

PAID DOMESTIC LABOUR AND POSTCOLONIALITY  
*Narratives of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese migrant women*

SABRINA MARCHETTI

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PAID DOMESTIC LABOUR AND POSTCOLONIALITY  
*Narratives of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese migrant women*

BETAALD HUISHOUEDELIJK WERK EN POSTKOLONIALITEIT  
*verhalen van Eritrese en Afro-Surinaamse migrantenvrouwen*  
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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SABRINA MARCHETTI

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*To the memory of my grandmothers  
nonna Evelina and nonna Tina,  
and in honour of Nabruka Mimouni*



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## INTRODUCTION

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«Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance»

Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather*

In the film 'Black girl' (1966), Ousmane Sembene shows us the story of Diouana, a young Senegalese woman who works as a nanny for a white French family in Dakar. She seems content, playing with these white children in the garden and walking around the streets with them. The French family also seems happy to be in Africa and to be surrounded by the locals. This happiness, however, is interrupted in the aftermath of Senegalese independence (1958) by the decision of the family to return to France, and to take the African girl along with them to be a domestic worker. In fact, in their apartment on the Côte d'Azur nothing is like before for Diouana: she is now required to do heavy domestic chores, to cook for her employers and their guests, and she has to remain at home the entire day. Her relationship with her employers, having been amicable in Dakar, becomes difficult and conflictual, especially with the French woman. Diouana suffers from not being understood any more by her female employer; the happy times they spent together seem far away; her identity as an African woman is repressed every day and the more the employers exalt her exoticism, the more she feels vilified. This deep alienation pushes her to commit suicide. At the end of the film, her male employer brings the girl's body back to her village, a lifeless body which now can only painfully testify to the failure of Senegal's hopes to find a better future in the former colonisers' land.

The story of Diouana brings the issue of migrant domestic work to the fore, an issue debated not only in academic work, but also in newspapers, tabloids, novels and films. In recent decades, migrant women have been playing an increasingly important part in many western middle-class households' caring and cleaning needs in a way which has raised the attention of political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians and gender and migration experts. The experience of these women workers speaks to us about the phenomenon of 'globalisation of care' whose functioning has been approached intersectionally through the categories of gender, age, class and 'race'/ethnicity. Yet, in my opinion, the story of Diouana demands more. Her story asks for specific interrogations about the representations surrounding domestic workers' experience which, I believe, descend from something which is seldom mentioned in today's debates on migrant domestic work: colonialism.

In the last thirty years, a growing body of literature has concentrated on the issue of paid domestic work. In this debate, paid domestic work is defined as the ensemble of activities in which «one individual cleans and cares for another individual or family» (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001, pp. xvii-xviii) and several services are provided «from childcare to garden maintenance, [from] answering the door to cleaning the toilet» (Anderson, 2007, p. 247). In this debate, domestic work is seen as *different* from other jobs in view of the intimate character of its performance, its strong gendered construction, and the uniqueness of the relationship between employer and employee (Lutz, 2008, p.1). Moreover, as is attested by historical research going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this kind of work was a typical occupation for migrant women, also in the case of internal or countryside-city migration (see Sarti, 2005a, 2005b, 2008). Today in Europe, it is thanks to these migrant domestic workers that parents, women in particular, can work outside the home, and that care for children as well as for older people – an important issue in the context of the ageing European population (Anderson, 2007, p.247) – is provided. This explains why migrant domestic workers are generally acknowledged to have a highly important function in the welfare of many European countries, and that policy decisions regarding them are the object of heated public debates.

With the increasing predominance of migrant women in this work sector, the debate of the last thirty years in academia has gradually taken the intersection between gender and ‘race’/ethnicity as a crucial axis of analysis of paid domestic labour<sup>1</sup>. Various studies based on the stories of migrant domestic workers, their employers and other subjects at stake in this phenomenon (brokers, intermediaries or policy makers), have drawn scholars’ attention to three major issues in human and social sciences, namely *care*, *migration* and *gender* (Lutz, 2008, p.2). Taking into account the complex articulation of the debate on paid domestic work, and the variety of the approaches which have been taken by different scholars in the last years, I will try to outline in the following pages the two streams of research that I find most relevant to my work, and I will then insert my personal trajectory in this debate with reference to them.

The first research stream, the one I call the ‘globalisation of care’, examines how paid domestic work performed by migrants is embedded in a global system of labour division grounded on gendered and ethnic divisions. This has been poignantly demonstrated by a number of studies. Among them, Rachel Salazar Parreñas (2001) looked at the case of Filipinas in Rome and Los Angeles. Pei Chia Lan (2006) drew attention to the ways in which ethnic stereotypes affect the formation of domestic work as a

---

1 Among the contemporary classics on migrant domestic work the books edited by Janet Momsen “*Gender, migration and the domestic service*” (1999) and Cynthia Enloe’s “*Bananas, beaches and bases*” (1990) deserve considerable mention. These have been the first texts to approach the issue of domestic work in a global feminist perspective.

labour market niche for Filipinas in Taiwan. She defined migrant domestic workers in Taiwan as 'stratified others', subjected at the same time to the process of 'othering' and to labour segregation. Along the same lines, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002) argued that global divisions of gender and 'race'/ethnicity have brought migrant women to embody, and thus offer, those traditional nurturing and caring skills which are supposedly lost by women in western and industrialised countries. These authors' emphasis is often on the exploitation in this sector, since these workers experience low possibilities of self-determination and upward mobility.

The second stream of research examines the 'the micro-politics of (paid) domestic work' in western households, focusing on the division of caring and cleaning work within households which employ migrant domestic workers. The daily interactions between employees and their employers (and other family members) have been seen as the location of tensions which concern wider transformations of domestic and family relations (see Moors, 2003). On this matter, Jaqueline Andall (2000) in her study on black female migrants in Italy<sup>2</sup> demonstrated the experience of migrant domestic workers to be a reflection of Italian women's social roles and their conception of family life. She also illustrated the existence of ethnic hierarchies between different groups of migrants within the domestic work sector in Italy (p. 169). Bridget Anderson (2000), moreover, taking the case of Filipinas, argued that two opposite and inter-dependent female models, which descend from the *whore/Madonna* gendered dichotomy, affect the relationship between European employers and migrant employees. Along similar lines, other examples of the employer-employee tensions concern workers' sexuality (Constable, 1997) or their competition in mothering roles (MacDonald, 1996).

It is starting from a micro-political approach that my own trajectory in this research field began. I first conducted an analysis of the relationship between female employers and employees as the instance of a woman-to-woman relationship which replicates the dialectic relationship between masters and servants, employing the interpretation of this relationship suggested by Carol Pateman (Marchetti, 2004). Later on, focusing my attention on the case of Filipinas employed in Dutch and Italian households (Marchetti, 2006), I analysed the interactions between female employers and workers. I analysed the way the two women make use of certain narratives to express conflicting models of femininity, between traditionalism and emancipation, and the way they negotiate boundaries of ethnicity, class and age along the same lines. I focused in particular on workers' precarious citizenship status, demonstrating how this pushes them to enact different emotional 'tactics' in order to sustain the biases

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2 Focusing on the early history of Italy's transition into an immigration country, Jaqueline Andall (2000) accomplished to promote one of the first studies on the interconnection between race and gender, within Italy.

affecting their working relationships. Yet it is thanks to a consequent team project<sup>3</sup>, when I had the opportunity to compare the experience of domestic workers from several countries, that I started to wonder about the way people's different pre-migratory socialisations affect their later working experiences. For example, I noticed a difference between those who had been educated in the Roman Catholic faith (strongly connected to Italy because of the Vatican State) and those who had not. Even more interesting was the case of people who had been educated with strong cultural and political ties to Italy, such as the people from former Italian colonies and protectorates or descendants of Italian emigrants abroad. This fact seemed important not only at the level of the general migratory experience, but also at the specific moment of their interactions with Italian people in the workplace. Thus, I started to ask myself what the 'new' aspects of the phenomenon of 'globalisation of care' could be which would come into sight when one merges migrant workers' national/cultural background with that of the country of arrival.



I WOULD LIKE to go back to the case of Diouana and see if this could tell us something more about the stories of the many women who travel and migrate today towards Europe. Figures like the one of Diouana stand, in my view, as the pioneer protagonists of this labour sector in Europe. Their stories draw our attention to the roots of migrant women's employment in western households, requiring us to explore the origins of its ways of functioning and of the representations which surround it. With this in mind, I decided to follow McClintock's suggestion in the epigraph («colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance») and explore the role of 'colonialism' in the taking shape of contemporary forms of migrant domestic work. In other words, I wanted to look *back* in order to understand what is happening *now*.

Thus, my present work will interrogate how pervasively colonial legacies affected the experience of postcolonial female migrants who arrived in the former colonising country and worked there as domestics and care takers. Looking at the narratives of Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, I want to explore the way postcoloniality affected the identity formation of migrant subjects who found employment in the niche of care and domestic labour. I will question the role of postcoloniality in shaping their social position and their identity formation as expressed by their subjective narratives. I will also interrogate the relevance of postcoloniality for what we know today as 'migrant domestic work', in its modalities, its

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3 In 2006 I participated in fieldwork for the project "Prin 2005. Nazionalità, genere e classe nel nuovo lavoro domestico" which led to a volume recently published by Raimondo Catanzaro and Asher Colombo (2009). This project gave me the opportunity to interview about twenty male and female domestic workers in Italy with different national backgrounds.

functioning and in its representation. If, as I said, gender and ethnicity are already core issues in the contemporary debate about migrant domestic work, my aim is to explore the way *continuities* with the colonial time affected some migrant domestic workers' self-representation and their relationship with their employers.

I consider the symbolic and material roots of migrant domestic work in Europe and the early stage of the employment of non-western women in European households to deserve further study. I find that more effort should be taken to preserve specificity in accounts of *who* comes to work *where* and *from where*. Too frequently this is lost when migration is described as a 'chaotic' ensemble of flows of labour forces. In this perspective, I want to contribute to the creation of a firmer footing for contemporary studies in 'globalisation of care' and migrant women's work. The challenge then, for me, is to take the framework of *postcoloniality* and see if this, in combination with an intersectional approach to issues of gender and migration, could offer some of the 'ground' I was looking for.

For this operation, I find particularly relevant another research stream which focuses on paid domestic work in the colonies and which is usually not mentioned as part of the scholarship on paid domestic work. This is the work by Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Ann Stoler on the life of colonial servants in the Dutch East Indies. In particular, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten analysed the colonial discourse which constructed native servants as the paradigmatic figure of 'the other' (Locher-Scholten, 2000, p. 88). Mainly using archival and literary sources, Locher-Scholten was able to demonstrate the importance of strategies of psychological and ideological *separation* between masters and their servants in strengthening the prestige and superiority of white colonisers (pp. 94-100). In similar vein, Ann Stoler together with Karen Strassler conducted several interviews with Indonesian women and men who worked in Dutch colonial homes between the 1920s and the 1950s (Stoler, 2002). Through the composition of this memory repertoire, Stoler and Strassler collected narratives of East Indies people's perceptions of the *intimacy* which used to take place in Dutch colonial homes. This work offers a unique standpoint on what constituted 'the colonial' and how it remains in people's memories today.

At the same time, I am also interested in the question of 'race' as it emerges from early studies on the relationship between black maids and white mistresses during or soon after the time of slavery and, later, of racial segregation. Phyllis Palmer (1983, 1989) observed that in the relationship between middle-class white US women and their Afro-American maids, between 1920 and 1945, one can find an exemplary case of the relevance of race based divisions in the constitution of female identities. She has shown that this relationship reflected distinct female models for white and black women which had been inherited from the time of blacks' enslavement. Along the same lines, Jaqueline Cock (1989) analysed the relationship between white employers and black employees in the domestic sector in South Africa during Apartheid; while Judith Rollins (1985) focused on the experience of Afro-American domestics working

in white households in Boston. These studies demonstrate the functioning of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1996, 2002) called the ‘racial division of reproductive labour’ in countries where historically blacks are placed at the bottom of the social ladder and thus are in charge of the most demeaning jobs – such as caring and cleaning for affluent people. Also for Glenn this stratification is based on racial categories which are largely inherited from the time of slavery and racial segregation.

My attempt is thus to contribute to the contemporary debate on migrant domestic work with an analysis of the legacies of colonialism which exist in the actual forms of domestic labour within migratory settings. In order to do so, I will take the insights offered by Locher-Scholten and Stoler on *colonial servitude* and apply them to *migratory* forms of paid domestic labour, despite the differences in time and geographical location. Secondly, I will make the issue of past enslavement and apartheid into a relevant explanatory feature of the representations affecting migrants’ labour segregation in Western societies today. In order to do so, my aim is to demonstrate the *continuities* between what happened in the colonial time at the peripheries of empire, and what happens today in the hearth of Europe. The analysis of narratives from postcolonial migrants in Europe will help me to uncover these possible continuities.



IN MY POSTCOLONIAL approach to migrant domestic work, I derive my hypothesis from a qualitative research using in-depth interviews with postcolonial migrant domestic workers about their relationship with the former colonisers as it took shape *before* and *after* their migration. As indicated before, I decided to take the case of domestic workers who came from Eritrea to Italy and from Suriname to the Netherlands before 1980.

The choice of these two groups and locations for fieldwork was made by taking into consideration not only the feasibility of the research from an empirical point of view, but also some fundamental features which make Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese women an interesting case for transnational comparison. The two groups have, of course, very different characteristics, as two populations which never entered in contact and which come from two very far locations in the world. Surinamese and Eritrean cultures are in fact very different, as different are also the histories of their colonisation by a European country, as I will illustrate in more detail in chapter three. Yet, the two groups share some important traits in common which have to do with (1) the periodization of their migratory patterns; (2) the relationship they entertained with the former colonisers; and (3) the socio-economic position they occupied in the country of arrival.

The first similarity occurs around the year 1975. This is the year in which the independence of Suriname was declared and it is also the year of explosion of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. This year marks a turning point in both countries’ relationship with

the former colonisers: for Suriname the beginning of a new independent political condition, for Eritrea the end of the last stage of Italian presence when, because of the new war, the last Italians who had remained in Asmara asked to be repatriated. Moreover, if it is true that the story of colonisation is very different for Suriname and Eritrea, I am convinced that the period of interviewees' childhood and youth, corresponding to the pre-migratory phase of their lives, carries some similarities in the character of colonisers' cultural presence and in the process of decolonisation. The time of decolonisation also brings forward a similarity in the migratory trends from both countries towards their former colonisers: in both cases one can observe the increase of arrivals during the 1960s and a peak in the years around 1975.

Secondly, with both groups it was possible to get a significant account of the role of the postcolonial relationship with the former colonisers in their lives<sup>4</sup>, from the times of their childhood until the present, and in particular in their working life. In their narratives they illustrated in comparable ways the meaning of their encounters with former colonisers' culture and society, as they took place in work related contexts and in their everyday life in general.

Finally, one can observe that, once in Europe, both Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women were channelled into jobs as domestics and caretakers whose representation is negatively characterised in the Netherlands and Italy, and associated with the subject-position of a female 'subaltern other'. In other words, I considered that for both groups of women, working and life trajectories have been determined by comparable representations shaped by gender, ethnicity and class as postcolonial female migrants. In my view, these representations are the reason for the overrepresentation of these women in the low level niche of caring and cleaning work both in Italy and in the Netherlands.



IN THE FOLLOWING pages, postcoloniality will emerge from interviewees' narratives in its intrinsic *ambivalence*, the same 'colonial ambivalence' which affects postcolonial representations for their potentiality of being, simultaneously, a space of subjugation to colonisers' hegemony and of its reversal (Bhabha, 1994). Likewise, I will demonstrate that representations attached to postcolonial migrant women may lead to opposite outcomes: they may ease their ways into the former colonisers' society but, at the

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4 The differences in the histories of Italian and Dutch colonialism in Eritrea and Suriname make it difficult for me to find a common terminology. I made up my mind to generally use the following criteria: I will talk of Dutch and Italians as 'colonisers' - and Surinamese and Eritreans as 'colonised' - for the period until 1975. I will do so, first of all, for the sake of simplification, and secondly in the belief that the Italian presence in the area of Asmara was so relevant until that moment that one can rightly talk about a form of 'post-colonization' or 'neo-colonization' (see Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007).

same time, they may be relegated to the lowest strata of society. The interviewees have been living a life on the edge of this *ambivalence*, where being Eritrean/Surinamese was simultaneously their tool of resistance, and the reason for their subordination. Postcoloniality, in this sense, will be seen as a double sided relationship between colonised and colonisers, oscillating between a positive recognition and a strangling tie.

From a theoretical point of view, interviewees' narratives will testify to the formation of a figuration which I call the *postcolonial migrant domestic worker*. In my view, the formation of this figuration is determined, constrained, and channelled by several forces which feature the continuity between the time 'before' and 'after' the colonisation and which I can here schematically summarise as:

- the construction of symbolic and material boundaries between Europeans and migrants which resemble the boundaries existing between colonisers and colonised (mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion which impose vulnerable and oppressive social positioning on migrants);
- the reiteration of specific representations of black women from colonisation, in particular from slavery, racial segregation and sexual exploitation; and, finally,
- the forced parallelism between the specific conditions of education, domestication and disciplining for women in colonial societies and in the countries of settlement likewise.

In my view, these different procedures took place during the interviewees' youth and later continued, after their migration. In particular, in the comparison between the Netherlands and Italy, I will consider as part of this continuity the circulation of two different sets of images which refer to two different coloniser-colonised relationships, namely plantation slavery in Suriname, and military exploitation in Eritrea. In both cases they were accompanied by the employment of women for sexual and domestic services.

Moreover, I will further argue that interviewees can testify to subjects' capacity to enact different 'tactics' (Certeau, 1984). They performed these tactics at the *narrative* level with the purpose to gain a better status, if not (or not only) in the material sense, surely at the level of self-representation and self-understanding. Narratives, in this view, are an important opportunity for subaltern subjects to enact micro-resistance, even when they inhabit narrow and oppressive positions in social space.

I will focus on interviewees' narratives as examples of micro-resistance to their social positioning, as *tactics* in which they are able to use knowledge and dispositions they *accumulated* under colonial legacies differently. In accounting for this accumulation process, I will elaborate on the concept of a gendered postcolonial 'cultural capital' which I derive from Beverly Skeggs' notion of 'feminine cultural capital' (Skeggs, 1997) arguing that her notion takes a new shape under the legacy of colonial dominations, when specific constructions of gender, ethnicity and class affect its configuration.

In general, the Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women I interviewed enacted two similar forms of narrative tactics. The first is the enhancement of their skilfulness in

practices related to the above mentioned postcolonial 'cultural capital' in order to achieve better life and working conditions from their subjective point of view. The positive depiction of their work is functional to a narrative made to 'sustain the difficulties' of a migratory destiny marked by a job which is otherwise stigmatised as 'dirty', degrading and servile.

The second tactic is the reference to the colonial past in order to gain a better socio-cultural inclusion in comparison with other migrants. With that purpose, interviewees provide a narrative which contrasts with the dominant representation that, in their view, conceals colonial legacies in Afro-Surinamese/Eritrean domestic and care workers' experiences, and depicts them as migrant workers 'like any other'.

Moreover, looking at the difference between them, I argue that Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean interviewees 'use' the historical bonds with former colonisers in different ways. These have to do with the construction of their representation as *similar* or *different* from the former colonisers; and thus with feelings of *affiliation* or *competition* that these representations carry along.



THE CONCEPTS which frame my understanding of the relationship between colonialism, work, embodiment and migration will be illustrated in the first chapter of this dissertation. Afterwards, in chapter two, I will explain the reasons that induced me to collect in-depth interviews. I will also illustrate some methodological issues and troubles related to the comparative character of my work. In the third chapter, I will characterise the background of my sample and provide the reader with the tools for an historical contextualisation of the narratives I will discuss from chapter four on.

The rest of this dissertation is organised in two parts which concern the analysis of interviewees' narratives. This first of them has a preliminary function to the second. In the first I describe the formation of a postcolonial migrant subjectivity in the (ex-) colonies, while in the second part I will dig more into the implications for labour experiences in the context of migration, which I consider to be the actual 'substance' of my present study, namely where the issue of domestic work will come into sight. You will thus find that the chapters in the second part are more extended and that in each of them I provide some more conceptual references to be considered in combination with those already sketched in chapter one.

Thus, the first part (chapters four to six), on the pre-migratory period, entails a discussion of a period of their lives in which, although interviewees did not know the future of work and migration awaiting them, they were already involved in a relationship with the prospective destination country. In these excerpts, elderly women, living in Europe for more than thirty years, delve into their memories in order to retrieve the little girls they had been, for whom 'Italy' and 'the Netherlands' were places only somewhere in their imagination. Thus, in chapter four and five, I will enter in the

discussion on how postcolonial migrant subjectivity is influenced by the absorption of knowledge and cultural practices from the country of destination. I will do this by looking at the way interviewees' feelings of 'belonging' and participation in colonisers' cultural identity are described in their narratives. In chapter six, finally, I will comment on excerpts in which interviewees talk about their first meeting with Italian/Dutch people. My point here is to show the general non-recognition of the colonial bond from the side of the colonisers, and to analyse its contrast with interviewees' sentiments of belonging and colonial acculturation that I will have illustrated in the previous two chapters.

In the second part of the thesis (chapters seven to ten) I will look at interviewees' experience as *postcolonial migrant domestic workers* and the relationships with their former colonisers. Here I will show how, in the country of settlement, interviewees relate to their gendered 'postcolonial cultural capital', that is, their gendered and ethnicised care and domestic attitudes and skills. This issue will be developed in four steps. First of all, I will outline the reasons that make Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese domestic workers' experience into one of an 'ethnic' labour niche (chapter seven). Secondly, in chapter eight, I will describe what this specific working experience *is* through the illustration of postcolonial migrant domestic workers' identity formation. Finally, in the last two chapters, nine and ten, I will look at two opposite and yet interdependent sides of interviewees' experience. I will show that their postcolonial background turned out to be at the same time a source of strength and of weakness. On the one hand this background allowed them to enact tactics of positive self-depiction as good and desirable workers, through a process of ethnicisation of their skills. On the other hand, however, it exposed them to racist offences which found their point of reference in colonialism.

Finally, adding depth to my analysis, you will also find three instances of cultural practices which were object of discussion during the interviews and which I analyse comparatively. This is the case of school education (chapter four), mass and popular culture (chapter five) and cooking (chapter nine). Yet, this dissertation is not organised with the purpose of outlining the differences between Afro-Surinamese and Eritreans, but I rather aim at enhancing the commonalities between them from a postcolonial point of view. The organisation of the paragraphs is not intended to counterpose two different sets of experiences, but to illustrate different sides of the same phenomenon.

## Chapter 1

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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«La differenza delle donne sono millenni di assenza dalla storia.  
Approfittiamo della differenza»<sup>1</sup>

Carla Lonzi, *Scacco ragionato: Poesie dal '58 al '63*

The following pages outline the theoretical references on which I built the analytical framework of this dissertation. A fundamental characteristic of this framework is that it takes theoretical tools from different disciplinary fields and research streams. As is rather common in Gender Studies, I took an inter-disciplinary approach, borrowing from different traditions of thought in order to achieve a complex and rich understanding of various subjects' lives and thoughts. In this view, I have looked especially to theories elaborated in the field of Oral History together with Anthropology and Sociology. At the same time, also Postcolonial and Cultural Studies, as well as Human Geography, Ethnic Studies, Migration and Memory Studies have been very relevant to me.

Thus, combining approaches from these fields of study, I will refer first of all to theories of identity formation which are relevant to issues of postcoloniality and Diaspora, as I will explain in paragraphs one and two. Afterwards, I will explain the relationship between personal narratives and subjects' processes of memorization and identification. In the following paragraph, I will illustrate the importance of intersectionality to the understanding of inequalities and differences between subjects, and, in so doing, I will place particular emphasis on the categories of class, age, gender, and 'race'/ ethnicity. In paragraphs five and six, I will explain how paid domestic work is related to issues of embodiment, and to a theory of the 'home' as a place of power

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<sup>1</sup> *My translation*: «Women's difference is in the absence from millennia of history. Let us take advantage from the difference». Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) was an Italian feminist intellectual and art critic. With her book "Sputiamo su Hegel" (*Let's spit on Hegel*, 1974) she inaugurated the series *Libretti Verdi* made by *Rivolta Femminile*, one of the most active groups in the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s.

construction. Finally, I will illustrate the notions of ‘tactics’ and of a gendered ‘postcolonial cultural capital’ through which I will investigate the relationship between postcoloniality and the experience of migrant domestic workers as it emerges from their narratives. In each paragraph, moreover, I will explain my own take on these theories and indicate the direction in which I develop or apply them to my own work.

## 1. POSTCOLONIALITY

The notion of postcoloniality offers an important space of elaboration in the attempt to demonstrate the existence of ‘colonial legacies’ within late-capitalist and globalised forms of commodification of women’s labour, and in the values and symbols attached to them. For this reason, I am taking postcoloniality, in this thesis, as the concept which, both at the descriptive and at the evaluative level, lies behind the narratives about work and migration that I will later analyse. However, I see that the notion of ‘postcoloniality’ is still widely debated and I believe that this discussion, despite being rich and stimulating, can lead to some confusion. This is further complicated, in my view, by the fact that postcolonial approaches, while today quite elaborated in the field of literary theory, remain rather underdeveloped in other disciplinary fields. I suggest that this has been particularly the case in Migration Studies where little work has been devoted to explore the connection between migration and postcolonialism<sup>2</sup>, which is often treated just as a ‘taken for granted’ feature of early migrations to Europe. My use of the concept of ‘postcoloniality’ needs thus some clarification, together with the illustration of how it links, in my view, to globalisation and migration.

I need to clarify, first of all, that some important differences exist between the two terms ‘postcoloniality’ and ‘postcolonialism’. Following on Huggan Graham (2001) if ‘postcolonialism’ refers to a series of intellectual practices and methodologies which operate in mostly aesthetic and textual forms, ‘postcoloniality’ refers to a *wider* global system of values and symbols. Postcoloniality refers indeed to the formation, on a global scale, of a ‘cultural regime’ wherein the principles of late-capitalism and globalisation set the conditions of exchange and value of all kinds of commodities, in connection with the legacies of colonialism (Graham, 2001, p.6). This connection be-

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2 Some exceptions are Luis Batalha (2004) on Cape Verdians in Portugal; Ian Talbot and Shinder Thandi (2004) on Punjabi colonial and postcolonial migration; Antoinette Burton (1998) and Visram Rozina (1986, 2002) on Indians in Great Britain; and finally Ramon Grosfoguel (1999) on Caribbean migration to the United States and Europe. For the Dutch context, some work on postcolonial migrants has been done by Mies van Niekerk (2004), Gert Oostindie (2000) and Hans van Amesfort (2006); while for the Italian context an article has been published by Nicola Labanca (2002a).

tween colonialism and globalisation is also addressed by Sara Ahmed who defines postcoloniality as:

[the] rethinking [of] how colonialism operated in different times in ways that permeate all aspects of social life, in the colonised and colonising nations. It is hence about the complexity of the relationship between the past and the present, between the histories of European colonisation and contemporary forms of globalisation. (Ahmed, 2000, pp.10-11)

In these scholars' views postcoloniality is something that goes beyond colonialism simply as a historical event, and can be equated to late-capitalism and to globalised forms of culture and knowledge production. In addition, feminist scholars such as M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty agree that what is behind late-capitalist and globalised principles is a continuous process of 'recolonisation' which is expressed in the permanence of gendered and racialised hierarchies (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p.xxi). The same emphasis can also be found in European debates on Cultural Studies, where scholars such as Paul Gilroy (2004) or David Theo-Goldberg (2006) discuss the permanence of symbolic hierarchies rooted in the colonial time, in the formation of European identity today.

The idea of a *continuity* between the times 'before' and 'after' colonisation, thus between colonisation and globalisation, is also present in Stuart Hall's notion of 'double inscription'. In his view, we are today witnessing:

an essentially transnational and transcultural 'glob' process – and it produces a de-centred, diasporic or 'global' rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives. Its theoretical value lies precisely in its refusal of this 'here' and 'there', 'then' and 'now', 'home' and 'abroad' perspective. (Hall, 1996 p.247)

Here again the emphasis is on a 'process' which 'goes beyond' colonialism as an event historically circumscribed (Hall, 1996, p.253). In this view, the use of the term 'postcoloniality' allows the rigidity affecting the distinction between different colonialisms in an historical and geographical sense to be overcome. Hall, furthermore, emphasises instead that postcolonialism is not simply an attribute for the time 'after' colonialism or the place where colonialism does not any longer exist. This aspect is particularly relevant to me, given that Eritrea and Suriname went through different histories of colonisation - period, modalities, date of independence, type of exploitation, etc. Yet, the *continuity* between globalisation and colonialism does not only have a descriptive value, in temporal or spatial terms, but it is a question which requires a new understanding of the relationship between colonialism and globalisation, and of the relationship between colonial discourse and European history. It is within this attempt that my own work finds its location, and that the narratives of former colonised migrant subjects enter in dialogue with each other.

In order to better articulate the way postcoloniality is relevant to my own work, I need to point out two last insights stemming from the debate on the legacies of colonialism. The first is the connection that Étienne Balibar (2004) has made between colonialism and contemporaneous forms of migrations. He suggested the idea of 'recolonisation of immigration' to illuminate the dynamics which affect migrants in Europe today. Taking the case of France, Balibar argues that a 'colonial heritage' lies behind migratory regimes today at the symbolic and material level. He distinguishes three different aspects of continuity between colonial regimes and today's strategies of migration control<sup>3</sup>: (1) the persistence of the same administrative methods and habits which characterised the coloniser-colonised relationship in the control and regulation of migration; (2) the fact that the current migration of labourers follows geographical paths established during the colonial period; and, finally, (3) the reproduction, in issues of migrants' entrance and integration, of the same hierarchical mindset with which colonizing nations categorised 'cultures' and 'ethnicities' in order to divide and control the dominated (Balibar, 2004, pp.39-42). On this last point, Balibar specifies that from colonialism we also inherited a model of 'ethnic classification' which is used today to divide a global labour force on a world scale. With that, Balibar emphasises the historical roots of migrants' status and living/working conditions, as well as reinforcing the responsibilities of industrialised and western countries. He says:

It is clear that the ethnicisation of human groups and the correlative representation of unbridgeable 'cultural differences' between individuals, maintained against the logic of the work situation itself by the accumulation of discriminatory practices, is much more the doing of the societies of the North that organize the movement of immigrants than that of the immigrants themselves. (Balibar, 2004, p.42)

The way colonial legacies are embedded in processes of ethnicisation, control and discrimination of migrant women workers are at the core of my dissertation.

Equally important is the second point I would like to discuss here, which is the need to contrast colonial master narratives with 'new stories' narrated by subaltern subjects (Gramsci, 1971), in this case, formerly colonised people. Stuart Hall indeed suggests that we need to challenge the Eurocentric account of capitalist modernity with *other* ways of 'telling these stories' which start from the point of view of people located at the 'dispersed global peripheries' (Hall, 1996, pp.250-251). The narration of historical events as *just* 'stories' is central in Hall's understanding of postcoloniality when he says: «Colonialism' [...] was always also a way of staging or narrating a his-

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<sup>3</sup> The reference is here to the European resolutions of immigration matters. The understanding of migration as something that has to be 'controlled', in the sense of managed and repressed, is at the centre of EU documents such as the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and the Dublin Regulation (2003).

tory, and its descriptive value was always framed with a distinctive definitional and theoretical paradigm» (p.253). With that, Hall contends that if colonialism has forged our knowledge of the modern world, we now need to include the accounts of the many who can tell this same story from a different, peripheral, de-centred, i.e. subaltern and postcolonial point of view.

The emphasis on the standpoint of subaltern subjects has a long tradition in the postcolonial debate where it has been mainly discussed in its relation to the question of 'othering' (Spivak, 1985b). 'Othering' is the condition pertaining to subjugated people within colonial discourse. This is the discourse wherein «the European Self is positioned as superior and non-Europeans are placed as an inferior, but necessary, Other to the constitution of that Self» (Jacobs, 1996). In the relationship between European Self and colonised others, the normative character of the 'imperial Other' merges together with its influence on the process of identity formation of a subaltern subjectivity. Following on this analysis, my present work intends to offer insights on the knowledge of subjects that have been positioned as 'others', as subalterns. In the following pages, postcolonial migrant domestic workers are taken as paradigmatic figures of subjects which have been the object of 'othering' during colonialism and are today alienated objects of commodification in global markets. Their position is affected by what Gramsci defines as the crucial characteristic of the subaltern condition, i.e. the fact of being 'inferior but necessary' (Gramsci, 1971), thus desired and rejected at the same time. This point will be further illustrated in paragraph five.

## 2. AFRICAN DIASPORA AND 'BLACK EUROPE'.

Within the framework of postcoloniality, migration is often seen not as an individual rational choice but rather as the effect of forces created 'during' and 'after' colonialism. Migration is a process which displaces subjects affected by colonialism and globalisation by pushing them to move in spontaneous or forced ways. In this view, the notion of Diaspora migration has been generally used with reference to the dislocation that migrants experience, in more or less forced ways.

Among the different uses of the notion of Diaspora, it can refer to people who have been displaced by traumatic or violent events, especially wars and persecutions, such as political refugees or expellees. Secondly, the term can also refer to workers and other types of migrants to emphasise their feeling of disconnection from a real or imagined common place of origin which they may call their 'home' (see Ahmed *et al.*, 2003; Thompson & Tyagi, 1996). A third use of the concept of Diaspora implies the interactions, at the material and symbolic level, between migrants and non migrants. This use was coined by Avtar Brah when saying that «Diaspora space is 'inhabited', not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous» (Brah, 1996, p.209). In this view, every

subject is 'modified' by the encounters taking place in the Diaspora space, beyond the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', between migrants and non-migrants.

When looking at the experiences of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese migrants, I find highly relevant the notion of Diaspora as a dislocation of people of a common origin<sup>4</sup>. The traumatic dimension of these groups' migrations is due, first of all, to the reason for their departures which is connected to the downfalls of the decolonisation of their countries, as I will illustrate in chapter three. This dimension is also related to both groups' common experience of discrimination in Europe, a question which I will analyse in particular in the last chapter of this thesis. I believe, moreover, that when one looks at the migration of Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese in Europe, one can recognise their experiences as part of the African Diaspora. In doing so, I follow Stephen Small and Kwame Nimako who argued that one can include in the African Diaspora all people whose migration was a consequence of European colonialism (Nimako & Small, 2009, p. 28-29). In this sense, they see a connection between the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the slavery in the Caribbean and in the Americas, and the twentieth century migration of continental Africans to North America and Europe.

The individual and collective migratory paths which have brought members of the African Diaspora to settle in Europe have articulated this differently in time; moreover, they also have different motivations. Just to give some examples, some of the blacks coming to Europe during the last century have done so for study reasons, as in the case of Africans in Russia, while others have travelled to Scandinavia for political asylum. Afro-Caribbean people have travelled to France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands for labour migration while still others, such as some Africans in Italy, have travelled for religious purposes. In this view, the attempt to define the composition of the African Diaspora in Europe is hampered by the variety of trajectories that black people now living in Europe might have taken (Blakely, 2009). Yet, for the sake of distinction, one could group the black people in Europe in two main categories: black Europeans of African/Afro-Caribbean descent or African citizens in Europe. The difference between the two groups is a fundamental one, as far as it deals with the attribution of citizenship to at least one European state.

The diffuse and yet consistent presence of black persons in Europe<sup>5</sup> pushed several scholars to formulate the idea of a 'Black Europe'. The pioneer among them is Paul

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Arnone (2003, 2008) has intermingled the notion of Diaspora with the one of 'exile' in her cross-generational study of the Eritrean community in Milan. For the case of the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora towards the Netherlands, this has been discussed rather as a form of 'transnationalism' by Ruben Gowricham (2001, 2004) or of 'binationalism' by Livio Sansone (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The most recent estimates of the number of 'black Europeans' date back to 1996 when Europe's black citizens amounted to less than five percent of the total population (Eurostat, 1996, cited in Blakely, 2009). In his 'Black Europe Map' Allison Blakely (2009) reports the highest presence of black population in the United Kingdom (1.5 million) and France (2.5 million). The

Gilroy (1987, 1993, 2000, 2004), who inaugurated a debate on 'race' as contextualised within European imperial history; as such, it was distinct from the U.S. debate which had been prominent until that moment. Gilroy (1987) broke the ice with his analysis of the exclusion of 'blackness' from the construction of the British national identity. This, in his view, did not incorporate the inheritance of the colonial past and, in so doing, did not acknowledge the way 'race' had changed the configuration of 'class' and 'nation' in Britain's contemporary identity which is, thus, ultimately racist.

Expanding Gilroy's claim from Great Britain to the whole continent, 'Black Europe' is a highly important intellectual project, which, like that on Postcolonial Europe<sup>6</sup>, has a deep anti-racist resonance at several levels. The first dimension stems from the acknowledgement of what David Theo Goldberg calls the 'racialisation of Europe' (2006), i.e. the process of coming to awareness of the (negative) representations which are given to blacks, Jews and Muslims in the moment one envisions Europe as an *only* 'white' continent. In this perspective, the use of the notion of 'Black Europe' challenges the idea of Europe as a project which «did not have, until recently, any ethnicity at all. Or didn't recognize it had any», to say it with Stuart Hall's words (2004, p. 256). This is exemplified by the fact that the founding documents of the European Union, from the beginning throughout the last decades, although aware of the existence of an African diaspora in Europe, did not mention colonialism even by name (Nimako & Small, 2009, p. 9).

Thus, at the level of imagination and identity construction, the powerful character of 'Black Europe' lies in its capacity to uncover the many paradoxes and conflicting beliefs which circulate in Europe today. In this vein, Gloria Wekker sees 'Black Europe' as an *image* which is capable of unsettling assumed identities and discovering limitations of possible transformations in identity. This is exemplified by the power of this image to express at once the «desirability and [the] impossibility of being a black European» (2009, p.278). The contradiction between desires and possibilities which pertain to a 'common' European identity questions the very foundation of the idea of Europe which has been so passionately discussed in the last decades (see Passerini, 2003).

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presence is quite significant, however, also in smaller countries such as Ireland (30.000 black people), the Netherlands (about 500.000), Italy (194.000) and Sweden (55.0000). In counter-tendency instead is Germany with 'only' 168.000 of blacks against its vast population of 80 million people (p. 4).

6 With Postcolonial Europe I refer to a project which, while it questions the way colonial legacies are relevant for the current definition of the European Union, also tries to understand the new forms of racism and religious fundamentalism (see Ponzanesi & Blaagaard, forthcoming). Black Europe and Postcolonial Europe are thus in a strong relation with each other, although Black Europe has a more specific focus on subjects whose experience is characterised not only by postcoloniality but also by their African ancestry.

Finally, at the more political level, the use of the term 'Black Europe' denounces the (low) social and economic position of blacks in Europe, and its relation to the phenomena of race-based exclusion, stigmatisation and discrimination. This intellectual project is thus in contrast with mainstream research which categorises immigration as an independent historical event and thus downplays blacks' subordination and its racist implications (Essed & Nimako, 2006).

It is with this in mind that I use the notion of 'Black Europe' in my analysis of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women's experiences of 'subordination' in Italy and the Netherlands. Indeed, although I do not want to homogenise their migratory histories and the different integration processes to which they have been subjected, I still find it important to put them together under the idea of 'Black Europe'. This can shed light on interviewees' narratives about their experiences of racial discrimination and, more generally, their processes of identity formation in the relationship with the former colonisers.

### 3. NARRATIVES OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY

The object of this study is specific forms of discursive construction, a particular type of personal narrative<sup>7</sup> that Nira Yuval-Davis calls 'identity narrative' (Yuval-Davis, 2001). Nira Yuval-Davis' use of the notion of identity narratives starts from the assumption that «identities - individual and collective - are specific forms of cultural narratives which constitute commonalities and differences between self and others, interpreting their social positioning in more or less stable ways» (p.61). These narratives can thus «constitute [a] major tools of ethnic projects. [...] dividing the world into 'us' and 'them'» (p.59).

In this formulation, the term 'identity' is understood as something unstable, an attribute which is never fixed or given once-and-for-all, but something which is always contested and destabilised: from the identity of the signs used in the narrative, to the identity of the speaker herself. Thus, speakers are seen, in Julia Kristeva's terms, as 'subject(s) in process,' where the word 'process' is used «in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled» (Kristeva, 1986). In this light, I define *identity narratives* as discursive constructions

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<sup>7</sup> With 'narratives' I mean the 'means of inquiry' which are offered by 'stories' told by individuals (Roberts, 2002, p.177). These narratives can be of three different kinds: personal, collective and institutional (Portelli, 2001). Identity narratives, in my view, can address these three levels simultaneously. From this assemblage of stories based on in-depth interviews I attempt to find common trends and draw some hypothesis. The process of collecting and analysing individuals' narratives will be explained in details in Chapter two.

which allow us to problematise the processes of identification that the speaker is – more or less directly – talking about.

In discussing these narratives, the concept of ‘experience’ comes into the picture as the content of these narratives’ statements and claims. Yet, following on the definition proposed by Joan Scott in her 1991 article, we need to challenge the definition of experience as something that people ‘have’, something that can be ‘accumulated’, as property. Scott’s proposal shatters the liberal notion of experience, introducing instead the idea of ‘subject of experience’ as an ever-changing entity which is affected by the world and by the events happening to her. As she says: «It is not individuals who *have* experience, but subjects who are constituted *through* experience» (Scott, 1991, p.779, emphasis added). In her view, history is what puts subjects in certain social positions, through discourse, and what produces their experiences. Scott continues: «To think about experience in this way is to historicise it as well as to historicise the identities it produces» (pp.779-780). Experience is thus not the source of our explanation but instead what we still need to explain, what we are trying to produce knowledge about.

The narratives I will analyse are the product of interviewees’ digging into their memories, going thirty, forty, even sixty years back in time, in order to find information, anecdotes, or accounts of specific events. Mieke Bal calls these operations ‘acts of memory’ (Bal, 1999), as moments of performance, representation and interpretation through which individuals constitute their ‘identities’ by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and often contested, norms, conventions and practices. Scholars in the field of Memory Studies, indeed, invite us to consider the fluid and intricate combination between collective and individual aspects of the process behind the narrativisation of memories. In fact, every ‘act of memory’ emerges from a complex intertwining of past and present, personal and collective, public and private, recalling and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears and desires, which make the work of the oral historian a very delicate matter (see, among others, Thompson, 1982; Portelli, 2007a; Fabian, 2007).

Among the dilemmas that the oral historians have to face, that of the relationship between ‘personal’ and ‘collective’ is of the most pressing kind. Although memories are, in a sense, always ‘common’ because it is only *in* society that people acquire memories and it is in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories» (Halbwachs, 1992), yet, the subjectivity of individual narrators enters into the picture, in the moment in which his/her ‘identity’ determines a peculiar account of those memories.

This is the case, first of all, when thinking about the role of gender: a question which has been discussed by scholars such as Selma Leydersdoff, Luisa Passerini and Richard Thompson (2005) or Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002). They have argued for the importance of women’s perspective and of a feminist standpoint on

processes of memorisation and narrativisation. An example is given by the work of Linda McDowell wherein the gendered ideology of domesticity is demonstrated to be crucial for the enactment of national identity, in the narratives of Latvian migrant women in the United Kingdom (McDowell, 2004).

While I will go into no further detail of what concerns the relationship between gender and memory, I would like to briefly discuss the postcolonial dimension of memory. Vron Ware defines postcolonial memories as ways to «recode and re-activate older, deeper structures of feelings» about colonial times and their legacy, and to underscore how these «memories of the past can transform understandings of current events» (Ware, 1996, p.146). Today's narratives by postcolonial subjects produce important testimonies which contribute to a 'historical memory of empire' (ibid.) in contrast with the colonisers' hegemony on the rendering of that time<sup>8</sup>. Both feminist and postcolonial historians share the purpose of dismantling, in a way, the European (and) male rendering of the past – a rendering performed for a long time by museums and history texts – thanks to the living testimonies and oral narratives of those who have experienced the past from a subaltern perspective. From this perspective, *micro* gestures and instances which are dissonant from master narratives can emerge (Stoler, 2002).

In conclusion, I will use narratives of memories and identity to describe the way colonial discourse used to shape (and still does shape) the representations, the expectations and the material conditions of life and work of Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women as postcolonial subjects. Yet, the process of narrativising their memories and their identities will emerge as crucial in offering important points of re-enactment of subjugated experiences and a relative rehabilitation of them in interviewees' accounts. This question connects with that of 'tactics' which I will illustrate in paragraph seven, on the basis of which narratives offer a possibility of increasing one's sense of dignity and self-esteem. This possibility is here grounded on the narrativisation of memories about their life-trajectories as postcolonial migrants.

#### 4. INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER, CLASS, AGE AND 'RACE'/ETHNICITY

Another fundamental part of my theoretical framework is related to the debate on Intersectionality, a notion which has been at the centre of a burgeoning academic production especially, but not only, between black women scholars in the Anglo-

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<sup>8</sup> Examples of this kind are offered by scholars such as Ann Stoler (1995) and Pamela Patynama (2005, 2007) with reference to the standpoint of people from the Dutch Indies; and by Giulia Barrera (2005b) and Nicolas Doumanikis (2005) for what concerns people from former Italian colonies. Another example is given in the work of Richard and Sally Price on the artistic and oral testimonies of the population of today's Suriname (1980, 1999).

