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## **"EMPLEADAS" IN THE U.S.A.: LATINA DOMESTIC WORKERS NEGOTIATING POWER AMONG BOUNDARIES OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER**

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Some contemporary Latina writers are currently addressing working-class Latinas's life as a privileged site for the study of power relations among people of different racial, ethnic, cultural and class backgrounds. Their works present themes which are currently becoming more important in contemporary American society. The situation of millions of Latina immigrants and women of Latin origin requires an analysis that can reveal how the dynamics of race, class and gender function and establish power relations which inevitably justify their present status as 'second class' citizens.

Most working-class Latinas find themselves in low-paid jobs mainly because of their race, their working-class origin, their lack of education and in many occasions because of their illegal immigrant status in the United States. Although domestic work is progressively losing importance in the range of available jobs for women, together with menial factory jobs and farm work, it is still a segregated occupation where women of color predominate. The causes which lead to this situation can vary to a great extent among different groups of Latinas. We have to take into account their national origin, the time of residence in the United States, their status as legal/illegal immigrants, their level of education, their skin color, their proficiency in English and even their family relationship.

Without ignoring the circumstances of other Latinas, in my study I will concentrate on two main groups, namely Chicanas and Puertorriqueñas, because of their longer history and more established literary tradition in the United States. Apart from gathering facts and data from sociological and anthropological studies, I think it is important to take in consideration how the experience of Latinas and more specifically the experience of Latina domestics and housekeepers is present in contemporary Latina works. Therefore, I will also gather information from two literary contemporary works, Esmeralda Santiago's *América's Dream* and Barbara

Mújica's "La despedida". Although there are more women writers addressing the lives of working class Latinas and how they survive in American society (Helena María Viramontes, Denise Chávez, Nicholasa Mohr, Judith Ortiz Cofer among others), I will deal with the already mentioned works because power relations in domestic work is a predominant theme, more thoroughly explored.

Latina women have been traditionally associated with domestic work and with the negative images and stereotypes which automatically confine them to these kinds of jobs. Contemporary Latina writers are clearly addressing this topic in an attempt to fight against these stereotypes which not only constraint Latina's achievement in American society but they also spread the belief that all Latinas are low-class, uneducated and non-proficient in English.

This is a commonly held belief as we can see in the following instances taken from real experiences. Mary Romero tells us how in June of 1995, a judge decided in favor of a father's "right" to prohibit the mother of his daughter from speaking Spanish to the child: "The judge claimed that teaching the child to speak Spanish would condemn her to a future of servitude as a maid: 'What are you trying to do? Make her a maid for the rest of her life?'" (1997: 3). Similar opinions about the handicap of speaking Spanish in order to succeed in the American labor force are still deeply ingrained in American society. Race and ethnicity are undeniably connected to 'second status' and difficulties to promote in the social scale. Another interesting example of traditional stereotypes among Americans is what happened to the Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer the day of her first public poetry reading in a boat-restaurant: "An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress" (Ortiz Cofer 1993: 153).

The interrelation between culture and ethnicity and an individual's opportunities in the United States cannot therefore be ignored. American labor market is still segmented along lines of gender and race and the Latino/a migrants who come to the United States are faced with this from the very beginning. At this point, we need to specify the reasons and causes which may have provoked the appearance of this cultural determinism, its development in time and the consequences it has brought about to Latina women. The percentage of hispanics in blue collar and white collar occupations respectively is: 70/29 (Mexicans), 63/36 (Puerto Ricans), 55/44 (Cubans). The situation of Latinas in the labor force is obviously slightly different from that of Latinos. The work of Latinas is more closely associated with lower income, higher unemployment rates and menial unskilled jobs as a consequence of the transformations undergone by American society and subsequent economic marginalization of women. The percentage of Latina women over 16 in the labor force in 1989 was 52.7 (Mexican), 41.7 (Puerto Rican), 49.1 (Cuban), 61.7 (Central and South American) (Chavira Prado 245). These figures are significantly low if compared with those of males: 82.2 (M), 69.6 (PR), 76.3 (C) (Arvizu 286). The statistic data can be of great help for our study of Latina situation

in the lower level of the labor market since it clearly reflects the differences between the main groups of Latinas that we will proceed to approach, together with their historical development as a marginal labor force and the influence of their origin in their subsequent achievements.

