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Performing race, class, and status: identity strategies among Latin American women migrants in London

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the stories of women migrants from Latin America who found themselves living precarious lives and struggling to sustain former idealised notions of their racial and class identities in London. Dispossessed of previous class membership due to an onward feminised precarity, a diminished social capital, undocumented legal statuses, and menial stigmatised jobs, women clung to an idealised perception of social status (shaped by white Eurocentric aspirations) to negotiate and reconfigure class and racial anxieties in London. They engage in various strategies that include processes of whitening through marriage and children, performances of taste and beauty, and negotiating their racialisation at work. These cases reflect the relevance of the coloniality of power, its influence in the subsistence of racial and class ideologies in Latin America, and in a global economy of care that produces and reproduces postcolonial forms of intersectional racialised and gendered exploitation.

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Sonia had a relatively stable middle-class life in Bolivia where she owned a pharmacy, taught at university, and worked part time at the local hospital. Her recently graduated daughter Paulina wanted to travel to Europe, and to see the world before finding a job and settling down. Sonia did not hesitate to borrow $4,000 to make her daughter's dream come true. Going to Europe was something that she always wanted to do but never could, she was happy to be able to provide this for her daughter. Unfortunately, Paulina flew to Madrid on the same day of the terrorist attack in the train station Atocha, so her plane was sent back home. After a few months she went back to Italy with the support of Sonia who got into further debt to help her daughter. On this occasion, it was agreed that Paulina would repay the money. Once in Italy, not only was she unable to find work, but she also fell in love and got pregnant. Although Paulina's pregnancy represented a financial problem, Sonia's main disappointment was that her daughter had fallen in love with a Bolivian – '*un indio ya ves*' (an indian, you see) – and not a white Italian who would have given her documents and 'white babies with

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blue eyes - pretty babies, we need to *mejorar la raza* (bettering the race)' she said. This expression (widely used across Latin America) refers to marrying lighter, it strongly signals the undesirability of non-white categories and in this case reflects the frustration of Sonia's aspirations of increasing her family's social status by whitening her grandchildren (Telles 2014; Telles and Paschel 2014; Hordge-Freeman 2021; Sue and Golash-Boza 2013). On top of this, she had entered an endless cycle of debt.

> I could not borrow more money from banks, so I started borrowing from loan sharks to pay the interests from the bank. At the end I could not keep the payments, so I decided to migrate, even though I knew I would end up working as a cleaner to save money, pay my debts and try to save my business in Bolivia

she told me. In this brief passage, Sonia gives an account of why she left home to begin a migratory journey to London that changed her life. Central to her narrative is the obligation of motherhood to fulfil her daughter's dreams of travel and adventure. There is also the frustration with her daughter for not taking advantage of the opportunity to improve her life chances by marrying a white European man instead of a brown Bolivian. The trip that was supposed to represent an opportunity for her daughter to accumulate cultural and social capital and for the family to expose their membership to the middle classes by being able to pay for a trip to Europe, turned into an unexpected migration journey that produced important personal dislocations in Sonia's life.

In this article, I analyse the stories of middle-class Latin American women migrants who became trapped in what McIlwaine calls 'feminised onward precarity' (2020) while working as domestic workers in London. Women's opportunities were severely restricted and their choice of work was limited by their lack of English, no recognised educational qualifications, no relevant experience in the UK, weak social connections and, for some accompanied by a legal status that was insecure. In other words, feminised onward precarity is underpinned by economic and social structural conditions that pull migrants into service sector economy occupations that include various forms of caring work such as: domestic work, nannies, elderly carers, and sex work.[1] Research has shown how these low-status precarious forms of labour have become a livelihood for migrant women (and increasingly men) across the world (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Anderson and Shutes 2017). Migrants find themselves trapped and racialised not only by being migrants, but by the intersectional economic racialisation that these, poorly paid, and 'dirty' jobs produce and the lack of social mobility that they entail. As a result, as many studies have suggested, for women who self-identified as middle class back in their home countries and had never done these jobs before, these occupations produce a series of class dislocations, as well as sharp downward status mobility (Parreñas Salazar 2001; Lan 2003; 2006; Gutiérrez Garza 2019). Research on race migrations has focused on the role that migration has had in the reconfiguration of race as a strategy that people use to make sense of their new lives and locations in the new place (Roth 2016; Vargas-Ramos 2014; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Darity, Dietrich, and Hamilton 2005). Important as they are, these studies have focused on either race or class, but have not provided a qualitative account of the role that the intersection that status, along with race, gender, and class has on migrants' precarious subjectivities (in this case middle-class), particularly among those shaped by the global political economy of care migrations. In order to fill this gap, I build on the notion of feminised

onward precarity as a framework that helps capturing 'how female and male migrants experience precarious living and working conditions that reflect devaluation and exploitation in intersectional ways' (2020, 2607) (Neuhauser, França, and Cortés 2023; Ramos 2018). I further this framework by adding an intersectional analysis of the effects that racial identifications and status (along with whiteness) have on women's understandings and reconfigurations of their own middle-class and gender identities in the new place.

