

Transnational Women Protagonists in Contemporary Cinema:
Migration, Servitude, Motherhood

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Transnational Women Protagonists in Contemporary Cinema: Migration, Servitude,
Motherhood

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This thesis studies the cinematic representation of transnational women workers in contemporary American and European fiction films including *Bread and Roses* (2000), *Dirt* (2003), *Spanglish* (2004), and *Amreeka* (2009). The research considers this representation as it articulates issues in the current state of global migration, immigration laws, and women's reproductive labor. Since the early 2000s, the growing numbers of women from the so-called 'developing' countries have been immigrating, alone or with their children, to 'developed' countries. Most often they are destined for employment in low-wage service jobs. This process, termed as the "feminization of migration" in the United Nations study (2006), has been addressed by filmmakers such as Ken Loach, Gregory Nava, Nancy Savoca and many others who have made films centered on the immigrant women protagonists. I argue that the cinematic impulse to portray the lives of underrepresented women and to appropriate their marginalized point-of-view signals a necessary turn to a transnational subjectivity determined by contemporary global economic and power relations.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Valentina Pavlovna Kim

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the 1983 drama *El Norte*, siblings Rosa and Enrique—indigenous Mayans from Guatemala persecuted during the Guatemalan Civil War—head north and cross the U.S.-Mexican border through a sewer pipe guided by a Mexican “coyote.” In LA, the coyote is paid \$75 for smuggling the young woman and nothing for her brother. Soon Rosa finds employment as a domestic worker, and Enrique becomes a busboy in an affluent restaurant. Nominated for prestigious awards and discussed by critics, the British-American coproduction, *El Norte*, was one of the first western films to show the life of undocumented workers and to employ both male and female immigrant protagonists. Difference in price (\$75/nothing) for undocumented labor signifies a gender shift in migration patterns determined by a growing demand for foreign women’s domestic labor. The narrative, thus, opened the path for films with strong female protagonists involved in service work in developed countries. Dying from typhus, Rosa tells Enrique what Katarzyna Marciniak calls “the exilic logic of impossibility”: “In our own land, we have no home. They want to kill us. ... In Mexico, there is only poverty. We can't make a home there either. And here in the north, we aren't accepted. When will we find a home, Enrique? Maybe when we die, we'll find a home” (*Alienhood* 44). Thus, through conflicting images of the claustrophobic north and Guatemalan spacious landscapes, the film articulates the problematic subjecthood of the transnational exilic characters shaped by denial of cultural acceptance and everyday experience of social abjection both in their homeland and the host country. The gender dynamics of migration portrayed in this film

reflects the large scope of issues of female migration such as crossing the border, employment in domestic service, and difficulties of social integration in the host country.

Adopting a transnational perspective, my thesis explores cinematic representation of women's migration from developing to developed countries. It locates films about working-class female immigrants subjected to servitude within the current state of international migration, exploitation of women's reproductive labor, and current discourses of displacement and national belonging. Transformation of a capitalist system, characterized by global integration of the economy and mass migration, calls into question issues of mobility, immigration, citizenship, and national belonging. While the marginal character of the immigrant female worker is largely erased from politics and history, determined by the framework of "national," cinema was fast to notice and reflect a mass exodus of women from developing to developed countries—a process called a "feminization of migration" by the United Nations. "There has been a change in the international migration patterns of women: More are moving from one country to another on their own, rather than to join their husbands or other family members," acknowledges Nancy V. Yinger, a director of International Programs at the Population Reference Bureau (Yinger). During the last two decades, the new immigrant subject – the woman immigrant worker - has been employed and discussed by European and American filmmakers, such as Stephen Frears, Nancy Savoca, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne constructing the imagery of cultural and physical displacement. A cinematic impulse to show unrepresented female migrants—a Mexican undocumented nanny in *Babel*, a Palestinian fast food restaurant worker in *Amreeka*, and a Russian janitor in *The Illegal*

—and to appropriate their “marginal” point-of-view signals a necessary turn to a new subjectivity determined by the hybrid and hyphenated identities. Telling the life stories of transnational women, cinema challenges the politics of silencing and invisibility that they endure. I call the characters of selected films “transnational” because this term, which literally means “beyond the national,” emphasizes female mobility and problematizes belongingness to one national space. ‘Foreign’ and ‘immigrant’ as the established terms sometimes wrongly connect the cinematic characters to the place they no longer live in and address their new country of residence as something secondary.

I do not regard *transnationality* as a positive or negative characteristic of one’s life or identity. For the transnational women, it is not a position of advantage or disadvantage. My research is far from a celebratory approach towards border transcendence, transnationality, and hybridity of the transnational women protagonists. On the contrary, I find that transnational female characters face the issues of exploitation, social abjection, and devaluation of their labor, as well as an identity crisis. They left their home, but in a host country they are not treated as full human beings. They are perceived only as immigrant women workers: cheap labor force that can clean, cook, and take care of children. They also can be disposed at no cost to their employer and easily be replaced by the new pair of working hands. They have a life in-between: a double life, which cannot be described in terms of national belonging. Many of these issues are unique to female immigration. Consequently, the transnational feminist perspective is necessary in film studies because national belonging, residence status, and citizenship cannot fully define contemporary female immigrant characters.

The films discussed in this thesis show foreign-born women who are employed in service jobs and whose “transnational subjecthood” is shaped by their border-crossing mobility and life in the host country. The corpus of films in consideration comprises the following cinematic narratives: *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, 1983), *Polish Wedding* (Theresa Conelli, 1998), *Bread and Roses* (Ken Loach, 2000), *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002), *Dirt* (Nancy Savoca, 2003), *Spanglish* (James L. Brooks, 2004), *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006), *Lorna’s Silence* (Jean-Luc Dardenne, Pierre Dardenne, 2008), *Amreeka* (Cherien Dabis, 2009), *Entre Nos* (Gloria La Morte, Paola Mendoza, 2009), *Illegal* (Olivier Masset-Depasse, 2010), and the episode *Loin de 16e* (Walter Salles, Daniela Thomas) from the anthology film *Paris, I love you* (2006). In her article “Foreign Women and Toilets,” Marciniak claims that the originality of the film *Dirt* by Nancy Savoca “comes from the fact that the film, with great poise and nuance, pulls the abjected and marginalized characters out of the peripheries where they are typically placed and makes their lives the central focus of the diegesis” (“Foreign Women and Toilets” 350). This agenda of demarginalization of the foreign female abject defines the selected films and shapes the contours of my research.

Feminization of migration provoked research on women’s immigration as a specific economic and social phenomenon. According to the UN, in 2013 women comprised 48 % of international migrants, which means that about 111 million women worldwide live and work abroad (*United Nations. International Migration Report 2013* 7). A growing percentage of female immigrant labor constitute a significant part of the work force in developed countries. By 2012, in the United States female immigrants

outnumbered their male counterparts, accounting for roughly 51.7 percent of the total foreign-born population: 100 women arrive to the U.S. for every 96 men (“Statement of Principles on Women and Immigration Reform” 1). In 2004, the UN-INSTRAW (The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) initiated research to explore how gender aspects impact immigration and global development. In the 2008 paper *Women and Borders*, the UN-INSTRAW transformed their initial approach towards migration, which was focused primarily on the analysis of receiving, sending, and using remittances. The new research covers a vast number of topics such as remittances, employment, global care, migratory policies, and transnational families. In general, the paper adopts a “transnational” rather than “foreign” approach, by which I mean that the UN recognizes female immigrants as new *subjects* of migration rather than “remittance senders.” Additionally, the shift from foreign and immigrant to transnational emphasizes women’s mobility rather than foreignness and alienhood.

A typical rhetoric of immigration approaches the host country as a global developed “center” where immigrants come from world “peripheries.” Since more than twenty million immigrant women and girls who came “from every *corner* of the *globe*” live in the U.S., this absurd rhetoric of center and periphery has already reached its limits (“Immigrant Women in the United States: A Portrait of Demographic Diversity,” my emphasis). Portraying immigrant female subjecthood, contemporary cinema challenges the old world political map with “corners” and national borders drawn on the globe.

This research focuses on representations of immigrant women protagonists because during the last two decades, immigrant women became a social group that

challenged and transformed immigration policies, anti-immigration ideology, and the work of human rights organizations. Because the narrative of female immigration has been radically different from the male tale, a gendered perspective is required to examine globalized gender identities.

1.1 Theoretical Background

The connection between race, gender, and class is not a new topic to discuss. A vast variety of literature is available on the issues of immigration of foreign women and foreign women's rights abuse. On the other hand, the growing field of transnational studies made a strong case for conceptualizing foreign women's identities and mobility. However, the intersection of identity politics and labor theories is still a rare case in film studies. This research of transnational women workers in cinema aims to bring in touch two developing fields: transnational studies and feminist critiques of reproductive labor. Next, I will discuss the main concepts that influenced my research of transnational women in cinema.

My research of transnational female workers is grounded in a transnational feminist critique of nationalist discourse and is inspired by works of transnational feminist scholars Dina Iordanova, Katarzyna Marciniak, Ella Shohat, Sarah Ahmed, Trinh Minh-ha, and Gayatri Spivak who introduced the issues of gender and class oppression to the discourse of cross-cultural transformations. As a result of the growing difficulty to locate film narrative within the scope of "national cinema," film studies has to shift from "conceptions of cinema and cinema history grounded in ideas of fixed, stable national identity to recognition and deployment of a new paradigm" (Ezra and

Rowden 13). In *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry

Rowden claim:

This paradigm is one that recognizes the heuristic (and affective) force of the concept of “national cinema”, while emphasizing the complex constructions of identity, citizenship, and ethics both represented on screen and created in the film industry’s transnational networks of production, distribution and reception. (Ezra and Rowden 13)

While from the early 1990s, transnational feminists “have vigorously argued for the critical need to move beyond the confining frame of a single nation, they also introduced different ways of understanding transnational, feminist positionalities and practices” (*Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* 10). Thus, by exploring immigrant women’s subjecthood in cinema, I aim to contribute to the discourse of transnational feminism and transnational cinema.

Transnational feminists work within a framework of a globalized culture that examines production and reproduction of gender in relation to and beyond the “national.” Across disciplinary borders, transnational feminism explores women’s lives across the borders of nation-states. In the introduction to the book *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, the series editor Channdra Talpade Mohanty gives a historical and economic background of transnational feminism:

The project of U.S. Empire building, alongside the dominance of the corporate capitalism kills, disenfranchises, and impoverishes women everywhere, and leads to various kinds of border crossing. Militarization, environmental degradation,

heterosexist State practices, religious fundamentalisms, and the exploitation of women's labor by capital all pose profound challenges for feminists at this time.

(Transnational Feminism in Film and Media ix)

Mohanty maintains that failure of postcolonial capitalist and communist countries to address the people's political, economic, and cultural needs led to the reorganization of the world economy.

Contemporary film studies suggest a number of new categories of cinema analysis such as accented cinema, exilic cinema, cinema of borders, and finally, transnational cinema which focus primarily on the aspects of distorted space, hybrid identities, difference, displacement, exile, immigration, and language. A theory of "transnational" works on multiple scales: local, regional, national, continental, international, and, finally, transnational. Born on the intersection of reproductive labor theories and transnational studies, this thesis will problematize cinematic images of foreign women workers. Throughout the text, I will use the term 'reproductive labor,' which is one of the key categories for understanding the logic of this thesis. Reproductive labor, or domestic work historically done by women for a long time was considered a natural part of a woman's life and identity. When employment opportunities for some groups of native-born women in the western countries expanded, foreign-women were employed to cover the deficit in the 'natural' woman's skills. As a result, their own families were subjected to a deficit of care. This and many other aspects are reflected in films about women migrant workers. I apply transnational feminist theory and Marxist feminist critiques of

reproductive labor to study how the “accented” socially marginalized heroine changes the politics of representation and spectatorship.

The transnational feminist perspective enables me to see the limits of categories used to examine immigration and foreignness. Hence, in the introduction to *Strange Encounters*, Sarah Ahmed argues against the ontologizing of foreignness and against “stranger fetishism” which means that the figure of a ‘stranger’ is produced by adopting a clear demarcation between citizens and aliens. “The alien stranger is hence, not beyond human, but a mechanism *for allowing us to face which we have already designated as the beyond*” (Ahmed 3). I admit that my research constructs the ontology of foreign womanhood which is obvious in my corpus of films. Examining films about immigration, I use terms such as foreign woman, undocumented immigrant, accented character, and foreign mother implying that these categories are self-explanatory and have fixed meanings.

To avoid the ‘ontologizing’ of foreign women workers, I use current debates on reproductive labor that show how global capitalism shapes the social group of foreign female workers marked as ‘others’ by their gender, class, and race. Moreover, I show how female ‘foreignness’ is problematized through the cinematic image. Since cinema operates with images and not theoretical categories, we inevitably need to question how film constructs the images of foreign women. For instance, the Belgian drama *The Illegal* is shot mostly in close ups and extreme close ups which constitute a claustrophobic and closed space as seen and perceived by Russian illegal immigrant Tania. The image focuses on Tania’s reaction to the constant humiliation and abuse, placing the spectator in

the uncomfortable position of a witness. Through cinematic techniques *The Illegal* simultaneously constructs ‘alienation’ and ‘otherness’ of the immigrant protagonist and deconstructs the ‘ontology’ of her foreignness.

1.2 Roots of Transnational Film Studies

The transnational perspective in film studies was developed in response to global film production and the increase of border-crossing narratives. Since the 1990s, and especially in the 2000s, film studies employ a transnational perspective in order to interrogate the limits of the category of “national cinema,” a dominant framework in film theory and practice since at least the rise of neorealism in the 1940s. The crisis of national cinema is connected with reconfigurations of the nation in an era of mass immigration and emerging crises of nation-state politics. Andrew Higson, following Benedict Anderson, defines the nation as “the mapping of an imagined community with a secure and shared identity and sense of belonging, on to a carefully demarcated geo-political space” (Higson 16). Despite transnational dispersal, argues Higson, diaspora proves that national identity does not depend on living within the geo-political space, and in some sense “all nations are diasporic. They are thus forged in the tension between unity and disunity, home and homelessness” (Higson 16). A national community emerges from the tension between the discourse of national patriotism and the realities of dispersal and homelessness

While Anderson understands the “imagined community” as a stable project with defined boundaries, Higson’s concept of a nation implies the “transnational” and “difference” as its essential element. For example, in his earlier work “The Concept of

National Cinema,” Higson writes that national cinema is “the product of a tension between ‘home’ and ‘away’, between the identification of home and the assumption that it is quite distinct from what happens elsewhere” (Higson 18). National cinema simultaneously looks inwards to reflect on the nation itself and looks out, across its borders, to assert the difference from other nations. Eventually, transnational film studies emerges simultaneously in opposition and in discussion with the concept of national cinema.

Transnational film theory not only examines transnational cinema, but also reconsiders the concept of “nation” in the realm of the transnational. As Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim suggest,

In the study of films, a critical transnationalism does not ghettoize transnational filmmaking in interstitial and marginal spaces but rather interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels – from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation’s image of itself (Higbee and Lim 10).

The “national” became an elusive category that tends to traverse the border. As Mette Hjort notes, “there are many films with transnational themes, made within a purely national framework of production and oriented in the first instance towards an audience defined in national terms” (Hjort 14). To some degree even Hollywood film production could be considered as national and transnational on the levels of production, distribution, audience, profit, and, as we will see in *Spanglish* and *Babel*, on the level of narrative.

