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**“Nunca Volverás a Sonreír”:   
A Critique of *Roma’s* Representations of Indigeneity, Gender, and Class**

By

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April 10, 2020

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# **Acknowledgments**

Tiara Na’puti – I went into Dr. Na’puti’s office hours, shy and hoping she would be willing to be my thesis advisor. She agreed to be my thesis advisor and she has been the most valuable, uplifting, and wise mentor I have had. I am extremely humbled and grateful for her extensive feedback, and consistent support. Dr. Na’puti has read through numerous drafts, and even helped me check my grammar in Spanish! Dr. Na’puti has taught me so much, given me so much confidence in my capabilities, and has become a mentor and a role model to me.

Jamie Skerski – I thank Dr. Skerski for her leadership within the Undergraduate Communication Department as well as for her experience and knowledge. I especially thank Dr. Skerski for believing in me and giving me permission to write an honors thesis. I am so honored and happy to be given the opportunity.

Jessica Ordaz – I thank Dr. Ordaz for generously dedicating her time and energy. Dr. Ordaz has been a wonderful professor and I have learned so much from her on Chicanx studies. I thank her for her feedback on my project.

Cindy White – Dr. White gave myself and my fall semester thesis classmates much guidance over the thesis process. She has been such a kind, dedicated, and knowledgeable professor. I thank her for helping us throughout the thesis process, bringing us treats, and calming our anxieties over the thesis process.

My thesis classmates – Building a community helped the thesis process and gave each of us a sense of “we’re in this together.” I thank them for always being willing to bounce ideas off of each other and the fun we had.

La Familia de los Diaz y Jackson – Navigating university has not been easy, especially being first generation (alongside my primos). I’m so thankful to have such a supportive system within my family. I thank mi familia for all of their confianza en mi to support and urge me to attend university as well as reminding me that I do have a place in academia.

# **Abstract**

The purpose of this project is to understand how Cleo’s representation in the film, *Roma*, signals Mexico’s relationship to indigeneity as well as gendered violence and colonization. As a prominent character in the film, Cleo shows how dominant ideologies and narratives are enforced in everyday interactions. To better understand how these ideologies are reinforced and how indigeneity is represented in Mexican media, this study utilizes a proposed Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical criticism (ILRR) framework to examine intersectional articulations of identity. The ILRR framework allows rhetorical scholars to critique and examine representations of indigeneity, race, class, and gender within Mexican media.

***Keywords:*** machismo, Indigeneity, machista, marianismo, Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical criticism (ILRR), *Roma,* Mexico

**“Nunca Volverás a Sonreír”:   
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# **Chapter 1: Centering & Literature Review**

**Introducción**

Mexico is a land of complex histories and a country marred by colonization. To grasp the complexity of Indigenism in Mexico, there needs to be a fundamental understanding that Mexico has violently displaced and conquered their Indigenous peoples. By 1800, Spaniards had colonized Tenochtitlan through aggression, violence, and exploitation of Mexicas (Casteneda, 2017).[[1]](#footnote-1) The Spaniards referred to Tenochtitlan as colonial New Spain from 1800 until 1810, when colonial New Spain fought for independence and became the sovereign nation of Mexico.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since the Spaniards colonization of Tenochtitlan, Mexicas were repeatedly told to adhere to a hegemonic, colonialist ideology that there is a inferiority in being Indigenous (Casteneda, 2017). This has resulted in Mexicans having a strained relationship to, and with, indigeneity. Our familias proudly share stories of our abuelas indigenas and yet, because of colonization it is common for Mexicanos to be disconnected from or even to deny their Indigenous ancestries.[[3]](#footnote-3) The plot and the main character, Cleo, in the 2018 film, *Roma* directed by Alfonso Cuarón exemplifies Mexico’s history of gendered and Indigenous violence, colonization, and classism.

Within this project, I will analyze the film, *Roma*, as a rhetorical artifact that critically illustrates how Mexicans have internalized colonization through the nation-state’s culture of hierarchy and hegemonic ideologies of race gender and class. The protagonist of the film, Cleo, is an Indigenous woman of the Mixtec peoples who is a domestic worker for a rich, white-passing Mexican family.[[4]](#footnote-4) Centering the film on Cleo shows how race, class, and gender hierarchies are compounded in the, “multiracial working class” (Belkhir and Bernett, 2001, p.168-169). Released in 2018, Cuarón’s black and white filmis set in Mexico during the 1970s. Cuarón highlights the power dynamics surrounding race, class, and gender through his use of cinematography. *Roma* also emphasizes racial hierarchy within Mexico by using subtitles that include the Mixtec language in brackets when the audio is in either Spanish or English. *Roma* is largely characterized by depicting Cleo in relation to the other characters in the film —the family she works for and their two children, her boyfriend, her Mixtec friend, and the other maids she interacts with. This project considers how *Roma* “accentuates contradictions of ethnicity, race, and class” through an analysis of Cleo’s positionality and communication within the film’s broader social and political context (Belkhir and Bernett, 2001, p.167).

*Roma* exemplifies life for the working class and makes strong arguments about how Indigenous women in Mexico’s working class are poorly treated. It is crucial to understand the cultural history of Mexico and how Mexicanos perform race and gender as well as how Mexico and Mexicanx claim or deny their Indigeneidad.[[5]](#footnote-5) Since the formation of the Mexican nation-state, Latinx coloniality has attempted to erase Indigeneity from both Mexico’s history and culture (Soto Vega and Chávez, 2018, p. 320). Spaniard settler-colonialists in the 1700 to 1800s attempted the erasure of Indigeneity through soldier-settler violence (Casteneda, 2017). Settler-colonial Spaniard conquest of Tenochtitlan and the Mexicas has worked through “patriarchal colonial society” which used “violence towards native women” as a “violent political act committed” primarily through sexual aggression against women (Casteneda, 2017, p.34, 35). As historian Gerda Lerner wrote, “the practice of raping the women of a conquered group … is a form of national terrorism, subjugation, and humiliation, wherein the sexual violation of women represents both the physical domination of women and the symbolic castration of the men of the conquered group” (Casteneda, 2017, p.40). This colonial ideology has continued to work as a hegemonic belief and narrative in the Mexican nation-state. Currently, Mexican dominant narratives have continued in attempting the erasure of Indigeneity in Mexico through distinguishing, “between race and ethnicity in order to highlight the complexity of white supremacy in Latinx rhetoric” (Soto Vega and Chávez, 2018, p.320). In highlighting how colonial histories have impacted Mexico, indigeneity must be used as an analytic to articulate ongoing colonialism (Na’puti, 2019, p.497). Considering indigeneity as an analytic can “challenge discourses of race and processes of racialization that are central to settler colonial” attitudes (Na’puti, 2019, p.497). Through focusing on Cleo, this project seeks to understand how *Roma* articulates Indigeneity, race, class, and gender.

This thesis analyzes *Roma* through the theoretical framework of Indigenous-Latinx racial rhetorical criticism (ILRR). I developed this ILRR framework by using the theory of intersectionality as a foundation in combination with tenants of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and ideological and racial rhetorical criticism. In doing so, this framework serves to act as “bridges [that] are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.216). This thesis also engages Indigenous Studies, Latinx theories and mestizaje as a part of a multi-layered Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical approach to fully examine the film’s communication strategies.[[6]](#footnote-6) The intersections of race, class, and gender leave women of color highly oppressed by systemic forms of power and control. Therefore, rhetorical critics must pay attention “to the persistent marginalization of racial and ethnic [minority]” representation in the media (Chakravartty and Kuo and Grubbs, and McIlwain, 2016, p.255). Following this earlier call for critical scholarship, this thesis project poses these research questions about the film, *Rom*a: **How does *Roma* communicate complex intersectional identities in relation to structures of colonialism in Mexico? What are the rhetorical strategies used to represent Cleo’s identity as an Indigenous Mexican woman? How are ideologies of machismo and marianismo rhetorically maintained as elements of Mexican society?**

This thesis chapter proceeds with a review of the literature on theories and perspectives that what I am combining to advance the theoretical framework of Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical criticism (ILRR) that informs this project. Then, the second chapter rhetorically examines the film through applying the analytical approach of ILRR. It focuses on Cleo’s character and attends to the communication dimensions operating within particular scenes and interpersonal relationships. Finally, chapter three offers a concise summary of the major themes from the rhetorical analysis of *Roma* and answers the project research questions. It discusses the potential of an Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical criticism framework and what this may approach allows for communication scholarship. Then, it concludes with future directions for understanding ideological issues through an intersectional consideration that centers indigeneity.

**Centrada**

In *Roma,* Cuarón relies on the invention and selection of persuasive materials that communicate identities and issues of race, class, and gender in order to showcase the power dynamics of Mexican culture. Due to this, it is important to understand how Cleo’s intersecting identities are represented and thus affect her everyday experiences and interactions in the film. In *Roma*, Cleo is a representative case of how nation-state ideologies have attempted to erase the identity of Indigenous peoples. Thus, to properly analyze the film requires examining the multi-layered aspects of Cleo's identity and positionality. Through the ILRR framework, this project can grapple with the ways that “intersectional recognition is enabled or disabled by situated rhetorical action” (Dow, 2016, p.68). As a scholar of critical race theory and racial-rhetoric, I will analyze how the film communicates how Mexico maintains its power through hegemonic ideologies based on race that became compounded with class and gender. It is important to note that I am also critiquing this film as a Mujer Mexicana, as such, my own positionality influences my interests and concerns about Indigeneity, gender, and colonization in Mexico.

Mexico is a land that is encapsulated by imaginary borderlands and a multitude of cultures. It is a country of shifting terrain and an ongoing commitment to building unity through embracing diversity. In Mexico, race, class, and gender function in a similar but notably different “system of meaning, a way of organizing and meaningful classifying the world” than within other Western cultures (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019, p.468). Therefore, *Roma* may not have a meaningful impact if the audience does not have a critical understanding of cultura Mexicanx, which requires specific consideration regarding the mixing and remixing of cultura within historical context – these are elements that will be addressed in the succeeding sections.[[7]](#footnote-7) Additionally, for an audience to more accurately understand *Roma,* they need to “fully culturally engage in texts and fields [in the native language] to understand multiple meanings that reside” within the media (Sowards, 2019, p.480). Through a dominant U.S. perspective, the formations of racial and colonial powers may be limited in their capacity to account for historical, political and social complexities and dynamic contexts of Mexico. In an effort to decolonize articulations of racial power, this thesis heeds the scholarly call for the audience to place itself in a non-Western lens (Chakravartty et al, 2016, p.255). The literature review will first focus on a brief historical account of Mexico that informs the 1970s timeline for *Roma*. Then, it will proceed in subsequent sections to review the theoretical literatures that I draw upon to create the Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical criticism framework.

**Revisión de la Literatura**

**Contexto Histórico**

Mexico is the historical product of mixing cultures and racial identities. This idea of cultural nationalism and its complications gives birth to the idea of mestizaje, a new way of understanding traditional concepts of race. Mexico has historically been defined by mestizaje, a concept that “played a central role in the country’s post-revolutionary ideology” when Mexico’s European and Indigenous roots began intertwining (Sue 2013, p.4).[[8]](#footnote-8) The concept of mestizaje is a fluid one, ever-changing in its relation to social, political, and philosophical ideas about the nation-state, national identity, and race. Mestizaje has also been a way to classify Mexicanos by how light or dark-skinned they are and has created a system of racial hierarchy responsible for racism and colorism. Thus, one cannot understand Mexico and mestizaje without also understanding how race is negotiated in la cultura de mestiza*.*

Mestizaje has since continued to refer to the 'mixing' of ethnic and cultural groups in Mexican history. This idea of racial and cultural mixing has also led to the term, mestizo or mestiza.[[9]](#footnote-9) Anzaldúan theory describes the mestiza and mestizaje as the ability to bring various parts of identity to the forefront. Anzaldúa (2008) further explains mestiza as an “umbrella term [which means that] certain aspects of identity don’t disappear, aren’t assimilated or repressed when they are not in the foreground.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Being mestizo is central to the concept of being Mexicanx (Sue, 2013). In cultura Mexicanx, “mestiza consciousness is a consciousness of duality embracing ambiguity and contradiction” (Anzaldúa, 2015). This is because it is fundamentally ingrained in the notion that all Mexicans are “Indigenous like corn, like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.103). While all Mexicanx have Indigenous ancestries, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are also Mexicanx who associate more with their whiteness (from centuries of European colonization) as well as Mexicanx who identify solely as Mexicano/a.[[11]](#footnote-11)This complex relationship with indigeneity is also a part of the culture that makes up how Mexico reacts to both race and gender.

