

RAMIREZ, LOURDES, M.A. Alfonso Cuarón's Problematic Portrayal of Female Figures in *Y tu mamá también* and *Roma*. (2020)
Directed by Dr. Laura Chesak. 61 pp.

The purpose of this work is to analyze the problematic portrayal of female figures in two Mexican films by Alfonso Cuarón: *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and *Roma* (2018). I will examine how Cuarón shapes and presents his female characters' identities as they attempt to emancipate themselves and self-actualize from the hold imposed on them due to societal constraints, such as stereotypical gender roles, class differences, and the domestic spaces that they inhabit. In order to establish this connection, I have supported my work with Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional feminism. While Cuarón is known for his feminist filmography, this critique will offer a different take on his female figures to identify the problematic ways in which he has represented them.

ALFONSO CUARÓN'S PROBLEMATIC PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE FIGURES IN
Y TU MAMÁ TAMBIÉN AND *ROMA*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2020

Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

I want to thank the Academy for recognizing a film centered around an indigenous woman, one of the 70 million domestic workers in the world without work rights, a character that had been historically relegated to the background in cinema, as artists our job is to look where others don't. This responsibility becomes much more important in times when we are being encouraged to look away.

Oscars 2019 acceptance speech by Alfonso Cuarón

In recent years, cinema from Mexican directors has grown in quality and quantity. Since 2013, several Mexican directors such as Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo Del Toro and Alejandro González. Iñárritu, known in U.S. film circles as the “three amigos” of cinema, have represented the growing industry through box office success and critical acclamation with numerous nominations and awards including Best Picture and Best Director at the Academy Awards. While most of these wins have been by the Mexican directors for English-language, Hollywood productions, Alfonso Cuarón stands out for having produced various stories that have reached audiences all over the world in the Spanish language and from Mexico. These stories hold significant cultural, political, and economic significance, oftentimes as a response to and for social change. However, the way he has portrayed and advocated for social change through his films can become more problematic than what it intends to convey. It should be no surprise that a director such as Cuarón chooses not only to create awareness, but to motivate viewers to challenge such

social and political conditions by advocating for change; nevertheless, there is still much left to discuss in how he chooses to do so. His success in telling these stories and reaching an audience cannot and should not be ignored because they are just as important as what I aim to discuss in this work.

Alfonso Cuarón assumes the position of a storyteller with his films *Roma* (2018) and *Y tu mamá también* (2001), which are the focus of this thesis. The deeply personal *Roma* explores the territory of marginalized domestic workers and their relationship with their employers, while *Y tu mamá también* explores the issue of identity through the character of a woman seeking her identity via newfound liberation against a political and societal backdrop. As Devin Gordon of *The Atlantic* writes (2019), especially within *Roma*, there is a sense that the director loves, even worships women, but is not too sure about the representation of men in Cuarón's filmography. Furthermore, I will examine how Cuarón shapes and presents his female characters' identities as they attempt to emancipate themselves and self-actualize from the hold imposed on them due to societal constraints, such as stereotypical gender roles, class differences, and the domestic spaces that they inhabit. The female characters Luisa and Cleo will be analyzed under those terms. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional feminism will be used to reflect on the class difference between two characters in *Roma*, and Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory will be used to examine how Luisa is viewed through the male lens, in further support my work. In acknowledgment of the fact that knowing the author can lend to the understanding of intent or deepen an understanding of his work, it is important to consider Cuarón's history. Cuarón was born in 1961, in Mexico City, Mexico. He was raised in an upper-

class home in the city (as reflected in *Roma*) and began his filmmaking career in college at the *Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos*, where he met his frequent collaborator Emmanuel Lubezki and began making short films. He spent his initial years working in Mexican television as a technician and then as assistant director for various projects before landing his first big-screen directorial debut. The directorial debut came in 1991 with *Sólo con tu pareja*, a sex comedy about a womanizer who is led to believe he has AIDS. Cuarón not only directed this film, but also wrote and produced it, for which he garnered the Best Original Story award at the Ariel Awards in 1992 (Mexico's Academy Awards) as well as international success at the Toronto Festival of Festivals. It was due to the international recognition from *Soló con tu pareja* that led to an opportunity in 1995 to direct his first feature film produced in the United States with *A Little Princess*, an adaptation of the classic novel (Valdes). Following *A Little Princess*, he continued with literary adaptations by directing a modernized version of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* in 1998 (Valdes).

Unfortunately, *Great Expectations* was not as warmly received as his other projects and after being in Hollywood for years, wanting to return to the freedom to create in an unrestricted environment, Cuarón returned to Mexico with *Y tu mamá también*. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*' Kenneth Turan in 2002, Cuarón mentions that he wanted to "go off and get my hands dirty." Turan calls it a film that "turned out to be a sexually candid, deeply Mexican film that pulses with energy and spirit." Furthermore, Turan makes note that Cuarón also comments on the country's political situation in the film, adding that:

Though the film's advance word will prepare audiences for *Y Tu Mamá's* sexual antics, passion is not this trip's only component. Cuarón and his collaborators are intent on giving us a vivid, kaleidoscopic vision of roadside Mexico, from local festivities to steers blocking the highway. When Luisa says, "You're so lucky to live in Mexico; it breathes with life," she is speaking for the film as well. Simultaneously, *Y tu mamá también* is making offhanded but pointed comments about the country's political situation. Jazzed by film's potential to tell all kinds of stories in all kinds of ways, director Cuarón did more than get his hands dirty. He struck a kind of gold. (Turan, n.p.)

The film was incredibly successful, and a censorship controversy in Mexico due to its rating only heightened interest in the film, resulting in global success and award nominations at the international level. Reviews and analyses of the film tend to focus on the relationship between the two young teenagers at the center of the drama. I will discuss the lead female character and her surroundings in regard to how she is portrayed in the film under the male gaze while seeking out an identity of her own.

Cuarón then returned to Hollywood to direct the third instalment of the popular *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* in 2004, a bold choice to direct a children's novel adaptation after *Y tu mamá también*. Shortly after, in 2006, he wrote and directed *Children of Men* which received wide critical acclaim and three Academy Award nominations. However, it was not until the film *Gravity* (2013) that Cuarón finally won seven Academy Awards including Best Director, making him the first Mexican ever to receive the award. With that success, he set a precedent for the next five years, with the exception of 2016, of Mexican directors being awarded the top prize of Best Director.

After the critical and box office success of *Gravity*, Cuarón could have shot whatever he liked, but he chose to return to Mexico to work on a deeply personal film after years with Hollywood productions. In an interview with Marcela Valdes for *The New York Times*, Cuarón mentioned that he had his pick of directing blockbusters but decided to go home to make *Roma*. “They offered me bigger pictures with bigger budgets, bigger everything,” Cuarón explained to Valdes. Instead, he poured himself into *Roma* (Valdes). Cuarón further explained to Valdes why he chose to make this film, adding that as a child, he saw how little he understood the life of an indigenous woman born into rural poverty.

Cuarón methodically shredded his old blindness so he could make Libo Rodríguez the protagonist of “*Roma*.” The film paints 1970s classism, parental neglect and federal violence with icy neutrality, but love colors its close-ups of Cleo, the character he based on Rodríguez. She bears witness to many of her employers’ humiliations: slaps, betrayals, car accidents. Cuarón makes us the witnesses to hers. She works while her employers relax and rests only when they sleep. The children snuggle with her. The adults bark at her. By training and by necessity, Cleo shares little of what she thinks, and even less of what she feels, with other characters. She is a woman of tremendous sensitivity and limited verbal expression. (Valdes n.p.)

Roma was received incredibly well, and the director was triumphant at the Academy Awards. During his acceptance speech, he called for justice for the thousands of women who engage in domestic work and are often ignored in cinema or relegated to the background. While the film did have a domestic indigenous character front and center, I aim to give a further in-depth analysis of how Cuarón actually failed the indigenous

character by reducing her to stereotypes while claiming to give her a voice. She is used and exploited by the successful white female character and the family that employs her.

Cuarón's stories often are centered on female protagonists, as in *A Little Princess*, *Gravity*, and *Roma*, or have women involved in the main plot, such as *Children of Men* and *Y tu mamá también*. The characters are left to their own devices to prevail against unfair odds, especially as women who are finding an identity and must find their voice after being oppressed. I hope to present with this work the problematic form in which Cuarón presents the emancipation and self-awareness of the women involved in his cinema. Cuarón hopes to give women voices when they are usually relegated to background characters and mere plot devices, but does he successfully achieve this? Cuarón's story addresses the very real social, economic, and political conflicts in the country's past and present. However, in doing so, there is a disservice to his female characters that I hope to illustrate by analyzing his characters through different viewpoints. This critique of Alfonso Cuarón works to offer a different take on the success and popularity of his feminist filmography. In allowing this interpretation to take place, hopefully it encourages a conversation that just may be transformative enough to change the interpretation of women characters, especially in Spanish-language films, which tend to already be dominated by the male gaze.