Saxon and Northern European worlds (see Wekker, 2003; Lutz, 2002; Davis, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006b; McCall, 2005). The influence of 'intersectional thinking' has now reached outside academia and informs policy and research in UN and EU institutions (Yuval-Davis, 2006b). If some authors see intersectionality as a heuristic tool and others see it as a 'buzzword' (Davis, 2008), many tend to search in the idea of intersections for the key to explaining how social categories affect the processes of subjectification and inter-subjective interaction.

Various scholars have tried to find a metaphor which can capture the image of the intertwining social forces which determine processes of subjectification. Initially, in 1989, the US scholar Kimberly Crenshaw suggested the following image of the black woman at a crossroads, saying:

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group [...] tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. [...] The main highway is 'Racism Road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. [...] She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Crenshaw, cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006b, p.196)

Later on, in Europe, scholars preferred images such as that of the 'kaleidoscope' (Botman, Jouwe & Wekker, 2001), or that of 'intersecting boundaries' (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983) in order to go beyond Crenshaw's simpler model of the multiple oppressions, which had already received much criticism in the US (Davis, 2009). Today, intersectionality is seen as a powerful tool for the analysis of inequalities and differences, as a way to talk about multiple identities and Foucaultian power dynamics, rather than oppression (ibid.)

A crucial assumption in intersectional thinking is that categories such as gender, class, 'race'/ethnicity and age are important social divisions which affect axes of power not only at the macro level, but also in people's actual lives. They can be observed in the functioning of institutions (state law, organisations, family) but also in people's subjective experiences. In this respect, Nira Yuval-Davis reminds us:

Social divisions also exist in the ways people experience subjectively their daily lives in terms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, specific aspirations and specific identities. Importantly, this includes not only what they think about themselves and their communities but also their attitudes and prejudices towards others. Finally, they also exist at the level of representation, being expressed in images and symbols, texts and ideologies, including those to do with legislation. (Yuval-Davis, 2006b, p.198)

To give just a brief illustration, Intersectionality envisions a multilayered process of identification, articulated along axes of power. These axes metaphorically dissect subjects' locations into the fundamental systems of meaning construction affecting them such as gender, sexuality, 'race', ethnicity, nationality, class, religion and education<sup>9</sup>. These categories are in a relationship of co-construction, and this heuristically allows starting from one category to then move on, gradually, to all the others. When subjects undertake trajectories in 'social space' which modify one category, this modification will affect all the others. Consequently, an intersectional analysis proceeds to shift its focus from one category to the other, and then to the next, «asking the 'other' question», in Kathy Davis' words (Davis, 2008), following on Mari Matsuda (1991). It is impossible, indeed, to talk, for example, about 'gender' as separated from 'class', or to talk about 'ethnicity' as separated from 'religion'.

In my study, I will look at each subject's experience through the lenses of gender, class, and 'race'/ethnicity which, among other categories, are reasons for differentiation in subjects' positions in social space. In so doing, I will undertake what Leslie McCall defines as an 'intra-categorical approach,' i.e. the study of «the intersections of some single dimensions of multiple categories in selected social positions» (McCall, 2005, p.1781).

Moreover, I am going to combine an intersectional perspective with a postcolonial approach. My purpose is in line with the approach of several authors, feminist scholars especially, who point at how the categories we use today to talk about existing social divisions cannot be fully understood if removed from the historical context in which they have been shaped. In other words, one can not talk about differences along axes of gender, class, age and 'race'/ethnicity without considering the way these notions have been defined within colonial discourses and how we have inherited a normative use of them.

The example is offered by scholars such as Anne McClintock (1995) who illustrates how western and industrial modernity produced specific conceptions of 'race' together with sex and class distinctions. Similarly, Elsa Dorlin (2006) demonstrates that colonialism was fundamental in modern history for the formation of categories of sex, 'race' and class, which have been coined in a 'genetic' relationship towards each other. Dorlin takes the case of representations of women, slaves and prostitutes who were considered to retain the same 'biological' features, corresponding to specific 'moral' deviant qualities, which cast them as 'others' (p.12). McClintock, again, demonstrates the historical roots of the intersection between 'race' and class, explaining how the notion of 'race' became central in the self-definition of white middle-classes as opposed to 'dangerous classes' during colonial times. The connection between

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<sup>9</sup> Helma Lutz (2002) distinguished up to fourteen interlocking axes of social divisions: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, culture, able-bodiedness, age, sedentariness, property ownership, geographical locations, religion, status in form of social development.

postcoloniality and intersectionality is crucial, if we consider how identity formations which are today extremely relevant, such as national and ethnic identity as the basis of war conflicts, are rooted in colonial legacies. In general, if one looks at the history of Africa, Latin America and Asia, one may recognise the role of colonisation in shaping contemporary cartographies of belonging and recognition between groups belonging to the same nation or the same area. One example for the above is that of Rwanda<sup>10</sup>, a country where the colonial domination brought a conception of ethnic identity which had terrible consequences during the later time of decolonisation. For this reason, Jean Loup Amselle and M'Bokolo (1985), among others, pointed at the need to understand processes of inclusion/exclusions between today's African groups in the light of distinctions based on 'race'/ethnicity promoted alongside colonisation.

In conclusion, the current definitions of sex, class, age and 'race'/ethnicity are historically embedded in colonial imperialism, seen as a political and economic project, and in positivism, as a scientific and a moral enterprise. This brings me to the explanation of the specific use of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' I deploy. In this dissertation I opted for the use of the formula 'race'/ethnicity on the basis of considerations which are connected with the awareness of the influx of imperialism and positivism in shaping our analytical tools. The term 'race', as I have shown, has a strong positivist legacy and the biologist roots of this term are today connected to very derogatory implications. Thus, I will always use the term 'race' between inverted commas in order to distance myself from situations, statements, and behaviours which find their reason of existence in this legacy. Secondly, I believe that this formulation ('race'/ethnicity) destabilises also the notion of 'ethnicity' which, as mentioned above, must be seen as the result of contested and arbitrary distinctions based on historical and cultural processes, in large part related to colonisation. Finally, with the slash (/) I refer to the fact that 'race' and ethnicity have often been seen as two faces of the same coin (Hall, 1992). The preference for the one term against the other can be seen as dependent from context-related motivations, as in the preference for the term 'race' in United States versus the preference for 'ethnicity' in English speaking Europe. In so doing I aim to problematise the use of Anglo-Saxon terms to describe phenomena taking place in contexts where other languages are spoken. If one looks at the Italian and the Dutch use of these terms one will find that its closest terms (*etnicità* and *razza* in Italy, and *etniciteit* and *ras* in the Netherlands) have actually slightly different semantic spectra. In this perspective, the comparative character of my dissertation also signals the need for further cross-national studies on the construction of 'racial'/ethnic representations of migrants in Europe and on the way those become part of a common European discourse.

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10 On the case of Rwanda, see the work of Silvia Cristofori (2009) on the roles of, first, the Belgian colonisers and later, of the White Fathers missionary order in shaping the antagonism between the two 'ethnic' groups Hutu and Tutsi which lead to the 1994 genocide.

## 5. BODY WORK

Much has been written in feminist and postcolonial scholarship about bodies and the way that they are gendered and ethnicised in our societies. For Elisabeth Grosz (1994) our bodies are 'inscriptive surfaces' on which 'values, norms and commitments' are written. Through history and culture, bodies are constructed as «determinate type[s], with particular features, skills, and attributes» (pp.141-142). It is through this process of 'inscription' that different categories of bodies are placed in socially different groups (male/female, black/white, etc.). One example is given by Frantz Fanon's writing on the experience of 'looking' at a black body, when the 'racial epidermal schema' takes hold and imprints inferiority on postcolonial subjects, for their being 'out of place', in Nirmal Puwar's words (Fanon, 1967; Puwar, 2004). Inscriptions on bodies are thus something that goes beyond physicality and involves the whole subject's experience, her gestures and her attitudes. Beverly Skeggs summarises<sup>11</sup>:

    categorisations of race and class are not just classifications or social positions but an amalgam of features of a culture that are read onto bodies as personal dispositions – which themselves have been generated through systems of inscription in the first place. (Skeggs, 2004, p. 1)

Crucial in this debate is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979) as a form of 'embodied self' (Wolkowitz, 2006; Witz, *et al.*, 2003). For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is learned and exemplified in durable ways of standing, speaking, walking and other aspects of deportment. The *habitus* is produced by history, and it is the principle generating both individual and collective practices, which afterwards seem objective in the eyes of those that ignore its existence. It is the hidden regulatory principle of the 'regularities' pertaining to a situation; it takes place par excellence in the dialectic between body and space.

However ample and rich this literature on embodiment might be, scholars such as Teresa Ebert (1996), Elaine Scarry (1994) and, more recently, Carol Wolkowitz (2006) have argued that these studies are not enough. They are indeed based only on the association between bodies and «sensuousness, play, pleasure and spontaneity rather than work, which is seen to involve mainly numbing routine» (Wolkowitz, 2006, p.9). The absence of *work* is not surprising, when we consider that the feminist scholarship also unwillingly inherited a biased knowledge about bodies; a bias due to the fact that «most of the activities which directly service the body have historically been provided by servants or slaves, or by women in their roles as wives and mothers, i.e. outside the labour market and not publicly visible as *work* at all» (p.14, emphasis added). At the

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<sup>11</sup> Beverly Skeggs sees 'inscription' - together with 'exchange', 'valuing', 'institutionalisation' and 'perspective' - as one of the processes which provide the conditions for «being read by others in the relationships» between groups (Skeggs, 2004, p.2).

same time, looking to the fundamental views on the 'body' in contemporary theory, in particular in the work by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffmann, Wolkowitz does not find material which is easily applied to the 'body/work nexus' because of the authors' lack of focus on employment as a specific concern.

More recently, however, significant steps have been taken in this direction in the analysis of the discursive construction of workers' subjectivity, thanks to the development of studies on the customer service sector. This sector is indeed worthy of special attention because there «the labour power and embodied performance of workers is part of the product in a way that was not the case in the productions of manufactured goods» (McDowell, 1992, p.32). In other words, Beverly Skeggs and Lisa Adkins argue that in these specific jobs a certain 'body capital' is required, as these jobs are organised on a gendered conception of embodied competence and on a masculinist hierarchy of values. In her study of female workers' experience in the customer service sector, Lisa Adkins demonstrates how this sector particularly exploits «the expectations of normative heterosexuality and locks women into subservient, hyper-feminine roles» (Adkins 1995, cited in Wolkowitz, 2006, p.81). The point for Adkins is the fact that gender more strongly defines worker's obligations in jobs where the *quality* of the interaction is part of what is sold as a 'service'; proof being the fact that women's jobs in these sectors require work that men's jobs in the same sector do not.

A particular case in the literature on the service sector is that of care and cleaning work. These jobs involve a highly important degree of bodily interaction and embodied experience. They go from nursing to office cleaning, all types of jobs which Wolkowitz calls 'body work', i.e. jobs that have bodies as their site of labour and/or involve some «intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body, its orifices or products through touch or close proximity» (Wolkowitz, 2006, p.147). In these jobs people experience bodies and bodily interactions in a peculiar way: from touching others' bodies, to removing other bodies' products and stains, until feeling the pain of injuries and ailments that this work often provokes.

This literature coined the concept of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) to discuss the commercialisation of feelings in most parts of the service economy and, crucially, in the (private) care sector. Here, indeed, workers require the proper means for emotional expressions which, for Ian Burkitt (1999), are acquired through 'techniques of the body' learned in childhood for communication within specific groups and communities. Therefore, since this emotional labour requires particularly distressing efforts, it has been pushed downwards, onto lower-level workers, especially women, blacks and migrants (MacDonald & Sirianni, 1996). In doing so, the construction and management of emotional labour, in the service economy, reinforces the exploitation of gendered and racial ideologies with naturalising assumptions about women, blacks or migrants' capacities, in the division of labour (MacDonald & Sirianni, 1996; Glenn, 2002; Bourgois, 1989).

In my view, it is particularly interesting to connect this elaboration on the value and the meaning of 'body work' with the framework of postcoloniality. The interconnections of gender, class, age, 'race'/ethnicity are shaped by the legacies of a specific part of the imperial project: the spreading of western and bourgeois standards of domesticity among colonised people. Through the imposition of 'civilised' manners concerning domestic and home-making practices, colonisers hoped to enact a social and cultural transformation which would have favoured ideals of the superiority of the colonial rules, while smoothing their way into further appropriation of land. Such an enterprise has been widely analysed by scholars such as Francis Gouda and Julia Clancy-Smith (1998) in the case of Dutch and French colonialism, or by Alison Blunt (1999) with regard to the British Empire.

Another instance of the nexus between 'body work' and colonialism is offered by Ann Stoler (1995). I suggest that a certain kind of 'body work' was involved in what Stoler calls the 'cultivation of European bourgeoisie'. In the colonies, indeed, we find that the configuration of the western Self demanded gendered, racialised and classed bodies, i.e. native servants, in order to take care of Europeans and their environments. In this process of 'management' of Europeans' everyday life in the colonies, the emphasis was placed on the 'need for bodies' who could «perform those nurturing services, providing the leisure for such self-absorbed administerings and self-bolstering acts» (p. 111). This process took place, not without contradictions, in the way Stoler that describes:

Those native women that serve as concubines, servants, nursemaids and wives in European colonial households not only defined what distinguished bourgeois life: they threatened that 'differential value' of adult and children's bourgeois bodies they were there to protect and affirm. (Stoler, 1995, p. 111)

Thus, the 'differential value' of European bodies (the rulers) and the inferiority of the colonised others (the ruled) was reaffirmed through a technology of sexual, nursing, caring, policing, protecting and isolating practices.

Finally, one has to bear in mind that this 'differential value' was based on sentiments of repulsion and rejection which used to shape the relationship between white western subjects and the native colonised population. In colonial regimes one can see the enactment of an unconscious aversion to native/black bodies as 'ugly', 'dirty' or, in one word, 'repulsive'. And the more bodies manifest their physical concrete material existence, the stronger is the revulsion. It is crucial here to mention the debate on *abjection*, a notion first formulated by Julia Kristeva (1980) and Mary Douglas (1999) and later developed by several scholars, such as Iris Marion Young (1990), Imogen Tyler (2009) and Sarah Ahmed (2000), among others. With the notion of *abjection*, taken as a psychoanalytical term, Kristeva explains the automatic and unconscious double processes of *attraction-revulsion* against which 'ugly', 'disregarded' or 'dirty' bodies are defined. From this, Douglas takes abjection as a tool of anthropological analysis in

the aim to individuate the 'emotional aspect of pollution behaviour', i.e. acts of repulsion that mark, stigmatise, devalue or degrade certain groups, and yet reveal attraction and desire for them. Anne McClintock (1995) uses the category of abjection to analyse different cultural practices taking place within colonial settings. In her study the doubleness of abjection-revulsion comes to the fore. Examples are her analysis of the Pearl Soap' advertisement campaign as civilising manoeuvres to 'whiten' the British colonies; or her study of the diaries of Hannah Cullwick, domestic worker in Victorian London, which convey practices of servitude as erotic performances. Likewise, Bridget Anderson (2000) applies the concept of abjection to contemporary paid domestic work, in her analysis of the opposition between madams and maids: a dyad which is modelled on the opposition of *clean* versus *dirty* domesticities, or *pure* versus *impure* femininities which strongly echoes the feminist debate on the opposition between *whore/Madonna* female models.

This same perspective can also shed light on the experience of those postcolonial migrants who have been channelled into paid domestic and care work in their former colonisers' countries. One may ask if the relationship between native servants and European colonialists was not only contingent to the colonial setting, but whether it could survive and be translated into the heart of Europe where one can observe the re-positioning of similar patterns of practices of labour and embodiment in relation to gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity.

## 6. HOME AS A WORKPLACE

During the 1960s and 1970s, in the perspective of the women's liberation movement, feminists in western countries denounced the domestic environment as claustrophobic and oppressive. The house was considered as the physical place wherein the patriarchal distinction between public and private had originated. Feminist scholars and women's rights activists rejected the centrality of the house in women's lives, looking forward to women's proliferation in other areas of activity (Friedan, 1963). Escaping from the house, or conversely launching a revolution which started from it, became a goal (Federici, 1978).

In the same period, however, other scholars, including feminist scholars, decided to investigate more carefully what was happening inside 'these four walls', in the belief that a close look at this microcosm could give new insights into broader social and cultural phenomena. In this view, forms of dwelling in private households were thought of as expressions of the way our societies and cultures function in general. This is why some scholars began observing poor and rural houses, such as those of Kabyle people in Algeria (Bourdieu, 1977). Other scholars interviewed 'ordinary' western housewives about their everyday housekeeping practices (Oakley, 1975). Others tried to physically

dissect the fundamental features of these houses, looking at the organisation of living spaces, the use of appliances, or the collectivisation of housework (Hayden, 1997). Every house became a privileged terrain for socio-cultural analysis, as in a snow globe where 'everything' already happens.

From these analyses, the house emerged as a 'mythically' structured space where the objectification of the 'generative schemes' occurs (Bourdieu, 1975), where fundamental 'ways of operating' are elaborated and sedimented on a daily basis (Certeau, 1984). Among these, I am interested in domestic and caring practices, as practices regulated by hidden principles and organised along axes of power. The 'home' is the site where those practices take place and identities are shaped, contested, and reshaped over time (Blunt, 2006).

It is in this domestic space that the relationship between migrant domestic workers and their employers evolves. In the perspective of this relationship, the house is considered not simply as 'space', but rather as 'place', i.e. a specific location where subjects' experience takes shape. The difference between 'space' and 'place' is emphasised by Doreen Massey who defines a 'place' as the result of particular interactions and of the meeting of certain social relations, which occur in that specific location (Massey, 1994). For this reason, when looking at interactions between employers and employees in the domestic sphere, one should see a 'place' rather than a 'space' being a specific location where different forces interact.

Relationships between employers and migrant domestic workers make explicit how place, power and identity are interconnected. In these relationships, homes become 'contact zones', for Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang (1999), or 'culture-contact situations', for Janet Momsen (1999). These scholars demonstrate how, in domestic and caring practices, employers and employees are constantly (re)negotiating shared notions about gender which find their spatial context in employers' homes. The domestic 'place' where these encounters take place, practically and metaphorically, reflects the structure of the 'social space', where different subjects occupy and take-up different positions. In this view, the organisation of these houses as workplaces is crossed by boundaries separating the upper-class in opposition to the working-class, and the white former-colonisers versus the black former-colonised.

Homes can also be seen as being affected by postcoloniality in the internal organisation of meanings attached to the domestic and caring practices. In this respect Alison Blunt and Robin Dowlings (2006) describe the imperial legacies shaping today's homes in the following way:

the home as a lived place and as a spatial imaginary has been mobilized and contested in ways that shape and reproduce the discourses, everyday practices and material cultures of nation and empire. (p.142)

What they call 'lived and metaphorical experiences of home' are ways for people to create a sense of identity, which then calls for an analysis of the power relations that exist *beyond*, and not only within, the household. They continue:

Rather than view the home as a private space that remains separate and hidden from the public world of politics, we argue that the home itself is intensely political both in its internal relationships and through its interfaces with the wider world over domestic, national and imperial scales. (p.142)

This leads us to investigate the ways in which colonial legacies relating to gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity are possible terrains of negotiation and confrontation between employers and employees. I will come back to this issue in chapter ten, questioning how racism affected the space regulations to which domestic and care workers are bound to comply, and also in chapters eight and nine when talking about domestic/care practices and the relationship between workers and members of the households.

## 7. TACTICS AND GENDERED POSTCOLONIAL 'CULTURAL CAPITAL'

I have said that gender, class, and 'race'/ethnicity are the result of a combination of discursive constructions and material conditions produced by the history of colonialism and modernity. In this last paragraph I want to investigate how the positioning of the subject in this social space works and how possible trajectories of transformation are created. This will be done with reference to the theory of 'feminine cultural capital' as elaborated by Beverly Skeggs, who integrated Bourdieu's original theory about 'capitals' with a gendered approach<sup>12</sup>. My purpose is to see if this can support my formulation of a specific form of cultural capital which is not only gendered, but also 'postcolonial'. In this kind of cultural capital gender, class, and 'race'/ethnicity are combined together in an historical perspective. In addition I will also discuss the issue of subjects' narrative 'tactics' with reference not only to Skeggs, but also to Michel De Certeau and Rachel Salazar Parreñas.

Beverly Skeggs, in her early work (1997), discusses narratives of working class British women in which they try to reconcile their desire for a better status with the actual material conditions they live in. The material conditions of these women's lives are shaped by the resources (the capitals) to which they have access: resources which are affected by highly gendered representations. Thus, Skeggs introduces the notion of 'feminine' cultural capital as the capital to which every woman is likely to have access on the basis of the circulation of gendered discourses and which sustains the

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<sup>12</sup> On a feminist reading of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capitals see the collection of essays edited by Beverly Skeggs and Lisa Adkins (2004).

appropriation and use of specific forms of capital. In a formulation which combines Bourdieu's theory of social position with an intersectional approach, she says:

[feminine cultural capital] is the discursive position available through gender relations that women are encouraged to inhabit and use. Its use will be informed by the network of social positions of class, gender, sexuality, region, age and race which ensure that it will be taken up (and resisted) in different ways. (Skeggs, 1997, p.10)

In this way, Skeggs addresses the importance of experiencing categorisations such as 'woman', 'feminine', 'heterosexual' in making people (women) become a *particular* subject.

Moreover, on the basis of the history of gender and class formations, only specific skills and practices are available to women and thus, in Skeggs' view, characterise the construction of their selves. This case is exemplified by a group of working class women<sup>13</sup> who have been trained as care-givers and therefore – Skeggs observes – have been 'incited' to particular 'productions of their selves' in which 'caring' was central (Skeggs, 1997, p.41). In conclusion, she observes that the subjectivity of the women she interviewed seems to have been 'channelled' into that of the 'caring self' through the practices and the discourses surrounding care education. The consequence is that these women see their job placements in the care sector or their role as mothers and wives as totally *worthwhile* because in them their (caring) subjectivity becomes legitimised. This sense of worth and appropriateness is expressed by its emphasis on the importance of having the 'right personality'. The process by which subjects occupy and take up the subject-positions offered to them results in the formation of what we call 'personalities'. In Skeggs' words, what is apparent are:

the natural consequence of the aptitudes and practices of the people who occupy the subject positions available, these being defined through institutional organization based on divisions of labour and historical legacies. The women continually stress how *practical* and *responsible* they are, coming to see such behaviour as a feature of themselves, of their own *personality*, rather than part of a process of educational differentiation (p.60). [Emphasis added]

We see, indeed, that in the course of this process Skeggs' interviewees construct narratives where the 'accumulation' of prior gendered experiences is exalted. This point brings us to one more interesting aspect of Skeggs' study on working class British women. Skeggs observes how it is exactly thanks to the emphasis on their skilfulness in caring and nurturing jobs as part of their 'personality' that these women resisted

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13 Skeggs explores the case of several young white working-class women from a small British town who all took part in a professionalising training as care-takers at the end of the 1980s. She has been interviewing and meeting them for almost 10 years.

the negative representations circulating about working-class women in comparison with upper-class women (Skeggs, 1997). Indeed, in order to praise their own qualities, they offer a description of upper-class women as selfish, lazy and not 'naturally' gifted in assisting children and the elderly. What we see here is that in this comparison their caring personality became an important resource in confronting the image of those in more advantageous positions in terms of class and educational backgrounds.

Finally, in Skeggs' view, we see the importance of narratives as a tool to improve people's self-representation. Here Skeggs refers to the notion of 'tactics' formulated by Michel de Certeau, who defines 'tactics' as everyday practices which cannot 'resolve' power hierarchies, which cannot change the inner logic of inequalities («the space of the tactic is the space of the other» for de Certeau), but through which subjects can carve out a space of resistance for themselves. Tactics are as «clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong'» (Certeau, 1984, p. 40). In other words, the idea of tactics is based on a conception of agency and resistance which is not socially transformative. This is due to the fact that among subjects' dispositions there is also that towards resistance, even against the same *habitus* which they embody, but which they try to resist at the same time. In some of their tactics workers may actually contribute to the reproduction of the same relations of domination to which they are subjected.

In this light, I find Skeggs' arguing for the importance of women's narratives, as a way to «challenge powerlessness [which] means, straightforwardly, that one is refusing to be seen as powerless or to be positioned without power» (Skeggs, 1997, p.11). In other words, the 'trading' of certain capitals, performed in specific fields, allows 'a momentary refusal of powerlessness'. In the case of working-class British women they 'trade' their feminine cultural capital in the field of (paid and unpaid) care work in order to contrast their demeaning depiction.

Yet, their social position is destined to remain the same. This is due to the fact that the kind of 'cultural capital' to which subordinated groups have access is condemned to be considered of the lowest level, and to pertain to the groups at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This type of cultural capital will never become 'symbolic' capital, to use Bourdieu's words. This means that the corresponding qualities and skills are continuously unrecognised, unvalued and dismissed by more dominant groups.

Further attempts could be made, in my view, to connect the notion of 'feminine' cultural capital formulated by Beverly Skeggs with that of narrative 'tactics', as applied to the issue of migrant domestic work. Skeggs' approach might illuminate the fact that care and domestic work is largely not recognised as 'proper work' and thus delegated to people occupying the poorest and most vulnerable positions in society (women, migrants, undocumented women) as I demonstrated elsewhere (Marchetti, 2006).

Moreover, if we think about 'narrative tactics' as a tool in the hands of migrant domestic workers, it is important to consider the study of Rachel Salazar Parreñas (2001) who, also following on from De Certeau, explains the way migrant domestic

workers can perform some narrative ‘adjustments’ in order to sustain their role and the expectations attached to it. The rhetoric of being ‘part of the family’ is the example she analyses in the case of Filipino domestic workers. Thanks to these tactics, Filipino domestic workers can even achieve an empowering reversal of hierarchy vis-a-vis their individual employers, but, as Parreñas argues, they cannot radically change their general position within the broad postcolonial and patriarchal order.

If we think of the case of postcolonial migrants in the domestic sector, one might consider how in some cases their narratives, if they cannot bring a radical change in their social position, can still bring them a sense of self-fulfilment and self-esteem because their ‘racial’/ethnic identity—largely shaped by historical legacies— is finally valued. In other words, the question of caring and nurturing skills which have been learned under specific historical conditions (colonial or neo-colonial times) may offer a specific connotation to Skeggs’ notion of ‘capital’ which I have just discussed. In this case, the gender and class features would be given in conjunction with the category of ‘race’/ethnicity as it is shaped under colonial legacies, resulting in a specific form of gendered postcolonial ‘cultural capital’. In the following chapters I will thus talk of ‘postcolonial cultural capital’ in a way that includes gender, class, age and ‘race’/ethnicity features as a resource which is first shaped in the colonial setting and is then permanently present in the trajectory of female postcolonial migrants also in Europe.

## CONCLUSION

In these pages I have outlined the basic concepts that will structure my understanding of postcolonial migrants’ narratives and, in general, my understanding of the relationship between colonialism, work and migration in today’s world. It is a world which I see as imbued by postcoloniality as a condition which is inherent to global labour markets as well as to the identity formation of individuals. I have illustrated how this understanding is based on a strong connection of various axes of differences between people’s subject-positions: gender, class, ‘race’/ethnicity are (amongst other categories) the elements which characterise people’s everyday life.

Looking at the intersections between these elements, one can also discover how colonialism and modernity play a role in the making of discursive constructions. The picture is, however, far from static and set in stone: thanks to ‘memory’ and to narrative ‘tactics’ subjects can variously interact with their past-future perspectives, and formulate their own personal accounts. In order to explore this intricate and interconnected puzzle I suggested peoples’ narratives as a precious material for the investigation of the way forces shaped by postcoloniality, globalisation, and history, materialise in everyday instances, as individual migrant domestics have directly experienced them in their lives.

Focal points of my framework are the notions of 'Black Europe', of workplaces and of workers' bodies, notions which I see through the lense of postcoloniality, understood as both a global and an individual condition at the same time. I have also illustrated my conceptualisation of a specific type of cultural capital which I call 'post-colonial' and which might constitute a resource for postcolonial migrants, if not for the advancement of their social positions, then surely for the improvement of their self-representation.

## Chapter 2

### METHODOLOGY

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In light of the conceptual framework I explained previously and taking into account also the matter of inquiry (memories of migrant domestic workers), a collection of in-depth interviews emerged as the most suitable research approach for this study. This is so for a number of reasons. First of all, I believe it is important to look at issues of postcoloniality, together with notions of African Diaspora and the idea of 'Black Europe' through the medium of personal narratives. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these narratives can offer us insights into colonial and postcolonial times and provide an alternative to those master narratives already accessible through archives, museums and history books. Secondly, narratives collected through in-depth interviews lend themselves to being seen through the lens of intersectionality, an approach which is fundamentally framing my research. Finally, in-depth interviews also allow me to test my hypothesis regarding the relationship between a gendered postcolonial cultural capital and the subjects' narrative tactics.

I should also explain that my methodological approach is in line with a growing interest in the standpoint of black and migrant women, as it is expressed in various forms of narratives (interviews, auto-biographies, novels, arts). This interest is grounded in an epistemological perspective which was developed during the 1980s in the feminist academic debate under the name of Standpoint Theory and then put in connection with the black women's movement and the perspective of non-western women. Inaugurated by scholars such as Nancy Hartsock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1987), Sandra Harding (1986) and Donna Haraway (1990), Standpoint Theory is today probably the most diffused background theory in the field of Gender Studies (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002;). With a particular emphasis on an anti-racist position, authors such as bell hooks (1992), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Philomena Essed (1991), and the Combahee River Collective (1995) have demonstrated that - to quote Essed - «black women [are] capable of profound and often sophisticated accounts on white supremacy, whites' racist ideas and their interpretations of reality, which come from a daily accumulation of knowledge through their own experiences in daily life» (Essed, 1991, p.1).

In my work, I decided to embrace this perspective and to consider narratives of black care and domestic workers about ordinary and normalized moments of their daily work as a precious material of study. Yet, I was aware that as a white, Italian middle-class researcher, I was going to encounter the limitations that other feminist scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak (1985), Chandra Mohanty (1984) and Uma Narayan

with Sandra Harding (2000), have found in the case of western academics' attempts to 'give voice' to subaltern subjects.

Given those considerations, I resolved to collect in-depth interviews with Eritrean women living in Rome and Afro-Surinamese women in Rotterdam. Despite the differences in geographical and historical features affecting these women's lives (differences which I will illustrate in chapter three) both groups seemed to me to share similar and comparable life patterns regarding their working and migratory experience and, in particular, their relations with the society of the former coloniser's countries. Thus, it seemed to me extremely relevant to have conversations with this type of woman, as privileged witness of the issues I wanted to investigate, from an embodied and subjective point of view.

In this chapter I am going to discuss the pitfalls and advantages of my approach and I am also going to discuss the procedure and the logic behind the collection of in-depth interviews which has characterised my research process. In the first paragraph, in particular, I am going to sketch the issues at stake in a research process based on the collection of narratives and also outline the method I used to build my questionnaire. In the second paragraph I will illustrate the fieldwork process with regard to the features of the terrain and the contact-making strategy. Finally, in the third paragraph, I will self-reflectively discuss how questions of age, class, 'race'/ethnicity affected my fieldwork experience, while linguistic matters became revelatory of the inter-'racial'/ethnic dynamics affecting the interview setting.

## 1. WORKING WITH NARRATIVES

In this thesis, interviewees' narratives about present and past events, thoughts and feelings, are the main material of analysis. This dissertation is based indeed on an analysis of narratives, a type of qualitative analysis which is increasingly common in the fields of anthropology, oral history and in the social sciences in general (Creswell, 2007, pp.54-57). What I am calling 'narratives' are, in more precise terms, personal experience stories i.e. individuals' accounts of historical events, personal episodes, and general situations that they remember and/or that they reflect upon. These stories are collected through in-depth individual interviews and, after their transcription, they become a form of discourse which researchers can then chronologically or thematically order, analyse, comment, and compare through a process called *restorying* (ibidem). During this process the researcher is involved in important choices which come from the need to order and give a certain 'direction' to the material. This process is thus extremely conditioned by the researcher's theoretical and personal 'location'. Here, I will illustrate this aspect with reference to the interviewing technique I adopted, and to my personal experience during the fieldwork.

In the last decades, interviewing techniques have been at the centre of important

methodological disputes, both in the feminist and in the postcolonial debate, with particular attention paid to the questions of the power, identity and the emotions which affect the moment of the interview (Nencel, 2005; Hoffmann, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Chakrabarty, 2003; Henry, 2003). On this matter, the oral history scholar Sandro Portelli recently declared: «I always thought that if we call it an inter-view it is because there is an inter-change, there are inter-changes of looks»<sup>1</sup> (Portelli, 2009, p.106). I find this statement a poignant summary of the most important principles shaping the dilemmas in qualitative research. The point, as Portelli reminds us, is that neither the researcher nor the interviewee is the protagonist of an empirical research. The knowledge produced through fieldwork is the result of a collaboration between interviewer and interviewee, in which the judgement capacity of one counts as much that of the other. As the researcher 'looks and asks' specific questions to the interviewee, the latter will 'look and respond' with specific answers to the interviewer.

This process is far from easy; it is instead full of contradictory forces, power asymmetries and communication obstacles. Feminist scholars invite us to consider these tensions as a fundamental part of the process of knowledge production, as when they ask researchers to position themselves 'within' their research (Henry, 2003). This emphasis on the position of the researcher acknowledges the importance of what Adrienne Rich (1985) first called the 'politics of location', as the need of a self-awareness of every person, in the moment s/he writes or speaks, of the specific 'location' from which s/he is doing so. In other words, Rich pushes us to continuously question which is the exact 'location' of the knowledge production, and how this location affects the modality and the outcome of this process. This perspective has been taken up by several methodologists in human and social sciences. It is indeed widely acknowledged that the interpretation of the research material cannot be separated from the whole research experience, whereas a self-reflexive research location is central (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). In paragraph three I will provide the reasons behind my research location, in the belief that such a location does not only affect the taking place of the fieldwork, but the whole research, its scope and its framing.

### *Questionnaire*

During the conducting of the interviews and the formulation of the questionnaire, I have followed the principles of what Jean-Claude Kaufman (1996) calls the 'understanding interview', a method very similar to what Anselm Strauss calls the 'grounded theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to these authors, after an initial idea prompting the research, it is only through the day-by-day work in the field, as some

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<sup>1</sup> *My translation from:* «Ho sempre pensato che se si chiama intervista è perché c'è un inter-scambio, ci sono scambi di sguardi».

hypotheses are confirmed while others are rejected, that 'what really matters,' emerges. In light of these considerations, I decided to shape my questionnaire progressively *during* the conducting of the fieldwork.

Consequently, I have been continuously busy with the reformulation of my questionnaire in different steps, between the two different locations of Rome and Rotterdam. Thus, in each round of interviews, I refined my questions in order to make the results more suitable for cross-national comparison. The questionnaire aimed at accounting for both groups of interviewees, without overlooking the differences among them. These diversities were determined not only by historical background features, but also in the storytelling style and other cultural differences that one group showed as opposed to the other.

In conclusion, after several months of elaboration *through* the different rounds of fieldwork, in both locations, I obtained a definitive list of questions which finally allowed me to work on the basis of a comparable semi-structured questionnaire, theme-oriented and open-ended. In Appendix II, the reader may find the translation into English of the final version of the questionnaire, originally made in Italian and Dutch, which I used during the second round of interviews in Rome and Rotterdam.

## 2. THE CONDUCTING OF THE INTERVIEWS

In this paragraph I would like to discuss the methodological issues which are related to the process of 'conducting the interviews,' strictly speaking. The way of structuring the fieldwork may offer the reader important insights into the characteristics of my research material. Thus I will here illustrate the rationale behind the process of making contact with prospective interviewees, in the Netherlands and Italy.

From February 2007 to December 2008 I conducted several rounds of fieldwork in the cities of Rotterdam and Rome. I started with the first phase in Rome from February to April 2007, then I continued with a first round in Rotterdam between July 2007 and January 2008 and then in Rotterdam again, for a second round, between June and September 2008. The second round of interviews with Eritreans took place in Rome between October and December 2008. Also in August 2007 I collected a couple of interviews in Rome, as a follow-up to the fieldwork conducted until April in the same year.

During this time I succeeded in collecting a total of 30 in-depth interviews (15 in Rome and 15 in Rotterdam) which form the basic material I analyse in this dissertation. I also managed to have conversations with gatekeepers, key informants and, in some cases, to conduct participant observation during women's gatherings - something that surely gave me further insights into the characteristics of the two groups and supported me in the interpretation of the in-depth interviews. The number of 15 interviews for each location was decided upon the consideration that the material

that I had collected at that point was rich, exhaustive and consistent. In other words, I followed the principle of *saturation* of the information which pushed me to stop my inquiry when the similarities between interviews were increasingly repeating.

The fundamental principles shaping the definition of my sample of interviewees have been the time of their migration, which I kept strictly up to and including 1980, and the fact that these women, at one point in their lives, had been working in the care or domestic sector. Another fundamental criterion was related to the fact that these women should have been primary migrants, people who migrated 'alone' as adolescents or adults, i.e. they should not have been children or teenagers travelling with their families. This criterion was important to me in order to focus on women who were *possibly* in the condition of starting to work for their self-sustainment. Therefore I included a woman who arrived at the age of 11 and was working as a maid, and two girls who arrived at 14 and 16 years of age (see table 3).

At the end of my fieldwork, my sample emerged to be spontaneously composed by a majority of women who arrived between the years 1970 and 1975, and of women who were born before 1946 (see tables 1 and 2), in both fieldwork locations. The age of arrival was a feature which emerged to differ substantially between the two places: The age on arrival of an Afro-Surinamese' tended to fall between 26 and 32 years, while that of an Eritrean was more evenly distributed (table 3).

**Table 1. Year of arrival**

| Year of arrival | Eritreans | Afro-Surinamese |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
| 1960 - 1969     | 2         | 4               |
| 1970 - 1975     | 8         | 8               |
| 1976 - 1980     | 4         | 2               |

**Table 2. Year of birth**

| Year of birth | Eritreans | Afro-Surinamese |
|---------------|-----------|-----------------|
| 1930 - 1946   | 6         | 9               |
| 1947 - 1954   | 5         | 4               |
| 1955 - 1962   | 4         | 2               |

**Table 3. Age of arrival**

| Age of arrival | Eritreans | Afro-Surinamese |
|----------------|-----------|-----------------|
| 11 - 18        | 3         | 3               |
| 19 - 25        | 6         | 4               |
| 26 - 32        | 2         | 7               |
| 33 - 40        | 4         | 1               |

Differences in the composition of the sample can be noticed also regarding the level of education (table 4), the religion (table 5) and the family status at the moment of the migration (table 6). For the specific case of the fieldwork in Rome, I added religion as an extra selection criterion: I found indeed that, on the basis of the specific features of Eritrea's colonial history, the religious uprooting of the interviewees made an important difference (see table 5).

In the following two paragraphs the reader may find further details on the process of gaining access to the sample and on the building of preliminary contacts for interviews. As one may notice, my main aim was to reach people through multiple venues to maximise my sample variation. This variety of venues has been achieved by the combination of the snow-balling method and the multiplication of gate-keepers (contact persons) and meeting places. I will offer here also some data on the Eritrean and Surinamese women's actual presence in the two cities, in order to render the context in which the process of contact making took place.

**Table 4 . Education in the country of origin**

| Education level                                      | Eritreans | Afro-Surinamese |
|--|-----------|-----------------|
| Illiterate   | 3         | —               |
| Primary school<br>(up to 10 years age)               | 5         | —               |
| I level secondary school<br>(up to 14 years of age)  | 4         | 3               |
| II level secondary school<br>(up to 18 years of age) | 3         | 10              |
| University or other high level education             | —         | 2               |

**Table 5. Religion**

| Religion           | Eritreans | Afro-Surinamese |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Roman Catholic     | 8         | 4               |
| Protestant (EBG)   | —         | 11              |
| Christian Orthodox | 7         | —               |
| Other              | —         | —               |

**Table 6. Family status at the moment of the migration**

| Status                       | Eritreans | Afro-Surinamese |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Single without children      | 11        | 5               |
| Married without children     | —         | 4               |
| Married with children        | 1         | 2               |
| Unmarried with children      | 1         | 1               |
| Divorced/widow with children | 2         | 3               |

*Fieldwork in Rotterdam*

In the year 2006, when I started my research project, the total number of Surinamese people in the Netherlands amounted to 331.900, of whom 16% were living in Rotterdam<sup>2</sup>. When looking at the female population in more detail, the Rotterdam Statistic Institute (Cos) stated that the number of Surinamese women living in Rotterdam was 16.942, i.e. 27% of non-western foreign women living in the city<sup>3</sup>. Women then represented 54% of the total Surinamese population in the city of Rotterdam, which consists of 31.061 people born in Suriname. Of these women, 35% were aged between 45 and 64, while 8% were over 65. This number included all the Surinamese ethnic groups (Afro-Surinamese, Hindustani, Chinese and Javanese) among which, however, the Afro-Surinamese seemed to be the majority (Niekerk, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> From *Statistics Nederland 2007*, available online via StatLine website.

<sup>3</sup> The distribution of Surinamese population in the city of Rotterdam is quite irregular. The district (*deelgemeente*) called Delfshaven is the one counting the biggest percentage in its total population (13%), followed by Feijenoord (11%), IJsselmonde and Charlois (10% each).

In order to access possible informants and interviewees I started visiting the area around the street called West Kruiskade, not far from the Central Station, which has been the main gathering place for people arriving from Suriname and other Caribbean colonies, since the 1970s (Buiks, 1983). Today in this area one can find several clubs (*55+ inloop*), religious groups, neighbourhood centres (*buurthuisen*), and a nursing home for Surinamese elderly. Subsequently I explored my connections with other gathering places for Afro-Surinamese women, in the area of Delfshaven, in Rotterdam Noord, and in the southern area of Feijenoord<sup>4</sup>.

A very particular feature of Afro-Surinamese women's lifestyle is their very active participation in social events which specifically target Surinamese over 50 years of age. All around town, plenty of group activities for these women exist in which they can socialise while engaging in varied activities, from hand-crafting, sewing and cooking, to praying and singing. Some of these women gather for cooking or caring together for Surinamese elderly in nursing homes on a volunteer basis. These activities are usually neighbourhood-based and they are organized by no-profit organizations in cultural centres or in parishes. Visiting several of them and involving the organisers of these activities (head volunteers, social workers, and community leaders) as gatekeepers was the easiest way for me to find interviewees. Thus, the final group of interviewees was put together through the following channels: two Evangelic Churches (four people), a Surinamese cultural centre (two people), two different neighbourhood centres (four people), and a cooking group (three people). Only one interviewee was contacted through personal contacts and another one was met by chance at the presentation of a book on Surinamese traditional cooking.

Among the Surinamese interviewees one can find an over-representation of women who were active in home care work (ten out of fifteen), while only two people did cleaning work, two others worked in childcare and one was a home nurse.

### *Fieldwork in Rome*

At the moment of starting the fieldwork in Rome, the most recent data from the National Statistic Institute estimated at 2.243 people the presence of Eritreans in Rome (Istat, 2007). More than half of these Eritreans were women (1.163). This meant that in Rome you could find about one third (30%) of the 3.926 Eritrean women living in Italy, but this is only 1% of the female migrant population in the city (110.356 women). The scenario, from the quantitative point of view, is thus very different from the one in Rotterdam.

Another important difference concerns the socialization of Eritrean women, which is different from that of the Afro-Surinamese. This, of course, affected my con-

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<sup>4</sup> These data considers the Surinamese population, born in Suriname.

tact-making strategy for what concerned the key places to visit and the people to get in touch with, in order to make contact with possible interviewees. I knew that, in the past, between the 1970s and the 1980s, Eritrean people in Rome used to gather in public places, especially around the area of Termini Central Station. As the documentaries *2000 Eritrei a Roma* (*2000 Eritreans in Rome*, Bruno *et al.*, 1977) and *Good morning Abissinia* (Ronchini & Sgueglia, 2005) demonstrate, their favourite gathering points were squares and gardens, restaurant or cafés run by their co-nationals, or meetings organized by Eritrean political groups. It is interesting however to notice that now the Eritrean community seems to conduct a more private life. The reason is in the fact that the people of the first generation are getting older, some of them have died while others have returned to Eritrea for their retirement; and the young people have new and different social habits. Another reason lies in the fact that after Independence, political activities no longer attracted so many domestic workers of the first generation, who seem today to prefer faith-related gatherings to meet their old friends. Many of them also meet at some periodic get-togethers organised by the official Organisation of Eritrean women, a group supported by the Eritrean Embassy of Rome, and which has in some sense replaced the role that political groups had previously.

Since churches are today the most important gathering places for Eritrean women, I started to visit both Catholic and Copt Orthodox Churches which celebrate Mass in the Eritrean language. In particular in the case of the Catholic Parish of San Francesco<sup>5</sup>, the beginning of my fieldwork fortunately coincided with one of the biggest celebrations of the Eritrean community of Rome (the Graceful Mary Holy Day). On this occasion I had the chance to meet several women and to get to know an Eritrean girl I will call Laila who was of fundamental support in the early stage of my fieldwork in Rome. The San Francesco Church, moreover, was also a very important location for me to perform participant observation which was very instructive at the beginning of my research project. During the second round of fieldwork, I devoted a particular effort in collecting interviews with Copt Orthodox women, meeting at the Church of San Daniele, who were not yet adequately represented in my sample. At the end, through the Catholic Church I was able to hold interviews with six women, while through the Orthodox Church I met four interviewees. I met other Copt women through snowballing, until reaching almost an equal proportion between Catholics and Copts in the interviewees (table 5).