Women of Mexican origin have the longest history in the United States and their employment rate has undergone several important changes mainly in this century. First of all, we have to distinguish among Mexican born and U.S. born Latinas. This is fundamental since U.S. born Chicanas have better jobs due to their long residence in the United States. Mexican born chicanas (Mexicanas), however, have less opportunities to find a job outside agricultural and service work. The reasons for this are varied and they allude to different experiences. First of all, a great number of Mexicanas come to the United States as illegal immigrants and this situation favors the exploitation and low wages they may receive from their employers in agricultural work or in domestic service. Yet, Chicanas have more resources as U.S. citizens. Even when both Chicanas and Mexicanas may be working in low-paying jobs, Chicanas are more occupationally mobile mainly due to their degree of adjustability to the employer's dominant culture in terms of language proficiency, education, values and experience in the country. The concentration of the Mexican-origin population in the southwest can also explain the higher participation rate in agricultural work with 4.0 percent, compared to 2.0 percent for Puerto Ricans and 0.2 percent for all other Latinas (Chavira-Prado 245).

The situation and history of Puerto Rican women is also different from that of Mexicanas and Chicanas. Since the early decades of this century more than two millions of Puerto Ricans have migrated to the United States with an early concentration in the north-eastern states and urban areas (mainly New York). The great migration from the 1950s was mainly the result of the great economic development factories and most especially garment factories with a predominant Puerto Rican female labor force. Their status as U.S. citizens favoured the creation of unions and increases in wages but after the crisis of the sector in the 1970s, the participation rate of female Puerto Ricans decreased considerably. As a consequence, the social and economic status of the Puerto Rican woman has not improved at the same speed as that of Puerto Rican males but they have been relegated to low-paid jobs.

The case of Cuban women is especially different from that of Chicanas and Puerto Rican women. Cuban population has the lowest poverty rate among Latinos (16.6%) in contrast to Puerto Rican population which has the highest (30.8%) immediately followed by Mexicans (24.9) (Rodríguez 1997: 109). The creation of a Cuban economic enclave from the early stages of Cuban immigration to the south east (Florida), has facilitated the improvement of Cuban women in labor force participation. It is necessary to notice that most Cuban immigrants were of middle and upper-class background (especially in the case of first immigrants who escaped from the communist system in Cuba). This generation of immigrants have been ruling the economic enclave facilitating the access to the labor market of newly

arrived immigrants from Cuba. The Cuban population have the lowest participation rate in service works and farm work and Cuban women's earnings is clearly higher even when the percentage of women in the labor force is lower than that of Mexicanas. Median income among Cuban women in 1990 is \$12,904, the highest among Latinas: \$9,286 (Mexican), \$11,702 (Puerto Rican), \$9,936 (Central and South American) (Falcón 1994: 65).

We cannot forget the importance of the newest immigrants of Latin origin, namely those from Central and South America. This group of Latinos has grown so fast in the last decades that in 1989 it amounted to 12.7 % (2,544,000) of Latin population in the U.S., higher than Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the Mainland (Rodríguez 1997: 108). Central and South American immigrant can be classified in two groups: middle- and upper class political exiled and working class people coming to the United States in search of economic and political stability. Within the second group we find many illegal immigrants undoubtedly relegated to low-paid jobs such as farm work and service work. In the last decades, Latina immigrants of central American origin are progressively substituting Mexicanas and Chicanas in these kinds of jobs, among them domestic service. Their status as "illegal aliens", their working class origin and their low proficiency in English is affecting their work conditions and their relationship with white employers as we will explore more thoroughly later on.

Among the menial jobs accomplished by Latinas, I have chosen to explore domestic service because it stands out as an occupational site of potential exploitation and where dimensions of race, class and gender are more easily at work. This is especially true for recent immigrants and even more so when these are illegal immigrants. This occupation has traditionally reinforced the direct power relationship between employers and employees. The basis of this relationship is not always one of mere work contract but a personal and closer relationship in which prejudices, attitudes and ideologies are sometimes unambiguously revealed. The employer is obviously empowered by this relationship since her status will always be superior to that of the maid in terms of class and economic background. Although this is what usually happens when both employer and employee are white, the distance which separates both power statuses grows considerably the moment a non-white maid is employed.

