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ROMA: REPARATION VERSUS EXPLOITATION

Sergio de la Mora

***Roma*'s reception has** been hyperbolic.[1] Hailed as a masterpiece upon winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, it continued to create buzz all through the fall and winter of 2018–19 up to Alfonso Cuarón's consecration at the Oscars. However, the film has also been associated with controversy from the beginning: first, because of its launch on Netflix—a decision that kept the film out of Cannes due to the festival's new rule (continued for the 2019 edition) banning from competition any films without a theatrical release in France; and second, because of an escalating critique of its representation of Cleo, the family's live-in maid/nanny.[2] The different ways of perceiving its representation of Mexican history, and race and class relations, have generated debates about racism, privilege, power, empathy, and compassion. The film's depiction of domestic work as racialized servitude lies at the center of these debates. *Roma*'s profuse reception by the press and on social networks, as well as its adoption by the Mexican women's rights non-profit Fondo Semillas in organizing for the rights of domestic workers in the United States, Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia through Mexico's Fondo Semillas, proves its global reach.[3]

No one, not even its director, anticipated the kind of response *Roma* has produced. Cuarón confessed: "I said it was going to be a film that nobody would see and then moving on. But it's been a really moving, strange process, finding the way people are responding. . . . And it's almost overwhelming. I didn't calculate that people would find [something so personal, so universal]. I wish I could calculate those things."[4]

While *Roma* is undoubtedly Cuarón's most personal film—semiautobiographical, very specific about time and space, period and neighborhood and nation—Cuarón's audience is global, as befits a transnational director whose hit films have included such disparate non-Mexican-based films as *Gravity* (2013), *Children of Men* (2006), and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). While training at Latin America's oldest film school, the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC) in Mexico City, he began working with his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki as well as his tight band of cohorts Carlos Marcovich and Guillermo del Toro, plus the non-CUEC Alejandro González Iñárritu. Today, Cuarón, del Toro, and Iñárritu, these three *güeritos* (light-skinned Mexicans), have become leading players in world cinema, all working between the national and transnational worlds of cinema.[5]

Throughout his career, Cuarón's work, according to Dolores Tierney, both "conforms to and frustrates a number of expectations of the Hollywood genre [that they] most resemble."[6] In *Y tu mamá también*, for instance, he revisits both the teen film and the road movie, but uses realist camerawork (long takes, handheld camera, critical voice-over narrative) to situate the film's gender and sexual politics in the context of Mexico's political system, and within the neocolonial race and class relations that inform the film's progressive politics. *Roma* marks Cuarón's return to his roots in Mexico City as an empowered global filmmaker. Within Mexican society and its film world, however, the movie's reception has been distinctive, both more celebratory and more bitingly critical, reflecting the film's intimate relationship with the nation's political history.

The film is set in Mexico City during 1970–71, the tail end of both the so-called Mexican economic miracle (1940–60) and the beginning of the end of the political domination of the PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party that governed Mexico for seventy-one years. However much it is a domestic view of familial drama, *Roma* keeps politics in its peripheral vision, showing how domestic and personal politics reverberates with the public and exterior. At one climactic point, the audience witnesses the Corpus Christi massacre of June 10, 1971, when a group of elite paramilitary attacked and killed more than a dozen student protestors, in an echo of an even more brutal government crackdown on dissent on October 2, 1968, at the Plaza of Three Cultures in Tlatelolco. Both acts of state repression haunt the film.

President Luis Echeverría Álvarez, when he was secretary of the interior under President Gustavo Díaz Ordáz prior to taking office himself, was widely known to have orchestrated

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the massacre at Tlatelolco ten days before Mexico hosted the Olympics—the first country in Latin America to do so.[7] Echeverría was also behind Mexico's dirty war against guerrilla movements in the state of Guerrero, the disappearance of other political dissidents, and the persecution of the press, though he subsequently tried to distance himself from this history by creating a so-called democratic opening and courting intellectuals and the cultural world—most notably, filmmakers.

