer fantástica* (*A Fantastic Woman*, Sebastián Lelio, 2017), the Oscar winner that seemingly “accelerated” the passing of gender identity legislation in Chile. At the Morelia International Film Festival in 2018, Alfonso Cuarón called for the [regulation of domestic labor within Mexico](#). The impact of Cuarón’s film/comments have yet to be seen, but judging from the plethora of articles published on domestic employees in the past few weeks, *Roma* has certainly renewed much-needed conversations about domestic workers’ rights in Mexico on a national level.

\*Olivia Cosentino is a Ph.D. student at The Ohio State University. She specializes in post-Golden Age and contemporary Mexican cinema and culture, focusing specifically on youth studies, star studies, affect theory and violence. Olivia is currently-co-editing a volume on the “lost” Mexican cinema of the 1960s-80s and has a forthcoming chapter on domestic labor, camp and Juan Gabriel in *¿Qué le dijiste a Dios?* in the edited collection, *Domestic Labor in Latin American Film* (Palgrave Macmillan).

[i] Not unless you are a domestic worker in [Mexico](#) or perhaps [other \(hierarchical\) post-colonial contexts](#).

[ii] Boris, Eileen and Rhacel S. Parreñas. "Introduction." *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies,*

*and the Politics of Care*. Stanford Social Sciences, 2010. 1-17.

[iii] Ríos, Sofia. "Representation and Disjunction: Made-up Maids in Mexican Telenovelas." *Journal*

*of Iberian and Latin American Research* 21, no.2 (2015): 223-33.

[iv] I further explore the performative nature of domestic labor in Mexico as it relates to race and class in "Serious Camp: Juan Gabriel's Queer Repertoire in *¿Qué le dijiste a Dios?*" part of the forthcoming edited volume, *Domestic Labor in Latin American Film* (Palgrave).

[v] Arlie Hochschild coined "emotional labor" in the classic, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983).

[vi] For more on this, see: Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press, 2012.

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