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REPRESENTATIONS OF DOMESTIC WORKERS IN FILMS *LA NANA* AND *DOLORES CLAIBORNE*

Abstract. *This article examines film representations of domestic workers in the films La Nana (2009) and Dolores Claiborne (1995) through the intersecting perspectives of gender, occupation, citizenship and class. Yet it also emphasises the – otherwise cinematically invisible – multi-dimensional identities of domestic workers via their subjugated storytelling positions. Both women-oriented films use power-relations with other women as the main parameter for their identity-making process on the basis of class, familial and personal groundings, which also intersect with feminist narratives of emotional selves, emancipated from the gender order and embedded in the many possible uses of the word "bitch". The authors find that the forming of protagonists' identities and models of behaviour as women does not depend on men, while the scope of power-resistant possibilities establishes them as multi-dimensional subjects far removed from society's one-dimensional views or conservative media/film representations of domestic workers.*

Keywords: *domestic workers, film representation, identity, La Nana, Dolores Claiborne*

Introduction

The emergence around the world of paid domestic work (PDW) raises the question of how the media portrays modern domestic workers. Yet what do films tell us about domestic workers, some of the most vulnerable, invisible and voiceless workers in the world? In this article, the authors discuss the ways in which domestic workers are presented in cinema. More precisely, the article highlights the extent to which domestic workers' voices and perspectives are heard in two films: La Nana and Dolores Claiborne.

Some theorists claimed (Coser cited in Ozyegin, 2001: 31) after World War II that PDW would one day disappear due largely to the rise of domestic

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consumer culture in the 1950s (e.g. the 'happy housewife' image firmly located within the nuclear family) and the stronger presence of modern democratic principles (i.e. human rights, legal transparency, law equality, equal bargaining power in contracts) that seemed able to make the existence of PDW less justifiable. But in the last few decades, PDW has in fact continued to grow around the world (Schwenken and Heimeshoff, 2011) for various reasons, including demographic changes (ever more older people need help in their home) and socioeconomic changes like more women holding paid jobs, the unemployment among certain social classes, typically the lower class, and the increasing feminisation of migration. The low social/economic value of 'maid's' work makes the employer–employee relationship highly unequal, leaving many domestic workers powerless and vulnerable to exploitation. Differences in gender, class, race and citizenship between employers and domestic workers often add to this inequality and the disparate treatment of workers. Yet, domestic workers are not passive victims of their work environment, but agential beings constantly negotiating their position, roles and identity through daily interactions with their employers and capable of struggle and resistance. Many scholars (Constable, 1997; Dill, 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992) give evidence of the everyday strategies used by domestic workers to resist the power held by their employer.

While considerable research has been done on PDW, how PDW and domestic workers are portrayed in films is quite an understudied area. The three most important reasons for highlighting film representations of domestic workers and PDW are: (1) societal – the growing recognition of such work that touches on gender, race and class; (2) theoretical – the development of their theoretical thematisation and thus visibility; and (3) cultural – as a popular opinion-shaping medium film is able to empower or dismiss something considered in society as abject or Other at a given moment. Still, popular cinema does not see many genres where (un)paid domestic work is a central premise. This may be explained by commercial and artistic beliefs that the topic is not gripping and lacks any mass appeal, which might lead to box-office failure; namely, views that derive from a broader sexist standpoint in Western society that devalue (female) housework. The unglamorous aspects of PDW (i.e. dealing with dirt and taking care of others) make it less worthy of media attraction and attention. TV shows Desperate Housewives (USA, 2004–2012) needed to glamorise and sexualise 'housewives', but not housewifery to retain high ratings. But it soon becomes clear in this particular soap opera, i.e. a popular genre among women, that the main premise revolves around private relationships and related dichotomies (love/hate, friends/enemies, deception/truth, good/bad...) more than the multi-dimensional concept of domestic work. Domestic workers are often portrayed in

films stereotypically as submissive and deferential women who are there not to drive the plot, but to faithfully serve 'the true stars' of the movie: the family of their employer. They appear as overweight, asexual domestic servants and often do not even hear them speak. One of the most memorable images along these lines is black Mammy (appearing in many films in the 1920s and 1930s), who still features in current Hollywood movies (The Help, 2011; Madea's Witness Protection, 2012). On the other hand, many films give a hypersexualised (the American television comedy/drama series Devious Maids, 2013) or a romanticised portrayal of a beautiful domestic worker romantically involved with her boss (Spanglish, 2004). Meaningful constructions (and the language to describe them) of domestic workers' experiences, roles, and identities are thus largely missing in today's cinema.

