



2020

of love and exploitation

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Recommended Citation

Vázquez, Karina Elizabeth. "On Love and Exploitation" [Contexts](#). *Sociology for the Public* Vol. 19, no 1 (Winter 2020): 56-57.

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contexts

sociology for the public

working to live

VOLUME 19 / NUMBER 1 / WINTER 2020

U.S. \$14.00

CAN \$15.00

contexts.org

a publication of the
american sociological association

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This silencing has costs for these workers and their families.

In the world of politics, 2018 set a historic precedent in the struggle to defend household workers' rights. Civil society organizations pushed for the ratification of the International Labor Organization's Convention 189, and this campaign revealed the openly discriminatory laws for domestic employment. Three presidential candidates in the 2018 election campaigns mentioned for the first time in Mexico's history the importance of guaranteeing better working conditions for domestic workers. A law was proposed in the Senate to equalize workers' conditions. The Supreme Court declared it illegal to exclude domestic workers from Social Security. In this sense, culture and politics became interwoven in a specific moment to strengthen efforts to make visible a public problem that has long been treated as a private matter: the relations

of power and inequality inside the home.

With the arrival of the new president in 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, new symbolic acts appeared to challenge the previous social order. In his discourse and public performances, economic elites were pushed to the margins and their traditional privileges imperiled, while "the people" [*el pueblo*], indigenous and poor, were centered. One example of this was the opening of the former presidential home, known as "Los Pinos," as a public space, which contrasted with the parade of elites that had moved through the estate during previous decades. It was here, in the first massive cultural event announced by the new government, that a free public screening of *Roma* was held. Seated on the lawn or standing, thousands of citizens could be part of this historic social phenomenon that emerged from childhood memories of the director. In this story, an indigenous household

worker didn't occupy the usual marginal location outside the main plot, but instead the central role.

Roma, for Cuarón, served as a platform to speak to memory—to the political yet intimate lives of household workers. At the same time, it provided workers' rights organizations the opportunity to use a collective, cultural memory to build renewed demands at national and international levels. Basic demands for dignified living conditions: regulation of the workday, access to health care and legal benefits, an end to abuse. Finally, *Roma* showed how the cultural sphere can be a site for change, demonstrating the power of stories that humanize "the other," and the power of memories as places to start imagining social justice reform.

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by karina elizabeth vázquez

At first glance, the film *Roma*, by acclaimed Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón, seems to expose the challenges faced by household workers. Cleo, a live-in maid of indigenous origin, works

and racialization of domestic service. Beyond Cuarón's intended tribute to his childhood nanny, the film spotlights the physical toll, and the emotional labor employers expect of domestic workers

to ease their own anxieties around class instability.

Cleo's lack of voice leads the audience to see her as someone "we have" but not someone who "is," noted historian Romina Cutuli. The film engages the colonial legacy of feudal hierarchies, where indigenous communities are forced to migrate to urban areas for work that serves white middle-class families. Thus, Cleo epitomizes the experience of poor women of color in the global market. The film offers a portrayal of the daily construction of racial "otherness." It exposes how work and life are merged within a model of mutual dependency between employers and employees, as noted by social scientist Santiago Canevaro. As scholars María Julia Rossi and Lucía Campanella have discussed, this

As *Roma's* main character, Cleo symbolizes the simultaneous feminization and racialization of domestic service.

for a white, upper-middle-class family in Mexico's capital during the 1970s. The film is a social dialogue about the invisibility of her job, the isolation she experiences, and the complex relationship she has with her female employer, Sofía. As *Roma's* main character, Cleo symbolizes the simultaneous feminization

living at the margins of their homes. Yet numerous researchers on domestic work have dismantled the nostalgic tone of Cuarón's tribute by arguing that he is really speaking to, about, and through Cleo, rather than allowing her to speak for herself. By speaking through Cleo, he offers the working elite a narrative

mutually dependent relationship distinguishes a job that has been historically racialized, feminized, and underpaid. Employers profit from the labor of social subordinates in isolated and private spaces who become receptors of employers' emotional and psychological needs.

The resounding applause to which *Roma* was released could be a response to changes in cultural attitudes towards domestic work, where the public is becoming more critical of the inequalities that place women of color inside the houses of whiter, more affluent families. At the same time, Cuarón provides his upper-middle-class audience a narrative to cast themselves as exceptional. Nowhere in the film does he reference payment, and he emphasizes the maid's devotion to the family, as if she would do this work even if she were not compensated. In this way, *Roma* is not really about Cleo and does not formulate a clear standing about domestic work and workers' conditions. Instead, it is possible that the film resonates with white upper and middle-class professionals due to their own crises of being disposable as elite workers. Cleo actually serves as a black mirror of her employers and middle-class spectators. She symbolizes work flexibilization at its extreme: a body totally at the disposal of capitalism, the merging of private life and work, personality as key to productivity, and emotional labor as appropriately central to how employers evaluate domestic workers' performances.

As a member of an exploited class, Cleo does not dare to challenge Sofía's demands. For example, when it is clear that the family is starting to struggle after Sofía's husband abandons them, there is no doubt Cleo will remain as their live-in maid. Cleo represents the perfect employee: endless love and benefit, and an infinite source of affective labor so highly valued in care workers. Two scenes serve as the initial and final visual articulation of rhetoric that eases middle classes' anxiety around their own disposability within a changing and more



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extractive economy. The first scene occurs at the beginning of the film when the family gathers at night to watch TV. After finishing her duties, Cleo sits on the floor next to Pepe, the youngest child, who is also the most attached to her. After observing the child's affection toward Cleo, Sofía requests something of her; boundaries are constantly redefined by those in power who appear uncomfortable with the too-familiar presence of their employees.

As an arm retaining and releasing, the employer's sight enforces obedience rather than recognition and exchange. The last scene shows Sofía and the children holding Cleo at the beach. After risking her own life to save two of the children from drowning, Cleo has an emotional breakdown in which she expresses her lack of love for a baby she lost, and that was the result of an unwanted pregnancy. This emotional exchange could be seen as the ultimate expression of alienation, although by expressing her rejection of the baby, she acknowledges her feelings towards the man who abandoned her and reassures her love (and belonging) to her employers.

Cleo represents a "maid's paradigm": a sort of labor exploitation where devotion means total alienation and love conceals an extractive capitalist dynamic. Cleo is the "other" that upper- and

middle-classes do not want to be, but whom at the same time they rely on to love them and their children. *Roma*'s emphatic reception might rise more from middle-class fears of becoming as alienated as Cleo, rather than from a real understanding of household workers' conditions. In the same way, domestic workers do not want to see themselves as Cleo, middle-class employers do not want to see themselves as victims of others' exploitation of their emotional labor. In this context, Sofía, Cleo's female employer, cannot ultimately be the villain. The film reinforces a horizon that does not threaten the employee-employer relationship but relieves middle-class anxieties about the disposable condition of the working elite.

Karina Elizabeth Vázquez is the Director of the Spanish Community-Based Learning Program at the University of Richmond, Virginia. She is the author of *Fogwill: Realismo y mala conciencia* (Circeto 2009), *Aprendices, obreros y fabriqueras: el trabajo industrial en la narrativa argentina del siglo XX* (Biblos 2013), co-editor of *Insomne pasado: lecturas críticas sobre Latinoamérica colonial*. Un homenaje a Félix Bolaños (F&G 2016) and translated the graphic novel *Darkroom* to Spanish. She currently studies how visual representations of work shape the biopolitics of touch and emotions.