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Can “Roma” Teach Trump’s America the Value of Compassion?

Staying in Santiago, Chile, at the moment, I see echoes and reflections of Cleo – the servant at the heart of Alfonso Cuarón’s wondrous film Roma – everywhere. Cuarón’s consummate recreation of his Mexico City childhood in the early 1970s has garnered 10 Oscar nominations and is a favourite for the top prizes later this month – including best picture, best actress, for Yalitza Aparicio who plays Cleo, and best director for Cuarón.

I see Cleo in the maids who trudge to work at seven in the morning after two hours of gruelling travel from the outskirts of the city. They hurry along so they can make a hot breakfast for their employers. I see Cleo in the caretaker who spends night after night sitting with an octogenarian friend who is dying of cancer. I see Cleo in the women who sweep the floors of a nearby hospital and those who serve the food at a cafeteria in the civil registry office. I see her in the female workers who water the municipal gardens in the morning and pick up the trash in the afternoons.

The film reminds us of all the Cleos who dream of coming to the US, fleeing from violence and exploitation

Primarily, though, I see Cleo, as Cuarón does, in the nanas. This is the euphemistic term here for domestic servants, the word that serves as a way of pretending they are part of the family rather than paid servants who can be fired at the drop of a hat. Each Chilean Cleo is a bulwark of the home, scrubbing and cooking and shopping and, above all, attending to the children: showering them with affection, comforting them when they are sad, celebrating their successes. In Cuarón’s masterpiece (full disclosure: we have been friends for many years), Cleo’s selfless devotion culminates in a poignant, shattering scene, where

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she saves two of the children under her care by plunging into the sea to rescue them, despite not knowing how to swim. Like audiences around the world, I was intensely moved by that finale. Digging deep into my response, I realised that the image of an indigenous woman entering forbidden waters resonated with me in a particular way.

When we visit Chile, my wife and I stay in a house we own in a comunidad, a condominium for educated professionals built on the land of an old hacienda in the foothills of Santiago. One of the delights is a small swimming pool and its icy-cold water, perfect for escaping the fierce summer heat of the southern hemisphere. One of the rules that govern the use of the pool is that servants and their progeny cannot refresh themselves in it. This regulation was put in place many years ago because of reckless behaviour by the adolescent son of the groundskeeper. It created quite a stir when it was first enforced, with several of the residents (including me and my wife) protesting against this prohibition.

It seemed unfair to the nanas, who would swelter under the sun while the kids they were supervising frolicked and splashed around. That parents would trust these women with the lives of their offspring but not allow them into the communal water was not only cruel but smacked of something more ominous. Fuelling this flagrant discrimination were prejudices of race and class that are prevalent all across Latin America, even among those professing liberal views. For those who are well-to-do, the poor can do the dirty work as long as their dirty bodies don't sully the supposedly pristine lives of their privileged employers. As the saying goes in the United States: not in my backyard.

Roma is based partly on memories of Cuarón's Mexican barrio of yesteryear. Viewed from Chile, it comes across as an indictment of the hypocrisy and blindness of the elites that today govern this country and so many other countries of the region, including the United States.

The film reminds us of all the Cleos who dream of going to the US, fleeing from the sort of violence and exploitation subtly alluded to by Cuarón. In the background, one senses the urban crises and the rural catastrophes that fuel Mexico's inequalities and which led to a massive exodus of the population. Once they manage to make it across the US border, millions of avatars of Cleo – as invisible and neglected as in Chile – keep the nation safe and affluent and healthy. They clean and cook and care for the sick and the elderly and, of course, for the children. They do so with love; what other word is there to use?

The word for love in Spanish is, of course, amor. And it seems significant, and maybe even deliberate, that amor is what you get if you spell Roma backwards: a love sadly lacking on our merciless planet today. Roma and the word amor, which it contains and

hides, ask us how it can be possible that Cleo, the character, can cross effortlessly into the States, appearing on so many cinema screens across the country, while her real-life sisters are met with teargas and threats and insults. Yes, Aparicio, the actor who so touchingly portrays that servant, is feted and nominated for major awards. But there is no red carpet for any of the women who care for other people's children with such devotion.

The Cleos of Chile and Mexico and the US, and so many other nations, are only requesting, after all, to be met with a measure of the amor that they lavish on us daily; and silently hoping, perhaps, we might someday invite them into the welcoming waters of our existence.