However, films like Corinna, Corinna (1994, d.: J. Nelson), The Nanny Diaries (2007, d.: S. Springer Berman and R. Pulcini), La Nana (The Maid, 2009, d.: S. Silva) and Dolores Claiborne (1995, d.: T. Hackford) do challenge racist, sexist and/or classist stereotypes about the characteristics and behaviour of domestic workers. The films La Nana and Dolores Claiborne were selected as our central case studies due to: (1) the cinematic perspective or gaze found in the female protagonist's (e.g. a domestic worker) subjugated position; (2) the very names of the films (Dolores Claiborne, La Nana) that instantly underline the importance of a female protagonist on a discursive level regardless of the low-status occupation they hold; and (3) the possibility of resistance against the heteronormative and hegemonic masculine gender order. Aside from the central theme of PDW, and the films' titles stressing the importance of the female protagonist and her (e.g. domestic worker) cinematic perspective, these two films also touch on notions generally overlooked in film narratives: (1) women's friendship; (2) substitute mothering; (3) dichotomy of good/bad femininity; and (4) dismissal, or at least questioning of androcentric discourses of the mother–daughter relationship. In analysing representations of domestic workers in the selected films, we explore these notions, focus on the relationship between women positioned differently by class to gain deeper insights into "the ways women of different classes participate in each other's lives and to examine the effects of class inequalities on the experiences of class and gender identities of women" (Ozyegin, 2001: 127). We consider the multiple ways femininity is performed and how those performances intersect with class, ethnicity/race and sexuality. We thus look at how female subjects participate in the processes of power relations, distancing/bonding, inclusion/exclusion, and the forming of a new individual identity and models of behaviour as women.

Methodological and theoretical framework

To meet the purpose of the study, a qualitative textual analysis is undertaken in order to interpret how domestic workers are represented in film where critical discursive analysis (CDA), a specific form of textual analysis, is the main research method used due to its focus on latent, subtle or subversive meanings within the dominant discourse (Fairclough, 1989; Wodak, 2011; van Dijk, 2008). The dominant discourse on PDW and workers perceives domestic work as a stable and therefore unquestionable social position, and domestic workers as an unrepresentable or voiceless social group. CDA reveals the position of subjugated discourses or latent meanings; in our case, the multifaceted subject position of a female domestic worker (e.g. power relations based on class, ethnicity and within the same gender – work, personal and kin relationships between them) and their possible resistance to the dominant perceptions of PDW. The use of CDA allows language and other semiotic features of data to be analysed, making it an appropriate research method for a study based on media text.

We perform a textual analysis to look at the form and content, as well as other aspects of the image text, and to uncover the films' main perspectives and themes. Our critical textual analysis examines multiple forms of semiosis in order to determine how the various signs (as a unit of meaning) operate within the specific film text and which ideologies are being reflected, if any. We adopt a (visual) semiotic approach to examine signifiers (such as words, images, appearances, body image, gestures, styles of dress, hair, objects, setting/time, colour etc.) to illuminate the underlying meanings being communicated to film audiences.[1] In the qualitative textual analysis, we also focus on camera movement and other film techniques that may add to the meaning.

To examine how gender and identities are represented, the study also draws on feminist conceptual frameworks. The aspects of feminist theorising that resonate with the purpose of our study are as follows: a (gender-) equal society involves changes are made to material practices and social institutions, as well as discursive and ideological practices that structure social reality generally, particularly a (woman's) sense of identity; the acknowledgment of multiple, intersecting social identities and forms of inequality (gender, class and ethnicity/race, and other categories of difference); and a basic constructionist premise which asserts that a sense of identity is always in the process of becoming – a construction, open to transformation. The social world, including identities and social relations, is thus conceived as being

[1] *Content analysis based around the frequency of the word "bitch" appearing in the film Dolores Claiborne to demonstrate how the frequency of a word relates to how meaning is made.*

at least partly constituted, understood, reproduced or resisted via the social production of meaning in a communication process – discourse and narrative. We discuss resistance by highlighting the female protagonists' attempts to resist the dominant discourses concerning domestic workers.

While gathering film material touching on domestic work and workers, we aimed include in the selection: (1) women-centric films; (2) films where PDW was the main premise; and (3) films challenging the dominant discourses of domestic workers as one-dimensional individuals living in a social vacuum. The material for analysis was obtained by simultaneously watching films and taking notes as to what was shown and told, but mostly whether and how the ideological premise about domestic workers was challenged. Two variables was determined while analysing the gathered material: (1) the independent variable was the dominant discourse about domestic work and workers; while (2) the dependent variables were gender-, work-, ethnicity- and kin-based power relations.

