



PORTRAYING GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN BLACK AND WHITE IN *ROMA* (2018) BY ALFONSO CUARÓN

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INTRODUCTION

Set in the 1970s, *Roma* (2018) by Alfonso Cuarón is an ambitious cinematic attempt to portray an upper-class family, facing a crisis due to the abandonment of the main provider of the household, by focusing on the family's maid, whose name is Cleo. Yalitza Aparicio makes her acting debut as the Mixtec¹ maid in the film, who prior to *Roma* hadn't had any acting experience. Even though Aparicio's father is Mixtec and her mother Trique, she is not fluent in Mixtec. However, in the film viewers can listen to her speaking in Mixtec. Her character's ethnicity allows her to display on-screen a vital trajectory and a double consciousness² that embodies one of the main migratory patterns that Mixtecs have endeavored in recent decades. While on the film she is framed as a new migrant in Mexico City—one of the main

¹ Mixtecs are the third largest ethnic group in Mexico. They call themselves "[Ñnu Savi](#)" or "People of the Rain" due to their skills in predicting changes in the weather based on the behavior of the flora and fauna of their homeland. The "Mixteca" region occupies half of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, where two thirds of all Mixtecs reside, and small parts of Guerrero and Puebla. Mixtecs, particularly in recent decades, have been migrating in large numbers to various Mexican states, including Mexico City, and to the United States in search of work and a different lifestyle.

² W.E.B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), coined the concept of the "double consciousness," and almost a century later Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), coined the concept of the "mestiza consciousness." These concepts can be read as linked ideas that describe interconnected systems of oppression that tie together the experiences of African Americans and Hispanic Americans.



destinations of Mixtecs that migrate from their homeland—her migration to a modern urban space indirectly points towards the second main destination that Mixtecs have pursued since the 1960s. Due to the Bracero Program³ (1942-1964), many Mixtecs migrated under temporary contracts to work mostly in the agricultural sector in Western United States. As it is the case of many “chachas” or “gatas” (derogatory terms for maids in Mexico City), Cleo’s role within the family’s dynamic is reduced not only to the cleaning demands of the big house where she works, but also as a caregiver of the family’s children.

At first glance, the use of a white and black palette in the film appears only as glamorous stylistic maneuver that fits within the Italian neorealist cinematic agenda. Charles L. Leavitt IV, in *Italian Neorealism: A Cultural History* (2020), sets the standard criteria of Italian neorealist filmmaking, which is a film that “combines factual narration, geographical specificity, political commitment, on location shooting, non-professional actors, and linguistic authenticity” (Leavitt IV 2020, 14). All these ingredients are present in Cuarón’s *Roma*, from the appearance in the film of factual narration (political turmoil and protests in Mexico City in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968), non-professional actors (Yalitza Aparicio), to on location shooting and linguistic authenticity (Mixtec language).

However, considering the emergence in recent years of a political agenda that has framed indigenous communities as places of both conflict and asymmetrical dependency,⁴ the use of black and white serves as an ethno-critical maneuver to access both gendered and racialized everyday life experiences of womanhood both in Mexico and indirectly in the United States.⁵ This is one of the reasons *Roma*, even though it is staged in the 1970s,

³ In 1942 the Mexican and the U.S. governments signed the Bracero Program, which officialized the temporary migration of Mexican peasant farm workers to the United States to work on cotton and beet plantations, in mines, and in the road and railway industries. The program officially ended in 1964, but Mexican peasant migration to the U.S. remained a common migratory phenomenon due to the networks that former “Braceros” had developed during their stay in the U.S.

⁴ It is well documented the contemporary *paramilitarization* of various Mexican states where most of the population belongs to an indigenous ethnicity. From the [Ayotzinapa Massacre \(Iguala mass kidnapping\) in 2014](#), to the [ongoing attacks perpetrated by paramilitary groups with strong ties to drug trafficking that target indigenous peoples across the country](#), not to mention that Mexico’s biocultural diversity is also in peril. In a study published in 2020, [Omar Vidal and Richard Brusca](#) establish the correlation between the endangerment of both biological diversity and linguistic diversity.