Different researchers have attempted to reveal if racial issues are really at the core of matter or it is only a question of class differences. While white employers have consistently used several techniques to establish a clear power relationship (calling their maids by their first names, confining them to one area of the house in the case of live-in maids), women of color suffer additional treatment revealing a patronizing, racial and and sometimes even annihilating attitude. Esmeralda Santiago's *America's Dream* foregrounds this relationship where a Puerto Rican immigrant, América González, comes to the United States to work as a live-in maid in a WASP family. Domestic work is not predominant among Puerto Rican females, but as Douglas T. Gurak comments "nevertheless, there is a clear tendency

for this type of job to be held by recent immigrants" (69), as in the case of América and other domestic workers who appear in the novel.

In the United States, América will have to face poor work conditions and stereotypes about Latinas. American society depicts Latinas as uneducated domestics, pasive, childlike women unable to speak proper English as Judith Ortiz Cofer points out: Many Latin women working at menial jobs must put up with stereotypes about our ethnic group such as: 'They make good domestics.' ... Work as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that's available to women with little English and few skills. The myth of the Hispanic menial has been sustained by the same media phenomenon that made "Mammy" from *Gone with the Wind* America's idea of the black woman for generations; Maria, the housemaid or counter girl is now indelibly etched into the national psyche. The big and little screen have presented us with a picture of the funny Hispanic maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm in a shiny California Kitchen" (*The Latin Deli* 153).

At the beginning, cultural clash makes America feel insecure and sometimes stupid as when her English is corrected by the children, when she doesn't know how to prepare American food, when she doesn't know how to use the many electrical devices at the Leverett's. Surprisingly enough, América is able to cope with the differences successfully, not forgetting her Puerto Rican heritage but instead trying to introduce them in American daily life. For instance, she manages to make the children like Puerto Rican dishes or learn some Spanish words. Though this may seem to be of little importance, América finds a way to reassert her own cultural identity even living among strangers who despise the culture she represents. Little by little she becomes a resourceful and strong woman.

The relationship between América and Mrs. Leverett is a complex but interesting one that can serve as a representative for most Latina domestic workers. Their interactions are based in a power relation which unmistakably favors Mrs. Leverett, whose power rests on a discourse of difference in a social, racial and cultural level. Mrs Leverett's patronizing discourse tries to confirm her superiority in opposition to América's powerless status and inferiority at the same time that she paradoxically tries to create an informal relationship.

Several researchers have explored this complex relationship and most of them agree about the existence of "degradation rituals of deference and maternalism" from the employers (Romero 1994: 74). It is widely acknowledged among researchers that race remains at the center of the occupation. The context in which this relationship takes place could be considered a microcosm, an extension of the hierarchical relationships between women from different class and racial backgrounds in everyday life. Latina domestics have to fight against this pre-established hierarchy and stereotypes in order to gain some dignity and respect as any woman worker. The conflict and lack of solidarity among white women and women of color is easily observed when the exploitation of women of color implies a gaining for white women as Kathryn B. Ward notices:

Choosing to work outside the home was a new idea for White middle-class women, while women of color have been working outside the home for years. In fact, their labor as domestics and childcare providers enabled White middle- and upper-class women to take paid employment outside the home" (Ward 1994: 212).

America also realizes the workings of this conflict in her own life: "we're everywhere and they resent it for it. It's incomprehensible. If it weren't for us, none of these women would be able to work" (Santiago 1996: 228). Latina women are aware of racist attitudes at the core of the relationship with their employers and this is even more obvious for them when they observe a white housekeeper's situation. The white maid is never called 'maid' but 'help'. Even though they belong to a different social class than their employers, they receive better treatment because of their racial privilege as América acknowledges:

the white empleadas are paid more than the Latina and black housekeepers, and they work less [...] The European au pairs and white nannies usually do little or no housework. That's why Frida and Mercedes, Liana and Adela have day jobs cleaning the homes of people who have help. Most of the time the help is white, like the householders, and they look down on the "cleaning lady," who does the work they refuse to do (229).