La Nana

The Chilean film *La Nana* (The Maid, 2009, director: S. Silva) is a story of forty-something live-in maid Raquel who works in an upper-class household who as the story develops emancipates herself from her own as well as from society's conception of what a maid is and what she represents in these postmodern times.

In *La Nana*, Raquel is a live-in and on top of cleaning and cooking her work includes some child caring/rearing, mostly combined with cleaning tasks. On the other hand, Dolores in the film *Dolores Claiborne* is a live-out at first, but later becomes a live-in. According to Coser (1973: 31), the servant role is obsolete: "Even when formally based on contract, it is in essence rooted in ascribed status, particularistic standards, and diffuse obligations. The master's family 'greedily' attempts to absorb the total personality of the servant, and ties him to the household in a totalistic manner". This obsolescence is symbolically manifest in Raquel's lack of self-concept and her life direction or lifestyle choices generally.

The film opens by showing the employer's family planning a birthday surprise for the maid Raquel while she is eating in the kitchen and they are all gathered in the dining room. This birthday surprise is a type of forced familiarity[2] because they invade her time/space while she is eating her dinner, even though she never invades theirs – she is only present in their

[2] *Personalisation of the employer–employee relationship is part of the PDW. Gregson and Lowe (1994) call this "false family relations", a strategic intimacy which prevents an employee from behaving professionally, e.g. asking for a higher wage without feeling that the network of (false) solidarity between them is broken.*

space when required to be (for that, sometimes they just ring a bell). The intentional social, cultural and spatial separation between her and the family becomes clear, revealing that the boundaries are unquestionably created by the dominant group (i.e. employer/family), but also crossed by them.

Raquel's structured cleaning schedule planned by mistress Pilar and willingly accepted by Raquel years previously also indicates the power her employer holds over Raquel's time and space. Despite the existing divided spaces in the household, there is only the illusion of respect for spatial privacy on both sides. Raquel often spends time in the mistress's dressing room, trying on her expensive clothes, whereas mistress Pilar discreetly browses through Raquel's belongings (photos, souvenirs etc.) in her room when she has a day off.

Like in any other household, a social and gender hierarchy exists, which is considered a pregiven condition by the family members, except the daughter; for example, the father's inability to find a shirt in the morning, his private time in his study, Raquel serving breakfast in bed etc. All of these situations indicate the stereotypical gendered roles as masculine or feminine in a feminine environment, such as the household.

The relationships between the different women (e.g. maid, mistress, mistress's daughter) living in the household constitute/construct/deconstruct Raquel's identity: one with her mistress (employer–employee), one with her mistress' daughter (i.e. symbolic substitute mothering) and those with her equivalents (i.e. other maids who arrive to help in the house).

The relationship between mistress Pilar and Raquel is governed by Pilar's kindness and overall understanding shown toward Raquel, which cannot be fully understood as an indicator of personal closeness but as a mechanism of social distance and class power. Pilar as a stereotype of upper-class femininity is non-confronting and peaceful in her domestic sphere (household, family), yet masculinised in her intentional displacement of housewifery to another woman and the profession she has achieved (she is a university professor). She displays both instrumental (household decision-making, money earning) and expressive (emotional warmth, moral guidance, integration of internal family relationships) family traits. The physical portrayal of domesticated femininity is evident in Pilar's visual appearance (fragility, softness, whiteness) through to her middle-class manners (spirituality, morality). Pilar is shown as a gentle moral guardian of family life, while Vera (from *Dolores Claiborne*) is – due to her childlessness – regarded as an openly tyrannical manager of the household. Although Pilar and Raquel are the same gender, the power within their social relationship is defined by their class positions. Pilar's upper-class status gives her the ability to hire/fire and reward/punish the employee because the employee's working space is simultaneously the employer's home. Employees whose working

place is located within someone else's home must accept the 'house order' or 'house rules' (e.g. time of starting work, time of finishing, day(s) off). For example, Raquel's vacuuming at inappropriate hours (early in the morning) is, in a Foucauldian sense, her way of resisting the house order. Her tactic is emotional – entailing passive aggression, an individualised action commonly used by relatively powerless, poor and subordinated subjects. We return to this later on.