⁵ This migratory life experience of womanhood is clearly present in the story that entangles Mexico and the U.S. featured in the multi-narrative film *Babel* (2006) by Alejandro González Iñárritu.



plays a critical cinematic role that problematizes the figure of the indigenous peasant migrating in the twenty-first century not only to the Mexican capital, but also to the United States. While Donald Trump was president, his rhetoric regarding the construction of The Wall was based on a binational biopolitical concern that placed the figure of the Mexican peasant migrant as an *unwanted alien* in the U.S., and, coincidentally, without any prospects of personal development in the Mexican territory. Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic crisis, this xenophobic rhetoric has only worsened as the U.S.-Mexico border keeps witnessing the *accumulation* of people from the entire Americas either awaiting asylum or attempting to climb the wall and traverse a life-threatening desert on their way to the United States.⁶

This short essay seeks to shed light on the relationship that the black and white palette of the film establishes with critical race theory issues related to the feminization of caregiving and domestic labor in urban Mexico. At the same time, the analysis will also emphasize that the *ethnospace* created by the black and white palette, instead of erasing the ethnic phenotypical features of the characters, only underscores the historical roles that ethnic phenotypes have played in Mexican society. Some reviews of the film featured in popular publications (Brody 2018; Dargis 2018; Gleiberman 2018) have focused mostly on the plot, the memorialist achievement of the film, and the ethnic origin of Cleo as either successful neorealist maneuvers or simply as commonplaces portrayed in other Mexican films. Nevertheless, most reviews about *Roma* have paid little to no attention to the relationship between the black and white palette of the film, spectatorship, and the issues that the film raises regarding traditional gendered roles within Mexican society. The essay is also one of the very first academic explorations of *Roma*. As a film released only three years ago, there are not any scholarly works published to this date that focus on Cuarón's *Roma* either as the main or one of the main objects of study.

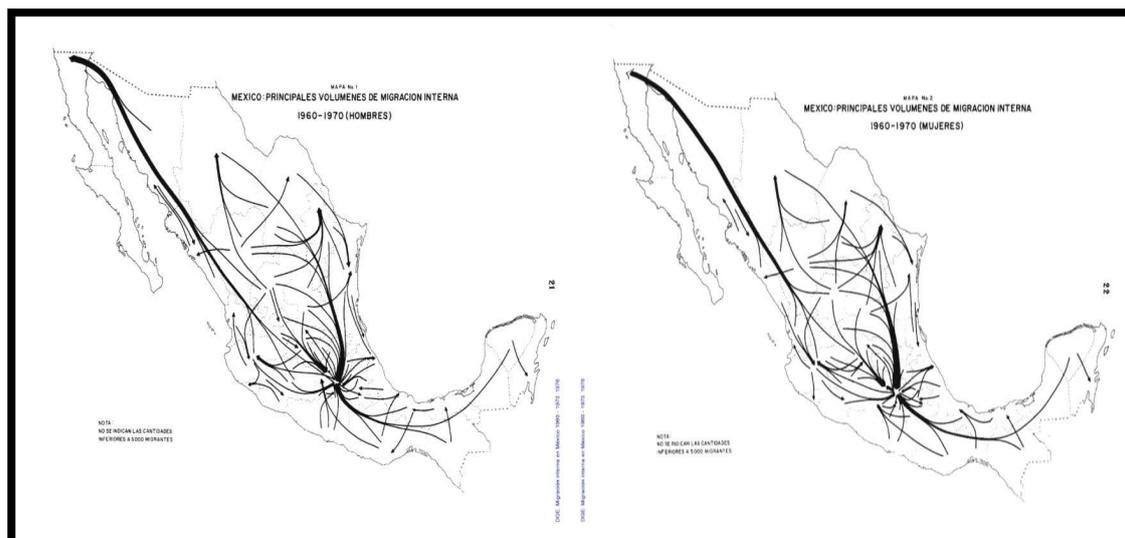
This year Faber & Faber published *The Faber Book of Mexican Cinema (Updated Edition)* by Jason Wood, which includes Cuarón's filmography up to *Roma* and features an interview between Wood and the Mexican director about his personal approach to filmmaking, his influences, among other subjects related to filmmaking in general. Also, the publisher Assouline released an expensive collector's edition containing 165 photographs from the film that features only a very brief introduction. Finally, Charlene Kiser published independently in 2020 *Road to Roma: Original Screenplay*, a 66-page