Class identity in Latin America cannot be fully understood without its colonial intersections with race, more specifically with being or becoming white, as a result, I follow and contribute to recent scholarship in Latin America that analyses the intersections of race, class, and status to examine the materiality of whiteness (shaped by people's understandings of *mestizaje* and whitening) in the multiple forms of economic, cultural and symbolic capital (Ceron-Anaya et al. 2023; Valero 2023; Bonhomme 2022; Viveros Vigoya 2015; Pinho 2009; 2021). I show how women dispossessed of previous class membership due to an ongoing feminised precarity, a diminished social capital, undocumented legal statuses (in some cases) and working in menial stigmatised jobs, reconfigure their class, status and racial identifications (shaped by white Eurocentric aspirations) as a way to negotiate middle class and racial anxieties in London.

My analysis of such reconfigurations includes an understanding of the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000) as a background to explore how women's racial and class-changing identifications do not exist in isolation or are simple responses to migration processes, but how they are also part of the legacy of colonial rules and historical forms of domination and exploitation. The coloniality of power, as Lugones (2013) further argues, also organised a racialised heterosexual gender system that was implemented through the organisation of labour, education, religion but also at the level of the household. Following this, this article contributes to discussions regarding the role that the coloniality of power has on global economic systems that maintain precarious jobs like domestic work and by doing it produce and reproduce postcolonial forms of intersectional racialised and gendered exploitation within global neoliberalism (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010; McIlwaine 2020; Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck 2011; Gutiérrez Garza 2019; 2022).

Fieldwork and methods

This article is based on twenty months of fieldwork research in London between August 2009 and April 2012. I followed the lives of twenty-five women (along with their friends and families in London) and lived with some of them for short periods of time.[2] The main criteria of my sample, and the way I initially selected my interlocutors was through women's occupations. My research was an ethnography on labour and migration, therefore I was looking for women who were working in domestic and sex work. My interlocutors were from Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Honduras, and Mexico. Most of my interlocutors had migrated before 2009 when entering the UK was relatively easy due to access to tourist visas (granted at the border) that migrants then overstayed;[3] others came from Spain after the economic crisis.[4]They migrated to the UK to repay various debts and to sustain their families at a distance, to search for new experiences, or to fulfil romantic ideas of transnational love (Oso Casas 2010; Gutiérrez Garza 2019, 2022; McIlwaine 2015; 2020; Piscitelli 2008).

Attempting to study such a diverse group of women poses potential problems when trying to construct an ethnographic narrative. I do not intend to be panoptic or develop general statements about a region as I am aware that the investigation of multiple national groups foregrounds complexity, but this reflects the natural progression of my fieldwork, as women lived and worked among people who often were not co-nationals.

As an anthropologist, my main research method was based on participant observation; however, toward the end of my fieldwork period, having developed close relationships with my interlocutors I dedicated some time to applying semi-structured interviews and recorded life histories. Gathering life histories, I found, served as a vehicle by which women were able to reflect on their past lives, their migration narratives and on the changes over time. From the beginning of my research, I disclosed my role as a researcher and explained the nature of my work. My research started in June 2009 at a bus stop in south London while en route to a Peruvian party. As I was standing at the bus stop while talking to a friend of mine in Spanish, a woman nearby asked us for bus directions. She was going to the same event, so we spent the evening together. I explained what I was doing in London and asked whether she would mind me contacting her in the future. Eva became my gateway to other Latin American women who worked in domestic work. It was a snowball effect, which led me from one story to the next. After establishing initial contacts with my interlocutors, relationships with them quickly developed. I was not only invited to their homes, to meet friends and family, but I also accompanied them to the houses where they worked and learned about their daily intimate labour while cleaning empty flats and houses. I cannot claim to have experienced the burdens of the demanding work that they did, but spending time with them at work gave me important insights into their work and created solidarity between us.

Being a Latin American woman facilitated my initial access to the lives of my interlocutors. My middle-class *mestiza* white identity helped me navigating cultural referents and provided me with an advantageous position. However, from the beginning of my research, I was aware of my position of power in our relationships. Not only there were significant differences between us in terms of class, race, education, and legal status but also my role as a researcher played an important part in how our relationships evolved. Acknowledging the relations of power that are intrinsic to our work, I decided to provide a series of services as a way to reciprocate, I do not claim that these erased the inequalities between us, but as a feminist scholar who was already conflicted over the gendered inequalities in the lives of these women, I did not want to extract yet more labour from them without giving something back. It was an ethical problem for me.