Mexico’s society is structured around a machismo-concentrated culture that gives power and control to men over, and at the expense of, women.[[12]](#footnote-12) Machismo culture is synonymous with hegemonic masculinity that is characterized by a man being domineering, sexist, violent, and typically has been characterized by a proneness to excessive use of alcohol (Torres, 2002, p.164). Mexico’s machismo culture puts an emphasis on the importance of “maintaining traditional values and gender role behaviors” (Torres, 2002, p.164). In Mexico’s machismo culture, there is a direct correlation to the value placed on an individual based on their gender and how much adherence that person has to the gender-binary. This gender divide has implications for everyday interactions and systems of violence enacted upon gendered and Indigenous bodies. The idea of terra nullius, “a legal concept used as justification that lands were empty and therefore open for colonization, conquering and resources extraction” has been used a lot in regards to both land as well as the subjugation of Indigenous people’s bodies within Mexico as open for conquering (Mack & Na’puti, 2019, p.14).[[13]](#footnote-13) In understanding machismo ideology, we must also consider the connections among gender and indigeneity—together these identities are disproportionately subjected to interpersonal and state violence. When speaking about Mexico and the film, *Roma,* it is important to note that gender and “gendered violence cannot be considered *only* a result of colonization” (Mack & Na’puti, 2019, p.5), it is also a part of the machismo culture that exists within Mexico. This selected review of the historical antecedents of mestizaje and machismo illustrate the cultural-historic narrative that Mexico has with a range of identities including Indigeneity. In the section that follows, I detail elements of the theoretical framework of that is central to this project.

**Indigenous Latinx Racial Rhetorical Criticism (ILRR)**

The Indigenous Latinx Racial rhetorical criticism framework is robust and overlapping and begins from the foundation of intersectionality. I first review a focus of intersectionality and then proceed with the literatures that I am engaging in different elements of the framework through three main parts: Indigenous Perspective, Latinx Perspective, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Each subsection also focuses on how the specific ILRR perspective aids in understanding race, class, and gender dynamics that will be useful for my analysis of the film in Chapter 2.

*Interseccionalidad*

Intersectionality is a multi-layered notion that encompasses broad social categories like race, class, and gender, which work together to manipulate “pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (Crenshaw, 1999, p.4). Analyzing the film *Roma* calls for an understanding of intersectionality to simultaneously examine how race, class, and gender are represented in the context of cultura Mexicanx. Using an Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical framework is necessary to more accurately understand the historical, political, and social dynamics that are communicated within the film. This lens draws from understanding ideological criticism to look at potential dominant social groups and is concerned with how power, class, race, gender, and dominant institutions influence the way people move and think about their world (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001). ILRR engages the theories of mestizaje, Latinx identity, Indigeneity, CRT, and racial rhetorical criticism to highlight inequities as a result of colonial powers in Mexican culture. In understanding Cleo’s position in the film, it is important to look at how these intersections portray her vulnerability. Using an ILRR criticism is fitting for this artifact because it aids in understanding the full scope of the complex identity portrayals of Cleo within *Roma.*

*Perspectiva Indígena*

In addition to race and gender, Mexico has had a complex history with Indigeneity. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe states, Mexicanx have an “ambivalent relationship to Indigeneity which emerges from Spanish conquest of what is now Mexico and the formation of the Mexican nation-state through biological and cultural mestizaje” (Rowe, 2019, p.530). Furthermore, it shows how Mexicans have always had issues with colorism through having a racial divide between light and dark-skinned phenotypes. In discussing how race and gender are portrayed in *Roma*, there should be an intellectual genealogy towards indigeneity that would offer “an ancestry/kinship lens that understands racialization and indigenization as interwoven colonial processes” (Na’puti, 2019, p.496-197). Indigeneity is a focal point of this project not only because the main character in the film is an Indigenous woman but also because when speaking about Mexico, we must address our Indigenous roots and culture. Accepting mestizaje as a part of being Mexicanx is to acknowledge our Indigenous ancestry. Indigeneity in context to Mexican culture is the acknowledgement of raíces indigenas and the understanding that “el árbol de [nuestras vidas] has Indigenous roots” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008, p.283).[[14]](#footnote-14) Through fostering academic space for Indigeneity in a conversation about race, class, and gender, it allows for a critical analysis of narratives “where generations of colonialism have silenced Native peoples about the status of their women and about the intersections of power and domination that have also shaped Native nations and gender relations” (Geoman & Denetdale, 2009, p.10).

Since the ILRR framework adopts an intersectional feminist perspective it helps to deconstruct the ways in which gendered violence is shown in the film. As bell hooks states, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. viii). Intersectionality is paramount in this feminist perspective. For this project I will be using an Indigenous feminist perspective, which works through radically resisting “the coloniality of gender” and uses “decolonial feminism [to cut] against heteropatriarchy,” like machismo culture (Mack and Na’puti, 2019, p.3, 20). For instance, Indigenous feminism shows how Mexicanx have been socialized from birth to see and accept sexist thoughts and actions such as strict gender binaries and the erasure of Indigenous and decolonial discussions about gender (hooks, 2000). Gender creates a narrative within the film that cannot be ignored especially when considering how Mexicanx cultura favors machismo over the feminine. As bell hooks has said, “Feminist revolution alone will not create such a world; we need to end racism, class elitism, imperialism” (hooks, 2000, p.x). These tenants of Indigenous feminism inform ILRR as a framework that works to understand gender binaries and to provide a decolonial critique of the rhetorical phenomena presented in *Roma*. Therefore, this project uses ILRR because it offers both a strong thread of Indigenous feminism and a Latinx perspective to critically examine the film.

*Perspectiva Latinx*

A Latinx approach is concerned with illuminating and critiquing the complexity of “interlocking systems of oppression and privilege” (Soto Vega & Chávez, 2018, p.319). This approach is reflective of the shifting tierras fronterizas of identification that are currently happening in Latinx communities.[[15]](#footnote-15) It analyzes how Latin histories are centered and how systems of dominance are intertwined with race and ethnicity. As noted above, an intersectional approach accounts for these overlapping complexities while also centering Indigeneity. In cultura Mexicana, “la gente indígena suffer a loss that’s cumulative and unrecognized by the masses” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008, p.283).[[16]](#footnote-16) In using the Latinx perspective, it is important to note how Mexican culture has worked to erase Indigeneity from its culture and how this has affected Mexican culture, Mexican people and Indigenous Mexican people.

Due to the placement of *Roma* being in Mexico as well as its narrative being directed by a Mexican man and discussing Mexican life, this project incorporates a Latinx approach to analyze the interlocking systems of oppression and privilege when concerning both race and gender performance within the film. As noted above, the intersectional aspect of ILRR framework attends to race simultaneously with other identity categories and to include the concept of mestizaje within a Latinx perspective.

*Crítica Racial*

As a nación built with mestizaje and many racial identities, the construction of race must be addressed within the context of Mexico. A pedagogy from Critical Race Theory (CRT) is called conscientização, which refers to the ability to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and use this to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.[[17]](#footnote-17) Conscientização is the process of consciousness-raising within an individual so that society can work to do better by those being oppressed in society. CRT proposes that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time and that the law may play a role in this process. This focus on racial power perpetuated by the law helps the ILRR framework consider how national ideologies of mestizaje function in relation with indigeneity. Another theoretical approach that informs the ILRR framework is racial rhetorical criticism. This perspective considers rhetoric to be a practice that engages in studying the persuasive language and politics that surround structures of race, gender, and class.

The foundation of racial rhetoric is similar to CRT in that race is at the center, “in understanding social, political, economic, and discursive disparity” (Flores, 2016, p.8). CRT and racial rhetoric are similar pedagogies in different disciplines. CRT focuses on the social context whereas racial rhetoric focuses on where power and control lie within a society and how this works to aid hegemonic ideologies. As Lisa Flores states, rhetorical criticism is reflective about and engages in the understanding of “racial oppression, logic, voices, and bodies and that theorizes the very production of race as rhetorical” (Flores, 2016, p.5). This idea is also central to CRT, which is concerned with the intercentricity of race, “the challenges of dominant Ideology; and the critical response to the “problem of the color line” (W.E.B., 1970).

For instance, racism and adherence to the Euro-American standard of beauty in Mexican culture have enabled those who are more white-passing “to gain jobs and social acceptance,” (Delgado and Stefancic, and Harris, 2017, p.81). This racial caste described both in CRT and racial rhetoric illustrate how race is a broader construct to inaccurately theorize, “space, [nationality], citizenship, difference, and belonging” (Flores, 2016, p.15). Race then, is understood as, “categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado et al., 2017, p.8).

Together, CRT and racial rhetoric are core components of understanding the intersections of Indigeneity and Latinx identities. Race is bounded across social, political, and economic borders. As a social construction, race is both an inherently rhetorical practice and a way for Mexican national ideologies to create a caste system and culture of mestizaje. As explained above, race must be understood in relation to Indigeneity, class, and gender to help critics reveal the dimensions of power in particular rhetorical texts and artifacts. Building from an intersectional foundation, ILRR combines theories from Indigenous and Latinx perspectives and CRT and racial rhetorical criticism as interdisciplinary bodies of work to understand how hegemonic ideologies shape national histories, politics and social dynamics. In analyzing and critiquing *Roma* through the ILRR framework, I will focus on both the historical-cultural context and the ideologies of class, race, and gender that are represented. This framework allows me to interpret and evaluate such representations alongside the communication phenomena Cleo experiences with other prominent characters such as Adela, Fermín, Sofia, Antonio, Paco and Pepe.

**Conclusión**

In ILRR, the synthesis of Indigenous Feminism along with CRT and Latinx scholarship allows for critical analysis of how the effects of colonization and machismo are conveyed within Mexican film. Because the framework also provides theories for understanding identity dynamics like indigeneity in the particular context of Mexico, it allows rhetorical critics to deeply examine communication phenomena from Mexicanx people who live “sin las fronteras” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 215).[[18]](#footnote-18) In the chapter that follows, I apply the ILRR framework to examine *Roma* by paying careful attention to the intersectionalities, racial rhetorics and constructions, and representations of Indigeneity and feminism (or lack thereof). The chapter examines six key scenes that strongly reflect *Roma’s* cinematic depiction of dominant narratives that comprise Mexican culture.

# **Chapter 2: Rhetorical Analysis of *Roma* Using Indigenous Latinx Racial Rhetorical Criticism (ILRR)**

**Introducción Reclamo Evaluativo**

“*She changed houses many times and felt at home in none*,” this quote from Uraguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano’s poem might initially appear to convey a woman who is constantly moving or perhaps travelling for work (Salazar 2018, para. 1). However, this quote actually references women domestic workers who labor to maintain their clients’ houses yet never feel welcomed or at home in any of these spaces. The film, *Roma* revolves around Cleo throughout her everyday routines and life. From this, the audience begins to see the often unspoken and invisible hardships of domestic work. Cleo’s life is consumed by carefully navigating the discursive and material impacts of machismo, patchwork parenting, being the caretaker for the entire family that she works for, and still being seen by the family as an “outsider.” Cleo’s position in the film points to a larger discussion on Mexico’s hegemonic ideologies not only surrounding class, but also Indigeneity and gender. This chapter uses the ILRR framework to focus on the film’s representations of problematic ideologies in Mexican culture that perpetuate social disparities and marginalization of Cleo as an Indigenous woman.