CHAPTER II

Y TU MAMÁ TAMBIÉN: HOW ALFONSO CUARÓN PRESENTS THE FEMALE BODY THROUGH THE USE OF SPACE AND THE MALE GAZE

Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* caused a commotion in Mexico when it was released in 2001. The reception was polarizing due to its depiction of homosexuality and explicit erotica elements (Mora 176). Paul Julian Smith calls it a rehash of the love triangle/coming-of-age movie that is condensed into one summer in the familiar cliché, "none of them would be the same after that summer" (8). While at first glance the film might be mistaken as just another road trip of self-discovery, it also explores other territory that is not typically touched upon in other examples of these types of films (Mora 177). Cuarón's film explores adolescent sexuality, class differences, and national politics to educate an audience on the political, social, and cultural evolution of Mexico at the turn of the decade in 1999. *Y tu mamá también* subtly revises models of gender and national identity for an evolving, modernizing Mexico. Most of the critiques and analyses of the film tend to focus on the representation of the two male characters, Tenoch Iturbide and Julio Zapata, and their friendship; however, this analysis will focus on the main female character of Luisa Cortés, who is seeking an emancipated identity. She embarks on a journey to self-awareness and actualization that is intertwined with how Cuarón chooses to represent her in a film that has plenty of layers.

Various journalists such as Deborah Shaw have celebrated and acclaimed *Y tu mamá también* for its representation and portrayal of Luisa Cortés as a self-aware female character who breaks free of her chains. Luisa is a middle-class woman on a journey to emancipation from a failed relationship and in turn, while on this journey she gains a sense of self-awareness and self-discovery through finding her peace and purpose. Nevertheless, Luisa's representation can be problematic. While the film hints at a feminist approach to her journey of emancipation and self-awareness, her stereotypical portrayal and representation under the male gaze theory makes it difficult for this film to be celebrated when it is at the expense of the female protagonist. This chapter will discuss that while Cuarón has been celebrated for his focus on female characters in his filmography, and for his representation of Luisa Cortés as a strong female character, it is achieved through problematic and stereotypical gazes.

Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* is a story about two young men, Tenoch Iturbide (Diego Luna) and Julio Zapata (Gael García Bernal), and is set in late 1990s Mexico City against a backdrop of political and economic change. The two characters embark on a road trip alongside a slightly older woman, Luisa Cortés, played by Maribel Verdú. As they travel in Julio's car, the three go in search of a paradisiacal, secluded beach, oftentimes conversing about different topics of their life such as sex, relationships and family. The group finally reaches their final destination, *Boca del Cielo*, which surprises Tenoch and Julio as they have not been certain of its existence. In a moment of drunkenness, the trio engage in a *ménage-à-trois*. After their night together, the three go their separate ways. Luisa decides to stay in the beach town and the young men return to

Mexico City. The final scene of the film informs viewers that though Julio and Tenoch return to Mexico City together, their night together has jeopardized their friendship and they do not remain close after the incident. Tenoch reveals that unbeknownst to them, Luisa had been diagnosed with cancer and died a month after their trip, having been aware of her diagnosis during their journey together. The dialogue between Tenoch and Julio asserts that they will meet again; however, the narrator reveals that they will never reunite.

Y tu mamá también was written by Cuarón and his brother Carlos and produced by his own *Anhelo Producciones* (Blanco 134). The movie was released first in Mexico, where there was a censorship dispute due to the Mexican government's decision to give a rating that censored a lot of the movie. It was eventually released in the United States in October 2001. The film won several awards at the 2001 Venice Film Festival, among numerous other nominations at the Academy Awards and Golden Globes. Prior to *Y tu mamá también*, Cuarón had been helming Hollywood productions and had not made a Mexican film since his debut, *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991), but he returned to Mexico years later to fulfill a desire he had before he went to film school (Wood 263). That desire had been to make a film like one would make before going to film school, a film in Spanish, and a road movie involving a journey to the beach (Wood 263). In an interview, Cuarón mentioned he felt he had lost his passion in filmmaking and needed a return to form where he felt he needed to make a film that was all about loving cinema without any of the rules:

After a few years engaged in the Hollywood process, I realized that I was losing not only my voice but also my passion for cinema. It was making me sad. I was living here in New York and there was Video City in Greenwich Village and I went there and just rented 25 movies. I was just walking by, they had a great selection, I was just walking by picking up the titles that I felt were the reason I wanted to make films. After watching all those films, I called Carlos my brother and I said, 'I want to write a script, I want to make a film in Mexico, will you come to New York and work with me for a couple weeks?' And two days later he was there, and we started writing *Y tu mamá también*. (Film at Lincoln Center, 00:00:40-00:01:46)

He rejected the Hollywood appeal of his previous films, *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998), and decided to return to form, back to his roots for an “intimate film, with a small, tight cast and crew, and the process of making the film is described by the director as like going on a road trip with your family” (Shaw 177). Cuarón was passionate about his previous productions and enjoyed the filmmaking process of those, but there was a need to return to what drove him to a type of filmmaking where he had control of the story he wanted to tell and how to tell it. *Y tu mamá también* allowed the director to have the freedom to tell his story with risks and no Hollywood pressures. Furthermore, the director has the ability to make a movie with a clear artistic identity that had not been established in his Hollywood productions. He employs a more pervasive *mexicanidad* (Mexican identity) by the characters' use of *chilango* Spanish (a Mexico City dialect) fused with typical Mexican slang; he displays various Mexican traditions that could only be experienced by voyaging into the *real* Mexico.

The freedom that came with being able to manage his own film without Hollywood pressures permitted other useful aspects to be explored as well, such as

camera technique and movement. In film there are visuals to provide imagery, yet this film takes advantage of the camera work to make sure the audience is aware of the surroundings of a truthful representation of Mexico by using various cinematic techniques. Cuarón decided to use a narrator or voice-over to reveal “a beam of tragic alternate stories,” along with providing details of the characters’ backgrounds (Blanco 137). Its use of voice-over informs us of what the characters can never know or choose not to reveal (Smith 9) and provides the audience with glimpses of a changing Mexico. For example, they drive past a town that Tenoch recognizes as the birthplace of his nanny, however he does not disclose this information to his companions, instead keeping it for himself. The camera highlights which character is speaking and allows for the audience to go deeper into who that character is, which is essential with the character of Luisa. On the other hand, the use of voice-over polarized critics who criticized aspects of it, but Cuarón felt it was necessary to include it. It ignites a conversation revolving Mexican culture and without taking anything away from the characters and their journey. On its surface, it is still a movie about a summer road trip through the Mexican landscape, but there is more to be deciphered and that is what the narration is needed for. Of the use of a narrator Cuarón had this to say:

I set out with Carlos to do something very objective. I said, “We need a narrator, a third-person narrator.” And he said, “No it won’t work; we need a first-person narrator.” Then I showed him “Masculin, Feminin,” and the first time that Godard uses the third-person narrator, he was like, “Okay, play no more, I get it.” (Kaufman, “Decade: Alfonso Cuarón on *Y tu mamá también*”)

It was important to include narration for the audience to know things that otherwise would not be explicitly stated, but that needed to be said. However, the journey is not just constructed through narration, but also through image and that is an important aspect of the film. The camera's gaze on Luisa and how the gaze represents her is essential to this analysis.

Cuarón works with his usual collaborator Emmanuel Lubezki, director of photography, to bring a raw truthfulness of Mexican society by refusing to film prettiness or anything too beautiful (Smith 9). The camera pans around to focus on other details, bringing attention to those details with a shaky movement to make the film mimic a documentary style and appear more honest. Cuarón's vision was to make a film that looked like it was pre-film school, with no rules, a film that was a rebellion of sorts from the expected perfectionism of his previous Hollywood productions. Nonetheless, the film is still beautiful with its long-shots and casual-looking cinematography (Smith 9).