As I said, some Eritrean women of the first generation also like to gather at events held by the official organisation of Eritrean women in the Lazio region. During the year, this group often organises parties and shows, especially on the occasion of national and patriotic festivities in Eritrea. Through this organisation I met one woman and I had the occasion to participate in the big celebration of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (Inter-

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5 Names of the meeting places, as parishes, and gatekeepers are pseudonyms.

national Day of Women) which represented another important occasion for participant observation.

Finally, among the Eritrean interviewees, I met three people thanks to contacts based on personal connections. Indeed, in comparison to the process of contacts collection in Rotterdam, in Italy I found larger support within my network of friends or acquaintances. All these women introduced themselves as domestic workers (or former domestic workers). However, as I will further explain, behind this label a variety of tasks is entailed, from cleaning and cooking, to children and elderly care.

### 3. SHIFTING 'LOCATION' BETWEEN ROME AND ROTTERDAM

In this section I will illustrate how the question of research location entered in my own fieldwork experience. Thus, I will mainly focus on the comparative character of my research project and on the implications thereof not only at the geographical level, but also at the linguistic and cultural levels, in Italy as well as the Netherlands. In so doing, I will also point at some elements of the research process which reflect more general issues I discuss later in the thesis.

The most relevant characteristic of my fieldwork experience, for its influence on the collection of the interviews, has been determined by the choice of Rome and Rotterdam as terrains of investigation. This has to do, in particular, with the fact that the shifting of fieldwork location between two cities was affected by important differences in the configuration of the power relations attached to the interviewing process.

On one hand, if I think of the commonalities between the two locations, it was true that my relationship with interviewees was in both cases affected by the fact that I was 'a researcher', someone coming from the University. This certainly put me in a higher position in comparison to interviewees for what concerns class and educational backgrounds. The age difference was also a feature which remained similar between the two settings, since I was considerably younger than both the Eritrean and the Afro-Surinamese interviewees. In both locations, in fact, the interview setting was affected, in my view, by the reproduction of a (grand)mother-(grand)daughter-like attitude in the interviewees' storytelling style.

On the other hand, as a consequence of moving between Rome and Rotterdam, some important differences emerged regarding the postcolonial, racial/ethnic and cultural dimension of the relationship between me and the interviewees. I believe these differences were able to emerge thanks to the variation in my position as seen by the interviewees, as an Italian woman living between Italy and the Netherlands, locations in which my relationships with the local civil society and migrants' communities are crucially dissimilar, as I am now going to discuss.

In Rome, the city where I was born and have been living most of my life, I was in the position of the 'native' and, thus, it was an easy step for me to be associated with the

image of the former colonizer or of the employer, as a white Italian woman. I noticed, however, that although my 'white Italian' identity was so politically and symbolically charged, I seldom felt uneasy in such a position, during the interviewing process. I attribute my feeling of 'comfort' to the warm 'cordiality' which these Eritrean women expressed towards me, to their general attitude in relationships of acquaintance with white Italians. Examples of their cordiality are in the fact that they usually invited me to their houses for the interview, they offered me food and drinks, and they asked me to join their religious or social gatherings on Sundays. This 'cordial' attitude of Eritreans towards Italians is something which will come up also during the analysis of the interviews and will be discussed with reference to the issue of 'domestication' and 'familiarity' of the Eritrean people in their relationship with the former colonisers.

In conclusion, the fieldwork in Rome remains for me an incredible experience of 'travel' inside 'my' city, a city which I thought I knew but which instead I 'discovered' in its parallel secret life. This is the somewhat invisible life which Eritreans conduct in their small churches, hidden gathering halls and apartments and which I had never encountered before. It was an experience which also put me in contact with people of an Eritrean background, who I hope will remain part of my life for years to come.

The fieldwork experience in Rotterdam was in many respects very different, not only for some intrinsic features of the terrain, but especially because there I was in the position of the migrant myself. I moved from Italy to the Netherlands in 2003 for study reasons and there I lived, between the cities of Utrecht and Rotterdam. Over the years, in this country I participated not only in academic circles, but also in the no-profit and activist groups engaged with issues of gender, migration and domestic work, especially in the city of Amsterdam. Yet, despite the fact that I had been living in Rotterdam for almost three years before starting this fieldwork (July 2007), it is thanks to this research that I finally had the opportunity to fully explore this city with regard to the condition of its migrants' communities. Between 2007 and 2008 I was driving my car into its most faraway outskirts or attending clubs, churches and other gathering places which, although being very 'visible' - contrary to the gathering places of the Eritrean community in Rome - I had never entered before.

However, I also have to say that the experience of encounter with the Afro-Surinamese community was more difficult for me than it had been with the Eritreans: people did not seem very welcoming, and seemed to be more suspicious of the presence of a white stranger amongst them. I was particularly surprised by the fact that interviewees almost never welcomed me in their house offering a drink or a cup of tea, nor did they invite me to keep in touch in the future. Despite having been incredibly inspiring, the fieldwork in Rotterdam gave me more often the feeling of being 'out of place', the feeling of being a white girl who had ended up at the wrong address. My position as a true 'outsider' represents, I believe, the strong and the weak point of my research experience in Rotterdam, allowing me at the same time to look at interviewees and their social context in a more distant and objective way.

In particular, if I think of the black-white encounters that I had in Rotterdam, which I often found distressing in comparison with those I had in Rome<sup>6</sup>, which I remember as very 'easy', I am pushed to examine the specificity of 'racial'/ethnic differences shaping my fieldwork experience. Of course, the setting in Rotterdam was, from the outset, more difficult for me simply because there I had to speak another language (Dutch) and because I had to adapt to other communication codes. However, I also have the impression that my overall experience was affected by the history of racial tensions in Dutch society and in the city of Rotterdam in particular. The relevance of these tensions was confirmed during the conducting of the interviews, when, talking about working experiences, the topic of anti-white feelings came through strongly. In light of this, in the next paragraph I will discuss how racial features concretely affected the interview setting. In order to fully understand this very important issue, let me start with the question of language.

### *Language and interactions in the field*

Another interesting aspect of my fieldwork experience(s), is related to the fact that this project required me to simultaneously use three languages (Dutch, English and Italian); which becomes more complicated if we think that two of them (Dutch and English) are not my native languages, while Dutch and Italian are not the native languages of interviewees (Surinamese often speak *Sranan*<sup>7</sup> while Eritreans speak *Tigrino*). In view of this very complicated linguistic setting, I resolved to conduct my fieldwork in the language which is the one commonly used by interviewees in their country of emigration, thus Dutch in the Netherlands and Italian in Italy.

While it goes without saying that this was for me a quite easy move in the Italian case, it brought up some complications in the Netherlands, since my Dutch was still quite poor at the beginning of the fieldwork in Rotterdam (June 2007). For this reason I decided to take with me a language assistant during the interviews and the initial

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6 I have to clarify that my fieldwork in Rome took place in the years 2007/2008, before the big explosion of racist violence started after the promulgation of the new Security Law (*Pacchetto Sicurezza*), which characterizes Italian society in the moment I write. I wonder if my feeling would have been different if my fieldwork was taking place now, rather than then.

7 I can say that most of the Surinamese interviewees are basically Dutch-Sranan bilingual. Many Surinamese speak indeed Dutch in a very characteristic way, which is called Surinamese Dutch (*Surinamse Nederlands*, SN) and is the result of Sranan influences into Standard Dutch (see Wekker & Wekker, 1991). A further distinction is the one between 'polite' (*beschaafd*) and 'deep' (*diep*) SN which corresponds to differences in class and education background of the Surinamese people speaking Dutch (Bruijning & Voorhoeve, 1977, p.580). This debate goes back in time to the first project of linguistic assimilation of Surinamese pupils to Dutch (Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001).

stage of contact making. This person was also in charge of the transcription of the interviews. The presence of an assistant determined a variety of concrete methodological issues which I came across during the rather long time of the fieldwork in Rotterdam (June 2007 - September 2008) and which I would like here to briefly discuss.

The decision to ask for the support of a language assistant for the fieldwork in Rotterdam was not only based on linguistic considerations. As I said, despite having resided in the Netherlands since 2003, and since 2004 in the city of Rotterdam, I still considered myself an 'outsider', especially in relation to the Afro-Surinamese community. Until that moment indeed, I had not met many Afro-Surinamese people through my friends. When I considered my own social network in Rotterdam – when attending cafés, public libraries, music clubs, underground and private venues - I had the feeling that there was a distinct separation between 'white' and 'black' circles in town.

Therefore I thought that I could have benefited from the support of a Dutch speaking person, preferably a young woman with an Afro-Surinamese background, who could have offered me not only language support, but also 'mediation' in a broader cultural and social sense. This person should ideally have been a student in social science or anthropology, in order to be also sensitive to the process of interviewing and transcription.

Unfortunately, my impression of separateness between black and white milieus was confirmed when I tried to find the right person for what I considered to be an important and delicate job. I realized then that my white Dutch friends and colleagues were not able to put me in connection with any possible assistant of Afro-Surinamese background, that the 'foreign students organization' (*allochtone studentenvereniging*) of Rotterdam University had only *one* female member of Afro-Surinamese descent, and that also my University in Utrecht was a predominantly 'white' place<sup>8</sup>. This 'discovery' remained for me a very telling aspect of my fieldwork process and pushed me to further explore the black-white separations as they affected the life of the Afro-Surinamese, in my study.

Since it was *impossible* to find a person who satisfied all the requirements, I finally decided to 'combine' three different people as language assistants, in order to take advantage of the diversity of their profiles and 'observe' the difference that each of them brought in the interview-situation. The three people were<sup>9</sup>: a white Dutch anthropology graduate with fieldwork experience on domestic work (Eleanor), a young BA student in Public Health with Afro-Surinamese background (Sophia), and an Afro-Surinamese woman in her forties usually working as secretary (Gladij). Taking into consideration the availability of each person, I put my effort in conducting ap-

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8 The only people with Afro-Surinamese background that I knew at that time at Utrecht University were my Professor and a PhD colleague.

9 All the names of these persons are pseudonyms

proximately half of the interviews with the white Dutch assistant, and the other half with one of the two Afro-Surinamese.

It is interesting to notice that the 'observations' I made during the making of the interviews challenged my assumptions about inter-'racial'/ethnic interactions in this type of setting. One of my assumptions was that the presence of a white person would have hindered interviewees in criticising Dutch people and in straightforwardly confronting the issue of racism. Unexpectedly, instead, the presence of Eleanor seemed to trigger interviewees to explicitly 'address the point', as if they wanted to take the occasion to give vent to their anti-white feelings. This offered me, on a couple of occasions, very detailed and profound accounts of the race-based discriminations they suffered, and of their difficulty in getting along with white people in the Netherlands.

It was true, however, that when I was with Eleanor the interview setting remained pretty cold and formal, which caused me a certain frustration for being so different from the setting I was used to in past experiences. On this matter, I noticed that the presence of an Afro-Surinamese rather than a Dutch woman really made a difference. When I was going for interviews with Gladij or Sophie the atmosphere seemed to me more chatty and informal. The interviewee and the assistant would exchange the usual 'where is your family from?' and the 'how long have you been living here?' questions which gave a more intimate and friendly touch to our meeting. Gladij especially, the more grown up of the two Afro-Surinamese assistants, was able to create a comfortable and cosy atmosphere, thanks to her social skills which I consider as, at least partially, due to her cultural background.

However, my further observations revealed that, in front of an Afro-Surinamese assistant, interviewees tended to be briefer in their descriptions, especially on the topic of racism and on their relationships with white people. In describing their feelings towards whites or their past experiences of mistreatment, often their narratives soon ended with a 'but you know that', which signalled their assumption that the assistant was already aware of the problem, thus there was no need for further details.

Another problem was that Gladij tended to be too much of a protagonist, in the moment of the interview: since most Afro-Surinamese women have connections with co-nationals who did care or domestic work for Dutch people (see chapter seven), she felt personally addressed by my research topic and tended to give short personal opinions or comments during the interview, which from a simple nodding sometime went to the bringing of a personal case into the conversation. This, of course, while it created part of the informality which I enjoyed, also polluted my data and influenced the interviewees. It required a lot of effort on my side to negotiate with this assistant as to how exactly she was expected to contribute to the interviewing process.

Finally, it also happened once that an interviewee discovered Sophie's grandmother to be one of her best friends, back in Paramaribo. Luckily this discovery was made only at the *end* of our appointment, at the moment of the final salutations. However this made me wonder if this interviewee would have told us so much of her

private life during the interview, had she known the identity of the girl sitting in front of her. This leads me to underline the fact that, since migrant communities are usually very keen in maintaining close relationships with co-nationals, this, in my view, may put at risk the basic conditions of anonymity and privacy that the collection of interviews requires.

In conclusion, I find it relevant to discuss the way the presence of different assistants shaped the interview-setting as far as this offers important insights into this particular research location. When considering which assistant happened to be with me, I obtained, due to the interactions I just described, an important insight into what 'my' location was within my own research: on how 'white' I was; on how much of an outsider I was considered by the interviewees; and on what they expected me to be aware of, and what not. In other words, the different profiles of my assistants threw a certain light on my own identity and my supposed knowledge on these issues, in the eyes of the people I was interviewing.

Moreover, these interactions in the interview-setting foretold what emerged to be a crucial difference between Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese from the analysis of the narratives I collected. As I will further discuss, opposite dynamics of affiliation *vs.* differentiation and of bonding *vs.* distancing respectively characterise, in my view, the relationship between Eritrean and Italian people in opposition to the one between Afro-Surinamese and the Dutch. These characteristics, as they emerge from the analysis of interviewees' past life experiences, also affect their everyday interactions with different subjects, in Rome as in Rotterdam. In light of this, a self-reflexive approach to the conditions of my fieldwork experience points at the fact that I, together with the assistants, participated in the construction of power relations between Eritrean/Afro-Surinamese women and the society where they presently live.

## Chapter 3

### BACKGROUNDS:

#### DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN HISTORY

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When thinking about the profile of my interviewees, one might at first be puzzled by the great difference between them: the period and the character of the colonial domination, together with differences in culture, language and religion make Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese two very different social groups. We know for example that while the Dutch domination lasted for several centuries in Suriname (1667-1975), the domination of Eritrea by Italy lasted only for a few decades (1869-1941), with less economic and cultural impact than the Dutch had in Suriname. Also, as I will later illustrate, the Eritrean and Surinamese presences today in their former colonizer countries are very differently characterized. Yet, the more I explored the background of the two groups, in particular in relation to the history of their decolonisation and of their migration towards western countries, the more I became convinced that one could find interesting points of comparison between them.

In making this comparison, I found that a particular moment in time had been a crucial turning point, for both groups, concerning their migration and decolonization. This is the year 1975, a moment in which Surinamese people in Paramaribo declared their Independence from the Dutch Kingdom, while in Asmara the Eritrean-Ethiopian war exploded. In both cases, the year 1975 did not mark the end of an historical phase, but it actually inaugurated decades of political tensions, civil war and economic impoverishment.

Moreover, one will notice that the migrations from those two countries also have some similarities<sup>1</sup>: in both cases one can observe that a first, small but significant, number of people, both men and women, already started to leave their country in the 1960s. This number increased during the 1970s, in particular in the years 1974/1975 in which one could see a peak in the amount of departures, with a clear correspondence with the above mentioned political events which took place in 1975. Again, the number of departures increased around 1979/1980, in correspondence with other changes in the national political situation.

Moreover, in the case of Eritreans and Surinamese alike, the people leaving from the 1960s until 1972 seem to have been pushed by a general desire to improve their

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1 While in the case of Surinamese people I had ample disposal of statistical data, in the case of Eritreans I am suggesting estimations based on the rhythm of the departures – arrivals on the basis of interviewees' profiles and their memories.

lives and to travel abroad, maybe for a short time; while those who left around the years 1974/1975 have in common the fact of having been in a sense forced to migrate by the fear of the political events taking place. These people did not really know what the future held for them, nor did they know exactly *what* they were leaving behind, because of the speed of change in their home countries. For the people leaving from 1978 on, however, one can observe a clearer consciousness in the decision to leave: war and impoverishment in their countries were already a matter of fact, while the conditions of entrance, work and settlement in the destination country had, by then, been tested by many co-nationals before.

Another similarity can be seen in the choice of the former coloniser as first country of destination, a choice which was not (or not only) based on some bureaucratic explanation (as visa and employment regulations), but it was rather based on the 'bond' which existed with these countries in the light of decades (even centuries in the case of Surinamese) of cultural and economic predominance in their lands.

Yet, the migration of these people is to be contextualised in a wider movement of black people from Africa and the Caribbean towards Europe and North-America especially, which started during the 1950s/1960s, and, as I explained in chapter one, brought about the formation of what I called 'Black Europe'. One of the consequences of this global movement can be found in the spreading phenomenon of anti-black xenophobic sentiments in western countries. From this point of view, Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese arriving in the 1960s and 1970s were pioneers in facing the anti-black racism and the discrimination against non-EU migrants which has characterised the last decades of European history.

In light of these considerations, one may find in this chapter an historical overview of the migratory movement of people from Suriname towards the Netherlands and from Eritrea towards Italy. In the following pages, I will illustrate the colonial and migratory history of each country; the conditions of settlement in the Netherlands/Italy, with a special focus on Rome and Rotterdam; and the conditions of the women's integration in the domestic work sector.

## SURINAME

### *Colonialism and slavery*<sup>2</sup>

In the seventeenth century, after a long time during which only native groups inhabited its territories, what is today Suriname became an object of interest of both Dutch

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2 For the colonial and contemporary history of Suriname and of Surinamese migration to the Netherlands, in this and the next paragraph, I refer to Rudolf van Lier (1977), Conrad Bruijning and Jan Voorhoeve (1977), Guno Jones (2007), Gert Oostindie (2000), Gerlof Leistra (1995) and Bea Lalmahomed (1999).

and British colonizers. In 1651 the British were the first to achieve a small settlement in this land. This small centre, named Willoughbyland, mainly consisted of sugar plantations wherein approximately two thousand slaves from West Africa were working. The British presence did not last long since in 1667, on the occasion of the Treaty of Breda, the Dutch gained, among other possessions, the right to this small territory which they named Dutch Guyana, while the British gained in exchange the area of New Amsterdam (today's New York).

The economy of Dutch Guyana was largely based on the cultivation of approximately 200 plantations of sugar, coffee, cocoa and cotton that was carried out by the work of slaves taken by the Dutch themselves from West-Africa. The enslavement of workers in Suriname was accompanied by a great operation of religious conversion and language imposition, which was first carried out by missions of the Moravian Church<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, domestic slaves, especially women, were employed in the Dutch masters' houses, to help the few white (or light skinned) mistresses in the domestic chores or in the care of the families. Female slaves also largely provided sexual services for white men in Suriname, taking place in various exploitative manners or, in some cases, in the form of concubinage. The connection between slavery and sexual/domestic services is thus very relevant to a gendered analysis of black women's experience in colonial Suriname.

Yet, across the centuries, many of the slaves managed to escape and find shelter in the interior rain forest, away from the coast, where Europeans with their plantations lived. These people, usually named Maroons<sup>4</sup>, often attacked the plantations where other slaves were still working and, in so doing, made a significant contribution toward the end of slavery, which was declared on the 1st of July 1863. Slavery however remained for a long time and still is part of Surinamese collective memory.

Various stories are told and circulate in Afro-Surinamese circles, many of them regarding enslaved women. One of them, for example, is the story of Slavin Alida, a domestic slave famous for her endurance of her mistress' tortures, who is usually taken as an example of the fierce character of Afro-Surinamese women. Equally prominent in collective memory is her mistress Maria Susanna du Plessis, who is represented as extraordinarily cruel (Neus-van der Putten, 2003). Typical songs, poems and cultural

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3 The Moravian Church (also known as the Evangelische Broedergemeente, EBG) arrived in Suriname in 1735. In 1765 it started its first mission in Paramaribo under the leadership of Cristoph Kersten and, since then, had a leading role in Surinamese society. The Roman Catholic Church, instead, whose first mission took place already in 1683, had for a long time a minor position compared to the EBG, due to bureaucratic limitations to which it had to comply (see Buijning & Voorhoeve, 1977, p. 72 and pp. 184-185).

4 Maroons developed interesting and typical cultures which has been largely analysed by Richard and Sally Price. Among the six Maroon nations inhabiting Suriname, each with its language and culture, the Price carried anthropological investigation on the Saranaka group (1980, 1999).

practices are also proudly kept alive, such as the one related to fashioning of dresses and head-cloths, which are an important inheritance of slavery<sup>5</sup>.

Of the greatest importance, however, are the yearly commemorations of the end of slavery (fig. 1), which are celebrated on July 1<sup>st</sup> not only in Suriname, but also in the location of the ‘Transatlantic Community’ created, as Gowricharn and Schuster (2001) say, by the diaspora of Surinamese people towards Europe and North America. In particular, the Surinamese community in the Netherlands is very keen that slavery be acknowledged as a page of Dutch history that cannot and should not be forgotten. This is the context in which the campaign for the building of the Slavery Monument in Amsterdam in 2002 and the yearly parades for the ‘Keti-Koti’ (*the chain is cut*) took place<sup>6</sup>.



FIG.1 Keti-koti parade in Rotterdam, 1 July 2007. (Photo by the author)

The end of slavery marks also the beginning of what is today considered a very important aspect of Surinamese society: ‘ethnic’ pluralism. In fact when, after 1863, the majority of former slaves refused to continue working on the plantations, the Dutch started to import contract workers from other countries: first Hindus from British India (today called Hindustanis), then Chinese, and finally Javanese from the Dutch East Indies. Thus, because of these repeated (voluntary or forced) migrations, Suriname very soon became an ethnically diverse society. Nowadays, Hindustanis are the biggest ethnic group (37%), followed by the Afro-Surinamese (31%), Javanese (15%), Maroons (10%), Dutch, Jews and Chinese. These groups are differentiated not

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5 A great collection of these dresses and head-cloths is conserved at the Ninsee (National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy) in Amsterdam.

6 About the making of the Slavery Monument in Amsterdam read, among others, Johanna Kardux (2004) and Joy Smith (2007).

only on the basis of their geographic origins, but also on the basis of their religions, languages, food and social organisations (Helman, 1978). It is important to add that while the Afro-Surinamese acquired Dutch citizenship in 1863, with the end of their slave condition, the other 'ethnic' groups had to wait until a decree of 1951 (Jones, 2007, p. 63 and p. 189).

### *Independence*

In 1954, the Netherlands and Suriname (still called Dutch Guyana) agreed upon the self-government of the country in most of its functions, except foreign affairs and defence, over which the Netherlands retained complete control. After the Second World War, indeed, the Netherlands aimed to soften their presence in the country, not only at the political level, but also regarding their cultural and social influence. During those years, a new emphasis was put on making Suriname a culturally autonomous country, through a process of valorisation of the cultural roots of each of the different ethnic groups which inhabited the country, with the aim of a harmonic coexistence between them. Yet, this process was not without internal contradictions, if we take into consideration that, in the same period, the use of the Dutch language was intensified and Surinamese society was subjected to a process of netherlandisation (*vernederlansing*), which I will illustrate in detail in chapter four.

The 1950s and 1960s also saw the development of a Surinamese independence movement which, through the action of the nationalist party NPK, intensified the demand for complete independence. This was actually gained on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1975 with the nomination of Johan Ferrier as Suriname's first president. After this moment, however, the national politics of Suriname were increasingly affected by internal conflicts, periods of dictatorship, economic stagnation and, according to many, a continuing dependence on the Netherlands. Crucial moments in this history are represented by two military coups d'état lead by Desi Bouterse (in 1980 and 1990) bringing to prominence an increasingly dictatorial regime whose violence is typified by the killing, in 1982, of 15 members of the opposition, an event which is recalled as the Decembermoorden (*December massacre*). As a consequence of these events, the diplomatic relationships with the Netherlands progressively worsened. In 1980, after the first coup d'état, a visa became compulsory, for the first time, for travelling between Suriname and the Netherlands and the Dutch financial aid programme was suspended. This scenario is at the root of the departure of almost a third of the Surinamese population, motivated by the fear of an economic crisis and of internal ethnic and political tensions.

## *Moving from Suriname to the Netherlands*

The above mentioned political events, especially the Independence of 1975 and the institution of a compulsory visa in 1980, are usually seen as determining factors behind the frequency and quantity of Surinamese arrivals in the Netherlands. However, as Jan Lucassen and Rinus Penninx (1994) argue, it was not just these specific events which prompted Surinamese people to travel to the Netherlands<sup>7</sup>. The first arrivals from Suriname were recorded in the 19th century<sup>8</sup> (ibidem.), but arrivals intensified with the end of the Second World War, when the colonial elite (especially young students), war veterans or workers previously employed in the Surinamese war industry moved to the Netherlands (Konter & Megen, 1988). Thus, Lucassen and Penninx, together with Guno Jones (2007), argue that from the mid 1950s - well before issue of Surinamese independence arose - a significant number of Surinamese had already moved to the Netherlands<sup>9</sup>. In fact, in the following table one can see that an intense migratory balance is already registered in the mid 1960s, when many Surinamese skilled workers were recruited for the expansion of Dutch industry. These were usually low or middle-income men who were followed, a few years later, by their wives and children, until the beginning of the 1970s. Yet, Annemarie Cottaar (2003) illustrated the case of some women who came also as primary migrants, who temporarily lived in the Netherlands as students and apprentices in the health sector.

However, when we consider what happened in the years 1974-1975, we can talk of a real 'leaving psychosis' (*vertrekpsychose*), which affected Suriname before and immediately after the declaration of independence from the Netherlands. People's distrust in the economic capacity of Suriname inspired the biggest wave of migration in absolute terms between the two countries. At this stage, a different type of migrant appeared: those in socio-economically vulnerable positions, women especially, searching their fortune abroad, pushed by the high rate of unemployment in their home country. The arrivals increased once more before 1980, with people want-

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7 This is particularly true for the Afro-Surinamese group. As evidence, one might consider that in the year 1970, 36% of the Afro-Surinamese population had already emigrated in comparison with 12% of Hindustanis and 4% of the Javanese (Bruijning & Voorhoeve, 1977, p.177).

8 Dienne Hondius (2009) demonstrated how black people's presence in the Netherlands dates back on the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Among all the anonymous black people who first travelled between Suriname and the Netherlands there are two more know figures. One is Jacobus Capitein who studied theology in Leiden where he defended his thesis 1742 (Hira, 1982, p.324, footnote 18). The other is Quassi Timotibo who, as collaborator of the Dutch government against the Maroons, visited the Netherlands in 1776 (Bakker, 1998, p. 52).

9 In 1955 already 10,000 Surinamese resided in the Netherlands (Jones, 2007). Their number increased in the years after and in 1976 more than 67.000 Surinamese were registered in the Netherlands (Bruijning & Voorhoeve, 1977, p.177)

ing to make the most of the last chance to travel from Suriname to the Netherlands without a visa. In the 1980s the numbers were very small but it is important to point out the presence of many asylum seekers among them, for the first time in the history of the relations between the two countries.

| Year | Migratory balance<br>NL-Suriname | Year | Migratory balance<br>NL – Suriname |
|------|----------------------------------|------|------------------------------------|
| 1966 | 2 301                            | 1973 | 9 035                              |
| 1967 | 2 425                            | 1974 | 15 674                             |
| 1968 | 2 988                            | 1975 | 35 537                             |
| 1969 | 4 370                            | 1976 | 621                                |
| 1970 | 5 558                            | 1977 | 1 368                              |
| 1971 | 7 466                            | 1978 | 1 777                              |
| 1972 | 6 313                            |      |                                    |

Source: Konter & Megeen, 1988, p.11

### *Migration and racism in the Netherlands.*

The question of migrants' integration in Dutch society had been for a long time easily dismissed, in the belief that the Netherlands was a successful model of 'multiculturalism' and 'tolerance', wherein racism and ethnic discrimination did not exist. Today, however, the 'tolerance' that Dutch people considered a positive quality inherited from their past seems today to stand on shaky ground. When considering the evolution in the meaning of that 'tolerance', Kees Schuyt argues that if it was possible to talk of an exceptional religious openness in this country during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century – based on values of freedom of conscience and worship -, this does not imply any capacity of contemporary Dutch society to welcome ethnic diversity (Schuyt, 2004, pp.113-114). Others point at the contradictions within the concept of 'multiculturalism' to say that it hides a specific form of racism which is spreading in the Netherlands. This racism manifests itself when one considers the tendency of the Dutch people to maintain 'whiteness' as the fundamental character of national identity, while blackness and migration remain 'alien' to that identity (Wekker, 2009, p.286). Thus, Dutch 'multiculturalism' is redefined by Philomena Essed rather as a form of 'ethnicism' «an ideology that explicitly proclaims the existence of 'multiethnic' equality but implicitly presupposes an ethnic or cultural hierarchical order» (Essed, 1991, p.6). In this, colonial legacies have a crucial position:

Contemporary Dutch racism against Blacks is a complex combination of remnants of colonial paternalism, structural marginalization, and cultural assimilation under conditions of advancing pluralism. (p. 14)

Thus, today, racism in the Netherlands appears to be more than simply present and well grounded, in contrast, once again, with the expectations related to the aforementioned self-image of the Netherlands as a multicultural and tolerant country.

Going back in time, to the period of settlement of the interviewees, one finds that huge problems of unemployment and deficit in labour participation affected Surinamese (and other migrants) during the 1970s and 1980s. When indeed, after the 'oil crisis' of 1973, a general restructuring of the industrial sector took place in the Netherlands, this forced many workers, postcolonial migrants among them, to leave their jobs because of the increasing automatization of production methods. Unemployment became a structural feature of migrants' presence in the country, remaining very high notwithstanding later periods of economic growth. The large masses of unemployed migrant people were undoubtedly a crucial social problem of the time, leading to social tensions and increasing racist sentiments among Dutch white people (Bleich & Schumacher, 1984). As today people of Muslim background are targeted as 'dangerous' subjects by a spreading islamophobia in the Netherlands, represented by people as such Geert Wilders, it should be remembered that Afro-Surinamese and other Caribbean people have been equally 'on the spot' in the past for their 'deviant' social behaviour (Ahmad Ali, 1984). It is striking indeed to consider that Surinamese people in the Netherlands are officially defined as 'aliens' (*allochtonen*), in spite of their full entitlement to Dutch citizenship and the historical bond between Suriname and the Dutch Kingdom (Wekker & Lutz, 2001).

### *Living in Rotterdam*

When thinking about Rotterdam, I believe a set of contradictory images comes to most people's minds. On one hand, we have the tragedy of the Second World War with the bombardments of the city, whose traumatic consequences are crucial to understanding Rotterdammers' psyche and imagery. On the other hand, there is a picture of Rotterdam as 'the city of the future' which portrays an 'open space' where all experimentation is allowed: ambitious architecture, radical behaviour and ethnic mixing are promoted and considered to shape the contemporary identity of this city. Ethnic diversity, in particular, is held as an essential ingredient of Rotterdam's *desirable* future.

This idea of Rotterdam's ethnic diversity descends from the history of the city as a 'harbour' for people (and merchandise especially) arriving from all around the world. The presence in town of one of the biggest commercial harbours in the world influenced its social and economic development making it one of the first destinations for overseas migrants. As early as the 1960s, one could find guest-workers from Cape

Verde employed for the harbour's expanded construction (Nimako & Small, 2009), and young nurses from Suriname working as apprentices in Rotterdam's hospitals (Cottaar, 2003), to mention just two examples.

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, Rotterdam was also a place of high racial tensions, with racist incidents taking place in some of the city's peripheral neighbourhoods. Examples are the riots taking place in the areas of Afrikaanderbuurt in 1972 and in Schiedam in 1976 (Lucassen & Penninx, 1994). The results of these tensions can be seen in the ghettoization of those areas where Caribbean migrants reside and gather. In particular, I refer to the stigmatization of the area around the street called West Kruiskade whose Surinamese and Antillean cafés, bars and shops have been often represented *only* as a reservoir for drug dealing and street gangs (see Buiks, 1983). Stigmatization also frequently occurred in the representation of Surinamese people, women especially, who, in my view, have often been used as material for social investigations as 'socially others', and put under scrutiny for their 'deviant' sexual and social behaviour (cfr Lalmahomed, 1999).

#### *Afro-Surinamese women in the Dutch care sector*

To this backdrop of social and economic difficulties, Afro-Surinamese women, together with other Caribbean women, slowly made their way into the care sector. Today, they can reasonably be considered as the corner stone of Dutch society when it comes to caring for elderly and sick people. Many of them have been working in the care sector all their lives, switching between public and private forms of employment, and between hospitals, nursing homes and private households. Although it is impossible to find statistical data on the actual numbers of Surinamese women employed in the care sector<sup>10</sup> in the Netherlands, I have reasons to believe that they make up the majority. My assumption regarding black migrant women's over-representation in this sector is based, first of all, on the many personal testimonies that I collected during my fieldwork about the fact that the number of Surinamese care workers has always been very high, from the 1970s until today. I also found evidence of this large representation in other essays about Afro-Surinamese women's lives in the Netherlands. Gloria Wekker (2006), for example, observes that working-class Afro-Surinamese women predominantly found occupation in the care sector as if this was 'naturally' the job for them. Another example comes from Anne-Mei The's study based on ethnographic research in a Dutch nursing home (The, 2008). On the basis of her observations, black women (Afro-Surinamese, Caribbean and Cape Verdeans) represent 60% of the personnel working in the sector.

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<sup>10</sup> The reason of this lack comes from the fact that both the general census (CBS) and *Home Care* do not allow to distinguish between the different ethnic backgrounds of the employees.

The reason for this over-representation can be found by looking back at the 1970s, seen in the fact that access to other sectors was difficult for these immigrants because of an economical and political situation which did not favour Surinamese integration. As I stated before, a form of 'institutionalised social inequality' in the labour market made it very difficult for them to climb the social ladder<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, around the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the care sector of the Netherlands entered a crisis. Because of the rapid ageing of the population, changes in the structure of traditional families, and a budding feminist consciousness more and more elderly were in need of 24 hour-personal care. The existing nursing homes could not meet demand and many elderly had to remain in their homes. This gave rise to a demand for care of the elderly in domiciliary form, offering a service which had to combine some sanitary care with housekeeping and simply providing company. The service was mainly provided through the social security system, with patients paying for extra services on their own. This type of domiciliary work was not considered as desirable by many white women. While indeed, at that time, it was common for working-class Dutch women to have cleaning jobs in wealthy households, home care was not considered an attractive occupation<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the number of Dutch women who took these jobs was not enough to secure the complete provision.

It was during this same period that, either following a husband who had migrated years before, or travelling alone, sometimes with young children, Afro-Surinamese women were arriving in the Netherlands. They were all in possession of Dutch citizenship, so the Netherlands was a 'land of opportunities' – 'Paradise the Netherlands' as they say<sup>13</sup> - easy to reach. Their trajectory coincided with the fact that, from the late 1960s on, private or semi-private care agencies such as *Home Care*<sup>14</sup>, *Moelen&Moelen*, not to mention other smaller ones, were channelling the great supply of workers made up of Afro-Surinamese and other Caribbean women into a newly burgeoning labour niche. These agencies gradually replaced Christian charity groups which, for a long time, had organised various forms of assistance to poor and needy people or to mothers with newly born babies (Lienburg, 2001). In the 1970s, however, a specific service targeting the elderly started to expand and offered new employment opportunities. What attracted the interviewees to this budding sector will be discussed in the second part of this dissertation.

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11 This inequality is confirmed by H. M. Becker and G. J. Kempen (1982) reporting diffuse prejudice by the side of Dutch companies which for 57% declared to prefer white workers over black ones (Becker & Kempen, 1982, cited in Konter & Megen, 1988, p.40).

12 It is also true that while cleaning could be occasionally paid under-the-table to people receiving a state subsidy, without losing it, the care sector, by contrast, was more regulated.

13 See footnote 14 in chapter six.

14 *Home Care* and *Moelen&Moelen* are pseudonyms

*Eritrea's history and Italian colonialism*<sup>15</sup>

If we consider the ancient history of Eritrea, two stories are vital in understanding my participants' view of their ancestors' times. The first is the legend of the Queen of Sheba who, after having visited the Israeli King Salomon, stopped in Abyssinia and there gave birth to a Jewish offspring. It is indeed thanks to this early proliferation of the Jewish religion in the region that Saint Frumentius, also arriving from the Red Sea in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., succeeded in converting a large number of local people to Christianity, much earlier than in the rest of Africa. The other important story is related to the discovery of various human fossils in the Great Rift Valley, a vast area which includes the Horn of Africa. The most famous of these fossils is the female australopithecine known as Lucy. Those two stories together contribute to a general claim concerning the antiquity of the population living in this area and its central position in the history of Judaism and Christianity. For many, this story supports the so called *Semitic Thesis*, i.e. the idea that Eritreans descended from Jews and are thus of a 'superior race', in comparison to the other African populations (Sòrgoni, 1998).

Like the Queen of Sheba and Saint Frumentius, the Italians also arrived in Eritrea from the Red Sea, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first Italians were again religious missionaries but soon after, Italy's commercial and military enterprise began. Its birth is commonly dated with the acquisition of the Assab bay by the Italian *Rubattino Shipping Company* (1869). Progressively Italy expanded its domination, inland from the coast with several battles, until the Treaty of Wuchale (1889), by which the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II dealt out a part of his territory to the Italian Kingdom.

In the years that followed, and especially after Adwa's defeat against Ethiopia (1896), Italian domination saw a period of stabilisation in the area. However, after the Fascist takeover in 1922, the colonial regime was subjected to modification and a new emphasis was put on expansionist campaigns. The strengthening of the ties between Italy and Eritrea accompanied this process, through a rhetoric of a privilege and kinship based on the portrayal of Eritrea as a 'first-born colony' (*colonia primogenita*) and of Eritreans as superiorly distinguished from other Africans, making use of a discourse which we have seen to be grounded in pre-colonial times. With the same purpose, especially during the 1930s, Italians reinforced their presence in the country, with an increase in the number of Italian soldiers, construction workers, farmers and

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15 For a general overview of Eritrea's history see Tom Killion (1998); Randall Fegley (1995), Alberto D'Angelo (1999) and Tekeste Negash (1997). For the history of the Italian colonial domination in Eritrea, read Giampaolo Calchi Novati (1999), Angelo Del Boca (1992), Nicola Labanca (2002b), Tekeste Negash (1987), and Alessandro Triulzi (2002).

small entrepreneurs who settled in Eritrea. At the same time, Italians appropriated all the higher positions in the administration and in the cultural life of the country.

The fact that Eritrea's colonisation was not based on a plantation economy and forced slavery made it possible for Italians to portray their colonial enterprise as 'poor and human', often defined as 'tramp colonialism' (*colonialismo straccione*), to which corresponded a representation of Italians as 'good fellas' (*brava gente*) always in friendly relationships with the locals. In recent years these images have been strongly challenged by scholars thanks to detailed information on the brutality of the Italian presence in their colonies. In this, a strong emphasis has been put on demonstrating that the Italian presence in Eritrea was characterised by a high level of oppression of the local population, inflicted along sexual and racial lines<sup>16</sup>. In the city of Asmara, for example, the locals did not have access to the city-centre and could not use public transport. Equally, Eritrean children were prohibited from attending school during most of the Italian domination (Negash, 2005). Indeed, Eritreans did not have access to full citizenship rights and they remained in the legal status of 'subjects' during the whole period of Italian colonisation (Marongiu Bonaiuti, 1982, pp.228-229).

Another aspect of locals' oppression concerned the use of local women for domestic and sexual services by Italian men, also by some who were already married back in Italy. This type of relationship was called *madamato*, a form of concubinage which was partially accepted by the local population thanks to the fact that the traditional marriage institution of Eritrea was based likewise only on informal agreements. Through this *madamato* arrangement, several Italian men could 'informally' unite with Eritrean girls, finding in them devoted spouses. Yet, these Italo-Eritrean relationships had a painful destiny after the promulgation of the Fascist *Racial Laws* (1937) which prohibited Italians to have intimate and sexual relationships with colonised populations. These laws had terrible effects on the lives of those Eritrean concubines who were abandoned by their Italian partners and who had then notable difficulties in raising their mix-raced children.

The image of *madamas* represents a painful page of Eritrean gender history which, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, is not usually addressed in public settings. Its importance, however, has been widely discussed by scholars such as Giulia Barrera (1996), Ruth Iyob (2005) and Sandra Ponzanesi (2005, 2007). Also the case of abandoned Italo-Eritrean children represents a still rather vivid issue, also in Italy where many of them have, for tens of years, campaigned to be recognized with the same citizenship rights as children of Italian fathers (Barrera, 2005). The inheritance of the gendered imagery shaped within the institution of the *madamato* is of paramount importance in today's representation of Eritrean women, for the Eritrean

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16 For what concerns the sexual and racial policies of the Italian colonialism in Eritrea I refer mainly to: Giulia Barrera (2003a, 2003b), Cristina Lombardi-Diop (2003), Patrizia Palumbo (2003), Nicoletta Poidimani (2009), Barbara Sòrgoni (1998), and Giulietta Stefani (2007).

scholar Ruth Iyob (2005). These images carry the legacy of the depiction of Eritrean girls as 'Black Venuses', in Sandra Ponzanesi's words, thus they are highly sexualised objects, seemingly at the ready disposal of the 'white male conqueror', as one can find them portrayed in postcards or songs<sup>17</sup> by soldiers and explorers during the time of colonisation (Barrera, 1996; Ponzanesi, 2005).

If the *madamas* embody the exploitation perpetrated by Italians on the local female population, the male corresponding figure is the one of *askaris*, a figure which is, conversely, often mentioned by Eritreans on public occasions. These men had been used as 'human reservoir' for the most dangerous military actions during the late stage of Italian colonialism, when Italy was desperately trying to occupy Ethiopia and Libya, as it eventually did.

Today, nostalgic Italians and Eritrean nationalists alike celebrate these historical events as a 'sacrifice' endured by the *askaris* in Italy's name. To the memory of *askaris* every year a wreath is placed in front of the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in Rome, while an art exhibition in the Museo Vittoriano (Rome) has been recently dedicated to their contribution in the Italian colonial expansion<sup>18</sup>. An example of the imagery which was underlined by the fascist rhetoric, and which still nourishes those commemorations today, is offered by the following piece from the 1938 Touring Club Guide of Asmara. From the Guide:

Reasons of gratitude and opportunity compel us to use the best manners towards this people, from which Italy, for more than half a century, has continually taken the human element of the glorious squadrons, teams and Eritrean batteries that made possibly the most beautiful colonial troop of the world, and whose history is made of admirable heroism and absolute devotion towards the Italian Fatherland<sup>19</sup>. (Guide of Asmara, 1938).

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17 Exemplary is the case of the song "Faccetta nera, bell'Abissina" (*Black face, beautiful Abyssinian girl*). The song was inaugurated on the occasion of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 and it spread quickly not only between Italian troops but also between the larger public in Italy as in the 'Italian Africa'. The text narrates the colonial expansion through the voice of a soldier who aims to 'save' a beautiful local woman (the Abyssinian) who 'waits and hopes' to 'have another King'. (see Poidimani, 2006)

18 The exhibition titled "L'epopea degli ascari eritrei" (*The epic of Eritrean askaris*) has been inaugurated in September 2004 with an official communication from the Italian senate.

19 *My translation from*: «Ragioni di riconoscenza e di opportunità impongono di usare il maggior riguardo verso questa gente, donde l'Italia trae ininterrottamente da oltre mezzo secolo l'elemento umano per i magnifici battaglioni, squadroni e batterie eritree che costituiscono forse la più bella truppa coloniale del mondo, e la cui storia è tutta intessuta di eroismi ammirevoli e di dedizione assoluta verso la Patria Italiana».

Such a representation of the *askaris*' forced recruitment is highly problematic. One has to consider that the compulsion for Eritreans to fight against Ethiopians coincided, at the symbolic level at least, to the beginning of a conflict between populations that were always united until that moment. Therefore, the praising of Eritrean soldiers' faithfulness to Italy evokes, even today, the troubling issue of hatred and betrayal between Ethiopians and Eritreans. In the next paragraph I will briefly illustrate the development of this conflict up to the time of Eritrea's independence.

### *Eritrea towards Independence*

After 1941, in the turmoil of WWII and the fall of Fascism, Italians lost their colony of Eritrea. This fell under British protectorate until 1952, when Eritrea became a federation with Ethiopia, as prescribed by a controversial UN Assembly. After ten years of federation, in 1962, the Ethiopian emperor Hailé Selassié pushed for the transformation of the federation into an annexation of Eritrea, with a resolution which has been seen by many as a *de facto* occupation. This inaugurated a particularly harsh period for Eritrea during which a strenuous guerilla war against the occupiers took place in the countryside. The independence fighters were organised in two groups called Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

Yet, after the dethroning of Selassié in September 1974 by the military junta of the Derg, the conditions of the Eritrean population definitively worsened. Thus, at the beginning of 1975, the struggle for independence turned into a real war, which brought a more urban dimension to the conflict with battles, bombardments and persecutions taking place in the city of Asmara. The situation deteriorated further in 1977, with the rise of Mengistu Hailé Auroram and the beginning of the worst phase of the conflict, known as Red Terror. Only in 1991 did the Independence Movement achieve the liberation of the city of Asmara, marking the end of a thirty-year war between the two neighbouring countries<sup>20</sup>.

In this context, I will focus on the features of a surviving Italian presence in Eritrea after the end of the official colonial domination. It is interesting indeed that not all Italians left after 1941, but a big community of 10.000 people remained, mostly concentrated in the city of Asmara (Bottaro, 2003). The period from the end of the Second World War to the Derg's uprising is remembered as a 'golden era' by those who, in fact, dismissed from their role as colonial rulers, easily assumed the role of a white elite and occupied a hegemonic socio-economic and cultural position in the country (Bottaro, 2003; Sforza & Luzzi, 1978). Although confined to the city of Asmara, Italians' prominent role in economic, cultural and social matters can make us see this time as a form of neo-colonialism.