Roots of transnational theory could be found in postcolonial theory that questions power relations, oppression and cultural division between Western and non-Western countries—issues close to transnational cinema studies. Postcolonial feminists such as Mohanty and Spivak examine how “Third World” women were subjected to a “patronizing” attitude within a feminist discourse. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Spivak is one of the earliest texts of postcolonial feminism that describe the “subaltern” – a subject marginalized in Western culture. Postcolonial feminists started with a criticism of Western feminism that failed to recognize the important cultural, political and historical contexts of women’s exploitation and oppression in the Third World. Introducing the troubling concept of difference within feminist discourses, they problematized the concept of “gender” in relation to religion, nationality, race, and ethnicity. Criticizing the Western model of feminism, they argued against homogenous feminist theory that ignored differences between women. Theorizing difference, gender and identity would become one of the central ideas of transnational feminist theory. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak notes that her “book charts a practitioner’s progress from colonial discourse studies to transnational cultural studies” (Spivak ix-x). The “moving base” of transnational studies enables her to grasp the vanishing present of the “native informant” in the Western text.¹ Spivak’s feminist study of dominant cultural narrative contributes to my research of exclusion and representation of foreign women in contemporary western cinema.

¹ For more information about a “native informant” see *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* and “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

One of the major concepts of transnational film study is Hamid Naficy's "accented cinema" which focuses primarily on the filmmaker as a transnational figure. Naficy describes accented cinema largely as diasporic cinema or a cinema of displacement,

If the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that exilic and diasporic subjects make are accented. This accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of characters in the various narratives as from displacement of filmmakers, their artisanal production mode, and their esthetics, politics and demography. ("Making Films with an Accent: Iranian Émigré Cinema" 42)

His main example is Iranian immigrant filmmakers that produced films outside Iran, mostly in the U.S., Canada and Europe. Although I'm describing the films that were made by the foreign-born, or "hyphenated" or "accented" filmmakers (expression of Hamid Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema" 115) such as Palestinian American Cherien Dabis, Colombian American Paola Mendoza, and Mexican American Alejandro González Iñárritu the film director's national identity is not the main focus of my research. I shift the focus from a displaced filmmaker to a displaced "accented" subject, the immigrant woman from the so-called 'developing' part of the world.

1.3 Methodology and Chapter Structure

First, I will conduct textual analysis of the form and content of a corpus of films selected for this thesis. Specifically, I will analyze how these films construct the image of transnational women through the plot and the use of cinematic techniques. Adopting the

concept of the *feminization of migration*, I argue that it is visualized in the American and European films I study. The concept of *feminization of migration* is useful for exploring how analyzed films respond to the current phenomenon of growing international female mobility.

Second, adopting Marciniak's concept of *alienhood* as a "highly racialized rhetorical and disciplinary apparatus that classifies immigrants, refugees, and border crossers in relation to the U.S. territory," I argue that it is not only materialized in American films, but also can be further applied to an examination of narratives related to the European border such as *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Lorna's Silence*, and *The Illegal* (*Alienhood* xiii). The idea of *alienhood* is useful for exploring how analyzed films respond to the current phenomenon of growing international female mobility. Through textual analysis, I will identify some central characteristics of these films such as border-crossing narratives, translation, and transnational subjecthood.

Third, I will discuss the feminist critiques of reproductive labor in order to examine the construction of social abjection integrated in the image of a working foreign woman. The concept of reproductive labor described by autonomist feminist Sylvia Federici, authors of "The Logic of Gender," Lindsay Palmer, Mary Romero, and Duffy Mignon lays a theoretical foundation for exploring representations of immigrant women workers. I will examine the question of how foreign women and labor low-paid, low-status service jobs became synonyms, (as autonomist feminist Mariarosa DallaCosta describes it in "The Power of Women and The Subversion of the Community"), and further, how foreign women and cleaning/domestic labor became equated. Their analysis

of reproductive labor enables me to further explain family as an essential element of films about foreign women.

Both transnational theories and Marxist feminist critiques reveal the social construction of race, gender, and class identities, and argue against the naturalization of such categories. Aggression and hatred toward dark-skinned, accented foreigners is not a natural fear of the “other” but a historically and culturally determined result of Imperial ideology based on a clear distinction of race, gender, class, and nation. To support and reproduce this structure, one should have a clear understanding—and the IMAGE - of who is who—White, Black, worker, policeman, man, woman, a citizen and an alien, us and them. Challenging clear differentiations by producing complex hybrid identities and acknowledging differences, that matter, might be a constructive way for rethinking immigration in cinema.

The first chapter of this thesis, “Feminization of Migration in Cinema,” examines the transnational subjectivity of women immigrant protagonists. To provide the political and economic background of such subjectivities I refer to the feminization of migration. The chapter follows an important cinematic shift from male to female immigrant subjectivity in representations of migrant experiences. Employing transnational theory, I analyze border-crossing narratives in the films *Dirt* and *Amreeka* and the role of the materialized border in the construction of transnational women’s identities.

The second chapter, “Foreign Women’s Work and Social Abjection,” explores representations of the cleaning professions done by immigrant women in cinema. I will analyze *Bread and Roses* (janitorial work) and *Spanglish* (domestic service) to analyze

the structural politics of abjection through service work. I will discuss how and why foreign women have become equated to cheap service workers, and how the characters of *Bread and Roses* and *Spanglish* challenge this characteristic. This chapter synthesizes contemporary debates on reproductive labor as the foundation of female immigrants' overrepresentation in service professions—an overrepresentation, which led influenced their cinematic representation. As a theoretical groundwork for the part on cleaning in cinema, I refer to “Foreign Women and Toilets,” “Palatable Foreignness” and *Alienhood* by Marciniak.

Placing a transnational female figure in the center of my analysis, I challenge the common discourses of women's migration that approach immigrant women as victims, as criminals, as workers, as mothers, but not as subjects of migration or socially constructed and ascribed roles. Consequently, I suggest transnational mobility, servitude, and motherhood as major correlative spheres that construct the cinematic image and identity of a foreign female migrant in contemporary culture.

CHAPTER 2: CINEMATIC “FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION”

2.1 Challenging Cinematic Representations of Foreign Womanhood

The growing visibility of foreign-born women beginning in the 1980s in American and European cinema is the result of ongoing economic and political processes such as increasing number of immigrant women involved in the European and American labor markets and anti-immigrant propaganda in media. The establishment of a high-income work force and growing employment of native-born women in skilled and semi-skilled positions produced a deficit of care in high-income countries and required the expansion of the service sector providing jobs for foreign women. Career opportunities for foreign-born women are often limited to low-paying, low-status, “unskilled” jobs such as household workers (launderers, cooks, housekeepers, child-care workers, cleaners, and servants) and public service jobs (waitress, laundress, janitor, nurses aid, fast-food server, cook, dishwasher, receptionist, school aid, cashier, etc) (Romero 41). Reflecting this new social reality, the new character of the immigrant female worker, and especially of an immigrant single mother, emerged in American and European cinema in the last two decades. Appropriating a woman migrant’s point of view signified an important shift in the cinematic representation of foreign womanhood and the integration of women’s perspectives to a growing field of narratives about international mobility and displacement.

From its early years Western fiction cinema incorporated narratives of immigration, but within these stories the character of the woman migrant was underrepresented. In 1917, Charlie Chaplin made *The Immigrant* in which the Tramp

(Chaplin) arrives to the United States on a steamer from Europe with hundreds of other immigrants. The title unmistakably reveals that the plot is focused on the arrival to the “Land of Liberty” and hardships of immigration. A crowd of impoverished passengers see the Statue of Liberty that, for generations of immigrants, would serve as a contradictory symbol of freedom and displacement.² On the shipboard, the Tramp meets a young immigrant woman (Edna Purviance) and her sick mother. The film ends with the Tramp and Edna getting married. In a short silent comedy, Chaplin portrays the most important issues of immigrant films: the arrival to a new country, the hopes of the immigrants, the hostility of the native-born people, fighting those hostilities, and, significantly for my work in this chapter, saving a woman. Marriage symbolizes a holy union of a man and a woman and a basic element that stabilizes the nation and guarantees its reproduction. Accordingly, in the Introduction to her book *Alienhood*, Marciniak writes about the naturalization of women in the U.S.: “immigrant women’s citizenship via naturalization was predominantly conditional on their marital status and thus motivated by a patriarchal and heteronormative conception of women’s citizenship” (*Alienhood* 14). At the end of the 19th century, women did not have independent political rights and were tied to their husbands. Marriage as depicted at the end of Chaplin’s film is actually the only way for Edna to naturalize. However, some women were not eligible for naturalization in the United States by the factor of their race, especially Asian women. It is important that “not simply whiteness but *masculine* whiteness was a foundation of discourse of citizenship” (*Alienhood* 14). The right for women’s naturalization was

² The Statue of Liberty would appear much later in the opening sequence of the Hollywood productions – a comedy *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002) and a drama *The Immigrant* (James Gray, 2013) – the films about a Latina chamber maid and a Polish sex-worker respectively.

restrictive and exclusive, guarding the purity, homogeneity and privileges of the white native-born citizens. As a result, *The Immigrant* focuses on the Tramp and makes Edna a supportive and passive character.

In the fiction cinema of the 20th century, the hardships of immigration were shown primarily through the male point of view because they were family breadwinners. In the American films, such as *The Italian* (Reginald Barker, 1915), *Sacco and Vanzetti* (Giuliano Montaldo, 1971), or the famous trilogy *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974, 1990), the hero was a man or a group of men who had to support their family in a new country. The same tendency of prioritizing the male immigrant figure existed in European films such as *Toni* (Jean Renoir, 1935), *The Emigrants* (Jan Troell, 1971), and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974). Left with responsibilities of housekeeping and childrearing, women were economically dependent and were subjected to the supportive roles in immigration narratives. The importance of domestic labor done by women was underestimated at the time.

However, employment of immigrant and native-born women has gradually changed the patriarchal family structure. During the great period of immigration (1900-1915) foreign-born women have gradually replaced native-born Black women as domestic servants in the United States (Romero 101). In the introduction to her research *Maid in the U.S.A.*, Mary Romero has shown that domestic work even today maintains racial, gender and class stratification. In 2006, the United Nations published research about a new gender dimension of immigration called the “feminization” of migration. The study found that while the percentage of female immigrants remained the same, these

women's participation in paid labor increased. Women from Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe joined the labor force in the 'First World' as factory workers, house workers, babysitters, and janitors. Mass immigration from the 'developing' countries to the 'developed' brought into question the concepts of citizenship, nationality, national borders, and national identity. It also evoked research on the overrepresentation of women of color and foreign-born women in low-waged service labor.

The feminization of migration was reflected in cinema by a shift in focus from male to female characters. In these films, women were marked as the 'other' not only by accent and foreignness, but also by gender.³ For example, the 1998 American feature *Polish Wedding* follows the story of a big Polish American family focusing on two female characters – Jadviga and her daughter Hala. The events take place within the Polish American community of Hamtrock, Michigan. Unhappily married, Jadviga, the mother of five, works as a janitor and has a love affair with her boss. She shares cooking and child care responsibilities with other women of her house. The family is close to dissolving when it comes out that Hala has become pregnant by a local police officer called Sailor, but close family bonds overcome the community prejudice. When the local community members call Hala a "Sinner!" during the Catholic holiday celebration, Jadviga guides her through the crowd. Beautiful, delicate blond women dressed in white, they visualize the western concept of purity and virginity. The film's closing sequence is an idyllic scene in which the three family generations come together to celebrate the joy

³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the definitions of a 'woman' is a "female slave or servant; a maid; esp. a lady's maid or personal attendant (no chiefly hist.). In later use more generally: a female employee; esp. a woman who is employed to do domestic work" ("Woman")

of life. In this scene, Hala is bathing the baby while Sailor and Jadviga are working in the blossoming garden. The non-diegetic children's choir singing "Santa Maria" accompanies the scene. It is significant that Jadviga's husband Bolek is excluded from the scene. *Polish Wedding* emphasizes that the foundation of the immigrant family is motherhood. A woman takes the traditional male place of head of the family. A strong maternal figure becomes central in contemporary films about women's immigration.

Two years later, in 2000, Lars von Trier's drama *Dancer in the Dark* was released. This film strips the image of immigrant motherhood of its idyllic tones by introducing a single mother as a protagonist. Almost blind, Selma works double shifts at the factory and takes work home to pay for her son's eye surgery. She kills an American police officer, her neighbor Bill, who steals the money saved for the surgery. Stuck in a patriarchal ideology, he is afraid to show his weakness and inability to provide for his own family. Protected by his high social status, whiteness, and citizenship, Bill feels rightful in stealing from Selma because, obviously, a poor blind foreigner has no man to protect her. However Selma is not as weak as she seems to be: driven by her "maternal instinct," Selma brutally murders Bill.⁴ The foreign male figure is erased from *Dancer in the Dark*; the child's father is unknown. This act of killing reflects her immigrant outrage against the everyday abjection, exploitation, and eventually, the hegemony of white masculinity. When Selma is accused of the murder, her prosecutor employs the rhetoric of the "ungrateful immigrant" who threatens the safety of a "welcoming host country" to justify the death penalty. She is reminded that she is only a guest in America. Her death

⁴ Although I am hesitant to use the phrase "maternal instinct," I think it is relevant for Selma's character. When she is asked why she has kept her child who would inherit her eye disease, she answers "I just wanted to hold a baby in my arms." See more about foreign motherhood in Chapter 3.

through hanging is a staged symbolic act of nationalist self-defense against the ‘strangers’ that the accented and foreign-looking Selma embodies.

A spectator of *Dancer in the Dark* identifies with the character of Selma by the structure of the narrative that focuses on her experience of gradual loss of vision. Unable to tolerate the dreadful reality of her immigrant life, the daydreamer Selma sees and hears the world as a colorful musical. Even in prison she creates her own reality concentrating on rhythms and sounds of the “outer” world that the protagonist is no longer able to see. Relying mainly on static camera shots and a bright color palette, (in contrast to the handheld camera of the grayish “real” scenes), this reality of the musical is visualized for the spectator that sees the world the way Selma experiences it.

To sum up, the narratives of *Polish Wedding* and *Dancer in the Dark* share a number of characteristics and signify an important shift in representations of women immigrants in American and European cinema.⁵ Undertaking the traditional male role of family breadwinner, the foreign female character becomes a film protagonist. Both Selma and Jadviga have paid jobs and fulfill tasks of family reproduction—cooking, sewing, and child care. The immigrant male figure (a man of the family) is weak in the first film, and does not exist in the second. Therefore, the economic and political consequences of mass women’s migration change cinematic representations of foreign womanhood from passive witness to central actor. Due to new cinematic narratives that prioritize the foreign female characters, the spectator has a chance to see diverse experiences of immigration and exploitation from a woman’s perspective. The character is often

⁵ *Dancer in the Dark* is a co-production that united twelve western countries including America, Argentina, Iceland, Denmark, Germany, Spain, and Great Britain.

constructed as a matriarch; she is driven by a strong desire to provide for her children and protect them from the hardships of life. Strong mother figures are portrayed in *Loin de 16e*, *Babel*, *Dirt*, *Illegal*, and *Entre Nos*. A small child often accompanies a mother in her dangerous journey across the border. Films about transnational women protagonists employ “the naturalized image of women as guardians of tradition, keepers of home, and bearers of Language” (the latter is reflected in expression “mother tongue”) (*Elsewhere, Within Here* 33). Cinematically, then, the “feminization of migration” was reflected in a gradual erasure of the immigrant male figure and growing visibility of female immigrants as the result of male unemployment and increasing demand for cheap women’s labor.