**Métodos: Understanding the Techniques of ILRR**

Before applying the ILRR framework to conduct the rhetorical criticism of *Roma*, I first drafted a descriptive analysis by watching the film several times and taking detailed notes about each of the key scenes and their communicative elements. For example, I jotted down observations about the characters (verbal and nonverbal attributes), particular phrases and language used in conversations between characters, and also paid attention to silences. Second, I reviewed these descriptive notes and looked for recurring themes, patterns, and cinematic elements. At this step in the method, patterns of repetition and omission were prevalent as I noticed repeated forms of violence being communicated and represented both directly and indirectly. I also observed patterns of omission as characters remained silent, used indirect or figurative language, and made allusions when it came to issues around gender and indigeneity. Recurring cinematic elements that I found include the camera panning close to a character during a scene or the camera panning out to point to a larger picture within a particular scene. These are a few select examples of my thematic findings from the descriptive analysis step. Third, I organized each of these themes in relation to the project's overall research questions by paying particular attention to how the intersectional dynamics of identity issues are communicated. At this step in the method, I focused on the emergent themes relating to feminism, Indigeneity, and machismo within the film.

This chapter serves as the application of my framework to analyze the film, *Roma,* and intersectional identities present within the artifact. Since ILRR uses intersectionality as its foundation, it is a multi-faceted and broad framework for analyzing and evaluating rhetorical elements within media. Thus, the evaluation of scenes in *Roma* will be intersectional in nature. However, certain scenes or characters may be focused on as a stronger singular example of feminism, machismo, or classism rather than the merging of all three dynamics at once. In these instances, the application of ILRR revealed intersecting layers that impact Cleo’s identity and experience in the film while also showcasing select identity elements. This is intentional both for the ILRR framework as well as for rhetorical critics to examine how intersectional life is communicated and experienced—at times embracing ambiguity, contradiction, and distinction.. Applying ILRR to this carefully curated film highlights the intersectionality of the world of *Roma.* The framework’s attention to how indigeneity and hegemonic ideologies are rhetorically naturalized and maintained reveals deeper understanding of *Roma*’s attention to how Mexicanos navigate their lives existing in the spaces created by their history marred by the colonial conquest of Mexicas.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Contexto**

Cuarón’s representation and centering on Cleo depicts what life was like for her as an Indigenous woman in Mexico’s working-class in the 1970s, as well as how Mexican society has attempted to erase Indigeneity from everyday life and speech. This erasure is primarily shown within a few scenes and depicted in the underlying narrative throughout the entire film, which illustrates how Mexico’s racist socioeconomic hierarchy has wielded power through forms of interpersonal and state-sanctioned violence against Indigenous peoples. *Roma* captures Mexico at a time when social and political violence was making its way into every facet of society. As Cuarón presents the often brutal depiction of everyday life in Colonia Roma, he also demonstrates how Mexico’s socioeconomic structure impacts marginalized populations and the ways in which state, physical, and emotional violence are perpetrated against women who are often of a darker skin complexion and comprise the working class.[[20]](#footnote-20) After all, Latin America’s working class, Indigenous peoples, and women understand most what it means to be marginalized – even more so when they communicate a combination of these structures of marginalization from hegemonic ideologies. *Roma’s* subtle elements of cinematography also highlight how these dominant structures create a situation of multiple jeopardy for Cleo (Delgado, Stefancic, and Harris, 2017).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Recalling the historical-cultural context of Mexico in the 1970s that was discussed in Chapter 1, in this chapter I build upon that larger context to analyze how *Roma* captures Mexico at the point where the nation-states’ civil rights activism and political party patronage just hit its breaking point. During this timeframe, which is highly marked by civil rights and political insurgency, the film showcases an intensified reality of Mexico’s social and political climate where machismo was very prevalent in both daily interactions and the treatment of women. Mexico in the 1970s was not known for its feminist ideals. In fact, feminism was nearly nonexistent on almost every social level. This is likely due to cultural norms like machismo and how it results in a lack of feminist ideals and values. From these dominant perspectives from Mexico’s historical-cultural context of the 1970s, the sections that follow examine intersectional issues across the three major themes of feminism, Indigeneity, and machismo that emerged from my descriptive analysis. These themes are heavily represented within key scenes of the film.

**Antecedentes: Synopsis of *Roma***

Cuarón’s film offers a representation of Mexico’s dominant beliefs that have led to forms of oppression and violence. Specifically, *Roma,* follows Cleo’s life as a live-in maid for an upper-middle-class family of six in Mexico City: Sofia (mother), Antonio (father), Senora Teresa (Sofia’s mother), Paco (oldest son), Pepe (youngest son), Borris (family dog). Cleo is an Indigenous Mixtec woman originally from Oaxaca which is a state located in the southwestern Mexico. In the film, Cleo does most things that one would expect a live-in maid to do. She sweeps the floors, scoops up dog excrement, and hand washes laundry. Occasionally, Cleo takes a break to play with the youngest child, Pepe. Cleo’s understanding of Mexico City largely comes from experiential learning as she navigates through city life and speaking with the other maids. Additionally, her close friend in the film, Adela, is also from Oaxaca and is also Mixtec. This identity connection becomes relevant during the film as Adela is the only person Cleo can speak with in the Mixtec language and essentially be comfortable expressing herself. Meaning, Cleo does not have to police herself via either the language she chooses to speak in or how animated she decides to be with Adela.

*Roma’s* representation of Cleo points to the ways Mexico’s hegemony has marginalized Indigenous peoples, women, and the working class. The film also shows how sexism, colorism and classism work as a form of legitimizing dominant ideologies. For instance, in one scene, Cleo’s only love interest in the film, Fermín (a working-class man), angrily calls her a “pinche gata” which is a derogatory term for women domestic workers in Mexico.[[22]](#footnote-22) ILRR illustrates how Mexican ideology acts as an invisible force to uphold structures of violence against marginalized and oppressed communities. Below, I use the Indigenous-Latinx racial rhetorical criticism framework to critique these ideological dynamics that sustain dominant beliefs and values about Indigeneity and intersectional identities.

**Evaluación de Artefactos: Examining Relationships & Scenes**

***Esto es Machismo: Definitorio***

Machismo “refers to an attitude of supremacy by men regarding women” (Torres and Solberg, and Carlstrom, 2002). It is a cultural hegemonic ideology which has created the social narrative that the essence of manhood is through, “men's sexual conquest of women, abusive male physicality” (Gutmann, 1996, p. 237). This hegemonic cultural attitude naturalizes manifestations of gendered violence. Indigenous feminist perspectives understand that machismo and gendered violence are a result and product of colonial violence (Mack and Na’puti, 2019, p.2). This is the essence of machismo culture and is a part of Mexico’s national hegemonic ideology. In 2020, violence against women in Mexico is as virulent as ever, the crisis of feminicidio provides a contemporary reminder of the need to examine connected systems of machismo and colonial violence—in cinematic representations like *Roma* and the contemporary national context in which the film was released (Lozano, 2019).[[23]](#footnote-23)

In Mexican culture, one’s adherence to machismo is depicted and performed by a man who is, “closed up in himself, capable of guarding both himself and whatever has been confided to him. Manliness is judged according to one's invulnerability to enemy arms or the impacts of the outside world” (Paz, 1961, p.3). Machismo is toxic masculinity; it promotes a lack of emotional vulnerability in men and an unrealistic standard of ‘macho’-hood in men. Machismo also impacts youth as well as adults, the ideology perpetuates a gender binary where young boys are considered more masculine and manly when they adhere to machismo. The learned values, attitudes, and beliefs of machismo begin young and manifest in adult men and throughout society. Another element of the hegemonic cultural ideology of machismo involves the belief in disrespect towards women. Within the machismo system there is an ambivalence to the femme. This presents itself in “hostile and benevolent sexism” and in more toxic and violent circumstances, machismo also presents itself through “physical aggression, womanizing and philandering, and alcohol abuse” (Torres and Solberg, and Carlstrom, 2002, p.175).

Relatedly, marianismo acts to legitimize machismo culture and attitudes within Mexico and Latin America in general. Marianismo, “serves as the counterpoint to machismo” and teaches women to endure the unequal situations of power and violence (Torres and Solberg, and Carlstrom, 2002, p.174).[[24]](#footnote-24) The legitimation of ideologies of machismo and marianismo primarily happens through authority figures verbalizing what behaviors, attitudes, and representations of binary genders are socially “good” socially “good” for every individual. A way of legitimizing these gender ideologies occurs through powerful messages that teach stereotypes that men will abandon their romantic relationship with women and that men only want women for sex. In *Roma,* the combination of machismo and marianismo are core ideologies that operate within several interpersonal relationships.

In this section, I apply ILRR to examine how various scenes and particular relationships convey adherence to Mexican hegemonic culture of machismo and marianismo. This section uses the ILRR components of Indigenous feminism and Latinx perspectives to evaluate how these dominant machismo narratives are reproduced within Mexican culture. The first scene looks at Paco and Pepe playing together and through ILRR, I analyze how their game shows one way that machismo is produced and reinforced within cultura Mexicana. The next scene that I examine is between Cleo and her love interest, Fermín. Through ILRR I evaluate how their romantic relationship is an example of Mexico’s culture of gendered violence—also a result of machismo ideologies—and attempted erasure of Indigeneity. The third scene that exhibits the theme of machismo actually looks at Sofia and Cleo’s relationship; considered from the ILRR framework, I evaluate how the film reflects the phenomena of multiple jeopardy and a lack of feminism in Mexican culture that normalizes machismo values among women and particular forms of gendered violence against Indigenous women.

*Paco y Pepe: Cómo se hacen cumplir las ideologías coloniales*

In one scene, the young brothers Paco and Pepe are playing a game that seems to mimic “cops and robbers” on the roof, which is designated as the place where Cleo does laundry. While Paco and Pepe are playing Cleo is seen in the background washing the family’s clothes. The boys are not supposed to be up there; however, they come running up the stairs and continue their game despite Cleo scolding them and telling them otherwise. The audience sees the boys hiding behind various objects on the roof as they pretend to shoot at each other (See, Figure 1). The boys come into the forefront of the camera’s view and Paco sneaks up on Pepe. Paco then pretends to shoot Pepe. Paco declares that Pepe is now dead. Pepe says that he does not want to be dead, to which Paco retorts, “tú lo juegas, niñita” as he storms off the roof away from Pepe and Cleo and then exits the scene.[[25]](#footnote-25)



Figure 1. From left to right: Paco (stripped shirt), Pepe (white shirt), Cleo (doing laundry)

The game that Paco and Pepe were playing conveys a performance of gender and class ideologies that make-up Mexican culture, “cops and robbers” acts as a colonial representation of power. As Michael Yellowbird (2004) explains, when children’s games and everyday interactions aren’t given much thought, it becomes easy for colonial canons of conquest to remix to fit modern tropes and ideologies. This game parallels the game “cowboys and Indians,” which has symbolic reference to the subconscious demands of white, colonial supremacy wanting power over another (Yellowbird 2004). Using ILRR, I look at how th game Paco and Pepe are playing normalizes machismo culture and gendered violence. Paco yelling, “tú lo juegas, niñita” is symbolic language that promotes machismo through aggression and a disdain for weak or effeminate traits in his younger brother Pepe. In this scene Pepe is depicted as weak simply because he does not want to play dead in a power-laden game where he takes on the role of the loser—the robber—who must violently die. Paco’s use of the word “niñita” is an intentional enforcement of the dominant narrative of machismo culture in Mexico. Paco intends to emasculate Pepe for not wanting to play.