By now, the story of *Roma* should be well known. Set in the Colonia Roma neighborhood, now part of a gentrified central corridor in Mexico City, *Roma* is the story of two women: Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), the young Oaxacan Mixtec housekeeper/nanny; and Sofia (Marina de Tavira), the woman whose husband and four children she looks after. It is a middle-class professional household of four kids and three adults: Sofia and her husband and mother Teresa (Verónica García). Both Cleo and Sofia are abandoned by their men early in the narrative, which tracks how each responds to this turn, while also powerfully centering and visualizing how Indigenous domestic and intimate labor has been racialized and gendered in Mexico.[8]

The structure of domestic work is a legacy of the caste system of New Spain (the colonial term for what is now Mexico), which encoded a system of racial classification tied to social status, whereby Indigenous people were obliged to work for criollos and mestizos for no compensation other than room and board. Beginning in the colonial period, the caste system involved a racialization that naturalized the servitude of Indigenous people.[9] Intimate labor, as theorized by Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, comprises everything from housekeeping and child rearing to home care for the elderly, and even sex—in fact, all "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."[10] *Roma* couldn't come at a more opportune moment than now, when the demand for domestic and intimate labor in the United States and Europe, performed primarily by immigrant women of color, is growing alongside anti-immigrant hate.

FRESCO
CERVEZA
Coron
EXTRA

Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio, left) and Sofía (Marina de Tavira, center) with the children. Courtesy of Carlos Somonte/Netflix

The Domestic as Film Genre

Roma is part of a distinct trend in contemporary Latin American cinema: stories of domestic workers, servants, and their masters, many of them made by women directors. A host of films explore the servant-employer relation, including *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001), from Argentina, in which the director shows how clearly all the family members project onto the maid their fears and desires, appreciation, paranoia, and obsessions. Other films that broach this subject have included *La teta asustada* (*The Milk of Sorrow*, Claudia Llosa, 2009), from Peru; *La Nana* (*The Maid*, Sebastián Silva, 2009), from Chile; and *Que Horas Ela Volta?* (*The Second Mother*, Anna Muylaert, 2015), from Brazil—to name just a few. In Mexican cinema, female domestic workers tend to be portrayed as comical and gossipy or as erotic objects, or they remain marginalized in the narrative.[11]

What differentiates *Roma* from these films is its reception, its social-action tie-in, its local/global reach, the reputation of its director, and the eloquence with which (his) camera portrays domestic labor. One sequence in particular honors the labor of domestic workers. It occurs in the early part of the film, when a skyward tilt and slow pan right reveals the surrounding rooftops of homes where women like Cleo are washing and hanging clothes. Some critics have taken offense at Cuarón's aestheticization of housecleaning —probably because black-and-white photography is equated with art and classic cinema—as if its depiction were a form of exploitation and a reconfirmation of domestic workers' low social status. Some critics have found the film patronizing, and blame it for enacting symbolic violence, while others question Cuarón's right to tell this story at all.

Miguel Salazar contextualizes *Roma* within what he calls "Latin America's nanny-inspired cinema [which] can often border on class voyeurism, a reality of which Cuarón seems fully conscious."[12] For Deborah Shaw, these domestic-worker films "reveal structural economic and social inequalities in a highly effective way."[13] Shaw uses the concept of a "dialectic of intimacy and distance" that, as Shireen Ally has posited, is characterized by "closeness, familiarity and intimacy coexist[ing] with distancing, estrangement and dehumanization."[14] And she argues that "there is a new socio-political vision in these films revealed through their focus on intimate, interior, private and domestic spaces."[15]

During the first twenty minutes of *Roma*, the camera observes and documents Cleo's labor, as her daily routine and interactions with the family portray her as a surrogate mother. Throughout, narratively and visually, the camera works to bring Cleo closer to the family and to the viewer. The beach scene is pivotal, for her greatest feat is to risk her life to rescue her young charges—a sacrifice that allows for greater compassion for Cleo and a stronger relationship with the family for whom she works. The waves crashing around Cleo align the audience with her point of view. Dolores Tierney analyzes the poster image of Cleo and the children's collective embrace on the beach: "In a crowded frame she's both embraced and wrestled down by the physical weight of the children as they cling to her (but her silhouette is still the more evident in the mass of bodies because the sunlight behind them picks her outline out more clearly)."[16] Yet the poster image also inspires rage at the injustice of putting Cleo in this position. The film shows throughout that "Cleo is both loved and exploited."[17] On the drive back to Mexico City, Cleo is in the center of a medium close-up shot looking out the back window of the Ford Galaxie, property of the absent patriarch, with the two youngest children asleep on her chest. Cleo has a protective hand over the head of Sofia, one of the two kids whose lives she saved. It is the picture of comfort and childhood bliss.