The nature of my research brought up other ethical concerns. First, my research entailed working with migrants who were potentially undocumented. I remained highly sensitive and careful to keep women's legal status protected from authorities, co-nationals, and others. The second issue of concern is that my research involved working with women in labour markets that are informal, illicit, and considered menial. Because of the nature of domestic work, women created alternative narratives of their lives in order to preserve some dignity. These narratives were not always consistent and were filled with contradictions, however, the nature of long-term fieldwork allowed me to realise that these alternative narratives were far from being a gossip or white lies; they were part of their migration trajectories and part of who they needed and wanted to be in front of others in London. Although my research included the

study of sex workers and domestic workers, in this article I focus on the stories of a handful of women who worked in domestic work. By doing this, I want to show how the occupation experienced as menial labour in the context of an intersectional socio-economic precarity and liminal legal statuses (for some), forced them to inhabit and reconfigure social and racial identities that they rejected back in their countries.

Understanding middle-class

When referring to the rise of the middle classes in Latin America, Portes and Hoffman (2003) argue that the insertion of neoliberalism across the region not only increased levels of debt, diminished formal wage employment, and expanded precarious forms of feminised labour, but also affected the attainment of social mobility through education. Those who belonged to the middle classes with university degrees and could attain social mobility before the 1980s started struggling to find middle-income jobs that correlated with their educational levels. These changes explain the rise of a middle class defined less by education and stable employment and more by an aspirational lifestyle, characterised by the consumption of goods and a sense of morality and respectability – guarded by women in particular. Women talked about the impact that the deterioration of the economic conditions in their home countries had on their social mobility. My interlocutors had no longer been able to improve their social status through education, even though many of them were well educated having attained tertiary level/university education.[5] As a result they found themselves facing increasing levels of unemployment, engaged in failed entrepreneurship projects, faced increasing levels of debt and experienced extreme difficulties to maintain a middle-class lifestyle that could guarantee economic security for their families. They were squeezed: caught up in the contradictions arising from the mismatch between aspirations as members of a racially and economically defined middle class and the structural economic conditions that threatened their aspirational lifestyle and future plans.

My interlocutors shared and talked about similar ideas regarding home ownership, credentials, moral values, taste, and consumption as means through which they could symbolically and materially perform their class identity and attain social mobility. Acknowledging the difficulty to theorise about the so-called middle classes, I follow recent scholarship that explains how these are common traits that increasingly define the global middle classes (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012; Liechty 2003; O'Dougherty 2002; Dickey 2012; James 2015). The identity of the middle class presents an in-between status that is characterised by people's efforts to attain an upward identification and aspirations, even if they do not seem to possess the material attributes or background. While my analysis takes the latter into consideration, I am also guided by migrants' stories about themselves as they provide insights into their subjective class and racial identifications. As Parker and Walker argue, 'These kinds of insights only become possible when scholars jettison their own classifications and listen to how people themselves talked about class, no matter how imprecise, unscientific, and contradictory those discourses might be' (2013, 12). Women's sense of class and race were marked by their migration journeys that, according to them, produced various dislocations in their sense of selves. Feeling dislocated was an *emic* category that was used to describe how they felt 'out of place'. They talked about themselves in London as

women who were not themselves, which refers to a sense of self that stand in opposition to what they thought of themselves before migration. This reflects a projection of the self that is not unitary as Minha-ha argues, is composed by 'infinite lawyers' and therefore cannot be understood as 'a unified subject, a fixed identity' (1989: 94). As a result, I understand the person not as bounded, or unitary but as relational and immersed in the performance of multiple roles in their various social relationships and locations.

Intersection of class and race

Women's understandings of race and class were infused by the intersection that persists in Latin America between both, shaped by historical conditions of mixing or *mestizaje* and whitening across the region. As Stutzman famously argued, despite *mestizaje* being a national ideology based on a homogenisation rhetoric it is in fact an 'all-inclusive ideology of exclusion' (1981, 50) that incorporates a de facto racial hierarchy whereby blacks and indigenous would eventually evaporate through mixing. As a lived experience, *mestizaje* nonetheless needs the presence of blacks and indigenous people. As Wade (2005:, 214) argues, people in Latin America think about their own mixed identities by including or excluding indigenous or black origins within their bodies and their families. Most of my interlocutors, for instance, identified themselves as white,[6] and those who had mixed backgrounds used racial categories that entailed some form of mixing that included some indigenous or black backgrounds. In some cases, they identified as *mestizas or mulatas* and referred to others as – less white, *morochos, collas, or morenos*.[7] *Mestizaje*, as Moreno Figueroa argues, is about the possibility of passing, 'of engaging in processes of whitening, and of positioning oneself – if at all possible, on "this side"' (2010, 398). However, the possibility of passing – although partly characterised by skin colour and body features – is also determined by one's context and relations, 'depending where, when and with whom you are, a certain space of whiteness as privilege may or may not be occupied' (2010, 398). While women used colour and body features as proof of whiteness, for example, a narrow nose or a white ancestor, their whiteness also included a social status that was reconfigured through stories of improvement and performances of distinction that encompassed cultural capitals and white European notions of taste (Liechty 2003; Bourdieu 1984). This, according to Bolt and Schubert (2022) is particularly important for middle class people who have experienced a loss of status and socio-economic precarity. These reconfigurations take place at the same time, sometimes in contradictory and conflicting ways, nonetheless they are fundamental part of their migration journeys, personal struggles and processes of adaptation to the new place.