This scene also illustrates Paco’s own temper and using verbally abusive behavior toward his sibling. Even at this young age, the game can be considered a way of disciplining gender and enforcing gender binaries. “Cops and robbers” is an example of broader ideologies in society where colonialism and machismo teach cultures of violence through gendered forms (Goeman and Denetdale, 2009, p. 11). In this instance, Pepe not adhering to his older brother goes against a gender binary taught through machismo, which is that the youngest always listens to the oldest sibling. Paco and Pepe’s game masks itself as being a part of the ‘toughening’ of young boys, yet it leads to aggressive, violent and uncaring men through being an avenue for them to learn machismo. In this scene, the boys are playing a "game" that celebrates violence and death. The violence is shown through their toy guns and the willingness to participate in a game where someone must kill, and someone must die. This game is also gendered; first, through the expectation that both the cops and the robbers are men. Secondly, it is gendered through the performance of learned behaviors of machismo. Paco and Pepe are performing an adherance to Mexico’s dominant ideologies of masculinity by embracing both the language and enactments of violence.

*Cleo y Sofia: Ella es machista.*

Another way the film reflects machismo is through the relationship between Sofia and Cleo. This section will interpret various scenes to understand how machismo and class discrimination are key elements of how the interpersonal relationship between Cleo and Sofia unfolds. In *Roma*, Sofia is seen wielding her place as a woman in a higher socioeconomic status to have power and control over Cleo as an Indigenous domestic worker. Through ILRR, the idea of physical space as not only a signal to social status but also to social power is explicitly presented in the differences in living spaces that Sofia and Cleo occupy. Sofia lives in a large, gated, and two-level house with a garage and sunroom. Cleo oversees maintaining that large house that Sofia and her family live in. Due to this, Cleo lives with the family since it is the most practical for what Sofia wants—Cleo is always physically nearby to take care of whatever Sofia and the family want at any time. Yet, the living space that Cleo occupies is drastically smaller than Sofia’s house. Cleo lives with her Mixtec friend, Adela (who works as the family’s cook), and they occupy a tiny shared room outside of the house next to the garage. They have a singular lightbulb that lights up this room. On opposite sides of this tight space are Cleo’s and Adela’s beds. They have one window which is positioned conveniently near Sofia’s bedroom window. This vantage point allows Sofia to keep watch on her domestic workers and she even polices how much electricity Cleo and Adela use. From dialogue between Cleo and Adela at the beginning of the film the audience can infer this power and control dynamic that Sofia wields over them:

Cleo: “Apaga la luz. A doña Sofia no le gusta encendida.”

Adela: “Ay, esa doña Sofia. Seguro está espiándonos.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

In this exchange Cleo warns Adela to turn off the light because Mrs. Sofia does not like it to be burning. Adela replies with “está espiandonos,” expressing that they are being spied on by Mrs. Sofia. Interpreted through the ILRR framework, Sofia “spying” and regulating the amount of electricity Cleo and Adela use in their room outside of the main house shows how Sofia is acting as a machista in her relationship to these Indigenous women. The audience can interpret this from how Sofia functions in a position where she has dominance over Cleo and Adela. She uses her position as their boss to have power over them and to control their quality of life. In the ILRR framework we can also interpret how Sofia is also using her placement as a form of colonialism through a gendered power control where she is able to disempower Cleo and Adela’s combined Indigenous and class identities. Sofia reinforces machismo ideology through her control and regulation over Cleo’s daily life and the quality of life that Cleo and Adela have.

What Sofia fails to realize in the film is how different she and Cleo are as individual women; she rarely conveys a consideration for Cleo’s Indigenous identity. Through the ILRR framework, this is interpreted through how Cleo and Adela code-switch from speaking in Mixtec to speaking in Spanish whenever Sofia is present around them. This act of code-switching is a cinematic technique that Cuarón uses to make sure the audience explicitly hears and sees Cleo as an Indigenous person—along with her other identities in the film. Yet, Sofia’s character perpetuates the idea of erasure for Mexico’s Indigenous population, she cannot fully account for or be empathic to Cleo’s experience, and she also seems to be aloof to the impact of class position.

Similar to Sofia’s control over the women’s use of the lightbulb in their small room, there are other instances in the film where Sofia defines the power-laden relationship she has over Cleo. The audience mainly sees this through Sofia giving Cleo orders. For instance, in the beginning of the film, Sofia is telling Cleo to make sure Pepe says goodbye to his Dad. In other scenes, she’s telling Cleo to get the children from school or giving her orders about what housework needs to be done. The majority of the conversations between the two consist of Sofia giving Cleo housework duties, giving Cleo jobs that fulfill a parenting role to Pepe and Paco, and/or giving Cleo a list of what to accomplish for that particular day. In these moments, there is not much of a communicative exchange between the characters since Sofia is primarily bossing Cleo around as her employee. The audience can see how this power display by Sofia communicates that she and Cleo are not the same. In fact, Sofia continuously reminds Cleo of her lower socioeconomic position via the demands for laborious chores and even common house chores and basic tasks—Sofia sees herself as above performing this kind of domestic labor.

This division of labor is especially evident with how *Roma* opens and closes with scenes where Cleo is alone, laboriously scrubbing the tiles of the house she works in (see Figure 2). *Roma*’s rhetorical stage is set by hearing Cleo washing over the tiles. Cuarón’s camera pans up at Cleo dutifully scrubbing and then pans out at the house where most of the film takes place. Cleo’s relationship to the family she works for is founded on her ability to run the house and keep it clean. Her relationships with Sofía and her husband Antonio are drawn almost exclusively from her experience as their live-in maid. Cleo’s position is not as an equal with them but rather as the person who does the hard, laborious, and often unrecognized work for the family. In contrast to Sofia, it is Cleo who is positioned as the stand-in parent for Paco and Pepe, as the person who picks up the dog excrement, and as someone who continuously scrubs the floor tiles to make sure everything is spotless for the family that fails to see or value her labor. These encounters in the film show how the hegemonic ideology of machismo uses legitimation to reinforce and re-manifest social concepts of power and class control.



Figure 2. Cleo is washing over the tiles in the driveway at the start of the film.

*Roma’s* representation of Cleo points to the ways that the nation-state’s hegemony has marginalized Indigenous peoples, women, and the working class. Through Cleo’s relationship with Sofia, the film presents how socioeconomic hierarchies can determine how well someone is treated and can determine which voices are more valued in society. In this section, I used ILRR to evaluate several examples drawing primarily from the relationship between Sofia and Cleo to show how machismo works in structures of power and is not limited to a man. Rather, machismo works through hegemonic structures like patriarchy to enforce the marginalization of individuals based on identities like social class. Through ILRR we come to understand how Cleo’s identities as both a domestic worker and an Indigenous woman overlap, creating a situation of multiple jeopardy that functions to legitimize her marginalization, oppression, and attempted erasure. Sofia’s treatment of Cleo also enforces the ideology of marianismo culture that teaches women that they must be self-sacrificing and are, “capable of enduring suffering” (Torres and Solberg, and Carlstrom, 2002, p.174). In the next subsection of ILRR analysis, I focus in more specifically on character relationships that depict sexism and classism legitimizing marianismo (as a related element of the ideology of machismo).

*Cleo y Fermín: Abandonado y Soledad*

In one scene Cleo and Adela go to a restaurant and the audience learns that the friends are there on a double date and Cleo is paired up with Fermín. He is wearing a well-fitted graphic t-shirt featuring a cartoon couple hugging and the message “amor es.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The group walks out of the restaurant with Adela and her love interest walking into a movie theater, while Cleo and Fermín decide to go for a walk. The next scene that the audience sees Cleo and Fermín together, they are in his apartment and Fermín is walking around naked—it is implied that they had sex. He takes a shower rod and then performs a martial-arts display in front of Cleo who is sitting in the bed with the blankets covering her. He finishes his performance with a grita and points the shower rod in Cleo’s face.[[28]](#footnote-28) The shower rod is a prop that symbolizes a sword, with Fermín mimicking the return of his “weapon” to its “sheath” at the end of his martial arts performance. He says to Cleo, “Y empecé a beber y luego a resoplar. Yo estaba muriendo. Pero luego descubrí las artes marciales. Y todo quedó en foco. Justo como cuando me miras.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Through ILRR, when Fermín describes the focus that marital arts gives him it is indicative of the false sense of manhood that machismo encourages and almost demands of males. For Fermín, the machismo culture of Mexico has likely meant he feels what Anzaldúa explains as the “loss of a sense of dignity and respect” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.104, 105), and so to cope with his feelings of inferiority he explains to Cleo that he was drawn to “the bottle, the snort…and the fist.” In this case, the ILRR framework helps interpret Fermín’s messages of his calling to martial arts as a more explicit representation of machismo—where masculinity and manhood are associated with the desire and need for violence to gain a sense of superiority.

Throughout *Roma,* Cleo and Fermín’s relationship is revealed in segments in-between other major scenes and time has passed every instance the audience sees them together. Later, Fermín and Cleo are next seen together kissing passionately in a movie theater and not paying attention to the film. They start to talk in between kisses:

Cleo: “Es solo que llego tarde. Creo que estoy embarazada.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Fermín: “¿eso es bueno, no? [[31]](#footnote-31)

They stop kissing and Fermín pulls her into him. They start watching the film, embraced together. After a bit, Fermín tells her, “tengo que ir al baño.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Despite Cleo’s questioning, Fermín leaves for the bathroom. The audience sees Cleo watch the rest of the film in the movie theater alone. Fermín never returns. This scene highlights the issue of abandonment and solitude for women, when Cleo tells Fermín about being pregnant he leaves her all alone in a movie theater.

Between the next instance the audience sees Cleo and Fermín together, the audience learns that Cleo is pregnant, and Adela tells Cleo to inform Sofia about it. When Cleo approaches Sofia to talk she is interrupted by Sofia first telling her to call the kids into the house. Cleo obeys the order and then awkwardly tells Sofia that what she needs to discuss is a private matter and Sofia tells the kids to go to their rooms. When Cleo finally has a moment without being expected to keep working, she discloses that her period is late and that she is afraid that Sofia will fire her. To the audience and Cleo’s surprise, Sofia reveals that she is not going to fire Cleo. Instead, Sofia takes Cleo to a hospital where the doctor confirms that Cleo is three to four months pregnant. Through the ILRR framework, Sofia exerts power and control by continuously expecting and demanding Cleo to work—even when Cleo tries to have a moment to communicate her personal needs like a pregnancy. Though Sofia declares she will not fire Cleo for being pregnant, the fact that Cleo is worried about possibly losing her job just for being pregnant reflects the multiple layers of her indigeneity, gender, and class that create a situation of her constant precarity. Later in the film, Sofia’s handling of Cleo’s pregnancy without empathy or care for Cleo’s emotional and mental state reinforce this element of economic and racialized power and control. I return to analyze these elements below, when addressing other ways that Sofia communicates machismo by being more concerned with insuring Cleo can still perform labor-intensive jobs than she is about Cleo’s well-being. This situation also represents marianismo by repeating the expectation that women must endure suffering with an endless capacity (Trujillo, 1998). In this case, Sofia also ignores and functionally silences the unique and intersecting elements of how Indigenous women like Cleo suffer within these systems of oppression.

In the next scene, a pregnant Cleo takes the bus to an under-developed city and then walks in muddy streets to talk to Fermín’s cousin who tells her where she can find Fermín. Cleo finds Fermín in the middle of martial-arts training with a paramilitary group.[[33]](#footnote-33) She calls after Fermín repeatedly until he turns around, annoyed and asks her why she is at his training. Cleo responds, “Te dejé mensajes pero no pude encontrarte.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Fermín’s response is indifferent. Cleo tells Fermín that she is pregnant, and the baby is his.

Fermín replies, “De ninguna manera. Y si no quieres que te golpe a ti y a tu ‘pequeño,’ no vuelvas a decirlo y no vuelvas a buscarme.”[[35]](#footnote-35) From the ILRR perspective, when Fermín calls their child, “tu pequeño” (your little one) it absolves him of his own responsibility of fatherhood by referring to the baby in the singular possessive “your.” His threats to beat Cleo and the baby if she doesn’t shut up and leave also reinforces the dominant cultural narrative that women must endure all pain and suffering alone. Fermín’s language is gendered violence that is “perpetuated through erasure” of Cleo and her indigeneity, and of a mestizo baby (Goeman and Denetdale, 2009, p. 13).[[36]](#footnote-36) Through the ILRR framework, Fermín conveys colonial structures and machismo through his verbal violence towards Cleo that absolves himself of his paternal responsibility and commands Cleo to not look for him again.