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<sup>20</sup> On the independence, birth and the evolution of the Eritrean State see, among others: Assefaw Bariagaber (1998); Dan Connell (2005); and Ruth Iyob (1997).

Moreover, from a cultural perspective, these years corresponded to a highly specific phase in the construction of Eritrean national discourses which entailed a redefinition of the past Italian domination. The formation of this new Eritrean standpoint is summarised by the following personal memory of the scholar Tekeste Negash:

Although the Italian and British presence in Eritrea cannot be satisfactorily compared, such a comparison was, nonetheless, made by common men in Asmara. In the late 1960s, the story was told in more or less the following manner. During the Italian period the rule was: eat but do not talk. The British changed the rule to: talk but do not eat. In the 1960s a third experience was added, namely the Ethiopian experience where the rule was: do not eat and do not talk. (Negash, 1997, p. 24)

It is interesting to note that anti-Ethiopian propaganda reinforced this sentiment of 'relative' appreciation of Italian times. The rhetoric of the independence, indeed, comprised the recycling of colonial discourses about the privileged bond with Italy and on the superiority of Eritreans above other African populations (Calchi Novati, 2005; Negash, 1997).

### *Eritrean migration to Italy*

Although there were already some Eritreans in various parts of Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>21</sup>, the first real Eritrean community took shape around the 1960s in the city of Bari where several Eritrean men, who arrived as sailors for shipping companies, later settled. Thus, for all of the 1960s/1970s, Italy became the first destination for Eritrean migrants to the Western world.

The Eritrean Embassy estimates that, during the 1970s, the presence of Eritreans in Italy reached a peak of 40.000 people<sup>22</sup>, a number largely made up by the overlap of different arrivals of people living in Italy only on a temporary basis. Unfortunately, no further data regarding the Eritrean presence in Italy at that time are available. This scarcity is due, first of all, to the fact that until Independence in 1993, Eritreans were considered as Ethiopians; another reason is the fact that, even during the 1970s and

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21 Documentation concerning the first Eritreans travelling to Italy during the colonial time tells us about some Eritreans working in the industrial sector coming to visit the Fiat factory in Turin (Pennaccini, 1989); a group of Eritrean schoolgirls accompanied by Italian Capuchin Fathers, again in Turin (Cordovani, 1997); and, finally, a group of *askaris* participating in a military parade at the Centocelle airport in Rome (Portelli, 2007b). The presence of people from the Eritrean region in Italy is, however, clearly long-running. This is testified by the establishment already in 1351 of the Ethiopian Collegium by pilgrims from Abyssinia inside today's Vatican City (Gori, 2009).

22 From a personal conversation with Eritrean authorities in Rome.

part of the 1980s, Italy was relatively unaware of the importance of keeping track of the migratory presence in the country. At that time, Italy was still very much concerned with the migration of Italians towards other western countries or with internal migration from the South to the North of Italy. Thus, detailed data about the early phases of arrivals from outside Italy are not only very scarce, but they also do not distinguish on the basis of gender or nationality. The first data regarding Eritreans are from the 1980s, when Alessandra Anselmi (1987) estimates that 85% of Eritreans in Italy were women.

Very often, however, they stayed in Italy for only a short time, one or two years, moving soon towards other European countries (the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom), or Canada, the United States and Australia. The main reason for Eritreans for settling in other countries rather than Italy was the opportunity to apply elsewhere for political asylum, as it was not possible for them to obtain asylum in Italy itself. In fact, until 1990, the so-called 'geographic limitation' of the *Geneva Convention* (1951) prevented any African person from applying for political asylum in Italy. On the basis of this limitation, only people coming from other European countries, as in the case of people fleeing from the Soviet Union for instance, could be accepted as refugees in Italian territory<sup>23</sup>.

The Eritrean migration to Italy peaked around 1975, with the intensification of the armed struggle against Ethiopia and the worsening of the economic crisis. It should be noted that most of the people leaving at this time were young, well-educated people who found it very difficult to accept the living and working conditions reserved for migrants in Italy, conditions which did not offer them opportunities other than low level jobs and temporary residence permits. This represented one more reason for young Eritrean migrants to leave Italy for other western countries.

Through my work, a very important group among the first Eritrean migrants came to light: those poorly educated women who, from the 1960s on, arrived as labourers in the Italian major cities, often guided by Italians with whom they were already in contact. Among these women, a particular case is represented by women who had been 'taken along' by their Italian employers in their repatriation from Eritrea. The break-out of war in 1975 caught these women by surprise and their migratory projects were quickly changed. Those who intended to return home after only a few years were forced to stay on in Italy, awaiting better times for their return. Many of these women are today called 'mothers-courage of Italy', to emphasise their strength in working in Italy for all their life, in very difficult conditions, sending back money not only in order to sustain their families, but also to support the Independence struggle (Sibhatu, 2004, p. 27).

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23 I want to thank Domenica Ghidei Biidu for having explained to me this specific historical feature which is otherwise difficult to reconstruct.



FIG. 2 The FPLE in Rome celebrates the Day of Eritrean Martyrs, 30 of April 1977. (From the documentary by Federico Bruno *et al.*, 1977).

### *Migration and racism in Italy*

If, in the Netherlands, the integration of migrants has by and large followed, with its own contradictions, the 'multiculturalist' model, Italy has always remained more or less attached to the so-called model of 'differential exclusion' (Castels & Miller, 1998). This model is typical of a migratory system based on labour migration, giving no citizenship and few socio-economic rights to migrants who are indeed welcomed *only* as temporary workers. In fact the only possible way for migrants to enter Italy has remained for a long time that of labour migration, while family reunification, for example, was not possible until the promulgation of the first Migration Bill in 1990 (*Martelli Law*). If we consider that migration for asylum was also precluded to Eritreans, one can understand why the majority of them, women included, migrated to Italy as workers.

The emphasis on migration as a source of cheap labour rather than as a social issue, an approach which still largely characterizes Italian policies on migratory matters, explains, in my view, the lack of studies on the cultural, religious and social aspects of the lives of migrants in the early phases of their arrivals. In fact, no kind of integration policy welcomed the migrants arriving in Italy from Cape Verde, Eritrea/Ethiopia, Philippines, or from former Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s (Grasso, 1997). In general, their destiny was to be the *invisible* substitutes for the Italian working-class, southern Italians and people from the countryside, who in those years started to climb the social ladder and renounced the most demeaning jobs.

For a long time, Italian thinking regarding migration issues underestimated the importance of recognizing migrants as subjects, entitled to political and social rights<sup>24</sup>. The foreigners' presence was seen as *purely* functional, to fill the holes in Italian society, taking on the most strenuous jobs that Italians rejected. A profound lack of awareness is also the reason behind the common belief that 'Italians are not racist', as many used to affirm. This belief was based on a mixture of beliefs rooted in the representation of Italians as 'good fellas' and benevolent colonisers that I discussed in the previous paragraph. This 'slogan' was also reinforced by the assumption that since Italians had themselves been discriminated against as migrants in many parts of the world, they were able to 'empathise' with the newcomers.

However, the rise of racist attacks from the 1980s on, and the increasing popularity of political parties such as 'Lega Nord', put into question the characteristics of what is actually a 'normalization' of a racist mindset in this country. Moreover, as several scholars have now demonstrated, there is a strong connection between today's forms of racism towards migrants and forms of discrimination which characterised Italian society in the past (Balco, 1993; Tabet, 1997; Rivera, 2009). Most importantly, the racist disposition of Italians is testified by the promulgation, in 1937, of the Fascist *Racial Laws* against Jews, homosexuals, blacks and the colonised. This regulation was sustained by an intellectual and political project which found expression in the review "La difesa della razza" (*The defence of race*), published between 1938 and 1943 (see Poidimani, 2009). Moreover, in this perspective, another form of identity-based discourse emerges as relevant: the stereotypes, the stigmas and the discriminatory practices that have always accompanied, and still largely do so, the common representation of Southern Italians in the country (Tablet, 1997). It is thus in the light of this representational background, that we can understand the strength of the conjunction between *popular* and *institutional* racism which today makes Italy a very difficult place for migrants to live (Rivera, 2009).

### *Eritreans in Rome*

Rome is a city which makes cultural diversity one of its identity markers. The cosmopolitan character of the city can be traced back to Ancient Rome, and Romans of today like to see their city as a place to which people from all around the world are happy to come and enjoy its 'eternal beauty.' Likewise, the high number of 400.000 migrants living in the city today (Caritas/Migrantes, 2009) is seen by most as a confirmation of its international character. Yet, despite these ambitions, in my view the city of Rome tends to 'cover' the variety of cultural identities of its inhabitants under

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24 On cultural integration policies in Italy in the last decades see, among others: Ralph Grillo and Jeff Pratt (2002), David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (1996), Sandro Mezzadra (2001), and Alessandro Dal Lago (1999).

an abundance of symbols and monuments constantly underlining the city's unchanging identity. These are symbols and monuments (churches, chapels, obelisks, triumph arches, pyramids, statues, etc.) which originate from Rome's role in the history of Catholicism, the Roman Empire and Fascism (see Von Henneberg, 2004). As we know, this is a history made not only of beautiful cultural and artistic artefacts - of which Rome is undoubtedly proud - but it is also a history of cruelty towards and the domination of so-called 'unfaithful' or 'primitive' populations: from Trajan's Column to the more recent Fascist monuments, several items remind visitors that Rome's eternity was built on someone else's annihilation. Moreover, the various cases of racist and xenophobic assaults taking place in the city in recent years sadly confirm that this is not such a welcoming place for a foreigner.

In trying to imagine the city in the same way that the women I interviewed might have found it in the 1960/1970s, we first have to consider that the numbers of migrant populations at that time were indeed very small. Only a few thousands Eritreans were estimated to be in Rome in the mid-1970s (Marchetti & Sgueglia, 2008; Capalbo, 1983). Yet, Rome was a very attractive destination for Eritreans for several reasons: the presence of a special office of the Vatican which assisted Eritreans to expatriate to the United States, Canada and Australia; the increasing demand for live-in domestics by Italian upper-class households; and the presence of numerous Italians, including religious people from catholic missions and churches, formerly living in Eritrea, who could work as intermediaries.

As I stated previously, during this phase migrants in Italy were *simply* included in the existing social stratification, occupying the lowest positions. When Eritreans arrived in Rome, the distribution of social classes between the city centre and the outskirts had been the result of several phases of economic and social transformations (Ferrarotti, 1971; Pagnotta, 2009; Balbo, 1980). An important feature of these urban transformations had been, throughout the century, the arrival of people from other Italian regions, pushed by the impoverishment of the rural economies, brought about by the progressive industrialisation of the country.

Amongst them, a special case was that of young women from the regions of Sardinia, Marche, Abruzzo or from smaller towns around Rome, who started to work for rich Roman families as live-in domestics. When, after the economic boom of the 1950s-1960s, these Italian working-class women were able to find better occupations in industry or trade, Eritreans and other foreigners were then 'called' to replace them (Di Leo, 1984). In that, one can literally say that Eritreans 'took their place', not only in their social function, but also in the actual physical occupation of the space reserved for them in rich families' apartments as live-in workers.

### *Eritrean women in the Italian domestic sector*

Francesca Scalzo (1984) estimates that 89% of the Eritrean women living in Italy were working in the domestic sector. The remarkable confluence of Eritrean women in this sector was the result of a form of labour migration channelled on the basis of Italians' labour deficits. These Eritrean domestic workers were employed on "on-call" contracts, signed by the prospective employer and employee before arrival, arranged by employment agencies or individual brokers (often religious figures) who, as early as the 1970s, were very active in Eritrea's main cities<sup>25</sup>. This mediation was necessary in order to arrange these contracts, to deal with the embassies and to find 'a good match' between prospective employers and employees. The contracts foresaw a trial period of one year, at the end of which the worker could either go back to her home country or apply for a permanent contract and residence permit, upon the decision of the employer. As the employment procedure was codified, so were working conditions<sup>26</sup>. In fact, the private employment of domestic workers was a sector already relatively well regulated in Italy: in 1958 a first complete legislation was promulgated, following the campaigning of, above all, Christian workers' unions (Andall, 2000).

For women migrating alone, domestic work gave them the opportunity to enter in a relatively safe profession and environment which also offered them food and accommodation. If these were the advantages in entering the sector, it is conversely true that in Italy this was the only type of work available to black migrant women (a situation which remains arguably true today). Furthermore, the job itself was often unnecessarily exploitative. In this sense, domestic service became a 'niche' due the coming-together of two mirroring factors: the attractiveness of the job for the migrant workers and the subsequent impossibility for them to find a job of any other description. In other words, once in the sector, there were few possibilities for leaving it.

### CONCLUSION

At the end of this historical overview differences and similarities emerge in the backgrounds of the two groups of interviewees. The first great difference regards the length and the modality of their colonisation. Other major differences relate to integration in the domestic/care sector (care vs. domestic work; employment as motivation for the migration, or as a solution found after the arrival) and with the quantitative dimension of their presence in the country of arrival. The most important difference, however, concerns citizenship status: all the Afro-Surinamese already had Dutch citizenship on arrival; while the Eritreans never had access to Italian citizenship before

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25 Several women spoke about the agency 'Maria' in the city of Massawa, for instance.

26 For the general working and contracting conditions of migrant domestic workers in Italy in those years see the work of Jaqueline Andall (2000, 2004, 2005).

their migration, a fact which greatly determined their circumstances of arrival in the country.

The two groups, however, also have many similarities: both groups come from a background of an independence struggle and/or a troublesome socio-economic situation in the home country; and they both encountered racism, difficult integration, and scarcity of job opportunities in the country of settlement. The two groups also share the period of the migration which, as we have seen, turns crucially around the year 1975, and its coinciding with a new market for caring/cleaning jobs in the Netherlands/Italy, connected with the transformation of women's behaviour models in those countries.

Most importantly, however, in this chapter I have outlined three 'figurations' coming from the colonial time which I will show to be an important inheritance for the self-representation of both groups in working and migratory settings. In fact, the tensions surrounding the images of *askaris* and *madamas* for Eritreans, and that of *domestic slaves* for Afro-Surinamese, will be important elements in the discussion which will follow, as I attempt to trace back in time the representations circulating seen today, and which interviewees' narrative seem to convey.

## Chapter 4

### COLONIAL ACCULTURATION AND BELONGING

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In this chapter, I shall illustrate the way interviewees' narratives appropriate different elements regarding the colonial past and, in so doing, build their identities as 'postcolonial subjects'. I will argue these narratives to be crucially characterised by a feeling of 'belonging' to the colonisers' cultural identity. In doing so, I will refer to Nira Yuval-Davis' definition of 'belonging' as a construction which «reflects emotional investments and desire for attachments» (Yuval-Davis, 2006a, pp.202-203). This construction has an important 'performative dimension' which consists of «specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behaviour» (ibidem). This performative dimension of 'belonging' includes a series of gestures and ideas which involve subjects' practices, attitudes and, most importantly, imagination. In the following pages I shall put this in relation to the understanding of colonialism and decolonisation by scholars such as Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1986) or Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh (1995). I find extremely important the fact that they challenge the idea of colonialism as a purely political or economic process and they see it instead as a process happening at the level of cultural politics and therefore «engaging the imagery» of colonised people (Nederveen Pieterse & Parekh, 1995, p.3).

In light of the above, I will focus on phenomena such as *netherlandisation* and *italianisation* which are here seen as part of a process of 'colonial acculturation' defined as the absorption of knowledge and cultural practices, to which corresponded sentiments of belonging and cultural participation, that was imposed on colonised people in relation to the culture 'emanated' by their colonising country. The hegemonic character of colonisers' cultures in colonial peripheries is an essential ingredient of such a process.

However, following Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994), I see the influence of colonial domination on cultural performances and self-representations of colonised subjects *not* as a passive replication of practices emanating from the centre towards the margins. I see it rather as a complex performance in which one can find some space for hybrid, ambivalent and challenging 'tactics' that colonised people can employ. With reference to his theory of cultural hybridity in (post)colonial settings, Bhabha argues that the *translation* of practices, symbols, etc. from the culture in position of 'priority' to the dominated culture results in an imitation which is *ambivalent* as far as it hampers the 'authenticity' of its 'original' (Bhabha, 1990, p.210). This is what Bhabha calls *mimicry*: 'the desire for a reformed recognizable Other' (p.122); in other words,

an imitation which transgresses and challenges the authority of its model because it endorses a *displacement* of «itself which is behind» i.e. the 'original' performance (p.121). In this view, the *translation* of cultural practices is shaped in the space between the repetition and the transgression of them. In order to underscore the role of these cultural performances in Asmara and Paramaribo, I devoted particular attention to interviewees' memories about the time of their early socialisation, especially concerning schooling, entertainment and public life.

In the following pages, I will first illustrate the process of *netherlandisation* to which Surinamese children and youngsters were exposed, drawing attention, in particular, to the character of the Dutch Kingdom as an 'imagined community', and to the creation of the 'Black Dutch' hybrid subjectivity. Secondly, I will discuss the ambivalence which characterises Eritreans' relationships of bonding with Italy. I will illustrate the two-sided nature of interviewees' tactical narratives which allows them to emphasise privilege and resentment at the same time. Finally, I will concentrate education, comparing practices of *italianisation* and *netherlandisation* which interviewees remember from their school time. In so doing, I will argue that, from these narratives, women's feelings of affiliation seem to oscillate between that with the Netherlands or Italy, and the one with the new Surinamese/Eritrean national identities. In other words, they seem caught in a tension between the identity offered by their former colonisers, and the autonomous identity gradually produced in their home countries through the struggles rising at the time of their youth, between the 1950s and the 1970s.

## 1. BLACK DUTCH

During the childhood and youth of the Afro-Surinamese interviewees, the Dutch presence in Suriname was in its last phase (1954-1975). This phase is generally called 'the autonomy period'<sup>1</sup> (Jones, 2007; Leistra, 1995; Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001). The cultural scene of this time was characterized by two major, only apparently conflicting, tendencies: the strengthening of Suriname's cultural emancipation<sup>2</sup>, on the one side, and the intensification of the *netherlandisation* of Surinamese society, on the other. In the following pages, I will illustrate the several forces which contributed to

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1 During these years the Netherlands pushed for an autonomous development of its colony through State directed reforms plans: the *Tienjarenplan* (1954/1963) and the *Nationaal Ontwikkelingsplan Suriname* (1966/1976). Main goals of these reforms were: a bigger economic autonomy for the country, improvement of social services, and, finally, the alleviation of its level of disenfranchisement, together with the improvement of infrastructures such as roads, water system, hospitals and schools.

2 The emancipation process was mainly operated through the emphasis on the different ethnic groups' identity, through the revaluation of each group language and tradition (Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, p.520).

this contradictory process: the Christian Churches, the institutionalization and the legislation as in Dutch models, mass and consumerist models, the import of western products, and personal contacts (Kruijer, 1973, pp.115-6).

Another very important issue for the late phase of Dutch colonialism in Suriname is that of language, an issue which again reflects the contradictions affecting Surinamese society during this time: the imposition of Dutch as the official language and the cultural language (*cultuurtaal*) was paralleled by a reevaluation of Sranan as an instrument of unification (*eenwording*) between the different Surinamese ethnic groups<sup>3</sup>.

This is the context in which the identities of people like Georgina - born in Paramaribo in 1940 and attending Christian schools there – were taking shape. In the following excerpt she powerfully illustrates the complexity of her feelings of belonging to the Dutch nation. From her standpoint, her participation in the construction of the Dutch cultural identity is an element that later affected her migratory path and her feeling of inclusion in the Netherlands, where she migrated in 1969. In Georgina's words:

*Look, in Suriname you were raised as Dutch. Your language is Dutch. Your school is Dutch. You know, you know some places in the Netherlands: The Hague, Amsterdam, Utrecht. You learn about them. You learn how the Dutch experienced the war. You learn all about food. You learn also how they dress. These are things that don't bother us, because we were then in Suriname. But when you arrive here, then you know something: they are white. [...] We were black and this was a white... part...and only the river, the sea, divided us from each other. But exactly the same education that you had there, you had it here. So, you are a 'black Dutch'. Only, you are born in Suriname, South-America<sup>4</sup>*

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3 During the colonial time, one could find in Suriname four major linguistic groups: Amerindian (as Carib, Kalina, Arawak between others); Creole (among which Sranan and the Maroon languages), Asian (Hindi, Indonesian, Arabic and Chinese) and European (mainly Dutch). However, Dutch was the one predominantly used in written form, being the language of education, law and faith (in Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, p.388). Dutch language was considered to be important for the upward social mobility of the Surinamese, possibly facilitating them in learning other European languages, as argued by Lou Lichtveld in 1949 in his speech 'De culturele koers van Suriname' (Lichtveld 1949, cited in Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, p.386).

4 *From the original:* «Kijk, in Suriname word je Nederlands opgevoed. Je voertaal is Nederlands. Je school is Nederlands. Je weet, je weet bepaalde plekken van Nederland: Den Haag, Amsterdam, Utrecht. Je leert daarvan. Je leert hoe de Nederlanders de oorlog hebben meege maakt. Je leert een hele voeding. Je leert wel ook hun kleding. Het zijn dingen waar wij ons niet aan storen, want wij zitten in Suriname toen. Maar als je hier komt, dan weet je het een en ander. Ze zijn blank. [...] Wij waren zwart en dit was wit... gedeelte.... en alleen de rivier, de zee,

Georgina's very suggestive narrative illustrates how her relationship with the Netherlands was forged by a process of acculturation to the country. This acculturation conveyed a dense mix of representations about Dutch people: the way they talk, the cities they live in, the way they dress, eat, their history, the songs they sing and the books they read. This 'previous knowledge' about the Netherlands had been fundamentally consisted of the education she received at the Christian schools, which seem to have equipped her for her later travelling.

Moreover it is worth noticing that despite the impression that she is talking about 'the others' when talking about the Dutch, she claims her belonging, her participation in the *same* identity construction of the colonisers: «the same education that you had there, you had here. Thus, you are a black Dutch». The image of the 'river' (which stands for the Atlantic Ocean) cutting the Netherlands in two parts, a white and a black one, is a common trope in the Surinamese rhetoric of the last decades (see Jones, 2007). This aims to emphasise the bond and connection between contemporary Suriname and the Netherlands, after independence.

From my point of view, Georgina offers the image of the Dutch identity as the one of a 'community', along the lines of what Benedict Anderson (1991) defines as 'imagined communities'. This is the (imagined) community living under the same flag, speaking the same language, reading the same school texts, etc. and therefore sharing a common national identity. In this perspective, she seems to have grown up under the influence of what Anderson calls an 'abstract sense of imagined simultaneity'. However, after her actual migration, Georgina perceived that other kinds of boundaries existed between the Dutch in the Netherlands and the people in Suriname. Where she used to see 'unity' (language, history, culture), she found instead 'separation'. The 'river' comes to symbolize this separation. In Anderson's words, it is as if «the image of the communion» (Anderson, 1991, p.6) with the other members of the imagined community, an image which lives in their minds in its abstract form, dissolved at the moment of the *actual* meeting with the part of 'her community' living on the other side of the Ocean. That is an issue to which I will come back in chapter six when talking of 'shock of arrival'.

Here we see that Georgina minimises such a shock, saying that she is open to a 'blurred' conception of Dutch identity. In fact, her migration stands as a turning point in the understanding of her identity which she 'discovers' to be crucially affected by her skin colour. She responds to this coming to awareness with a conceptualisation of her blackness as a *variation*, a modification of Dutchness' main characteristic, i.e. whiteness. In order to do so, she makes up a hybrid entity, the one of 'the Black Dutch': people that have absorbed the culture, the language and the knowledge related to

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die scheidde ons van elkaar. Maar identiek hetzelfde onderwijs die je daar genoot, genoot je hier. Dus je bent een zwarte Nederlander. Alleen ben je in Suriname geboren, Zuid-Amerika».

'being Dutch', and yet maintain their skin colour as a sign of their difference, as the symbol of their geographical and cultural roots.

## 2. THE 'AMBIVALENCE' OF BONDS

Here I shall introduce narratives in which Eritrean interviewees address the themes of the privileged bond and the one theme of resentment in relationship to Italy's past domination in their country. Interestingly, these themes emerge from the interviewees' words not as conflicting, but as interconnected elements.

In general, Eritrean women try to reconcile with Italy's colonial past, asking for a privileged status of Eritreans in comparison with other migrants. This rhetoric of *privilege* is usually based on images which emphasise the representation of Eritrea as Italy's 'first-born colony' (*colonia primogenita*). Yet, as I will further discuss, this is an image which tends to mask the exploitation which occurred throughout the history of Italian domination in the country. Moreover, this historical bond today manifests itself as an expectation of benevolent treatment on the part of Eritrean migrants in Italy<sup>5</sup>. The discussion of those elements as they emerge from the interviews will shed light on the *ambivalence* which characterises the bond between Italy and Eritrea. I am here quoting the words of Olga, a woman born in 1951 who used to work in an Italian clothing factory in Asmara, before migrating to Italy in 1973. Olga remembers:

*'Cause our parents always spoke well about Italy: what [Italians] did during the domination, how they entered Eritrea... the history. Now that my children are grown-ups, thanks to politics I read stories of what the Eritreans suffered: these are bad stories, a bit. But [our parents] did not tell them. They don't tell bad things. [...] My uncles and my father fought in Libya, they were askaris [...] So, they always told us good things about Italians. But if you have a look at history, at what politicians write – those who studied politics, those who engaged with Eritreans – there are many [Eritreans] that suffered. Eritreans suffered. And we keep suffering, as Eritreans. As it'd be right, because we are children of the askaris... now Eritreans should have been, not [only] now, 'privileged', a bit<sup>6</sup>.*

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5 Touching declaration on this point can also be heard from the interviewees in the documentary film by Chiara Ronchini and Lucia Sgueglia (2005).

6 *From the original:* «Perché i nostri genitori hanno parlato sempre bene dell'Italia: quello che [gli Italiani] hanno fatto nei tempi di dominio, che sono entrati in Eritrea... la storia. Adesso che sono grandi i miei figli, tramite la politica ho letto storie, cose che hanno subito gli eritrei: sono storie un po' brutte. Però [i nostri genitori] non ce l'hanno tramandate. Le cose brutte non le raccontano. [...] I miei zii e mio papà hanno combattuto in Libia, erano ascari. [...] Quindi hanno sempre raccontato bene degli italiani. Invece, se vai a vedere la storia, quello che

In these few lines, Olga gives us important insights into the history and the modalities of the representation of Italian colonialism among the Eritrean women I interviewed.

First of all, she refers to the fact that, during the period of the interviewees' youth, the older generation, those who experienced the Italian colonial time directly (especially in the case of ex-*askaris*) were the main and only source of stories about, and impressions of, Italians. She stresses the importance of this 'filtration' of information which the older generation made with the clear aim of giving a positive depiction of Italians, and of infusing conciliatory attitudes in the new generations towards the colonial past<sup>7</sup>. Their aim has to be understood, in Olga's view, as in line with the traditionally conciliatory character of historical transmission between generations in Eritrea, which often took the shape of oral storytelling<sup>8</sup>. It is also true, however, that this can be also explained as historically contextualized in the specific political conditions of the 1950s, when Eritrea was under the British protectorate, towards which the ties with Italy were emphasised in anti-British feelings.

Interestingly, Olga also says that she came to know the 'actual truth' about the Italian domination only later, in Rome, where she became involved in Eritrea's liberation movement with the ELF. Indeed Eritrean political groups, in the diasporic locations of their struggles, used to organize several educational activities for their members which included lessons on Eritrea's history. In fact, Eritreans of Olga's generation were generally unaware of their historical past of domination. This was in part due to the fact that the Ethiopian King Hailé Selassie strategically censored schoolbooks containing critical accounts of the previous regimes (Italy, UK) in order to disfavour the nourishing of a pro-independence consciousness among Eritreans.

Finally, I would like to stress the politicised character of her tone when talking about the importance of Eritreans' historical consciousness. In so doing, she is also making use of those self-victimising representations, such as those of Eritreans' enduring sufferance and submission, which are frequently used by politicised people in order to express grief towards the successive occupiers of their country, Italians, British and Ethiopians altogether. Yet, out of these feelings, she concludes that Italy must acknowledge a 'privileged status' for Eritreans of today, recognising the sacrifice of their ancestors fighting as *askaris* next to the Italians.

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scrivono i politici - che hanno studiato la politica, che hanno seguito gli eritrei - ci sono tanti [Eritrei] che hanno subito. Hanno subito gli eritrei. E continuiamo a subire, come eritrei. Com'è giusto, perché siamo figli degli ascari... adesso gli eritrei dovevano essere, non [solo] adesso, 'privilegiati', un pochino».

7 See chapter three for a discussion on Italian domination as 'human face colonialism' and of Italians as 'good fellas' (*brava gente*).

8 In the Eritrean traditional culture, *orality* is very important for the transmission of common past history. On such a traditional form of oral communication, which is called *Aulò*, one can read the book by Ribka Sibhatu (1998) and Sandra Ponzanesi's analysis of it (2004).

Olga's ambivalence between resentment and privilege reveals, in my view, the tensions which are present in these women's bonds with Italy: the desire to participate in Eritrea's new national identity, at least as diasporic members, is painfully in contrast with a colonial history with which, however, they need to reconcile after living in Italy for so many years.

### 3. THE CASE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

The Togolese Kayissan Dravie-Houenassou-Houangb (1988) analysed the influence of colonial educational systems on the pre-existing mindset and cultural traditions of the colonised, taking the case of East African countries under French domination. What she demonstrates is the colonisers' attempt to 'destroy the African soul' as a tool to implement 'modern education' in their colonies. From this perspective, she questions the teaching of the ideal of French superiority as it was conveyed to African children. Out of her own experience in Togo, she remembers that: «When, as a child, I started school, they taught us that our ancestors were the Gauls. A statement in which we firmly believed...»<sup>9</sup>. In line with this quote, in these pages I would like to analyse the paradoxes and the contradictions conveyed by a European acculturation for colonial subjects in Eritrea and Surinamese.

I will analyse Eritrean and Surinamese schoolgirls' performance of 'Italian and Dutch cultures', i.e. the absorption of practices they saw as 'imported' from Italy or the Netherlands. In my view, these practices promoted an emotional attachment to the colonisers' identity, while the schools functioned as specific 'places' for cultural collective performances. Thus, I aim to demonstrate how schools had a crucial role in the supremacist character of the relation between colonizers and colonized, as it was experienced by the interviewees.

In my view, however, thanks to various forms of resistance from local cultures, this westernised education did not succeed in 'destroying the soul', in Dravie's terms, of the colonised. The importance of this cultural resistance emerges also from the interviewees' words, which express those ideals in circulation at the time of national identity movements in Eritrea and Suriname (1950s-1970s).

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9 *My translation from the original*: «Lorsque, enfant, j'avais commencé l'école, on nous apprenait que nos ancêtres étaient les Gaulois. Affirmation à laquelle on croyait fermement...» (Dravie, 1988, p.xi).



FIG.3 Elisabeth I, Roman Catholic School, 5th grade elementary, 1966. The girls did not have to wear uniforms in occasion of their teacher's birthday. (From private collection).

### *Suriname*

The memories and the experiences of the interviewees have to be contextualized within a period of increasing participation of Surinamese youth in schooling<sup>10</sup>. The reform of the schools in 1948 was based on ideals of westernisation and aimed at improving the students' skills in the Dutch language. Most of the interviewees do indeed remember a childhood strongly oriented towards western models, with language having a crucial role. Everything, from books to teachers, compelled them *to be Dutch*<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The percentage of participation in education in 1965 was 33,2%. Moreover, if at the end of the 1940s the city of Paramaribo counted only four Mulo schools, four Ulo and twenty-one Glo schools, in the 1960s there were nine Mulos; six Ulos; fifty-two basis schools (ex-Glo); and moreover forty-two nursery schools (from the *Nationaal Ontwikkelingsplan Suriname* of 1965, cited in Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, pp.457-460). The management of these schools was equally accomplished by the Evangelische Broedergemeente and the Roman Catholic Church. They ran boarding schools and schools at all levels, from elementary to secondary schools. The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, provided the professional education of girls as nurses, childminders and teachers (Bruijning & Voorhoeve, 1977, p. 73).

<sup>11</sup> This aim was often destined to failure from the beginning. Already in the early 1950s Hellinga conducted a first big inquiry on the use of Dutch in Suriname, drawing the following conclusion: «The ideal of the Surinam teacher, who is a civilized Dutch with the civilized European language as its norm, cannot be achieved, not even by the teacher himself. A Surinam Dutch

All the Afro-Surinamese women I interviewed in Rotterdam had at school received a very detailed and pervasive knowledge about the Netherlands. I will show how they tell of learning about cities, streets, islands, houses, and farms. In addition, they learned about cooking and everyday life in the Netherlands. They were also instructed about the climatic conditions and about people's lifestyles. Very importantly, they knew the language and could 'make use' of a number of typical Dutch expressions, as when singing Dutch children's songs.

Ettie was born in 1944, the second of twelve children of a police officer. She left Suriname in 1972. When answering my question: "What did you know about the Netherlands while you were still in Suriname?", she said:

*Yes, a lot. We knew the history of the Netherlands by heart. Even the national anthem with all the couplets! It was more oriented towards the Netherlands also in Suriname – you know? You had to speak Dutch; otherwise, you were slapped if you spoke Surinamese. Eeh...we knew all the history books. So you must learn everything about the Netherlands. Thus you knew the Netherlands well, but you had never been there, as a child<sup>12</sup>*

Ettie's narrative is quite typical: many interviewees told me that they had had the impression that they knew 'everything' about Dutch people, their cities and their houses - from the history of the country to the domestic customs. This detailed and complete knowledge was perceived as compulsory, as a demand from colonial institutions, and especially from the school system. A crucial role was also played by some children's families, who seem to have reinforced the authority of colonisers compelling the children to speak Dutch also at home. This was often the case in middle-class Surinamese families which aspired to an upward class mobility.

Another central aspect of Dutch cultural hegemony in Suriname was the circulation of Dutch school texts and children's books. Reading was considered an important instrument for enhancing one's knowledge of the Dutch language<sup>13</sup>. That is the way Ettie remembers these many books from the time of her childhood:

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with its own structural character has developed itself» (Hellinga, 1955, cited in Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, p.436).

12 *From the original*: « Ja, een heleboel. De geschiedenis van Nederland kenden we op en top. Tot het volkslied met alle coupletten! Het was meer Nederlands georiënteerd ook in Suriname - hè. Je moest Nederlands spreken, anders kreeg je nog een lel om jouw oren als je Surinaams sprak. Eeh...alle geschiedenisboeken kenden we. Dus je moet alles uit Nederland leren. Dus je kende Nederland wel, maar je bent er nooit geweest als kind».

13 Different initiatives were organized such as collection of books by children in the Netherlands which were sent to Suriname. In this period was also inaugurated the idea of the *Bibliobussen* which distributed – and still do – books to children in schools of the interior territories.

*Books? About Dutch books...there was 'Dik Trom'... It was more those books that you get at school, such as 'Jip and Janneke' and 'Toos' and these sorts of things. But not real Surinamese books. [...] The books that we had at school came all from the Netherlands. They were all Dutch books that we got*<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, she points at the fact that the school curricula of this time were largely devoted to the history and geography of the Netherlands, while Suriname or South America remained outside teaching manuals. As I will show in chapter six, this fact will be critically understood by interviewees in their adult life. Moreover, it led to some quite paradoxical situations: Caribbean children who were reading Northern fairy tales<sup>15</sup> about wooden shoes and icy lakes, a scenery difficult to imagine while living in a tropical climate. These paradoxes are often mentioned when Surinamese people describe what their image of the Netherlands had been.

Finally, other cultural practices aimed at infusing into the pupils a sentiment of 'belonging' to a common Dutch national identity were performed in those schools. An example of that is offered by Ton, a woman born in Paramaribo in 1952 who migrated to Rotterdam in 1970. As a child, Ton attended a Christian school. From this time, she remembers the regular taking place of a celebration called the 'flag parade'. On this occasion, children had to sing the Dutch and the Surinamese national anthems together, and give a small donation for needy people in the Netherlands. In her words:

*Every Monday there was the flag parade and we had to stand in a circle. In elementary school, from the first until the sixth class, we had to sing the Dutch national anthem. And they [Dutch children] didn't know it and we did, very well! And then – something I found a bit shitty – we had to sing the Surinamese anthem. [...] Every Monday. And every Monday you had a... On Monday we had to bring to school... a 'Monday-cent'*<sup>16</sup>

I found it very interesting to learn that Surinamese pupils were involved in a collection of money in order to support people in the Netherlands during an emergency (maybe it was first instituted at the big flooding in Zeeland of 1953). The story of the

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14 *From the original:* « Boeken? Als het Nederlandse boeken... was het Dik Trom... En het waren meer die boeken die je op school kreeg van 'Jip en Janneke' en 'Toos' en al dat soort dingen. Maar niet echt Surinaamse boeken. [...] De boeken die wij ook op school kregen, die kwamen allemaal uit Nederland. Dat waren allemaal Nederlandse boeken die wij hadden».

15 A collection of traditional Dutch fairy tales can be found in *Dutch fairy tales for young folks* by William E. Griffis (1919, reprinted in 2005).

16 *From the original:* «Iedere maandag was het vlaggenparade en dan moesten we in een kring gaan staan. De lagere school, vanaf de eerste tot de zesde, moesten we het Nederlandse volkslied zingen. En dan wisten hun [Nederlandse kinderen] het niet en dan wisten wij het wel. En daarna - en dat vond ik een beetje lullig - en daarna moesten we het Surinaams volkslied zingen.[...] Elke maandag. En elke maandag had je een... Moesten 's maandags naar school brengen... een 'maandagcent'».

'Monday-cent' offers us an example of a collective cultural practice performed in the school as a space of acculturation. One can find therein the confirmation of school education contributing to the formation of an 'emotional investment' (Yuval-Davis, 2006a) in the colonisers' cultural identity, and of a sentiment of affiliation to it.

These interviews also show, however, the paradoxical character of some of these practices. Examples are the complaint made by Ettie about the fact that they read only texts about the Netherlands, and not about Suriname; or Ton's judgement about the singing of Dutch and Surinamese songs together in the flag-parade as 'shitty'; and again, Ton's remark that Surinamese children probably knew Dutch songs better than Dutch children did.

In order to give a background to those statements, one has to consider that a political reaction to the top-down importation of Dutch culture was spreading during the years of these women's youth. A movement of cultural nationalism was indeed developing in Suriname, firstly and most intensively in the Afro-Surinamese entourage. The main element of such a movement revolved around the issue of language with some Afro-Surinamese intellectuals promoting Sranan as the ideal language to express Surinamese people's identity. These ideas had importantly been influenced by Julius G. A. Koenders<sup>17</sup> who argued, in particular, that schools were responsible, together with European religious missions, for having cultivated a sense of inferiority in Surinamese people. In his view, the school system, as far as it «taught blacks to reject their language and culture», had major responsibilities in reinforcing these sentiments (Koenders 1972, cited in Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, p.417). The excerpts from the interviews of Ettie and Ton introduce us to this theme of inferiority and colonial hierarchy, which I will later fully develop in chapter six.

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17 During his life (1886-1957), Koenders put enormous effort in promoting the use of Sranan, in particular on the pages of the monthly review *Foetoe-boi*. He was arguing for the beauty of this language, which he used for the first translations of poems, Dutch children songs and Christmas carols.

## Eritrea

Differently to what had happened in other colonial regimes<sup>18</sup>, colonisers' schooling in Eritrea was never not directed to 'indigenous' children<sup>19</sup>. In fact, Eritrean children had been excluded from education until 1934 and, even then, they could not study past the fourth grade (Negash, 1990, 2005; Milkias 2006). However, if we look at the period *after* the Italian colonisation, from the end of the Second World War onwards, one can see that the number of Eritrean pupils in the Italian schools of Asmara gradually increased<sup>20</sup>. Their enrolment in these schools can be seen as a consequence of the hegemonic character of the surviving Italian socio-economic and cultural presence in the city of Asmara<sup>21</sup>. Here I will show what it meant for these Eritrean students to participate in an education that was *not* designed for them, but for their Italian classmates, being mainly based on the transmission of Italian patriotism and cultural heritage to the children of the Italian community in Asmara<sup>22</sup>. I will contend that one

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18 In Suriname, for instance, school education became compulsory for local children from seven till twelve years of age in 1876, in the aftermath of the end of slavery (Bruining & Voorhoeve, 1977, p. 442). For different colonial educational policies see the classic work by Martin Carnoy (1974). For the British policy in India see Gauri Viswanathan (1989); for the French in West Africa see Kayissan Dravie-Houenassou-Houangb (1988); for the Belgian case see A. Boone and M. Depaep (1996). For a specific gendered approach see Joyce Goodman and Jane Martin (2002).

19 During the colonial time, Italian schools in Eritrea had rather the following functions: to support Italian Catholic evangelism (Bottaro, 2003; Marongiu Buonaiuti, 1982); to shelter Italo-Eritrean children abandoned because of Mussolini's Racial Laws (Barrera, 2005a); or finally to educate the children of Italian colonial settlers and officers (Floriani, 1974).

20 Italian schools in Asmara were: religious elementary schools run by the Daughters of Saint Anna from 1895, by the Combonian Sisters Pia della Nigrizia from 1938 and by the La Salle Christian Brothers from 1938. Moreover the British 'Daniele Comboni' school was running an Italian section from the end of the 40s. Moreover, there were the Ursulines' boarding school for girls from 1949; and, finally, the State Italian Schools, which were going from elementary until high school with specializations in accountancy, surveying, trade and science (Bottaro, 2003; Suore Orsoline, 1989).

21 In Ghidei and Marchetti (2009, forthcoming) we discuss in more detail the reasons for this increase of Eritrean children's enrolment. One reason is found in the general rise in schooling for Eritrean children under the British protectorate and the Ethiopian federal administration. Another reason was the presence of Italian firms, factories, banks, missions, shops, and trade companies which made it important to provide children with Italian language skills. Moreover, in some cases, Italian or Italo-Eritrean adults in the family might have pushed for a cultural *italianisation* of the children.

22 The education of European children growing up in the colonies had been indeed a major concern throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An example of it is discussed by Ann Stoler with reference to the case of Dutch children raised in nurseries and Christian schools in the East Indies (Stoler, 2002).

can consider the experience of those Eritrean children as a witness of Italy's surviving colonial power and, thus, as an example of colonial acculturation for prospective migrants.



FIG.4 Saint Anna Institute, 3rd grade elementary school, 1958.  
(From *Il Chichingiolò* website)

First of all, the narratives of the interviewees illustrate the importance of the imposition of the colonisers' culture as a model, as what Homi Bhabha calls 'authority' (Bhabha, 1994). Indeed, at the Italian schools of Asmara, the feeling that things were done 'as in Italy' was transmitted to children and their families. These schools were understood to be places where a 'perfect Italian' education was provided, where one could learn about Italy and its culture. Luam, born in Asmara in 1946, attended the Italian State schools from the primary to the high school level. She explains:

*Everything was under the supervision of the Italian consul. [...] The books came from Italy. It was a good school, you know. [...]*

***So, did you study in Italian?***

*Yes. Everything in Italian and then there was also the Ethiopian language, which was like here [in Italy] with English: two hours a week.*

***And the textbooks, were they Italian?***

*[...] Yes, geography, history, sciences, everything in Italian. There were teachers from Italy, all Italian teachers. My husband attended the Scientific High School. He was the best in his class. There was the Scientific school,*

*the school for surveyors...There was the Italian culture, exactly perfectly Italian*<sup>23</sup>

From this statement, different ideas concerning Luam's experience of an *italianised* acculturation can be drawn. In particular, drawing on her statement «There was the Italian culture, exactly perfectly Italian» and from her emphasis on the fact that books and teachers «came from Italy», I want to stress the fact that the schools in Asmara aimed at a faithfulness to the 'authority' of Italian culture and language. For people like Luam, this truthfulness to Italian 'authority' is also the ground for their feelings of 'belonging' to and participating in Italy's culture.

Moreover, as I have shown in the case of Suriname, Italian schools and boarding schools also had the function of a social and cultural space where the performative dimension of belonging and attachment was deployed. A practice which was surely working towards the formation of these feeling was the performance of Italian patriotic and imperialist songs. The first example is offered again by Luam, with reference to the fact that, again during the 1950s, Italian teachers forced students into a rigid discipline, asking them to sing the Italian national anthem, every morning. Luam again:

*They even made us sing the Italian anthem! If you did not sing the Italian anthem, you could not go in. In the morning, one had to sing the anthem first, and then go in.*

***Every morning?!***

*[Laughing:] Every morning!*<sup>24</sup>

Another example of a cultural practice which was experienced as the replication of an 'Italian model' is offered by Luisa, a woman born in Eritrea in 1962, who attended an Italian boarding school, run by the Ursuline nuns, between the ages of 11 and 14. Luisa's narrative illustrates the spontaneous circulation of different Italian songs that teenagers sang at school, during the sixties and seventies. These were patriotic strains, such as the *Leggenda del Piave* (*The Legend of Piave*) which celebrated the sacrifice of Italian soldiers against Austrians in the First World War; Italian Partisan songs, such as *Bella Ciao*, which accompanied the Resistance against the German occupation in the Second World War; and lastly imperial songs, such as *Faccetta nera*, *bell'Abissina*

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23 *From the original:* «Sono organizzate dal console italiano. [...] I libri venivano dall'Italia. Era una buona scuola guarda. [...] / **E voi studiavate quindi in lingua italiana?** / Sì. Noi studiavamo in lingua italiana e la lingua etiopica veniva come qui un'ora di inglese o un'ora di tedesco. Così la nostra lingua veniva. / **E i libri erano quelli italiani?!** / [...] Sì, la geografia, la storia, le scienze, tutto in italiano. C'erano i professori che venivano dall'Italia, tutti professori Italiani. Mio marito ha fatto il liceo. Era il più bravo della classe. C'era il liceo, c'erano i geometri... C'era la cultura italiana, proprio italiana perfetta».