In the following sections, I show, via ethnographic material, how race and class, as processes, entail the performance of whiteness through whitening practices as part of their migration dreams, through practices of social distinction, including taste and beauty infused by white Eurocentric aspirations and by the reconfiguration racial and class locations while making sense of their feminised precarious jobs. Women's class and racial dislocations and shifting identifications in London are filled with contradictions and contain changing meanings that women assign to themselves and others based on particular relationships and social locations (Anthias 2008). I follow women's stories of themselves in conjunction with various performative and material practices

that they enact in London to gain insights into the ways in which mobility is shaped by socially constructed post-colonial racial and gender norms, and how these are reworked, resisted, or embraced under conditions of precarity.

Migration dreams of whitening

Eva from Peru decided to leave the country in 1991 due to insecurity and because she was pregnant and wanted to avoid the shame of being associated with the indigenous background of her daughter's father. He was, according to Eva, '*De lo más profundo del Peru*' (from the deepest part of Peru), an implicitly racist remark that suggests having an indigenous background. For Eva, having an indigenous partner was not part of her life project, or her idea of social mobility for her and her family, as a result, pregnant Eva migrated to Spain where she worked as a domestic worker before embarking on a second migration to London in 2008. The UK, as I have previously explained, became a destination for many Latin Americans who had been living in Spain for decades, for some of my interlocutors London offered better opportunities in terms of work, but also the possibility to access state benefits (including housing), provide better education for their children and in many cases, as Eva told me, to have a life where she would not experience the racism she did in Madrid (Bermudez and Oso 2018; McIlwaine and Bunge 2016; Lera and Pérez-Caramés 2015). Eva's daughter had grown up in Madrid, and although her father was indigenous, she had very little racial traces of him. She had, according to Eva, inherited the 'white' genes on her family's side and not the brown ones of her father. 'Is she *mestiza*?' I asked, 'I guess so, but she is definitely whiter than not, *es bien blanquita*', she told me. The whiteness of her daughter's skin combined with the possibility of growing up in Europe would eliminate all traces of indigenousness and would secure her daughter's future. The logic of *mestizaje* resides in the evaporation of indigenous and black backgrounds through a process of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) via racial mixture based on a skin colour continuum (as it happened in Brazil) or via cultural assimilation (as it happened in Mexico and Peru) (Saldívar 2014; Hooker 2005) by which people could achieve 'moral and social uplifting' (Wade 2010, 849). *Mestizaje* is then constructed on a racist logic, that 'have made it possible for racism to be lived as a constant, normalised feature of social life' (Moreno Figueroa 2013, 139) whereby people normalise processes of whitening through mixing as a symbol of class mobility. For Eva, removing her daughter from her indigenous background offered a chance to guard her white middle-class identity and develop her daughters' in a new place where she would obtain social and cultural capitals that reflected Eva's middle class white Eurocentric aspirations.

With similar ideas of whitening and class mobility, Cristina left Ecuador back in 1994 and migrated to Madrid with her three small children to escape from an abusive relationship with her husband. Like Eva, in 2008 she embarked on a new journey to London that according to her, would allow her to save money for her old age. I met her when she arrived in London and was working as a live-in domestic worker in a rich house in West London. As a woman who had been in an abusive relationship, Cristina was very adamant at guiding her daughters into choosing the right partner that will, not only take care of them, but will provide a good future for them and their children. Ivonne her oldest daughter was a single mom who had made the mistake of getting

pregnant with an *Ecuatoriano* in Madrid, 'a good for nothing', luckily, she had learned her lesson and was about to marry a white Spanish man who belonged to a middle-class family in Madrid. I was invited to Ivonne's wedding. The occasion brought together *la abuela* (grandmother) from Ecuador and her four daughters. The wedding was a sumptuous and elegant party, it was during these occasions that women needed to prove that they had gained economic stability, as well as preserve a level of respectability through fostering middle-class traditional family values among their children. Her oldest daughter was marrying a white European man, and her youngest was in a long relationship with a white English boy who was paraded and introduced to the family at the wedding. As she explained, as middle-class Ecuadorians, it was almost a duty to marry white, therefore marrying European white men automatically improved their social position. Furthermore, this was proof that they, as migrants, had acculturated and belonged to the middle classes in Spain. In contrast to other young women in her extended family, Cristina's daughters were not marrying Ecuadorians or black Dominicans in Madrid, something that I learned was considered a sign of failure.