When a domestic worker is in a live-in situation, it is more difficult to define and separate leisure time from working time. The working hours of a live-in are as long as the employer wants them to be and are comparable to the long working hours of the typical housewife. In Raquel's case, no boundaries exist between her work and leisure time – they are seamlessly merged together; her leisure time is an extension of her time at work. Her concept of free time is also undefined (e.g. she watches TV without interest, goes shopping without any desire to actually buy anything), which can be ascribed to her general lack of self-identity. But this changes when a new maid, Lucy, arrives in the house.

Due to her social background (i.e. poor education, rural area, low class), Raquel was socialised and professionalised in the traditional female role of housekeeper, a role she could perform in her own home as a full-time housewife or at her employer's home as a domestic worker. As mentioned, Raquel has stuck to her mistress' house schedule even though she displays her "informal, unarticulated" revolt (Oakley, 1985: 14) because "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 2000: 55). Her spectrum of resistance is basically a transgression of her housework tasks (e.g. vacuuming at inappropriate hours of the morning), which may also be seen as a tactic in her own micro-organisation of the housework, regardless of the routine imposed by mistress Pilar. Raquel strongly identifies personally with housewifery and, while she is 'just a maid', from her standpoint the visible results of her completed housework are viewed as personally self-fulfilling. For example, when a cat arrives in the house as a present for the daughter from her boyfriend, she immediately opposes looking after the animal because, in her thinking, it is simply yet another living creature she has to take care of. She reacts like an adult would in a conventional household when a child wants a new pet given that only an adult is aware of the responsibilities that follow.

Emotional labour (Hochshild, 1983) is another of her household duties and in this particular working environment it is reflected in her passive aggressive behaviour[3] and emotional distance from others. This can be

[3] *Women's passive aggression as a sophisticated and non-confronting way of expressing socially unwanted emotions is displayed as 'indirect' aggression, which can be seen as silence, non-verbal yet*

understood as a power tactic over the family she works for or as occupying a less feminine mode of emotional self ('being a bitch'), but these are merely her ways of dealing with everyday work micro-conflicts. Her direct display of anger/frustration is disabled by the traditional conceptions of her (low) class, gender (anger is considered a masculine emotion), and masculine framework of a work ethic (i.e. rational, instrumental, non-emotional).

The second relationship with the mistress' adolescent daughter develops due to the mistress' transfer of maternal duties to Raquel. The practical aspect of child-rearing and childcare may be regarded as a type of substitute mothering which resonates with Raquel's concept of traditional femininity, regardless of her partial role which mainly entails cleaning after the children. Her live-in life in the same household for two decades has led to the creation of an intense, quarrelling and dismissive relationship with the mistress daughter, reminiscent of a mother–daughter relationship, except that it is not. The practical relationship between them is governed by Raquel's disciplinary power over the daughter, shown in everyday family dynamics: she does not wish to prepare food for the mistress' daughter at late hours, she vacuums at inappropriate hours despite the daughter wishing the contrary, and she does not want to take care of the cat. The lack of formal addressing, customs and rules in this quasi mother–daughter relationship results in overt and covert aggression between them; the daughter's direct verbal aggression and Raquel being passive aggressive or dismissive of her.

Here, clear evidence is seen of the splitting of mothering into two categories: good and bad mother. Pilar as a biological mother represents an absolute image of a good mother because she has transferred the 'bad mother' components to Raquel (e.g. all the 'dirtiness': the practical/physical/material aspects of mothering, channelling of bad interpersonal emotions). The physical mothering (i.e. cleaning after teenage children) performed by Raquel also shows that certain aspects of the offspring's selves are invisible to Pilar (e.g. traces of the mistress' son's masturbation are visible only to Raquel when she is change the bed sheets), which leads to the mistress' lack of awareness of her son's sexual awakening. The cultural pressure and proneness to eliminate any kind of (self-)pollution (e.g. sexual activity, sexual self, dirty domestic work) is also seen in Raquel's denial of her being regarded as "the Body". Her self-presentation is intentionally desexualised and she exists only as a working body: a domestic worker. Her desexualisation also acts as her subconscious mechanism against the stereotype of

aggressive actions (e.g. use of physical appearance, artefacts, environment, kinesics, haptics, proxemics and chronemics), incompetency to openly communicate (i.e. to lie, 'to dodge the bullet'). Raquel's passive aggressive ways of handling everyday situations within the household are, for example, the abuse of sound emissions common in a household (the vacuum cleaner and TV at an extremely loud volume) as a mechanism to disconnect or block herself off from the household's reality.

another profession a woman of poverty or certain nationalities could or is forced to engage in – sex work. The other reason lies in the possibility of 'undesired attention' from the master (i.e. Pilar's husband) or sexual harassment, although no such thing happens in the film.