24 *From the original:* «Anzi ci facevano cantare l'inno italiano! Se non cantavi l'inno italiano, non entravi. La mattina, dovevi prima cantare l'inno e poi entravi. / **Tutte le mattine?!** / *[Ridendo:] Tutte le mattine.*».

(*Black face, beautiful Abyssinian girl*) which Italian troops sang when invading Ethiopia in 1936. From the interview with Luisa:

*And then there were the [Italian] Partisan songs which we used to sing at boarding school. So about the Germans: "Mamma mia, they are fascists!". At that time I was scared of Germany! [Laughing:] We used to say: "They are terrible". Prejudices<sup>25</sup>.*

***So, you were singing Italian Partisan songs against the Germans. But didn't you sing songs by Eritreans against Italians<sup>26</sup>?!***

*No, no. [Pause] The only thing was this "Faccetta nera bell'Abissina". Which we did not sing 'really'. Instead, we sang dirty 'drinking songs' at boarding school. Those were terrible! I can't tell you them now! [Laughs]<sup>27</sup>*

The narratives from Luisa and Luam powerfully illustrate different elements of the ambiguity affecting the *translation* of the colonisers' culture to the colonies<sup>28</sup>. At first, the use and interpretation of Italian patriotic and imperialist songs can be seen as part of the deep 'colonisation of the imagination' to which Eritrean children were exposed in an Italian-dominated environment. Interestingly, this colonial acculturation entailed the absorption of negative 'othering' stereotypes which constituted Italian national identity, but are far from Eritrean direct experience. In this light I see the paradox that Germans were feared as ferocious 'fascists' («about the Germans: "Mamma mia, these are fascists!"»), while Italians were not an object of equal stereotyping despite having been equal perpetrators of cruelties, especially in the course of their colonial expansion in Eritrea itself.

Moreover, Luisa and Luam point to the contradictions of their inclusion in this type of cultural environment as, today, they both try to show also the ironic side of the rituals they were taking part in. A mix of comic and bitter tones accompanies their words: Luam now finds the compulsive celebration of Italian patriotism ridiculous, while Luisa is critical about the passive absorption of stereotypes and models she was exposed to, as a little Eritrean girl.

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25 In English in the original.

26 None of the interviewees knew about any Eritrean resistance song against Italians.

27 *From the original:* «E poi c'erano le canzoni dei Partigiani che si cantavano nel collegio. Allora i tedeschi: "Mamma mia, sono dei fascisti!". Allora della Germania avevo paura! [Ridendo:] Dicevamo: "Quelli là sono terribili". *Prejudices. / Quindi voi cantavate le canzoni dei Partigiani degli italiani contro i tedeschi. E non cantavate, che ne so, le canzoni degli eritrei contro gli italiani?! /* No no. [Pausa] L'unica cosa era la "Faccetta nera bell'abissina". Che non si cantava 'veramente'. Invece le canzoni porche delle osterie [le] cantavamo in collegio. Erano terribili! Non te le dico che perché altrimenti! [Ride]».

28 In Ghiddey and Marchetti (2009, forthcoming) we illustrate the question of *colonial ambivalence* as defined by Homi Bhabha, based on Walter Benjamin's concept of *translation* (Bhabha, 1994).

These types of narrative which point at paradoxes and contradictions can be seen, I contend, as a way of resisting the frustration that, despite their good education and strong *italianisation*, a destiny of segregation in the lower strata of Italian society was awaiting them. It is indeed true that their later social position in Italy was fundamentally based on the non-recognition of the cultural capital that Luam and Luisa accumulated in their years of study.

This argument will be fully developed in chapter six, where I will show in more detail how the easy forgetfulness of Italians towards their colonial past erased the peculiarities of the bond between Italy and Eritrea. It is also the case that, often, the narratives of the participants, stressing the complexity of the process of inclusion in which they participated, attempt to heal this erasure.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter, together with the next, is dedicated to memories of the interviewees' childhood and youth in order to explore the question of 'colonial acculturation' and sentiments of 'belonging'. These are, I believe, very important aspects of postcolonial migrant workers' cultural identity, with relation to the country of their prospective migration. In this light, citing various examples, I aimed to show the roots of an 'emotional investment' (Yuval-Davis, 2006a) towards the colonisers' cultural identity, a phenomenon which I will later demonstrate to be exceedingly relevant in the experience of migrant domestic workers as postcolonial subjects.

First of all, I have demonstrated that interviewees' narratives contain a series of powerful *images* which are the basis on which their 'belonging' to the colonisers' culture has been built. In the case of Surinamese women, these images present a conception of the relationship with the colonisers which I see, borrowing from Anderson, as related to the formation of an 'imagined community'. In this case, the sentiment of community does not only apply to the formation of one's national identity, but, I argue, also to the case of cultural participation by the colonised in the coloniser's national culture, thus shaping the relationship between centre and periphery in post-coloniality. As I have shown, this sentiment emerges for instance in the Suriname's idea of 'unity', for instance when they recount that all the parts of the Dutch colonial empire were one big nation divided by a 'river' (the Atlantic Ocean). In the case of Eritrean interviewees, the question of belonging and cultural participation is articulated around the idea of a privileged 'bond', rather than around the idea of commonality. In other words, I see the emergence of an intrinsic hierarchy between Italian colonisers and Eritrean colonised, which is not mentioned by Surinamese who seem to put greater emphasis on the equality and commonality of a shared cultural identity (e.g. language). This difference between the two groups' narratives will be a matter

of discussion in the following chapters as it affects their different conceptions of the relationship with the employers at the workplace.

Secondly, I have discussed the case of school education in order to explore the importance of *practices* which demonstrate the performative dimension of what I call 'colonial acculturation'. When telling stories about their childhood in school settings, interviewees reveal what Homi Bhabha calls 'colonial ambivalence'. Indeed, both in the case of Afro-Surinamese and Eritreans, I found interesting examples of cultural performances during which they appropriated Dutch or Italian cultural items (songs, children stories, novels, magazines, etc.) and, at the same time, changed them. These moments are taken here as being revelatory of the tensions affecting their participation in the colonisers' cultural hegemony.

In conclusion, this chapter, together with the next, prepares the discussion on the questions of inferiority and colonial hierarchy which I will later fully develop in chapter six, and which will be the common thread through the last part of this dissertation. At the same time, in this chapter I also wanted to show the life stage in which interviewees accumulated a cultural expertise (knowledge and language skills above all) which, I contend, typifies postcolonial migrants. This, as I will show in chapter six, explains their frustration when this expertise is eventually unrecognised, and they thus are relegated to the lower strata of the colonisers' societies 'like any other foreigner'.

## Chapter 5

### PARAMARIBO AND ASMARA AS CULTURE-CONTACT ZONES

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Both Paramaribo and Asmara were cities where language, culture, food, religion, music, and education were all important elements of a European colonial presence, during the time of the participants' youth. Moreover, different urban premises testified to the colonizers' architectural and infrastructural influence on these towns<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, I see Asmara and Paramaribo as what Anthony King calls «cities in colonized societies and territories», located at the periphery of empires and which «carried the core [imperial] cultures to other peoples» (King, 1990, p.20). From this perspective, I would like to continue my discussion on the issue of 'colonial acculturation' from the previous chapter, focusing on how Italian and Dutch cultures were circulating in these cities and thus were accessible to the colonised population. This circulation was regulated in different ways by the colonial institutions and by the 'white elites', with the purpose of maintaining and reinforcing colonial legacies. My argument here is based on the definition of these cities' urban spaces as 'culture-contact zones' (Pratt, 1992), as zones in which the access, absorption, modification and exchange of cultures between colonised and colonisers took place. In these cities indeed several places - not only schools, factories and households, but also offices and leisure facilities such as bars, cinemas, theatres, and shops - can be seen as the location for what I will call a 'hierarchical cultural contamination'. This is, in my view, a 'contamination' that takes place between subjects in asymmetrical power positions, when the absorption of one's practices as a *model* carries a normative implication, i.e. its reputation for being 'the best'.

My aim here is to shed a new light on the issue of the formation of postcolonial identities starting from the analysis of the spatial organisation and social stratification of Paramaribo and Asmara between 1945 and 1975. In the following pages, I will demonstrate that these cities conveyed hierarchies which divided, metaphorically and/or physically, their population along the lines of skin colour, 'racial'/ethnic backgrounds, religion, class, etc. I will discuss, in particular, the major divide 'crossing' these cities: the one between white European colonizers and darker skinned 'indigenous' or (formerly) enslaved populations. In this respect, Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women's

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1 An example of what King calls a 'dependent urbanization' model (King, 1990, p.20) can be found in the development of modernist architecture in Asmara's urban expansion during the 1930s (see Gaddi, 2003; Lo Sardo, 1995; Fuller, 2007). This 'dependency' is confirmed as well by the fact that Asmara still today is called 'the second Rome', recuperating the Fascist rhetoric emphasizing Mussolini's wish to turn the Eritrean capital into a 'miniature' of Rome.

narratives offer a personal perspective on the fact that, in colonial cities, 'racial'/ethnic hierarchies had a prominent role and articulated the 'symbolical structure' of the relationship between the white elite and local population. This is in line with Anthony King's observation that «the distinctive social characteristic of the colonial city [...] is that of race» (King, 1990, p.34. *Emphasis added*). In this perspective, I will show how 'racial' boundaries were differently shaped in the two cities of Paramaribo and Asmara, depending on the different configuration of the boundaries between colonised and colonisers, and how these were designed and maintained by different groups and institutions.

For Anthony King, 'racial'/ethnic tensions at the urban level can take two forms: either a rigid 'spatial segregation', which corresponds to the clear imposition of social urban divisions; or a 'physical propinquity', which corresponds to the absence of such an explicit imposition. However, as King specifies, this is a distinction which should not lead us to believe that without 'urban division' a form of separation cannot still be at play. In fact, it can be the case that in some societies these divisions are already clear, without the need for top-down intervention, because «everyone knows their place», as King says (p.37). In the following pages, I will show how the urban division, in the form of segregation and propinquity, was differently experienced by the interviewees during their youth in Paramaribo and in Asmara.

In order to do so, I will first analyse the phenomenon of spatial separation between Hollanders and the rest of the population in Paramaribo, which was due not to segregationist impositions, but to voluntary divides based on class and social status. This will also sketch the context of the survival of service work performed by the formerly enslaved population. Secondly, I will show how, in Paramaribo, the Afro-Surinamese looked at the Dutch life-style as a model for consumption practices, within a process of 'hierarchical cultural contamination'. Then, I will shift my focus to Asmara and explore, in the third paragraph, how the neighbourhood and family circles are often remembered as the location of 'contacts' between Italians and Eritreans. In the fourth paragraph, I will demonstrate how Eritreans' impression of closeness and vicinity with Italians was still affected by fundamental boundaries of class and 'race'/ethnic differences which created an unavoidable distance between the two groups. This scenario is discussed here in order to illustrate the introjection of black-white divides and of inferiority feelings on the side of postcolonial subjects, which emerged to be very relevant in the experience of the migrant domestic workers I interviewed.

Moreover, the final part of this chapter explores how cultural contamination was conveyed by mass and popular culture, in the colonial cities. I have already demonstrated in the previous chapter that people in Paramaribo and Asmara were involved in some forms of 'culture-contact' when participating in the same religion and school system, speaking and understanding the same language, and being informed about the colonisers' history, geography and culture. In this chapter, I will illustrate another aspect of this phenomenon, in a comparative section dedicated to Eritrean and Afro-

Surinamese ways of 'consumption' of colonisers' cultural items like films, music, books and magazines. Music, women's press and films will emerge as important elements of 'contact' between colonisers and colonised, which played an important role in the formation of interviewees' feelings of participation in Italian and Dutch cultures.

## 1. SEPARATION AND SURVIVAL OF DOMESTIC SLAVERY

Remembering their life in Paramaribo, interviewees tell how although the opportunities for contact between the different ethnic groups were many, the white people<sup>2</sup> preferred to conduct a separate life. They lived in their own parts of town<sup>3</sup>, in residential areas, and did not share much with the rest of the population. It seems indeed that contact with Hollanders and the other whites used to happen only at school or at the workplace, since they seem to have avoided socialising with the Surinamese. During the interview with Hortencia, the separation between Hollanders, in particular, and Afro-Surinamese was explained in the following way:

*You came in contact with them [Hollanders] during work. But then everyone went their way. Also, they lived in different neighbourhoods. The contact with them was normal. In Suriname there is not racial division<sup>4</sup>*

Many interviewees remember the tendency of Dutch people to live in their own neighbourhoods, which are described as separated areas. Georgina remembers:

*[Loud voice] Hollanders have their own neighbourhoods in Suriname. It is not that they live separately, because the blacks 'cannot' go there – absolutely not. Hollanders live apart because they are rich people<sup>5</sup>*

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2 The white people (*de blanken*) living in Suriname at that time were the descendants of the Dutch (*Hollanders*), the Portuguese and Spanish Jews, the Germans, the Anglo-Americans, the French Huguenots who settled in Suriname. The Portuguese and Spanish Jews had their farms in the interior of the country, together with the Dutch coming from the area of Groningen and Gelderland (known as *boeroes*). The other Europeans and Northern Americans, instead, were usually living in the area of Paramaribo.

3 Interviewees are probably talking about the neighbourhoods of *Zorg en Hoop*, *Kersten Project*, or the town called *Moengo*.

4 *From the original*: «Je kwam wel met ze in contact tijdens werk. Maar verder ging ieder zijn weg. Zij woonden ook in andere wijken. Je had wel gewoon contact met ze. Je hebt in Suriname geen rassenscheiding».

5 *From the original*: «[Harde stem]. Hollanders hebben eigen wijken in Suriname. Niet dat ze apart gaan wonen, omdat de zwarten niet daar mogen komen - absoluut niet. Hollanders wonen apart omdat ze rijkelui zijn».

It is important to notice that the interviewees do *not* see this separation as based on 'racial'/ethnic differences (*Hortencia*: «In Suriname you don't have racial division»), while they mention, instead, income and class as the reason for this separation (*Georgina*: «Hollanders live apart because they are rich»). In so doing, they try to emphasise the fact that in Paramaribo there was not a law dividing the city into separate areas, nor was there a division at work, school or in public places. They want to clarify that in Suriname there was not a regime of racial apartheid against blacks, as was the case in other parts of the world, during the same decades.

Yet, they recognise that the urban divisions were due to the different *class status* of Hollanders in comparison with the rest of the population. Ton says, for example:

*And the Hollanders who were there, they immediately created some sort of village. There [Afro-Surinamese] women went to work, iron, cook, everything. And they [Hollanders] were lying next to the swimming pool. [...] Everything was separate: swimming pools, houses... just like a village*<sup>6</sup>

Hollanders' higher incomes and their luxurious lifestyle were the most evident markers of their being the colonisers, the white elite, and of the fact that the others were in a relatively inferior position. This hierarchical difference in class status should not, however, be taken as isolated from the difference of 'race'/ethnicity among the population of Paramaribo. It is indeed the interweaving of these boundaries which, as Guno Jones (2000) demonstrated for the case of white people in Suriname, shaped the inter-group relationships in Paramaribo.

I would like to draw attention here, in particular, to the fact that the difference in status between Hollanders and Afro-Surinamese is associated, in the narratives of several interviewees, to the fact that black girls used to work as service personnel in rich Hollanders' villas. Because of their specific working function, these girls seem to have been among the few Afro-Surinamese allowed to cross the symbolic and spatial boundary between blacks and whites in Paramaribo. Let us see how some of the interviewees describe the situation. In the words of Monique:

*Then there was someone working in the house... a gardener, a domestic. Someone taking care of the children. My sister was working for one of these ladies*<sup>7</sup>

And again in the words of Georgina, who was personally working in one of those houses as caretaker, during her youth:

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6 *From the original*: «En Hollanders had je daar, dan had je zo een dorp. Dan gingen die vrouwen daar werken, strijken, koken, van alles. En hun [zij] lagen bij het zwembad [...] Hun [zij] hadden alles apart, zwembad apart, huizen... net een dorp».

7 *From the original*: «Dan had je dan zo een iemand die bij je thuis werkte... een tuinman, een huishoudster. Iemand die voor de kinderen zorgde. En mijn zus die werkte bij zo een mevrouw».

*They have big houses, they have cleaning ladies, they have babysitters. And the black people work for them – not as slaves, absolutely not – but simply as domestics, helpers in the house work, ironers, nannies, playing with the children...<sup>8</sup>*

I find it very significant that Afro-Surinamese interviewees remember that it was common practice for women from their ethnic group to be in charge of service work for the whites in Paramaribo. Also important is the fact that Georgina and Monique experienced, in a more or less direct way, ‘contact’ with Hollanders *through* service work. Thus, Georgina’s and Monique’s comments raise for me the question of how much from domestic slavery had been inherited in Paramaribo’s everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s – when enslaved Afro-Surinamese women largely exploited in Dutch masters’ households. This question is in line with analysis carried out by authors such as Phyllis Palmer (1983, 1989), Judith Rollins (1985) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1996) of the paid domestic work performed by black women in previously slavery-based societies. Taking the case of today’s United States, they argue that important elements of continuity with the slavery system can be found there, especially concerning black-white female models and the reproduction of ‘racially’/ethnically based social stratification.

It is worth mentioning that one may take as a sign of dissonance from my interpretation the fact that Georgina disagrees with an easy association between slavery and domestic work as it was performed in the city of Paramaribo. In the previously cited excerpt, she states: «black people go to work for them - not as slaves, absolutely not – but simply as domestics». That is a very interesting point which cannot however be considered separately from the whole interview with Georgina. For this reason, I will come back to it in the second part of the dissertation, when I will provide an analysis based on a comparison between her memories of Paramaribo and her later working experience in the Netherlands.

For now I would conclude by saying that the colonial situation in which the interviewees grew up, in the city of Paramaribo, presented a series of elements which, with different intensities, testified a *continuity* with the old colonial regime. One of these elements is the reproduction of colonial *domesticity* and *subservience* which entailed the delegation of household tasks to people belonging to specific social positions from a class, gender and ‘racial’/ethnic point of view, an issue which will emerge in its crucial role in the second part of this dissertation.

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8 *From the original:* «Ze hebben grote huizen, ze hebben dienstmeisjes, ze hebben oppassen. En de zwarte mensen gaan bij hun werken - niet als slaven, absoluut niet - maar gewoon als hulp meisje, hulp in de huishouding, strijkster, kindmeisje, met de kinderen spelen».



FIG.5 Schoolgirls at a religious hallelujah meeting, 1963. (From private collection).

## 2. A HIERARCHICAL CULTURAL CONTAMINATION

Hollanders are often described by interviewees as *just* one of the many groups inhabiting Suriname<sup>9</sup>. In my view, however, despite the changes since the time of slavery and the plantation economy, colonial kinds of hierarchies between these groups were strongly at play, with the white Europeans holding the higher position. At the cultural level, Dutch predominance was strengthened by the process of *netherlandisation* of Surinamese society, which I illustrated in chapter four.

I believe that, taking into consideration the words of the interviewees, such a predominance emerges in their description of the Dutch people's lifestyle as a model for the construction of national identity, and for the spreading of western manners, in the context of postcoloniality. For example, Raurette, a woman born in Paramaribo in 1941 remembers:

*The Dutch that, for example, were in Suriname decorated their houses in the Dutch way: with enormous orange things. Orange things*<sup>10</sup>

From this excerpt one can understand that Hollanders were seen as *models* of Dutch patriotism, for their use of the orange national colour - as is commonly done in the Netherlands - when they exposed orange flags or other orange decorations on

9 One has to consider, indeed, that in the 1960s, when the total population of Paramaribo's District was of approximately 102.000 people, only the 6% of the population had an European or Anglo-American background, while the 60% of the inhabitants were Afro-Surinamese (Brujning & Voorhoeve, 1977, pp. 464-468).

10 *From the original*: «De Nederlanders die bijvoorbeeld in Suriname waren die richtten hun huis in op de Nederlandse manier: enorme oranje dingen. Oranje dingen».

national bank holidays. In so doing, Hollanders not only reinforced their *difference* from the local population, but they also offered them an example of the 'Dutch way' of doing things. The exposure to such a model can be seen as one more aspect of the construction of a sentiment of 'belonging' to the Dutch nation that I illustrated in chapter four.

Secondly, I further argue that the Surinamese were exposed to a 'hierarchical cultural contamination' at the level of *consumption models*, which here I mean as an ensemble of cultural practices. The presence of Hollanders in Paramaribo had indeed propelled the local production of typically Dutch vegetables and the import of items from the Netherlands. Thus several people in Paramaribo used to buy or to order for importation Dutch items, such as food, clothing and furniture, which were then made available to the rest of the population. Interviewees' narratives regarding these items offer, in my view, a description of specific culture-contact situations.

The first example of such a narrative is offered by Sylvia who was born in 1932 and migrated to the Netherlands in 1962. Her case is interesting because Sylvia's father was an Afro-Surinamese man who had been raised by a white Dutch family as a foster child. In order to explain how strong the process of *netherlandisation* in her family was, Sylvia explains that for her parents' wedding most of the furniture came from Holland:

*Because when my mother married my father, then also stuff came from the Netherlands. Closets. Dressers and all those things. Yes.*

***For clothing or what for?***

*Yes closets. And table covers. And bed sheets. Cutlery. You know? Plates and so forth<sup>11</sup>*

As Anne McClintock (1995) and Alison Blunt (1999) demonstrated for British colonies, the import of European habits and items for domestic life had a great value in the general mission of civilising which colonisers embraced. Following them I also see, in the arrival, described by Sylvia, of specific *domestic* objects – such as bed sheets, kitchen items and covers – proof that the Netherlands were considered by Afro-Surinamese interviewees as, quite literally, the *source* of a civilised and a modern lifestyle.

On the same issue, I would like to quote Raurette again, when she talks about some eating habits that they learned from the Dutch, at that time. She says:

*We also started eating potatoes. And sauerkraut is something from... sauerkraut is something from the Netherlands... The fact that we [started to eat] sauerkraut, brown beans and those things, is really something. It was*

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11 *From the original*: «Want toen mijn moeder ging trouwen met mijn vader, toen zijn er ook allemaal spullen van Holland gekomen. Kasten. Dressoir en al die dingen. Ja / **Voor kleding of waarvoor?** / Ja kasten. En tafellakens. Beddenlakens. Bestek. Weet je wel? Borden en zo».

growing, so we were also eating them. And when I arrived here I could say: “Oh, sauerkraut”. Yes... [and] eating potatoes.

**But what did it mean to eat potatoes, at that time?**

[...] Well, it was something from the Netherlands. But it was more expensive. It was just showing off, [like] doing something chic<sup>12</sup>

Eating and consuming practices are understood as very significant by Raurette herself. Eating sauerkraut, potatoes and beans is not mentioned by her as tasty or convenient, but rather as a *model* of what colonisers liked, and therefore as something to imitate, learn and appropriate. In her narrative, she tries to recuperate as western elements some ingredients (potatoes, beans, etc.) which had already been incorporated and modified by the local Suriname cooking style, but which she interestingly presents as a symbol of the cultural influx of Dutch traditions on her everyday life.

Moreover, it is interesting to note, in my view, how Raurette’s narrative associates the learning of these customs with her feelings after arriving in the Netherlands. The sauerkraut she used to eat in Paramaribo acquires a new symbolic resonance once the connection is made with her new life in the Netherlands. Accordingly, this excerpt supports my argument that postcolonial migrants assign great value to their pre-migratory life, and especially to its cultural dimension, as a preparatory stage to their experiences after migration. The examples here offered by Raurette and Sylvia tell us about the crucial role of the pre-migratory contact with Hollanders and of their process of ‘colonial acculturation’ in their migratory trajectory. This not only offered them access to certain practices, but it also taught them the *hierarchies* that they would later need to reproduce in their relationships with the dominant group (the white Dutch), in the social, cultural and working life in Rotterdam.

### 3. SPATIAL PROPINQUITY AND CULTURES

During the years of the Eritrean interviewees’ youth, with Racial Laws no longer effective, Eritreans and Italians lived side by side in Asmara. Many interviewees remember conversations and common activities as occasions of cultural exchange between the two groups. The following quotes will illustrate some features of these ‘contact’ moments which serve to explore the question of ‘spatial propinquity’ and racial divides, and to put them in connection with the question of ‘hierarchical cultural contacts’.

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12 *From the original:* «Wij ook de aardappelen gingen eten. En zuurkool is iets van... zuurkool is iets van Nederland... Dat wij de zuurkool, de bruine bonen en die dingen [gingen eten] is echt iets. Het groeit, dat, dus dat ze gingen wij ook [eten]. En toen ik hier kwam kon ik zeggen “Oh zuurkool”. Ja... aardappelen eten. / **Maar wat betekende het dan om in die tijd aardappelen te eten?** / [...] Nou, het komt uit Nederland. Maar het was duurder. Het is gewoon sjiek hoor, sjiek doen».

Following on from the idea of spatial propinquity, I noticed that *neighbourhoods* seem to have been the spontaneous location for most of these contacts. Indeed, contrary to what was happening in Asmara under colonial rule, when the city centre and the Italian quarters of Asmara were closed to Eritreans, in the 1950s and 1960s some Eritreans could live in the same neighbourhoods as Italians.

The first example of spatial propinquity can be found in the words of Mynia, born in Asmara in the 1950s, who lived in the area known as ‘the Italian quarter’<sup>13</sup>. She remembers:

*I knew them [Italian guys], [many] with an Italian father and an Eritrean mother. In the area where we used to live, there were many of them. [...] I knew some of them because we used to live next to each other: one was a driver, the other worked at Enel<sup>14</sup>. Some of them were studying, some were working in a bank, others ran small shops<sup>15</sup>*

For Mynia the neighbourhood is the place for contact between Eritreans and Italians, and also Italo-Eritrean youngsters. Mynia is stressing the familiarity with them, the spontaneity of their encounters and their mixing. Propinquity is taken by Mynia as a concrete example of the easy inter-‘racial’/ethnic contact between different groups.

A neighbourhood relationship is also described by Madihah, a woman born in Asmara in 1950. She remembers the everyday meetings with her Italian neighbours as not only occasions of physical interaction, in the sharing of a common courtyard, but also as occasions for the transmission of a culturally specific knowledge. In Madihah’s memories, the preparation of traditional Eritrean coffee was accompanied by nostalgic conversation between Italian migrants and by language exchange:

*They used to say that Italy was beautiful and the Italians too. [...] They used to say so also between themselves, when they were talking. [...] They spoke our language, and we spoke Italian with them. [...] So, we talked while making coffee. [...] There was a nice courtyard, so we made the coffee there.*

***At the homes of these Italians?***

*Yes. When the professor came back home, we made coffee. It was nice<sup>16</sup>*

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13 This is the area called *Amba Galliano* which was built for the Italians during the colonial time.

14 Italian state company for electric energy provision (*Enel* is acronym for ‘Ente nazionale energia elettrica’)

15 *From the original*: «[Ne] conoscevo: padre italiano, [molti con] il padre italiano e la madre eritrea. Nella zona dove abitavamo ce n'erano tanti. [...] Alcuni li conoscevo, perché abitavamo insieme: uno era autista, uno lavorava all'*Enel*. C'erano che studiavano, qualcuno che lavorava in banca, qualcuno che aveva forse un piccolo negozio...».

16 *From the original*: «Loro dicevano che l'Italia era bella e così gli italiani. [...] Dicevano così anche tra loro, quando parlavano. [...] Loro parlavano la nostra lingua e noi con loro parlavamo italiano. [...] Quindi parlavamo mentre facevamo il caffè. [...] C'era un cortile carino.

In these words the semi-private space of a courtyard stands as the location for Italo-Eritrean cultural encounters. Madidah's family seems to have achieved an advanced level of cultural integration with their Italian neighbours: they exchanged not only practices related to food - with Italians preparing traditional Eritrean coffee - but also language, as each family learned the other's language. Most importantly, Madidah remembers that during these moments of contact she was also 'absorbing' a specific image of Italy, depicted by nostalgic Italians as a beautiful country. The scene stands in Madidah's memory as an example of bonding and connection between Italians and Eritreans. This brings us back to the issue of the 'emotional investment' involved in colonial acculturation.



FIG.6 State school F. Martini, 2nd grade high school, 1969/1970.  
(From *Il Chichingolo* website).

However, in line with King, I do not necessarily see this urban 'propinquity' as a challenge to colonial boundaries of 'race'/ethnicity and class. I actually believe that this closeness was largely possible only thanks to the fact that some forms of colonial hierarchies were still at play. Neither Mynia nor Madidah mentions a relationship of *friendship* with Italians, but always one of superficial acquaintance, which meant that colonial divides were not overcome in the intimate sphere. Moreover, in both excerpts one can find some reference to a higher class status of these Italians, who held jobs in the commercial, industrial and education sectors, where Italians' predominant employment was due to colonial legacies. This high class status strikingly contrasted with that of Mynia and Madidah, if one considers that these girls belonged to recently

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Allora lì si faceva, così. / **A casa di questi italiani?** / Sì. Quindi il professore quando tornava, si faceva il caffè. Mi piaceva».

urbanised Eritrean families, in a condition of economic hardship which made even studying difficult.

I have demonstrated that interviewees' memories describe the city's space as structured around hierarchies which are generally implicit, since in Asmara everyone seems to 'know her place', as King says. In the social space of the town, Italians and Eritreans were still, years after the end of colonialism, at opposite ends of the social ladder. What is interesting, in my view, is the way the social distance between the two groups coexisted with a sense of closeness, familiarity, and acquaintance. It illustrates the fact that, as in many colonial societies, it was the rigidity of social positions which allowed different groups to enter into close contact with each other, at the same time maintaining the 'distance' which protected colonisers from actually intermingling with colonised people.

#### 4. HIERARCHIES WITHIN 'FAMILIARITY'

Narratives from the interviews with Eritreans also offer us an example of the way colonial discourse was comprised of a complex intertwining of intimacy and authority, proximity and distance. The *ambivalence* of these intricate forces is partially explained by the abundance, in colonial discourse, of gendered metaphors related to *kinship* as a way to affirm social hierarchies. In fact, in the view of scholars like Frances Gouda (1998) and Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (2000), the use of images connected to family life, the 'family imagery' in Gouda's terms (1998, p.176), served to normalize a patronizing relationship together with those hierarchies which are considered to be an intrinsic part of kinship relationships. I will here show how Eritrean interviewees refer to the issue of 'familiarity' and to family life in order to emphasise the intimacy of the relationship with Italy prior to their migration. In so doing, I argue, they also convey the asymmetries that characterized this relationship, in which Eritreans had the position of the 'primitive' and submissive subject. This will be explained with reference to the interviewees' sentiments of 'respect' and 'subservience' towards the Italians that stayed on after the end of Italian colonialism in the city of Asmara.

A first way of introducing one's intimate relationship with Italians in Asmara is usually the reference to an Italian figure in one's circle of relatives, often in the person of an 'Italian uncle'. These 'uncles' were some of the men who decided to stay on after the end of colonialism, and live together with Eritrean women, in line with the practice of *madamoto* that I illustrated in chapter three. For many interviewees, as in the case of Olga, it was one of those 'Italian uncles' who transmitted an often idealised representation of Italy. With the following words Olga remembers the way her Italian 'uncle' influenced her ideas about Italy, when she was a young girl:

*There was '68, I had already heard that they used to strike often. The seventies... Even before the seventies! "My country is a free country. What do you think, that over there it's like it is here? They are always on strike, they have democracy!", he used to say.*

**Who used to say so?**

*My uncle. He was Italian<sup>17</sup>*

As Olga illustrates well, the presence of these Italian men embodied a surviving Italian authority which proposed itself as a model of civilisation and modernity. The spread of democracy and civil rights struggles was taken as the symbol of a better life in Europe, by a young Olga living in a country under oppression and in permanent conflict with Ethiopia. This created the possibility for contact and exchange with the Italian culture and, in some sense, it awakened her 'imagination' about a life in Italy which she appears to have idealized.

In another statement, this time from Azzeza, born in Asmara in 1957, one can appreciate the meaning of Eritreans' familiarity with Italians. Here Azzeza says that she was used to the presence of Italians and that she was acquainted with their culture, because of the sharing of a common public space in the city of Asmara. There the Italian language predominated. In Azzeza's words:

*There are many Italians in Asmara. Many children speak Italian, in Asmara. And we are quiet [people]... In Asmara you can hang around with everybody. [...] There are many Italians... There are the Italian priests... Everyone speaks [Italian]. We are already used to Italians in our country. Here, it's not the first time [for us]<sup>18</sup>*

One has to keep in mind that the purpose of Azzeza, in this statement, is to downplay the shock of arriving in Italy and she does that *through* the emphasis on her inclusion in the process of *italianisation* of Asmara. The Italian presence was pervasive and created a positive cultural mix, in Azzeza's view. From her words, however, we also understand that the peaceful coexistence of these different groups was possible only thanks to the quiet and friendly attitude of Eritreans. In other words, the coexistence between these different groups was only possible due to the privileges Italians had in economic and cultural life, and thanks to Eritreans' attitudes of acceptance and submission to it.

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17 *From the original:* «C'era il '68. Già lo sentivo che scioperavano spesso. Anni settanta... Prima degli anni settanta! "Il Paese mio è libero. Che ti credi, che è come qua? Fanno sempre sciopero, c'è democrazia!», diceva. / **Chi diceva così?** / Mio zio. Era italiano».

18 *From the original:* «Ci sono tanti italiani ad Asmara. Tanti bambini parlano italiano ad Asmara. Poi siamo tranquilli... Ad Asmara puoi andare in giro con tutti. [...] Ci sono tanti italiani... Ci sono i preti italiani. [L'italiano lo] parlano tutti. Noi siamo già abituati agli italiani nel nostro paese. Non è la prima volta qui».

This view is confirmed by narratives in which interviewees describe Italian ‘authority’ as based on the Eritreans’ incorporation of feelings of ‘respect’ towards them, which, in my view, reproduced colonial social positioning. These sentiments are expressed by Semira, a woman born on the outskirts of Asmara in 1941 and who later migrated to the capital to work as a domestic for an Italo-Eritrean family. In talking about Italians in Asmara, she explains:

*We give a lot of respect to foreigners: Italians are very respected.*

***And why?***

*I don't know... This is the way it is – I don't know how to explain... We have a lot of respect for foreigners. Above all for Italians. I believe that they are better off [in Eritrea] than in their own country. Actually, they say it [themselves]. They say so because there they give orders, they are very respected and they always come first<sup>19</sup>*

Here Semira is depicting the general attitude of Asmarians towards Italians of putting them first. In her view, the authority of the Italians in the town, together with the Eritreans’ attitude of acceptance, might explain why some Italians decided to remain in Asmara after the end of colonialism and why, even today, one can still find a small but vivid Italian community living there.

In conclusion, the ‘contacts’ which took place in the public space of Asmara had their influence on the configuration of the postcolonial relationship between the two groups. Indeed, one can recognize several key points in this relationship which were maintained during the transition from colonial to postcolonial times. These are elements such as: respect and subservience towards Italians; idealization of Italy and Italian people; and the belief in the affinity and closeness between these two populations. In the following chapter and more extensively in the second part, I will explore how these elements are also recognized, as here in Azzeza’s words, to have influenced the subsequent integration in the former colonisers’ country.

## 5. THE CASE OF MASS AND POPULAR CULTURE

So far, I have shown that an important part of ‘hierarchical cultural contamination’ with the Netherlands and Italy revolved around several cultural products and consumption goods that were accessible in Paramaribo and Asmara respectively. Here I

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<sup>19</sup> *From the original:* «Da noi c'è molto rispetto per gli stranieri: gli italiani sono molto rispettati. / **E come mai?** / Non lo so... è questo lo spirito – non so come spiegarli... Per i forestieri abbiamo molto rispetto, più gli italiani: per me stanno meglio che nel Paese loro. Anzi lo dicono proprio loro. Lo dicono perché lì comandano, sono molto rispettati e sono sempre al primo posto».

would like to focus in particular on mass and popular culture as far as it was part of the dynamic of the 'culture-contact' situation which arose in these 'colonial cities'. The importance of this section is based on the acknowledgement of cultural consumption as an important element in the subjects' process of identification (Barker, 2008) and of mass and popular culture as a fundamental gear of the colonial system. In this light, mass and popular culture were two of the most pervasive tools in the hands of colonisers in shaping their relationship with the colonised<sup>20</sup>, with the spread (and thus absorption) of their national culture at the peripheries of colonial empires.

I am going to demonstrate how, in Eritrea as in Suriname, the arrival and diffusion of colonizers' mass and popular cultural items took place in different ways depending on the different formation of the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and, consequently, how they variously affected the 'space of encounter' between colonisers and colonised people. If we look indeed at the period between the 1950s and 1970s, one can observe that while in Suriname these items came from a cultural production explicitly directed towards the colonial audience, in Eritrea the process of contamination was more spontaneously activated by Italians and Eritreans alike. I am here offering a comparative analysis of both contexts.

### *Suriname*

After the Second World War, the colonial administration devoted particular effort to the spread of Dutch mass and popular culture in the city of Paramaribo, with the aim of strengthening the cultural exchange between the motherland and the colonies, and to oppose North American influence on Surinamese culture<sup>21</sup>. Instruments of such a cultural intervention were two institutions founded in Paramaribo in these years: the *Sticusa Foundation* and the *Cultural Centre of Suriname (CCS)*. These two organisations promoted cultural events such as tours in Suriname for Dutch theatre, dance and music companies. Moreover they supported the production of films<sup>22</sup>, and of radio and television programs about Dutch culture and society. *Sticusa* and *CCS*

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20 Exemplary in this case are the collection of essays by John Mackenzie on "Imperialism and popular culture" (Mackenzie, 1986) and the more recent book by Jeffrey Richards on the role of music in British imperialism (Richards, 2001).

21 See speech from 1948 by Lou Lichtveld on the necessary activities for such a cultural make over (Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001, p.394).

22 In the case of cinema production, one has to think that from 1953 to 1955, 77% of films in Surinamese cinemas was American while 11% was Indian, leaving little space for Dutch or European productions (*Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek*, cited in Gobardhan-Rambocus, 2001). In 1952 the *Sticusa* promoted the foundation of a *Liga* in Paramaribo with the purpose to show films from Western Europe and, in particular, documentaries produced by the Dutch Education Department.

also acquired from the Netherlands big collections of song-books, of gramophone discs, newspapers, magazines and other publications.

From the words of the Afro-Surinamese interviewees, the radio seems to have been a crucial medium of access to Dutch culture and language in their everyday life. As we have seen in the first paragraph of this chapter, Afro-Surinamese used to live in different areas from Hollanders. The radio, however, had the power to reach into the private spaces of these houses, bringing the *same* cultural items to all the inhabitants of Paramaribo. In the imagination of the interviewees, the radio was able to cross those boundaries of 'race'/ethnicity and class discussed previously, and build up a common cultural repertoire between white and black households. In this section, I will illustrate how this repertoire was constituted and its main features.

Let us first see some examples of how music, songs and singers are at the centre of interviewees' memories about their youth. Marita, a woman born in Paramaribo in 1953 who migrated to Rotterdam at the end of the 1970s, told me:

*We had a lot of Dutch songs. [...] The music that was played on the radio, yes. Yes. Sure. Heintje.*

**Heintje?**

*Those [songs] by Heintje. Heintje [was] a young boy who... could sing very nicely. And who else? Who else? Also the Dutch singers. [...] Kramer and also another one... how is he called? [...] Bennie Nijman! And all those kinds...<sup>23</sup>*

A similar tone can be heard in the interview with Monique, a woman born in 1951, who left Paramaribo at the age of 17, who remembers:

*Willeke Alberti. Wil Toura. Wil Ture. [...] They played '7, 9, 1, 2' such a song by Wil Ture. [...] Johnny Lion. [...] And Willie and Willeke Alberti. [...] Johnny Hoes [...] Yes, the Jordanese. Or Jordanius, or how they were named... [...] This kind of ... Who else? Tante Leen. Ria Valk. [...] Yes! Those kind of songs. How was the title? 'Worstjes op mijn borstjes!' [Small sausages on my small breasts] [laughs]. [...] Yes, then you heard on the radio this sort of songs<sup>24</sup>*

All the Afro-Surinamese interviewees told me something about pop music, even though singers' names were sometimes difficult to recall. In some cases they felt like

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23 *From the original:* « We hadden heel veel Hollandse liedjes. [...] De muziek die gemaakt werd door de radio, jawel. Ja. Ha hoor. Heintje. / **Heintje?** / Die van Heintje Heintje een kleine jongen die...heel mooi kon zingen. En wie meer? Wie meer? Ook die Hollandse zangers. [...] Kramer en nog eentje... hoe heet die nou [...] Bennie Nijmans, en al dat soort... ».

24 *From the original:* «Willeke Alberti. Wil Toura. Wil Ture. [...] Hun [zij] draaiden '7,9,1,2' zo een nummer van Wil Ture. [...] Johnny Lion. [...] En Willie en Willeke Alberti. [...] Jonny Hoes [...] Ja, de Jordanezen. Or Jordanius, of hoe ze heette volgens mij. [...] Dat soort... Wie nog meer? Tante Leen. Ria Valk. [...] Ja! Dat soort nummers had je. Hoe is de naam? 'Worstjes op mijn borstjes!' [lacht]. [...] Ja, dus dat soort nummers hoorde je op de radio».

singing a little, to show me the song they meant. This part of the interview was indeed very entertaining, producing a mix of laughter and tenderness in our conversations.

The following excerpt from the interview with Ton portrays a very intimate scene, which is still firmly rooted in her memory and seems to come up again and again when considering her feeling of belonging to the Dutch nation. Beautifully, she starts to recall the morning rituals with her sisters and her mother, in Paramaribo:

*In the morning before we were going to school, my mother was braiding our hair for us...braids... And then she was singing the old Dutch songs. Yes, and at 7.00/6.30 it started on the radio – I don't think that they still do it – with songs, real Dutch songs. Yes. And then they said what time it was: "It is now 6.40 – it is now 6.45 – 7.00 – 7.30"<sup>25</sup>*

The traditional Afro-Surinamese morning activity of making braids for the children intertwined with the singing of old Dutch songs. This quote illustrates perfectly the sense of a very peculiar mix between attachment, identification and cultural participation that constituted 'Dutch identity' for these women. Moreover, narratives about the 'old times' bring us to the issue of 'nostalgia', and to question how this is constructed in the case of postcolonial subjects.

Ton's words remind one of the fundamental characteristics of the 'colonization of imagination' which, following Nederveen Pieterse and Bhiku Parekh, consists in the difficulty of «identifying what values, institutions and identities are foreign and [what are] part of the colonial legacy. And if one succeeds in identifying some of them, they are sometimes too deeply intertwined with their endogenous analogues to be clearly separated from them» (Nederveen Pieterse & Parekh, 1995, p.3). Indeed, the 'emotional investment' of these women in this cultural repertoire demonstrates how profound and internalised some cultural practices had been. This invites further exploration, beyond the purpose of this dissertation, into the ways in which Afro-Surinamese women appropriated these cultural practices and how they lived them in their own ways, beyond the homogenization to the Dutch cultural model.

### *Eritrea*

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, Italian mass-media products such as newspapers, magazines, films and music circulated widely in Asmara (Bottaro, 2003). If during the time of colonialism the diffusion of cultural items, especially films, to colonial audi-

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25 *From the original:* « 'S morgens voordat we naar school gingen, ging mijn moeder vlechtjes voor ons maken...vlechten... En dan zong ze die oude Nederlandse liedjes. Ja, en om 7:00u/6:30u begon het op de radio - ik denk niet dat ze dat nog doen hoor - [met] liedjes, echte Nederlandse liedjes. Ja. En dan gaven ze de tijd van: "Het is nu 6:40 - het is 6:45 - 7:00u - 7:30u"».

ences had been part of an explicit strategy of Italian hegemony (Ben-Ghiat, 2005), after 1941, this process took a different shape. Rather than being top-down promoted by the colonial administration, the Italian culture was something that belonged to the white elite and to which only some Eritreans had (or wished to have) access. In comparison to the Surinamese situation, the diffusion of Italian culture to Eritreans had an elitist character, which contrasts with the bigger spread of Dutch culture in Suriname which was made possible by the radio. The narratives of interviewees belonging to educated and westernised Eritrean families illustrate the different ways in which this cultural contamination took place.

Magazines were the most shared item of popular culture. Women's magazines especially used to circulate widely in the city of Asmara among people that read Italian. Luisa remembers the newspapers and magazines that she shared with classmates at the Orsoline's boarding school which she attended during the 1970s:

*There was Famiglia Cristiana – you might know it – then there was Gioia which still exists, there was Topolino, La Settimana Enigmistica; and then those small magazines about [pop musicians like] Pooh, Gianni Morandi, Ranieri, things like this. And the fotoromanzi. And there was also this 2Più that was a magazine about sexuality that for us at the boarding school was 'the top'!*<sup>26</sup>

Reading Italian magazines was part of those westernised habits that spread among Eritrean youngsters, like Luam and Luisa, who exchanged their magazines among their friends. In particular, Luam and Luisa talk about *fotoromanzi*, magazines in which famous actors and actresses were portrayed in a sort of photographic-novel, which were very common in Italy at that time<sup>27</sup>. From the point of view of young Eritreans, the Italian women's press emerges as a fundamental tool in having access to the lifestyle of western women. In the women's press of the time one could find not only articles about fashion and house decoration, but also sexuality, politics and science<sup>28</sup>. The *fotoromanzi*, moreover, had been very important in conveying a gendered dimension of Italian identity which, in these years, was internationally popular for the beauty of some famous Italian stars (Gundle, 2006, 2007).