Fermín then quickly does a high kick in the air near Cleo and steps closer toward her, he gives a loud grita in her face and calls her, “pinche gata” before running away. Cleo is left alone. This scene, interpreted through the ILRR framework, shows how Fermín is embodying machismo culture and reinforcing marianismo through his displays of verbal violence that leaves Cleo to endure the pain (Torres, 2002). “Gata” is the feminine word in Spanish for cat, and it is also a slur for women who are domestic workers. This derogatory term for women domestic workers in Mexico not only belittles them but it also dehumanizes them by relating them to an animal. Fermín’s use of derogatory language to classify and erase Cleo from his life is an attempt of Fermín to reinforce his machismo as well as “patriarchy, heteronormativity, [and] binary Western epistemologies of gender” (Mack and Na’puti, 2019, p.4). Cleo is pregnant and has gone through the emotional and physical labor of searching for Fermín. Yet, when she finally finds him and confronts him about their baby his response is to angrily call her a slew of sexist and derogatory words.

Fermín also denies Cleo’s indigeneity through his domestic violence and verbal violence. Fermín does this through the gritas and martial arts performances the aforementioned scenes. Each time Fermín does a grita, he uses it to shock Cleo. He also does this as a show of dominance through a verbal display of power. Additionally, Fermín’s display of physical dominance is another form of gendered violence. This stems from not only machismo but also from an attempt at erasing Indigeneity through forms of physical, colonial violence (Na’puti, 2019, p.497). Fermín’s attempts at silencing Cleo through displays of power are tied to “generations of colonialism [which] have silenced Native peoples” (Goeman and Denetdale, 2009, p.10). Fermín uses these various forms of violence as an attempt to actively erase Cleo and her indigeneity.

The final scene where Fermín and Cleo are seen together begins with Señora Teresa (Sofia’s mother) taking Cleo to go shopping for baby cribs. As Señora Teresa and Cleo look at cribs, the sounds of a protest are heard in the distance. Señora Teresa starts telling Cleo about the cribs that she and Sofia bought for Sofia’s children. The camera begins to pan away from them as the protest gets louder and soon the protest turns into a massacre in the streets. People are screaming as several men burst into the store. The next thing the audience sees is a close up shot of a gun that is pointed at Señora Teresa and Cleo. Slowly, the camera pans away from the gun to reveal Fermín is the person holding the weapon, he is wearing the same “amor es” t-shirt that he wore to their first date together (See Figure 3). Fermín wearing the same t-shirt from their date while holding a gun to his lover symbolizes how machismo expects extreme emotional rigidity where “tenderness, a sign of vulnerability is so feared” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.106). So Fermín’s only association to what “love is” must be filtered and enacted through gendered, state, and physical violence. Fermín appears to have intentionally held Cleo and Señora Teresa at gun point. Through the ILRR framework it can be interpreted that Fermín’s violence is subjugating both women to marianismo through enduring fear and pain. Fermín joining a militarized group and being involved in the massacre as a part of Los Halcones shows his complete adherence to violent machismo culture, this situation also reflects his desire to achieve “power and control at any cost” (Torres, 2002, p.163). Fermín slowly walks away from Señora Teresa and Cleo, this is the last time Fermín appears in the film.

Fermín’s final scene with Cleo communicates the ideology of marianismo through abandonment as well as state and gendered violence. Fermín being a part of the violence and death that is happening in the streets as he points his gun to Cleo through the ILRR framework represent how machismo exists synchronously with marianismo. Machismo and marianismo function together because both structures rely on strict gender roles that ultimately impose the burden of pain and suffering on women (Anzaldúa, 2007). Cleo and Fermín’s relationship especially in this scene shows the constant threat that Indigenous women face with violence from their romantic partners that threatens the women’s’ futures and future generations like her baby.



Figure 3. Fermín holding a gun to Cleo and Señora Teresa

Cleo and Fermín’s relationship is captured through a few select scenes where the couple is seen together. Analyzing their relationship through ILRR, reveals how Fermín embodies the role of a machista whose violent actions reinforce the culture of machismo as “a complex interaction of learned and reinforced social, cultural, and behavioral” ideologies associated with “power relations” (Torres, 2002, p.166, 167). Fermín’s treatment of Cleo is also indicative of verbal violence, colonial violence, and machismo culture. Through the ILRR framework, Fermín’s acts of verbal violence are a result of machismo hegemonic ideologies such as “hierarchical male dominance” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.105). Given that the ILRR framework considers Indigenous feminism, we can also understand Fermín's reaction to Cleo as a part of intense verbal gendered violence toward women that is played out with distinct force upon Indigenous women. In the final scene with Fermín, he also demonstrates the threat of physical violence, pointing the gun at Cleo symbolizes how “Mexicans have both participated in the violent displacements and conquests of Native peoples” (Rowe, 2019, p.531). Cleo’s quiet and silence when Fermín points the gun at her and her silence when he did the gritas and martial arts performances speak on how, “colonialism has taught many Indigenous Peoples to be silent” and how this colonial hegemonic ideologies persist in society (Yellowbird, 2004, p.42). Fermín’s acts of violence, as interpreted through ILRR, depict machismo, marianismo, and colonial ideologies of power that attempts erasure of Indigeneity. However, when Fermín walks away, we might interpret this as adhering strictly to abandonment within marianismo culture, but examining this move from ILRR also invites us to consider the strength and power of Cleo toward survivance and perseverance in the face of multiple jeopardy and colonial forms of violence.

*Sofia y Otras: Nosotras Nunca Fuimos Iguales*

To further examine the complexities of the ideologies of machismo and marianismo in Mexican culture, we must return to consider Sofia’s character and other relationships in *Roma.* In this subsection of my ILRR analysis, I look at pivotal scenes where Sofia addresses issues with her husband Antonio and Cleo’s boyfriend, Fermín. My analysis reveals that adherence to values of machismo and dominant stereotypes of marianismo occur throughout the film as male characters enact and perform violence, hypermasculinity, and abandonment around their family and other romantic relationships.

Focusing on Sofia’s husband Antonio, he is shown through Cuarón’s directorial perspective as a character adhering to machismo culture by virtue of being a man prone to alcoholism. He returns home late with ruffled work clothes; he is also seen almost crashing his beloved car into the parking lot of the home just a few scenes before he leaves Sofia and his family behind for a business trip. Antonio tells Sofia that he is leaving for a business trip, yet Sofia is desperately clinging to him and telling him, “Nosotros estaremos aquí.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Sofia watches as Antonio leaves in a rental car. The scene ends with Cleo mopping the floors, alone. Though no one knows it yet, this ends up being the last time anyone sees Antonio—in similar and distinct ways with Fermín he has left his partner and his family for good.

Months have passed since Antonio left for his “business trip.” As the audience hears Sofia talk off-camera, Cleo is cleaning the kitchen table. Sofia says, “Fue con su amante a Acapulco. No ha enviado un centavo y han pasado seis meses.”[[38]](#footnote-38) As Sofia is talking on the phone, the camera focuses in on Cleo who sees Paco walking down the stairs. Cleo walks over to him and the camera pans to the stairs where Paco begins to listen to his mom through the closed door, Cleo whispers to him to get away from the door and suddenly, Sofia comes out through the door and starts screaming at Paco for eavesdropping. She slaps him, then cries harder and hugs him. Sofia quickly turns her rage onto Cleo, blaming Cleo for Paco eavesdropping on her. Sofia tells Cleo to get out. The camera then focuses on Cleo with a shocked facial expression. Taken together this brief scenario reveals how Sofia acts as a machista through her use of physical and verbal violence to maintain superiority and authority over Cleo. Sofia is also still putting the burden of parenting her kids onto Cleo. What this communicates is that Sofia when experiencing feelings of her own vulnerability, she turns to dominant values of machismo culture to wield power over others—physical aggression against her own son, and emotionally abusive acts against Cleo. This scene also shows Cleo as being the one person that endures multiple burdens and threats—this is her experience as an Indigenous women living within the confines of her machista boss’s control. This is the price of marianismo ideology reinforced in Mexicanx culture.

The next scene follows Cleo as she watches a drunk Sofia wreck the fancy car that Antonio used to drive. This action provides an interesting parallel because Sofia now seems to have followed in similar footsteps as her husband—the alcoholic who wrecked his car—and she is now filling his shoes by drinking and behaving dangerously. This scene also communicates how Sofia falls into behaving as a machista when she is put into the role of marianismo (in this case, of enduring the pain and suffering of her husband leaving her). Sofia parks the car, gets out and stumbles over to Cleo saying, “No importa lo que te digan, las mujeres siempre estamos solas” (Figure 4).[[39]](#footnote-39)



Figure 4. Sofia holding Cleo by the face and reinforcing hegemonic ideologies about gender.

Sofia intensely telling Cleo how women are always alone is a part of the marianismo culture. Sofia utters this to Cleo after both women have had the men in their lives walk out and abandon them, reinforcing a common trope about Latin men—that there is nothing a woman has that can keep a man around. While Sofia reinforces this ideology of marianismo to Cleo, she is also seeking common ground with Cleo as a woman. This is a critical moment in the film, because much of Sofia’s previous interactions with Cleo have not been in seeking common ground but rather, in Sofia acting as a machista towards Cleo (a point mentioned earlier that I also return to below). Sofia’s act as a machista is through her utilizing her position of power over Cleo. Yet, when Sofia and Cleo are caught in the same manifestation of machismo culture (the man leaving) Sofia tries to relate to Cleo through giving her seemingly universal advice. Sofia’s attempt at relating to Cleo, as interpreted through ILRR suggests that Sofia is trying to show that she and Cleo are one and the same solely based on their gender. However, Sofia fails to realize how their separate identities of class and indigeneity distinguish them completely.

In addition to the earlier examples provided in the ILRR analysis of Cleo and Sofia’s relationship, later in the film marianismo continues to be perpetuated through the way Sofia handles the information about Cleo’s stillbirth. After Fermín points the gun at her when she is shopping for a crib, Cleo ends up having complications with her pregnancy. The camera pans to her feet and the audience sees a dark liquid pool forming at her shoes. Señora Teresa rushes her to a hospital where the doctors quickly try to give her aid, explaining that her water broke and taking Cleo off into a room closing the door behind them. The scene leaves the viewing audience outside of the closed room and goes silent. Then the audience sees doctors rushing Cleo into another room, instructing her to breathe—we then hear Cleo’s panicked breathing over the doctors speaking to each other as a few stitch Cleo up and another few directly communicate the stillbirth that she has just experienced. The main doctor tells Cleo, “Tu bebé nació muerto.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

The scene turns quiet again as the audience only hears Cleo’s panicked, quick breath over white noise—it remains quiet for a couple of minutes. During this time, Cuarón’s lens focuses on another scene with various shots of architecture both inside of and outside of the family’s house. Cleo is also shown in her tiny room facing the main house, she is sitting alone. Señora Teresa is the one to take her to the hospital, it is not Sofia. When they return from the hospital, Cleo is left alone to endure her loss – Sofia is not present and she does not help Cleo through this aftermath. Using the ILRR framework to interpret this scene, Sofia is once again acting as a machista by removing herself from situation—her absence communicates her unwillingness to connect with

the emotional elements of Cleo’s pregnancy, labor, and miscarriage. Sofia seems to have abandoned Cleo by pushing her off onto Señora Teresa, this move also absolves Sofia from any responsibility of directly experiencing the labor with Cleo and subsequently she conveys no emotional connection or support when Cleo returns from the hospital. In this scene, Cleo is represented as an individual that must bear and suffer “a loss that’s cumulative” and a loss that is “generations old” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008-2009, p.283). Her solitude and her silence communicate volumes about her ancestral and generational trauma that are ignored in a culture of marianismo that normalizes suffering.