The third relationship between Raquel and the new maid Lucy begins when mistress Pilar introduces the other maid to her. The mistress' intentions are good – she wants to unburden Raquel for reasons linked to Raquel's worsening health. Her dizzy spells, caused by strong cleaning products (i.e. technical amenities and aids) are a health hazard in her working environment and, despite the health issues facing maids, are broadly speaking an irrelevant topic in the usual discourses concerning domestic workers.

We are presented with three different types of 'maids': (1) a young foreign girl whom Raquel bullies; (2) an older maid who bullies Raquel; and (3) the third one, Lucy, who unintentionally succeeds in bonding with Raquel. When it comes to hiring the first maid, a young Peruvian girl, Raquel is passively aggressive and shows a racist attitude to her. Although they both deal with 'dirty work', the new maid's nationality makes her – in Raquel's eyes – even dirtier and, therefore, positioned even lower down the household hierarchy. Raquel finds a simple way to show her disgust towards her: she always disinfects the bathroom after the new maid has just used it. Feeling threatened by the new help, she constantly locks her out of the house, symbolically signalling she is not welcome in the (her) house(hold). The young maid who asks for the employer/mistress Pilar's intervention to resolve the situation is portrayed as a passive victim and Pilar as a (class) indifferent or (personally) indecisive employer. In any other working environment outside of the home, such behaviour (mobbing, racial discrimination) would be strongly condoned. Yet, in this precarious case, the family's non-involvement in the 'domestic drama' results in the new maid quitting her job.

The second maid, an older and experienced woman, is an active defender. She retaliates in the face of Raquel's attacks. They become involved in a physical fight: a "maid fight, we've seen so many of them", as a visiting grandmother dismissively describes it. This upper-class nonchalance as a sign of classism shows their belittlement and disinterest in an internal conflict among the lower-classes so long as the situation does not affect them economically.

The third maid, Lucy, is witty, self-confident and liberal. Raquel once again tries her manoeuvre of locking the new maid out of the house, but after Lucy's reaction is different – Lucy starts to sunbathe topless on the front lawn. Lucy takes the initiative to transform her working time into leisure time and Raquel's forced conflict into a controllable situation. Raquel is practically forced to come out of the house – metaphorically (as a person/woman) and in fact (due to her curiosity). For the first time, she has

lost power over the maid conflict she has imposed. This is the turning point in Raquel's identity transformation. Lucy's toplessness, which semiotically indicates her personal freedom and acceptance of her body, makes Raquel laugh. Lucy and Raquel start to bond. Their friendship and bonding may be seen as class solidarity or consciousness in a Marxist sense vis-à-vis the dominant class – the family (which controls the means of production: house, money, time), but they are revolutionising in a postmodern feminist and consumerist way – they are self-improving (working on themselves as persons, self-care).

Before Raquel met Lucy, her life was similar to the stereotypical 1950s' housewife: socially excluded, lonely, handcuffed to the house tied, and her communication with other family members was basic and formal. She lacked any kind of social interaction and her only social contact outside the household was her kinship contact – Raquel's mother – but this was an emotionally empty relationship. Lucy unintentionally becomes her role model with respect to how to behave or act as a 'normal' (non-stigmatised) person, an 'average woman'. Raquel has tried some role-playing before, when she bought the exact same sweater as her mistress Pilar owns, but it is Lucy who helps Raquel create her own self-concept[4] as a gendered being. This becomes most evident at the end of the film when Raquel starts jogging, a sporting activity Lucy is also engaged in. Jogging becomes her way of enforcing her decision to establish a clear dividing line between her free time and working hours; her choice to use her body for a different purpose (a physical activity outside the house and just for herself) and, symbolically, perhaps running away from the past (e.g. her undefined maid identity) to a future that is slightly better defined.

Dolores Claiborne

The second film we examine is *Dolores Claiborne* (1995, director: T. Hackford), based on the novel by Stephen King where the main theme of paid domestic work intersects with narratives of domestic violence and incest, the norm of hegemonic masculinity, the fluidity of mother–daughter and other women's relationships, classism, ageism and old-age care, and personal liberation from the traditional gender order.