> This man here (pointing at a black man who was in the dance floor) is the husband of my niece. He might be attractive, but this *moreno* is a typical black Dominican man, charming, but a total womaniser. They are only trouble

she told me. These notions reflect the intersection that persist between race and masculinity in various parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, whereby black men have particular expertise for seduction and conquest; they are sexually desirable but can be potentially dangerous (Viveros Vigoya 2002a; 2002b; Kempadoo 2001). The highly sexual and erotic aspects associated with blackness sharply contrast with the ways in which indigenous sexuality is regarded as passive, but it also contrast with the ways in which whiteness is regarded as respectable and could lead to social mobility within a context of migration.

Women's aspirations to improve their lives and their children's through migration and processes of whitening speak of the embodiment that the ideology behind *mestizaje* – as a form of whitening – has in their understanding of race, and its intersections with class and status. There are two aspects of *mestizaje* happening here, the biological one from which women are expected to 'improve the race' to whiten themselves via genetic inheritance of white European blood; a whitening that is located on the skin and the body. Although a gamble, the desire to have 'pretty' babies (white looking) was a matter of good luck – as in Eva's case – or was the result of careful planning and the making of 'right' or 'wrong' choices – as Cristina and Sonia's cases demonstrated. There is, however, a second aspect of *mestizaje* that compliments the biological and that is the acculturation achieved by bringing their children to Europe to acquire social and cultural dispositions that would whiten them. Both processes demonstrate the reconfiguration of such identifications and, to some extent, success in their migration journeys despite their current labour locations and downward status mobility.

Class and race at work

Migration offered the opportunity to advance socially and economically, however, women's lives in London confronted them with new class and racial challenges that

needed to be negotiated. One of the main challenges, as I have previously explained related to their new occupations in London. As middle-class migrants, my interlocutors became part of the global care market that is structured around racial, class, and gender lines. This informal market is sustained by the caring labour of often non-white women who are believed to be 'naturally' fit for the job. Although this global market has offered a degree of independence that may improve women's economic conditions, it is often outweighed by the exploitative nature of care work, the stigma attached to it, and the downward status mobility that the jobs entail.

This is particularly important for my interlocutors because in Latin America it is an almost normalised practice to employ a domestic worker; it is a fundamental part of the middle and upper classes' identities and social privileges. Within their own national contexts, like their middle or upper-class employers in London, my interlocutors hired poor and, in most cases, racially different women to help with housework and children. Their narratives in this sense, included subtle and not so subtle forms of social and racial inequalities and prejudices that persist in Latin America where they had been the white bosses and not the brown maids. Among my interlocutors hiring poor uneducated or indigenous women (*inditas* or *cholitas*) was commonplace. Hence, working domestic work in London produced important dislocations and feelings of shame that were characterised by the perception of the job as racialised and demeaning. Domestic work in Latin America is defined through colonial processes of slavery and indentured labour (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010; 2014); it reflects the racial and class hierarchies structured around colonial historical processes of class formation, gender and ethnicity whereby indigenous and black people are placed at the bottom end of society *vis-à-vis* whites and *mestizos (*Radcliffe 2003; Gill 1994; Casanova 2019). This is linked to the coloniality of power that established a system of exploitation based on the correlation between race and value. Within this correlation, while the labour extracted from those considered white was productive and superior, the labour power extracted from indigenous and blacks was considered inferior and free. In this sense, 'Spanish and Portuguese colonialism established a new model of global power on the basis of which the capitalist mode of production would evolve' (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2014, 5). This model is reproduced within global neoliberalism and the economy of care through the maintenance of postcolonial forms of labour extraction and exploitation of non-white people.

Women shared similar understandings of domestic work as an occupation for non-white poor people. Brazilians, for example, talked about the predominance of black women working as domestic workers, which is rooted in the coloniality of power regarding slavery and racial relations. As Goldstein illustrates, employers still maintain their class privilege through various forms of patronage and see non-white women as inferior regardless of discourses of love and appreciation, especially for those who devote their lives to serving the family (2003, 85–88). Perhaps unsurprisingly for most of my interlocutors, the racial and class hierarchies that persist in Latin America masked and somehow normalised the problematic connections between class, race, and domestic work. So, when women talked about their own dislocating experiences regarding the job, they referred to poverty and a lack of education as two of the underlying reasons for the existence and persistence of domestic work in their own countries. The meanings and consequences of racial difference (except for some of my Brazilians interlocutors) were barely considered.

For Cristina there was a difference between her – working temporarily as a domestic worker – and Felipa from Mexico, who was an indigenous woman. In her view, the fact that Felipa was a domestic worker was unquestionable as she had no education and was indigenous, the juxtaposition of both naturally led to the employment of indigenous women as domestic workers in Latin America. 'What else could she do?', she said once. Women like Cristina explained that she did not have a choice but to temporarily become a domestic worker in London, yet there was a difference between her and others. On the one hand, it was her whiteness (whose value varies within a system of gradation of whiteness) used as a form of symbolic capital what made her different from Felipa, and on the other hand, the homes and employers that she worked for (Pinho 2009). Middle class women like her and Amelia, from Venezuela, worked for white, rich and educated employers, something that helped them feel less humiliated. 'At least I am a *cachifa* (maid in Venezuela) in Holland Park and not in Brixton', Amelia told me. Both women had acquired their jobs as live-in domestic workers and nannies through the Catholic Church in Chelsea (rich neighbourhood in London). The nuns in this Church functioned as a liaison between middle-class, respectable middle-aged women migrants (with Spanish passports) who had in inherent caring nature (due to motherhood), and the upper class, younger mothers (often white) in West London. Despite distinctions that women migrants made between them and others, in their new fragile and contradictory reality in London, they were often the low-class women who were hired by white middle- and upper-class people. Consequently, their personal conflicts were structured around having to painfully endure the obligation to take on these demeaning jobs that were still done by indigenous and black women back in their countries.