At the end, back home from the beach, the family collapses in the living room and celebrates Cleo's heroism, even as she goes about picking up dirty laundry and is asked to make a banana smoothie and bring a Gansito (subtitled as "a Twinkie," but actually a chocolate cake with strawberry jelly and cream, made by the Marinela confectionery). It is in the midst of all this activity that Sofía and the children discuss a possible visit to Cleo's hometown. The offer, a gesture toward closeness, is read through Aparicio's reaction as a promise that will remain unfulfilled, something that will never be a priority for her employers.

Roma has already catalyzed widespread organizing. Ariel Dorfman notes that *Roma* spelled backward, *amor*, translates as "love" in Spanish—a quality that he argues is missing in U.S. immigration policies.[18] Perhaps the film can enable the production of greater compassion for the Cleos of the world, as Dorfman hopes, but it is also, according to Cuarón, intended to effect a structural change, to empower domestic workers to claim their social and political rights. There are hints of such attitudes regarding other sectors in *Roma*, too, for those who know where to look. Cuarón stages *campesino* resistance during the scenes of forest fires at the hacienda where Cleo and the family spend New Year's Eve and the following day. There are mentions of land grabs, which point to political tensions that prompt the internal migration that supplies the domestic labor of Indigenous women to urban centers like Mexico City. The so-called Mexican economic miracle did not benefit women like Cleo and Liboria "Libo" Rodríguez, Cuarón's nanny since he was seven

Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio) comforts Sofía (Daniela Demesa) and Pepe (Marco Graf). Courtesy of Carlos Somonte/Netflix

months old, the person to whom the film is dedicated. Both Libo and Yalitza Aparicio are from Oaxaca, one of three states with the highest levels of poverty in the entire country, partially as a result of its large Indigenous population, whose levels of poverty are "four times higher than the national average."[19] Many Oaxacans migrate elsewhere in search of work, but the state also has a history of resistance and robust oppositional political organizing, with conflicts between Indigenous groups and a colonizing ruling class that go back for centuries.[20]

Reparation/Restorative Impulses

For Deborah Shaw, *Roma* reflects Cuarón's acknowledgement that he and other middle-class Mexicans enjoy lives that are built on the exploitation of poor Indigenous or mestiza women. Shaw sees *Roma* as a denunciation and reads it as Cuarón making "amends" with this childhood.[21] By placing "value on her story," Cuarón is giving back to Libo—and all the other Cleos of the world. The social consciousness operating in *Roma* did not surface for the future filmmaker in his youth. "It was probably my own guilt about social dynamics, class dynamics, racial dynamics," Cuarón recently told *Variety*. "I was a white, middle-class, Mexican kid living in this bubble. I didn't have an awareness."[22]

Housecleaning, cooking, shopping, and childcare: these constitute the domain of the person whom Mexicans call *la muchacha*, the girl. Despite the fact that employers depend on the *muchacha*, or *chacha*—a term that is at once anonymous and specific—the term is also used as a slur. It is somewhat less violent than an earlier dehumanizing term, *gata* (female cat), the insult that Fermín (Jorge Antonio Guerrero) shouts at Cleo when she goes to inform him that she is pregnant with his child. For Julieta Colás, the term describes a situation "where dark skin is associated with poverty, and poverty with domestic work, and domestic work with failure."[23]

Colás further points to a documentary video that was produced by AJ+ Español (Al Jazeera) with the Center for Support and Training for Household Employees (CACEH), who claim that they can identify with Cleo but "don't want to be Cleo." Even though some of the women featured in the three-minute documentary (which intersperses talking heads with scenes from *Roma*) attest to having it much worse than Cleo, they insist on their autonomy. They lay out the perverse logic according to which domestic workers, nannies, and others who perform intimate labor are both part of the family and not.[24]

These discussions about the racialization of domestic work demonstrate the political effects of *Roma* and expose "Mexico's darkest secret."[25] Mexico is not the mestizo nation it imagines itself to be. For Marcela García, "Mexico's caste system is omnipresent and we have not reckoned with it."[26] The guilt the film activates, according to García, functions

Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio) confronts Fermín (Jorge Antonio Guerrero).

Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio) enjoying the sun on a visit to the countryside.