Like in *La Nana*, the relationship between employer (the upper-class mistress Vera Donovan) and employee (the lower-class domestic worker Dolores Claiborne) is the essential one, yet it does not constitute Dolores' identity like it does for Raquel (*La Nana*). Dolores is married, the mother

[4] *Raquel has no self-concept of being a maid. She is socially (there are no informal groups of maids for maids) and spatially (she works in someone else's home) isolated.*

of a young daughter, and a live-out domestic worker at first but as the film unfolds this changes; she is widowed, her relationship with her adult daughter becomes ever more difficult and she becomes the live-in domestic worker/old-age caretaker of Vera.

The relationship between Dolores and Vera starts as a precarious professional one, strongly separated by class with Vera as the house mistress being in absolute charge when it comes to structuring Dolores' domestic work schedule. Her work demands (work, salary, hours) are strict and unnegotiable. As a member of the low class, Dolores does not object to these unjust working terms since during her life span while working as a house cleaner she has already internalised this 'natural' economic discrimination.

Dolores is a representation of 'the Body': a working-class woman who makes her living through traditionally feminine manual work with a low social status and reputation – cleaning. Her body is the sole resource she has available to economically and physically survive – to work and defend herself. She resists being a docile body – her body is robust (not slender), her hands are damaged (not cosmetically groomed), her voice is loud and speech uncompromising. At a crucial point in the film's narrative, Dolores' hands are shown in an extreme close-up: the first shot shows how her hands looked at the beginning and the other how they look now after 20 years of manual work. Her hands are damaged, rough, unappealing and unfeminine. Women's hands do reveal social and working differences between women: 'true' femininity (middle class, leisure time, physically fragile and delicate, groomed) versus 'other' femininity (working class, rough, female masculine, ungroomed).

On the other hand, mistress Vera represents upper-class white femininity, where appearance is more important than substance. Her appearance is classic/classy and, due to her childfree status, showing her as the openly tyrannical manager of her household, where her class position enables her to buy the 'power to command', that transforms an employee's (Dolores') self into a commodity, is even more stereotypical. She is emotionally cold towards her employees and is affectionate only to her detached husband although, as we learn later, she is dissatisfied with her marriage. After her husband dies (in a car 'accident'), she decides to live on the island permanently and by herself.

The business relationship between Dolores and Vera is transformed into a women's alliance on account of one significant event. But first, we must consider Dolores' own household.

Dolores is in an abusive marriage; her husband has abused her physically, emotionally and verbally.

After one episode when Dolores is physically attacked by her husband Joe, her counterattack (she smashes a big bowl of gravy on his head and

threatens him while holding an axe in her hands, claiming she will kill him if he ever attacks her again) triggers Joe's misogynistic attitudes to translocate his aggression over towards their daughter – he starts sexually abusing her. The incestuous relationship between the daughter Selena and father Joe is hidden; Selena has been fiercely concealing it out of personal shame, newly developed distrust in authority, and an internalised victim-blaming discourse present in society, but Dolores soon realises what is going on. In this context, we can understand incest as a masculine deadly weapon to destroy the unity or *chora* between mother and daughter (Kristeva, 1980 cited Silverman, 1988: 101) and women altogether. Men (husband Joe, det. Mackey) are representatives of the law (Kristeva, 1982) and, therefore, 'destroyers' of that symbolic *chora*.

Dolores' realisation about the incest, along with domestic violence and Joe's theft of Dolores' savings leads her to an emotional breakdown while performing domestic duties in Vera's house. This is the turning point in their relationship: (1) Vera's suggestion to call her by her first name indicates the intentional removal of a social barrier between them; and (2) Vera's comment – "In a depressingly masculine world we live in" – links them together through their gender, which temporarily rises above class.

Although only implied and never actually witnessed, Vera must have given Dolores instructions on how to get rid of her husband or, as she states, "an accident can be an unhappy woman's best friend", possibly implying her adulterous husband's car accident was in fact a planned murder.

The accident/murder of the husband Joe is 'scheduled' during a sun eclipse. If the moon is culturally seen as a symbol of femininity and the sun that of masculinity, then the sun eclipse can be read as the only time when the feminine 'naturally' overpowers the masculine. Joe's deadly fall into an abandoned well can, therefore, be easily translated into a 'natural' accident.

An investigation into Joe's death is launched, but Dolores is not a suspect, except for detective Mackey who represents the law – masculine, rational, judging, who believes that Dolores is a serial killer, that she killed her husband; and 20 years later, she is accused of killing her cohabitant Vera.

Over time, Vera and Dolores' relationship transforms into a living arrangement of two elderly widows living in Vera's house. One is childfree, the other has an estranged daughter, so they basically only have each other. Although they have both got rid of men from their lives to escape patriarchy and Selena mentions once that these women loved each other, we will not delve further into that statement to place their relationship in a lesbian or queer context, although this is a plausible interpretation of their relationship.