In a similar vein, Juliana from Brazil, who had never worked as a domestic worker before going to London, explained how in Brazil the job held a low status and was prevalent for *pretas* or *mulatas* (black or mixed race) because those who had lighter skin automatically had better opportunities in life. Juliana's explanation resonates with Lovell's (2000) argument regarding how the majority of Afro-Brazilian remain confined to domestic work because this occupation has the lowest wages within the Brazilian economy. Juliana had black ancestry self-identified as *mulata;*[8] her mother was black and her father was lighter, her three sisters all had different colours, 'I am what you call *mulata*, I am the darkest of my family'. She explained to me that, when she was a child a teacher called her *preta* at school, it made her feel ugly and inadequate, more importantly until that day Juliana had never thought or herself as black (Hordge-Freeman 2021, 73). Later in life, she still did not call herself black because she had not had the life of a *negra*, after all, she had had more opportunities in life than her mother did. Her lived experience of being mixed race was based on her own kinship mixed background and family relations and on her class location as being in the middle. Although she was aware of the intersection that exists between race and class within domestic work, according to her, there was a sharp difference between being a domestic worker in London and in Brazil as being a *mulata* and a domestic worker was not inextricably linked as it was back home. Juliana could put herself on one side of the spectrum, where in this context she was not a *mulata* working as a *faxineira,* but an educated migrant temporarily working as a domestic worker. It was not her skin colour that determined her occupation in London, but her lack of documents and social capital.

Racial identifications within domestic work cannot be fully understood without the intersection that they have with particular forms of affect and the way in which it produces stereotypes of certain migrant groups (Berg and Ramos-Zayas 2015; Gutiérrez Garza 2019). In my own research, I have explored this connection through the emotional labour that women performed with clients and employers and the consequences of this. Although emotional labour is marked by racial and national stereotypes and it is performed within labour structures that are exploitative, stigmatised and for many, legally insecure, here I am interested in addressing the various perceptions that women had of their own racial identifications and conflicts while working on a care market that profits from racial and class inequalities at a global level and reflects postcolonial legacies of racialised and feminised exploitation. Despite these structural conditions, in the next section, I show how women engaged in various material and practices of social distinction to manage contradictory social and racial locations.

Taste and distinction

As I have explained in previous sections, for many of my interlocutors being *morenas*, mixed raced or having some physical traits that were associated with non-white people was disadvantageous as it could signalled lower class locations. Women were experts at reading people's class and racial backgrounds through markers of taste during various social events. These events, as already explained with Cristina's daughter wedding, were opportunities where people momentarily felt as ease and performed their success as migrants, however, they were also opportunities where people measure one another in terms of class and racial backgrounds. This was the case with the baptism of Lourdes' grandchild, in which I was asked to be the godmother, therefore I needed to buy the christening gown. When I showed the dress to Patricia (Camila's mother) and Lourdes they looked quite disappointed at my choice. In search of advice, I turned to Jovanna and showed her the dress that I had selected. 'Ay, you do not understand, this dress is way too plain for their taste. These are low-class people that like flashy things and want to make in impression at this type of event. You need to buy a big, garish dress for Camila', she told me. I was surprised by Jovanna's remarks about Lourdes' family social class, especially by the condescending tone that she used while describing them.

Her explanation was simple – they belonged to a different class. It was not only their taste but the fact that Lourdes' family came from an indigenous background from La Paz that gave Jovanna the authority to signal them as lower class and not white. On top of this, their consumption practices revealed that they were not really white, in other words, they did not 'act white' enough because of their class and ethnicity (Ceron-Anaya et al. 2023, 187). For Jovanna, as a self-defined white person from Santa Cruz, Lourdes, and Pedro's taste was just aspirational and clearly revealed their low-class background. However, Pedro and Lourdes explained that they could not identify themselves as poor people.

> The poor people in my country are really poor and have no real opportunities to improve. My mother was poor, she was an indigenous woman who spoke *quechua,* but she did not want us to learn the language and made huge efforts to send us to school to have better opportunities in life. My father was *mestizo* but I never met him, that is why I am not that dark.