"as a kind of prelude to an overdue reckoning."[27] Any such reckoning will carry more weight if changes are put in place to unionize domestic workers. In Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has recognized Mexico's supreme court ruling that domestic workers have a right to social security.[28] Cuarón posted a video on his Twitter account celebrating this achievement.[29] The ruling includes access to health care, sick leave, and retirement. The catch? Employers would need to be compelled to pay into the social security system.

Roma has also unleashed a wave of racist commentaries directed at Yalitza Aparicio. Sergio Goyri, a well-known character actor who often plays villains on telenovelas, called Aparicio a "*pinche india* [a damn Indian]." A group of Mexican actresses called for barring Aparicio from eligibility for a nomination to the Ariel Awards, Mexico's counterpart to the Oscars, on the grounds that she is not a trained actor; their assumption was that Aparicio, as an Indigenous *oaxaqueña*, must only be playing herself in the film. Aparicio's success outside Mexico and the racist backlash inside the country are both part of the film's reparatory and restorative dimensions. *Roma* is global not only in the scope of its address (as evidenced in its reception) but also in how Cuarón points, in discussions of the film, to the larger social dimension of the traffic in sixty-seven million domestic workers worldwide, according to the International Labor Organization.[30]

While Libo has been vocal in her defense of the film, Mexican film critics have been divided.[31] Some critics took the opportunity the film offered to bond with their own nannies.[32] The film critic Fernanda Solorzano recalls that she reconnected with her own nanny after seeing a sequence in *Y tu mamá también* where Tenoch (Diego Luna) remembers his nanny as he, Julio (Gael García Bernal), and Luisa (Maribel Verdú) pass the town where she was born.[33] Others, such as Alonso Díaz de la Vega, have been critical, writing that "*querer a la sirvienta no es liberarla* [loving the servant is not the same as liberating her]," a distinction that points to the limitations in Cuarón's critique of servitude and white privilege.[34] In order to truly show you care, he argues, you need to abolish the structural inequalities that perpetuate a racist colonial order.

The figure of Cleo and the presence of Aparicio, the actress who plays her, have become lightning rods for public and especially online debates. Some Native Americans have celebrated her achievement. In a *Hollywood Reporter* column about the invisibility of Native Americans in Hollywood film and television, Navajo writer and television producer Sierra Teller Ornela responded enthusiastically to Aparicio's Academy Award nomination, calling her "the first Indigenous American" to earn such recognition and writing: "I can't express what it means to see Ms. Aparicio speaking Mixtec in *Roma*, appearing at premieres and on magazine covers. It makes me dance at random times in random places."[35] And indeed, it is when Cleo communicates with her coworker Adela in Mixtec that her voice is strongest. (However, the Mixtec translations are rendered differently than the Spanish in the subtitles, because brackets are used to identify translations from the Mixtec. The brackets render the translation of Mixtec as strange, as if those exchanges were somehow not quite part of the story.)

The Cherokee scholar Joseph M. Pierce indicts *Roma* for its naturalization of Indigenous labor and erasure of Indigenous futurity, for its extraction of "emotional value," and for its inability to imagine Indigenous life other than in relation to serving settler colonialism. His critique is lacerating and cuts to the core of why *Roma* can be so unsettling: "I saw in *Roma* not sensitivity, but the continuation of an imaginary that can only see Indigenous women as the surrogate life force of a still-colonial society that is oblivious to its hubris, and its past, and its ongoing indifference toward the survival of Indigenous women. . . . *Roma* is a film that both stars an Indigenous woman and harnesses indigeneity to do the work of white supremacy at the same time. . . . I hate *Roma* because it turns Indigenous pain into the condition of possibility of our existence as objects of a history that will never be ours."[36]

Sophie Lewis, a feminist critic of capitalism, emphasizes the ideological violence done by repeating the narrative that glorifies the sacrifice and exploitation of a colonized Mixtec woman for a privileged "white settler" and makes Cleo responsible for so much in this family, constructing "a deeply constricted vision of love and servile devotion."[37] On the other hand, Valeria Luiselli, the Mexican novelist and advocate for U.S. immigration reform who has lived in South Africa, India, and South Korea, writes in her introduction to the photography book *Roma* (authored by Cuarón, with photographs by Carlos Somonte) that anyone who grew up in the 1970s in Mexico City "might as well as have grown up in Beirut, Memphis, Mumbai, Palermo or Johannesburg."[38] Mexicans don't see themselves as a racist society, she argues, because its race and class divides are so naturalized that they are almost not perceptible.