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26 *From the original: «C'era Famiglia Cristiana - che la conosci - poi c'era Gioia che c'è ancora, c'era Topolino, La Settimana Enigmistica; e poi c'erano quei giornoletti piccoli dove c'erano i Pooh, Gianni Morandi, Ranieri, e queste cose. E i fotoromanzi. Poi c'era 'sto 2Più che era una rivista sulla sessuologia che per noi collegiali era una cosa 'al massimo!'».*

27 Among the most popular *fotoromanzi* of the time were *Bolero Film* and *Grand Hôtel* that, at the peak of their success, used to sell up to one million copies in Italy and abroad (Detti, 1990).

28 Interesting studies on the development of Italian female press during these decades have been made by Anna Bravo (2003), Milly Buonanno (1975), Ermanno Detti (1990) and Maria Teresa Anelli (1979).

The circulation of these magazines and newspapers is remembered by interviewees as an important ingredient in their *italianisation*. It seems that they used to actively seek them out, buying these cultural items, and exchanging them. In doing so, they participated in a real network of communication which had, as its object, Italian culture. It is important to remark, however, that these networks were constituted and maintained only by those young Eritreans who actively pursued a better inclusion in the Italian community of Asmara.

Secondly, some interviewees remember that the presence of the Italian community often created opportunities for culture-contact during leisure time. These encounters took place in social gatherings at Italians' cultural clubs, cinemas, or dancing halls. In the following statement, Luisa talks about her time of entertainment with Asmara's Italian youth as an opportunity to access Italian popular culture:

*Italy for me was Italian films: all the films by Fellini, Pasolini; Italian poetry; Italian songs: Pooh, Gianni Morandi, Patti Pravo [laughs], Gigliola Cinquetti, Mina! For me, this was Italy. [...] Living in Eritrea, the Italo-Eritrean community was so concentrated on Italy that... All those things... [...] I felt like I knew Italy, even though I had never been there, because of [all] these films<sup>29</sup>*

The possibility of 'envisioning' Italy through the images taken from films had an important role in Luisa's emotional attachment to this country, as I illustrated in chapter four. Here, however, I am interested in the characterisation of the 'place' in which this cultural contact happened. These are, for Luam, clubs and school. There, Eritrean girls first encountered a specific expression of Italian culture, which consisted of the images of those pop-stars that populated their imagination during their youth. She says:

*I saw all the Italian films coming out, like [those with] Giuliano Gemma, Ciccio and Franco, Bud Spencer...All these films. The Westerns of the 70s: all of them. [...] So I wouldn't miss one Sunday. Saturday or Sunday. I wouldn't miss one, when we were young. At 2pm we went in and at 4pm we came out, and we went on to the Italian Club for dancing.*  
***At the Italian Club?***

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29 *From the original:* «L'Italia per me erano i film italiani: tutti i film di Fellini, Pasolini; la poesia italiana; la canzone italiana: i Pooh, Gianni Moranti, Patti Pravo [ride], la Gigliola Cinquetti, Mina! Per me, quella era l'Italia. [...] Essendo in Eritrea, la comunità italo-eritrea era talmente orientata sull'Italia che... Tutte queste cose... [...] Conoscevo l'Italia, anche se non c'ero mai stata, perché con [tutti] questi film...».

*There we were, all the Italian students. All the students, we used to meet there*<sup>30</sup>

Again, in Luam's words, one can see the importance of spaces of intermingling and contamination between Italians and Eritreans. In this statement, not only the Italian Club's dancing hall, but also Italian cinemas become spaces of inclusion for some Eritreans to live in close contact with the Italian elite. However, if in the fourth paragraph of this chapter I have demonstrated the pitfalls of this feeling of closeness, here again, I argue that, since those 'common' social activities only took place in locations which referred to the Italian community, thus rather than moments of exchange those gatherings were moments of cultural assimilation.

## CONCLUSION

In chapters four and five of my dissertation I have done something unusual for a study on paid domestic work: I have looked into interviewees' narratives which start at a time before they had acquired their common identity *as care and domestic workers* in Europe. And yet I have shown that they already had a lot in common: being young girls growing up in the cultural hegemony of a European country which turned out to be their country of destination and settlement. I have shown how their imagination and cultural upbringing was directed *towards* Italy and the Netherlands: in learning and using their languages, in reading their books and magazines, in watching their films and singing their songs. They learned the names of rivers and cities of those countries; their typical food and their clothing. In that, they found examples of western and modern lifestyle. Moreover, these girls familiarised themselves with Dutch and Italians, those who lived in Asmara and Paramaribo. In so doing, they learned that these people liked to keep 'others' at the right distance, and that they were rich, educated, and beautiful.

With this chapter, in particular, I wanted to lay the groundwork for the development of my analysis of a gendered 'postcolonial cultural capital' of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese migrant domestic workers. My point here was to demonstrate the role of a youth embedded in a colonial setting for the formation of a postcolonial subjectivity. In order to do so, I have illustrated several features of narratives concerning the experience of having been raised in 'colonial cities', like Asmara and Paramaribo, where

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30 *From the original*: «E dei film ho visto tutti i film italiani che escono, tipo [quelli con] Giuliano Gemma, tipo Ciccio e Franco, Bud Spencer... Tutti questi tutti film. I Western degli anni '70: tutti. [...] Quindi io ogni domenica non mancavo, o il sabato o la domenica. Non mancavo, quando eravamo giovani. Alle 2 entravamo al cinema e alle 4 uscivamo e andavamo al Circolo Italiano a ballare. / **Al Circolo Italiano?** / Ci stavamo tutti gli studenti italiani. Tutti gli studenti, ci vedevamo là».

public and private spaces were imbued with the former colonisers' cultural presence. This presence, I argued, was not without some normative implications and, in fact, it positioned Italian and Dutch cultural practices (including consumption habits, lifestyle, etc.) in a position of 'authority' towards other groups' cultures. This cultural dimension was considered here as emerging from deep symbolic and material hierarchies which I outlined in the case of the association between class and 'race'/ethnicity in the relationship between the colonisers and the colonised.

The normative character of this presence has also been illustrated in the formation of spatial boundaries. In the comparison between the different kinds of spatial boundaries existing between black and white people in Paramaribo and in Asmara, during the same period, one can see that various articulations of *distance* and *proximity* were all made possible by asymmetric symbolic positions. In the cases of both cities, I have highlighted the relevance of class status differences in reinforcing 'racial'/ethnic divides, from the interviewees' perspective.

In particular, I have pointed to the great importance of the case of black domestic workers in Paramaribo, which is today remembered as a unique opportunity to cross the divides between white and black populations. The narrativisation of this example is very interesting because it demonstrates how the hegemonic cultural presence of the former coloniser was associated with the question of servitude. I argued, indeed, the importance of the image of domestic workers as a paradigmatic example of the hierarchical divides affecting the colonial city of Paramaribo. In the figure of these women one can find the convergence of the cultural and material supremacy of the former coloniser subject which determined Afro-Surinamese subjugated position in Paramaribo.

As a comparative case I have taken the question of the diffusion of mass and popular culture from Italy and the Netherlands to Asmara and Paramaribo respectively. I have shown the circulation of magazines, songs, films and other cultural items to be elements of cultural hegemony which permeated not only public but also private places, and are thus particularly suitable to be incorporated in the formation of subjects' identity through processes of 'emotional investment'. Here, I pointed at some crucial differences in the ways in which Eritreans and Surinamese participated in the colonisers' culture: a selected access for the case of middle-class Eritrean youths in Asmara's Italian milieu (schools, clubs, cinemas), in comparison with a more common everyday participation of Surinamese people in Dutch culture which reached everyone's house through radio programmes.

In conclusion, in these two chapters I have shown how different forces shaped the interviewees' relationships with the prospective country of migration during their youth: acculturation to colonisers' practices and the absorption of knowledge (in the specific forms of *netherlandisation* and *italianisation*); construction of feelings of 'belonging' to colonisers' national cultures; reiteration of colonised people's attitudes of submission and acceptance; exposure to Dutch and Italian socio-economic and cul-

tural predominance; and, finally, different modalities of inclusion/exclusion in the lives of the white elites in Paramaribo and Asmara.

From the next chapter, I will start to analyse which role these forces had in the migratory experience of the interviewees. In so doing, I will question which role the social and cultural capital, accumulated in the colonial setting, will play in the 'new' relationship with colonisers, in the Netherlands and Italy.

## Chapter 6

### POSTCOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS: ARRIVING IN ITALY AND IN THE NETHERLANDS

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«I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things,  
my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world,  
and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects»

Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*

The arrival in the new country is a paradigmatic moment in the experience of all migrants. For Meena Alexander this moment can be described as a 'shock', the 'shock of arrival', as a trauma which signals the start of a new phase in life, a moment of «explosive possibilities, [in which] we [migrants] must figure out how to live our lives» (Alexander, 1996, p.1). In this moment, everything people used to be in their life before migration is shattered open and, at the same time, they need to invent anew what to do in their life in order to live (ibid.). It can thus be a moment of great anxieties in which, as Frantz Fanon (1952) says in the epithet to this chapter, one might feel the loss of her/his identity with the realisation of one's minority and marginal position in the new society.

It is thus this same 'shock' that accompanies postcolonial migrants in their journeys to the former colonisers' land. Here the feeling of estrangement from the knowledge previously possessed about this country is associated with the need to renegotiate one's position within the colonial power legacy. In fact, as Antoinette Burton (1998) illustrated in the case of three Indians travelling to late-nineteenth-century Britain, the encounters taking place between Indian migrants and British society were affected by imperial ideologies to the point of making of the United Kingdom a 'contact zone' as much as the colonies themselves. In other words, Britain revealed itself to be, in the opinion of Burton, an imperial «site productive not just of imperial policy or attitudes directed outwards, but of colonial encounters within» (Burton, 1998, p.1).

Likewise, personal, political, social and cultural forces affect the journey of contemporary migrants into today's Black Europe. Various examples of the experiences of these people have been given by great novelists and poets who challenged the Eu-

ropean literary canon by introducing a postcolonial and culturally displaced perspective (see Phillips, 1999, 2000). For the specific case of postcolonial encounters taking place in the Netherlands/Italy, one can find important examples of the experience of dislocation, non-recognition and frustration of expectations given by authors who describe their arrival from a former colony into Italian/Dutch societies. Examples among many are novels such as *Il latte è buono* (*The milk is good*, 2005) by Garane Garane, *Madre piccola* (*Small mother*, 2007) by Cristina Ali Farah or *Regina di fiori e di perle* (*Queen of flowers and pearls*, 2007) by Gabriella Ghermandi which tell about migrants' arrival in Italy from Ethiopia and Somalia. On the other hand, Bea Vianen, with her *Het paradijs van Oranje* (*The paradise of the Orange*, 1973) and Astrid Romer with *Neem mij terug Suriname* (*Bring me back Suriname*, 1974) can be taken as examples of authors who described the troubling settlement of Surinamese people in the Netherlands.

Treasuring these authors' insights on the profound meaning of postcolonial encounters, I want to offer in this chapter interview excerpts regarding the time soon after the interviewees' migration, in the period of their first actual meetings with Italians or Dutch - often members of the families where they used to work. I will show here the important role these first encounters had in the (non) recognition of that 'colonial acculturation' and 'belonging' whose construction I have illustrated in the fourth and fifth chapters. In general, these encounters were characterised, above all, by interviewees' realisation of the biased character of their identification with the land of their colonisers. For this reason, their emotional attachment with Italy and the Netherlands was generally frustrated in the 'actual' encounter with the community of colonisers, that until that moment they knew only at the level of the imagination. Moreover, the narratives about these encounters reveal the interjection, on the side of the interviewees, of a hierarchical view which is typical of the coloniser-colonised relationship (Fanon, 1952; Memmi, 1974).

I will also illustrate the experiences of Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese after their arrival in the Netherlands/Italy regarding the different constructions of their relationships with these countries. In fact, looking at their memories of the time soon after their arrivals one might understand, first of all, the different modalities in which boundaries of inclusion/exclusion between colonisers and colonised were articulated in the two countries. Secondly, one can see the different effects of the colonial systems of knowledge transmission which descend from the varying articulations of colonisers' cultural hegemony and 'authority' (Bhabha, 1994) as I have illustrated them in chapters four and five.

Consequently, in this chapter I will illustrate the three main ways in which 'post-colonial encounters' took place in the memories of the interviewees, in Italy as in the Netherlands. First, I will elaborate on the double-sided sentiments of 'familiarity' which Eritreans expressed towards Italians. Interestingly, while those who had less intimate relationships with Italians in Asmara stress a *continuity* in their 'familiarity'

with Italians in Italy as in Eritrea, those who had closer relationships with them in the colonial setting expressed a profound disillusion of their expectations about re-establishing in Italy the same intimacy with Italians they had in Asmara. Secondly, I will illustrate the way Afro-Surinamese women expressed their feelings of betrayal and the frustration of their expectations about the Netherlands. These negative feelings were due, in their words, to the contrast between the 'reality' of the Netherlands and what they had learned from books and radio. Finally, I will show how Afro-Surinamese interviewees recounted their gradual acknowledgement of the fact that the cultural capital which, as I illustrated in chapter four, they had accumulated through the school system in Suriname, was not recognised by the Dutch. This lack of recognition is one of the factors of their feeling of inferiority to the former colonisers.

This chapter has a preparatory role for the chapters of the second part of this dissertation, where the working experience of the interviewees will be discussed. In this perspective, this chapter has the fundamental function of representing a turning point in interviewees' life-stories which is crucial in the formation of a postcolonial migrant subjectivity. This is indeed intrinsically characterised by an asymmetric relationship between former colonisers and colonised. In this chapter I will show how, on the basis of this asymmetry, some attributes of colonised peoples' personalities are not recognised once in the colonisers' land, i.e. their language skills, their cultural competency and their capacity to participate as 'equals' in the colonisers' cultural and social milieu. The attributes which are instead going to be acknowledged will be discussed in the second part of the thesis, in chapter nine in particular, where I will demonstrate this acknowledgement to be based on a negotiation of the qualities which might turn out to be useful for colonisers' care deficits and colonised peoples' labour integration.

## 1. CLASS AND BELONGING 'AFTER' THE MIGRATION

One can broadly distinguish between two types of comments, from the Eritrean interviewees' side, about their encounters with 'Italians in Italy'. I believe the difference between them to be due to the social and cultural status in the country of origin of the interviewee. One has to consider, indeed, that women who came from the lower class or who belonged to recently urbanized peasant families often used to work in Italians' houses or in the small companies that Italians run in Asmara. Such interviewees seem to me to downplay the impression of *surprise* they experienced in Italy as it usually tended to represent their relationship with Italians 'before' and 'after' the migration as based on *continuity*. In this perspective, these women stress the similarities between the Italians they met in Italy and those they used to know in Asmara. Typical in this sense are the views of people like Azzeza and Mynia. During our conversation, Azzeza, who arrived in Italy in 1975, told me:

*It's the same. Because we are used [to them], we see them as Italians in Asmara.*

***You see them as the Italians in Asmara?!***

*There are no differences<sup>1</sup>*

Mynia also arrived in Rome 1975, at a very young age. She stated:

*The Italians, I already knew [them] in Asmara. [...] In Asmara there were quite a few Italians. They are many. Even during the war time<sup>2</sup> they did not want to leave, they stayed there. Not all of them, but many remained there<sup>3</sup>*

The opinion of these women has to be compared with that of others who came from a better socio-cultural position in Asmara and who, now, complain of their loss of status after migration. These are women who had been raised in *inclusive* relationships with Italians. In my view, their frustration comes from the fact that, while *before* migration they used to participate in the cultural life of Italian colonial circles, *after* arrival they suffered the lack of recognition of their cultural capital. Luam, for example, remembers as a great disappointment the moment she realised 'the difference between Italians *here* and *there*'.

I will focus on the experience of Luam who arrived in Italy in 1978 with her children. She had been raised by an aunt married to an Italian and, for this reason, she studied at the Italian school in Asmara. During the interview, she complained about the fact that the *same* Italian people she used to be very close to in Eritrea, suddenly behaved as strangers once they met her again in Rome. I am quoting a long excerpt from her interview where she gave the example of one of these episodes:

*I was very disappointed by my friends. [...] By our Italian friends. Because my husband used to work at the 'Bank of Rome'. [Bitter laugh]*

***The 'Bank of Rome' in Asmara?***

*Yes. The 'Bank of Rome' in Asmara. Which is totally Italian. [...] When I arrived here – not to be hosted, can you imagine... - I went to the Bank of Rome to look for our colleagues, the colleagues of my husband. Those with whom we used to eat and have parties. I met one of them and he just said: "Look I cannot even take you to my place because my wife... this and that". And I said: "But when we were in Khartoum<sup>4</sup> you used to say: 'as soon as you*

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1 *From the original:* «E' uguale. Siccome noi siamo abituati, li guardiamo come gli italiani ad Asmara. / **Voi li guardate come gli italiani ad Asmara?!** / Non ci sono differenze».

2 The Eritrean-Ethiopian civil war:1974-1990.

3 *From the original:* «Gli italiani già li conoscevo ad Asmara. [...] Ad Asmara ce n'è abbastanza di italiani. Sono tanti. Anche in tempo di guerra non sono voluti uscire, sono rimasti là. Non tutti, ma alcuni sono rimasti lì».

4 Khartoum, in Sudan, was for many, as in the case of Luam, an intermediate stop in the journey from Eritrea to Italy or other western countries.

arrive in Italy come to us'...' [...] And he gave me 3.000 lire. A guy who used to eat at my place! That when there was a party, we put anything down on the floor [and] we all slept in the living room! He gave me 3.000 lire and he told me "Go to a restaurant somewhere and have a good meal". [Bitter laugh]. I looked at him and I told him: "It's not money that I miss"<sup>5</sup>



FIG. 7 Interview with an Eritrean student working as domestic in Rome, 1977.  
(Photo from Federico Bruno *et al.*, 1977)

Luam tried to convey in her narrative the importance of the relationship of affection and closeness she used to have with Italians, as in the example of the fact that they all used to sleep together after parties in her place in Asmara. The frustration of her expectations to reunify with these people as *friends* was due, in my view, to the fact that the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion between the Italians and Eritreans in Rome did not function in the same way she had known in Asmara. Her transition

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5 *From the original*: «Sono rimasta molto delusa dagli amici nostri. [...] Dagli amici nostri italiani. Perché mio marito lavorava al Banco di Roma. [Risata sarcastico]. / **Il Banco di Roma di Asmara?** / Sì. Il Banco di Roma di Asmara. Che è totalmente italiano. [...] Quando sono arrivata qui - non per ospitarmi, lasciamo perdere... - sono andata al Banco di Roma per cercare i nostri colleghi, i colleghi di mio marito. Gli amici che ci mangiavamo e facevamo festa insieme. Ho incontrato uno di loro e dice: "Guarda non ti posso portare manco a casa mia, perché mia moglie... di qua, di là". E io ho detto: "Ma quando stavamo a Cartum mi dicevate: 'appena arrivi in Italia presentati da noi!'" [...] E lui mi ha dato 3 mila lire. Uno che mangiava a casa mia! Che quando c'era la festa buttammo non so che cosa, dormivamo anche nei salotti! Mi ha dato 3000 lire e mi ha detto: "Vai in qualche trattoria o ristorante e mangia bene". [Risata sarcastico]. Io l'ho guardato e ho detto: "Guarda non sono i soldi che mi mancano"».

from Asmara to Rome implied, in her personal experience, the collapse of those same boundaries. Luam's perspective illustrates, in my view, the great disappointment of those who used to be in a relationship of closeness with Italians in Eritrea, but were not longer so once in Italy.

This phenomenon can also be seen in the light, again, of the construction of those 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) which survive in the imagination of post-colonial subjects until the moment of migration, as traumatic rupture destroys them. Such a rupture brings not only confusion of the boundaries associated to one's socio-economic status but also the loss of the social network which could, if required, offer protection in case of need, as was the case for Luam and her children in the story she told.

## 2. ASYMMETRIES OF RECOGNITION

Several Afro-Surinamese interviewees expressed their disappointment in understanding that certain paradoxes affected their ideal of a common cultural patrimony with the Netherlands. The first paradox concerned the discrepancy between what they had learned at school about the Netherlands, and the actual experience of 'being there'. In fact, almost none of the Afro-Surinamese women claimed to have been able to understand, or portray with her imagination, what it actually meant 'to be' in the Netherlands and what this place actually 'looked like', despite the fact that they spent so much time reading about and studying the Netherlands, in Paramaribo. The paradox of Cynthia, for example, should be seen in this light; Cynthia, a woman who arrived in Rotterdam in 1976 at the age of twenty, who strikingly affirmed simultaneously of 'not knowing much' about the Netherlands and of knowing 'everything' about how the country 'was', during her youth in Paramaribo.

Along the same lines, from the interview with another woman, Ettie, who arrived in 1972 at the age of twenty-eight, I discovered that:

*We had to learn 'everything'. So, you knew the Netherlands only from books. But how it really was here...well, this you didn't know then. Then I thought "oh" [when] I was in the train for the first time...[when] I was in the metro...<sup>6</sup>*

I found very interesting the fact that, within the space of a few sentences, Ettie went from saying that she knew 'everything' about the Netherlands, to admit her ignorance about the 'reality' of the country. Her narrative aims to exhibit the contrast between a knowledge acquired from books and her actual feelings when sitting in

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6 *From the original: «'Alles' moesten we leren. Dus je kende Nederland alleen vanuit de boeken. Maar hoe het echt hier was... nou dat wist je niet toen. Dan dacht ik van "oh" [wanneer] je gaat voor het eerst in de trein zitten... je gaat voor het eerst in de metro zitten».*

the train or in the metro. The she finally perceived the *novelty* of the Dutch environment for her. Ettie continued to tell the story about her disappointment when she could not find in the Netherlands something that she had learned from fairy tales as being typically Dutch, but which she did not find in ‘reality’: a cupboard-bed. She remembered:

*When I was living in Suriname, I used to say “if I go to the Netherlands I’d like to sleep in one of those tiny cupboard-beds”. But those box-beds weren’t around anymore! ‘Cause you learnt from books [that] they always slept in a cupboard-bed, in farms with chickens and geese! When I thought ‘if I go to the Netherlands...’, then I want to sleep in a cupboard-bed like that... But no!*<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, I argue that Ettie would agree on the strange feeling of *surprise* which most interviewees recall when talking about their arrival in Rotterdam. If the Netherlands had been, in a sense, *always* present in their life and imagination, the actual arrival was still definitively something different.

From these narratives, I understand the moment of the first real ‘look’ at the country to be a turning point in peoples’ migratory stories since a fundamental change in the postcolonial relationship is taking place there. Many other interviewees, such as Marita saying «...and I *saw* it!» or Raurette’s suggestive «It came *all of a sudden*», offer us important insights into the complexity of the changing relationship of ‘belonging’ between themselves and the Dutch. I will go more deeply into the details of these changes in the next paragraph.

I stated before that a common experience of Afro-Surinamese interviewees on their arrivals is the realisation of the paradoxes affecting their belief about a commonality of knowledge and culture between Surinamese and Dutch people. This commonality is understood to be false while interviewees acknowledge that the price of their *netherlandisation* had been the loss of knowledge about their country’s history and geography, which had been overlooked because of the predominance of the Netherlands in their curricula. This is the moment, in my opinion, in which they became aware of the fact that they had learned the ‘superiority’ of the Netherlands, in comparison to Suriname. The profound consequences of this for their self-perception will be fully analysed in chapter ten.

I spoke about this issue with Hortencia, a woman who arrived in Rotterdam in 1970 at the age of 27. I was asking her what kind of knowledge she had about the Netherlands, when she told me:

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7 *From the original:* «Toen ik in Suriname woonde, ik zeg „als ik naar Nederland ga zou ik graag in een bedstee willen slapen“. Maar je kunt nergens een bedstee meer vinden! Want je leerde uit de boeken [dat] het was altijd slapen in de bedstee op de boerderij en de kippen en de ganzen! Ik denk ‘als ik naar Nederland ga...’, dan wil ik een zo’n bedstee slapen... Maar nee hoor!».

*You learn only about the Dutch houses and what the Netherlands look like. We were under the Dutch flag, so we learnt the history of the Netherlands with Dutch books. We didn't learn the history of Suriname*<sup>8</sup>

With the image of the 'Dutch flag', Hortencia assertively referred to the importance of being born under colonial rule in shaping the context of her absorption of knowledge about the Netherlands. As I illustrated in chapters four and five, such a context was characterized by the hegemony of the Dutch culture in Suriname and thus by the fact that Surinamese students did not learn the history, geography and language of their own country. As we saw in the fourth chapter, this question was a matter of vivid debate both within the Dutch colonial educational institutions, and within Surinamese nationalist circles.

However, what is important for the experience of these migrant women is not the fact that they did not learn much about Suriname, but rather the fact that the Dutch did not possess *any* information about Suriname. The contrast between the fact that Surinamese pupils were forced to learn by heart everything about the Netherlands, while the Dutch ones had almost no knowledge about their Caribbean colony, was at the centre of interviewees' narratives in more than one case.

An example of this kind came up during the interview with Francisca, a woman who arrived in the Netherlands in 1975, at the age of 29. In a quite entertaining way, Francisca started to make a comparison between herself and Eleanore, my interview assistant, who is a young white Dutch woman. Since the two of them had never met before, she simply took her casually as an example for 'any' white Dutch person. Francisca then said:

*I had to know by heart: Texel, Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland, Schiermonnikoog, Rottum*<sup>9</sup>. *I don't think that she [pointing at Eleanore] can say them as fast as I can. [...] They made me cram them. I had to. But if now I ask her [Eleanore]... If I ask – ok she is a student – but if I were to ask something like "Do you know Suriname?" Then she doesn't know where Suriname is. Or she never heard about it!*<sup>10</sup>

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8 *From the original:* «Nee dat leer je niet. Je leert alleen over de Nederlandse huizen en hoe Nederland eruitziet. We waren onder de Nederlandse vlag, dus leerden wij de geschiedenis van Nederland, met Nederlandse boeken. Wij leerden niet de geschiedenis van Suriname».

9 These are the names of the West Frisian Islands. Francisca says these names very fast, like in a rhyme, putting her thumb and fingers up, one by one».

10 *From the original:* «Ik moest uit het hoofd: Texel, Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland, Schiermonnikoog, Rottum. Ik denk niet dat zij [pointing at Eleanore] het zo snel zegt zoals ik het kan. [...] Ze hebben het voor me in mijn hoofd gestampt. Ik moest. Maar als ik haar [Eleanore] nou vraag – oké ze is nu student - maar als ik haar zomaar een vraag zou vragen "Ken je Suriname?" Dan weet ze niet eens waar Suriname is. Of ze heeft daar niets van gehoord!».

I saw Francisca' yearning to compete with a white Dutch and to show how better Surinamese do as a 'tactic' of resistance to a super-imposed cultural hegemony. From the point of view of the interviewees, the fact that Hollanders were unaware that Surinamese children used to study Dutch history and culture, reveals a general lack of acknowledgement of the colonial past, in the Netherlands.

The last issue concerns language skills. The interviewees found it striking that Hollanders used to be surprised about the fact that Surinamese people were able to speak Dutch. Wilma, a woman who arrived in the Netherlands in 1974, at 31 years of age, said in this respect:

*And then you arrive somewhere and, at one point, you speak Dutch. And the people say: "Oh, you learnt that so fast!" [We laugh]. Yes! "Oh, you have learnt so fast!" I say: "No, in Suriname we speak Dutch. We grew up with it"<sup>11</sup>*



FIG. 8 One interviewee posing with her mother before the departure for the Netherlands, Paramaribo, 1970s. (From private collection).

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11 *From the original:* « En dan kom je ergens, je praat het Nederlands. En die mensen: "Oh, wat heb je dat toch gauw geleerd!" [We laugh]. Ja! "Oh, je hebt het gauw geleerd". Ik zeg: "Nee, in Suriname praten we Nederlands. Je groeit daarmee op"».

The women I spoke with remembered bitterly, sometimes angrily, the first occasions in which they realized this ‘asymmetry’. This was final proof of the fact that their feeling of participation in and affiliation with Dutch culture, which they had so strongly felt during their youth, as I have shown in the previous chapters, was however *not* based on a reciprocal recognition. It is in this moment that the fact of having learned the Dutch language at school, the prohibition of speaking Sranan even at home, the absorption of Dutch culture through books, music, and radio emerges in its intrinsic ‘violence’. It is the violence that, as authors like Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986) have pointed out, characterised the imposition of the cultural complex which was functional to the maintenance of imperial territorial power.

### 3. THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

As an effect of Dutch hegemony and predominance at the cultural level, several Afro-Surinamese interviewees expressed a feeling of ‘humility’, which features in their relationship with Hollanders, in the time *before* and *after* migration. From the interview with Sylvia, a woman who arrived in the Netherlands in 1962, at thirty years of age, one can read:

*You had never been in the country, so you look up to the country a lot. Especially if you had been taught by a Dutch [teacher]. And, you know... And in this there is still also a... certain humility – you know. Humility. But this is something from the time of slavery. ‘Cause once we looked up to the Dutch. You know<sup>12</sup>*

Interestingly Sylvia talks about ‘humility’ as ‘inferiority’, for example saying that had a lot of esteem for the Netherlands. This is something that is not only learned through the process of ‘colonial acculturation’ I discussed in the two previous chapters, but it is also something which descends from a self-representation of Afro-Surinamese which had been inherited from the time of slavery and evangelisation. This is the way Raurette expressed her attitude towards Dutch people once she arrived in Rotterdam:

*You looked up at them. ‘Cause you were taught to do so. You had to look up to them. And this remained so for a long time. Until a certain moment when I thought “No, we are the same. She is not better than me”. [...] I was looking up to them in the beginning a bit, ‘cause this was a bit from the slavery time.*

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12 *From the original:* «Je bent nooit naar het land geweest, dus je denkt heel wat van het land. Vooral als je onderwijs krijgt van een Nederlandse. En weet je wel... En dat heeft nog ook een... dat nederigheid – hè. Nederigheid. Maar dat is een stukje van de slaventijd. Want vroeger keken wij op tegen de Nederlanders. Weet je wel».

[...] *You learnt about the winter...And about 'the paradise'. [Laughs]. The paradise-Netherlands! And the humility in that!*<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to notice the fact that Raurette made use of the image of the Netherlands as a 'paradise', as a representation of the Netherlands which kept coming back in many interviews and seemed to constitute a classic trope of the narratives circulating between Surinamese migrants about the mother land<sup>14</sup>.

My point here is that an idealised image of the Netherlands (Paradise Netherlands) is associated in Raurette's narrative with a sentiment of inferiority – *humility* she said – which she thus understood as an inheritance of slavery. This chain of associations signals, in my view, the fact that process of subjectification of these women taking place along their migratory path were marked by an inevitable *hierarchy*. This is the hierarchy which features the distinction between subjects who belong, although in different positions, to a 'social space' that has been shaped by a specifically colonial history of representations along the axes of class, gender and 'race'/ethnicity. Colonial discourses and their legacies are those which nurture the inequality of those representations, as do the material life conditions at the basis of these subjects' needs and desires. I will not fully discuss here the value of slavery-legacies in this hierarchical positioning, but I will instead continue to elaborate on it in the second part of this dissertation. Then I will be able to draw a clear connection between these interviewees' feelings and their successive working experience.

For now, I would like to remain with the interviewees' memories of the first moment in which they grasped that, rather than being one of reciprocity, the cultural exchange between the Netherlands and Suriname was based on a mono-directional imposition. This cultural imposition emerged in the last pages as intrinsically asymmetrical, based on the hegemony of the Dutch (and European) culture and the erasure of the Surinamese culture. The asymmetry lied in the fact that, while the Netherlands (as a country and a culture) had occupied a central place in the imagination of the interviewees since their youth, the same had not happened conversely in the minds of the Dutch concerning Suriname.

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13 *From the original:* « Je zag tegen ze op. Want dat was je geleerd. Je moest tegen ze opkijken. En dat heeft heel lang geduurd. Tot op een gegeven moment, dat ik dacht "Nee, we zijn gelijk. Zij is niet beter dan mij" [...] Ik keek in het begin een beetje tegen ze op, want dat was een beetje van de slaventijd. [...] Je leerde dus over de winter... En over 'het paradijs' [Laughs]. Het paradijs Nederland! En de nederigheid daar».

14 Further proof of the fact that the image of the Netherlands as a 'paradise' was circulating among Surinamese migrants in the 1970s comes from the title which Bea Vianen gave to her novel *Het paradijs van Oranje* (*The paradise of the Orange*, 1974). The same metaphor was recently taken by the Dutch scholar Gert Oostindie for his essay on Caribbean migration to the Netherlands, which he titled *Het paradijs overzee* (*Paradise overseas*, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

In the first part of this dissertation, which finds in this chapter its conclusion, my aim was to prepare the ground for the explanation of how postcolonial subjects' emotions, ideas and beliefs play a role in their everyday working experience as migrant domestic labourers.

In this perspective, I have shown that the arrival in the Netherlands/Italy was a traumatic experience mainly because of the clash between the *real* Netherlands/Italy, and that which the subjects had *imagined* during their youth as a consequence of the 'colonial acculturation' they had been exposed to. What actually happened in this moment was the non-recognition of the ties between colonised and colonisers, with a consequent *underestimation* and *devaluation* of the cultural capital interviewees possessed. The example of Dutch/Italians being astonished by the language skills of the interviewees stands as paradigmatic case of this phenomenon.

In these stories, the journey to Europe coincides with the recognition of the fact that it was actually *normal* that Dutch and Italians did not know anything about them, about their cities, their languages, their culture; that it was *normal* for them to be at the bottom of society, and that their years of study and learning did not count enough to be *equal*; and that an intimate relationship with colonisers before migration did not correspond to a better experience upon arrival.

In other words, this meant that the 'postcolonial cultural capital' these women had accumulated in the colonies (their language skills, their cultural repertoire, their knowledge) did not count any more *after* their arrival in Italy or the Netherlands, or, at least, did not count as much as they expected. This is explained, in Beverly Skeggs' terms, by the fact that the cultural capital accumulated by groups at the lowest social positioning will never become 'symbolic capital', the capital which is socially recognised and valued. All the skills these women 'had' were not enough to reach a better social position than that of the postcolonial migrant woman who performs care work.

From the next chapter, I will show how this translated into Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women's narratives of their experiences as home-carers and domestic workers in the Netherlands and Italy. Thus my analysis will focus on their everyday tactics used to negotiate and sustain their labour segregated positions in the society of settlement.

## Chapter 7

### A LABOUR NICHE FOR POSTCOLONIAL MIGRANT WOMEN

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«Je suis une femme immigrée et mon orgueil doit être épargné.  
Sans travaille, je ne suis plus rien»  
Fatima Elayoubi, *Prière à la Lune*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter starts the second part of the dissertation by looking at the question of the entrance of Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women into the domestic service sector. In this discussion I will refer mainly to the notion of ‘ethnic labour niche’ which was inaugurated by Nancy and Theodore Graves in 1974 but has since then acquired a variety of meanings. The definition of which I will make use descends from Suzanne Model’s simple definition of ‘ethnic labour niche’ as a sector in which an ethnic group is over-represented (Model, 1993, p.164) with an emphasis on the *relevance* of an ‘ethnic labour niche’ to the integration of a migrant group (Schrover *et al.*, 2007). As a contribution to this debate, I contend that postcoloniality is a determinant factor in domestic and domiciliary care work becoming an ethnic labour niche for Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women.

It is true that the mechanisms for the entrance in this sector were significantly different in the cases of Afro-Surinamese in Rotterdam women and Eritreans in Rome. Indeed, while in the Eritrean case their first employment was found predominantly through the on-call system (thus directly from Eritrea), the Afro-Surinamese found their first job only *after* their arrival in the destination country. This difference has repercussions on the fact that while Eritreans more straightforwardly mentioned the employment in the domestic sector as motivation for their migration, the Afro-Surinamese presented a variety of motivations: a general improvement of their socio-economic conditions (yet not directly linked to any specific job opportunity) or the reunion with a husband or fiancé who had left Suriname some time earlier. Afro-Suri-

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1 *My translation:* «I am an immigrant woman, my pride has to be saved. Without work, I’m nothing». This is taken from the novel published in 2006 by Fatima Elayoubi, a Maghrebi woman, writing about her experience as a domestic worker in France.

nameese interviewees indeed often started to do care work only after previous working experiences in factories or offices, or after a period of unemployment.

Yet, great commonalities can be found in the influence of the coloniser-colonised relationship in characterising interviewees' entrance in the sector at the level of representation and identity formation. These show how postcoloniality is fundamental in going beyond the frame of 'globalisation of care' which, I contend, is not always enough to account for the historical roots of the niche of paid domestic work.

In this light, I will demonstrate in the first paragraph that, in order to fully understand migrants' access to different labour sectors, it is essential to look at the colonial legacies at play at the level of representation and of the strategies of disciplining they encountered. Moreover, with reference to the notion of 'coloniality of power', I will try to introduce the question of postcoloniality into the debate on niche formation. The rest of the chapter will be devoted to the analysis of interviewees' personal narratives where the representations which accompanied Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women's entrance in this sector are conveyed. Thus, I will outline two main differences between the two groups' experiences. The first difference concerns the social process framing the entrance of these women in the sector: while Eritreans see themselves as 'substitutes' of Italian women previously occupying the same niche, Afro-Surinamese see themselves as opening a new working sector to resist economic and social segregation. The second difference concerns the relevant actors that, between others, facilitated these women's access to this labour niche: religious people in the case of the Eritreans versus employment agencies for the Afro-Surinamese.

This analysis has a preparatory role for my chapter eight where I will discuss the importance of an 'ethnicisation' of skills in the performance of this work.

## 1. NICHE FORMATION AND COLONIALITY OF POWER

Migrants' access to labour markets in foreign countries is often characterised by their concentration in the same types of jobs. Migrants have often tended to group themselves in what are called 'labour niches' or 'ethnic economic enclaves', i.e. categories of work marked by a high homogeneity of its members along national, 'racial'/ethnic, linguistic, religious or gendered features. This results in a situation of over-representation of co-nationals in specific jobs. Most famous examples are those of Italians as ice-cream makers, Afro-American women as hairdressers and domestic workers, Latinos/as as janitors, Filipinos as seamen, Chinese as laundry specialists and restaurant workers.

Behind this phenomenon is the fact that, between the 1950s and the 1970s, the segregation of migrants at the lower level of segmented labour markets was often seen as 'beneficial' by policy makers inasmuch as it increased opportunities of social mobility for nationals and residents. In addition, as demonstrated by Stephen Castels

and Alastair Davidson, migrants tended to concentrate in similar jobs also as a «result of both racism in employment practices and a lack of ‘human capital’» (Castels & Davidson, 2000, p.74). This pushed them mainly into factory work, construction work, small trade and private service. The increase in the entrance of migrants in a niche, and their enduring permanence in it, are also reinforced by their tendency to settle in the same neighbourhoods, which creates communities of people living and working in close relations. For Castels and Davidson this picture applies, in particular, to the labour segregation of migrants arriving from the former colonies of European states (ibidem).

Gender and ‘race’/ethnicity both appear to be crucial in the case of migrant women as domestic workers, when we consider the interaction between processes of ‘ethnic niching’ and of gendered labour segregation that characterises this sector. Paid domestic work is indeed, in Nancy Green’s formulation, a ‘classic immigrant women’s niche’ (Green, 1997, in Schrover *et al.*, 2007, p.531). In fact, in the last three decades, paid domestic work has emerged as an often unique employment opportunity for transnational migrant women, in most industrialised countries. Josè Moya (2007) has worked on an historical and transnational comparative analysis of those features which make of paid domestic work a labour niche. As explanatory factors for the entrance of certain groups in this sector, he has pointed to: the preference of workers for this type of job over other types; the influence of personal contacts and networks in attracting increasing numbers of co-nationals; and, finally, the match between the ‘cultural preferences of pre-migratory origin’ from the side of employers and employees at the same time (pp. 571-572). Moya thus concludes that domestic work represents an important example of what has been defined as ‘worker-dominated niches’ i.e. when a particular ethnic group can *dominate* a sector, regardless of its exclusive ownership (Wang, 2004, p.482). This means that, usually, paid domestic work is not *exclusively* occupied by one group but that one specific group can be over-represented in comparison with others therein.

But let us take a step back and ask what the reasons are for the over-representation of some migrant women in the private domestic sector. The answer is to be found in these women’s difficult entrance point in the labour market, and in the fact that this position is located at the lowest level of society. The majority of migrant women tend to be pushed to the bottom of the labour market, and to be relegated to jobs which are considered too humble, too tiring, too dirty or too dangerous, and at the same time not remunerative enough, by the residents or by previous migrants. In a sentence, migrant women perform the ‘3 D’ jobs: dirty, dangerous and demanding (Anderson, 2000).

Mirjana Morokvasic first explained that women are generally treated as ‘cheap labour’ because of their vulnerability, their flexibility and their undemanding attitude:

[women] represent a ready made labour supply which is, at once, the most vulnerable, the most flexible and, at least in the beginning, the least demanding work force. They have been incorporated into sexually segregated labour markets at the lowest stratum in high technology industries, or at the 'cheapest' sectors in those industries which are labour intensive and employ the cheapest labour to remain competitive. (Morokvasic, 1984, p.886)

Gender and ethnicity are thus crucial axes on which segregation in the job markets is played out.

Yet, in the purpose of this study, I want to take our discussion further and start to investigate the way postcoloniality played a role in this phenomenon. In order to do so, I am looking at the concept of 'coloniality of power' as elaborated by Anibal Quijano (1993) and further developed by Ramon Grosfoguel (2003). Starting from the assumption that the cultural implications of the colonial past did not simply vanish with the end of colonialism, they demonstrate how 'coloniality' still shapes power relationships between people today. Furthermore, they contend that by looking at a plurality of ideas, images, values, attitudes, and social practices which circulate in all systems of social power in contemporary societies, we can recognise the legacies of the colonial regime under which they were shaped (Quijano, 1993, pp. 167-169).

The concept of 'coloniality of power' is applied by Grosfoguel to the question of labour segregation. In the labour discrimination suffered by migrants in their former colonising countries, Grosfoguel sees «the reproduction and persistence of the old colonial racial/ethnic hierarchies, in a postcolonial and post-imperial world» (2003, p.197). The fact is that the arrival of large numbers of postcolonial migrants in Europe has maintained the system of representation which existed in the imperial peripheries and which is now thus present also in the heart of 'imperial metropolises'. Taking the case of Puerto Rican migrants, Grosfoguel demonstrates that when we talk about 'postcolonial' migrants we address not only a long *past* relationship between former colonisers and colonised, but also migrants' «*current* stereotypical representation in the European imagination». Postcolonial migrants' «subordinated location in the metropolitan labour market» (ibidem) gives evidence to the profound consequences of a surviving colonial mindset.

In the next pages I will show that interviewees' experience demonstrates that the labour segregation of migrants and the formation of working niches are due not simply to 'racial'/ethnic factors, but more specifically to what Grosfoguel and Quijano call the 'coloniality of power'.

## 2. SUBSTITUTION ACROSS CLASS AND 'RACE'/ETHNICITY

The majority of migrant women arriving in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s were channelled into the domestic sector which, in those years, employed especially Eritreans, Cape Verdeans and Filipinas (see Andall, 2000). These years inaugurated the transition of paid domestic work from a job for working class Italians into a labour niche for migrant women, Eritreans among them. During the 1970s, indeed, this sector became very *relevant* to Eritrean migrant women, since 89% of the Eritrean women who were working in Italy in the early 1980s were employed in it (Scalzo, 1984). This makes of paid domestic work an ethnic labour niche for Eritreans in the sense that it was relevant, as Model would say, to their integration, although they did not possess the exclusive ownership of it, in Wang's terms.

But how did the protagonists of this phenomenon 'make sense' of their entrance and stay in this niche? They understood it in terms of 'substitution': they were *simply* 'taking the place' of those Italians who did not want to do the work any longer. This is the way in which Anna, who arrived in 1967, sees her story: Eritrean women 'took' what Italians 'left'. And she found in the opinion of an Italian public figure (the minister) the confirmation of her thoughts:

*When [Italians] got pissed off, [Eritreans] came to take their place, they came in this way. Eh no...I say... What Italians left, [Eritreans] took. Who was the guy who said the other day... ? The minister: "They came to wash [away] our problems, our kitchens, [to do] humble jobs, the work that Italy didn't want to do". That Italians didn't want to do<sup>2</sup>*

The story, however, has also to be understood in the context of postcolonial relationships between Italy and Eritrea. Why did all these women come from Eritrea in particular? The question finds an answer in the opinion of Anna and her friend Amarech who intervened in the conversation. In the following long excerpt two women are seen vividly discussing the issue:

**Amarech:** *Selassie made peace with Italy... the Consulates made an agreement... In this way we could leave [of our country], if not, where could we have gone?!*

**Anna:** *And there were all those domestics in Italy... In Italy it was no longer well looked upon as a job for Italian people... Then it came easy for them to ask, for little money, the girls from Eritrea!*

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2 *From the original:* «Quando [gli italiani] si sono arrabbiati, [gli eritrei] son venuti a prendere il posto, son venuti così. Eh no... dico... Quello che hanno lasciato gli italiani, [gli eritrei] hanno preso. Chi è quello che l'altro giorno diceva... ? Il ministero: "Son venuti a lavare i nostri guai, le nostre cucine, [a fare] i lavori umili, il lavoro che non ha voluto fare l'Italia". Che gli italiani non hanno voluto fare».