It's not a postcard. It was about decomposing, as opposed to composing the shot. It was about making it look improvised. One of the reasons why I wanted to do this film was because I wanted to go back to my roots, and I'm not talking about Mexico, but my creative roots: to make a film that we would have loved to do before going to film school, when you don't know how to shoot a movie or compose a shot. It was going to be a film schoolteacher's nightmare. It was not about breaking the rules, but about not knowing the rules ever existed. (Kaufman, "Decade: Alfonso Cuarón on *Y Tu Mamá También*")

Audiences may initially think this movie is about two teens who go on a trip with a seductive older woman, with a similar trope to *The Graduate* (1967). The film provides a glimpse into the life of a slightly older woman who upon further reflection into her life

has been submissive to her husband; after her diagnosis, she decides to begin a journey towards emancipation and “break the chains.” Through that journey, she becomes aware of herself and her needs, but this does not come easy. Cuarón relegates Luisa to the stereotypical Hispanic female in film who is taken advantage of by the male gaze.

Female Emancipation through the Male Gaze

As mentioned previously, Luisa Cortés embarks on a journey of emancipation from men and acquisition of self-awareness through the road trip to the beach with the two young men, doing so through the lens of the male gaze. This is problematic particularly for the body of a Hispanic woman because the male gaze promotes the hypersexualization and stereotypes of the Hispanic female body (Lipman 28). Feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, and Bell Hooks have studied the effects of the male gaze on women in film (Lipman 27). For this analysis, the critical approach from *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey will be applied to this work to provide information and evidence of the effects of the male gaze on women in film.

As Mulvey explains, the male gaze functions in showing women within film “on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (Mulvey 62). Even though this film illustrates a story of a woman as she is on her journey to death, it falls victim to objectifying women with a male gaze that furthers perpetuates that “patriarchy is part of the film industry” (Lipman 27). Mulvey’s theory regarding sexual objectification of women in the media is

more commonly known as “The Male Gaze” theory. Mulvey’s theory first appeared in 1975, and although it has been used extensively to lay bare the misogynistic representation of women in film, decades later, women’s roles are more or less the same. While the theory has worked to identify gender issues and bring them to light, these problems still persist years after Mulvey first established the theory. Mulvey argues that “the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses” (57). The male gaze therefore removes the female from her identity, diminishing her to be an object to be praised for her appearance. The theory suggests that women can more often than not only watch a film from a secondary perspective and only view themselves from a man’s perspective. Furthermore, a female character has no real importance herself: it is how she makes the male feel or act that has importance (Mulvey 62). This is depicted in *Y tu mamá también* with Luisa’s role as mediator for the two male protagonists. She serves as their teacher, guiding them through various disagreements and sexual acts, and she exists solely for Julio and Tenoch’s plot advancement. Once she serves her purpose, to restore order to the homosexual desire the friends share, Cuarón disposes of her body by ending the film on the note that she passed away.

In regard to the camera work, the male gaze occurs when the camera puts the audience into the perspective of a heterosexual man (Mulvey 63). It may linger over the curves of a woman's body, for instance, or a slow-motion effect is used, with deliberate camera movements and cut-aways that focus on the woman as an object. The camera enacts the male gaze, panning up and down the woman’s body—a body in pieces-and

moving in for close-ups of various fragments of the female body, especially the face (Oliver 452). An example of this is the opening of the film as Tenoch and his girlfriend are having sex, which is immediately from the perspective of a male as the camera lingers over the female body. Even when Tenoch's girlfriend attempts to be on top of him, he overpowers her and the view stays from his perspective: he gains control and possession of her. She is there simply to be observed, or as various critics have said, "men do the looking, and women are to be looked at." This continues in further scenes between Luisa and Julio/Tenoch. Her body becomes the focus and is the forefront of this film (Lipman 28).

In her work on *The Impact of the Male Gaze on Hispanic Women in Film*, Hannah Lipman writes, "images of both the idealized and disabled Hispanic body are represented dramatically in *Y tu mamá también*" (27). Lipman argues that while the film and the gaze are focused on Luisa's hypersexualized body, there is a sad undertone to her character that is then overshadowed by the portrayal and focus on her naked body (28). Lipman posits that the film could take the direction of diving deep into Luisa's characterization as there are clear signs of "cracks" in her personal life, yet what the audience sees is Luisa in her underwear crying, clearly for the male audience's pleasure (28). As Kelly Oliver states,

There is no place for identity with feminine activity, therefore that could explain why Cuarón would choose to have Luisa be a mediator or a teacher, but in the mother/whore role. She guides the two teens on their sexual self-discovery while she herself is experiencing a self-discovery as well, but at the expense of exposing her body rather than have a film that focuses on her life and the 'cracks' in her personal life. (451)

Luisa is merely a spectacle for the two young men, and she becomes a spectacle for the audience as well when we continually view her as Julio and Tenoch do through the lens of a “Peeping Tom.” There are shots that show Luisa crying in her underwear or a variety of other camera angles that position her for sexual gratification targeted towards the heterosexual male to enjoy. The sight of a woman’s breasts or cleavage frequently becomes a visual pleasure for the male audience (Lipman 29). Lipman explains that it is not that the sight of the female body can't be enjoyable for women to view as well, but the way in which the female is produced in the film is constructed around the male gaze (29). A pivotal scene in the film is the *ménage-à-trois* when Luisa is shown disappearing from the frame, yet the camera never loses its focus on Julio and Tenoch. This time the gaze is on them but at the expense of Luisa. Luisa uses her sexuality and body to push these two young men to question their own sexuality (Lipman 29). It becomes apparent that the gaze on the female body and the exploitation of Luisa’s body was used as a means to an end. In the words of Lipman:

This being the most crucial and powerful point to the film gives a saddening understanding as to why Luisa’s body might have been used so heavily in this film. Prior to this awakening moment, the female body and female promiscuity seemed to frame the screen, but it is now apparent that to get an audience to watch two men kiss, there would have to be a lot of breasts. (29)

Corey Birkhofer states that it could be argued to a certain extent that Luisa’s purpose is indeed to strengthen Tenoch and Julio relationship through their objectification of her. That is to say, only until she has sex with both characters can the repressed homosexual relationship the friends share be resolved, and the road-trip can continue. This is

problematic because it exposes an idea that in order to get a film made that includes homosexuality, it requires the exposure of the female body. The female body could then be discarded once her character's purpose has been completed. Luisa is there to be used to drive the plot: she serves as a catalyst who advances the plot but only via the exploitation of her body by the male gaze.

Stereotyping to Portray the Hispanic Female Body

The male gaze not only impacts women through the physical focus of the character, but there can also be objectification in a sexual and racial way that falls into stereotypical territory. The male gaze also promotes hyper-sexualization and stereotypes of the Hispanic female body (Lipman 28). Stereotyping “puts people in boxes and creates images that result in false presumptions accepted as incontrovertible truths” (Oboler 27). For example, the bodies of Latina women are overly sexualized, expected to be voluptuous, or posited as “exotic, sexual, and available, and as more in touch with their bodies and motivated by physical and sexual pleasure than white women” (Beltran 82). The body of the Hispanic female is used to represent not only a young sexualized figure but also the form idealized as Hispanic (Lipman 27). There is a stereotype that the body of the dark-haired women tends to signify danger and sexuality (Valdivia 139). Cuarón falls victim to the stereotyping of the Hispanic body because of the way he oversexualizes Luisa's body even at times when it's unnecessary to do so. There is an idealized Hispanic body embedded in sexual stereotyping of Latinas as “hot” bodies with “fiery” temperaments that are shown in media (Arrizon 192). These terms are

often employed to objectify women with explicit or implicit sexual connotations. By relegating Luisa's role to objectification via the male gaze, Cuarón also unfortunately reduces her body to that of the stereotypical "caliente" Latina. In one scene Luisa reprimands Tenoch and Julio, yelling at them while storming out of the car. She walks away while berating them for their attitudes, and with this portrayal, she falls into the "fiery" Latina woman with attitude. Some stereotypical behavioral characteristics assigned to Latinas include "addictively romantic, sensual, sexual, and even exotically dangerous" (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz 125). Luisa becomes a stereotype when her journey to emancipation and self-awareness is represented only by her being an idealized sexual symbol that is objectified by the male gaze (Lipman 30).

The female body is viewed by a male gaze in the film industry, which has left Hollywood with a string of stereotypes revolving around the woman's body. The Hispanic woman's body has been a focus of the male gaze since the early representation of Hispanics in Hollywood cinema. The male gaze has left the Hispanic body to be viewed for visual pleasure. (Lipman 30)

Hispanic females have historically been portrayed as such; however, in a film directed by a Latino male, one would not expect a reversion to stereotype in line with how a mainstream Hollywood film would present a Hispanic female.

In addition to the identification of the Hispanic female as fiery Latina, there have been numerous other forms that "epitomize the range of representations of women in Hispanic" and Anglo television and film (Merskin 137). For example, Debra Merskin highlights G.D. Keller's tripartite typology of Latina stereotypes as

1. Cantina Girl. “Great sexual allure,” teasing, dancing, and “behaving in an alluring fashion” characteristics of this stereotype. She is most often represented as a sexual object, a “naughty lady of easy virtue.”