She told me. In Lourdes' narratives of racial identity, she recognises and includes her mothers' indigenous background. However, her class location and Pedro's as middle class allowed her to locate herself in a position of symbolic privilege *vis-a-vis* other migrants. Even though in the eyes of other Bolivians they 'looked indigenous', they did not ascribe themselves an indigenous identity. Lourdes was also very keen at reminded me that Pedro had a master's degree, something that was a clear sign of their middle class and was regarded as the ticket out of cleaning jobs, his educational capitals would open the door for social mobility as soon as they managed to legalise their status in the country.

Among my interlocutors and particularly in the Bolivian community, there were other ways to signal their racial and social position within their own home countries. The celebration of a beauty pageant commemorating Miss Santa Cruz was an occasion that *Cambas* used to differentiate themselves from other Bolivians.[9] Back in 2012, I was asked by Cecilia from Santa Cruz to be one of the judges in the beauty pageant. My role as a judge for the upcoming Miss Santa Cruz 2012 was thought to guarantee impartiality as two of the judges already had a favourite. Viviana (the favourite) had participated in the previous Miss Santa Cruz but had not won the title.

The pageant was held at a big, brightly lit hall that belonged to an Evangelical Church in South London. The place was filled with big round tables where people were drinking Fosters beer, red wine combined with Coca-Cola, eating Bolivian *empanadas* (pastries), and chatting. Most of the women in the event were elegantly dressed in long or cocktail-style dresses, while some of the men were wearing suits or blazers. As Jovanna told me, it was an event in which people liked to look their best and forget about the fact that they were cleaners or undocumented migrants in London. Cecilia had explained to me that the pageant involved three categories: traditional dress, formal dress, grace, and personality. At the end of the catwalk, the candidates were interviewed by the host who asked each of them a different question that related to the Latin American community in London.

What interested me were the answers that each candidate gave when interviewed. They all referred to their tough lives in London as migrants and how these events reminded them of who they really were. The caveat, I would add, is that they were a particular type of Bolivian. The fact that the four candidates were 'white' looking corresponded with specific ideas of race, class, and beauty (Fabricant 2009; Canessa 2008; Rogers 1998). In contemporary Bolivia, images of feminine physical beauty are overwhelmingly white, and from a very young age girls (those both indigenous and non-indigenous) are exposed to the image of what the standard of feminine beauty is, that of the white western woman (Canessa 2008, 45–46). The beauty contest of Miss Santa Cruz also responds to wider concerns and ideas about race and beauty among *Cambas* (people from Santa Cruz) and the importance of whiteness. Being *Camba* evokes whiteness, social power, and racial purity, aspects that this community was eager to perform and exhibit in London. Events like these provide spaces where communities that feel excluded can enhance various forms of nationalism through the embodiment of notions of beauty (Chow 2011; Mani 2006). It was as if, by performing these roles in the beauty pageant, they were able to alleviate the difficult and precarious lives led in the UK and acquire a different class, ethnic/race identity in the process. At the same time, the women were able to fulfil roles that they had never been able to perform back in Bolivia. In

London, they were beauty queens due to their closeness to whiteness, regardless of their social position. As Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje have argued, 'beauty contests are places where cultural meanings are produced, consumed, rejected, where local and global, ethnic and national and international cultures, and structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but vital aspects' (1996, 8). Through Miss Santa Cruz people collectively made claims about their social and class aspirations; it became a collective vision of what it meant to be from Santa Cruz.

The winner was Rosalia who was the most 'Latina' looking. She was *morena* (brown) and did not fit with the Caucasian model of beauty she was the contestant I had voted for. However, my interlocutors were surprised and disappointed by my choice as she was not, the 'best-looking' woman of the context. There was a unanimous preference (among my interlocutors) for the woman that fitted the European model of beauty (Moreno Figueroa 2012). This reflects how 'the power of whiteness in shaping social fields inevitably impacts how people, wittingly or not, internalise attitudes, dispositions, and emotions' (Ceron-Anaya et al. 2023, 187). 'Not everyone is indigenous in Bolivia, as many people think. There are white people like us', Karina told me (Canessa 2008, 56). These notions confirm what Peter Wade explains as the key to race in Latin America, that is, 'that racism and mixture coexist and interweave' (2008, 179), creating societies in which categories such as black and indigenous exist and are part of the national imaginary. Yet, because modernity, development, and high status are often associated with whiteness or at least mixedness, people with lighter skin automatically place themselves at the top of the racial pyramid. For migrant women, locating themselves on the side of being white or whiter than others within their new context and new relations in London was an important part of reclaiming part of the privilege that was lost due to migration. People from Santa Cruz believed that they could physically embody European ideals through the white body, yet the conditions of their new context and relations confronted them with the fragility and fleetness of such privilege.