*Amarech: The Italians knew that we were good at working, because they were there! – they are still there...*

*Anna: 'The girls in Asmara are good, are smart, are clean' they knew that!*<sup>3</sup>

Showing a great knowledge of Italian society, interviewees see their working experience as contextualised in an historical phase wherein the decolonization of Eritrea coincided and intertwined with social and class transformations happening in Italy at the same time<sup>4</sup>. Thus, 'the girls from Asmara' are the best candidates for solving 'the problem' of caring and cleaning in the Italian household, within a system in which welfare provision was uniquely based on families' private arrangements (Andall, 2000). Of all foreigners, the 'good, smart and clean' Eritrean girls were preferred. What is at stake is very important here: for the Italian state the maintenance of a precarious social system, for Ethiopia-Eritrea the possibility of opening migration channels and profiting from migrants' remittances.

This dialogue offers, in my opinion, a good example of the way individual subjects 'make sense' of wider socio-economic phenomena which affected their individual experiences. The reasons that they see as being at the root of their migration are, indeed, fundamental in their own understanding of their migratory experience and, thus, in shaping their self-representation and their *identity narrative* (Yuval-Davis, 2001). In fact, the quote reveals in a nutshell what I believe to be the peculiar features of postcolonial women's experience in domestic work.

First of all, we touch here on the roots of the binary which generally characterises postcolonial narratives of servitude: being *needed* for essential reproductive tasks, on one side, and being at the *lowest* level in society, on the other side, in an opposition which echoes the postcolonial 'othering' (Spivak, 1985) as I discussed in the first chapter. The dichotomy of inferiority/ necessity of subaltern subjects (Gramsci, 1971) is held together by the fact that their work is an irreplaceable response to those 'essential needs' (which Anna summarises as: «to wash our problems, our kitchens, the humble jobs») which are commonly *abjected* in bourgeois societies and yet coincide with their reproduction, as Kristeva (1980) and Mosse (1985), among others, say. Here we find the formation in postcoloniality of a representation which today still stigmatises

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3 *From the original: Amarech: «Selassìè aveva fatto la pace con l'Italia ... i consolati si sono messi d'accordo... Così siamo potuti uscire, sennò dove andavamo?!» / Anna: «E tutte queste domestiche in Italia... In Italia a quei tempi non era ben visto [come lavoro per] il popolo italiano... Allora gli è stato facilmente di chiedere, per pochi soldi, le ragazze dall'Eritrea!» / Amarech: «Gli italiani sapevano che noi lavoravamo bene perché stavano lì! – fino ad adesso stanno lì...» / Anna: «Le ragazze di Asmara sono brave, sono intelligenti, sono pulite, [lo] sapevano!»*

4 I am here referring to the changes in the organisation of the family structure in Italy and to the increasing participation of women in the labour market occurring during the 1970s. For further details see Andall (2000), Bergamaschi *et al.* (1995), Righi (2003).

domestic workers as a «*lower kind of people for lower kind of jobs*», in the words of Barbara Ehrenreich (2002).

Secondly, these two quotes also emphasise Italians' *previous knowledge* of Eritreans as 'suitable girls' for domestic work as a determinant factor for the formation of the niche. Conversely, it is also said that Eritrean women 'knew' how to satisfy Italians' wishes. In this, interestingly, the qualities which Anna considers to be fundamental in 'making the match' between Italians and Eritreans reveal her absorption of the colonisers' perspective: her description echoes that of the 'good savage' who achieved civilisation becoming good, smart and clean. In this I see the crucial example of the inheritance of domestic and caring skills which have been shaped under a regime of servitude, an issue which I will develop fully throughout this second part of this dissertation.

In conclusion, these quotes from Anna and Amarech are very important, first of all, because they connect the experience *before* migration with the one *after* the migration. Secondly, because it shows how the people's understanding of their entrance in the niche is based not only on economic factors, but also, and especially I contend, on cultural conditions which are shaped by postcoloniality.

FIG. 9 Eritrean woman in Rome, 1977. (From Federico Bruno *et al.*, 1977)



### 3. RELIGIOUS FIGURES AND EMPLOYMENT

Many interviewees mentioned Italian religious people (missionaries, nuns and priests) as intermediaries in their search for a job, especially when contracts had already been organised from Eritrea. It should be made clear however, that this was not the only channel, but only one of many. As I said in the third chapter, agencies and other types of brokers or informal networks also used to support Eritrean women in their search.

Yet, I believe it to be important to focus on this particular channel for its unique role at the level of shaping the cultural context of interviewees' experience. In fact, when priests, nuns and missionaries actively administered the intermediation this could offer to prospective employers, as to workers, a warranty on the *trustworthiness* and *goodness* of the employment. Italian families found in people from missions or parishes in Eritrea, advice on the *suitability* of these Eritrean girls for the job in Italy. For this reason, although other subjects were available as intermediaries, I believe that religious people were preferred as reference-persons because they could offer the *cultural mediation* which was often necessary. Here, I will investigate in what measure this 'cultural mediation' influenced these women's migratory paths at the level of the representations surrounding their experience.

All this is well exemplified, in my view, by the story of Anna, a woman born in a village outside Asmara in 1939. After the death of her mother, she found employment as a cleaner at the Italian Comboni mission in Asmara. After some years of work, the nuns of the mission suggested to her to move to Italy where people needed 'good' and 'reliable' help for domestic chores. In Anna's view the missionaries had a predominant role in organising the flow of Eritrean girls leaving their country as domestic workers:

*My dear, these Combonians already knew everything! Them, as well. Then they were saying: "We could take these girls, we bring them to Italy... - they [were saying] - in another family<sup>5</sup>.*

She travelled to Italy then in 1967, where a Combonian priest accompanied her to her first employment for the Mirabella<sup>6</sup> family. Anna worked in this family for a long time, in very difficult working conditions due to the abusive character of her female employer. At one point, however, she decided to run away and ask for shelter at the Combonian convent in Rome. There, she told her unlucky story to the same priest who, years before, had introduced her to this family. Her narrative very interestingly is centred around her disappointment in understanding that her 'preparation' was not enough. In her words:

*I said to the missionaries: "I don't understand this woman! Nothing of what I brought with me from Asmara — Anna knows how to iron, how to work, how to understand — none of this helped me, father!"<sup>7</sup>*

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5 *From the original* «Figlia mia, questi Comboniani sapeva già tutto! Anche loro. Poi dicevano: "Magari prendiamo queste ragazze, le portiamo in Italia... - [dicevano] anche loro - [in] un'altra famiglia» .

6 All names of employers are pseudonyms.

7 *From the original*: «Ho detto ai missionari: "Io non la capisco questa signora! Niente di quello con cui sono venuta da Asmara – Anna sa stirare, sa lavorare, sa capire – niente di quello mi ha aiutato, padre!"».

On this occasion, she also contacted the Combonian nuns who had invited her to migrate, years before. In the following excerpt, Anna remembers the nuns talking about the fact that Anna had been the first Eritrean (of the many that followed) who left the mission to go to Italy, and thus she was *chosen* because of her skilfulness in domestic chores and her good character. Yet, despite that ‘skilfulness’, Anna explains that:

*The nuns who were there were surprised about how I found myself in Italy: “I am sorry, Anna. You were ‘the only one’ that we could take to Italy, but you were unlucky...”*<sup>8</sup>

These quotes bring us back to the question of ‘colonial acculturation’ that I discussed in the first part of the thesis, and confirms that missions had a great function in ‘teaching’ Italian customs, including cleaning and caring practices, which were then considered to be crucial for a good working experience in Italy. Learning ‘the Italian way to do things’ was fundamental in these women’s self-representation as ‘suitable’ for working for Italians and in reassuring them against the fear of failing in their migratory project. Moreover, when Anna tells of having been considered by the Combonian Sisters «the only one» (meaning ‘the best’) she is conveying the role of colonialism in defining the working skills that are considered most valuable for the entrance in the niche. In this sense, Anna’s disillusion offers a very interesting perspective on the way postcoloniality affected the entrance of Eritrean women in the niche of domestic work in Italy.

This brings me back to what Jose Moya calls ‘cultural preferences in the pre-migratory origin’, to argue that these ‘cultural preferences’ acquire a special meaning when the ‘culture’ of the country of origin has been influenced, modified, contaminated by the culture of the country of destination, by virtue of a colonial hegemonic presence. This fact differentiates postcolonial migrant experience from that of any other kind of migrant who might also have had cultural ties with the country of destination (e.g. the catholic religion for Filipinas in Italy) but these cannot reach the intensity of what a colonial domination might have left as inheritance which equipped migrants both at the material and symbolic level.

#### 4. THE ‘GOOD’ JOB

As I said in the third chapter, in the Netherlands the presence of black women workers in the care sector is overwhelming. The few stories I personally collected talk about

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8 *From the original*: «Le suore che erano lì si sono meravigliate [di] come mi sono trovata in Italia: “Mi dispiace, Anna. Eri ‘l’unica’ che potevamo portare in Italia, però non hai avuto fortuna...” ».

many Afro-Surinamese women who all did the same job: ‘a troop’ of black postcolonial women cleaning, feeding, and washing old and sick people, in Dutch society. When Afro-Surinamese interviewees illustrated their over-representation in this sector, they usually saw it as a reason of pride, as an example through which you can really ‘touch’ the *contribution* they made to Dutch society. I liked the way these ideas were expressed by Wilma, a woman living in the Netherlands since 1974. When she was talking about one of her last patients before her retirement, Ms. Gelderbloem, she happily remembered the following statement given by this elderly woman:

*This woman, she said: “I don’t know what I have with Surinamese, but everyone who comes here to work for me, is Surinamese!”<sup>9</sup>*

Wilma reported with affectionate tone this statement, which she took as a compliment for the service received. In my view, this statement signalled how common it had become for Dutch elderly to be assisted by a Surinamese woman.

Here I would like to suggest that the over-representation of Afro-Surinamese women in the Dutch care sector derives from a strategy of *resisting* the discriminations faced in the job market at large. The narratives of Afro-Surinamese women variously confirmed the convergence between the ‘need’ of Dutch society and their necessity of finding a good job. They were willing to do what no one else wanted to do. It was a demeaning job, yet *indispensable*. In comparison with the Eritrean case, the stigma attached to this job was compensated in some ways by the fact that it was appreciated by the elderly. This is what Josephine, who worked in this sector from 1967, explains with an ironic tone, when saying:

*Because they couldn’t find any white person to clean shit [Laughs].  
Yes?! Are you serious?  
Yes, oh yes. And well paid hè<sup>10</sup>*

This quote testifies to the intricate, colliding forces which permeate these women’s working experiences: the hierarchy between black and white subjects; the repulsion of excrements, dirtiness, related to bodily products; and, finally the importance of finding ‘a good job’ in the perspective of migratory success.

In these quotes one finds a new articulation of the tension between inferiority and necessity, in the fact that what repels white/superior subjects is instead socially appreciated when black/inferior subjects take it in charge: in relieving whites from degrading tasks, blacks find their *appropriate* - Skeggs would say *worthwhile* - social positioning. The representations and the social values attached to this tension are filled by colonial legacies. Indeed, both Wilma and Josephine suggest again the

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9 *From the original*: «Die mevrouw, ze zegt: “Ik weet niet wat ik met Surinamers heb, maar iedereen die hier bij me komt werken, zijn Surinamers!».

10 *From the original*: «Omdat ze geen blanken konden krijgen om de poep te gaan opruimen [Lacht]. / **Ja?! Ben je serieus?** / Ja, oh ja. En goed betaald hè».

coloniser-colonised dichotomy in describing *appropriate* Surinamese social position in Dutch society: who is the *carer* and who is the *cared for* – as who serves and who is served – derives from a clear-cut distinction. This process reveals manoeuvres of social differentiation and control which we have seen to be typically applied to post-colonial subjects (Stoler, 1995) and white working-class women (Skeggs, 1997).



FIG. 10 In front of the Willems Bridge in Rotterdam, 1970s. (From private collection).

It is interesting to notice that, in comparison with Eritrean women, Afro-Surinamese tend to emphasise the decency and respectability of their job, and thus position themselves vis-à-vis the phenomenon of abjection in a slightly different way. Although also in the Netherlands care work is considered a very simple and low status job, the conditions of employment of these women were surely better than those experienced by Eritreans as live-in domestics. In fact, the different features of the work performance offer to interviewees the possibility of enacting different narrative tactics whose meaning will be further illustrated in chapters nine and ten.

##### 5. AGENCIES AND ‘ETHNIC’ REPRESENTATIONS

As I said in the third chapter, the strong predominance of Afro-Surinamese women in the care sector is due to the interconnection between the changes occurring in Dutch society between the end of the 1960s and the 1970s and the discriminatory tendencies against postcolonial migrants. I am here interested in focusing on some of the key ac-

tors of this phenomenon: home care agencies. Through the analysis of interviewees' memories on the mediation of these agencies I believe that one can see how a postcolonial form of cultural capital was crucial already at the moment of recruitment.

Various agencies run by Dutch people seem to have started to prefer 'black women' in their job placements. In fact, another interviewee, Cynthia, remembers the manager of one of these agencies telling her that patients themselves started to demand more and more black migrant women for the service provision. It is interesting to understand how, in this context, agencies performed a 'mediation', not only at the economic level, but also at the cultural level, the encounter between demand and supply. Let us examine the features of this type of mediation.

In particular, interviewees remember that agencies preferred Surinamese women who had a diploma or some sort of experience in care work: from those who had attended Housekeeping School to those trained to work in hospitals or nursing homes. Marita arrived in Rotterdam in 1980 - she is the interviewee with the latest date of arrival - when the sector had already taken shape. She explained:

*'Cause look, in Suriname I've also done childcare. Which fit nicely with it... you know. 'Cause when I went for the job interview, I was asked why I had chosen this job. And then...yes, I even didn't know. I just said it, and this amazed [laughs]...this has so amazed Joke!'<sup>11</sup>*

What is interesting is that the agency found so valuable for the entrance in the job sector a type of education which was rather common among the Afro-Surinamese women of Marita's generation. She explained to me indeed that at that time only studies related to sanitation, infancy or housekeeping were considered to be 'good' for girls. Most of the Afro-Surinamese women I spoke with had such secondary education, sometimes because of a choice, others just following the general custom. We find here an important example of the making of the 'match' between gendered models to which black girls in the colonies had been educated, and their later channelling into specific work sectors.

A second feature of agencies' recruitment strategies emerged from the interview with Raurette who worked as home carer after her arrival in 1965. She explained to me that Surinamese women were in high demand as care workers after a woman from the Caribbean, Ms. Moelen, had started her own agency:

*It all started with the Surinamese... and the big part at the beginning, in the 60s, was done by Surinamese women. It was a Surinamese or Antillean woman who started the agency. 'Cause she came here...and she said: "In*

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11 *From the original:* «Want kijk, in Suriname, ik heb ook kinderverzorging gedaan. Dus het sloot mooi er bij aan... weet je. Want toen ik ook voor het sollicitatiegesprek ging, werd mij gevraagd waarom ik dit werk heb gekozen. En toen... ja, ik weet het zelf niet. Ik heb het gewoon verteld, en dat boeide [lacht]... dat heeft Joke zo geboeid!».

*Suriname our elderly...we care for them! There aren't nursing homes". [...]  
This was private. So it went through word-of-mouth<sup>12</sup>*

This quote contains in a nutshell what I will show to be the recurring idea regarding the association between Surinamese women and caring skills. This crucially revolves around the representation of 'respect' for elderly people as an 'ethnic' characteristic of Surinamese society, by way of an essentialist move which yet, in interviewees' eyes, makes their contribution to the care sector in the Netherlands highly important and worthwhile. While I will better analyse the effects of this representation in chapter nine, I would like here to argue that the emergence of the stereotyped representation of Afro-Surinamese women as ever-nurturing<sup>13</sup>, is a gendered and ethnicised representation which cannot be dissociated from the inheritance of domestic slavery.

In conclusion, the fact that Afro-Surinamese women had such a smooth entrance in the elderly care sector was not without repercussions at the level of representation. Agencies' managers were literally 'encouraging' Afro-Surinamese women to take advantage of their background, promoting an essentialist image of Surinamese women as particularly *gifted* in the care of the elderly. Moreover, the example of women like Ms. Moelen, mentioned by Raurette, offered a self-entrepreneurial model, able to maximise her 'resources' and find her own migratory success thanks to the cultural/economic interconnection between what 'Suriname had to offer' and what 'the Netherlands missed'. In other words, when looking at the role of those agencies, we find again that labour niche formation was due to the interrelation of multiple factors among which migrants' *marketable* skills, which derived from specific gendered and 'racial'/ethnic representations, were of crucial importance.

In this way I explain the fact that the care sector offered to interviewees the possibility of transforming into paid work something that, on the basis of their 'ethnicised' background, already allegedly belonged to their 'personality' (Skeggs, 1997). In chapter seven I will illustrate the details of the interrelation between women's representation of their 'personalities' and the 'ethnicisation of skills' for domestic/care work.

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12 *From the original:* «Het begon allemaal met Surinamers... en het grootste deel in het begin, in de jaren 60, werd door Surinaamse vrouwen gedaan. Dat was een Surinaamse of een Antilliaanse mevrouw die met het bureau was begonnen. Omdat ze kwam hier... en ze zei: "In Suriname, onze oudjes... wij zorgen voor ze! Je kende geen bejaardenhuizen". [...] Dat was puur particulier. Dus dan, via mond op mond ging het».

13 Another account of the important role of this representation of Afro-Surinamese as ever nurturing subjects can be found in Gloria Wekker's book (Wekker, 2006) when she discusses the issue of Afro-Surinamese women integration in Dutch society and the easiness with whom they find occupation in the care sector.

## CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated that Eritrean and Surinamese interviewees see their working experience as shaped by the overlapping phenomena of gendered segregation in labour markets and of the formation of ethnic labour niches. We have indeed seen that the working integration of migrant women is shaped by their gender and 'racial'/ethnic identity to the point of grouping them in specific working sectors, placed at the bottom of the job market ladder, as is the case with domestic work.

This chapter aimed to consider the different modalities of 'niching' in Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women's experiences, in the light of postcoloniality. I have shown that this process can take two different directions. One can be observed when a 'new' group takes over a niche previously occupied by another group of migrants or by a disadvantaged social group, as its privileged sector of occupation. The second case is at play when newcomer migrants inaugurate a new type of work, selling new products or offering new services which were previously rare or unknown in the society of settlement. In this second case, one talks about migrants' capacity to *commodify* several characteristics related to their ethnic backgrounds. While I described the Eritrean case as belonging more to the first option, I suggested that Afro-Surinamese' experience took the second direction, yet not in the form of starting a *completely* new business, but in the sense of *marketing* their skills in conjunction with the expansion of a service which was scarcely developed before.

While I will analyse the implications of this hypothesis for the job *performance* in the following chapter, I have offered here an explanation on the way this process affected Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women's understanding of their *entrance* into the sector of domestic service. In so doing, I highlighted the importance of intermediaries as an element which carries a profound meaning for the construction of the representation circulating about these women's groups as postcolonial migrant subject. The narratives in which the role of these intermediaries is explained appear to be centred around a fundamental *continuity* between the colonial past and the later migratory condition.

In the light of these considerations, I suggest the niche of paid domestic work for postcolonial women to be crucially conditioned by the colonial past, not only in establishing personal contacts and networks facilitating the arrival of workers, but also in shaping the representation of the skills which are considered necessary for the access to the niche.

## Chapter 8

### NARRATIVES AND PRACTICES OF WORK AND IDENTITY

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«She beats time on the rugs,  
blows dust from the broom  
like dandelion spores, each one  
a wish for something better»  
Natasha Trethewey, *Domestic work*<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I want to explore *what* is this ‘experience of care and domestic work’ that interviewees shared. In other words, I am interested in what lies beneath the label ‘domestic work’, and in how this is modified by the particular condition of postcolonial migrants. If it is true that, as Jaqueline Andall says, «black women’s social identity was largely constructed around the basis of their labour» (2000, p.193), I am here arguing for a performative dimension in interviewees’ identity narratives *as* postcolonial migrant domestic workers.

Thus, having discussed in the previous chapter the conditions of entrance of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese interviewees in this labour niche, I am here offering narratives on *what* are the basic features of their labour activity. What is the job of postcolonial migrant domestic workers and how does its performance contribute to the construction of their identity? In the following pages, I will demonstrate how in the everyday performance of this job, *the doing* of specific tasks is a fundamental element of such a process of identification. This process is affected by the intersection of several axes of differentiation, primarily gender, class and ‘race’/ethnicity, in the realm of postcoloniality. It characterizes the *postcolonial domestic worker* as a paradigmatic figure who expresses herself in a narrative dimension.

In the first paragraph of this chapter I will start by sketching some conceptual references that will later allow me to talk of cleaning and caring practices as a realm

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1 With her first collection of poetry, *Domestic Work* (1999), Natasha Trethewey won the inaugural Cave Canem Poetry Prize for the best first book by an African American poet. A full version of this poem can be found at: <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/025.html>.

of identification. In order to do so I will introduce the definition provided by Judith Butler of *performative identity*. While Butler uses this notion to talk about gender-identity, I will take the relationship between performance and identity in a wider perspective and use that as a starting point in order to question the relationship between processes of identification and everyday labour practices. I will also develop the connection between domestic labour and the notion of *practices* - a notion that I already briefly illustrated in chapter one - offered by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel De Certeau. This connection, for me, is possible through reference to the work of Jean-Claude Kaufmann, which I find crucial for the analysis of cleaning and caring activities as fields of identity construction. I will underline in particular Kaufmann's emphasis on rhythm and repetition which I put in connection with the performative character of domestic work.

In the following paragraphs, while appropriating these theories, I will simultaneously introduce a postcolonial approach on the basis of the material offered by interviewees' narratives. I will subsequently focus in particular on the importance of narratives about domestic and care tasks, their *rhythms* and their *gestures*, as a terrain of subjects' self-representation and of expression of the power relations characterising their work experience. Afterwards, I will explore the importance of subjects' positioning within multiple identity-labels related to their job. Then I will show how different people try to challenge bureaucratic and rigid definitions which constrain the complexity of postcolonial migrant subjectivity. In the fourth paragraph, I will analyse the representations regarding competing female models (white mistress vs. black maid) which emerge from the accounts of live-in domestic workers and which are in line with the tradition of colonial servitude. In so doing, I will begin to elaborate on the question of 'time' as a tool of power enactment. These issues will be further developed in the fifth paragraph with reference to interview-material on the combination of exploitative working practices based on time restraint and identity negotiations between the worker and the employers' family.

On the whole, in this chapter my aim is to analyse the ways in which interviewees alternatively challenged or adapted to power dynamics affecting their job performance (tasks, rhythms, functions, etc.) and to the normative identification with their job performance (labelling, self-definition, etc.). In so doing, I will focus on individuals' everyday standardised experience as well on isolated moments of insurgence, in relation to the performance and definition of their work.

## 1. EVERYDAY DOMESTIC PRACTICES AND IDENTITY

Listening to recordings of in-depth interviews with domestics or home-carers, one might be surprised by the great amount of talk which regards detailed, lengthy lists of *what they had to do for madam/sir*. Through this specific recollection, the interviewee

is usually describing what it meant to her *to be* a domestic worker. The idea is that such a catalogue of domestic and caring actions, gestures, chores and duties contains in a nutshell all the ingredients to illustrate her 'personality', as a worker, as a woman, and as a migrant, simultaneously. In my view, these domestic and caring 'practices', or — as de Certeau says — 'ways of operating', shape the performative dimension of these women's experiences and, as a consequence, their process of identification as *postcolonial domestic workers* in white households.

The interconnection between identity and performativity has been extensively discussed by Judith Butler, who contended that identities are not stable and fixed over time. She provided a deconstruction of the category of gender saying that it is something «we do» rather than something «we are». This *doing* consists, in her view, of «the stylised repetition of acts through time» (Butler, 1999, p.179). Here lies her conceptualisation of *performativity* as recitation and repetition, as a practice which «enacts or produces what it names» (Butler, 1993a, p.23). In other words, identities (what we name) are enacted or made through the specific performance of certain acts. Conversely, each process of identification has a corresponding performative dimension, which is *conditio sine qua non* of its existence. Neither identities nor performances are set once-and-for-all, and it is actually on the relationship between them that we need to focus.

But what is the connection between ordinary, simple acts and wider systems of power? I will show how these acts can (or cannot) challenge dominant power systems, starting from the generally subaltern and minority position wherein subjects find themselves. Drawing on Michel Foucault's idea that in 'repetition' there is space for transformation, Butler insists that performative practices are simultaneously affected by 'constraint' and 'production'. In other words, these practices are, at the same time, embedded in hegemonic power relations and possess a contestatory value. In Butler's view, performances can challenge the fixed and stable definition of the *same* identities that they are enacting. In so doing, performance is a process of re-signification.

Further conceptual tools for the analysis of the following narratives come from a Bourdieuan analysis of domestic practices through the lens of the theory of *habitus*. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which I briefly described in chapter one, is the 'generative principle' which regulates everyday practices and which makes them appear as 'coherent and necessary' (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus the *habitus* is simultaneously *produced* by history while it *determines* individual and collective practices or, in other words, the regularities pertaining to a situation. Making use of this definition, Bourdieu looked at the meanings circulating in the domestic sphere with an anthropological analysis of the Kabyle house, in Morocco.

On the basis of Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus*, Jean-Claude Kaufmann (1997) developed the idea of domestic work as the ensemble of «rhythm of movements, of dance steps repeated and reinvented incessantly, of emotional hand to hand with

objects»<sup>2</sup> (p.10). In his view, changes in socio-cultural organisations across different times find in *gestures* a fertile terrain of transformation: disciplining procedures can re-shape them, forging new gestures and modifying old ones and, in so doing, operate a modification in the ‘order of things’ (p.24). Thus, Kaufmann took the case of domestic work to demonstrate how everyday gestures refer to our societal structures like families and households, echoing Althusser’s conception of the family as ‘archetypical ideological apparatus’ (Althusser, 1970). After the collection of dozens of interviews with men and women on the topic of housekeeping, he argued that domestic work is constituted by a series of reflex movements which are always based upon an immense ‘embodied knowledge’ (*savoir incorporé*). Observing cleaning’s ‘discrete automatism’, he says that «it is never about small gestures without importance»<sup>3</sup> (Kaufmann, 1997, p.196).

I find the work of Butler, Bourdieu and Kaufmann together extremely relevant for my analysis of the narratives of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women working in the domestic sphere, in which they ‘make sense’ of their everyday lives and of their power relationships with employers. It is in fact in their daily domestic/caring practices, that the power dimension of their experience comes to the fore. A specific articulation of power in contemporary societies applies to everyday practices in the domestic sphere and to the employer-employee relationship; the actual possibility for interviewees to challenge the labelled identities attached to these power relationships will be the research question leading us through this chapter.

## 2. RHYTHMS AND GESTURES OF CARE

I was always surprised by the fact that interviewees seemed to remember the time schedules of their past jobs remarkably well. This gave me the impression that each of their tasks had to be placed in the *right* position, in a *temporal* sense, and that they enjoyed the feeling of control coming from the repetition of the same chore at the same time of day. In fact, behind the enumeration of these tasks we find the symbolic identity constructions which permeate the realm of domestic and care service illustrated.

In this view, I am here offering two quotes from the interviews with Raurette and Georgina, that I find important to read in their entirety, despite being relatively long. Indeed, only the complete reading of them can convey their peculiar narrative construction: a slow and wordy explanation of daily tasks as the enumeration of actions, gestures and small chores which are repeated day after day, time after time. These narratives express the incorporation and personalisation of what Ann Oakley (1975)

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2 *My translation from:* «rythme des mouvements, des pas de danse sans cesse répétés et réinventés, du corps à corps émotionnel avec les choses».

3 *My translation from:* «il ne s’agit jamais de petits gestes sans importance».

demonstrated to be the fundamental characteristics of care and domestic reproduction: being circular, ineluctable, repetitive, monotonous, and ultimately necessary.

The first example is offered from a quote by Georgina, a woman who arrived in the Netherlands in 1972 to be reunited with her husband. Here, she describes her job as a live-in maid for a rich, old woman, Ms. Van der Meren, that she performed for several years on a private basis (not through an agency). Georgina interestingly constructed her narrative giving the impression that a 'ritual' was performed, in every day of work:

*In the morning, when I stood up, it was: to wake her up. The very first thing I did: to put on her arch support soles. 'Cause otherwise she couldn't walk. [...] And then [...] I was glad to help her with her dress, or with fixing a strap. Her bra especially I helped her with. And then I would go to the kitchen. 'Cause then [...] every morning rusks. Bolletje. Bolletje were her rusks with butter and jam and a cup of tea. And then we often sat at the table together to eat. The table had to be set. And then, when we had breakfast... Then she would go to her chair. [...] And then the two of us went walking. The whole Rojaard square. A very beautiful walk. Sitting on a bench in the park. And then simply back home on time for her to eat, or that she should leave, or do whatever else. I've to add that she went to concerts every Sunday. The Philharmonic Orchestra there in the centre of The Hague. Then I had to bring her there. And then I had to go again after two hours to pick her up. This was the 'ritual' for the Sunday<sup>4</sup>*

In Georgina's words we see the importance of scheduled times, of a precise sequence of actions as necessary tasks, one following the other: cooking, helping, walking and sitting, then asking and waiting. And everything had to follow a 'ritualised' programme, as she says when talking in particular about Sundays. The elderly woman conducted a monotonous life codified by rules and prescriptions which, interestingly, illustrate also her belonging to a certain class; from the demand to prepare the table

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4 *From the original:* «En 's morgens, als ik opstond, was het: haar wakker maken. Het aller-eerste wat ik deed: haar steunzolen aantrekken. Want anders kon ze niet lopen.[...] En dan [...] Ik help graag met haar jurk, of met een band vast doen. Haar bh vooral, daar hielp ik haar mee. En dan ging ik de keuken in. Want dan [...] iedere ochtend beschuitjes. Bolletje. Bolletje waren haar beschuitjes en met boter en met jam en een kopje thee. En dan zitten we vaak samen aan tafel te eten. De tafel moest gedekt worden. En dan, en als we hadden ontbeten...dan ging ze in haar eigen stoel. [...] En dan gingen we wandelen met zijn tweeën. Het hele Rojaardplein om. Echt lekker wandelen. Op een bankje zitten in het park. En dan gewoon weer thuis tegen de tijd dat ze moest eten, of dat ze weggaat, of wat dan doet. Ik moet er bij vermelden dat ze iedere zondag naar concerten ging. Het philharmonisch orkest daar in het centrum van Den Haag. Dan moest ik haar brengen. En dan moest ik haar weer na twee uurtjes gaan ophalen. Dat was het 'ritueel' voor de zondag».

for breakfast to her passion for classical music concerts. In this light, Georgina's narrative can be read as a list of gendered class/'race' specific 'dispositions' - as Bourdieu would say - related to domestic and care practices.

It is indeed with a double purpose that Georgina, like other interviewees, devoted so much attention to describing her working day: this at once illustrates her feelings in performing the job (boredom in this case) and the personality of the employer (her class or character). Everyday practices are indeed revelatory of people's social positioning and of the hierarchies between subjects, in their performance. Importantly, Georgina's role in this picture is the one of a black woman who has to assist and care for the rich white woman, a role due to the consolidated interconnection between bourgeois values and race based hierarchies which characterise black women's experiences in my understanding of Black Europe.

Raurette offered a slightly different example when talking about one of her favourite patients. In her narrative the focus is very much on what I explained to be 'body work' for Carol Wolkowitz, in chapter one. The description of the touching, washing, tending of an old man's body is a very good example of the combination between work and embodiment in caring tasks. In Raurette's words:

*So you had the whole care of the man. The whole care. So, throughout the entire day, you had a scheme of everything you had to do. [...] You had to care for him, give food, take him out of bed, put him in bed again, wash completely. So you knew the job... for which you had been educated. You did all of this for him. [...] Fix the dentures. Fix the dentures. Comb hair. Shaving. Everything. Shaving. Everything. So, you had to do everything.*

***Also shaving?!***

*Also shaving yes. Remove the dentures like that [she makes the gesture] from the mouth. Clean it. Brushing his mouth carefully. Put the dentures back it. Comb the hair. Quickly take care of the nails. Yes<sup>5</sup>*

Raurette's emphasis is on the sequence of 'things to do', their routine, their standardisation, but also their precision, their necessity, and their completeness. In this quote, repeating often the same words (especially names of body parts and of tasks) and abundantly using expressions such as 'everything' or 'again', Raurette conveys a feeling of monotony and automatism. In her words, the automatism affects also the

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5 *From the original:* «En dus de hele zorg had je van die meneer. De hele zorg. Dus de hele dag door, had je een heel schema wat je allemaal moest doen. [...] Je moest hem verzorgen, eten geven, uit bed halen, weer in bed, helemaal wassen. Dus je weet het werk... waarvoor je geleerd hebt. Dat deed je allemaal bij hem. [...] Gebit doen. Gebit doen. Haren kammen. Scheren. Alles. Scheren. Alles. Dus alles moet je doen./ **Ook scheren?** / Ook scheren ja. Het gebit zo [she makes the gesture] uit de mond. Schoonmaken. Poetsen. Weer in zijn mond. Haren kammen. Nagels even verzorgen. Ja»

body of the elderly person which seems to be an object in her hands which she moves, pulls, washes, brushes as if it was a doll.

Yet, her narrative does not convey any sense of boredom (which was more evident in the case of Georgina) but rather a sense of *pride*, a pride based on her ordered and indispensable function. In these words, we find the example of a black woman tending to and caring for a white body, bringing him the 'dignity' of cleanliness which is essential to a 'respectable' bourgeois lifestyle, as in the association between cleanliness and respectability illustrated by George Mosse (1985) and Julia Kristeva (1980). Moreover, following Ann Stoler's argument that I illustrated in the first chapter, I should stress here that it is *not* by chance that this function is in the hands of postcolonial women.

### 3. SELF-IDENTIFICATIONS BETWEEN CARE, CLEANING AND SERVITUDE

In looking at interviewees' narratives, I am searching for tools to problematise the processes of identification to which they have been subjected as postcolonial migrants, as black women and, most of all, as care and domestic workers. Thus, I find it important to discuss the connection between identification and interviewees' experiences related to their jobs, as I will do in this paragraph, taking the case of the Afro-Surinamese.

Each of the interviewees in Rotterdam had responded to my very general search for 'women who have been working in Dutch households.' Most of them said that they had provided 'private care' to a family, to a child or to an old Dutch person<sup>6</sup>. Yet, it soon emerged that these women had a very broad and flexible conception of their job, which left ample room for an independent self-identification with their working experience. For example, none of the people who did 'cleaning work' introduced herself as a *cleaner* (*alphahulp* or *schoonmaker*), but they used instead the name *carer* (*verzorger* or *thuiszorger*). In fact, they all perceived themselves as *thuiszorgers* as far as they saw their tasks as embedded in the emotional demands of the employer (or patient) and the intimate context in which the working relationship took place. This is the way in which, I argue, these women tended to challenge 'bureaucratic' and top-down imposed definitions of their jobs.

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6 Looking at the case of Afro-Surinamese women, it is interesting to notice that during the 1970s and 1980s the sector of domiciliary care was less regulated than it is now and any worker could provide most medical or sanitary services, also those that later could be done only by women with a specific education. In other words, only later regulations introduced a rigid distinction between 'cleaners' and 'carers' which did not apply to the early experience of these interviewees.

Let us first see the example of Wilma who was basically doing cleaning work, but yet presented her job as that of 'a carer' rather than 'a cleaner'. Describing her working day, Wilma said:

*The first thing that I had to do then [was] her bedroom, her bed... make it... or if it had to be washed, washing it. Clean her bedroom. [...] Water the plants. Dust, vacuum. And...yes... and around 11:00, then we used to drink coffee together. And have a small chat. And... yes... after that... I did the bathroom, toilet. Clean everything for her. And then I would clean the kitchen and the scullery. So this I did. Sometimes... possibly... ironing. Good. So this was what I did for her. Taking with me the rubbish-bags when I was going home. Yes<sup>7</sup>*

We see that, for Wilma, as in the case of many others working in the domiciliary sector, the spectrum of tasks performed during the working day was quite broad. Yet, in the light of her overall experience, she thinks of cleaning as part of the caring service provided for the health and comfort of Ms. Gelderbloem. The elderly woman was indeed called a 'patient' even though the service received did not include any medical or sanitary task. Yet, Wilma understands her function as one of making the house tidier and cleaner, together with exchanging some words, in order to bring to M. Gelderbloem the *cosiness* that old people usually wish for.

In Wilma's concern for the old woman's general well-being, one can find a good example of 'emotional labour'. This emotional labour – as I have discussed in the first chapter - is seen by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (2002) as migrant women's capacity to 'sell love'. For Ehrenreich and Hochschild it is this 'loving' attention which is today missing in many western households and which is thus 'imported' in the work of migrant women. It is true, indeed, that elderly people in Europe today suffer from the absence of the care which was previously available inside their family network. Daughters, daughters-in-law or younger sisters 'traditionally' took charge of the tasks that today a foreign woman is 'called' to perform. In this we find the importance of an 'importation' of care where migrant women are 'taking the place' of traditional female figures today disappearing in advanced capitalist societies.

The question of migrant women filling the gaps left by the transformation of family life in industrialised countries becomes even more relevant when looking at the work of nannies. The function of migrant women in households with young chil-

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<sup>7</sup> *From the original:* «Het eerste wat ik moest doen dan, haar kamer, haar bed... opmaken... of het verschoond moest worden, verschonon. Haar kamer schoonmaken. [...] De plantjes water geven. Stof afnemen, stofzuigen. En...ja... en tegen de tijd zo van 11:00, en dan gingen we samen dan koffiedrinken. Een praatje maken. En... ja... en nadien dan.... deed ik dan de badkamer, toilet. Alles schoon maken voor haar. En dan had ik de keuken en de bijkeuken schoonmaken. Dus dat deed ik. Soms... eventueel...strijken. Goed. Dus dat was het wat ik voor haar deed. De vuilniszakken meenemen als ik naar huis ging. Ja».

dren is to be contextualised within the important transformations that mothering has undergone in recent decades. I take the example of Sylvia, a woman who arrived in 1962, to show how this question affected workers' self-representation. Sylvia has been working for the wealthy van der Vliet family in Kralingen, a well-to-do area of Rotterdam, from 1980 until today. During the interview, she remembered the early times of this working experience, when the children were young and the job was more demanding:

*I was there the whole day. So I was a kind of mother for the children, you know. And it felt so good. And they could trust me. You know. [...] In the morning I took the children to school. Then I was there at 3:00 to pick them up. [...] And then I went home with them. Drink a cup of tea. Make sure there were some biscuits there, you know? Taking a bit care [of them] like that. And then at 5:00 I would start cooking. [...] 'Cause when the mother came home, [if] she still had to cook, the children would go to bed too late. Then I made sure that dinner was ready, when the mother arrived so... they could just eat [...] and then I would go home<sup>8</sup>*

When describing her job, Sylvia talks not only about her tasks, but also about the social function she was covering, i.e. her role in the employer's family vis-à-vis the figure of the mother. This function is articulated through different *practices* which confirm her trustworthy and caring 'personality': accompanying the children to school, supervising their homework, preparing snacks and dinner for them. In this quote, Sylvia confirms the fundamental split between two dimensions of mothering which has been largely discussed in the debate on paid domestic work (see Anderson, 2000 amongst others). In the experience of migrant domestic workers, the basic functions connected with nurturing, feeding, washing and clothing are disconnected from the 'higher' functions such as educating children and playing with them.

In my view, the fact that postcolonial migrant women become a fundamental part of the organisation of households, substituting mothers, sisters or daughters, is to be seen in terms of the formation not only of an 'intimate other' but more importantly, I contend, of a 'subordinate other'. We know indeed that migrant domestic workers challenge our assumptions about intimacy, instantiating the paradox of a person who is too 'close' to be defined as 'stranger' and yet is not 'part of the family' (Parreñas,

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8 *From the original:* «Ik was daar de hele dag. Dus ik was een soort moeder van die kinderen hè. En het beviel zo goed. En ze konden mij vertrouwen. Weet je wel. [...] 's Morgens bracht ik die kinderen naar school. En dan was ik.[...] Dan was ik er om 3:00 om ze te halen. [...] En dan ging ik met ze naar huis. Een kopje theedrinken. Koekjes [neer]zetten, weet je wel? Zo een beetje verzorgen en zo. En dan om 5:00 begon ik te koken. [...] Want als die moeder dus thuis kwam, [als] dan moest ze nog gaan koken en dan gingen die kindertjes te laat naar bed. Dus ik zorgde dat het eten klaar was, als die moeder kwam dan... konden ze dus gewoon eten [...] en ik ging naar huis».

2001; Enloe, 1990; Anderson, 2000). I would like to further argue that here we find the construction of a subordinate subjectivity. From this perspective, postcolonial women's performative identification as home-carers, companions, nannies, or cleaners is based on the normative dimension of what Pothiti Hantzaroula poignantly calls the formation of a 'serving subjectivity' i.e a «specific subordinated subject position produced in the relationship between mistress and maid» (2004, p.400).

From this, I intend to further explore if a form of colonial subordination is at the root of the experiences of those black Surinamese women who first discretely support, help, assist and satisfy the wishes of their white mistresses, and are then ready 'to go home', as Sylvia said. Here again, it is important to dig into the colonial repertoire of 'servitude' and find what are the colonial legacies affecting the representations of Afro-Surinamese carers in Dutch households. This question will be further illustrated in the next paragraph where the more exploitative implications of these forces permeating the setting will be discussed.



FIG. 11 In front of Blijdorp Zoo, Rotterdam, 1970s. (From private collection).

#### 4. TIME, TASKS AND FEMALE MODELS

The dynamic between white mistresses and black servants has been largely analysed in the study of paid domestic work by US scholars as Phyllis Palmer (1989) and Judith Rollins (1985) as I briefly mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. I follow these scholars in the belief that both (white) employers and (black) employees shape their identities in *co-presence* of each other, along the axes of gender, age 'race'/ethnic-

ity and class. The setting of these identity-negotiations is the home, seen as a peculiar setting for the encounter of subjects' differences, through various everyday practices.

In line with this perspective, in this paragraph I am going to analyse the interview with Zufan, an Eritrean woman who arrived in Rome in 1975, thanks to an Italian informal broker who found her employment in an Italian family. When I asked Zufan what she had to do in her employers' house, on a typical working day, she answered:

*Make the breakfast for everyone, for children and adults. [Break] So, make the breakfast for everybody. After they ate: dress, wash [the] children. When they were ready, the father took them [to school] while he was going to work. The father took the children, who I had got ready. All ready. She slept. Then, I began with the bedrooms, the living room, the kitchen, to clean the whole house, everything. And then she went out, went out to buy the groceries. I put everything in order, the stuff I washed; then she started to cook. "We have to do this and that". In the first two – three weeks we cooked together. Then later: the sauce, the roast, the thing, or [the] grilled meat, the pasta, [the] tomato sauce... I learned immediately, then I did it<sup>9</sup>.*

Zufan's style in storytelling was very vivid and often ironic. She described herself as a quickly *indispensable* part of the household and emphasised the importance of knowing the 'Italian way' of performing chores. This is an example of how interviewees usually talk about their job as a *delicate* function which entails different 'soft' skills and 'cultural' competences. As I will further discuss in the next chapter, this ability to adjust to employers' wishes is often reason for pride in Eritrean domestic workers' accounts. I am here interested in Zufan's use of several narrative devices, mockery especially, in order to construct her identity in opposition to that of her female employer and at the same time resist and re-articulate the oppression experienced in the past.

In this quote, Zufan presents her *hectic* image as being in opposition to the figure of Ms. Pavoni. She enumerates the many tasks she had to do, rendering the frenzy of her working day. In addition, she uses a fast and high tone talking about herself, as worker, she slows down her tone and speed when talking about the Italian woman, who we cannot imagine other than lazily waking up and reluctantly going out to do the shopping. The figure of the employer is infantilised, as a woman unable to manage the care of the house and the children without external support. Zufan's childlike

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9 *From the original:* «Preparare colazione per tutti, per bambini e grandi.. [Pausa]. Allora, preparare [la] colazione per tutti. Quando hanno mangiato: vestire, lavare [i] bambini. Quando avevano fatto, li accompagnava il padre quando andava al lavoro. Il padre portava i bambini, che li preparavo io. Tutti pronti. *Lei dormiva*. Poi, io cominciavo con le camere, con la sala, in cucina, a pulire la casa, tutto quanto. E poi, lei usciva, usciva a fare la spesa. *Mettevo io tutto a posto*, la roba che ho lavato, poi lei si metteva a cucinare. "Dobbiamo fare questo, quest'altro". Le prime due, tre settimane abbiamo fatto insieme da mangiare. Poi dopo: il sugo, l'arrosto, il coso, oppure [la] carne ai ferri, la pasta, [la] *pummarola*... Ho imparato subito, quindi facevo io».

description of her employer echoes Phyllis Palmer's argument about the dichotomous representations affecting the mistress-maid relationship in the pre-war period in the United States (Palmer, 1989). Palmer argued that the *infantilisation* of white female employers was essential in the relationship between white mistress and black maid. More generally, the description of white women as childish and irresponsible corresponded to the spreading of new models of upper-class femininity in the post-war period. These new models required white women to be 'light' and 'youngish', in opposition to the traditional model of women as hard workers, carers and nurturers. This 'traditional' model was then relegated to working class and black women (p. 43). I will have occasion to come back to these dichotomies of black-white female models in the next chapter.