Exploitation and devaluation of the employee's personal life is a recurrent feature in this relationship. The employers usually tend to control the work process by monitoring the housework, its pace, amount of work and method and Latina employees will try to fight against this. América and Rosa in Barbara Mujica's "La despedida" find themselves within this struggle over control. America soon realizes she deserves as much respect as a woman and time for herself as Mrs. Leverett and other white women have in the United States: "She thinks I have no life other than the one that solves her problems [...] I'm also expected to suspend my life, to be available on my days off to make it easier for her to have her life. As if her life were more important than mine" (285).

Among the strategies available for domestic Latinas to face their employer's exploitation is to define the limits of their work, minimize informal contact with employers and change from live-in to day work (Romero 1994: 75). When América asks Mrs. Leverett for a raise, she tries to set the limits for her work and its pace but she loses her first battle:

"I work hard longer than eight hours every day [...] I need raise."

"You've only worked with us for three months. You get a raise after a year, as we agreed."

"I know but you say I work eight hours. I work more than eight hours." [...]

"I'm sure you can work this out, América. You just need to be more efficient, so you can have the time. I know you can do it, okay?"

"Okéi," América says, not because she agrees but because she's angry and doesn't know what to do with her anger" (256).

America has little time for herself being always at home. She has little contact with people of her class and ethnicity and this clearly favours isolation and depression. Some of the other empleadas America meets already changed from live-in to day work. They refer to themselves as 'empleadas', never as 'maids' to avoid the connotations of servitude and to reinforce the idea of remunerated job as any other.

The situation of the other 'empleadas' can also be of great help to analyze how other factors such as legal status, education and language proficiency function at the basis of the relationship. Like América, these Central American 'empleadas' also feel uncomfortable and humiliated by the racist treatment they receive not only from their employers but from white population in general. In the park, one of the empleadas runs to take a girl who just fell from the swings and her mother runs to take the girl from the woman's arms screaming hysterically':

"Don't touch her" [...] The woman panicked not at her daughter's fall but at the sight of a dark-skinned stranger bending over her [...] They saw the mistrust in the woman's eyes, the resentment, the 'why don't you go back where you came from' look. It's a look that follows the empleadas everywhere they go. In stores clerks hover over them, expecting them to steal whatever they touch. On buses and trains people won't sit next to them, as if sharing a seat were too intimate an association. On the street, people avoid looking at them, as if not seeing them will make them disappear (227).

Racist and superior attitudes toward 'empleadas' are also present in Barbara Mújica's "La despedida" where Rosa is allowed to bring her son to the house she works in. The employers know that it is the only way to get Rosa for less money than other housekeepers, however, they cannot avoid to show their true feelings even towards a 'brown' baby as we can see in this passage. Rosa's son gets a cold and she tells Carolyn: "Al principio ella no dijo nada pero miró a Bertito como si fuera un gusano y entonces miró a su niño y respiró [...] Esa noche me llamó y me dijo que Billy estaba empezando a toser y que por favor no fuera con Bertito el día siguiente" (Mújica 1986: 64). Later on, Carolyn's husband will call Rosa's son "mocososo mugriento y enfermizo" (64).

We find important differences among the group of Latina domestic workers in Santiago's novel. América's status as a U.S. citizen becomes a privilege over the other maids who dream of achieving citizenship in order to improve their social and economic situation. In fact, the other 'empleadas' cannot understand why América is working as a domestic when, as a U.S. citizen she could look for a better job. In Helena Maria Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café" and *Under the Feet of Jesus*, latina/o field workers' lives are dominated by the fear of being found out by the 'migra' and sent back to 'el otro lado'. In *América's Dream*, the empleadas are all longing for 'the American dream' of prosperity but the fulfilment of this dream seems to be restricted to those who become 'American' with all its cultural, racial and class implications.