At this stage of their relationship, Dolores is taking care of the dying Vera; an example of invisible old-age care, usually performed by women. Two

features regarding the concept of Dolores' old-age care work must be mentioned: (1) the decaying bodies are manifestations of an abjection (Kristeva, 1982), hidden or invisible from public consciousness, as their relationship was to others; and (2) old-age care can be understood as Dolores' substitute mothering. Depression and uneasiness with body decay and death is a common mindset in modern Western society, so committing suicide and ending a (non)life is part of Vera's agenda: she does not want to live anymore because now, as an old woman, she has lost her privileges of class and youth; she cannot even control her own bodily functions and fluids, the body controls her. When she commits suicide by throwing herself down the stairs, we retrospectively figure out that Dolores is the only (available, trustworthy or capable?) person whom she begs for help to carry out a "mercy killing" (Jay, 2008: 90) – to be the one to end her life. Dolores' old-age care for Vera may also be viewed as substitute mothering. Dolores has failed in mothering her own daughter, Selena – she did not and could not protect her from a brutal misogynistic sexual crime: incest.

The relationship between Dolores and her adult daughter Selena is nonexistent – disconnected, anxious and disempowering. The spectrum of past events, shown in a retrospective film sequence, reveals the burdens of their past relationship (child sex abuse, domestic violence, poverty). Before the incestuous episodes occurred, Selena was a good girl – pretty, communicative, bright, successful at school, helping her mother with housework to relieve her. But once the incestuous behaviours of her father Joe commenced, she started to reject the concept of traditional femininity: she stopped grooming herself (resistance to the disciplinary heteronormative-beauty regime), was self-harming (the desertion of life and a fascination with death) and became non-talkative (a refusal of women's obligation to communicate with others). Selena's abandoning of femininity is more a protective or rescue tactic from further incestuous episodes than an act of resisting the gender order, although the outcome is essentially the same.

The adult Selena continues to reject any aspect of traditional femininity: she is a single, childfree and career-oriented woman with no family attachments, androgynously clad in dark colours (grey, blue, black), yet also depressed and anxious.

As already noted, the names of the female protagonists hold a symbolic meaning (and a subversive narrative task); not only context-wise, but also more broadly in the gender order of hegemonic masculinity. Dolores' name can be translated to "pain borne out of flesh", if we borrow the equation of clay and human flesh from religious discourse and apply it to her working status. The name Selena means "moon" in Greek mythology, which is commonly understood as a symbol of femininity. The symbol of moon or femininity appears several times in the film: (1) when Joe is jokingly mooning

Dolores and then asks her if she wants to see the dark side of the moon by physically attacking her; (2) Dolores' intentional use of her broad body as a shield (or moon) to protect Selena from witnessing the physical quarrel she has with Joe; and (3) the murder of Joe occurs during an eclipse of the sun. Selena's depression also represents the dark side of the moon (or of herself). Kristeva (1992) compares depression and melancholia with a black sun, where the depressed individual is linked with Narcissus – a person disconnected from others and also oneself. Selena is like Narcissus, disconnected from her repressed incestuous history: emotionally (sedating her emotional self with prescribed antidepressants), intellectually (working as an assertive and high-profile journalist without any family ties), and spatially (living in New York). Her past may also be seen as a state of damaged femininity (e.g. her own helplessness as an abused child, domestic violence towards the powerless Dolores, maternal identity, and poverty), from which she must protect herself. For her, Dolores is a symbol of dirt in a material, social and temporal sense and thus she constantly moisturises her hands with antibacterial lotion while talking with her. The lotion serves as a fluid protection between her and others (e.g. in one scene, we see that she was forced to sexually please her father by hand).

Selena's dismissive and passive aggressive stance show to her mother Dolores can be seen as a revolt against Dolores' still persisting maternal power (Dolores wants to reconcile with her and shatter her illusions about her blameless father) because in an androcentric society the mother image is an ambivalent one, made up of a powerful mother and a powerless woman (de Kanter, 1993: 33).

In the end, the relationship between mother Dolores and daughter Selena is rekindled. If Dolores' societal position (low-class woman) could not protect (and rescue) her own child from a harming patriarchal culture, in this case from incest, then adult Selena, armed with (masculine) legal knowledge, rescues her from the accusations levelled by det. Mackey, i.e. man's law.