2. Faithful, self-sacrificing *señorita*. This woman usually starts out good but goes bad by the middle of the film or television program. This character realizes she has gone wrong and is willing to protect her Anglo love interest by placing her body between the bullet/sword/posse/violence intended for him.

3. Vamp. Whereas Cantina Girl is most often presented physically as an available sexual object, the Vamp uses her intellectual and devious sexual wiles to get what she wants. She often brings men to violence and enjoys doing so. She is a psychological menace to males who are ill equipped to handle her. (137)

Keller’s categorization functions mainly in relation to an Anglo love interest, but it can also be applicable to Luisa. Luisa can be viewed as all three examples. After having sacrificed herself and been the submissive wife for years prior, Luisa is ready to begin her journey towards her peace and truth on a path to self-discovery. However, the celebratory feminist approach and role model potential of this character is quickly undermined by a stereotypical representation imbued with many of the qualities that have, for decades, perpetuated dehumanizing and limiting beliefs about Latina morality and potentiality (Merskin 146).

Luisa is presented as a fetishized, sexualized, dominated object; the fact that she begins her adventure with Julio and Tenoch as a reaction to her husband's infidelity marks her out as a victim of an age-old machismo that is all too familiar (Donapetry 97). Thus, this creates another stereotype: the Hispanic woman locked into the traditional mold of submissiveness where self-sacrifice is expected (Donapetry 93). Luisa is initially

presented as the stereotypically complaisant Hispanic wife who is victimized by machismo, only later to be turned to another stereotype as the feisty Hispanic spitfire, or as Paul Julian Smith puts it, “from a prim, melancholy wife (dressed in ivory satin), she is transformed into a denim-clad sexual predator who takes on the boys in a seedy motel and on the back seat of a car” (17).

Luisa’s transformation results in another stereotypical view of Hispanic women. Typically featured in Latin American literature, they are essential archetypes of female characters: the Virgin, the Mother, and the Whore, all of which have their genesis in biblical literature (Burrows 75). Each of the archetypes is founded on the sexuality of women and is used by society to press certain expectations on them (Burrows 76). These archetypes can even be combined with Keller’s categorization of the Hispanic stereotype; the Whore as the Cantina girl and Vamp, and the Mother as the self-sacrificing *Señorita*. Furthermore, Vera Burrows explains that Latin American female characters are categorized into the Virgin or the Mother archetypes according to their sexual activity (76). Meanwhile, the Whore archetype emerges through the biblical tale of the adulterous Mary Magdalene (Burrows 77). In these terms, Luisa would fall into the Whore archetype while being part of the Mother archetype as well.

The virgin/whore dichotomy is usually associated with Latina/Hispanic women. As put forth by Maria Donapetry, “the explicit eroticism and visual titillation might lead us to perceive her as one who fulfills and combines the roles both of mother and whore” (94). In other words, Luisa takes on the role of the mother wanting happiness for her “children,” as well as the symbolic role of the promiscuous whore. She may not be the

biological mother of Julio and Tenoch, but, because she cares for them as such, she symbolically takes on the role as their mother (Birkhofer). Initially, Luisa is seen as the unattainable Madonna. Julio and Tenoch first encounter Luisa at a wedding where she is in a satin dress, almost saint-like and unattainable due to her being married to Tenoch's cousin. However, when they embark on the road-trip, the audience slowly starts seeing the dichotomy manifest into the mother/whore roles as she is caring for and making sure her "children" are being treated fairly. The act of sleeping with Tenoch and Julio to be fair to the both reveals Luisa's motherly traits, according to Birkhofer. Nevertheless, when she initiates the threesome that lead them to finally consummate their love for each other, Luisa takes on the role of the promiscuous whore. Various sources including Corey Birkhofer agree that in her death Luisa returns to the time when she was the unattainable holy Madonna. Even in her death Luisa is still a stereotype. By positioning Luisa as various forms of stereotypical categories such as sexpot, the Whore, Cantina girl among others, Cuarón contributes to and perpetuates long-standing stereotypes of Hispanic/Latinx women in film. While this is not a Hollywood film, the director presents Luisa as a stereotype of the seductive woman trope who "corrupts" the youth that is often seen in film. Plenty of films only have women present to be the object of desire and affection, and once they have served their purpose, the character is discarded one way or another. She no longer continually serves the plot and is disposed of when that has been completed. Cuarón could have used other means that did not result in Luisa or the other minor female characters being easily categorized as the stereotype of a Hispanic woman.

Femininity Liberated Through Space

Y tu mamá también is after all, a road-trip movie and as with many road movies, it is typical that the main characters involved are on a quest for something. The quest differs for all three characters: Julio and Tenoch are motivated by selfish, superficial reasons while for Luisa, the journey is a search for self. When her life is thrown into shambles, she quickly decides to join the trip after initial refusal. As the audience suspects, Luisa was diagnosed with terminal cancer before she goes on the road trip. Thus, the narrative slowly starts to shift and her adventurous spirit and willingness to join two teenagers is not simply a way of getting back at her husband for infidelity, but a last attempt at enjoying her life after being marginalized and constrained to societal norms before it comes to an end. The audience then sympathizes with Luisa as we come to understand why she needed to embark on the trip initially. It was much more than a vacation for her. Driving through the vastness of the Mexican countryside enables her to unshackle the metaphorical chains of her marginalized role. For Luisa, riding through the vast open space represents a transformation from her saddened and vulnerable state into the adventurous vixen ready to finally enjoy her life. Due to this, the audience quickly identifies that an enclosed, interior space is where Luisa is at her most vulnerable, whereas, while on the road, the vast open land seems to offer space for Luisa's self-affirmation. In other words, femininity is liberated through the exterior space offered while on the road.

Luisa dissociates herself from the intimate domestic space of her apartment and the city, which has restricted and marginalized her, toward an exterior space (the beach) that liberates and allows her to feel a freedom that pushes her to a haven where she can fully embrace life as she wants to. Cuarón creates a distinction between internal and external space from her mental state when she is in an interior space vs. an exterior space. When Luisa is shown at her most susceptible, such as in her apartment or in the hotel room, she is tearful and fragile. Luisa is at her most carefree and cheerful while on the road and once they reach the destination. This shows that she is joyous and at peace mainly throughout her time in exterior space. When she is on the road and reaches the beach, as opposed to being in interior space, she is finally able to take matters into her own hands and overcome them, not just sit idly by as time passes, which is where she was in the beginning of the film. She soon leaves the domestic space for other spaces that allow her to be herself without the ties of societal norms overcoming her. No longer intimidated and bound to societal norms, she leaves the domestic space to venture into other spaces that liberate her from the role of caretaker and “mother” that has followed her through the various spaces she has inhabited from Spain to Mexico.

The glimpses of Luisa in interior spaces tend to involve a domestic space where she is usually crying and forced to face her problems; however, while on the road, it is as if her problems “disappear” or are left behind in the space she used to inhabit. For example, in her apartment in Mexico City she is seen breaking down and tearful. The next time we see her is on the road and she is a refreshed, new person who left behind her problems in the domestic space in Mexico City. We then view her once again crying in

her hotel room, only to next be seen moving on from the sadness and refreshed. The exterior spaces are clearly where Luisa is most fulfilled; the camera cuts to her enjoying time with her guard down. In contrast, we immediately associate the shots of interior spaces with sadness because it is mostly what we see when she is positioned inside domestic spaces. Also, interior spaces tend to represent domestic spaces that are associated with the feminine. The rough terrain of the outdoors is primarily masculine; therefore, Luisa defies patriarchal order by defying the norm and stepping outside to her own journey rather than pertain to an enclosed space that controls and surrounds her, bound by walls and borders.

The open space outside has no boundaries; she is liberated, to seek out the hope and optimism that the beach represents. The beach is the place where she can find calm and joy amid her troubled life. The name of the beach "*boca de cielo*" or Heaven's Mouth represents the other passage that Luisa is about to take, from life to death. This constructs Luisa's newfound identity of self, as the beach represents escape and release. She joins the trip to escape her troubles, including her husband's infidelity and the diagnosis that has taken a toll on her, and she has a sense of enjoyment in what little life she has left. The last scene of her features Luisa as she walks into the sea, which represents her release as she leaves this world behind toward the next step. The sea in this film is used to symbolize life and its hardships. The sea can be daunting, wide, and deep, that becomes deadly with the waves representing the obstacles of life. So, for Luisa, her going to the sea represents her coming to terms with what will eventually happen to her,

the obstacles that life has thrown her way, but by accepting it and walking into the ocean, she is at the border of land and sea, or life and death.