⁶ The migratory experience of traversing by foot through the U.S. life-threatening desert is portrayed in many films, one of the most recent Mexican ones is the color film *Desierto* (2015) directed by Jonás Cuarón, son of Alfonso Cuarón.

non-academic work that focuses on the documentary film *Road to Roma* (2020), where Alfonso Cuarón reflects about his memories, among other details, that gave cinematic and narrative shape to *Roma*.

MEXICO CITY DURING THE EARLY 1970S

During the 1970s, Mexico experienced an oil boom that at first glance promised to attract the kind of foreign investments that was going to catapult Mexico as the world's second largest oil producer. The oil boom, as such, was going to allow Mexico to enter a new phase of infrastructural modernization and economic development (Sanchez 1983, 229-230). However, due to a systemic combination of political corruption and the mishandling of the administration of the national oil company (PEMEX), the oil boom drove the national economy to a payment default and a deep economic crisis. One of the most notorious consequences of the oil boom at the socio-national level, however, was a vigorous internal migration that brought people to Mexico City from all over the country. Thus, the presence of a new wave of *provincial people*, as they were often labeled, began to transform the physiognomy and the microeconomic orientation of one of the biggest megacities of the world (Chávez 1999, 38; Secretaría de Industria y Comercio 1976, 21-29). All of a sudden, indigenous people from all the Mexican states arrived to the capital city under the promise of job opportunities and new lifestyles shaped by modernity and a kind of individual freedom not found in their communities of origin.



Density and patterns of internal migration in Mexico between 1960-1970 (Women on the left; men, on the right). Source: Secretaría de Industria y Comercio 1976, 21-22.



In terms of urbanization, one of the major repercussions of these waves of internal migration was the expansion of the city limits. Thus, as *Roma* successfully portrays it, the construction of new neighborhoods began to be built at first as provisional, yet precarious, settlements in the outskirts of the city. This way, the sprawl of the city developed in tandem with the continuous internal migration often of entire small communities, which in turn created a demographic explosion that witnessed the population growth of Mexico City's periphery from a population of 2,208,321 in 1970 to 6,960,763 in 1990 (Aguilar and Ward 2003, 10-11; Ziccardi 2014, 206). As we can see through the eyes of Cleo, *Roma* guides the spectator from the Roma neighborhood—one of the most traditional and modern neighborhoods of Mexico City's heart during the 1970s—to one of those blooming, yet quite rural neighborhoods located in the periphery of the city. As an internal migrant herself, Cleo witnesses—while traversing the city on public transportation—the expansion of the urban borders of Mexico City.

Cleo's journey to Mexico City's periphery, however, does not occur randomly. Through another Mixtec friend, Cleo meets on her day off a very young and attractive man—who is also a new migrant in the city—with whom she establishes a formal relationship. As a maid with only one day off a week, their relationship can be maintained only through the experiences they share on their weekly encounters. This is how after a few dates at the movies and walking in the streets of downtown Mexico City, they also establish a one-time sexual relationship that leaves Cleo pregnant. During their last date at the movies, Cleo tells her partner that she might be pregnant, then, under the pretext of going to the bathroom, he disappears all of a sudden. Therefore, Cleo's journey to Mexico City's periphery has the purpose to find her partner in order to tell him about the confirmation of her pregnancy. After a few failed trips, she is able to locate him in a precarious peripheral neighborhood that is slowly under construction; his reaction is not only the refusal of his fatherhood responsibilities, but also a violent demonstration of his masculine strength. Even though Cleo's partner only rejects her verbally, his hyper-masculine menacing martial arts demonstration in front of her suggests a form of symbolic and subjective violence against both her womanhood and *pregnanthood* (Zizek 2009, 1-3). Considering that in recent decades the increase of feminicides in Mexico have reached unprecedented rates, Cleo's experience indirectly highlights the emergence of the radicalization of everyday forms of violence against women in contemporary Mexico, including the capital city.⁷

⁷ In 2019, according to data provided by a report issued by Mexico's Executive Secretariat of Citizenship Protection, ten feminicides were perpetrated at the national level on daily basis.