2.2 Images of the Border

In the 20th century, shaped by mass migration, boundaries and borders became loaded concepts used to describe hybrid identities, belongingness, and displacement. Accompanied by their husbands and fathers, women for a long time were not subjects but objects of migration and displacement. A woman's individual mobility was restricted by her real or potential motherhood and other domestic responsibilities. As Trinh Minh-ha writes on female mobility,

For, unless economical necessity forces her to leave the home on a daily basis, she is likely to be restrained in her mobility—a transcultural, class- and gender-specific practice that for centuries has not only made traveling quasi impossible for women, but has also compelled every “traveling” female creature to become *a stranger at her own family, society and gender*... Women are trapped (as quoted) within *the frontiers of their bodies* and their species... Women are not supposed

to circulate freely in these male domains, especially after dark. (*Elsewhere, Within Here* 33, my emphasis)

Although juxtaposing traveling with economic migration, Trinh Minh-ha conceptualizes restricted female mobility through the boundaries of a woman's body, which always implies marriage and motherhood. The female body becomes a boundary, a trap that keeps her from traversing external national boundaries. By keeping a woman at home the patriarchal society secures family reproduction and stability of the national borders. In this part on female border-crossing narratives, I want to further explore this comparison of the boundaries of the female body and national/geographical/political boundaries within a framework of cinematic feminization of migration established in the first part of the chapter. In order to do so, I apply contextual analysis to the American films *Dirt* (Savoca, 2003) and *Amreeka* (Dabis, 2009). I will show how growing female mobility results in estranging and alienating the "female creature" creating a hybrid transnational subjectivity. In this regard, materialized border and a physical act of border crossing are crucial for any understanding of female transnationality, hybridization of female subjectivity, and "multiplicity of national belongings" (term used by Marciniak in her analysis of film *El Norte*).

Cinematic images of the border have already been discussed in several works on transnationality and migration in cinema.⁶ In cinema, the border represents not only a real physical, geographical borderline but also the "imagined communities" called nations determined by cultural and linguistic boundaries. When Third-World female characters

⁶ See *Alienhood, Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, "No Country for Old Certainties: Ambivalence, Hybridity, and Dangerous Crossings in Three Borderland Films."

cross the border of the First World, they automatically change their social status from “a citizen” to “an alien” that implies a different relation to the national space, language, and culture which determine their access to a national welfare. To explain how materialized borders such as walls, airport security, border patrols, or checkpoints, affect and produce transnational female identities, I will further discuss border-crossing narratives in *Dirt* and *Amreeka* that show different scenarios of women’s mobility in relation to the American border.

2.2.1 Border Memories: U.S.-Mexican Border in Dirt

One of the most important characteristics of contemporary cinematic narratives of immigration is that focus has shifted from Ellis Island (“Island of Hope, Island of Tears”), the legendary place where immigrants from the Old World took their first step to the “Land of Liberty,” to the highly militarized U.S.-Mexican Border. As a consequence, the image of the border transformed from the images of white Europeans waiting in line to obtain the documents to people of color crossing wire fences, going through check points, and facing the U.S. border patrol armed with guns and helicopters. The Mexican-American border appears in multiple films about female immigration from Mexico and Central America to the United States such as *Spanglish*, *Dirt*, *El Norte*, and *Babel*.

Dolores, the main character of *Dirt*, is an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador. She has been living in the U.S. illegally for more than twelve years. She works as a domestic worker cleaning penthouses in downtown New York. She and her husband Rodolfo send monthly remittances to El Salvador to build a family house. When house construction is almost complete, she has a fight with her son Rudy who obviously does

not want to return to his country of origin. Born in El Salvador, he immigrated to the States with Dolores in his early childhood. Having grown up in New York, this antagonistic Salvadorian American teenager speaks American English and has absolutely *no memories* of El Salvador. Together Dolores and Rudy follow a difficult and painful path of long-forgotten memories of the Mexican-American border to understand their complicated identity and belonging. The tragic death of Rodolfo will bring them back to El Salvador for the mourning mother and son to acknowledge the U.S. as their real home.

Neither Dolores' son Rudy nor her husband Rodolfo, but Dolores, the maternal figure, possesses and is possessed by the memories of the border. These terrifying images return to Dolores in the form of nightmares the day she gets into the fight with Rudy. Troubled relationships with her son and his American identity reopen Dolores' repressed memories. The sequence in which Rudy rejects his Salvadorian past starts with Dolores and Rodolfo in the phone booth calling their family in El Salvador. When Dolores asks Rudy to talk to his *abuela*, he aggressively rejects her request. When Dolores addresses him in Spanish, Rudy says that he does not understand, creating an artificial linguistic barrier between them. Offended, Dolores replies that he will see how children respect their parents when they return to El Salvador. Finally, Rudy ends their conversation, saying that he would never come back to that "stupid place": "No, that is *your* country. I don't remember nothing of that place and I am never going back there!" Cinematic techniques emphasize their antagonism and her perplexity in dealing with her son's subjectivity unknown to her. Dolores and Rudy's conversation is shot in a 2-shot medium close-up with a handheld camera in one continuous shot to show the spontaneity of the

scene. The camera then approaches Dolores to the close-up. She looks confused: it seems that it has never occurred to her that their prospective happy family's return to El Salvador would displace Rudy, who considers the United States and not El Salvador as his real home.

The sequence then transitions to their family house. Seen from Dolores' point of view, Rudy watches television. Rodolfo sleeps, and Dolores fixes a male shirt while watching her son carefully. Warm light of her room establishes a family atmosphere, a feeling of safety and domesticity. Dolores turns off the light. A close-up of her face shows that she is obviously troubled by her fight with Rudy. Sharing her doubts with her sleeping husband Rodolfo, she says: "Maybe it's better if we stay here. I'm so worried. I don't know what to do." While Dolores speaks to her husband Rodolfo, he is off-screen. He does not share her worries about the future and life after in El Salvador, and Dolores alone deals with her agonizing fears of their future in America.

Images of the Mexican-American border haunt her in a nightmare questioning her decision to become an "illegal alien" in America and the possibility of return to her country of origin. The following is Dolores' dream sequence of the Mexican American border, which disrupts the continuous narrative. In a medium close-up of a man's scared, sweaty face hardly lit and surrounded by darkness; a man tells Dolores to pretend that they are sleeping. Dolores, with a small boy in her arms, is among the other bus passengers. She must cross the border to reunite with her husband who had already moved to America. The police stop the bus for documents check. It is dark and only the police's flash light searches the bus interiors. Placed in the end of the bus, the camera

films from a low angle, which presents Dolores's point of view. The police officer approaches Dolores and takes her son away from her. The camera is shaky, and the picture is almost entirely discolored. Dolores's red dress is the brightest spot of the scene. The handheld camera reflects the scary reality of the scene and the fear of the young migrant mother whose child was taken from her. It is raining heavily. She follows the border guard begging him to leave the child. But he moves away from her carrying Rudy. Lighting techniques emphasize Dolores' isolation. The border guard car is flashing in front of the guard. The bus lights work as a back light for Dolores's slim figure, darkening her face. In despair, she falls (her face is lit by the front light) on her knees begging and crying "por favor, Senior!" Heavy beats mixed with Latina melodies that accompany the border scene enhance the feeling of danger, confusion, and disorder. As a result of the fight with Rudy and his rejection of his origin, Dolores' recollection of the border crossing is directly connected with her fear of losing her child. This significant episode reveals the bond of maternity and border crossing in *Dirt*.

The border scene cuts back to the home sequence. Rudy sleeps on the couch. Darkness stylistically connects the two scenes. In a 2-shot medium close-up, Dolores (dressed in a red robe) caresses Rudy, almost crying and bending over him when she suddenly slaps him. Rudy wakes up from the unexpected hit. Hitting him twice, she yells, "I didn't risk your life for you to throw it to *the garbage*." Rudy tells Dolores that he hates her and never wants to talk to her again. Again, Dolores is left alone in the frame. She is isolated in her decisions and her memories. When their return to El Salvador is approaching, her own son becomes a stranger, an "illegal" American. The border

between El Salvador, which Dolores considers a backward country with no computers but with strong family traditions, and America is of cultural and economic difference.

The second time the border memories return is when Dolores loses her most profitable job of a domestic worker at the Ortegas. Working for the Ortegas family constituted the main part of her income; besides, they were her first employers. The reason for her dismissal is Claudia Ortega's political campaign for senator in New York, which is based on anti-immigrant ideology. Precisely, she argues against "illegals" in the city. Hypocritically, the family who kept an undocumented domestic worker for years and are immigrants themselves, became the forefront of anti-immigrant policies. Thus, Mr. Ortega announces Dolores' dismissal when she looks through the old family photographs of the Ortegas' pre-American past. "It's all *garbage*,"—he tells Dolores who is hesitant to throw the photographs away, but the same words he could use to describe Dolores. While Manny Ortega, the head of the family, talks to Dolores in Spanish in previous scenes, he prefers English to fire Dolores. As a result, English emphasizes the distance and social hierarchy between Manny Ortega and Dolores. Dolores attempts to argue in Spanish, but her employee quickly switches to English so she will feel uncomfortable to keep arguing. To legitimize their own legal status, her employers want to get rid of their old photographs along with their housekeeper Dolores – a symbolic cleansing from the unwanted elements that might make the American voters suspicious. They use her cheap labor when it is convenient, but argue against illegal immigration and fire her when it is convenient for them. Mr. Ortega shows her that like any other immigrant domestic worker she is disposable. Her illegal status, gender and her low-

status occupation construct the boundary between her and Mr. Ortega despite that both are immigrants. Legitimate immigrants are those who are privileged to erase and forget their pre-American life, while “illegal” Dolores is haunted by her past.

Her memories mark her as a part of the group presented as unwanted, undesirable, dangerous, and dirty people: the undocumented immigrants, bound by the shared memory of crossing the border. After Dolores is fired, the sequence transitions to the ground floor where her immigrant co-workers try to pacify her. They drink and discuss how each of them crossed the border. However, Dolores is silent and alienated from the others. Influenced by the stories of her colleagues, her own border-crossing memories occupy her. The off-screen voice screams: “Dolores, what’s wrong with Rudy?” Rudy is inside the closed track among other Latina women and children. Someone brings him closer to the window so he can breathe. When it does not help, they open the track door. The voices and traffic sounds become louder. Like a previous memory episode, the track scene is discolored and shot with a handheld camera visually differentiating her memories from the present. Like in the first sequence, her vision of the border crossing reflects her fear of a child loss. The possible death of Rudy is encoded in her fear of the border. The Mexican-American border is a threat to her as a mother—a memory that she tried to repress. Thus, *Dirt* visualizes a female border crossing through the protagonists' maternal figure. “The family is the archetypal ideological apparatus. Its goal is reproduction in a physical sense but, more importantly, the family oversees the reproduction of the basic ideological forms – class race, age, and gender ideologies, social expectations, folkways, mores, norms, and the like” (Romero 60).

The death of her husband Rodolfo fosters her transition to a new subjectivity of a transnational mother. A man who helps Dolores and Rudy to arrange their departure from the United States to the funeral notifies them: “Leaving is not a problem. Getting back is more complicated.”

While the film portrays the memories of her first border crossing, it does not show Dolores’s arrival to El Salvador to arrange her husband's funeral. Eventually, the most unexpected transition is presented in an abrupt cut from New York to the funeral in El Salvador. The wide shot depicts the trees and a light-purple sky that stylistically differentiates from the closed framing of the American sequences. A group of people is seen from afar. Next we see the close up of a blue cross with Rodolfo’s name. The portraits of individuals and small groups reflect that the protagonist is in a different culture and different country. The film therefore establishes a connection between a homeland (*patria* in Spanish) and the paternal figure. Rodolfo’s corpse remains in El Salvador while Dolores and Rudy return to the United States. “Rudy, wake up! We are going home,” – says Dolores in English. However, to return to the United States is not easy. After their attempt to get tourist visas legally fails, they decide to pay in order to get American visas. Finally, their plane lands in the United States and go through customs. Immigration inspector Bob Martinez (the uniform badges are shown in the close up) carefully examines their faces. Rudy and Dolores cannot cover their anxiety; obviously, inspector Martinez identifies this type of expression but he stamps their passports and lets them in. Dolores officially enters the country as Maria Cristina Sanchez-Lopez. Dressed in red, she enters the United States with Rudy. She repeats her own story of border

crossing, but this time she and her son, equipped with fake documents, are “allowed” to enter. Entering the country ten years later, under a new name and with a grown-up son, Dolores is no longer the Salvadorian woman begging the American border guard on her knees. This time she knows and feels that she returns home warmly welcomed by other “immigrants.”

Although *Dirt* seems to leave open the question of why Dolores decides to immigrate for the second time, I believe that the answer is in the film and the character’s change in the border scenes, described in this part. Conversation with her son about El Salvador makes her understand that he was raised in America and *does not remember* El Salvador. Dolores herself is haunted by the memories of the Mexican-American border crossing. Both of the flashbacks show that she could lose her son. Since her mobility is determined by family reunification, her actions in the film are driven mainly by her maternal responsibilities. However, Dolores’s subjectivity is not substituted by “mother instinct.” As women of her family notice, she became more independent while working in America. “Independence” is not a characteristic that is often used to describe a “woman,” and especially a woman of color. Returning to Trinh T. Minh-ha, the protagonist’s mobility alienates her from her gender, family and her country. El Salvador is no longer her home.

2.2.2 Border as Checkpoint: National Borders and (In-)Security in *Amreeka*

A 2009 film *Amreeka* features Palestinian Christian single mother Muna (Nisreen Faour) and her teenage son Fadi (Melkar Muallem) who get a Green Card and immigrate to the United States. In the U.S., Muna reunites with her sister and her family who

immigrated a long time ago. The political and historical frameworks that constitute the events of *Amreeka* are the American invasion of Iraq (2003), the Second Intifada (2000-2005), and post-9/11 Islamophobia. Thus, *Amreeka* questions the effectiveness of militarized national borders and walls in preventing conflicts while affirming their role in creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.