By coming to terms with her fate and embracing the ocean, Luisa is embracing a newfound identity as well. The trip helped Luisa gain emancipation and self-actualization by abandoning the societal expectations from the domestic hold imposed on her. She, like the ocean, has much more depth to her. While the film shows us this character through the male gaze, Luisa's progress and growth cannot be denied. Her new identity matches her new surroundings. When we first meet Luisa, she inhabits the role of the submissive wife, at the disposal of her husband; however, through the transgression of the film, we see her transformation and transition as the scenery and space change as well. Therefore, her new identity matches her new surroundings to where she is no longer submissive and is only responsible for her actions and for taking care of herself, unlike before where she was always the caretaker forced to give up her dreams due to taking care of others. The narrator mentions a metaphor said by Luisa as her last words to Tenoch and Julio about how "life is like foam, so give yourself away like sea," meaning that life is always changing and there will be obstacles, but do not forget to live life in the present with enthusiasm and joy. Unfortunately, Luísa came to realize this much later in life as she changed her mindset after her terminal diagnosis; nonetheless, the open road and sea liberated her from the oppression before her. Thus, travel represents Luisa's journey toward emancipation and liberation that she had never embraced before.

The Political Space

According to German Martínez Martínez, *Y tu mamá también* takes an openly political turn in contrast to previous Cuarón films (399). The political and social space that the film encompasses is important because the commentary is not only against the country of Mexico itself, but represents the social conflict that separates the main characters as well. The characters of the film also serve to personify the social class conflicts that the film demonstrates throughout its visuals as we follow them along the road trip. This leads to the social element in the film which links with the road movie genre by presenting a country on the brink of transition as the characters travel through the countryside (Orgeron). The camera pays attention to spots indicating where fatal accidents have taken place, crosses on the side of the road and other instances throughout the journey. This is said by the omnipresent narrator who provides social and political commentary about Mexico. Mexico, like Luisa, is attempting to transition toward a more modernized country. Meanwhile, the voice-over comments on the corruption, and instability the country is facing. So, will Mexico be successful at transition even if marked by social differences and civil unrest? In one scene at the beach, pigs escape from a nearby farm and overtake the beach. This could be read as Mexico's attempts to modernize through tourism and capitalist ventures, such as the resort that will be built on the land of others, but "pigs" will then begin to occupy the space that once belonged to the locals. A select few citizens throughout the country will flourish from this transition while the rest of the country that does not fall under that social class will suffer.

Space creates boundaries in the film to show the difference in lifestyles of Luisa, Tenoch and Julio in comparison to the rest of the Mexican citizens who are not within their immediate world. As we see Luisa leave her domestic space and venture into other spaces, our perspective of her positively changes, and we root for her. Ultimately, while we root for Luisa for rejecting hegemonic social norms, we want the opposite for the country. Mexico embarks on their own journey to self-actualization; however, Mexico embraces the patriarchal and capitalist spaces even if that means losing their own Mexican identity. Similarly, Julio and Tenoch are taught by Luisa to reject hegemonic norms and traditional spaces, but they also embrace those as they head back to the city to conform to society and what is expected of them. Luisa, on the other hand, having been following traditional spaces all her life, finally embraced her own.

Conclusion

Luisa is presented as a woman on a journey to claim an identity and emancipate herself from all that was weighing her down and was restraining her from breaking free of the chains. She joins the young men on the journey in the face of her cancer diagnosis and her husband's infidelity because she is no longer tied down in a caregiver, pseudo-maternal role. Rather, she is at liberty to pursue freedom and liberation through exterior spaces, even if under the male gaze.

Y tu mamá también employs patriarchal conventions of cinematic female representation through being under the male gaze. Luisa proves her purpose in the film when she is used as a mediator for Julio and Tenoch. She perceives their repressed

homosexual love and teaches them to act on it, by accepting it if only for one night, as they proceed to reject it afterwards. She is the teacher, the mother, the whore, the object being spied on by the male gaze. Perhaps Cuarón wanted to make a different type of film that focused on a homosexual relationship, but limitations of the time, especially in Mexican filmmaking, made it so that the only way we could have those underlying themes is through the exploitation of the female character who is victim to stereotypes and a male gaze that objectifies her. There is no necessity to highlight who this film is about as it can be about one or the other characters; however, had the audience been given a proper story of Luisa's emancipation journey to self-discovery/self-awareness after years of sacrificing her wants and needs by putting others before herself, this would be a very different story. Ideally it would be one that could be told from the creation of a new gaze, without constant objectification or without having to reduce her to the portrayal of Hispanic women that is so often reflected in Hollywood film

CHAPTER III

ROMA: HOW CUARÓN FAILS HIS INDIGENOUS FEMALE CHARACTER

The cinema of Alfonso Cuarón typically has women at the center and his most recent film, *Roma* (2018) is no different. The film follows two women of different backgrounds and the hardships they face in 1970s Mexican society. There are clear societal differences between them that the film will present as they navigate through their circumstances in a society that will continuously oppress them albeit for varying reasons. The critical implications of presenting Cleo as a stereotypical domestic servant who lacks a proper voice, and is exploited by her employer, Sofia, will be discussed in greater detail to analyze how Cuarón fails to positively represent his female indigenous character.

While *Roma* has been widely celebrated and hailed by critics for its feminist themes of women's empowerment through a journey of emancipation from men and gaining of self-awareness, there are those who critique it including philosopher Slavoj Žižek in his article about *Roma* for the online magazine, *The Spectator US* because "it is being celebrated for all the wrong reasons." The story of the film is about women's stance against forms of oppression and how they handle that oppression to then begin their journey into emancipation and self-awareness (Demircan 201). The representation of the two women, particularly Cleo, in the film may actually send the wrong message and seem incongruous in a film that initially appears to break barriers by representing indigenous and domestic work at a time when such voices tend to be ignored and erased

from the media. While *Roma* is not the first film to represent indigenous peoples and domestic servants; it did catapult one of the main actors, Yalitza Aparicio, into mainstream stardom and has “brought important social issues to the fore, such as the treatment of domestic workers and indigenous representation,” declared Carolina A. Miranda from the *Los Angeles Times* in her article about the film. It is important to mention that for the role of Cleo, Cuarón cast Aparicio, a non-professional actress of indigenous Mixtec heritage who had worked as a schoolteacher in Mexico prior to joining the film. People throughout social media expressed appreciation to see a woman “who looked like them” on screen. Additionally, Aparicio’s January 2019 *Vogue Mexico* issue went viral online, as she was the first indigenous woman to be featured on the cover. For her role, Aparicio became only the second Mexican actress and the first indigenous woman to be nominated in the lead actress category at the Academy Awards, resulting in her status as a “barrier breaker” according to Miranda. While Cuarón’s work may be hailed by various critics and viewers as a feminist film for the way it explores different topics about women and indigenous representation, this chapter will examine the film’s internal contradictions and inconsistencies, particularly with the character of Cleo.

Roma, the eighth film from Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón, was released in December 2018 through the streaming platform, Netflix. Several months prior to release, it made its debut at the Venice Film Festival in August where it won the top prize, The Golden Lion. *Roma* then continued to dominate the awards season and eventually won three out of ten nominations at the 91st Academy Awards, including the award for Best

Director. The images of a recreated 1970s Mexico generated a response from many viewers, garnering universal acclaim particularly for its cinematography and Cuarón's direction, for which it immediately stands out (Mora).

Cuarón takes on the role of director, producer, editor, screenwriter and cinematographer for *Roma*. He shot the film in black and white, and in chronological order; thus, the actors gradually discovered their own circumstances; and were unaware of what was to come next, as Kristopher Tapley revealed in an interview with the director for *Variety*. Cuarón also worked extensively with production designer Eugenio Caballero to recreate the 1970s décor accurately (Ledesma 2). For Cuarón, there were three elemental aspects to his filmmaking process that he refused to question: the film would be shot in black and white, it would be centered on his childhood nanny Liboria Rodríguez, and it would be taken from his own memories (Tapley). The use of black-and-white photography has been widely discussed, with various critics including Owen Gleiberman for *Variety*, stating that while impressive and a work of art, it's somewhat cold and too distant. In her article, "*Roma*: Feminism and Intimate/Emotional Labor", Olivia Cosentino writes, "Cuarón's use of black and white is a nod towards colorism and pigmentocracy." The photography provides an evocative aura from the very beginning with its deep focus and long takes that allow Cuarón to create a fully detailed and immersive environment (Ledesma 2).