Through this narrative maneuver, spectators are forced to witness the dichotomy of urban and newly suburban Mexico City not only through the traumatic experience of Cleo—similarly to spectators who watched the experiences portrayed in early neorealist Italian cinema—but also through the lens of white and black as a metaphorical critical approach to a megacity’s population that experiences contrasts at both the economic, ethnic, and gender levels on daily basis.

FRAMING DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT THROUGH BLACK AND WHITE LENS

In his essay “Color, the Formless, and Cinematic Eros,” Brian Price claims that color serves as an analytical feature in film—referring to the color film *Punch Drunk Love* by Paul Thomas Anderson (2003)—to frame various forms of abstraction (Price 2006, 23). Conversely, Cuarón’s *Roma* defy both abstraction and the use of color as a cinematic maneuver to saturate and force the spectator to establish a critical relationship with the film through deploying both contrast and sharpness. Furthermore, Price also argues, now citing Jacqueline Lichtenstein’s *The Eloquence of Color* (1993),⁸ that one of the purposes of relying on the distribution of color in film is yielding pleasure to the spectator (Price 2006, 25). Nevertheless, Cuarón’s main intention in *Roma*, based on the story portrayed on-screen, has nothing to do with pleasure at all. Actually the opposite, the film—while it still renders a highly aestheticized experience in terms of spectatorship—focuses on tracing Cleo’s traumatic *coming to age* experience as a new disoriented urbanite and internal migrant in Mexico City. Even her erotic experience is synthesized in one scene saturated with gender-based violence and emotional disorientation: Cleo is in bed covering most of her body with a bedspread while she witnesses the martial arts demonstration of her partner.⁹ Despite the black and white palette of the

In 2020, these numbers went up at disproportionate records. However, this data doesn’t take into consideration the complaints of sexual abuse, sexual harassment, family violence, and the various forms of rape that the report provides in relation to women. The report is available online [here](#).

⁸ “A random distribution of the most attractive colours would never yield as much pleasure as a definite image without color,” (Lichtenstein 1993, 59). As a matter of fact, Lichtenstein is citing Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and Lichtenstein’s remark about the distribution of color is pointing at the use of color in painting.

⁹ A man who abandons her at a cinema after finding out about the suspicion of her pregnancy, threatens her to tear her into pieces when she goes to the neighborhood where he lives, and that ultimately points at her head with a gun. In a scene where Cleo and the children’s grandmother are buying a crib for her upcoming baby, all of a sudden student



scene, the tenderness that Cleo attempts to express during the intimacy of her sexual encounter with her partner is consumed by the expression of an excessive form of masculine violence, indirectly pointing towards a set of dark tonalities that ranges from a dark grisaille to the complete darkness where the scene fades out. This set of dark tonalities also anticipates the fatal outcome of Cleo's pregnancy.

Moreover, the hyper masculinity that Cleo's partner displays throughout the film could be read as a reaction to the depressing reality that he experiences on daily basis, for he spends most of his time in the peripheral neighborhood where he told Cleo to never seek him again, which is a form of totally silencing her. Furthermore, Cleo's imposed silence re-articulates Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concern regarding women's experiences that account as modes of "production narrative, as participants/resisters/victims" (Spivak 2010, 21). Throughout the film, Cleo is a producer of multiple forms of narratives in the three modes framed by Spivak. She is part of the production narrative engine of the film through labor (participant), care and affection giver to the family's children (resister), as she means to avoid the temporary neglecting of their mother due to her depression and total deployment of energy towards recovering her husband, and an inevitable victim of both her partner and destiny. At a public hospital, Cleo endures on her own a miscarriage that exposes to the viewers the dead, somehow malnourished body of her baby as a metaphor of the kind of future that is awaiting internal migrants in a megacity that as it keeps growing is slowly turning into an *ethnospace* inhabited by strangers.