The narrative begins in a bank where Muna serves as a bank clerk. The first shot shows a woman holding documents (Muna) behind a glass partition. Anticipating the following film events, the glass partition that separates a client from the workers signifies a “border.” Unlike the other female worker at the bank, Muna, as a Christian, does not wear a hijab—a sign of her religious difference. When a fan blows Muna’s documents away, the woman in hijab turns back and says “Sorry” with a hard “R.” Thus, the short opening sequence that takes place in Palestine introduces a number of important themes: female employment, artificial borders, multiculturalism, and Westernization. Driving her own car, Muna picks up the tired and quiescent Fadi, a student at a private school. Their way home lies through a checkpoint that divides Israeli territories from the occupied West Bank. The first check point sequence portrays the lines of signaling cars and people moving back and forth. Handheld camera deliberately moves and constantly shifts positions depicting this chaotic reality. The Israeli border guard is seen from the inside of Muna’s car, therefore, binding the audience with the point of view of Palestinians, people who go through everyday IDs’ checks. After their car is examined, they are *allowed* to go home to Bethlehem. They drive by the wall that divides Israeli and Palestinian territories, and is covered in miles of multi-lingual graffiti. Palestinians’ speech and behavior reflect

their physical and emotional fatigue caused by heat, check point interrogations, and various errands. A letter of their eligibility for Green Card comes exactly on time. However, Muna is still in doubt; “We’d be like visitors”, she tells Fadi. “It’s better than being prisoners in your own country,” answers Fadi. He persuades her arguing that in Palestine he would be nobody. Thus, it is difficult to call Muna an economic migrant. She rather migrates to ensure a better future for her only son Fadi—what a “civic” migration:

Underscoring the centrality of family as the motivation for making a permanent home in a new country, women immigrants named “securing family stability” as the primary motivator in their pursuit of citizenship. A second reason, some said, is to vote in elections” (*Women Immigrants: Stewards of the 21st Century* 5).

Muna’s life decision to immigrate seeking safety and a future for her son is, no doubt, a political decision when family values (one-parent family, so to speak) exceed one’s nationalism. In this regard, “feminization of migration” becomes a time bomb for nationalist and patriotic ideologies.

The next day, the theme of “prisoners in their own country” is continued when Fadi and Muna drive through the checkpoint. The camera shows the checkpoint from Muna’s point of view. Already adopting a view of an “outsider” with a Green Card, she witnesses passing Palestinians, car lines, wire, Israeli flag, Israeli soldiers, and child vendors—all the tragic signs of Israeli occupation. From a close-up of Muna’s thinking and watchful face, the sequence cuts to the wide shot of the militarized check point that separates the West Bank. Fences, armed soldiers, military cars, multiple car stoppers, and barbed wire support the politics of humiliation and social abjection of Palestinians. Fadi,

thrilled by possession of a Green Card, is rude to the Israeli interrogator and is searched in front of his mother (point-of-view shot). On their way home, again, they pass the Wall. Dreadful repetitiveness of the past two days leaves the characters hopeless for a better future in occupied Palestine. Thus, “prisoners in their own country,” Muna and Fadi become “visitors” in the United States later on. The last shot of Palestinian part of the movie depicts the vast fields of the Palestinian land. The landscape evokes a feeling of nostalgia and longing for the lost home.

The American narrative starts unexpectedly after a jump cut to the Chicago airport and a close up of two passports. A custom officer, who is separated from Muna by a glass partition—a repetitive sign of the borders, asks Muna about her citizenship. Muna answers with an accent: “We don’t have.” The officer looks surprised: “You don’t have citizenship as if you don’t have a country” Muna replies politely and with a smile: “That’s right...” Another question: “Is your husband travelling with you?” Muna answers: “No, we are divorced. He’s not a good man.” The officer gives Muna, an Arab woman without a husband or a country, a suspicious look, but lets them pass. Next, they go through security checks of their luggage where Fadi loses a cookie box—unaware that all their money savings are inside. The security dog barks fiercely at Muna, and the female officer asks if she is carrying any firearms or drugs. And finally, they enter the country. In the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear and right after invasion of Iraq, their security checks last for three hours. According to Nabeel Salaby, Muna’s brother-in-law, the U.S. military dropped thirty-eight bombs in the first ten minutes of the invasion. Thus,

invasion of Iraq is introduced in the film as the remote event that directly impacts Muna's Palestinian American family.

Having lost their savings, Muna is desperate to find a job. Her attempts to apply for positions in a bank fail. Despite her experience, she is seen, first of all, as an accented Arab woman, but not as a professional. It is important that she immigrated not because of the lack of economic opportunities at home; on the contrary, she had a better job, lived in her own house and was economically independent in her home country. Immigrating to the United States, she sacrifices her professional skills as a bank worker and accepts a job at a fast food restaurant to ensure her son's bright future in the U.S.

Although the *Women Immigrants* report mentioned earlier comprises important numbers and information, it suggests a simplistic view on women's migration claiming that "women immigrants clearly have much *to teach* and much *to offer* the country where they seek to make a family home." It employs rhetoric that Maciniak calls "foreigners as moral cleaners," which means that a foreign woman serves as an ideal model of motherhood and womanhood for Anglo-American women. The report does not question degradation of fatherhood that accompanies women's single parenting. In Muna's case, her husband is not "a good man": he divorced Muna and married a younger woman. Fadi says that he would not even notice if they immigrate. Muna's single motherhood is not a choice, but a result of her husband's rejection of his own family. In the report, however, foreign women are naturalized as perfect mothers and home keepers that can teach the host country some family values. Avoiding foreign women's abjection through anti-immigration racist politics that force women to take low-waged demeaning jobs, it

suggests that it is the new immigrant women who “determine whether or not the new immigrant populations will find themselves “at home” in the American city” (*Women Immigrants: Stewards of the 21st Century* 5). If the immigrants do not feel at home, we should blame a woman for not making it feel like “home.” Movies such as *Amreeka* portray women individuals within a larger political and economic framework. They challenge naturalization of foreign motherhood focusing on troubled identities and confused national belonging.

In *Amreeka*, presence of the border is embodied in Iraq invasion, Israeli checkpoints, and Chicago airport security. All three border events affect Muna and her family. Invasion of Iraq is largely covered in news, which produces debates on the U.S. military presence in Iraq and larger issues on international politics at Fadi’s new school. Fadi’s classmate, whose brother serves in Iraq, employs conservative rhetoric of invasion of Iraq by the U.S. as help to Iraqi population. He also wants to humiliate Fadi, a Palestinian, who, in his eyes, represents the whole Arab population. Next, he spits a drink in a White Castle restaurant to humiliate Muna, Fadi’s mother. Chasing him, Muna slips on the drink, falls, and badly hurts her back. Furious by this incident and trying to defend his mother, Fadi goes to his classmate’s house and starts a fight. Fadi ends up in jail because parents of the attacked teenager call the police. Only Mr. Novatski, the school principal, persuades the police officer to release Fadi. While Mr. Novatski argues that it is just a schoolboys’ fight, the police officer replies: “We take these accusations extremely seriously... I don’t have to tell you what’s going on in the world... This is a special circumstance.” The police officer exploits post-9/11 Islamophobic rhetoric

intensified by the Iraq war. By “special circumstance” he implies that Fadi is an Arab and an alien who attacks a white American. Iraq conflict is used to justify a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy’s detention in jail because he represents a threat to American national security.

Both in Israel and in the United States, the protagonists Muna and Fadi are treated as potential terrorists. Their border mobility – going through checkpoints in Jerusalem and immigrating to the U.S. - makes them “suspect.” Security checks increase their feeling of exclusion and deny their right for safety and acceptance. Post-9/11 Islamophobia has strong implications for the lives of the film characters—homogenizing all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as a threat to national security.

The film ends with a night scene in an Arab restaurant where the big united family of the Farahs and the Halabys gathers for celebration. In this oasis of Arab culture—with Arab food, coffee, hookah, music, dances, and oriental decorations—this clearly “foreign” family celebrates Muna’s and Fadi’s arrival and survival in the U.S. in the midst of the war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The restaurant scene marks another border—a border of cultural difference—hat film creates isolating the characters (including a school principal Mr Novatski—a “Polish Jew” born in the U.S.) from the rest of the country. Israeli-Palestinian conflict established in the beginning of *Amreeka* gets a “relief” through friendship and romantic interest of Muna and Mr Novatski inside this artificial space of Arab restaurant.⁷ Thus, a multigenerational family is juxtaposed to the

⁷ A naive attempt to find a solution for an Israeli-Palestinian conflict through friendship of individuals was shown in *Arranged* (Diane Crespo, Stefan C. Schaefer, 2007) and *Amreeka*. These attempts simplify the conflict as they define individual people through their ethnicities (Jewish, Arab) and often reestablish

darkness of the host(ile) country, where Islamophobia is still strong, and where Muna sweeps floors in a fast food restaurant.

2.3 Summary

In the 1980s, the building of Ellis Island was reopened as The Museum of Ellis Island, adopting a predominantly celebratory rhetoric of immigration from Europe with the intention to preserve and exhibit such artifacts that inscribe immigrant histories within American history. In 1979 the National Border Patrol Museum was established by the Fraternal Order of Retired Border Patrol Officers” (FORBPO) in El Paso, Texas. According to the NBPM website, museum exhibitions include displays of weapons, vehicles including helicopters, and uniforms (The National Border Patrol Museum). While the Museum of Ellis Island celebrates the immigrants’ history, the Border Patrol Museum preserves the history of those who guard the border from the unwanted alien elements. The militarized border reflects the new attitude towards non-white immigrants that resulted in the criminalization of migrants.

American and European fiction cinema reflected the process of the “feminization of migration” by creating narratives with immigrant women’s protagonists. From early films such as *The Immigrant* and *The Italian* to contemporary *Dancer in the Dark* and *Babel* foreign female characters went through the evolutionary process from a passive silent figure to a family bread-winner and decision maker. This change in strategies of representation was determined by the growing involvement of women migrants on the labor market that put them in charge of providing for a family. Grace Chang writes that

clichés of difference through ethnic food, language, traditions, etc while often mistreating a historical background of the conflict.

the immigration debates shifted from male immigrant workers to immigrant women: “Men as “job stealers” are no longer seen as the major “immigrant problem.” Instead, the new menace is immigrant women who are portrayed as idle, welfare-dependent mothers and inordinate breeders of dependents” (Chang 4). The analyzed films *Dancer in the Dark*, *Polish Wedding*, *Dirt*, and *Amreeka* depict immigrant mothers who build a new life for their children in the United States.

In the second part, I showed the construction of transnational female identity through an analysis of crossing-border narratives. For non-white female bodies, the border is one-sided and uneven depending on which side they are on; once they immigrate, it is easy to leave the U.S. and almost impossible to return. Crossing the border irreversibly affects the women protagonists’ national identities increasing their sense of insecurity and desire for acceptance. In Trinh Minh-ha’s words, “Democracy remains an everyday fight and a constant border crossing” (Trinh 5).

The cinematic “feminization of migration” does not always mean migration for economic necessity, but it usually implies family reasons. Thus, Muna migrates to secure Fadi’s future outside occupied Palestine. Dolores immigrates for family reunification. Divorced or widowed, these women consequently become the main family providers. Migrating, they join the low-waged labor force that carries stigma of social abjection and inferiority. The host country keeps foreign, accented women from naturalizing and acceptance. Consequently, the characters are seeking for their identity and cultural belonging by visiting their families back in Mexico, El Salvador, or reuniting with the family in America (sisters Raghda and Muna). “The “new” immigrants are

transnationalists, or people who maintain social linkages back in the home country; they are not bound by national borders, and their multiple identities are situated in communities in different nations that cross nations (*Alienhood* 62). Likewise, transcending two or more national spaces, cultures and languages, the transnational women belong and do not belong to any of them.

Returning to Trinh Minh-ha these “female creatures” become strangers to their families, society, and gender. A transnational woman worker is in the situation when, paraphrasing Julia Kristeva, the question “Where am I?” constitutes and determines “Who am I?” (Kristeva 8).⁸ Immigration determines the protagonist’s social status and her legal rights, and impacts her identity. The non-white woman who crosses the border, legally or illegally, becomes the object of alienation and suspicion on both sides of the border.

⁸ See *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* by Julia Kristeva.

CHAPTER 3. FOREIGN WOMEN'S WORK AND SOCIAL ABJECTION

In this chapter, I continue my examination of transnational female characters in cinema by looking at representations of service jobs, specifically cleaning in the public and private spheres done by women in cinema. American and European films depict immigrant women from developing countries as maids, nannies, or hotel workers, as though these occupations were reserved for them. Palestinian, Turkish, Mexican, Salvadorian, Russian, and Guatemalan protagonists often work in servitude in the United States and Western Europe, which eliminates their national difference and emphasizes their “foreignness.” Consequently, the main question I want to address is how and why the immigrant female cinematic character became synonymous with the cheap service worker. I contextualize films about foreign service workers by examining gender, race, and class aspects of service labor (reproductive labor in particular) in works of feminist scholars such as Romero, autonomous feminists Sylvia Federici, and transnational feminists such as Marciniak, Irene Gedalof and Lindsay Palmer. I discuss the rise of the service sector and the increasing demand for care, or reproductive labor, as part of this process. I examine the presentation of cleaners in *Bread and Roses* (institutionalized cleaning, public sphere) and *Spanglish* (domestic labor, private sphere). Focusing on gender and the racial specifics of cleaning professions in these films, I will analyze how cleaning labor encodes gender differences.

3.1 Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Popular Culture

During my research, I was surprised by how many Western films and popular shows, from arthouse *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1983) to the popular *Christmas Story*

(Bob Clark, 1983), include immigrants as a tiny and unimportant part of the story and always portray them as servants for white characters. I was asking myself why the filmmakers even bother to include these absolutely irrelevant parts, besides for comic effect. As a concerned viewer, I was furious to see that TV and popular cinema often portray accented women from developing countries as nannies, house servants, janitors, or hotel maids. *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and other popular shows exploit the images of foreign women in uniforms by making fun of their accented speech and “strange” behavior.⁹ For example, the 2013 comedy film *In a World...* by American director Lake Bell exploits the image of a Russian maid Alla (Yelena Protsenko). In one of the most disturbing scenes, Alla *washes her male employee’s hair* while he is taking a bath. In this case, the maid’s demeaning work emphasizes her employer’s wealth and success in contrast to her subservient work. She does not have any important role in the narrative besides being a “Russian maid.” I watched an episode of *Louie*, a popular show by an American stand-up comedian Louie C.K. In this episode Louie trains to be a TV show host. His prospective boss (David Lynch) suggests that he interview a cleaning lady as a part of his training. During the interview, the “accented” Slavic-looking woman bursts into tears, haunted by the memories of her childhood. The way that the cleaning female workers of *In a World...* and *Louie* are treated, dressed in uniform and equipped with a broom or a mop is humiliating. That allows these characters to be laughed at, while emphasizing their already low social status. Images of foreign maids in popular culture often reify “gendered racism” by naturalizing the portrait of a non-western female

⁹ Latina cleaning lady appeared in 14th episode of the fourteenth season (“Crème Fraiche”) of *South Park*. Mexican domestic worker Consuela is a character of the *Family Guy*.

cleaner. Gendered racism in this case means that a stereotypical image implies an assumption that immigrant women share certain personal characteristics such as obedience, simple-mindedness, and servitude based solely on their gender, race, and ethnicity.

The immigrant characters in secondary roles are used, consciously or unconsciously, to emphasize the main characters' belongingness and privileged position in society. Films that exploit accented women cleaners comfort the Western audiences, showing white protagonists in juxtaposition with this clichéd, caricaturist foreign minor character. This representation dehumanizes the immigrant characters by limiting their role to servitude, and it reproduces racial and gender stereotypes that represent white middle-class characters as a norm.