Sofia pulls into the garage with a new car. Sofia greets her children while Cleo is standing in front of Sofia and the car, staring into the abyss. Sofia tells the children that the family is going on a vacation. The children animatedly ask about where they are going. Sofia then turns to Cleo, and says, “vamos a invitar a Cleo ¿verdad?” Cleo shakes her head “no.” Sofia replies, “Venga. Te hará bien. Además, los niños te extrañarán si no vienes.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Sofia continues to pressure Cleo to join them and eventually Cleo reluctantly nods her head “yes.” Content with the response she wanted, Sofia leaves the garage and goes into her house with her kids. Cleo is left alone, staring at the new car. This scene is representative of the racial and economic power imbalance between Cleo and Sofia. Applying ILRR, I understood Cleo’s act of giving into Sofia’s demands as a direct correlation between Sofia acting as a machista and Cleo maintaining an ideology of marianismo. Cleo also experiences multiple jeopardy here as she endures discrimination and threats from Sofia that normalize marianismo. This scene highlights the way Cleo is silenced, abandoned, and continues to experience “consequences of Latinx coloniality” (Soto Vega and Chávez, 2018, p.320).

While Sofia’s invitation for Cleo to join her and the kids on a road trip to the beach seems to be her way of offering support following the stillbirth, it is soon revealed as just more work for Cleo as she is expected to watch after the kids. Through ILRR, we can understand this as Sofia relying on her positionality to wield power over Cleo and demand more work and labor from her even while Cleo is suffering physically, mentally and emotionally after a miscarriage. This scene depicts unequal power relations that also reinforce that Cleo is always to be providing labor for others—this unequal situation is heightened when she has a stillbirth and needs to be cared for, she needs a leave of absence from her domestic work. Instead, Sofia practically demanded that she continue to work by taking care of Paco and Pepe. Cleo is reminded at the end of the film that her personal needs come last because her material and emotional labor for the family are expected to come first.

*Cleo y Trabajadoras Domésticas: Diferencias en la Misma Tela*

Other dimensions of intersectionality cohere around class dynamics in cultura Mexicanx. In *Roma*, the family attends a New Years’ Eve party with this scene offering very explicit examples that communicate how dividing class hierarchies can be. Sofia, the kids, and Cleo drive for a while to arrive at a huge mansion in the countryside. The mansion where the New Year’s Party is held is architecturally more Western-looking with a sleek design, long columns, and rounded roofs. The family partied in the mansion with numerous other guests including American actors and Sofia’s extended family and friends. Here, *Roma* shows the strange relationship dynamics that develop between Cleo, the family, and other domestic worker characters in the film.

Prior to the party, Cleo catches up with a fellow domestic worker from the countryside, Benita. Then later, while all the guests are drinking and dancing, Cleo and another domestic worker are taking care of the children. Benita sees Cleo with the children and pulls her outside, they leave the children behind and move away from the mansion into what appears to be a smaller house. There they join what appears to be another New Year’s celebration just for the domestic workers. With the family and housemaids from other households, Cleo is heard speaking in Spanish. But here, with Benita at the party on the ground level Cleo is switches from speaking Spanish to speaking Mixtec. Both Benita and Cleo are Indigenous women, and although the film doesn’t explain how the women know each other the film conveys the significance of their connection through the use of their Mixtec language. Their comradery is also conveyed through how Benita treats Cleo with respect, acknowledging Cleo’s need for a break from the constant labor she performs for Sofia. This is a consideration that Benita does not extend to the other domestic workers in the film. When Cleo asks if they should invite two of the domestic workers they left behind in the mansion, Benita replies, “no, no queremos esas niñeras de la ciudad aquí. Se sienten más elegantes que sus jefes. Ven.”[[42]](#footnote-42) From an intersectional analysis it is clear that Benita is communicating a “racial dimension to class images,” and that the domestic house workers and “working class is fragmented” based on whether the domestic workers are from the countryside or the city (Belkhir and Barnett, 2001, p.168, 169). These place-based terms that divide “the city” from the countryside are also often racially coded. Cleo follows Benita. As Cleo follows, she starts to make herself smaller in appearance. When they sit down, Cleo looks around timidly for the duration of the party. Examined through ILRR, this scene describes how social backgrounds define characterization even within a social class. When Benita says, “más elegantes que sus jefes,” she is marking the separation between countryside and city domestic workers due to her narrative that the “city” workers think too highly of themselves because they feel empowered enough to ask for benefits. Benita’s comment on city domestic workers also marks how class and race affect individuals’ identities even within a social class or specific job.

In Mexico, the difference between the countryside domestic workers and city domestic workers is a difference in socially perpetuated ideologies. Generally, upper middle-class families or individuals will seek out domestic workers from the countryside. This is due to the ideology that countryside domestic workers have which is being loyal and grateful for the job out of fear of losing the job (Moya, 2007). The film depicts this phenomena when Cleo asks Sofia if she is going to lose her job because she is pregnant. The countryside domestic workers generally are characterized by being unwaveringly loyal to the families that they work for because the families provide them with pay, shelter, and food. Through this, the families that are privileged enough to afford domestic workers create a dynamic where their employees feel protected even though they are also woefully dependent upon the families’ provision of basic necessities. In return, the countryside domestic workers are extremely loyal because they do not want to lose the job (and lose the benefits as a result). Since the countryside women need the job for its benefits, it makes them a more “controllable” asset to the upper-middle class families. Yet, domestic workers who come from the city tend to advocate for their value more than the countryside domestic workers—by asking for more job benefits (higher pay, better hours, etc.) and are not extremely loyal to the family.

Another aspect this scene shows is how colorism is represented in the film. Through ILRR, I noticed the racial differences presented in the New Year’s scene. Sofia and the rest of the upper middle-class guests are all Mexicans with noticeably lighter skin tones. Sofia and the other guests look more European as well as the mansion where they are all partying in. The domestic workers look more Indigenous, with varying shades of grey skin tones. *Roma* is filmed in black and white which makes the difference between Sofia’s literal white skin and Cleo’s darker grey skin that much more noticeable. Through ILRR, this reflects a racial difference in relation to class. In this scene, Cuarón is showing how colorism is prevalent in socio-economic hierarchies where lighter-skin characters like Sofia are positioned as occupying a better socio-economic class. The complex, subtle, and often unspoken iterations of class and indigeneity are revealed through the ILRR framework to further illustrate how Mexican machismo and marianismo cultures act as invisible forces upholding structures of inequality and violence on marginalized and oppressed communities like the Mixtec.

*Cleo y Pepe: Estoy Muerto*

The use of Mixtec in the film is somewhat unique and rare, which conveys that the majority of the relationships in Cleo’s life are unequal and in opposition to her Indigenous ways of being. Using the ILRR framework to examine this language element in the film, it clearly reflects continuity of colonial control that has prohibited Indigenous languages and peoples from openly practicing their culture in Mexico. This situation also reflects how “western ideologies and discourses of race disappear Native claims and peoples” (Na’puti, 2019, p.497). The racialization and colonization of Cleo occurs through the displacement of Cleo’s Indigeneity as the film progresses. To further understand some of the Indigenous language dynamics from an ILRR perspective, in this section I examine *Roma’s* opening scene.

The film begins with Cleo and Adela speaking in Mixtec. Adela reminds Cleo that it is time to grab Pepe from school. Once Cleo brings him in to the house, she and Adela speak in Mixtec again as the phone rings. Pepe whines to Cleo asking her, “­¿qué dices?”[[43]](#footnote-43) Cleo and Adela continue to talk in Mixtec as Cleo says that she wants to answer the phone call. Pepe whines again, “qué dices. !¿qué dices?!.” Cleo responds to Pepe telling him in Spanish, “sube las escaleras” and then she continues speaking to Adela in Mixtec. Pepe swiftly sasses back to Cleo, giving her a command, “deja de hablar así.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Cleo’s only relief from the family she works for is her friendship with Adela. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Cleo and Adela live together in a tiny room outside of the family’s main house. Both women are from the same area of Oaxaca. They both speak in Mixtec to each other but only when none of the adult family members are around, or when they are alone together. Through the ILRR framework, I interpreted Cleo’s code-switching as a part of policing herself and her presentation of her Indigeneity. Cleo speaks in Mixtec only when she is by herself or when she is with Adela (and none of Sofia’s family is present). Cleo’s act of speaking in Mixtec either in the privacy of her room or only around Adela is an indication of the effect of the processes of separation and an active and perhaps strategic distancing from Indigenous identity in society.

This process of language switching in the film signals how Cleo is always marked as an Indigenous woman—at least to the viewing audience. Her indigeneity becomes a determining factor in her social status, not just with the family but also with other women from the same socioeconomic standing as Cleo (as seen in the New Year’s party scene). The acknowledgement of Cleo’s Indigeneity is always marked by who she is around. If Cleo is by herself or around Adela, she speaks in Mixtec and freely expresses her culture. When Cleo is around the family or Fermín, she speaks to them in Spanish. Her use of the Spanish language when speaking to people with authority over her, or to people she is in a hierarchical relationship with highlights the power dynamics of Spanish as a dominant language.

Pepe repeatedly whining and asking Cleo to translate what she’s saying in Mixtec, then commanding her to “stop speaking like that” points to broader power dynamics about the value and importance placed on Indigenous language, culture, and lives. There is no indication of wanting to learn what Cleo says or even to understand why she chose to speak in another language besides Spanish. Instead, his words communicate to her that there is only one *correct language* to speak in and Pepe showcases how Indigeneity is made to be “Other” and difference is considered abject. This scene provides an example of the “colonial canon asserting white supremacy and Indigenous inferiority” (Yellowbird, 2004, p. 33). Here, Pepe is following this canon and previous, “generations of colonialism [that] have silenced Native peoples” (Goeman & Denetdale, 2009, p. 10). At a young age, he has already learned that he can command and control Cleo even just by demanding that she not speak her own language. It conveys complex issues beyond just a young kid having a bit of a temper tantrum. It reflects colonization as an active practice that continues negating spaces for Indigenous language and representation. Colonization continues to set whiteness as the standard and thus, it makes “Other” and alienates what is not. Through the linguistic elements used in this scene, we are able to see how in Mexican culture forms of colonization live on to maintain social structures where race is bounded and indigeneity is often erased, silenced, or unimportant.

In another scene between Pepe and Cleo, Cuarón depicts for the audience how colonial ideologies of machismo and marianismo functions in a way that attempts to erase indigeneity from the world. Machismo culture has treated mujeres indígenas in Mexico poorly, “for 300 years [it has made her] a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people” (Anzaldúa , 2007, p.45).[[45]](#footnote-45) Aggravating the silence and attempted erasure of Indigenous Mexican women are Mexican iconographs such as La Virgen, “a reincarnation of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin” (Trujillo, 1998, p.214).[[46]](#footnote-46) La Virgen is tied to marianismo and enforces cultural ideologies which stipulate that women must “be submissive, self-sacrificing, humble, and modest and to possess other passive or reserved characteristics” (Torres, 2002, p.166). This cultural ideology has taught Cleo that in order to be a virtuous and ideal woman she must have “the virtues of passivity, obedience, unswerving love, and an endless capacity to endure” (Trujillo, 1998, p.216). Through reinforcing the idea of enduring pain and suffering to women, El Virgen and marianismo sustain a culture of machismo that allows men to “put down women, and even to brutalize them” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.105). The combination of iconographs perpetuate a dominant narrative where Indigenous women are marginalized and nearly erased at the cost of believing that all women must endure pain and suffering. As explained in my analysis above, this phenomenon occurs at various times in the film. But here, I focus in on the scene immediately after Paco and Pepe are playing “Cops and Robbers” on the rooftop.



Figure 5. Cleo and Pepe laying on the concrete pretending to be dead.

After Paco and Pepe disagree about their game, Paco leaves and Pepe is upset so he pretends to shoot at his older brother who is walking away on the rooftop. Then, Pepe lays on the concrete near Cleo who is doing laundry (Figure 5). Cleo asks Pepe, “Y ahora, ¿tú qué tienes?”[[47]](#footnote-47) She repeats her questions a few times, but Pepe doesn’t respond. Then, Cleo tries again to speak with Pepe—they are both speaking in Spanish:

Cleo: “¿qué? ¿No me vas a hablar?”