Another powerful theme in this film is that of a woman's self-rescue or liberation – be it financial, spatial, emotional or spousal from the patriarchal order. Financial independence was achieved by Vera through her husband's inheritance; Selena is an educated white-collar professional (her status is derived from Dolores' manual labour for Vera); and Dolores' material emancipation comes later in life – after Vera's death she inherits 1.6 million dollars in Vera's will. Spatial liberation is manifested in Selena's living in New York and Vera's moving to the island after her husband's death, and her single-person household. There is also spousal liberation – the deaths of both husbands (Vera's adulterous, Dolores' abusive) and Selena's single marital status. Perhaps the most central is Selena's emotional liberation, i.e.

her confrontation with memories of her childhood sexual abuse, and there is also Dolores momentary social and cultural escape from her lower class through the medium of her own offspring, when she is reading Selena's praised news articles to Vera.

Throughout the film, the word "bitch" is used quite frequently. The word is written on Dolores' abandoned family house; she has been called a bitch many times by different men; even her daughter insults her using this word when Dolores starts to unravel Selena's repressed memories of her abusive father. Vera, on the other hand, mockingly self-identifies as a bitch when she fires one of the servants ("look on the bright side, dear", she says to a former employee, "now you can tell all your friends what a bitch Vera Donovan is"), but this can be ascribed to her class position. She is also lovingly addressed as "a smelly bitch" by Dolores when they are living together.

The most famous quote from the film ("Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman can hold on to") is also said by all three protagonists (Vera, Dolores and Selena) on three different occasions: (1) by Vera to Dolores when they are forming a women's bond as part of their mutual recognition of society being male-oriented and misogynistic; (2) when Dolores is driving in a car with Selena, who is suspicious of Dolores being Vera's murderer; and (3) when Selena basically repeats those words unconsciously to apologise to her mother for not believing her story and abandoning her. As we can see, the word "bitch" transgresses its pejorative meaning in this film such that "a bitch" can be: (1) an abject woman who erodes the system of hegemonic gender order by her liminal societal position; (2) a woman's self-chosen protective identity, used against a hostile outside world; and (3) a culturally reappropriated former slur, now functioning as an empowering word for a woman's entitlement to disregard societal ideological discourses on 'true' femininity. The conscious elimination of socially constructed feminine traits and the identification with masculine ones (rationality and tyranny in Vera's case, stubbornness and physicality in Dolores', and intellectualism and ambition in Selena's) constructs women as bitches, but the most important fact is that they do not have men in their lives (two premeditated widows and one single woman). They avoided becoming embedded in a heteronormative matrix as a significant Other(ed).

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the 'Mammy' discourse and hypersexualised/romanticised cinematic portrayals of domestic workers support and sustain patriarchal constructions of domestic workers by situating them as emotional/caring or sexual objects. The theme of domestic work from a subjugated and, therefore, challenging storytelling position is uncommon

in the mainstream film industry, and the chosen films (*La Nana* and *Dolores Claiborne*) thus reveal a set of different perspectives on gender, class and work, but also on the multifaceted identities held by domestic workers.

Both films are women-oriented and the main parameter for their identity-making process is power relations with other women based on class (employer–employee: Dolores and Vera, Raquel and Pilar), familial (mother–daughter: Dolores and Selena, Dolores and Vera in the form of old-age care, Pilar and her daughter, Raquel and Pilar's daughter) or personal groundings (friendships between Dolores and Vera and also between Raquel and Lucy).

There are two central points that constitute gender and work emancipation for women. The formation of their individual identities and models of behaviour as women is, despite their material embedding in a Western male hegemony, not related to or dependent on men (gender emancipation), while the scope of power resistant possibilities or tactics creates them as multidimensional subjects far removed from society's predetermined and one-dimensional presumptions or conservative media representations of PDW (work emancipation). The narratives in both films do not condemn them on the basis of their emotional selves; all of their behaviours may be understood as feminist survival tactics (e.g. emotional distance and passive aggressive behaviour by Raquel in *La Nana*, the diversity of 'bitch' attitudes shown by all female protagonists in *Dolores Claiborne*).

While past representations of domestic workers have largely been stereotypical, the films we selected depict characters with complexity that eschews stereotypes and provide viewers with a new vision of social, economic or cultural issues; the films thus give the opportunity to develop different meanings and understandings of PDW and domestic workers. To conclude, the chosen films clearly challenge the dominant discourses on domestic work and domestic workers on many levels: (1) cinematic (irrelevance to the film industry and their audience); (2) occupational (work invisibility); and (3) gender (one-dimensionality of domestic workers as film subjects).

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