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Cuarón mentions that he was meticulous about recreating the atmosphere of the time: he attempted to represent it faithfully by including everything he remembered of his childhood, going to great lengths

to immerse viewers cinematically in that world (Ordonez). Cuarón's intention in including these details is to "leave no doubt of the social, political and geographical moment in which the story unfolds" (Román 186). References to societal and political issues of the time period, while not directly the focus, are subtly included in the narrative. *Roma* captures "the political turmoil of Mexico that swirled around Cuarón as a boy, forming a near-constant, if largely unexplained, backdrop," explains Scott Johnson for the *Hollywood Reporter*. The 1971 Corpus Christi Massacre, in which a crowd of protesting students were attacked by a group of government-trained paramilitaries; campaign posters for the Centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI); and glimpses of how others throughout the city lived in comparison with the middle-and-upper classes were all featured in the film to provide glimpses of Mexican society at the cusp of great social change in the early 1970s (Bruni 1). In that regard, Cuarón returns to his homeland of Mexico to make a semi-autobiographical, very detailed film that draws inspiration from the life of Liboria Rodríguez, the Mixtec housekeeper who helped raise him. The film finishes with a dedication to her: "For Libo." According to Cuarón, *Roma* is her story (Žižek).

The film takes viewers to the 1970s Colonia Roma neighborhood of Mexico City (from which the film takes its name) and centers on Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), an indigenous domestic worker; it explores her loving yet complicated relationship with the middle-class family that employs her. The household consists of Sofia (Marina de Tavira), her husband Antonio, their four young children, Sofia's mother Teresa, and another indigenous maid, Adela. Cleo is clearly one of the family, kneeling down to

watch television with the family as one of the children puts an arm around her. Within several seconds, however, she is instructed to make some tea for the man of the family and the spell is broken: she is still a servant. The film explores other aspects of Cleo's life, such as her romance and unexpected pregnancy with Fermín (Jorge Antonio Guerrero). Early in the film Cleo is abandoned by her boyfriend as soon as she reveals to him that she is pregnant, and Sofia is abandoned as well (her husband leaves the family to be with a younger mistress). As the film progresses, viewers become aware that both these women are suffering, and the film will track how each respond to this turn (Mora). However, there is a clear difference between the ways each woman responds to her respective situation. Cleo and Sofia both experience abandonment by a man, yet the gaps between the darker-skinned indigenous servant and her phenotypically European patron who is better off financially, reveal plenty of dilemmas (Ledesma 2). The film's turning point occurs when Cleo delivers a still-born girl shortly after going into labor after being threatened at gunpoint by her ex-lover, Fermín. In an attempt to help Cleo cope with the loss of the baby, Sofia takes her and the children away on holiday to the beach (though as various critics have pointed out, in reality, they still want to use her there as a servant). Sofia later reveals that the father is removing his possessions from the house while they are out, ending any hope that he may come back to the family. During the trip Cleo saves two of the children from drowning, even though she herself does not know how to swim. Sofia and the children affirm their love for Cleo, embracing her in acknowledgment that she chose to risk her life for them. During the embrace, Cleo confesses that she did not want her baby. A moment of solidarity ensues between the two women, yet as Žižek

states, it's a "false solidarity" because as soon as the family returns to their house, Cleo resumes her regular duties as well. The final scene of the movie follows Cleo as she heads upstairs to prepare a load of laundry.

Female Emancipation at the Expense of the "Other"

Dilemmas arise from the differences between the two women. Sofia and Cleo experience similar problems, yet are very different in the way they can express their feelings and reactions to these problems. There is a nod in *Roma*, as stated by scholar Natalia Pérez, to the fact that the emancipation of middle-class women relies on the exploitation of women such as Cleo. In other words, Sofia's journey of female emancipation and her ability to support her children after being abandoned by her husband requires Cleo's loss, writes scholar Ignacio Sánchez Prado in his article, "*Roma*: Class Trouble." This nod then turns Cleo into a time-worn stereotype, as various detractors of the film note, focusing on "her submission and silence" (Sánchez Prado). For now, Cuarón presents a path toward middle-class female emancipation and self-awareness via the exploitation of Cleo. The story clearly illustrates the way in which the privileges attained by those who can access modernity rely on the losses and exploitation of the many others who cannot do so (Sánchez Prado).

While *Roma* attempts to present female empowerment through each woman's journey to emancipation and attainability of self-awareness, it does so in the wrong ways. Cuarón presents a film that embodies "first-wave feminism's lack of intersectionality solidarity" (Cosentino). "Intersectionality" is defined as "the complex, cumulative

manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect,” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. As Cosentino states, “privileged women hire (and oppress) other women to complete their domestic ‘duties’ to be able to work outside the home, in essence, preventing cross-class female solidarity.” In *The “Nanny” Question in Feminism*, Joan C. Tronto discusses and analyzes this social phenomenon. It is important to note that Cuarón himself has not stated his intention to make a feminist film involving strong female characters who gain self-awareness against patriarchal oppression; rather, it has been celebrated by various reviewers for being such. Therefore, this analysis addresses critical response to the film.

As stated above, there is a notable lack of intersectional solidarity in *Roma*. This is not to assess the film as good or bad, but rather to challenge those who proclaim it a feminist film despite opposition to that point, such as Devin Gordon who stated so in his article about Cuarón’s feminist filmography for *The Atlantic*. Can *Roma* still be celebrated as a feminist film for its representation of women’s emancipation and indigenous representation when there is a clear social divide present that separates rather than unites them? The exploitation of Cleo for the advancement of Sofia and the lack of intersectional solidarity divides critics.

Intersectional feminism was used to explain how the feminist movement could be more diverse and inclusive. According to an article by journalist Arica L. Coleman for *Time Magazine* on the history of the term, there was a dire need of diversity within feminism, as it was initially based on the cultural and historical experiences of middle and upper-class heterosexual white women. Consequently, issues of race, class,

sexuality and ableism were ignored (Coleman). Therefore, feminist scholar-activists, a number of whom were also LGBTQ and women of color, developed theoretical frameworks to serve as a model for other women of color, to broaden feminism's definition and scope (Coleman). "Intersectionality" or intersectional feminism was first used by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to "develop a black feminist criticism because it sets forth a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw 139). While feminism exists to further the fight for equality, some scholars such as Crenshaw realized that the focus of feminism was on the most privileged group members, marginalizing those who were not part of that group (140). Intersectionality exists to bring into the conversation those who were overlooked by first-wave feminism. Crenshaw directed her study towards African American women, but since then the term has been expanded to apply to other oppressed groups, among them the LGTBQ community. In *Roma*, intersectionality is notable for its absence, as Sofia will get a chance to further her career and family, while Cleo, categorized as the "other" in this situation, will not. The director does not envision that both women will face the struggle together, in global sisterhood or solidarity. Sofia, the middle-class white female, has certain advantages that do not extend to Cleo, her indigenous maid. This allows viewers to engage with the critical implications of Cuarón's choices in reconsidering 1970s Mexican society. The film does not encourage viewers to acknowledge the roots of problems that persist in today's Mexico.

As Tronto states in *The “Nanny” Question in Feminism*, when the wealthier members of society use domestic servants to meet their child care needs, the result is unjust for individuals and for society as a whole because it undercuts basic feminist notions of justice (35). These notions of justice challenge various forms of exclusion such as sexism, racism and classism. Sofia’s character should not be labeled a feminist. We may expect Sofia to empathize with Cleo as she is going through similar abandonment by her husband, but she has the resources to resume her life and career. The clear differences between Cleo and her employer divide more than unite them. Cuarón tells the story of Cleo and her life and, in doing so, also shows the many injustices that arise from it. Cuarón explains that “in many ways, her journey amplifies a lot of the complexities of Mexico as a society” (Ordoná). He further adds:

On one hand, there’s the perverse relationship between social class and ethnic background. In Mexico, the whiter you are, the better the possibilities — socially and economically — you’re going to be more privileged. You go down to the indigenous communities, and they live in very tough conditions and are oppressed. On top of that, she’s a woman; that adds another vulnerability in the social hierarchy. (Ordoná)

Roma’s celebration as a feminist film poses a moral problem when characters like Cleo cannot afford “luxuries” such as self-actualization and independence that the middle-class women can, thus creating a wedge caused by injustice. If Cleo were actually “part of the family,” then it would be no surprise that many scholars including Tronto do not identify domestic help as employment (37). Michael Walzer writes: “The principles that rule in the household are those of kinship and love. They establish the underlying pattern of

mutuality and obligation, or authority and obedience. The servants have no proper place in that pattern, but they have to be assimilated to it” (52). Oftentimes, the domestic servant is conceived as a substitute for the wife, conforming to work that is only partly real “work” (Tronto 37). Domestic servants are expected to become attached to the family they work for, but being “part of the family” is not necessarily the end goal. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo observes that “employers are shocked to learn that some childcare workers were only working for the money” (120). It is automatically expected in the line of childcare/domestic work for the employees to become attached to the family, even so far as risking their life for them as witnessed in *Roma*. According to Tronto, the workers themselves state that the most degrading aspect of their work is that they are not accorded sufficient respect and dignity (38). Žižek states that Cleo is simply caught in the trap that enslaves her. Cleo is perhaps too caught in the trap to be aware of the form of exploitation imposed upon her. Throughout the film, the audience views scenes where Cleo is more than ready to serve the family through any means possible. For example, her being able to watch television with the family displays that she is indeed part of the family; however, seconds later she is asked to get up for a task. Regardless of the role she displays through this scene; her main role is that of domestic help. That being said, Diemut Bubeck has observed that care workers are especially vulnerable to a particular form of exploitation in which “those who perform it incur a material net burden whilst at the same time freeing the others to pursue materially more beneficial types of activities by way of exploitation of care workers (181, 182).