3.2 New Strategies of Representation and Identity

Expecting similarities between the representations of service workers in popular shows and films, I supposed that American and European fiction films with female immigrant protagonists would bring common gender, racial and ethnic stereotypes to the big screen. An analysis of films, including *Bread and Roses* and *Spanglish*, revealed that immigrant women in leading roles affect the politics of women service workers' cinematic representation by contextualizing servitude within a larger historical and political scope. In contrast to the minor roles of maids that emphasize the main character's privilege of hiring a servant, an immigrant protagonist shows invisible sides of service occupations, such as female workers' social abjection and alienation. Cinema can reflect social abjection and alienation of transnational service workers by depicting

their difficulties with social and economic integration in a host country (*Amreeka*, *El Norte*), sexual abuse (*Dirty Pretty Things*, *Bread and Roses*), problems of transnational motherhood (*Illegal*, *Babel*), language barriers (*Spanglish*), or threats of deportation (*Illegal*, *Lorna's Silence*). These and many other issues construct multilayered and compound portraits of female immigration and service work. Additionally, international actresses such as Audrey Tautou, Bjork, Arta Dobroshi, and Paz Vega created complex subjectivities and hybrid identities in their “accented” characters, representing foreign women who are often subjected to silence and invisibility. Films, such as *Bread and Roses*, *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Dirt*, and *Illegal*, focus primarily on immigrant female workers’ lives in their host countries, arguing that the immigrant labor force has geographical and gender specificity and cannot be treated as a non-differentiated and impersonal mass character.

3.3 The Female Face of Immigration: Service Work and Reproductive Labor

To understand the representation of women migrants in cinema, we need to examine female immigrants’ integration into European and American labor markets. Growing employment of immigrant and native-born women has not subverted gender inequality and gender subordination. Although women joined the labor markets, men did not share their domestic responsibilities. However, structural gender inequality does not affect all women in the same way, but it depends on “variables such as social class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc” (Orozko, Paienowsky, and Garcia 10). Consequently, issues such as sexism, social abjection, racism, xenophobia, and

exploitation have become a part of the cinematic narrative. Furthermore, these stereotyped ideas are rooted in women's history of employment and gendered labor.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the feminization of migration represents the gender restructuring of immigrant labor. First, a decrease in demand for immigrant male labor in agriculture and construction in 'developed' countries caused immigrant male unemployment (Romero, Federici). Federici claims that falling wages and unemployment led to an increase in violence against women,

Triggered in part by fear of economic competition, in part by the frustration men experience not being able to fulfill their role as their families' providers, and most important, triggered by the fact that men now have less control over women's bodies, and work as more women, as more women have some money of their own and spend more time outside the home (Federici 109).

Additionally, difficult economic situations in countries of origin and social cataclysms have forced women to immigrate and join the workforce in the so-called developed countries to seek a better life for their families. Third, growing female employment in those countries, the lack of available institutionalized childcare in developed countries created demand for *traditional female skills* fuelled by available immigrant women's labor. Traditional female skills include cleaning, cooking, sewing, ironing, babysitting and other care giving jobs. As a result, the labor of immigrant women from developing countries became a cheap and desirable commodity sold in European and American labor markets. Additionally, the immigration of women from developing countries to post-wall Europe has been taking place under specific economic conditions. For example, in

contrast to previous immigration flows, women migrants who entered the European Union in the post-Soviet/post-Wall situation “encountered closed labor markets with job openings primarily in marginal, irregular sectors of the economy... Although many of the new female migrants are well educated, they find work for the most part in the gendered labor markets of domestic and care work, the services industry, and commercial sex work” (Kontos).

As a result, foreign-born women from developed countries who reside and work in Europe and the United States are overrepresented in service jobs. Service jobs are marked as “unskilled” and “elementary” to justify underpayment, the lack of health care coverage, and bad working conditions. What really places servitude on the bottom of the social hierarchy is the gendered and racial social constructions of servitude, which are often overlooked in analyses of immigrant women’s economic integration. To explain the existing gender division of labor in the global economy, I will discuss definitions and various concepts of reproductive labor next.

3.4 Theories of Reproductive Labor

The concept of reproductive labor is present in academic discourses on female migration, but there is no universal definition of reproductive labor. Generally, it is understood as women’s work for family sustainability and labor reproduction.

Reproductive labor includes cooking, laundry, cleaning, childcare, and other types of work often performed by women and strongly associated with womanhood. Care work, dirty work, nurturant work, and domestic work might be sometimes used as synonyms for

reproductive labor. Importantly, the concept of reproductive labor exceeds biological reproduction, or childbirth.

Lindsay Palmer discusses reproductive labor as the work of mothering and everyday tasks performed for family reproduction. Not defining reproduction directly, she examines images of mothers' laboring hands in her research of transnational motherhood in cinema. Palmer adopts Irene Gedalof's concept of the reproductive sphere as "both the embodied work of mothering, such as childbirth and childcare, and the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging" (Gedalof 81). Palmer's research bonds motherhood and reproduction, implying a narrower concept of reproductive labor than used by Marxist feminists Sylvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa.

By reproductive labor, Federici understands that all women share a burden of domestic labor but in different proportions. To understand the capitalist system today, claims Federici, we need to rethink the question of "reproduction" in *a planetary perspective* (Federici 93, my emphasis). Led by the Women's Liberation Movement, writes Federici:

The discovery of reproductive work has made it possible to understand that capitalist production relies on the production of a particular type of worker—and therefore a particular type of family, sexuality, procreation—and thus to redefine the private sphere as a sphere of relations of production and a terrain of anti-capitalist struggle. (Federici 97)

While the 1960s' Women's Liberation Movement in Europe and the U.S. could lead the struggle against housework in order to pursue career, women's house work did not

disappear, but was given to immigrant women. A large part of the housework “have been taken out of the home and reorganized on a market basis through the virtual boom of the service industry, which now constitutes the dominant economic sector from the viewpoint of wage employment” (Federici 107). Budget cuts and other austerity measures applied by the American and European governments made public services and health care unaffordable for many and helped with the increase of women’s house work. Federici’s concept of reproductive labor is important for understanding how the capitalist system benefits from underpaid immigrant women’s labor.

While Federici supports the women’s movement to establish salaries for housework, Romero claims that many feminists do not realize that wages for housework will not challenge the basic gendered and racial division of labor and the psychological and cultural consequences caused by that division of labor (Romero 61). Romero suggests shifting the focus of feminist politics from the problem of a “wageless housewife” to the problem of racial and gender division of reproductive labor. She also challenges the common arguments that housework, especially cleaning, is demeaning by its nature; another dimension of the same argument is that domestic work has low social status because it is done by women of color and by foreign-born women. This notion based on Romero’s interviews with Chicana domestic workers contributes to my analysis of films about janitors and domestic workers in films. It confronts a common perception of reproductive professions as dirty and unworthy. Hiring women of color as domestic workers reinforces power relations of sex, race, and class. Consequently, Romero argues that “domestic service must be studied because it raises a challenge to any feminist notion

of ‘sisterhood’ ... Domestic service accentuates the contradiction of race and class in feminism, with privileged women of one class using the labor of another women to escape aspects of sexism (Romero 45). The undocumented immigrant single mother, claims Romero, is easiest to abuse and over-exploit. Immigrant women work longer hours, do tasks not included in their job description, are underpaid and are not connected with a trade union. Undocumented women workers are afraid of deportation, and those with children agree to do any job in order to provide for their families. In the case of underpayment, sexual harassment, or any other workers right violation, they do not report them to the police.

Similar to Federici’s concept of reproduction, Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton, the authors of an article “The Logic of Gender,” argue that the idea of the “immigrant woman” is produced and reproduced by the capitalist labor-market because it needs a constant supply of cheap labor; therefore, capitalist systems produce a *gendered sphere of reproduction* and reinforce inequality (Gonzalez, Neton). The authors explain that ahistorical definition of *woman* (woman as a mother) determines labor-market politics. The woman’s physical reproductive body, therefore, place limits on her devaluation in the labor market.

Once a group of individuals, women, are defined as “those who have children,” once this social activity, “having children”, is structurally formed as constituting a handicap, women are defined as *those who come to the labour-market with a potential disadvantage*. This systematic differentiation — through the market-

determined risk identified as childbearing “potential” — keeps those who embody the signifier “woman” anchored to the IMM sphere. (Gonzalez, Neton)¹⁰

Sexual differences are necessary for the reproduction of capitalism itself: “Woman as a bearer of labour-power with a higher social cost becomes its opposite: the commodity labour-power with a cheaper price” (Gonzalez, Neton). When the cost of the white woman’s labor increased, her domestic responsibilities were delegated to the lowest-paid strata of the total population - poor immigrants and women of color. Since the 1970s, the reproductive sphere has been increasingly commodified due to mass production and the expansion of the service sector, subverting the dichotomy of the private and public spheres (Gonzalez, Neton). Gonzalez and Neton argue that the market of reproductive work is gender-neutral, but it needs a constant supply of the cheapest work force, which is filled by immigrant women. As a result, “immigrant woman” and “woman of color” as categories of one’s identity and social position are produced and reproduced in the capitalist economy. I find their argumentation contradictory, as they refer to a woman’s ability to have children (and maternity as a social practice) as justification for immigrant women’s devaluation in supposedly gender-neutral labor-markets. However, their attempt to place maternity at the core of reproduction theory is important, but I think that films such as *Dirt*, *Illegal*, and *Dancer in the Dark* approaches maternity not as a potential disadvantage but as a source of identity, strength, and dignity.

¹⁰ IMM – Indirectly market-mediated sphere. IMM is a domestic sphere of labor reproduction – childcare, cleaning, cooking, etc. IMM is subordinated to the market, but in some cases the activities of IMM can be commodified and sold on market (ready-made meals, cleaning service, babysitting). IMM is a female sphere.

Finally, the author of *Making Care Count*, Mignon Duffy adopts a broader definition of reproductive labor that includes “the entire universe of occupations – from child-care workers and teachers to nurses and social workers to janitors and cafeteria workers.” Duffy considers “reproductive labor” and “care work” as synonyms. Duffy persists “in the effort to define a care sector despite the ambiguities of doing so because of the fundamental assumption of the concept of care: there is a group of tasks that share some basic characteristics that are inextricably intertwined with the public and private value of work” (Duffy 19). Challenging the private/public spheres that define care work, Duffy includes institutionalized reproductive labor such as the work of janitors and nurses in her analysis. Deficits of reproductive labor in developed countries were solved through employment of immigrant women both in skilled and unskilled occupations. This situation constructed global chains of care that might be performed both in private and public spheres (Pei-Chia Lan 1801). A global chain of care presents the transnational characteristic of contemporary social reproduction: labor of immigrant women from developing countries contributes to the sustainable development and reproduction of western society.

Summing up various discourses on reproduction and female immigration, globalization increased pauperization and strengthened the gendered labor division. Although women increased their participation in the wage labor force, this did not change reproduction as woman’s work. The restructuring of the world economy due to the process of globalization simply led to a reorganization of reproduction. Since the 1960s, reproductive activities have been reorganized as value-producing services that workers

must purchase. The service sector expanded without eliminating household unpaid reproductive labor and the sexual division of labor. Housework was technologized, marketized and redistributed mostly on the shoulders of immigrant women from the South and former Socialist countries (Federici 107). This process produced new power relationships between native-born and foreign-born women and the class relationship of employer and employee. Consequently, global capitalism required massive living labor steadily supplied from developing countries. Subjected to the most undesirable work in unregulated sectors of the economy, foreign women are seen and treated as a lamentable social group. This argument directly relates to the previously described border crossing narratives as the physical act of border crossing frames the body of an immigrant woman as an unworthy body. Already marked as foreigners, aliens, and strangers, immigrant women find employment in the service sector with limited opportunities for professional growth, promotion, or employment in the non-service sector.

Among reproductive services, various cleaning professions have especially strong negative connotations. Cleaning entails a process of eliminating dirt, and dealing with dirt has been exploited in various texts on abjection, exploitation, and immigration. From early films, such as *El Norte* and *Polish Wedding* to the more recent *Amreeka* and *Dirty Pretty Things*, foreign women clean someone else's dirt. This reinforces their low status and also implies a social commentary on the hierarchy of gender, class, and race in a contemporary globalized society (which sometimes is assumed to be post-class, post-race, and post-gender). In the next section, I will discuss the representation of migrant

women in the so-called “elementary occupations” (low-skill, low-pay, low-status jobs) of janitor and domestic worker.

3.5 Cinema on Social Aspects of Cleaning

In her research on female migration, Marciniak examines multiple meanings of cleaning in cinema, such as the cleaning in *Spanglish* as moral cleansing, the form of woman’s social abjection in *Dirt* and *Maid in America*, or the way to reestablish white supremacy and subordination in *Enre Nos*. In the article “Foreign Women and Toilets,” she “considers representation of migrant women who work as domestic help and probes the abjecting logic of cleaning practices vis-à-vis current issues of legality, illegality, immigration, transcultural difference, and rage” (“Foreign Women and Toilets” 337). Marciniak explores the apprehension of female “foreign” subjectivity in relation to “cleaning for others, in relation to dirt” in films *Fear and Trembling* (2003), *Maid in America* (2004), *The Ukrainian Lady* (2002), *Dirt* (2003), and *Friends with Money* (2006). To reflect the heterogeneity of the social abjection of a foreign female subject, she suggests the concept of “scales of abjection” (“Foreign Women and Toilets” 353). Marciniak argues that there is a correspondence between cleaning dirt (and the concept of “dirt”) and the social disposability of those who clean. A figure of a “foreign” cleaner is tolerable until she agrees to clean and, therefore, obeys the differentiation between the proper bodies of native citizens and the unclean bodies of “aliens.” Cleaning for others determines one’s low place in the social hierarchy. While women traditionally did reproductive work, cleaning as the most undesirable task has been redistributed exclusively to native-born women of color and foreign women. Adopting her complex

approach to the representation of cleaning in the context of female migration, I will examine how *Bread and Roses* and *Spanglish* portray women in cleaning occupations. More precisely, I will discuss how these films reflect women's social abjection and why these narratives escape the victimization of foreign women.

Similarly to how women of color and foreign-born women are overrepresented in cleaning jobs, cleaning as a protagonist occupation is overrepresented in cinema on female immigration. From the early films of *El Norte* and *Polish Wedding* to the more recent *Amreeka* and *Dirty Pretty Things*, foreign women always clean someone else's dirt. Cleaning in cinema becomes a universal job suitable for any non-native woman. Thus, Hispanic domestic workers are portrayed in *El Norte*, *Dirt* and *Spanglish*. The protagonists of *Spanglish* and *Lorna's Silence* work in dry cleaning service. In *Amreeka*, Muna, a Palestinian Christian, works in a fast food restaurant: her responsibilities include cooking, taking orders, and mopping floors. The characters in *Bread and Roses* and *The Illegal* do janitorial work in office buildings. The Turkish protagonist in *Dirty Pretty Things* serves as a chambermaid. The unemployed character of *Entre Nos* who emigrated from Colombia collects cans and bottles for money on the streets of New York. Foreign women do cleaning, wiping, ironing, dish washing, laundry, picking up cans and bottles, and mopping – all types of cleaning. Surrounded by garbage, trash, litter, and dirt, they challenge the idea of “human waste” and reflect on the disposability of human life.

Films about cleaners can vary in their political message from the leftist *Bread and Roses* to the Hollywood ‘Cinderella’ story of *Maid in Manhattan*. Nevertheless, cleaning

jobs indicate the low and undesirable social position of the female character even if the character never actually cleans throughout the film.