Pepe: “No puedo, estoy muerto.”

Cleo: “ahh, bueno”[[48]](#footnote-48)

In this brief exchange, Cleo’s final response indicates that she finally understands Pepe’s silence and then she lays down next to him in the sun.[[49]](#footnote-49) Cleo closes her eyes with her arms stretched out, her body lying in the formation similar to the paintings of Jesus being crucified on the cross. Through the ILRR framework, Cleo laying down might also invoke resonances of La Virgen de Guadalupe who is seen as the “good woman” who lives in “a virtuous service to God” (Trujillo, 1998, p.215). Pepe then repeats back to her the same questions that she asked him. Cleo responds, with her eyes still closed, “No puedo, estoy muerta.” Pepe thinks for a bit and continues to lay next to her (See Figure 5). After some silence, Cleo says, “Oye, me gusta estar muerta.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Then the camera pans up for the audience to see several houses of other maids furiously cleaning laundry on the rooftops. Here, Cuarón seems to be depicting how the women of the working-class in Mexico are metaphorically dying in some ways to keep middle to upper class families afloat. Pepe is relatively oblivious to these class power dynamics, but in the scene, he illustrates how machismo and violence are an ingrained part of his everyday life as a male child. Pepe goes to the roof to play violent games with his brother, he pretends to shoot a gun, and is non-responsive to Cleo pretending to be dead even though she is his caretaker and responsible for him. Cleo’s treatment by the family she works for shows that the nation-state’s hegemonic ideologies attached to status correlate to marginalization and oppression, particularly for Indigenous women.

Examining this dialogue from an ILRR framework helps consider the reasons that Cleo may “like being dead” because for her it is a moment of rest, stillness and quiet from her labor-intensive work. This game is different than the earlier “cops & robbers” game played between Pepe and Paco, because here Pepe and Cleo mimic death together and neither of them had to violently kill the other to play the game. For Cleo, someone who is considered Other and often faces attempted erasure, pretending to be dead/silent could be considered empowering because she gets to determine how to perform and how to play.

**Conclusión**

Cuarón presents Mexico’s racialized social hierarchy and how deeply embedded the significance race has in this nation-state’s culture, politics, and society through the way Cleo is positioned against other characters in the film. Cleo’s struggle to make sense of her identity in *Roma* is directly representative of Mexico’s struggle with Indigeneity as a form of identification. Cleo is constantly reminded that her race, class, and gender set her distinctly apart from the family that she takes care of as well as other housemaids who are non-Indigenous and Indigenous. Cleo is positioned as without power based on her race, class, and gender. One way that the film communicates this is through her voice. Her voice is only raised in care of others - it never cries out for the development or agency of her own character. Instead, Cleo’s identity is largely erased through her environment and circumstances. She learns to not speak her native tongue, Mixtec outside of the privacy of her room and her friend, Adela. Cleo practices how to code-switch in order to survive social settings whether it is working for Sofia’s family or relating to the other housemaids like Benita. Cleo’s character in the film’s story, “mourns the losses - loss of land, loss of language, loss of heritage, loss of trust that all Indigenous people in” Mexico will survive (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008, p. 283).

# **Chapter 3: Nada es Singular: Understanding the Applicability of ILRR**

**¿A Dónde Vamos Desde Aquí?**

“¡POR FAVOR, AYÚDAME! ¡NOS ESTÁN MATANDO!”[[51]](#footnote-51) Someone off-scene screams this call for help, this cry that they are being killed and then the camera pans over to Fermín pointing the gun at Cleo inside the cradle store. This quote is representative of Cleo's character arch in *Roma*, it depicts how Indigenous culture and Indigeneity continues to be under the threat of violence and erasure from Mexican life. Through Cleo’s character, the audience sees how intersectional life is. Rarely is there a scene that only focuses on one aspect of any of the characters. Instead, the film depicts complex layers of their identities. For example, *Roma* illustrates how class systems and their related socio-economic standings can marginalize certain groups of people and give power and control to others. These class issues directly impact with Cleo’s identity as Indigenous woman, and as a domestic worker. We see class imbalances in the way that Cleo interact with other maids as well as with the family that she works for. While also discussing representations of class ideologies the film depicts how Mexican society has nearly erased Indigenous women from mainstream culture and how this impacts Cleo’s relationships. This element is largely seen as an overarching narrative of indigeneity that is expressed in Cleo’s life through direct and indirect ways. Amidst both issues of class and Indigeneity, *Roma* also addresses the impacts of machismo and race in Mexican society. Cleo’s life story specifically depicts how machismo and state violence are enacted in her world. The audience sees this explicitly through Antonio leaving Sofia as a part of machismo culture. This culture, which is prevalent in Mexican society, is also the reason for Fermín threatening Cleo with violence (see Chapter 2). When Fermín pulls a gun out on Cleo, the representation goes further than a single act of domestic violence. This scene also signals the lack of importance and value that Mexico’s society puts on respecting women.

Machismo culture can also be linked to colonial powers that naturalize childhood “games” that perpetuate violence like Pepe and Paco’s ‘Cops and Robbers.’ *Roma* depicts machismo and its sister ideology of marianismo, by reminding the audience of how gender binaries perpetuate stereotypes. These stereotypes may be used to justify gendered violence. Viewers see this representation of gendered dimensions through Sofia’s and Cleo’s interactions. Throughout the majority of the film, Sofia marks her position to Cleo as one of authority, power, and superiority. In this way, Sofia acts as a machista to create an emotional, and social boundary between herself and Cleo. The audience gets glimpses of this hierarchy through Sofia verbally berating Cleo, as well as Sofia using Cleo for domestic housework and also as a “stand-in parent” to perform the extra labor of motherhood to Pepe and Paco. Throughout the film, *Roma* shows how the colonial legacies that have ruled throughout Mexico have continuing impacts. It does so by artfully communicating the ways in which intersectionality and multiple jeopardy compound within an individual like Cleo’s life. By analyzing *Roma* through the Indigenous Latinx racial rhetorical criticism (ILRR) framework, this thesis reveals the overlapping identities and complex relationships that comprise Mexican life in the 1970s which still resonate with Indigenous cultural realities in the present context.

*Respondiendo a la RQ*

Within this project about *Roma*, I asked the following questions: **How does *Roma* communicate complex intersectional identities in relation to structures of colonialism in Mexico? What are the rhetorical strategies used to represent Cleo’s identity as an Indigenous Mexican woman? How are ideologies of machismo and marianismo rhetorically maintained as elements of Mexican society?** These questions are concerned with considerations of how power and ideological control are communicated within *Roma*’s characters and scenes. Canons of colonial power continue to present themselves in Mexican society. *Roma* provides cinematic representations of how colonialism manifests through ideologies of machismo, marianismo, gender, class, and processes of racialization. My project conducted a rhetorical analysis of these elements of this film using the ILRR framework to address these critical research questions.

Through the ILRR framework, like how machismo creates a divide between women and men that supports one as inherently dominant over the other. Through this phenomenon, a survival mindset is imagined that allows women to exist within a machismo world, but only through a constricted lens of reality that is perpetuated by marianismo’s belief that woman must suffer. Similarly, ILRR allows the audience to see how Indigeneity has also continued to attempt to be erased from Mexican culture. By virtue of the film’s strategic use of silences and absences within the scenes that deny Cleo’s Indigeneity (Cleo code-switching around the family). The film demonstrates some of the challenges that Indigenous women face daily. Through both Indigenous feminism and the Latinx perspective that informs the ILRR framework, my analysis uncovers how Indigeneity is at the heart of Mexicanidad and yet it is also what dominant, colonial narratives have oppressed in various contexts of Mexican society. *Roma* presents this complex aspect of erasure to the audience through Cleo’s character and experiences throughout the plot. For instance, the machismo culture presented in *Roma* is also the crux for Cleo being both abandoned and threatened by Fermín. It is the same reason that Sofia continues to use Cleo’s labor after Cleo has undergone severe state and gendered violence towards the end of the film. These two aspects of Cleo’s identity reinforce the subjugation of her character beneath men, upper-class individuals, and Mexicans who have forgotten “el árbol de [nuestras vidas] has Indigenous roots” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008, p.283).

Machismo functions not only as a power dynamic but also as leverage between different social classes. Using ILRR to examine the scenes between the prominent characters of the film (Sofia, her family, Fermín, Cleo, etc.) the audience begins to understand social situations are characterized by each individual’s present and overlapping identities. With Fermín’s character, through the ILRR framework, we see how machismo operates as an exploitive tool of power and control over others—particularly over Cleo and her own body. This was represented through Fermín’s use of the gritas, martial arts performances, verbal and physical violence. Fermín used these various machismo-centric displays of power to silence Cleo and reinforce the marianismo ideology that she must suffer and endure all of the pain he causes her. Whereas with Sofia, the audience sees how a woman can embody the role of a machista and use the same hierarchical tactics to perpetuate ideologies of machismo against others like Cleo. This is perceived through how Sofia uses her place in the social hierarchy as Cleo’s boss to manipulate Cleo’s life—forcing her to focus exclusively around Sofia’s family, needs, and desires.

Analyzing the film through an ILRR framework offers a robust theoretical mode of introspection to conduct a close analysis of Cleo. By using ILRR, I was able to critically analyze the importance of Cleo speaking in her mother tongue, Mixtec, and how this represented her identity and cultural connections as an Indigenous woman. At the beginning of the film, I saw a young woman who was once proud of her roots and where she came from. At the end of the movie, that woman is broken, quiet, and hurt. Cleo seems to lose her self-identity as she takes on more of the burden of being Sofia’s maid and acting as a parent for Pepe and Paco. At the end of the film, the woman that stands before them is shy, barely talks to anyone, and is traumatized. The ILRR framework reveals through characters like Fermín and Sofia, how social and state ideologies have worked in an attempt to erase Indigeneity. However, Cleo is not completely erased. At the end of the film, she is still present and despite all of the trauma and pain she has endured. By using ILRR, I was able to interpret how Cleo’s intersectional identities are portrayed and thus, communicated in her interpersonal relationships with both non-Indigenous and Indigenous characters. Through the ILRR framework, I explained her positioning within the film as an Indigenous domestic worker living outside of her homeland. I paid careful attention to the rhetorical strategies used in both interpersonal dialogues and particular scenes that best illustrated interconnected issues from an ILRR framework. This analysis of the film reveals how hegemonic ideologies and dominant narratives are perpetuated and naturalized through direct and indirect communication, as well as cinematic effects that represent Mexican culture. The hegemonic ideologies of machismo and marianismo in Mexican culture has led to the oppression and subjugation of women.

**Qué Marco ha Permitido**

In proposing the ILRR framework, I used a synergy of CRT, Indigenous feminism and Latinx perspectives, Ideological criticism, and racial rhetorical criticism. This intertwining approach allowed me to address the immensely complicated topic of Mexico’s culture, history, and politics as portrayed within *Roma*. The film explores how the various identities of an Indigenous Mexican woman are both presented, not represented, and compromised through relationships and structures of colonialism.

By using ILRR, rhetorical critics are able to more fully understand the complexity of Cleo’s intersectional identities (such as being a domestic worker and being an Indigenous-Mexican woman) within the film. ILRR was crucial to consider how Indigeneity functions as both a living culture in Mexico, as well as a historic piece of Mexico. Through ILRR, we can interpret that Sofia’s family functions from the dominant narratives perpetuated in Mexican society that uphold colonial structures of power.