Undoubtedly, the latina empleadas are not desirable candidates to become American citizens so they have to endure personal and social devaluation

represented by their descent in the occupational scale: "Liana, from El Salvador, was a bank teller. Frida, from Paraguay, was a schoolteacher. Mercedes, from the Dominican Republic was a telephone operator[...] They all have one thing in common. They've entered the United States illegally" (219). While some education should imply better job opportunities for these women, their status as illegal immigrants obliges them to 'survive' in jobs that they consider devaluating: "'But some work is more valued than others,' Adela insists. 'Maybe it's different in this country, but where I come from, a nurse is more important than an empleada [...] We don't have a choice when we come here. We have to take whatever work we can find. But you, an American citizen. And you speak good English...'" (220)

Language proficiency is also crucial for the Latinas who want to find better jobs. Low-skill jobs such as domestic work does not require so much English language proficiency as others would. The empleadas tell America about another 'empleada' who spoke no English at all. All day long she could speak to no-one and she finally tried to kill herself. In Barbara Mújica's short story "Ladespedida", Rosa a cleaning lady who cannot speak English is happy to find an American employer who speaks Spanish and allows her to bring her son to work but who also pays her much less. Rosa cannot ask for more for all those reasons as she tells her husband:

- La Chely gana cuarenta y dos [says her husband]

- La Chely no anda acarreando una guagua mientras trabaja- le dije. -Además, ella habla bastante inglés. Puede trabajar en cualquier casa. La ventaja aquí es que la señora Carolyn sabe castellano... Pero nos entendemos, y eso es lo principal. Otra cosa, Alberto, cuando una está aquí de ilegal, no puede pedir la luna.

- La Chely está aquí de ilegal. Todo el mundo está aquí de ilegal (Mújica 1986: 62).

However, when she has to do work on holidays and weekends and asks her employer for more money, she insults her in English and dismisses Rosa:

- Pedazo de mierda -gritó. - Pedazo de mierda (o algo por el estilo, sólo reconocí la palabra 'shit' y algunas otras barbaridades) [...] Nosotros le pagamos lo que le pagaríamos a una mujer americana que hablara inglés y que pudiera llamar al doctor en una emergencia, que no estuviera aquí de ilegal, que pusiera ocho horas de trabajo... y tú te portas como una mierda con nosotros. Porquería! (67).

Language can be a weapon to use against those who are 'different'. Still nowadays, many Latinos/as in menial jobs are forbidden to speak Spanish among them while they work. Language can be powerful for a group of people who suffer daily denigration and exploitation from those in power. Contrary to WASP belief (or what they want others to believe), Spanish is not a handicap but a link to one's cultural and personal strength. English proficiency is also necessary but learning does not have to mean dismissing the other. Both of them are essential for the Latinos/as who keep on fighting for their rights as a cultural and ethnic community within American society.

Those in the lowest social level are also those who suffer the most racist and patronizing attitudes as we have been able to observe throughout this brief study of work relationship for Latin American domestic workers. Other similar jobs occupied by lower-class Latinas such as factory workers and farm, field workers deserve as much attention, but domestics suffer the additional burden of traditional stereotypes about Latina's servile condition, something difficult to fight against from a powerless position.

The interactions of race, class and gender sometimes draw an unfortunate picture for Latina women. To conclude my commentary on the situation of working class Latinas I think it is important to mention the current unresolved problem of woman-headed Puerto Rican households which progressively increases with no solution at sight. Puerto Rican women not only have the lowest participation rate (in progressively decline) in the labor force but they also have the highest percentage of female headed households 44.0 in contrast to other groups of women: 18.6 (Mexican), 16.0 (Cuban), 21.9 (Central & South American), 37.3 (African-American), 11.1 (white) (Klor de Alva 1988: 119). The situation of these Puerto Rican women is "of great concern because of the high incidence of poverty" (Santana 1980: 79), and the feminization of poverty among Puerto Ricans. Most of the female-headed households with children under 16 can only live on welfare, which encourages marital disruption (only women without a husband can get welfare benefits). These women are uneducated and now are finding more difficult to find low-skilled jobs after the decline of the factory sector (mainly located in the northeast) which involved the loss of a great number of low-skilled jobs (garment factories) previously occupied by Puerto Rican females.

América could be a perfect candidate to become a female head of a family living on welfare but she will fight to fulfil her own dream. For working-class Latinas the 'American Dream' is a dream designed by those who have the tools and power provided by their racial, class and cultural privileges. The negotiation of power takes time, even generations and we still need to hear about strong working-class women fighting to find their way out of powerlessness and marginalization.

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