The drama *Bread and Roses* shot in Los Angeles by a British director Ken Loach shows the process of unionizing immigrant cleaners. It focuses on a Mexican woman, Maya, who decides to join the janitors' union Justice for Janitors. *Spanglish* is an American comedy, which follows a Mexican single mother Flor who is hired by an American upper middle-class family as a domestic worker. Both films have undocumented Mexican protagonists who immigrate to Los Angeles, a city with a large immigrant population. The urban space of Los Angeles plays a crucial role in film narratives alluding to relations between the occupation of space and citizenship.

3.5.1 Problematic Collectivism in *Bread and Roses*

A 2000 drama *Bread and Roses* directed by an acclaimed left-wing English director Ken Loach and written by a Scottish screenwriter Paul Laverty tells the story of a young undocumented Mexican woman, Maya, who works as a janitor in Los Angeles (Pillar Padilla). The plot is based on the 1990 "Justice for Janitors" campaign, which took place in Los Angeles. The film shows the process of building the janitors' union. The film focuses on the collective fight of immigrant janitors and the relationships within the immigrant family. The film title was inspired by the slogan of the 1912 strike organized by immigrant workers, largely women and children, in Lawrence, Massachusetts (Lowry).¹¹ The near-century, that divides the 1912 "Bread and Roses" textile strike from

¹¹ In 1912, the textile workers protested against poor working conditions and underpayment in the mills of the American Woollen Company and other textile companies as the result of deindustrialization

the 1990 *Justice for Janitors* campaign was marked by the deindustrialization of the American economy, the expansion of the service sector, and the globalization and militarization of the Mexican American border. As a result, immigration from developed countries has become a topic of contemporary political debates.

Bread and Roses was inspired by the global economic immigration that affected the society of Los Angeles. Lavery, a screenwriter for *Bread and Roses*, who lived in L.A. in the 1990s wrote about his meeting with the activists from the “Justice for Janitors” (also known as JFJ or J4J) campaign and learned about their stories, “Many of the cleaners had two jobs, and for those who worked weekends, sometimes three. Many were scared that their kids, if left unsupervised, would join the street gangs, but it was impossible to bring up a family on the income of one cleaning job” (Lavery 39). Latin American cleaners worn down by hard work joined the *Justice for Janitors* campaign that made the hiring companies back down, “Since then, the janitors have continued to organize, and following city-wide protests that enjoyed huge public support, they signed a master contract in April 2000 which has had a knock-off effect on other low-paid workers across LA County,” writes Lavery. JFJ is a part of the Service Employees

and hiring of “unskilled” immigrant labor to replace native workers. According to Sam Lowry, “the skilled textile jobs in Lawrence were mostly held by 'native-born' workers of English, German and Irish descent, about 2,500 of whom, in theory, belonged to the United Textile Workers, a section of the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL), although it is estimated only a couple of hundred of them were fully paid up by 1912. The unskilled workforce was made up mostly of Italian, French-Canadian, Portuguese, Slavic, Hungarian and Syrian immigrants.” (Lowry)

International Union and unites more than 250,000 cleaners and caretakers across the country. Their main campaign slogan is “One Industry, One Union, One Contract.” (“Justice for Janitors: A Look Back and a Look Forward: 24 Years of Organizing Janitors”). Tens of thousands of workers and their families now have health care due to this campaign. “It doesn’t change the world, but it transforms their lives” (Lavery 40). Thus, two historical immigrant workers’ strikes in 1912 and 1990 with large female representation served as a framework for the events of *Bread and Roses*. Loach, thus, anticipates our screening experience by laying out the main topics of the film: immigrant workers’ movement, unionization, janitorial work, and the role of women in janitorial service and in the union. In my film analysis, I will focus on how and why the cleaners build the union and how it affects immigrant female characters’ visibility in *Bread and Roses*.

Immigration from Mexico to the United States, devaluation of janitorial work, sexual abuse, and undocumented workers’ assumed invisibility (obedience) are the main issues that foreshadow the unionization of immigrant janitors in *Bread and Roses*. The film starts with a border crossing sequence as Maya is smuggled through the U.S.-Mexican border and reunites with her older sister Rosa who lives with her family in Los Angeles. Crossing the border “illegally,” Maya automatically transitions from a Mexican citizen to an abject figure of an undocumented female immigrant. Her work opportunities due to her undocumented status and gender are limited to “unskilled” occupations in the service sector. First, Maya takes a job as a waitress in a Latina bar but because of sexual harassment, she wants to be a cleaner in an office building like her sister. After Rosa

arranges her employment in a cleaning company, *Angel*, Maya becomes a part of the multi-racial janitors' team employed to clean downtown office buildings. Implying class hierarchy is a racial difference, the film portrays the office workers as white Americans dressed in suits in contrast to the janitorial team wearing uniforms. Before the working day starts, the janitors, dressed in green baggy uniforms gather in a windowless, harshly lit room, while their supervisor Perez (also of Latin American origin) watches them behind a glass wall. The uniform and cleaning responsibilities mark the janitors as the "abject," dirty bodies, making them invisible for office workers. When Maya and her friend Ruben kneel to clean the elevator, the office workers simply overstep them without saying a word. Ruben tells Maya: "For them we are invisible." Ruben's way to become visible is to enroll in a prestigious law school. He works as a janitor to save money for college. Loach thus establishes a miniature and schematic "capitalist society" inside the office building in which white Americans work in the upper floors, while immigrants occupy the marginal space in the basement.

An impulse of unionizing comes to the *Angel* janitors from outside, which I believe challenges the immigrant workers independence and agency.¹² Sam Shapiro, an organizer and a leader of the *Justice for Janitors* campaign in *Bread and Roses*, infiltrates the building bringing an idea of a workers' union. Noticed by Perez and the office building security, Sam tries to escape from the building. Maya helps Sam to escape hiding him in her trash cart, which emphasizes that Sam, the union activist who wants to unionize the janitors, is an unwanted and dangerous element in this building. Later on

¹² An opposite example is the film *North Country* (Niki Saro, 2005) in which the female protagonist Josey Aimes (Charlize Theron) appeals for collective action to oppose harassment at work and negotiate her working conditions.

Sam organizes several workers' meetings, encouraging janitors to organize. Portraying a collective workers' movement, *Bread and Roses* creates a contradictory image of the immigrants in relation to Sam as the Justice for Janitors leader. The film visually differentiates Sam as an individual from the mass of workers; Sam is filmed in close-up and medium close-up, and he often dominates the frame. The workers are shot in a pan camera movement, which constructs a homogenous, mass character of the janitors.

During the meetings Sam, as their leader, is placed higher than the workers. The protagonist Maya is not a leader but an active participant of the movement.

Controversially, she is in love with Sam who teaches her the basics of Marxist theory of workers' exploitation. The film, therefore, places a question of why Maya joined the union: because of her romantic interest or because of her strong affiliation with janitors.

Through Sam's propaganda, *Bread and Roses* explains how American capitalism, personified in the office-building owners, benefits from the underpayment of immigrant cleaners. He is self-confident speaking about the exploitation of janitors and the decrease of janitorial wages.¹³ To persuade the workers, Sam explains how the capitalist system works, drawing a simple scheme (we see the scheme in a close up.): the owners and tenants of the office building benefit from janitors' underpayment. However, he never mentions the immigrants' insecurity in comparison to the native-born Americans and their fear of deportation that make them work under bad conditions and without

¹³ According to SEIU (Service Employees International Union), "In 1983, the average janitor working in Los Angeles earned a salary of more than \$7.00 an hour and full family health insurance. But by 1986, wages dropped to \$4.50, and health care coverage had evaporated. Building owners were no longer hiring cleaners directly, and employers were starting to hire Latino immigrants and becoming very resistant to janitors' unionization efforts. So SEIU took action." (Justice for Janitors: A Look Back and a Look Forward: 24 Years of Organizing Janitors).

healthcare coverage. He employs traditional arguments about workers' exploitation avoiding (or ignoring) questions of race, gender, and citizenship, although the majority of janitors in front of him are immigrant and native-born ethnic minority women.

Overlooked by Sam, racial and gender aspects of cleaning, however, are central for understanding class exploitation and the process of unionizing/deunionizing.

According to research by Gavin Musynske on the SEIU's labor (Service Employees International Union) union called Local 399:

Many African Americans worked as janitors, and the majority of the Local 399 was African American. In the 1980s, Latino immigrants began to supply the labor to the janitorial workforce because they were willing to work for nonunion contractors for lower wages and worse conditions. The Local 399 traditionally had good representation of the African American janitors in the workforce; however they were now disconnected from the Latino community that made up the new workforce (Musynske).

Thus, native-born people of color and later immigrants have always provided cleaning service at low wages. White Americans could escape the drudgery of cleaning by paying someone else to do this task that they think is demeaning creating a system of race, class, and gender domination.

In fast growing Los Angeles, immigrants from Mexico and Central America supplied a non-union workforce for employers, replacing Black Americans. "It wasn't that [employers] would actually fire the blacks; [but] with attrition, the replacement pool was Latinos" (Waldinger 106). Cheap foreign-born workers were also more controllable

than unionized African American workers. Importantly, due to the wage decline, the gender representation in janitors' workforce has changed; more women took the janitorial jobs. As one of the union activists claims, early on, the majority of nonunion workers were women. Might it be a gender factor that influenced a decline in Local 399 union membership? *Bread and Roses* shows women on both sides of the movement; in the union and in strong opposition to the JFJ movement, but the film leaves room for discussion of women's participation in political movements led by male workers' demands rather than feminist demands.

Immigrant women and especially women of color constitute the majority of the janitors in *Bread and Roses* and take part in the Justice for Janitors movement. They also are shown as the main victims of sexual abuse and workers' rights abuse. For example, after one of the union meetings, the supervisor finds a scheme absentmindedly left by Sam. As a result, he fires the older janitor Berta who refuses to name the meeting organizers. Perez fires her despite the fact that Berta has been working for the *Angel* company for seventeen years sending remittances to her family in El Salvador and saving money for her daughter's wedding. Like any other immigrant worker, she is a disposable body. This event finally persuades the janitors to join the *Justice for Janitors* campaign.

A key moment of the film is a JFJ protest, organized and inspired by Sam, during a Hollywood celebrity party. The workers armed with vacuums interrupt the official event and make the Hollywood stars uncomfortable. Their action emphasizes not only their obvious presence but also a process of cleaning for others and a social hierarchy of foreign meaning dirty and native meaning clean. Like underground workers in Fritz

Lang's *Metropolis* who enter the city during their uprising, the janitors enter the upper world of Hollywood despite the ascribed subordination of the working class world and 'masterminds.' The TV news company broadcasts the janitors' strike and makes their protest visible to the American population. Thus, the film uses media, such as documentary and news, to disrupt the silence that surrounds immigrant workers. Additionally, workers themselves watch these images and see results of their strike on a TV screen as a confirmation of visibility of their struggle. After the strike, several janitors, including Maya and pregnant Dolores, are fired and replaced by new foreign female workers. To everyone's shock, Rosa is a traitor who gave the main union activists' names to Perez. The capitalist system of women's exploitation puts the sisters, Rosa and Maya, on the opposite sides of the protest movement.

Women, and Rosa one of them, constitute opposition against the union collective movement. Rosa, Maya's older sister, contradicts Sam saying that they are at the bottom of the society. Sam replies: "And we will stay there if we do nothing." Rosa is enraged: "Fat white college-boys! Don't dare to say 'we'!" Unlike Maya, Rosa is a legal resident and lives in her own house in Los Angeles. Still marked as an 'alien' by her low-status profession, she attempts to build a new life in the U.S. for her children. Sam's other opponent is a Russian janitor Marina who is afraid that protest actions would cost her the job. She claims that she had nothing in Russia, and now she has a job and can feed her kids. Marina sees employment as a janitor in the United States as an advantage itself. Unfortunately, we do not know her past. But we do know that in the 1990s' post-communist Russia experienced unemployment, hyperinflation, and low wages in the

public sector, and to Marina her life might be better in the U.S.

Several times throughout the film Loach employs family and children in particular, as the reason for women's opposition to collective actions. This is similar to what I have described in the previous chapter on border crossing narratives such as *Dirt* and *Amreeka*: children become the main reason for women's action. Obviously, Rosa and the Russian janitor Marina are family breadwinners. Providing for children is the argument that they employ to contradict Sam—a man without family or children to support. During a JFJ first meeting, Maya contradicts the Russian woman claiming that as janitors they have equal rights. Janitors support Maya and ask Sam to continue. This scene shows the first public meeting of janitors and union members which results in Sam's first success in unionizing and Maya's first conscious identification as a janitor. But most importantly, it reveals that Sam does not have arguments when it comes to individual workers like Rosa or Marina that oppose collective action.

Bread and Roses reflects the (in)visibility of the immigrant women workers on the mass and individual levels. While the JFJ campaign gains media attention, some women's lives still remain invisible. In a fight that takes place between two sisters, Maya learns that Rosa worked as a prostitute in the border town of Tijuana, Mexico, and later in the United States to support Maya and their mother. The scene starts when Maya comes home and sees Rosa ironing clothes. Rosa doing her domestic work is juxtaposed with Maya dressed in her uniform. Maya wants Rosa's attention and throws a piece of clothes on the floor. The action repeats several times. Finally, her offensive behavior enrages Rosa: "I've been whoring all my life, and I'm tired." Rosa discredits Maya's idealism,

telling her that she had sex with Perez to get Maya a cleaning job. For a long time, Maya was protected from a painful truth of her sister's life and felt morally superior through courageous participation in the Justice for Janitors campaign. Her sister's double life was invisible to Maya because of silencing, abjection, and the marginalizing of sex work in society. In this scene, Loach complicates the collective portrait of the janitor by distancing Rosa from the union movement as a victim and a traitor.

Invisibility and silencing of immigrant women through servitude, therefore, is established in *Bread and Roses* through the character of Rosa. Rosa's story is a drama of women's pauperization in developing countries. Teenage Rosa had to work as a prostitute to provide for her family in Mexico and in the United States because her father had left his wife, Rosa's mother, and two little daughters with no means of survival. Rosa juxtaposes family unity with working class solidarity because she has always managed alone seeking for social and economic integration in the United States. Similar to an earlier scene when Rosa opposes Sam, her family house becomes her stronghold. The janitors' union, as it is presented in the film, might solve problems of health insurance coverage and wage increase, but in long term it overlooks the gender aspects of service labor and, therefore, excludes workers such as Rosa and Marina.

Bread and Roses constantly mentions gendered issues such as pregnancy, miscarriage, children, unknown fathers, police violence against women, sexual exploitation, and single motherhood. In *Bread and Roses* a foreign migrant woman is a mother (Marina, Dolores, Berta) or a sex object (Maya), or both (Rosa). Introducing a strong female protagonist, Maya, the film, however, avoids making these issues central in

its discussion of the janitors' movement. Consequently, the JFJ campaign is represented in the film as a seemingly 'genderless,' unified workers' movement.