If Cleo is precluded from telling her own story, the film's final words are doubly significant. Tellingly spoken by Cleo to Adela in Mixtec, she confides that "I have so much to tell you" upon her return from the family's beach outing. With these words Cleo is revealed as having a story she wants to tell, one that now stands in contrast to the stories behind her of a stillborn child and a painful relationship with the child's progenitor. A new story, perhaps, for a new cinema.

Roma's Camera, Cuarón's Eye

The cinematography stands out. It shifts between objective and subjective points of view. The camera stands with and behind Cleo and parallel to her. A number of sequences are shot through her point of view in a film with few subjective shots. It is never a question of who is mostly doing the looking and telling: it is Cuarón, looking back in time, remembering.

The camera is all-seeing, both intimate and distant. For Owen Gleiberman in *Variety*, Cuarón "puts us in close quarters with his characters, but he's also staring at them from a beatific and nearly abstract remove."[39] The camera's dynamic of intimacy and distance is disorienting. The camera's gaze is often voyeuristic, but at the same time it is observant and somewhat detached, "often indifferent to [the characters'] individual plights," according to Lindsay Zoldaz.[40] For Gleiberman, though, the pristine black-and-white photography recalled an impressive but somewhat cold coffee-table book of photography. Too distant, too much a work of art. For Olivia Cosentino, however, "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."[41] Though Cuarón is a director whose signature trademark is color saturation, he is an unabashed cinephile: it is no surprise that his first film in black and white (the first without his longtime cinematographer, Lubezki) is rich and evocative.

In conversation, Cuarón and Lubezki have noted that Cuarón is pushing film language in new directions. Lubezki observed: "The blocking of the scenes is very perpendicular to the lens . . . the camera becomes almost like a consciousness that is revisiting the story, like the camera knows something that the actors don't." Cuarón added: "I would say it's the ghost of the present that is visiting the past, without getting involved, just observing, not trying to make a judgment or commentary. Everything there would be the commentary itself."[42]

The camera as a ghost of the past or as a form of consciousness—one that observes, doesn't comment, but does hint at a future of class guilt and a commensurate pressing demand for the enfranchisement of this long-taken-for-granted sector of workers—is perhaps the film's clearest gift, and one that can stand on its own, apart from the arguments over narrative or casting that have dominated the many months of *Roma's* release and reception.

Notes

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3. Dolores Tierney, "Constructing Cinematic Point of View in *Roma*," talk at American University, Washington, DC, February 27, 2019 (text made available to author).
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6. See Tierney, *New Transnationalisms*, 91.
7. The numbers of dead and imprisoned were in the hundreds. The classic account is Elena Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 1991).
8. For a more detailed analysis of this aspect, see Olivia Cosentino, “Feminism and Intimate/Emotional Labor,” *Mediático* (blog), December 24, 2018, http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/mediatico/2018/12/24/special-dossier-on-roma-feminism-and-intimate-emotional-labor/.
9. Deborah Shaw, “‘Intimacy and Distance’—Domestic Servants in Latin American’s Women’s Cinema: *La mujer sin cabeza* and *El niño pez*.” in *Latin American Women Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics*, ed. Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 124–16.
10. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, eds., *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies and the Politics of Care* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2.
11. There are exceptions. Archibaldo Burns’s debut, *Juego de mentiras* (*The Lying Game*, 1967), based on a short story by Elena Garro, offers an early and significant twist on the usual characterization of the maid as evident in its alternate title, *La venganza de la criada* [*The Revenge of the Maid*].
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13. Shaw, “‘Intimacy and Distance,’” 128.
14. As quoted in Shaw, “‘Intimacy and Distance,’”126.
15. Shaw, “‘Intimacy and Distance,’” 127.
16. Tierney, “Constructing Cinematic Point of View.”
17. Tierney, “Constructing Cinematic Point of View.”
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26. García, “‘Roma’ Exposes Mexico’s Darkest Secret.”
27. García, “‘Roma’ Exposes Mexico’s Darkest Secret.”
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29. Televisa.news, “AMLO se une a Cuarón.”
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