The low levels of pay, the working conditions, and the high level of arbitrariness that employers can exercise make domestic servants highly vulnerable to some form of abuse (Tronto 39). The power the employer has to change the conditions of employment, to act erratically, and to insult and degrade workers is very high (Tronto 39). For example, this is reflected in a scene when Sofia discovers her son spying on her as she converses on the phone about her marriage and her husband's mistress. Sofia reacts with anger towards her son and slaps him in the face. She regrets it immediately afterwards and proceeds to upbraid Cleo for not preventing the situation. In Sofia's mind, the situation could have been avoided if only Cleo had stepped in and stopped him from eavesdropping on the phone conversation. Tronto further explains that being a member of the family can be an imposition, one that often proves to be abusive as demonstrated by the previous example (47).

What does this convey in relation to *Roma*? The purpose of this section has been to identify how the middle-class women in the film who employ domestic workers to care for their children proceed to exploit and abuse them in ways that are patriarchal and unjust. There are other upper and middle-class families portrayed in the film when they come together to celebrate the holidays, bringing their indigenous maids as well. The treatment of their domestic servants is similar to how Sofia treats Cleo, particularly in a scene when the families begin to dance and the maids must tend to the younger children, unable to participate in the festivities. Once again, being “a part of the family” is not reflected because if it were, then Cleo along with the other maids would not be continuously shown working, especially during the holidays. The lack of intersectionality

is noticeable in this film. Not only do the indigenous maids experience exploitation and abuse, given the nature of their low-paid employment, but their (female) employers will benefit in many aspects from having a domestic worker present. This stance changes the way in which critics have come to identify *Roma* as a feminist film.

To conclude, there is no doubt that upper middle-class working women (like Sofia) benefit greatly from hiring other women to work as underpaid, exploited, domestic servants (Tronto 46). In other words, “one woman is exercising class and citizenship privilege to buy her way out of sex oppression,” as bluntly stated by Audrey Macklin (34). To put it another way, the use of Cleo as a domestic worker allows Sofia to benefit from feminist changes and ideals, when she has to work because of her marital predicament, without having to surrender her privilege (Tronto 47). There is a lack of intersectionality present and Sofia expresses this thought when she tells Cleo: “We are alone. No matter what they tell you, we women are always alone.” Sofia does not see herself in a position similar to Cleo’s even though there are similarities between them that could lead to a relationship or friendship that goes beyond an employee/employer relationship. This does not happen and “global sisterhood” does not exist here as much as viewers would want it to as a way to signify solidarity with one another. The actress who portrays Sofia, Marina de Tavira, has stated that she can’t define Sofia and Cleo’s relationship either. In an interview with *Bustle*’s Lia Beck, De Tavira explains:

It's an employer/employee relationship. But it's also family. But you also depend on her. But you also pay her. But she knows every single detail of your life, because she's a witness of your private life, and she's *in* your private life. But at the same time, she's not. We don't have a word for that, but I can tell you that these two women live their whole lives together.

They may live their whole lives together with Cleo feeling like a member of the family, but she will never officially occupy the space of anything other than a domestic servant in the family, regardless of how many times the children tell her, “*Te quiero.*”

Stereotyping to Portray the “Other”

In its final moments, the film hints that not only Sofia has attained emancipation and self-awareness, but that Cleo also will (Žižek). Furthermore, Žižek explains that Cleo may be becoming aware that her selfless dedication to the family is the very form of her servitude. Her selfless dedication is a trope oftentimes seen in films that represent and dramatize domestic workers. As in Cleo’s case, they are often portrayed in a “pathetic role of a faithful servant ready to sacrifice herself” (Žižek). In this section, the stereotypes associated with indigenous and domestic workers within the Hispanic context will be discussed to further affirm the stance that Cuarón, while representing indigenous and domestic workers, employs inaccurate characteristics by reducing his characters to stereotypes and stereotypical tropes.

Before mentioning possible stereotypical characterizations as they appear in *Roma*, it is important to define the term to gain a more precise understanding of what stereotypes are. One of the earliest definitions of the term comes from Walter Lippman,

who described stereotypes as “pictures in our heads” (4). According to Charles Ramírez Berg in *Latino Images in Film*, “a single and unified concept of stereotype cannot be found” (13). Berg explains that “there is much to be gained by reviewing the different types of ideas from researchers and [...] examining the many perspectives presents an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the process of stereotyping” (13). However, in additional publications such as his article “Stereotyping in Films in General and of the Hispanic in Particular,” Berg defines the term: “Stereotyping is a psychological mechanism, having to do with the creation of categories, which allows people to manage the swirl of data presented to them from the environment” (287). Stereotypes as the creation of categories comes with negative generalizing of those categories, and frequently, stereotyping is the act of making judgements and assigning negative qualities to other individuals or groups (Berg, *Latino Images in Film* 14). Cuarón has applied generalizations about the indigenous community through his stereotypical characterization of Cleo by assigning her qualities that are typically perceived as negative.

Seemingly, *Roma* is presented as a story about an indigenous maid and her life. In an interview with Cuarón about the inspiration for *Roma*, he explains that Liboria Rodríguez would talk to him about her hardships as a girl, about feeling cold or hungry (Tapley). When watching *Roma*, however, that side of Cleo is not explored. The audience waits to see a moment of Cleo’s life outside of her employer’s family (Brody). In an article about the film in *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody says: “Cleo remains a cipher; her interests and experiences of her inner life remain inaccessible to Cuarón. He not only

fails to imagine who the character of Cleo is but fails to include the specifics of who Libo was for him when he was a child.” At the end of the film, the audience still does not know much about Cleo that they did not already know from the beginning thus challenging the interpretation that the film is solely about her. In the process, Cuarón has reduced Cleo to a stereotype by not giving her a space, a voice, where she can express and explore her hardships other than in a few words or glares. Cleo can be seen interacting with Adela, usually in their native Mixtec, but it gets rejected quickly by the children who scold her to “stop speaking like that.” If Cleo is seen as a representation of the Mexican working class, a stereotypically silent maid without agency, then should this film be celebrated for breaking barriers? The children have quickly become accustomed to their place in society compared to that of Cleo’s place, as her background and ethnicity add to her gender oppression. There is no redemption that allows Cleo to break free of stereotypical tropes. Instead she is another domestic worker, characterized like most domestic workers are in typical Hollywood films that portray Hispanic workers. While Roma is not a Hollywood production, the stereotypes from the film fall into place with what Emily M. Pressler has coined as the five popular Hispanic stereotypes that tend to reappear in contemporary Hollywood film (12):

1. The Criminal
2. The Sexpot
3. The Clown
4. The Servant
5. The Immigrant

The analysis of stereotypes in *Roma* will focus on “the servant,” which most closely conforms to the role of Cleo. It is important to note that Pressler’s analysis is based on U.S. films with Hispanic characters, while *Roma* is a foreign film, although the information provided from Pressler’s work can still apply. Pressler describes the servant as primarily a woman in her role of serving others; however, some men can exemplify this role as well (17). The servant is an image of a working-class woman who is trying to provide for her children, most often by becoming a domestic servant for the rich, who are often white (Pressler 17). These characters serve others in a way that promotes an inequality between them and their employers and a difference in treatment (Pressler 18). We can relate this to the earlier discussion about the success of the employer at the expense of the employee. The employee will not dare speak out about the inequality or abuse he/she faces. The servant is typically silent and submissive; since Cleo displays those characteristics, critics such as Richard Brody argue that it reduces Cleo to the stereotypical domestic server role. Brody further elaborates that Cuarón’s worthwhile intentions and evident passions towards Cleo’s characterization are reduced to vain gestures. Brody is not wrong in his claims about Cleo’s characterization. She falls victim to being stereotyped because in reducing her to be a silent and compliant domestic servant, he is immediately placing her in *The Servant* category from Pressler’s five stereotypes. It is significant to remember that not only is Cleo a domestic servant, but she is an indigenous domestic servant as well. This brings into play even more stereotypes that are categorized because of their indigeneity.