Maya becomes a primary actor in an immigrant political protest that contributes to the remaking of American society, contradicting Rosa's affiliation with an immobilized domestic space. The film then constitutes public and private (or domestic) spaces as spaces of progressive political action versus conservative opposition. Maya and *Justice for Janitors* belong to the public sphere, occupying the streets of Los Angeles, while Rosa belongs to the domestic space. Stuck between two influential figures, Sam and Rosa, she strives to find her own truth, which she finds in JFJ identifying as a janitor. Undocumented Maya reflects the immigrant janitors' hopes for recognition and acceptance in the United States. She sees herself as a part of an abjected social group whose rights do not match their contribution to the national wellbeing. Maya's character suggests a new scenario of foreign workers' empowerment through solidarity in the JFJ campaign. The film juxtaposes Maya's dreams of inclusion through union struggle with Rosa's approach of adaptation and adjustment through hardwork and conformity. *Bread and Roses* aims to show Justice for Janitors as a main social force that can empower janitors. However, the union, as a form of struggle, is not acceptable to all immigrant workers in the film.

3.5.2 "She Would Be My Mexico." Cleaning and Privilege in *Spanglish*

Spanglish follows the story of a Mexican live-in domestic worker Flor Moreno (Paz Vega) and her daughter Cristina (Shelbie Bruce). The narrator of the story is a grown-up Cristina who is applying to Princeton University. All committee members are

white women that read through a large amount of similar application essays written by female applicants. Cristina's story about her Mexican mother's work and her personal example of strength draws the committee's attention. From her essay, we learn that after Cristina's father had abandoned them, Flor and Cristina immigrated to America in the "Economy class," meaning: illegal border crossing. Similar to the already analyzed films *Dirt*, *Amreeka*, *Dancer in the Dark*, and *Bread and Roses*, the absence of a male figure (a father or a husband) through death, divorce, or family abandonment is a repetitive narrative in the films about female immigration that justifies and motivates woman's mobility. Left without protection and financial support of the husband, the female protagonist seeks better life opportunities abroad.

To raise her daughter properly, writes Cristina, her mother needed the security of "her own culture." By "her own culture," Cristina means a mixed Hispanic community of Los Angeles. Settling down in this Hispanic neighborhood of Los Angeles, Flor works two jobs getting paid a total of \$450 a week. She works at a dry cleaning station during the day and serves night shifts at a driving and traffic school. Both jobs are presented in short scenes. In the first scene, she works at the dry cleaning station rotating large piles of clothes. In the following night scene, she talks to the clients of the traffic school. The night scene transitions to Flor's home where Cristina microwaves tortillas following her instructions left in a short note which Flor ends with the words: "*Te quiero mami.*" Flor's third shift is her mother's work of love and care.

The opening sequences establish Flor's character as a loving mother who works hard to provide for her daughter's upbringing. For six years after her arrival in the United

States, Flor lives and works in the Hispanic neighborhood of Los Angeles and, as the result, she neither speaks nor understands English. According to Cristina, in this Hispanic community they were at “home,” within the United States’ territory but outside its “national” culture. Their immigrant status and the differences of language, ethnicity, and class exclude them from the dominant American culture. Cristina, however, speaks American English and Spanish, which signifies her possible belonging to both cultures.

Flor has to leave her night job to keep her “watchful eye” on her teenage daughter. Flor’s job opportunities, however, are still limited by the service sector. As a result, Flor finds a job as a domestic worker in an affluent white upper middle-class American family. Her daughter describes her new job as “working for Anglos,” emphasizing the notion of the “White America.” To attend a job interview with the Clasky family, Flor for the first time arrives in a district where white American families reside. During the job interview, Deborah Clasky (Téa Leoni), her new employer, announces to Flor: “You are gorgeous! You are gorgeous!” Deborah’s compliment of Flor’s physical beauty serves to emphasize her “exotic” body. It is difficult to imagine Deborah screaming: “You are gorgeous!” to a white maid. Later on, meeting Flor’s daughter, Deborah will say: “Look at this child! You can make a fortune on surrogate pregnancy.” She cannot think of Flor as an independent person, but only as a set of body functions ready for servitude and maternity. Deborah used to work for a design company but now she calls herself a “full-time mom.” Being a full-time mom is a privilege for Deborah as a rich white American woman who can choose between building a career and children. Besides, she can hire Flor, a Mexican woman, to help her around the house for six days a week, twelve hours a

day. For a weekly payment of only \$650 Flor serves as a maid and a nanny. Hiring Flor, friendly and educated Deborah contributes to the structural oppression of immigrant women:

In other words, hire a woman of color and pay her as little as possible to fulfill your housework duties and responsibilities. The most exploitative form of domestic service is maintained through systems of gender, class and racial domination. Thus, middle-class American women aim to “liberate” themselves by exploiting women of color — particularly immigrants in the underground economy, for long hours at relatively low wages, with no benefits. (Romero 128)

Deborah welcomes Flor as part of the Clasky family—an attitude that aims to cover women’s hierarchy but, in fact, reestablishes the power relationship between an employer and an employee. The Claskys’ household is not Flor’s new family house but a working place in which the Claskys dictate the rules. Domestic work, however, questions a distinction between work and the life of a domestic worker.

Representation of domestic work in *Spanglish*, a romantic comedy, is glamorized: we see no dirt, garbage, or anything unpleasant that would make the spectator shrink. Flor’s first task is to make coffee for Deborah. A shiny chrome coffee machine is shown in a close-up (PoV shot). The coffee machine looks like a miniature sci-fi space ship with multiple buttons and pipes, and Flor sighs in confusion. Her confusion reflects her foreignness and strangeness in relation to an American “modernized” household. This portrayal of foreignness repeats the scene from the film *El Norte* in which Rosa, an indigenous Mayan woman from Guatemala, learns how to use a washing machine and a

dryer under her employer's guidance. Confused by complicated instructions, Rosa washes clothes by hand in a kitchen sink and lets it dry on the house terrace instead of loading the washer with clothes. The American employer considers hand wash almost barbaric, but she does not consider it barbaric to hire the Guatemalan woman as domestic help. Another parallel between *El Norte* and *Spanglish* is the employers' familiarity. "Please, call me Helen," insists Rosa's employer. "Please, call me Deborah," asks Deborah Clasky. Politeness and familiarity mask their "unquestionable ontological superiority as a Western, white female" ("Palatable Foreignness" 53). By employing an immigrant domestic worker, Deborah and Helen confirm their superiority and privilege. This notion proves Romero's claim that domestic work must be studied because it challenges the concept of women's "sisterhood." While it is true that all women share a burden of domestic work, women from the upper classes can employ immigrant women to do their domestic work. Domestic work, therefore, represents the intersectionality of class, race, and gender oppression.

Flor's job responsibilities are more than vague. As Marciniak points out in "Palatable Foreignness," Flor is a domestic worker who never cleans ("Palatable Foreignness" 200). She makes coffee, arranges flowers, cooks, and serves Mexican food, carries shopping bags, takes care of children, Bernice (Sarah Steele) and Georgie (Ian Hyland), and talks to Deborah's mother Evelyn (Cloris Leachman). Sometimes Flor does things not required of her. For example, she spends an early morning redesigning Clasky's daughter's jacket to make her happy and more confident about her body. In a parallel editing that shows two actions that happen simultaneously in different spaces we

see Deborah Clasky running; her fit body and physical strength are emphasized. The sequence transitions to a close-up of Flor's hands that unstitch Bernice's jacket. Bernice tells Flor "Lovely way to start the day! The world's most true Mexican learns her first sentence and uses it to urge me grant my weight into a..." Thus, the teenager Bernice already recognizes the difference between Flor, 'the world's most true Mexican' and herself, the true American, as the difference between an employer and an employee. Bernice stops sobbing, unable to find words to describe her appreciation for Flor's work. Obviously, the Clasky family has money to buy Bernice another jacket, but Flor's manual work of sewing implies motherly quality, care, and warmth that the girl needs and does not receive from her self-absorbed mother. An incident with a tight jacket makes Flor learning English. Consequently, her first English words are: "Just try it on." For \$650 of weekly payment, Flor becomes a substitute mother, substitute daughter, and a substitute wife replacing Deborah and temporarily taking responsibility for the Clasky family.

Marciniak claims that the film avoids portraying Flor's abjection. I would partly disagree with this claim because through employment of a Mexican domestic Deborah Clasky, "a full-time mother," performs her class and racial privilege. She does not need Flor to clean; Deborah needs this Hispanic woman's *presence* in her house as the approval of her ability to be a woman and a good housekeeper. It is obvious in the fact that Flor does not understand English; communication between Deborah and Flor is always one-sided. Deborah and other members of the family can give her orders. Additionally, she becomes a perfect listener who understands on an emotional level but who does not contradict, argue, or talk about herself. When the family rents a beach

summerhouse, Flor becomes a live-in domestic. Arguing Flor's opposition to this idea, Deborah says: "I'm sorry, my friend, but this is what *I need*." Moving in with the Claskys, Flor and her daughter Cristina become involved in the family issues. She loses her privacy, her free time, and independence.

Difference between paid and unpaid reproductive work, and especially the childcare, gradually becomes indistinguishable in *Spanglish*. Judgmental and strict to her own children, Deborah Clasky is charmed by Cristina, especially by the girl's admiration for her. From Cristina's point of view, the beach house is a paradise on earth. "You are the most amazing white woman that I've ever met," Cristina complements Deborah. As "an amazing white woman," Deborah buys her presents and arranges her acceptance to a prestigious private school. Flor, who sees that Cristina is influenced by the Claskys, quits the job and asks her daughter a question: "Is what you want for yourself to become someone very different than me?" This is a difficult identity question that a bilingual and bicultural Cristina has to answer. Her application for Princeton signifies that Cristina inherits her mother's Mexican culture, but she also wants to get access to prestigious and privileged college education.

In *Spanglish*, Los Angeles is visually divided into Hispanic and "white Anglos" districts. Inhabitants of the Hispanic community are those who work for the "white Anglos." Division of the two areas, therefore, is based on class, race, and citizenship, which Cristina calls, vaguely, 'culture.' "Privately owned oceans as people's backyards" are juxtaposed with Flor's *barrio* in Los Angeles. Deborah uses the word *barrio*, meaning a low-class neighborhood, a slam. Mixing two communities by bringing a live-

in *domestica* to the wealthy neighborhood leads to the family drama. The conflict is resolved only when Flor deliberately quits the job and leaves the Clasky family house and returns to the *barrio*, taking a bus trip that represents a distance between the two neighborhoods.

Like many films on immigration, *Spanglish* suggests a unique scenario of the female immigrant's liberation from servitude. The story of Flor becomes a topic for Cristina's application essay for Princeton. She approaches her object of study, her Mexican mother, from a double position of an outsider and an insider. She codes her mother as a Mexican, writing "she would be my Mexico" and juxtaposing Flor with the Claskys (especially Deborah Clasky), "the white Anglos." However, her mother's story of immigration and servitude constructs Cristina's identity as a Mexican-American woman. In her everyday work of raising her daughter, Flor represents and translates traditions of Mexican culture. Exploring and narrating her past, Cristina attempts to overcome the limits to her professional development placed by her Mexican origin and her gender.

3.6. *Summary*

In this chapter, I have discussed representations of immigrant female service workers by focusing specifically on janitorial and domestic work to answer how and why the immigrant female cinematic character became synonymous with the cheap service worker. As a precondition of analysis of servitude in contemporary films, I have examined the difficulties of immigrant women's social and economic integration into the American and European labor-markets. Reflecting on gendered and racial aspects of

service professions, I have discussed feminist discourses of reproductive labor. In my film analysis, I have looked specifically at the films *Bread and Roses* and *Spanglish* to research the issues of visibility of immigrant cleaners, social hierarchy, womanhood, and servitude in cinematic narratives.

In contemporary American and European cinema we can find direct correlations between immigrant women's representation in service professions and the overrepresentation of service professions such as janitorial work, domestic work, and babysitting in films with immigrant female characters in leading and secondary roles. However, while service workers in secondary roles emphasize the privilege of those who they serve for, primarily white middle-class people, service workers in leading roles are portrayed as individuals who for various reasons work in servitude. Prioritizing the female protagonists' point of view, the cinema contextualizes servitude within economic, social, and political conditions of women's immigration.

The discussion of feminist theories of reproductive labor showed that reproductive labor is central to the analysis of immigrant women's employment in the service sector. Due to the Women's Liberation movement and feminist critiques of reproductive labor in the twentieth century, family reproduction finally has been recognized as work. Women, however, remain the main provider of family reproduction services from childbirth and childcare to cleaning, despite their integration into the labor markets. As we see in *Spanglish*, some native-born upper-class women can share their burden of domestic labor, both in paid and unpaid form, with immigrant women who are willing to sell their 'women's skills.' Therefore, *Spanglish* manifests Romero's statement

against liberal feminist “sisterhood.” women are not a homogenous group, and some women exploit the labor of their “sisters.” The immigrant women employed in service jobs face intersectional oppression based on their class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

It is difficult to underestimate the symbolism of cleaning in films about immigrants and immigrant women, in particular. Cleaning as the process of elimination of dirt is hidden, covered, and suppressed in modern society. Those who are subjected to clean dirt become associated with dirt. Cleaning dirt, consequently, is seen as a great misfortune. In my analysis of *Spanglish* and *Bread and Roses*, I focused not on the strong symbolism of dirt or cleaning, but on the act of cleaning *for* someone.¹⁴ Both in janitorial and domestic work, cleaning reveals class, gender, and racial structures of servitude: Mexican protagonists clean for white middle-class Americans. This has two important implications. First, the protagonists’ employment opportunities are limited to the service sector, and cleaning becomes the ‘best’ option among many others (waitress, dry cleaning) regarding payment and even working conditions. Second, the physical act of cleaning for others – the Clasky family in *Spanglish* or the office workers in *Bread and Roses* – lead to the protagonists’ increase of self-awareness. As a result, the protagonists act to improve their life and working conditions. The films portray the immigrant women as independent, dignified, and proud, which challenge the common representation of female immigrants as misfortunate victims or evil intruders.

¹⁴ For analysis of cleaning in cinema from a transnational feminist perspective I recommend “Foreign Women and Toilets” and “Palatable Foreignness” by Karazyna Marciniak. To learn more about the symbolism and role of ‘dirt’ in modern society, read *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts* by Zygmunt Bauman.

Presenting strong women protagonists occupied in cleaning professions, *Bread and Roses* and *Spanglish* attempt to undermine the social stigma that surrounds cleaning professions. Maya and her co-workers proudly identify as janitors and demand a wage increase for their work. Loach portrays “feminization of migration” in a rare framework of the labor union movement that aims to improve working conditions and increase income of the janitors. *Spanglish* portrays Flor as a maternal figure who takes a domestic job to provide for her family and spend more time with her daughter Cristina. Flor’s story empowers her daughter and becomes her inspiration. It is not the cleaning itself that is wrong, but the modern culture that perceives and frames the cleaning of dirt as an inferior and demeaning occupation.

Unlike films and popular shows that dehumanize the female immigrant figure, treating her only as a servant (a mere function of service), the films with transnational women protagonists show that the ‘immigrant woman’ is a socially constructed image that homogenizes women’s lives and personalities. The films about female service workers avoid naturalizing immigrant women’s occupation in domestic, janitorial, or other service work. Although *Spanglish* associates paid service work with maternity, which comforts the image of a social abjection of a domestic worker, it does not normalize Flor’s mistreatment. Throughout the film, Flor and other characters question different aspects of her work, such as the transition from live-out to live-in domestic, Deborah’s objectification of Flor, her ignorance towards Flor’s personhood, and an unclear division between the life and work of a domestic worker.