Conclusion

The women in my research faced a paradox commonly experienced by global middle-class migrants: while migration confers a degree of economic independence that improves women's status in the family and achieve economic mobility, their trajectories as domestic workers produced a series of class and racial dislocations that deeply affected migrants' subjectivities. In this article, I offered a picture of those middle-class migrants trapped in a system characterised by a juxtaposition of emancipation and oppression that holds them in ongoing cycles of postcolonial racialised inequality and feminised precarity. By highlighting the relevance of the power of coloniality in the definition and the reproduction of domestic work as menial labour due to its gendered and racialised features, I have shown how colonial and postcolonial systems of inequality operate to exploit people along racial lines, even when the people involved are adamant at identifying themselves as middle-class and white or closer to white (provided that they colour allow them to do so), or at least mixed-race. Due to the contradictory and shifting racial and class identifications of my interlocutors, I have shown how women engaged in everyday practices of white privilege through idioms of social status and middle-class identifications.

These were used as resources to gain some symbolic advantage over others that appeared as less white, or from a different social class.

The racial and class identifications of my interlocutors intersect with national and regional social hierarchies and shifting meanings of race and colour, as well as *mestizaje* (as a process of whitening) in Latin America. Women's racial and class identities are dramatically disrupted as a consequence of a feminised onward precarity, as a result, they reconfigure their non-unitary and conflicting identities through various social practices. Race and class are produced and reproduced through the daily actions of women at work, while they strategise around whitening their families, and while they expose their membership to a white middle class via idioms of taste and distinction. As Ceron-Anaya, Pinho, and Ramos-Zayas explain, 'embodied forms of cultural capital demonstrates that whiteness in Latin America rarely operates along a continuum that consistently produces the same results, regardless of historical and national contexts' (2023, 188). For instance, women who were perceived as 'white' lost their status associated with these physical features because of their new class location. At the same time, women who were not white, or dark skinned, were able to accumulate European or Anglo-American cultural capitals and get 'closer to' or become 'almost white'.

The various practices and performances that woman used to reconfigure their contradictory racial and class locations demonstrate an affective commitment to what Pihno calls 'aspirational whiteness' (2021). This aspirational whiteness is manifested in women's efforts to locate themselves closer to the white spectrum and through their positioning within particular social relationships that could potentially enhance it. Whiteness is deployed to emphasise women's 'intrinsic' difference between them and others (non-white), it becomes a resource to recover a site of privilege that they no longer inhabit, particularly when their middle-class membership can no longer be easily reproduced or claimed. However, these practices are not straightforward, they are not always successful, and most importantly they are filled with fractures and contradictions that emerge from the socio-economic context in which they are generated.

The stories in this article expose the relevance that class and status have in the understanding of race in Latin America. One does not exist without the other. My article offered a detailed analysis of such intertwinements and the need to see them as co-constitutive. Only then we can fully understand the ways in which migrants who experienced deep class dislocations position themselves within a white spectrum – along with its embodied cultural and social dispositions – to negotiate shifting identities. The lived experience of my interlocutors regarding race, class, and status, as a process rather than a fixed identity, manifests itself in the fractures, in the instability of such identifications, and in their efforts to perform and materialised new social locations that allow them to deal with a neoliberal system that relies on such racialised and feminised precarious subjects to subsist.

Notes

1. The service sector economy in the UK, which dominates 91% of London's economy, provides plenty of job opportunities for migrants. A quarter of all Latin Americans in London work in service sector occupations (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016, 20).
2. The ages ranged from early 30s to mid 50s.

3. The situation has changed since 2010 as migrants from Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru needed to apply for a tourist visa in advance and needed to prove that they had a source of income back in their countries.
4. According to McIlwaine and Bunge from 2012 to 2014, there were approximately 15,600 migrants moving from Spain to London (2016, 13). By 2013, there were an estimated 145,000 Latin Americans in London and just under 250,000 in the United Kingdom as a whole, making them the second fastest growing non-EU migrant population in the country.
5. My findings resonate with what McIlwaine and Bunge (2016) found among Latin Americans in the UK, whereby 51 percent of them are well-educated, having attained tertiary level/university education (of which 1 percent are postgraduate).
6. In this regard, McIlwaine and Bunge (2016) found that half of Latin Americans in England and Wales defined their ethnicity as 'white other'. This needs further explanation as the census does not include a categorisation specifically for them; nonetheless it is quite revealing that out of the categories in the census, including 'other ethnic group', most Latin Americans chose 'white other'.
7. Although the term *moreno* is used across Latin America to identify a shade of brown, among my interlocutors the term was used to refer to black people in order to avoid the term '*negro*' due to its racist connotations. Overall, the categories 'black' or 'indigenous' were avoided because of their devalued characteristics, even among those who claimed to have had indigenous or black parents or grandparents.
8. According to Telles (2014, 99) women who are well educated are reluctant to identified themselves as *pretas*, they rather used the term *mulata* as it includes some racial mixture.
9. Santa Cruz has a particular history within Bolivia which has been a region fighting for autonomy, considers itself a white, urban, and modern region that stands in opposition the rest of indigenous Bolivia and its social movements. As a region, Santa Cruz is quite proud of their European white looking population and of having fewer indigenous people than other parts of Bolivia like La Paz.

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