A similar estrangement takes place at the interior of the household where Cleo works as a maid and nanny for the wealthy family that also provides her with shelter: a "cuarto de servicio" in the "azotea" of the house that sets her apart from the family as she has to walk all the way to the roof to find her tiny bedroom.¹⁰ This way, and without following a programmatic neorealist agenda, *Roma* succeeds at conveying to spectators unfamiliar with recent

protestors clash on the street outside the store with the police and the paramilitary group "Los Halcones." Cleo's partner is a member of this paramilitary group and enters the store with other "Halcones." When he notices the presence of Cleo, he points at her head with a gun. On June 10 1971, "Los Halcones," a group created by government and military officials to infiltrate with student protestors during the aftermath of the Movimiento Estudiantil of 1968, perpetrated the Massacre of Corpus Christi, which assassinated at least 225 students between fourteen and twenty-two years old.

¹⁰ *Cuartos de servicio*, often without a bathroom and almost always located on the roof, were built in the houses of many neighborhoods of Mexico City's main urban spaces that relied on maid and caregiving services mostly of young women coming from rural states, often indigenous communities, as it is Cleo's case.



Mexican cinema—which is overloaded with depictions of gender-based violence, poverty, and systemic socioeconomic inequalities—the feelings intrinsic to the experience not only of economic poverty, but also to the emotional precarity that new migrant women experienced in Mexico City during the 1970s. Thus, Cuarón’s approach to white and black cinema is inevitably anchored to his own interpretation of Italian neorealist cinema, which, as Christopher Wagstaff has noted:

Gives a higher priority to recreating the “experience” of their protagonist than to furnishing the viewer with material “facts” about their situation (you almost never find out exactly how much anyone is paid in a neorealist narrative, but you always know what it feels like to be poor) (Wagstaff 2007, 29).

Furthermore, the departure of the main provider of the household not only unleashes an emotional crisis at the interior of the house, but also brings to the surface the fixed role that the *female master* of the household has had within the family’s dynamic, despite the apparent modernity and freedom that she has supposedly enjoyed. Similarly to Cleo’s experience, but on the opposite economic spectrum, upper class Mexican women often endured in silence the abandonment of the main economic provider of the household. As Enrica Viganò points out, one of the goals of Italian neorealism was to instigate positive social development and create a national identity (Viganò 2018, 3). Following this critical hint, Cuarón’s *Roma*, by focusing on 1970s Mexican modernity through the lens of white and black, allows Mexican spectators to interrogate themselves about the uneven allocation of development and their present national identity in a country that in the most recent national censuses most of the population has identified as belonging to an indigenous ethnicity, including the recently recognized identity politics identifier *Afromexican*.¹¹ Moreover, the use of the white and black cinematic palette instead of erasing or attenuating the *saturation of ethnicity*, serves as a critical framework that accentuates the whiteness of the upper classes, in this case, Cleo’s employers and their children.

¹¹ In 2015, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) included for the first time in history the ethnic identifier “Afromexican/Afrodescendent” in a preliminary census that reported that 1.2 million of the total Mexican population identified as Afromexican. The states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz are the ones with the highest percentage of Afromexican people.



This image, from one of the final scenes of the film, serves as the cover photograph of the worldwide distribution poster of Roma.

One of the final scenes of the film, and perhaps the most beautiful sequence in terms of photographic composition, shows the whole family melting in a collective hug where some arms, legs, facial features, and even complete faces disappear. Cleo appears in the center of the group, as if she were the *sine qua non* element of an identity crucible of contemporary Mexico. The human figures blend in with the sand and the ocean, while in the background a dot of sunlight emerges as a hopeful metaphor of the whole origins not only of Mexico, but the entire American continent. Moreover, Cuarón's *Roma* sets a point of inflection in his own *oeuvre*, as he departs from a cinematic approach—however acclaimed and worth of many critical accolades and international awards—that had touched only tangentially everyday life, to finally bring to the big screen a critical and post-neorealist narrative that is still ubiquitous in contemporary Mexico City. Up to this date, internal migration remains a constant socioeconomic phenomenon, and the feminization of labor and caregiving has trapped many Mexican women in *timespaces* consumed by giving away their time and emotional strength to other people, but not themselves.



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