One of the complications that the films about immigrant service workers produce is that by juxtaposing white middle-class Americans with immigrant workers, they further ontologize and preserve the image of the immigrant woman as an accented, dark-skinned, often Hispanic woman. A social construct of the 'immigrant woman' as the low-paid, low-status, gendered figure that dominates media, gets visual representation in the cinema. While the filmmakers attempt to deconstruct the stereotypes and clichés that surround immigration from the so-called 'developed' countries and challenge social fears, they nevertheless contribute to the imagery of immigration, which is often based on dominant, already stereotyped modes of representation.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have discussed representations of the transnational women protagonists in contemporary American and European cinema. I have explored the process of ‘feminization of migration’ in cinema and the shift from the male to the female point of view in narratives of immigration. Expanding Trinh T. Minh-ha’s idea of the alienation of a traveling woman from her family, gender, and society, I have shown that women migrants challenge the norms ascribed by their gender, families, and societies. Adopting the transnational feminist perspective, I have analyzed the impact of the physical act of crossing the border in cinema on the protagonist’s identity. The other major topic discussed in this research is the problematic representation of immigrant female workers involved in service occupations.

I will further discuss four main points of my cinema research about female migration. First, I argue that hybrid identities of transnational women protagonists in cinema are socially constructed phenomena caused by institutionally organized structures of alienation and exploitation. Second, I discuss the intersection of identity politics and reproductive labor theories. Third, I focus on motherhood as the foundation of the transnational female identity. In the last section, I discuss the possible impact of the films that depict female migration on society.

4.1 Transnational Protagonists

Throughout the thesis, I used the term *transnational* to discuss the hybrid and fragmented identities and subjectivities of women protagonists. The global, transnational mobility is a popular topic exploited in tourism, pedagogy, business commercials, and

work of humanitarian organizations. The ideas of crossing the borders, traversing the borders, or transcending the borders have become increasingly popular over the last decade. Global economy is based on the assumption that money, knowledge, businesses, and NGOs should move freely across the national borders. However, when women from the so-called developing countries leave their homes and migrate to Europe and the U.S., they are confronted with hostile immigration policies and unregulated service labor markets. They are called ‘illegal aliens,’ undocumented aliens, legal residents, strangers, foreigners, and immigrants. These different categories are used to classify the immigrants as strangers and emphasize their non-belonging to the host national space. From the early film, *El Norte*, to more recent narratives, *Amreeka* and *Illegal*, the women film protagonists who migrate from the so-called developing to developed countries anticipate acceptance and acknowledgment of their personhood. They seek a better life in a host country and aspire to find a place they could call home, but experience hostility and rejection. This unfulfilled wish for home, acceptance, and integration in their new society produces fragmentation and dispersement of the protagonist’s identity and a confused sense of (non)belonging. Dolores, the protagonist of *Dirt*, changes her idea of home through the conflict with her son Rudy. After visiting El Salvador, she returns to the U.S., which she now calls ‘home.’ The border crossing memories play a crucial role in her personhood.

Confronted with new social and economic relationships in the host country, foreign-born women join the low-status, socially constructed group of *immigrant women*. The politics of immigration and naturalization in the U.S. and Europe subject foreign-

born women to employment in the low-status, low-waged service sector. The society considers the jobs occupied by the immigrant women as dirty, unskilled or low-skilled, and, therefore, undesirable for the native-born population. I want to reiterate Romero's notions that cleaning professions and other gendered service professions are not inherently dirty. The analysis of films *Spanglish*, *Bread and Roses*, *Amreeka*, and *Dirt* has showed that immigrant women from different countries work in low-waged service jobs and often struggle against dehumanization and exploitation. With an exception of *Bread and Roses*, most of the films show the transnational protagonists' individual struggle for the right to live, work, and raise children in a host country.

My research of the transnational film protagonists aims to show that women migrants should be more focused on in today's discourses about migration in cinema. As I argued elsewhere, a growing number of women immigrate to developed countries alone or with their children. We cannot stop or control this process because the capitalist system in Europe and the United States is heavily dependent on a supply of cheap labor of immigrant women. Moreover, many native-born women in the developed countries can seek careers outside of the home due to the labor of foreign-born women. As the part of capitalist ideology, media and popular culture comfort the viewer by producing the comic image of the female accented servant. Turning the image of a Latina maid into a cliché, they normalize it. The American and European filmmakers who choose to fight against these racist images by producing alternative portraits of foreign-born women, still work within the limits of the capitalist system of film production. It means that the

feminist film researchers, including myself, have to further explore and question the images of immigration, womanhood, and their intersection.

4.2 Transnationality and Labor Migration in Cinema

In this thesis, I have attempted to bring together two fields of study: transnational film studies and feminist theory of reproductive labor. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue, there is a continuing discussion between the transnational feminist cultural studies and Marxist theories. They suggest that Marxist theories need to utilize gender “as an analytic category and to acknowledge transnational patriarchal links of culture and capital as important reactionary interests” (Grewal and Kaplan 361). In fact, feminist Marxists already introduced gender to their analysis of capitalism. In the second chapter, I have applied the Marxist term *reproductive labor* to explore the construction of transnational female identity through employment in low-wage, low-status jobs.

Despite the fact that all the female immigrant characters are employed in service jobs, feminization of migration in cinema is not limited to economic migration alone. The notion of economic migration is, in fact, not enough to describe the complexity of women’s life choices. In films such as *Amreeka* and *Dirt*, we see examples of the so-called ‘civic migration’ when immigration become a political and social decision. Muna, the protagonist of *Amreeka*, has a job and a house in Palestine. Her son Fadi attends a private school. However, from Muna’s point of view, Fadi has better opportunities in the United States than in Palestine. In *Amreeka*, family security and well-being challenge patriotism and the sense of national belonging based on the country of origin. Her decisions are not driven by financial reasons. Dolores, the protagonist of *Dirt*, immigrates

to the United States for family reunification, but later on becomes a domestic worker. We cannot explain her return to the United States as migration for strictly economic reasons: she has a private house and a family in El Salvador that could ensure her a sustainable life there.

Besides family reunification and civic migration, the films such as *El Norte*, *Illegal*, and *Dancer in the Dark* question the distinction between political refugeeism and economic migration. The characters of *El Norte* flee the Guatemalan village escaping the persecution during the Guatemalan Civil War. They are seeking safety and security in the North and join the labor market of cheap immigrant labor in the United States. Often the female immigrants escape their country of origin to seek a better life in the West, but their life in the developed countries is far from the glossy image that Western Europe and the United States promote through movies and commercials. These and other examples show that cinema portrays individual lives and personal dramas of women within the mass phenomenon of the feminization of migration.

Visibility and representation are important positive consequences of the growing number of films with transnational women protagonists. (In)Visibility of the women immigrants in the American and European society is one of the main issues raised in contemporary cinema about immigration. Visibility and invisibility of immigrant women in relation to the national space, national border, and national law reflect the intersectionality of class, race, and gender in modern society. But the growing number of films about immigrant women does not automatically change the politics of silencing and invisibility. Most of these films pose questions about immigrant women's exploitation

and rights' abuse but provide no answers. While the immigrant women protagonists join the union, escape from the detention centers, get fake or real documents to cross the border, work double shifts, or sacrifice their life for their only child, society has barely changed its attitude towards migration and people marked as foreigners by their accent, citizenship, or color of skin.

The films about transnational service female workers visualize the global chain of care which sustains the capitalist system. Service professions, cleaning in particular, prevail in cinema about immigrant women, while babysitting, laundering clothes, janitorial service and fast food restaurant work are rarely represented as the protagonist's occupation in mainstream cinema, especially if the protagonist is a native-born woman. In contemporary cinema, cleaning work is used as a social marker related to the protagonist's race and gender. The filmmakers who depict the protagonists employed in cleaning aim to challenge the clichéd and simplified image of a 'foreign domestic,' but they also contribute to the controversial imagery of the immigrant domestic workers and janitors.

Women characters in traditional narratives are determined by their relationship with a man. The films about transnational women, however, show that women undertake the male role as the head of a family due to the process of feminization of migration. Women as the main family economic providers change the methods of women's representation. It is too early, however, to celebrate for victory of women's liberation from patriarchal norms in cinema. While women migrants in developed countries represent a heterogeneous group that significantly challenges the perception of

citizenship, nationality, and 'womanhood,' it is difficult to transform ideologies formed and preserved in patriarchal societies. In many cultures, a woman's body and the national border are interrelated because a threat to a woman was perceived as a threat to a nation. Women were kept inside the national borders while men had to protect them from the dangers that came from the outside. Since women increasingly cross the national borders, the rhetoric of female mobility is changing as well. While immigrant women undertake the traditional male role as breadwinner, the emphasis is often made not only on their economic independence, but also on their strong family affiliation. Although women actively integrate into Western labor-markets and become family heads, they remain, first of all, home keepers. The female protagonists' achievements are viewed and depicted in terms of their families' prosperity by the filmmakers. In this regard, immigrant women until today remain the prisoners of their material female body and of ahistorical understanding of maternity and womanhood.

Why are the filmmakers persistent in their representation of immigrant women as mothers? To some degree, women's border mobility is justified if it is performed for strong family reasons. If an immigrant impoverished woman from a 'developing country' leaves her children behind the border, she must do it for the sake of children, not to fulfill her personal interest or professional growth. Otherwise, she would be considered a bad mother. Border mobility, therefore, emphasizes the difference in social perception and evaluation of border movement based on gender. Transnational women's migration is excused in Western cinema when immigrant women *bring* their family with them across the border, literally or by sending remittances.

4.3 Transnational Motherhood and Family

Maternity is thought as a foundation of womanhood and female identity that exists across cultures. Being a woman is tied up to the ability to be a mother, and this connection seemed to be absolute. Global mobility of women and their children, defined as feminization of migration, impacts established concepts of womanhood and maternity. In the narratives of female immigration, children often become women's ultimate *raison d'être* for immigration. While *woman* is no longer connected with *wife*, she is still *mother*. American and European cinemas risk being entrapped in "a single story" of female immigration as a story of a self-sacrificing motherhood.¹⁵ Multiple cinematic narratives of immigration are needed to build a more detailed and complex image of immigration than we have today.

Despite a common idea that ability to have children defines a "woman," motherhood differentiates rather than unites real women in global world. Being a single immigrant mother is different from being a single native-born American or French mother. Foreign working mothers are not blamed for their employment because they work to provide for their children; their employment is justified and even praised. The society perceives their employment as a continuation of woman's traditional role as a mother. On the contrary, native-born women's employment, whose goal is to pursue a career and financial success at the price of their children, is denounced in the patriarch society.

¹⁵ Here I use the concept of "the single story" introduced by a Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story."

While cinema portrays motherhood as an expression of woman's nature, it also introduces new types of character—immigrant children. Children as the film characters are often overlooked in cinema until it is a children movie. Cinema about female immigration, on the other hand, depicts children of various ages and of both sexes as individual, well-developed characters. Analyzing the film *Babel*, the editors of *Transnational Feminism and in Film and Media* emphasize children as main victims of transnational mobility:

While the film's criticism of the celebratory rhetoric of global mobility is not new and has already been explored by other filmmakers, its intensity is particularly disturbing because the most vulnerable victims of the border crossings and transnational interactions in this story are children. The narrative connects four families to one another through the themes of violence, terror, and border crossings (*Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* 5)

Similar to *Babel*, films about women migrants, such as *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dirt*, *Polish Wedding*, *Spanglish*, *Amreeka*, *Illegal*, portray children as witnesses and participants of border crossing mobility. Children of transnational protagonists were born outside the host country and crossed the border with their mothers sharing the status of "aliens." Most of the protagonists' children grew up in the host country and were exposed to its culture and language from early years. Rudi in *Dirt* and Cristina in *Spanglish*, for instance, represent the examples of undocumented Americans with double identities. While Cristina 'masters' her double identity by exploring and narrating her Mexican mother's story, Rudy has a troubled relationship with his Salvadorian past. The national

border that they have crosses in their early childhood impact their lives in the American society.

4.4 Films and Society

Feminization of migration is a complex social phenomenon produced by a globalized world economy. Foreign women's mass employment in low-waged jobs raised questions about their ability for social and economic integration that was of particular convenience for anti-immigrant propaganda. Systematic attacks on immigration to the United States and Western Europe take form of anti-immigration rallies or reforms in legislation influencing lives of thousands of immigrants and their families. In this regard, fiction cinema about immigration with its power of storytelling and emotional involvement of the spectators might contribute to the process of rethinking the concepts of nation, ethnicity, and citizenship:

If cultural representations intervene in collective beliefs, then art, media, and music clearly influence the ways the experience of migration is articulated and recalled, and thus directly and indirectly impact the development of public policy. These discourses not only present experiences and attitudes, but also create values that operate in shifting cultural and political environments (Davis, Fisher-Hornung and Kardux 2)

In the process of relativizing and multiplying of immigrant female identity, motherhood emerges as a stabilizing core of female subjecthood. Maternal subjectivity substitutes transnational female identity. Through maternal figure, cinema pays tribute to reproduction as the foundation of human existence. Cinema of migration that traditionally

focused on a male protagonist, finally has acknowledged that woman's work had been overlooked and requires representation. Consequently, a transnational motherhood has become a possible transitional form of migrant characters' subjectivity.

Presented in cinema, women's experiences of reproductive work reveal structures of institutionalized abjection that reproduces immigrant women workers as the underpaid low-status social group. To such practices of institutionalized abjection we can attribute categorization of immigrants into legal and illegal (or documented/undocumented, *Dirt*), militarization of the Mexican-American border zone (*Dirt*, *El Norte*), increased security measures in airports and other public places (*Amreeka*), and persecution of the undocumented workers (*El Norte*, *Dirt*, *Bread and Roses*). These measures create an atmosphere of fear that surrounds issues of immigration and criminalizes undocumented immigrants. Consequently, these processes lead to the dehumanization of the migrant women justifying their bad working conditions, detention, and deportation as shown in *Bread and Roses* and *Dirt*. Films about female immigrants disclosed that supply of immigrant female labor from developed to developing countries did not impact low social status of reproductive work. Immigrant women from Eastern European, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries replace native-born women and ethnic minorities doing domestic work and other kinds of service work. In *Loin de 16e*, for instance, Latina woman Anna replaces her French employer in her home because the price of Anna's labor is cheaper than her employer's labor. Doing extra work, Anna does not spend with her own child. Instead, she helps her employer to reproduce the employer's family. In long term, Anna and other immigrant female workers' labor reproduce class, race, and

gender structure of capitalist society. The place of undocumented immigrant woman from Global South at the bottom of social hierarchy determines other forms of economic subordination. But immigrant reproductive labor, as *Bread and Roses'* Justice for Janitors campaign shows, also creates preconditions for social change.

Despite the social abjection of women migrants on economic and political levels, contemporary cinema, however, avoids victimization of the protagonists. On the contrary, it creates various forms of main characters' opposition and resistance to their alienation and exploitation. Cinema represents women workers' resistance in its various forms and practices that confront the institutionalized anti-immigration policies and structural forms of abjection and degradation of foreign women. In Trinh Minh-ha's words, "Democracy remains an everyday fight and a constant border crossing." Transnational women who immigrate to Europe and the U.S. do not wait for policies to change but the society we live in must acknowledge that the global economy is based on cheap labor of millions of women who left their homes to find a better life abroad. They are the citizens of a growing transnational community that exists across the limits of one culture, one country, and one language.

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