An article by Dorany Pineda for the *Los Angeles Times* highlighting parodies of indigenous people in television and cinema, reveals negative or limiting stereotypes of such characters: rural, naive, noble, uneducated, simple-minded and ill-equipped for city life, sometimes mischievous, but often susceptible to the trickery of others. This immediately applies to Cleo as she is characterized as being too naive about her situation and simple-minded. She is often treated like a child by her employers, who speak to her in infantilizing ways. Sofia berates Cleo in a tone very reminiscent of when a child does not complete a task that a parent has demanded of them such as when she notices that the gated parking area has not been cleaned: “Goddamnit! I’ve told you to clean up the dog waste.” Additionally, Sofia’s and her mother’s attitude toward Cleo is also very paternalistic. Cleo is interrogated by Sofia after she reveals her pregnancy, is immediately taken to the family doctor, and is told when and where to buy a crib, as though she is incapable of taking care of herself during her pregnancy. Furthermore, in her review of the film, Dr. Gabriela Spears-Rico remarks that “indigenous women and Black women in media were typically uneducated, ignorant, poor service workers who would often be physically or verbally abused by the light-skinned mestiza/o.” Cuarón presents Cleo as naive and excessively noble, even angelic. *Roma* celebrates Cleo’s simple goodness and selfless dedication to the family (Žižek). Richard Brody adds that Cuarón:

Turns the character of Cleo into a stereotype that’s all too common in movies made by upper-middle-class and intellectual filmmakers about working people: a strong, silent, long-enduring, and all-tolerating type, deprived of discourse, a silent angel whose inability or unwillingness to express herself is held up as a mark of her stoic virtue.

Cleo is a domestic worker; as such, she sweeps, prepares and serves food, washes dishes, and does laundry because that is her occupation. However, portraying her as angelic and saint-like is problematic and continues to perpetuate the stereotype of the indigenous domestic worker. There is a missed opportunity to give Cleo the platform to express what she feels in a film that is purportedly about her. In an interview Cuarón gave to *Variety* about the inspiration for the film, he mentions that Libo endured hardships, but also told stories about her father and the local witch doctors from her villages. Important tidbits such as those revealed in the *Variety* article are lost, forgotten, or ignored in the film. This prompts Brody to declare that “there’s a voice missing in *Roma*,” that of Cleo herself, which causes her portrayal to be a bland and blank trope that does not differentiate her from any other portrayal of “the servant” on film (3).

The Voice in *Roma*

Detractors of Cuarón’s portrayal of Cleo in *Roma* question the film’s voice. In her analysis of *Roma*, Maisy Menzies interprets the film not as an indigenous woman’s story, but as Cuarón’s. She elaborates:

Roma is surely a representation of someone’s story; it’s simply not Cleo’s or Libo’s. It’s Cuarón’s. And that is OK. The film should be recognized for telling his largely autobiographical story in a beautiful way. But the problem is that the film seems to be parading itself as a milestone representation of the working-class Mexican woman. We simply cannot regard this film as such when Cuarón’s lens subjects Cleo’s story to so many narrative limitations.

Cuarón's attempt at telling Libo's story through Cleo falls flat and remains stereotypical because it is told from the perspective of a "white" Mexican man who has never endured her hardships. These narrative limitations are what ultimately reduce Cleo to a stereotype as the servant role. She is deprived of her voice and her character insufficiently challenges stereotypes because she is painted as a silent faithful servant with no room for expression or growth. We see Cleo breakdown at the revelation that she did not want her baby, but there's no "breaking the chains" from the family although it is possible to think that her heroic act and admission of guilt came from her own motivations. However, Cleo returns and continues to be a faithful servant. According to Sánchez Prado, her heroics are in turn erased. Žižek alludes to the possibility that she may be ready to break that hold, as in a scene towards the end of the film, she tells Adela, "I have much to tell you." This could mean that Cleo is finally getting ready to step out of the trap of her "goodness" (Žižek).

Cleo fails to become present her full personality and identity, adhering to the norms and social roles imposed on her and others in the indigenous communities by society. She is never given a voice or a chance to be heard. The only voice heard according to critics is Cuarón's, but then that changes the dynamic of the film.

Conclusion

Cuarón's *Roma* purports to tell the story of Cleo based on Libo's life. However, it becomes more apparent that this is Cuarón's story from his memories of his childhood

with his nanny. In consequence, he makes his characters neutral and generic, reducing Cleo to stereotypes (Brody 9). In his review of the film for *The New Yorker*, Brody adds, “for all its worthy intentions, *Roma* is little more than the righteous affirmations of good intentions” (9). Thus, the film results in what scholar Joseph M. Pierce has called “an upper-class *mea culpa*” as stated in his article “*Roma* is a Beautiful Film of Indigenous Erasure.”

The main objective of this study is not to provide solutions to the issues raised, but to bring up key issues that arise from this film, such as the representation of the indigenous and domestic worker who is reduced to stereotypes, and the journey of emancipation and self-awareness of the middle-class woman who is able to thrive at the expense of the indigenous domestic worker. Hispanic/Latino audiences, specifically Mexican audiences, have put their hopes of representation into this movie, as Maisy Menzies states. *Roma* is a film that has the potential to highlight the indigenous experience, but there are faults with the portrayal. While this is an impressive achievement for representation and Mexican cinema, perhaps more films about Mexican and Hispanic women’s stories can be told that do not rely on stereotypical tropes and exploitation.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Life is like foam, so give yourself away like the sea.

From *Y tu mamá también*

This thesis has sought to interpret the representation of the female characters in Alfonso Cuarón's films *Y tu mamá también* and *Roma* and the importance of how Cuarón chooses to represent Hispanic female characters as they begin a journey towards self-actualization and emancipation. He directs and writes stories about women's private and internal lives. He presents their reactions to situations that affect them whether it's to run away from it all and keep it to herself like Luisa or continue down a path of exploitation and oppression like Cleo, but it is necessary to analyze how Cuarón chooses to present this in his film.

While his focus on women in his films is not an automatic indicator that they are all feminist masterpieces, it is important to challenge why they are not (Beck). This thesis was not to identify whether *Y tu mamá también* and *Roma* are feminist films, but rather to critique the problematic portrayal of his female figures. A focus on women does not automatically mean they are feminist, but it is important to question why they are not and how it can be improved.

Films like *Y tu mamá también* and *Roma* are important stories to be told, not only for cinematic discussions, also for the complex characters and themes presented that initiate discussions based on them. In this case, I was interested in examining two female characters from Cuarón's Spanish-language films, Cleo Gutiérrez, and Luisa Cortés. In doing so, I offered an interpretation through various lenses as we follow their journey toward emancipation and development of an identity and space of their own. Therefore, this work considered various implications that complicate the space of a Spanish woman and an indigenous domestic worker, as stereotypical gender roles, differing social classes and the space that surrounds them keep their voice from being heard. Based on this work, it can be seen how a woman's identity and social role is restricted by several complications that arise and that men often tend not to face. In this case, as seen through film, unfortunately it is true for many women who encounter the challenges that Luisa, Cleo, or Sofia have faced.

In many countries across the world, protests and demonstrations have taken place recently in demand for social change. This thesis reflects the current societal climate as it further highlights and demonstrates instances of marginalization and oppression. Though *Y tu mamá también* and *Roma* are set in the past, the 1970s and the 1990s respectively, those same challenges are very much still present today. For example, in the Academy Awards speech for his Best Director win, Cuarón brought attention to the treatment of domestic workers around the world. Furthermore, women continue to be enclosed in domestic spaces, unable to be liberated toward emancipation from that hold.

Future studies should investigate Cuarón's other filmography and female characters. His films tend to have women at the center and several of those films have characters also on a quest, while having complex societal and political implications in the background. Films such as *Gravity* and *Children of Men* situate the female characters in vulnerable positions with heightened political tensions in the background. Perhaps a study can be accomplished comparing those characters to that of Cleo and Luisa and how the situation differs when representing another country that is not Mexico and how Cuarón chooses to present them.

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