Mexico in the 1970s and presently is marked by colorism, machismo-culture, and a lack of respect and love for Mexico’s Indigenous roots and our Indigenous peoples. The 1970s was marked by the social, political, and civil rights campaigns that were happening around the globe. For instance, in the United States, women, African Americans, Native Americans, the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized communities rallied for equality. On a similar note, the 1970s in Mexico was also marked by civil rights campaigns as the people of Mexico faced increasing state violence. The peak of Mexico’s state violence was the Mexican Dirty War, which was characterized by a paramilitary group (Los Halcones) massacring students during a rally in Mexico City (Muñoz, 2016). This brutal massacre was a catalyst for multiple communities, including Indigenous peoples, to demand equality and more political rights. During the 1970s “Indigenous leaders working within Mexico’s Department of Colonization and Agrarian (DAAC) sidestepped state attempts to control indigenous communities” and began to define “the ways Indigenous peoples engaged” with the Mexican government (Muñoz, 2016, p.xii). *Roma* captures how Mexico in the 1970s was beginning to experience a surge in civil rights protests. Cuarón shows the treatment of Indigenous Mexicans as well as public political protesting in various ways throughout the entire film. The ILRR framework allows rhetorical scholars to consider how *Roma* addresses these issues in the larger context of Mexican society.

**Direcciones Futuras Para ILRR**

ILRR is a broad framework that allows for examinations of intersectional identities and how their complex layers in relation to hegemonic ideologies like colonialism. Given the robust theoretical framework of ILRR, it would be able to be used on various kinds of projects concerning Indigeneity and Latinx issues because it centralizes its focus on a decolonial approach that could be applied to a wide variety of rhetorical artifacts. The broad scope of ILRR is useful for a deep examination of intersectionality and calls for the rhetorical critic to analyze all parts of an issue instead of focusing on just one singular identity category or discursive aspect. A way to mitigate this issue could be for the rhetorical analysis to first focus on a specific element—such as how machismo functions in Latin society—and then proceed to examine the intersectionalities of machismo along with feminism and how these dynamics are communicated in Latin culture.

A benefit of the framework is that it requires an expansive breadth and depth to conduct analyses and can be utilized on a wide range of rhetorical artifacts. Overall, ILRR has much potential to rhetorically critique many of the social dynamics and issues surrounding Indigeneity and Latinx perspectives. ILRR uses intersectionality as the foundation for this rhetorical framework so that it can address how identities function both within social dynamics and internally as a result of colonial structures. My hope is that ILRR can expand rhetorical scholarship focusing on both Indigenous and Latinx topics. I believe this framework allows for future rhetoricians to analyze the complex identities that persist in the face of ongoing colonialism.

**Conclusión**

Our realities are not made up of singular threads that never touch one another. We are interwoven. We exist within a tapestry of intersecting identities. Within Mexico, there is still a struggle where we are attempting to unweave these convoluted knots. Cultura Mexicana has fostered an insidious national ideology stemming from colonialism that manifests through machismo. The combination of these two hegemonic ideologies leads to social, economic and class issues for Indigenous women. Through our history of colonization, many have forgotten or become disconnected from the practices of respecting our Indigenous roots and our Indigenous women. This history has caused Mexican society to only value one version and one outcome of our history. These ideologies are not only perpetuated in the media but also in Mexico’s history and modern-day society. Perhaps this is why Mexico is one of the top countries with femicide and missing Indigenous women (Lozano, 2019). As such, Mexican culture has not made it safe for an Indigenous woman to freely exist and express her Indigeneity. This way of thinking does not remind us of our mestizaje, give respect to our abuelas indígenas, or give respect to our Indigenous peoples.

By understanding how Mexico’s dominant ideologies are enforced, we can understand how to combat these ideologies. Through intersectionality we can decolonize ourselves and allow our mestizaje to flourish. *Roma* gives us a glimpse at the cultural identity that we have tried to erase as a Mexicanx community for decades. Our Indigenous peoples deserve to speak in their tongue and exist freely in their Indigeneity. Mexican@s deserve to be in touch with our Indigenous roots. Our Indigeneity shouldn’t be erased from our history, or society - it should exist freely. We have a responsibility to understand the complexities that define what it means to be Mexicanx.

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# **Appendix**



Figure 1. From left to right: Paco (stripped shirt), Pepe (white shirt), Cleo (doing laundry)



*Figure 2. Cleo is washing over the tiles in the driveway at the start of the film.*

**

*Figure 3. Fermín holding a gun to Cleo and Señora Teresa*

**

*Figure 4. Sofia holding Cleo by the face and reinforcing hegemonic ideologies about gender.*

**

*Figure 5. Cleo and Pepe laying on the concrete pretending to be dead.*

1. Tenochtitlan is most known as Aztlán (which is the name that Spanish called the land of present-day Mexico that Indigenous peoples lived and continue to live on). Mexicas (also known as Aztecs or Aztecas) are the Indigenous peoples who lived on Tenchtitlan prior to the formation of the nation-state Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The formation of the sovereign Mexican nation-state happened afterwards the signing of the Treaty of Córdoba (Casteneda, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Throughout this project, I do not differentiate Spanish or Mixtec words through the use of italics to avoid “othering” non-English languages, and to make a continued attempt to decolonize my writings. This effort follows the call that “rhetorical scholarship must move in new linguistic and decolonial directions, to illustrate those languages/cultures/nationalities that have been marginalized in academia” (Sowards, 2019, p. 477). Familias means families in Spanish. Indigenas means Indigenous in Spanish. Mexicanos means Mexicans in Spanish. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mixtec-Indigenous refers to the Mixtecs or Mixtecos, one of the largest groups of Indigenous Mexican peoples. Mixtecs refer to themselves as Ñuu Savi, "People of the Rain." Their homeland is the Mixteca, which is now a part of the western half of the Mexican state of Oaxaca and small parts of Mexican states Guerrero and Puelba. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mexicano refers to people of Mexican ancestry and is in the traditional, gender-binary umbrella term. Mexicanx is an attempt to de-gender Mexicana/o. Indigeneidad means Indigeneity in Spanish and refers to those who identify as Indigenous within the diaspora of Indigenous peoples in Latin America. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mestizaje is the Spanish word for mixture. Anzaldúan theory uses mestizaje to refer to transformed combinations and a methodology of decolonized resistance (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008, p.209). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cultura means culture in Spanish. Mexicanx is similar to Mexicano/a and it is an attempt to go against the gender binary imposed in Spanish language. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Spaniards referred to Mesoamericas in the nation-state as Aztecs and named their land Aztlan. Aztecs, otherwise known by Mexicans and Chicanos as the Mexica or as the "Tenochca." Tenocha was derived from Tenochca which is known as Aztlan by Spaniards and most of Western academia. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mestizo, or Mestiza refers to people of both Spanish and Indigenous blood. This term evolved during the Spanish Empire’s reign over Mexico and was used as a racial social hierarchy during the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Con los ojos y la lengua como pluma en la mano izquierda,” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2008, p.211) when translated means “With eyes and tongue like a feather in the left hand,” and is symbolic to how Anzaldúan theory interprets the mestiza and mestizaje. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mexicano means Mexican in Spanish and is the male gendered version. Mexicana means Mexican in Spanish and is the female gendered version. Mexicanx attempted to de-gender the word to be inclusionary to gender non-conforming folks. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Machismo is a Spanish and Portuguese term that refers to strong or aggressive masculine pride. Machismo is also central to Latin America’s concept of what it means to be a man. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Terra Nullis means nobody’s land in Latin, (Mack & Na’puti, 2019, p.14). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. El árbol de nuestras vidas means the tree of our lives in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tierras fronterizas is a Spanish phrase that means theoretical borders or borderlands. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. La gente indígena when translated into English means the Indigenous community. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Conscientização is a Portuguese word that means critical consciousness. It is a social concept that was developed by Paulo Freire and is famously used in his influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sin las fronteras is a Spanish phrase that when translated into English literally means “without borders.” This phrase is famously known from Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands/LaFrontera* where she states, “To survive the Borderlands you must live sin fronteras be a crossroads,” in context to being Mexican and living in America. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mexicas are the Nahuatl-speaking Indigenous peoples of Mexico. The More common term for Mexicas is Aztecs which is a term that the Spanish colonizers called the Mexicas. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Colonia Roma is a neighborhood within Mexico City. This is an upper-middle-class to an affluent area of Mexico City. Therefore, the film was named *Roma* because it focuses on Colonia Roma in Mexico City. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Multiple jeopardy is a term coined within CRT and the field of Ethnic Studies. It is used in relation to intersectionality. Multiple jeopardy is a term that describes how the intersecting layers of one’s identity factors in their experience of/with discrimination and oppression through gender, class, and race. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pinche gata when literally translated into English means “fucking cat;” however, in Mexican slang it can also mean ‘fucking servant.’ In the context that Fermín uses, he is calling Cleo a ‘fucking servant.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Feminicidio means femicide in Spanish. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Marianismo is essentially the hyper feminine gender role in Latinx culture. It is the hyper femininity yin to machismo’s hyper masculinity’s yang. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Tú lo juegas, niñita translates to “You are a little sissy,” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cleo states, “Apaga la luz. A doña Sofia no le gusta encendida.” In English Cleo states, “Turn off the lights. Mrs. Sofia doesn’t like it on. Adela replies, “Ay, esa doña Sofia. Seguro está espiandonos.” In English Adela replies, “Ugh, that Mrs. Sofia. She’s probably spying on us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Amor es” means “Love is” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “Grita” means “shout” or “yell” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Y empecé a beber y luego a resoplar. Yo estaba muriendo. Pero luego descubrí las artes marciales. Y todo quedó en foco. Justo como cuando me miras” in English means, “And I started drinking, and then huffing. I was dying. But then I discovered martial arts. And everything came into focus. Just like when you look at me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “Es solo que llego tarde. Creo que estoy embarazada” means “It’s just that I’m late. I think I’m pregnant” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “¿ eso es bueno, no?” in English means “that’s good, no?” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. , “tengo que ir al baño” in English means, “I have to use the bathroom.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cuarón suggests that Fermín is a part of Los Halcones, a paramilitary force responsible for the massacre of student demonstrators during the Dirty War in Mexico City in the 1970s. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “Te dejé mensajes pero no pude encontrarte” in English means I’ve left you messages, but I couldn’t find you. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “De ninguna manera. Y si no quieres que te gane a ti y a tu "pequeño", no vuelvas a decirlo y no vuelvas a buscarme” in English means, “No fucking way. And if you don't want me to beat the shit out of you and your "little one," don't ever say it again and don't ever come looking for me again” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Mestizo refers to Mexican-Indigenous and is used heavily within Anzaldúan theory to refer to Mexicano/a and Chicano/a’s relationship to and with indigeneity. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “Nosotros estaremos aqui” in English means, “we will be here.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “Fue con su amante a Acapulco. No ha enviado un centavo y han pasado seis meses” in English means, “He went with his mistress to Acapulco. He hasn’t sent a dime and it has been six months.” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “No importa lo que te digan, las mujeres siempre estamos solas” in English means “no matter what they tell you, we women are always alone.” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. “Tu bebé nació muerto” in English means, “your baby was born dead.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. “vamos a invitar a Cleo ¿verdad?

    Venga. Te hará bien. Además, los niños te extrañarán si no vienes” in English means, “we are going to invite Cleo, ¿right? Come on. It'll do you good. Besides, the kids will miss you if you don't come.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. “no, no queremos esas niñeras de la ciudad aquí. Se sienten más elegantes que sus jefes. Ven” means “No, we don’t want those city nannies here. They feel fancier than their bosses. Come” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Que dices means “What are you saying.” [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Sube las esaleras means “go upstairs.” Deja de hablar asi means “Stop talking like that.” [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. mujeres indígenas in English means Indigenous women. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. La Virgen means “the virgin” in English. La Virgen is a reference to the Mexican Virgin Mary, La Virgen de Guadalupe, which is an Indigenous symbol in Mexican culture. “The Virgen da Guadalupe has also served as an ‘alternate Eve’” (Trujillo, 1998, p.215). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. “Y ahora, ¿ tú qué tienes?” when translated into English means, “What’s up with you?” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cleo: “What? You don’t want to talk to me?”

    Pepe: “I cannot because I am dead.”

    Cleo: “good.” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Bueno when translated into English means, “good.” [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Translated to English means, “Hey, I like to be dead.” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. “Please help! They’re killing us!” [↑](#footnote-ref-51)