Now, I would like instead to go back to the interview with Zufan and offer one excerpt where she conveyed her frustration with the Pavoni family through the description of her working times. She said:

*My time to be with someone, or even alone, even crying, no, I did not have this time! [...] I did not go to sleep until 3.00, till 3.30, till 2.00, 2.30, at 1.00 in the night. But the day after I had to wake up anyway at 7.00 and prepare food: this is slavery. Eh! [...] I went out on Sunday [only] at 3.00, even at 3.30 [after] they ate. 'Cause it was Sunday, so they slept, they woke up late'<sup>10</sup>.*

The abusive character of the working relationship is rendered in the narrative through the description of her life as a *restless* sequence of tasks over which she had little control. She had to perform them as an alienated machine. This alienation and her limitation of freedom are interestingly equated by Zufan with slavery, in an association between abusive employment and the image of slavery which signals the importance of the circulation of representations of anti-black discriminations and of the continuity of colonial relations in Black Europe. While I will return to the legacies of slavery in black Europeans' experiences in the last chapter, I would like here to discuss the question of limitation of one's control over time, free time and working time alike.

Here we find the theme of 'time' as an area of violent coercion and of inequality between people in different positions of power. Zufan is able to use the question of 'time' as another device to show rebellion and challenge towards her female employer. She straightforwardly says to have suffered from the corrosion of her free time during which she could have socialised outside the employers' house, for example on Sunday afternoons, or to be *just* alone. The enjoyment of a life style without domestic and car-

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<sup>10</sup> *From the original:* «Il mio tempo di stare con una persona, pure da sola, anche a piangere, no, non ce l'avevo il tempo! [...] Io fino alle 3, alle 3.30, fino alle 2 alle 2.30, all'1 di notte non dormivo. Però il giorno dopo mi dovevo alzare lo stesso alle sette e preparare da mangiare: questo è schiavismo. Eh! [...] Uscivo domenica alle tre, può essere anche alle tre e mezza [dopo che] loro mangiano. Dato che è domenica, quindi dormono, si svegliano tardi».

ing responsibilities by her employers is *materially* going against her own happiness: the longer the employers sleep on Sundays, the less free time she will have to go out and to socialise in the afternoon. In the following paragraph I will further discuss how the compression of time is a particular kind of abuse which can be enacted by employers on employees, in line with coercive manoeuvres of control and discipline.

## 5. TIME, BODY AND ENACTMENT OF POWER

The Eritrean women I interviewed do not hesitate, today, to draw harsh criticisms of the treatment received during their first working experiences in Rome. In this paragraph I am commenting on excerpts of interviews in which Haddas and Anna vehemently expressed their frustration and their feeling of exploitation. Both quotes I present here refer to the period of summer vacations, when the employer's family moved to the house at the sea-side where domestic workers' functions seemed, more than ever, indispensable<sup>11</sup>. In these summer days, the price to pay for the worker was the loss of any control on their job. Because of the exceptionality of the situation, the number of their tasks increased beyond sustainability. The more tasks, the more their daily performance became constipated, with strenuous rhythms.

Let us first see the case of Haddas, a woman who arrived in 1975, talking about her job experience with the Mastroianni family. This is the way she remembered those summers:

*Poor Haddas! There I killed myself, 'cause everything was in my hands. And the stuff, [the] laundry: everything by hand. The bathtub always full with water, I left it there during the night, in the morning I woke up early and I washed [it] before they woke up, washing everything, 'cause I had to free the bathroom. And then when it was dry I had to iron everything<sup>12</sup>*

One can see that the job was particularly demanding because, while working to satisfy employers' demands for cleanliness and comfort, she had to make efforts not to disturb them. In this, Haddas' quote recalls Phyllis Palmer's argument about the 'per-

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11 It was (and it still partially is) a tradition for well-off Roman families to spend the summer in one of the small towns in the coastal area nearby the city. Then from June-July until September, most rich Roman people moved to their summerhouses in places like Fregene, Torvajonica, Santa Marinella or Santa Severa. It was a very common custom that domestic workers followed them for the whole summer.

12 *From the original:* «Povera Haddas! Lì mi sono massacrata, perché tutto era nelle mie mani. E la roba, [la] biancheria: tutto a mano. La vasca sempre piena con l'acqua: [la] lascio lì nella [durante la] notte, la mattina [mi] alzo presto e lavo prima di [che] loro [si svegliano], lavando tutto, perché sennò dopo dovevo lasciare libero il bagno. E poi quando è asciutto dovevo stirare tutto».

fect housekeeping standards' which prescribe that people receiving the service should not be disturbed by the performance of this same service: they should not notice hands cleaning up what they just dirtied, ironing and washing their clothing, tidying up the mess they made. With reference to the US context, Palmer demonstrated that this 'hidden' service which was once performed also by white women for their husbands, later passed to black maids performing it for white men and women.

A different example is offered by Anna, again talking about Ms. Mirabella. The following excerpt is quite long, but I believe it is important to read it in its entirety in order to appreciate the interviewee's use of language. Anna is, indeed, an illiterate woman who is particularly keen in the orality of language, carefully using repetitions, emphasis, direct discourse, and various rhetorical devices. In the following quote Anna is describing a day which, in her memory, stands out as an exceptional day in which she rebelled against her employer:

*One day, I had done everything, my dear... At one o' clock she sent me to the kitchen to prepare the food in a rush, whatever I could. Something easy: meat, salad, this and the other. They had to eat at one o' clock. I had to clean the entire house, in the morning. And everything had happened that day... She told me to do the omelets: and put it, and whisk it, and flip it, and put the mozzarella inside, here and there [making the gesture with her hand]. Sant'Antonio, how can I?! First I am not one of those with 'the magic wand' – as the Italians say. [With] calm, but I work fairly. She exaggerated, that day. Before I did three or four omelets, [one] for each person...: you had to put it, to flip it, to do it [simulating the gestures with her hands]. An omelet is an omelet: you had to put the mozzarella inside... It takes time to flip it, to cook it, to do it. In this moment, I left [her], I went away in my room and I left her... [...] I left her, I went to my room and I started to cry. Later, that day, there was a lot to do: washing the chicory, [washing] the children' socks, all these things. You cannot imagine how the day was...and I could not stand it any more!<sup>13</sup>*

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13 *From the original:* «Un giorno avevo fatto tutto, figlia mia... All'una ti mandava in cucina a far da mangiare in quattro e quattr'otto, come potevi. Una cosa semplice: fettine, insalata, una cosa e l'altra. All'una dovevano mangiare. Dovevo pulire tutta la casa, la mattina. E mi viene [succede di] tutto quel giorno... M'ha detto di fare le frittate: e mettilo e sbattilo e giralo e metti la mozzarella dentro e qua e là. [facendo il gesto con la mano]. Sant'Antonio, come faccio?! Prima di tutto non sono una di quelle con 'la bacchetta magica' - come dicono gli italiani. [Con] calma, ma lavoro giusto. Lei ha esagerato quel giorno. Una volta che ho fatto tre o quattro frittate per ognuno [tutti]: dovevi mettere, dovevi girare, dovevi fare [simulando il gesto con le mani]. Una frittata è una frittata: dovevi mettere la mozzarella dentro... Ci vuole a girarla, a cuocerla, a farla. In quel momento l'ho lasciata, sono andata via nella mia camera e l'ho piantata [...] L'ho piantata, sono andata in camera mia e mi sono messa a piangere. Dopo, quel

This is a very rich and dense quotation in which one can read Anna intermingling the description of her tasks (cooking, washing, etc.) with exclamations and complaints about the harshness of her condition. She also adds ironic statements and remarks which stress her self-esteem. The quote also demonstrates her familiarity with Italian cultural repertoire, in her invoking the saints, in paraphrasing an Italian saying (about the magic wand), or in mentioning regional food (chicory and mozzarella cheese). Finally she seems to be able to describe the opposition between herself and her employer as the one between a victimised subject, who runs crying to her bedroom and has piles of socks to wash waiting for her, and a tyrannical subject, who 'sent her to the kitchen' and demands the impossible from her.

I believe the most interesting part of the quote concerns the preparation of the omelette. Here a particularly embodied dimension of her working experience is conveyed by the predominant role of physical descriptions about movements and interactions with objects. In this sense her narrative reminds one of Kaufman's view of domestic practices as a series of impulses, rhythmic actions and micro-motions (Kaufmann, 1997, p.202). Anna vividly retells the procedure which is necessary in order to prepare a good omelette and, while mimicking with her hands the whole scene, she describes a sort of choreography taking place in the kitchen. One can imagine her hands whisking, flipping, turning, filling, putting, and cooking, again and again, each omelette that has to be done. Her description sounds like a poem, as if she took it from Natasha Trethewey's collection which I cited at the opening of this chapter. But in contrast to Trethewey's, Anna's words are not about hopeful wishes, on the contrary the *accelerated rhythm* of her actions communicates her despair to make it until the end. And indeed, when she collapses, the sequence is broken: she empties her hands, she abandons the job and runs away. She succumbs to what Kaufmann calls a 'hand-to-hand combat' between people and objects, in which objects win, dethroning people (Kaufmann, 1997, p.67).

Similarly to the case of Zufan described above, Haddas and Anna also complain about the loss of free time, the lack of control over themselves and frustration of their desire for a 'normal' life. 'Time' is described as extremely scarce and suffocated by the ever-increasing demands from their employers. This reminds me of Guy Mundlak's argument in his analysis of Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* (Mundlak, 2005). In the film we see that the protagonist, a white woman (Nicole Kidman) recently arrived in a provincial town, is asked to perform various domestic and sexual services, in exchange for her acceptance within the community. Interestingly, the tyrannical character of the situation is rendered by the reiterated request to perform the same chores in an always decreasing time span. Here, in Mundlak's view, one can understand how

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giorno, c'era da fare: da lavare la cicoria, i calzini dei figli, tutte quelle cose. La giornata non sai comè fatta... e non ce la faccio più».

time can be a subtle instrument of psychological and physical abuse against domestic workers, in the hands of employers.

In these narrative devices based on body and time constraints I see the capacity of interviewees to construct an *identity narrative* through the description of their work. They are indeed able to convey sentiments of rebellion or acceptance, criticism or adaptation vis-à-vis regulations which affect their jobs. The figure of the employer (or patient) has always, despite some differences, the role of being the 'other' in opposition to whom workers' understand their function and typify their identity. In this we again find the way in which dichotomous representations (white/black, rich/poor, clean/dirty, mistress/servant) were enacted in the everyday experiences of interviewees. As I said, for this reason I see in these narratives the example of colonial legacies in the specific instance of the surviving of hierarchies between a coloniser that *is cared for*, and a colonised who *has to care*.



FIG. 12 Two Eritrean women in front of the Square Coliseum, Rome, 1977.  
(From Federico Bruno *et al.*, 1977).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has a very important role in giving to reader the 'feeling' of what the experience I am describing *was*, in the memories of the people I interviewed. The experience which is seen here is shaped by the narrativisation of the experience and on the subjective meaning ascribed to it by the interviewer. In so doing, Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women have the possibility to variously position themselves in the field of paid domestic and care work. In the attempt to re-conduct these multiple

processes of identification to the question of postcolonial subjectivity, I see that the figuration of the *postcolonial domestic worker* takes shape in three ways.

First of all, interviewees are seen as subjects who convey through the narrative of their job not only a sense of their identity, but also of the challenges, the ruptures, the negotiations that this identity carries. Their subject-position of postcolonial migrant domestic workers emerged thus as unstable, never fixed, but at the same time as characterised by the capability of negotiating wider power dynamics through the redefinition of personal skills, attitudes, feelings and attachments. From this perspective, I also see the ability of interviewees to individuate their cultural, gendered, ethnic competences and put them forward with the purpose of enhancing their own fulfilment and self-representation.

Secondly, the work-narratives illustrate that the dichotomy between coloniser and colonised is reproduced in the relationship between white employer and migrant domestic worker. I find this reproduction in the rigidity with which the coupling between white mistress and black servant is repeated in the fixity of the roles between the one who *has to* care and the one who *is* cared for. This is a relationship where the person who is in charge of the *necessary* and yet *abject* chores for the comfort of the other is set, once and for all, by material and symbolic hierarchies. In that, I make my hypothesis that the employer-employee dualism that can be observed today descends from a pattern inaugurated in the colonial setting, where the normative character of the relationship between native women and bourgeois Europeans was established. This point will be further illustrated in the next chapters.

Finally, this dichotomy is importantly articulated also at the level of gender constructions. When migrant women say that they are ready to discretely support, help, assist and satisfy the wishes of their white mistress I see the crucial role of a colonial repertoire of female models. Here, patterns of 'colonial servitude' affect the representation of a white bourgeois femininity (infantilised, irresponsible, etc.) in counterposition to the representation of black servants as ever nurturing and accountable for the care needs of the whole household.

I discussed these three questions at the level of the analysis of work experiences seen as concrete physical gestures and working rhythms, which I demonstrated to be emblematic of the construction of power hierarchies within the household work embedded in postcoloniality. In the next two chapters I will develop those issues from a different perspective, that of labour skills and labour conditions pointing towards the dimension of empowerment and, at the same time, of discrimination that they imply.

ETHNICISATION OF CARE AND DOMESTIC SKILLS

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The way interviewees represent the skills which they consider to be relevant for their work is crucial in the light of my general argument on the role of a gendered 'post-colonial cultural capital' in the narrative 'tactics' of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women in the domestic sector. Here I will contend, first of all, that migrant domestic workers tend to represent their (professional) skills as 'ethnicised', i.e. pertaining to people with a specific ethnic background, rather than to others<sup>1</sup>.

More in detail, with the term 'ethnicisation' I am referring to interviewees' processes of identification with their 'being Eritrean' or 'being Surinamese', which are the result of complex historical and cultural events<sup>2</sup>. The question of 'ethnicity' emerges indeed as related to a historically determined association with values which concern not only physical attributes – as in Harry Hoetink's idea of *somatic norm image* (Oostindie, 1996) – but also other characteristics that people from the same group are supposed to share, such as culture, religion, traditions, habits, and personal attitudes. In this and the next chapters, I will talk about 'race'/ethnicity and its effects on the performance of domestic and care work (chapter nine) and, later, discrimination at the workplace (chapter ten).

In this chapter I will show how Afro-Surinamese women claim to have skills which white Dutch women do *not* possess, while Eritreans rather compare themselves with migrants from other 'racial'/ethnic and national origins. This is the phenomenon I call 'ethnicisation of care and domestic skills' which explains, in my view, the connection between the formation of a labour niche and the essentialist assumptions about those pre-migratory skills that confer on postcolonial women gendered and 'ethnicised' forms of cultural capital.

Here, I will introduce the question of 'ethnicisation' of skills in the first paragraph with reference to the study of Francesca Scrinzi (2003, 2004) in which one can find a clear instance of the cultural construction of 'racial'/ethnic representations about domestic work. This process is determinant in workers' self-representation of what they call 'characters' and which, I believe, closely resembles what Beverly Skeggs defines as

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1 I am here using only the expression 'ethnicisation' for the sake of simplification, but this has always to be understood as strongly linked to 'race', in the light of what I have explained in chapter one, in the fourth paragraph.

2 Indeed, as Stuart Hall argues: «The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual» (1996, p.446).

'personalities'. In order to analyse the representation of these 'personalities', I discuss the case, still very much alive, of stereotypes of black servants circulating in the nineteenth century United States.

Thus in paragraphs two and three of this chapter I will show how Eritreans repeatedly stressed their *familiarity* with Italian customs and their capacity in understanding Italians' wishes. Their skilfulness is a consequence of the *acculturation* with Italian culture, and comes from the cultural and social propinquity in which they grew up, which I have illustrated in chapters four and five. Their present contribution to Italian families comes directly from the fact of their colonisation (together with missionary activity) and it is based on the stereotyping representation which descends, in particular, from the history of *askaris* and *madamas*.

In paragraphs four and five, I will look at the Afro-Surinamese case. These women see their *skilfulness* in caring and cleaning as a feature of *superiority* to the Dutch, in doing the same domestic tasks. Their aim is two-fold: from the one side they try to reverse the hierarchy with the former coloniser in co-working situations (especially when working in hospitals and nursing homes). At the same time, they try to magnify Afro-Surinamese culture that, in their words, possesses qualities such as reciprocal support, respect and obedience towards the elderly, qualities that are very important for caring and housekeeping practices as we saw in chapter seven.

In conclusion, Afro-Surinamese women, by taking the position of 'black Dutch', attempt to *reverse* the hierarchies with the 'white Dutch'. These interviewees, as I discussed in chapter four, see their 'race'/ethnic difference as a positive variation to the common 'Dutch' identity. Consequently, Afro-Surinamese women can *compete* with the white Dutch and yet still feel part of the *same* nation, a possibility that is precluded to the Eritreans because of the more subjugated relationship with the colonisers which always cast them as *outside* the Italian society (in Italy as in the colonies).

At the end of the chapter, one will find a section on food practices, comparing the Eritrean to the Surinamese case. There I will comment on excerpts from interviews where 'cooking' is taken as a paradigmatic case of a wider discourse pertaining to the postcolonial encounter taking place between workers and employers.

## 1. 'ETHNICISATION' AND THE RIGHT PERSONALITY

As I stated previously, I take Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese interviewees as examples of subjects which use different narrative 'tactics' as a form of reaction to their social positioning. I am here trying to demonstrate how the disposal of a postcolonial form of cultural capital is crucial in this process. In my view, indeed, interviewees can 'use' the colonial bond between their country of origin and the one of arrival as a narrative tool for the 'trading' of their gendered postcolonial cultural capital. I am here further arguing that, in this same process, they operate a self-identification with a personality,

i.e. the ensemble of aptitudes and practices which relate to one's background along the axes of gender, class, age and 'race/ethnicity' (Skeggs, 1997).

Narratives which entail a conception of one's cultural capital together with one's personality can become, in my view, an important tool of negotiation of power asymmetries in the worker-employer relationship. In the case I am presenting, in particular, these narratives combine the description of one's personality with postcolonial features, wherein the legacy of representations, relations, stigmatisations, coming from the colonial time play a fundamental role. The 'ethnicisation' of domestic and care skills is, in my view, one of these narrative tactics.

The question of the 'ethnicisation' of skills in migrant domestic work was first approached by Francesca Scrinzi (2003, 2004) who carried out comparative research in Italy and France on migrant women's placement agencies in the domestic sector. She emphasized the importance of stereotypes associated with migrants' backgrounds in arguing that the internal functioning of the sector reflects the same racist and sexist values present in the society at large. In particular she noticed how beliefs and images about the 'culture of origin' and the 'nature' of migrants construct an 'ethnicised' demand-supply of labour:

In this culturalist vision the cultural features blend in with the natural – certain qualities of the character which are necessary to accomplish the domestic tasks will be associated with the 'culture of origin' of migrants. In this view, the Peruvians are thought to be more suited than the Nigerians to the assistance of the elderly, the Moroccans are believed to love to do cleaning<sup>3</sup>. (Scrinzi, 2003, pp.137-162)

Scrinzi draws our attention to the association between working tasks and people's assumed attitudes with relation to 'race'/ethnicity, an association wherein cultural categories overlap with 'natural' ones. As a consequence, the working relationship is often seen as an 'inter-cultural' meeting of a 'foreign' person (the worker) with a 'native' one (the patient or the employer). If we take the 'home' as a standpoint, we see then that the meeting is not equal: the worker is allowed inside *only* to 'offer a service' as far as this satisfies the (white national) employer's demands. Scrinzi concludes that, in the view of the recruitment agencies, a 'successful' match is then by definition the one in which workers are able to *adjust* 'their culture' to the 'domestic culture' of the employer.

My intervention in this debate leads us back in time. From an historical perspective, one will find that various representational manoeuvres have always been at play

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3 *Translation from the original*: «Dans cette vision culturaliste les traits culturels se fondent dans le naturel – certaines qualités du caractère nécessaires pour accomplir les tâches domestiques seraient à associer à la 'culture d'origine' des migrantes. Les Péruviennes seraient plus aptes que les Nigériennes à la garde des personnes âgées, les Marocaines aiment bien faire le ménage».

in order to convey an image of domestic workers which could reassure the employers and, at the same time, suggest a collective identity to workers. The fact that black/migrant workers needed to be *categorised* in order to be allowed into the intimate domestic sphere pushed onto workers those master narratives which combined their social position with an 'appropriate' behaviour, or personality.

A paradigmatic example about the categorisation of black women comes from the United States where, in the mid nineteenth century, several stereotypes of blacks were formed, stereotypes which were all specifically associated with domestic service. The 'African-American persona' was then typecast into several different roles, many of them variations of the prevailing stereotype of the docile and obedient black servant. I would like here to refer in particular to the female version, which was articulated in the characters of Dinah, Aunt Jemimah and Mammy (O'Leary, 1996, pp.130-131). In general, these figures gave expression, in the form of female models, to the same qualities of the childlike and happy Jim Crow, or the gentleness and docility of Uncle Tom. Let us take for example the common representation of Mammy, probably the most pervasive stereotype of the African American female servant. The term 'Mammy' was generally used in a positive connotation, as endearment for older, black nursemaids and she was depicted as the ever-nurturing lady who cares for white children or weak old men. Physically Mammy was represented as fat and sexless, though with large breasts, and her head was always covered with a kerchief (O'Leary, *ibid.*).

I am interested here in exploring if representations related to the time of slavery have travelled trans-atlantically and whether they have consequences at the level of the job performance in postcoloniality. In the following pages I will go through different aspects of the imagery connected to black postcolonial domestic workers, looking at the way interviewees articulate their self-representation in this respect.

## 2. SUBSERVIENCE AS A SKILL

In general, employers seemed to have been only superficially informed about the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea. The little information they had tended to idealise Eritrea as their 'first-born colony' (*colonial primogenita*), as a pleasant place, and a land of prosperity for Italians. Relying on several studies on the lack in Italy of a true self-criticism about the colonial past (Del Boca, 2002, 2005), I would suggest that most employers had uncritically inherited the dominant representations of Eritreans as they circulated during the colonial time. This representation depicted them as faithful, modest, happily subservient, and intuitive – in relation to understanding orders and demands from Italians.

Here I argue that the image of Eritreans as docile and submissive people comes back in their own self-representation of 'good servants'. In fact, the interviewees follow a mechanism of 'appropriation' in which colonised subjects borrow the images

produced by colonisers, and modify them in order to improve their status and gain new opportunities in the encounter with the colonisers' world.

I see this mechanism at play when, with the purpose of depicting themselves as successful workers and migrants, Eritrean interviewees talk about 'the way Italians see them'. For example, during the interview with Anna she told me that, in her opinion, Italians thought of Eritreans:

*that they are intelligent. Especially because of this 'bond' with Italians, between Eritreans and Italians, they had more trust. Really. Because [in Eritrea] Italy is well known, Italians [are well known]<sup>4</sup>.*

Eritreans are seen as a quite *domesticated* population, in a way that confirmed their inferior position in the exact moment it praised them for the suitability for the job, for their reliability, and their propensity to Italianisation. Anna for example, when talking about signora Mirabella, remembers:

*She immediately let me see [how to do] the pasta sauce, all that. "Did you see how quickly Anna learnt? You just have to let 'them' free, and 'they' are good!", she used to say<sup>5</sup>*

In this quote we see how immediate is the shift from the singular to the plural person, when the employer generalizes Anna's character to all Eritreans. The shift from the singular to the plural form is a fundamental representational device of colonial discourse, in what Alberto Memmi calls *the mark of the plural* (Memmi, 1957). Memmi formulated this notion to explain the massive homogenisation in the discourses of the coloniser about the colonised, where «the colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity» (p. 129). This is the same collective homogenisation which Chandra Mohanty (1984) had demonstrated as particularly affecting 'third world' women; while Jacqueline Cock (1989) also recognized it in the statements of white South African employers about their domestic workers.

It is interesting to see how Eritreans found in those statements opportunities for a self-empowering identification with the 'good and reliable' worker. Semira, for example, positively remembers the employer for whom she worked since 1973. Once she heard madam Corradi talking over the telephone about Eritreans:

*I heard that she recommended to her friends: "You shouldn't tell them: do this, do that, because they are very responsible, the Eritrean women". She*

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4 *From the original:* « che sono intelligenti. Soprattutto per questo legame con gli italiani, fra eritrei e italiani, avevano più fiducia. Veramente. Perché [in Eritrea] è conosciuta l'Italia, gli italiani».

5 *From the original:* «Subito mi ha fatto vedere il sugo, tutto lì. "Visto come ha imparato subito Anna? Basta lasciarli liberi, sono bravi!", diceva».

used to say: “They are very reliable and they do everything without saying a word”. I heard her saying so to one of her friend<sup>6</sup>

The connotation of Eritreans as submissive and trustworthy people brings us back to the colonial past and its crucial role in the Italian-Eritrean relationship of that time. In my view, Semira is ‘using’ the common representations circulating about Eritreans in order to describe a specific ‘personality’ that, in her opinion, characterises their performance. This is an example of what Jenny Sharpe (2003) argues when saying that subjugated women can tactically use representations associated with domestic slavery and concubinage for the improvement of their status.

In the quotes from Semira and Anna, we see at play a set of representations which come, first of all, from the fact that many Italians had heard about the ‘courtesy’ and the ‘obliging’ attitude of Eritreans in the city of Asmara, especially of those who served in Italian households or worked in Italian-run activities. Secondly, they are affected by the representation based on the fact that Eritrean *askaris* had fought on the side of Italians against Ethiopians and Libyans and that, for this reason, they had been celebrated for their sacrifice in the name of Italy. As was said in chapter three, the history of *askaris* remains to this day a major trope with a major role in narratives about the encounter between Italians and Eritreans (see chapter three). Its importance comes from its role as a ‘trial issue’ which testifies to the colonisers the faithfulness of Eritreans, who sacrificed the centennial friendship with the neighbouring Ethiopian population. The figure of the *askaris* carries an important message not only of trustworthiness, but also one of docility, of endurance to submission and heavy charges, which, I contend, we find again in these interviews.

Finally, this issue refers to the historical fact of the disposal of Eritrean women to sexual and domestic service of Italian officers and workers during colonial times. This recalls the constitution of an Italian colonial imagery around the figure of Eritrean *Black Venus* (Ponzanesi, 2005), which was also introduced in chapter three. The image of the Black Venus is associated with Italians’ predilection for Eritrean concubines, described as *domesticated* savage beauties and devoted intimate companions. This figuration thus combines ethnicised and gendered representations alike, following the pattern of the sexualisation of colonised subject that has been explored by scholars as Anne McClintock (1995) and Ann Stoler (1995). This was put in connection with colonial cultures of domestication by Frances Gouda (1998) and Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (2000), for the case of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, or by Alison Blunt (1999), for the case of British India.

However, I need to clarify that the women I interviewed, while they often spoke about some male relative who had been an *askari*, they never referred to the story of

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6 From the original: «Sentivo che suggeriva alle amiche: “Non gli dite: fai questo e fai quest’altro, perché sono molto responsabili, le eritree.” Diceva: “Sono molto responsabili e fanno tutto senza dire niente”. Ho sentito una volta che lo diceva a un’amica sua».

*madamas*. As I discussed in chapter three, the subject of *madamas* is today a matter of embarrassment and it is seldom mentioned in public settings<sup>7</sup>. In fact, just a couple of interviewees mentioned some form of concubinage when talking about aunts ‘married’ to Italians (Luam), or some Italian uncles (Semira and Luam). Yet, as I said already, following on scholarly literature (see Ponzanesi, 2007; and Iyob, 2005), I believe the story of *madamas* to be central in today’s gendered representations of Eritreans. The image of the domesticated Black Venus, together with the faithful *askaris*, remains fundamental in the gendered construction of the relationship between Italians and Eritreans, providing an influential repertoire of images and stereotypes of submissiveness, docility and trustworthiness of Eritreans, men and women alike.



FIG.13 Domestic workers at Sunday classes of Tigrino language organised by Eritrean political parties. Rome 1977. (From Federico Bruno *et al.*, 1977).

### 3. FAMILIARITY WITH DOMESTIC WORK AS A SOCIAL POSITION

In general, the Eritrean women I spoke with gave me the impression of claiming a certain expertise on ‘how Italians like things done’, because of the pre-migratory ‘familiarity’ that I discussed in the first part of this dissertation. Interviewees believed there was a specific Italian way of carrying out domestic and caring tasks, for which Eritreans were more prepared than other migrants. That was the case not only with

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7 On the tabooing of the story of *madamas* in Eritreans’ memory see Domenica Ghidei Biidu and Elisabetta Hagos (forthcoming), edited by Barbara De Vivo e Sabrina Marchetti.

cooking and child minding, but also with things like cleaning, ironing or preparing and decorating the table.

I am interested here in the fact that this feeling of knowing ‘how the job has to be done’ comes in the narratives of interviewees as a self-empowering aspect of their working experience, supporting them in the moment of negotiations with employers, and sustaining them in the distress of the difficult life they faced in Italy. Anna, for instance, insists:

*Because I — thank God — knew about ironing, lifting [the beds]... In its nature, as a job, it was the same I did in Asmara. [...] For me, [with] the work... I never found difficulties. [...] ‘Cause if you don’t know the language you don’t know how to orient yourself, but [if] you know how to iron, you know how to wash, you know how to understand: what do they want more than that?’<sup>8</sup>*

The capability of Eritreans in ‘understanding’ Italian wishes comes here to the fore: since the missionaries taught her how to wash, iron, clean, make beds, in an Italian fashion, they made her into the *right* person to satisfy the demands of Italian households.

Haddas, for example, believes that the fact of having worked for an Italian family in Eritrea was a crucial factor for the success of her migratory project. It is interesting that she did not actually have this ‘experience’ herself (since in Asmara she was working in an Italian shoe-factory), but she says that she had been very lucky because she had been able to organise an on-call contract together with a friend who had previously been employed by Italians in Asmara. Haddas explains:

*If I go with this other friend I feel that I will not have problems, because she speaks Italian, she knows how to work, because she is working for some Italians, in the service [...] She works with Italians, at home, so she knows everything! [...] Then I immediately started to work, I was desperate to learn everything they wanted well, [how to do] ‘the Italian chores’, in a word, let’s say<sup>9</sup>*

In the words of Haddas and Anna I see a clear example of the way the colonial past is related to a ‘cultural capital’, in the interviewees’ narratives. Throughout the en-

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8 *From the original:* «Io perché - grazie Dio - avevo la conoscenza di saper stirare, di saper alzare [i letti]... Di natura, di lavoro [è] quello che ho fatto ad Asmara [...] Per me, [con] il lavoro... non mi sono trovato in difficoltà . [...] Perché se non sapevi la lingua non puoi orientarti, ma [se] sai stirare, sai lavare, sai capire: che vogliono di più?».

9 *From the original:* «Insieme a un’altra mia amica di andare non mi sento tanto che trovo difficoltà, perché lei sa italiano, sa lavorare, perché lavora per italiani a servizio. [...] Lei lavorava con italiani, in casa, allora sa tutto! [...] Sono entrata subito a lavorare, avevo voglia di imparare per bene tutto che vogliono, [come fare] ‘le faccende degli italiani’, insomma, diciamo».

during presence of Italians in their country, before and after the colonial domination, the contact with Italians in Asmara *prepared* them in a way which was suitable for Italians' tastes and which, thus, could grant them a successful migratory experience. The skills learned are considered to be a real 'capital' which these subjects can 'trade' in order to improve their symbolic status and better their material working conditions. This capital is here seen as articulated in its gender qualities, being related to care and other feminine skills, and in its 'racial'/ethnic features, as far as colonialism shaped the 'ethnic' representation of Eritreans, as I said in chapter three.

However, since this is a form of capital which is not held by the culturally 'dominant' group, but by a group positioned at the fringes of society, it will not take them very far. In other words, it is a capital which does not allow them to climb the social ladder or to significantly improve their position, since it will never become a 'symbolic capital' (Skeggs, 1997). Still, it is an important resource for them in order to achieve material and emotional security, comfort and, most of all, self-esteem. It is also an important tool in understanding and *making sense* of their experience in this labour niche. As I explained in chapter five, Eritreans see themselves as *substitutes* for working-class Italian women in wealthy households. It is important for Eritreans, then, to stress the character of this replacement not only in the economical sense, but also in the cultural sense, as 'ideal' support for Italian households.

In conclusion, depicting themselves as *similar* to the Italians, or as 'ready to learn from them', they are finally able to inscribe themselves in the same social space as Italians. In a word, this allows them to not portray themselves as 'fully foreigners', like migrants who come from countries other than Eritrea. Thus, their belonging to Italy serves now to 'adapt' to a social position which is 'inside' the Italian social space. Yet, from there – as women, migrants, blacks, poorly educated – they are the 'best' candidates to be the 'new poor' in Italian society.

#### 4. REVERSAL OF HIERARCHIES

In interviews with Afro-Surinamese many recurrent images revolved around the representation of black women as more suitable for nurturing, caring and nursing *than* the Dutch. In these narratives I found a striking similarity with Beverly Skeggs' study on working-class British women educated as carers. Skeggs illustrated the insistence of her interviewees on criticising the lack of domestic and caring attitudes in middle and upper class women. They believed that working-class women had maintained a more caring attitude towards children and the elderly, an attitude which richer women had lost, because of their integration into the 'male' working market. This comparison was framed in terms of an essentialist self-representation of the 'innate' attributes characterising women located at different social positions.

In this paragraph I will show that the Surinamese also enact a self-representation founded on the criticism of white Dutch women which is based on the direct experience of contact with them in the Netherlands. For example, many interviewees compared themselves to the female relatives of the people they assisted. They criticise daughters of the elderly for ‘abandoning’ them in the hands of strangers, to which they contrasted the importance of caring for loved ones, in times of sickness and when death approaches. As Anne Mei The (2008) observed, for Surinamese women it can be particularly shocking, and also emotionally distressing, to see Dutch elderly people’s destiny of isolation due to the disinterest of their close relatives.

In these pages, I will focus on the opinions of the interviewees that have worked with Dutch women in a peer situation, such as colleagues in nursing homes or for *Home Care*, where they worked side by side with Dutch colleagues. Their standpoint is particularly interesting because it offers a direct insight into the performance of job skills and caring practices which would be difficult to access otherwise. From this perspective, the comparison between Dutch and Surinamese is articulated on two main points: the first is that Surinamese women are ‘cleaner’, the second is that they are more ‘careful’ with the elderly. Let me thus illustrate these two points through some examples.

The question of different hygienic standards is emphasised by Cynthia, a woman who arrived in 1976 to be reunited with her husband. She tells of having encountered difficulties in the work place because of this difference between herself and her Dutch colleagues. She was very unhappy in working with people who were superficial on cleanliness matters, an issue that she takes as a question of ‘identity’:

*They took the cloth to wipe the table with and then they clean the floor with it. This is something very dirty for us! [...] I say, there is one thing I don't want to lose: cleanliness. That's the way I've been raised and that's the way I want to stay*<sup>10</sup>

The question of cleanliness is of course extremely interesting from a postcolonial perspective. As I already mentioned, colonisers thought that it was they who brought ‘superior standards’ concerning hygiene, health and sanitation to the colonised<sup>11</sup>. However, from the perspective of Cynthia, the colonial hierarchies are overturned: Afro-Surinamese complain of the dirtiness of the Dutch. They criticize the Dutch for not knowing the basic rules of a clean and decent life, a fact which emerge at the work place. This accusation is very interesting, and there one can see Surinamese women’s

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<sup>10</sup> *From the original:* «Ze dus de doek pakte waarmee je dus de tafel veegde en dan veegde zij er de vloer mee. Dat is ‘bij ons’ heel erg vies! [...] Ik zeg, want dat is één ding wat ik dus niet ga laten: netheid. Ik ben zo opgevoed en zo moet het ook blijven».

<sup>11</sup> It is indeed starting from the study of sanitation and medicine at the time of French imperialism, that Elsa Dorlin (2006) demonstrates the ‘genealogical’ connection between ‘sex’, ‘race’ and ‘nation’ which was inaugurated by colonial discourse.

attempts to dismantle the superiority of their white colleagues and rehabilitate their own 'racial'/ethnic origin. Cynthia sees indeed the difference between 'clean' and 'dirty' behaviour as a difference between 'us' and 'them'; something she is not going to sacrifice in name of her integration in the Netherlands.

However, the story takes a different angle if we consider that her Dutch colleagues' behaviour is explained by the fact that their work place had a priority other than cleanliness: *speed*. Cynthia further explained that there was a constant tension between herself and her Dutch colleagues because she was accused of being too slow in doing the job. She was criticised for paying attention to 'unimportant details' and pushed to perform the job as the Dutch did it, thus faster and faster. At the end, Cynthia decided to quit the nursing home and started to work for *Home Care*, where it was easier for her to avoid tensions of this kind, since most of the work was done individually rather than in a group.

The question of 'speeding up' the job brings us also to the second point, that of carefulness. Working faster meant, above all, minimizing the attention paid to each patient and to washing, feeding and cleaning them one after the other, without wasting too much time. This is also something that Afro-Surinamese workers cannot stand. They complain of the 'distance' and hurry with which Dutch accomplished their tasks. Wilma, who has been working in a nursing home since 1982, says:

*But I'll be very honest [...] what I've seen: I find that the Surinamese nurses, 'we Surinamese', we have more patience with the elderly than the Dutch<sup>12</sup>*

Another woman, Francisca explains that for Surinamese, in contrast to the Dutch, care is not just *any* job, it is something you do with passion and you put effort into assisting people in an affectionate way:

*Surinamese people care with love, to help a person, to put the person at ease. [...] But if you do your job with love, then the people are... you gain the people<sup>13</sup>*

Finally, for Cynthia again, the Dutch seem to work only from the perspective of earning money, without taking the 'human' side of the job they are doing into account:

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12 *From the original:* «Maar ik zeg het heel eerlijk [...] wat ik gezien heb. Vind ik dat de Surinaamse zusters, 'wij Surinamers', wij hebben meer geduld met de ouderen dan de Nederlandse».

13 *From the original:* «Surinaamse mensen zorgen met liefde, om de persoon te helpen, om de persoon op zijn gemak te stellen. [...] Maar als jij met liefde je werk doet, dan zijn die mensen... dan win je de personen».

*They are quite rough with the people in the nursing home. Really! [...] But they don't think about that. They thought only about money. Even if it was their mother or grandmother*<sup>14</sup>

In these quotes, interviewees provided a narrative which stresses their own emotional involvement in the care giving, in contrast with the cold and money-interested attitude of the Dutch. This is an example of a difference in what I see as 'personalities'. For Afro-Surinamese interviewees, the focus is on the *relationship* with the patients, as a continuous practice of overcoming difficult situations to gain the trust of the care-receivers. In these words we find much of what has been said in the first chapter about care work as a *unique* type of job<sup>15</sup>, as far as it is based on 'emotional labour' as no other job can be. Yet, what I would like to stress is the fact that here we find a self-representation which is in line with the repertoire of images inherited from slavery. An example of this is the character of Betty Brown (O'Leary, 1996), a domestic slave famous for her devotion to her old mistress who wanted to be fed only by her until the last days.

My intervention here tries to emphasise interviewees' accounts of what *typifies* the way they perform this job; what makes unique the way Afro-Surinamese do it. Francisca answers this question with reference to the social organization of life in Suriname which makes these activities enjoyable for Afro-Surinamese. In her words:

*The majority [of Surinamese women] 'loves' home care. 'Cause they like caring for the elderly, to care for children. It's without a doubt. [...] It comes from our situation. You must care for your parents. [...] It's automatic. The houses are next to one another and if the neighbour is away [...] you just have to keep an eye on the children*<sup>16</sup>

Francisca's explanation is particularly true for women of her generation who, as I said, grew up in a very traditional society where caring and domestic skills were encouraged among girls, whereas in post-war Suriname, girls were usually pushed into housekeeping, care, or child-minding schools. For all these reasons, Afro-Suri-

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14 *From the original:* «Ze echt ruw tegen die mensen praten in bejaardenhuizen. Echt! [...] Maar daar dachten ze niet aan. Ze dachten alleen maar aan het geld. Zelfs als het hun moeder of hun oma was».

15 I am here following on Helma Lutz' question: is paid domestic work "just another job"? The reasons why this job is indeed different from other ordinary jobs have mainly to do with the context of its performance (the private house) and the emotional demands that it often entails (Lutz, 2008).

16 *From the original:* «Het grootste deel 'houdt' van de thuiszorg. Omdat ze heel graag voor ouderen zorgen, voor kinderen zorgen. Dat zit er heel dik in. [...] Die wordt geleerd uit de situatie bij ons. Je moet voor je ouders zorgen. [...] Dat ging automatisch. De huizen staan naast elkaar en als de buurvrouw er niet is [...] dan moet je maar een oogje gooien voor de kinderen».

name represent themselves as possessing a specific gendered 'cultural capital', which is moreover highly 'ethnicised'.

I suggest that what we see here at play is the enactment of different narrative tactics by interviewees. First of all, they celebrate traditional Surinamese society as being based on values of solidarity, reciprocity and support. The issue is explained with reference to the urban setting (the position of the houses in Paramaribo), as if to say that it is something intrinsically part of Suriname's social structure. At the same time, they adopt a very negative description of the Dutch, who are dehumanized as rude, selfish and merciless, because of their lack of human empathy and family values. These tactics have the purpose of overturning colonial legacies, which are seen as shaping collective identities, as an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy between Afro-Surinamese and Dutch. Interviewees react to this dichotomy stressing that Surinamese society, as whole, is radically *different*, even 'superior', in moral terms, to the Dutch one. The 'personality' of a caring person is thus not an individual feature, but it rather belongs to the Surinamese (versus Dutch) as a whole.



FIG. 14 One interviewee in the late 1960s. (From private collection).

This issue offers the example of a narrative tactic which is adopted for the sustainability of the narrator's perspective, following on the definition of tactics of De

Certeau and Parreñas which I illustrated in Chapter one. In fact, we understand that interviewees were not always able to impose their working practices on the Dutch, at least in the nursing homes. The story of Cynthia gives us an example of the fact that she had to adapt to principles of Dutch efficiency (the reduction of the time employed) which were imposed on all the workers from management regulations. Consequently, she preferred to enter into the domiciliary care sector, although less valued than nursing, in order to avoid conflicts at the workplace. There finally, in a relatively new sector, she was able to promote her ‘capital’ of skills and expertise, thanks to the individual relationship with the care receivers.

## 5. RESPECT AND DISCIPLINE

I would like to further illustrate a specific feature of Afro-Surinamese ‘caring personality’ as a source of positive self-representations for the interviewees. In particular, I want to focus on the issue of respect, for the elderly especially, and discipline as far as they affected the experience of Afro-Surinamese women in the niche of care and domestic work.

The discussion here revolves around the question of respectfulness for adults and the elderly which, in Surinamese culture, is very important. As an example of this, several women explained to me that children learn to use always the third formal person (‘u’) when talking with any adult, also with their own parents. This is said to be one of those *typically* Surinamese features that interviewees were keen to transmit to their own children, although they were raised in the Netherlands where the child-raising customs are more liberal.

Some interviewees explain that the ‘respectful’ attitude of Surinamese is a major difference between themselves and the Dutch. For some women I spoke with, the disciplined and submissive education given to Surinamese children frustrates their ambitions. In Sylvia’s view, Surinamese children should learn from Dutch children to challenge authorities and be more self-confident:

*In Suriname you are humble. Everything that your mother says is true. And you’ve to...you cannot reply. Look here in Holland you have to learn to stand up for yourself. You have to say what... you think. That you shouldn’t believe everything people say. See, that’s the difference<sup>17</sup>*

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17 *From the original:* «In Suriname ben je nederig. Alles wat je moeder zegt is waar. En je moet je... je mag je moet er ook niet tegenspreken. Kijk hier in Holland, kom je dat leren, dat je voor je zelf moet opkomen. Je moet dingen zeggen wat je... hoe je denkt. Dat je niet alles klakkeloos moet nemen. Kijk en dat is het verschil».

In Sylvia's words we find the representation of Surinamese population as humble and submissive towards authority. In this sense, this statement recalls excerpts from the interviews with Afro-Surinamese which I discussed in chapter six. There I illustrated the feeling of inferiority of which women complained after their arrival in the Netherlands and their connection with slavery and colonial domination.

Yet, what is interesting to me is the fact that this aspect of Surinamese 'personality' is something that was generally appreciated by the Dutch, and which therefore made their entrance into the domestic work sector easier. A good example of this is offered by Josephine telling the story of her first encounter with a white Dutch woman, Suzanne, who later became her employer. One day, Suzanne and Josephine were both sitting with their children in a self-service restaurant in one of the big Rotterdam shopping centres. Josephine tells the story in the following way:

*I was there with my children. [Laughs] I was with my children and she with her children. And her children were running. [...] And then she addressed me... [saying] that she found [it] so nice: so many children and yet sitting there so tidily, and waiting, and talking to each other [whispers] not loud. She had never seen that. Yes, this is 'how we are'...*<sup>18</sup>

After this initial chat, Suzanne asked Josephine if she could start babysitting her children when she was busy with work, with the express request to educate them in 'the Surinamese way'. In Josephine's eyes, this story truly represents an encounter between Dutch and Afro-Surinamese cultures, from which she gains self-esteem and appreciation.

Josephine was then employed and, from the rest of the interview, one can understand that she perfectly fulfilled Suzanne's expectations. Josephine was reliable, nurturing, affectionate and, at the same time, she was demanding and controlling towards the two Dutch children. Interestingly, in the relationship between Josephine and Suzanne the usual hierarchy between worker and employer seems to have been reversed. Often it is the worker telling the employer what she has to do, which makes the figure of the white woman once again a passive, infantile woman, unable to shoulder heavy domestic responsibilities, as I illustrated in chapter eight.

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18 *From the original:* «Ik zat met mijn kinderen. [Lacht] Ik zat met mijn kinderen en zij met haar kinderen. En haar kinderen rennen. [...] En toen heeft ze mij aangesproken... dat ze dat zo prachtig vind, zoveel kinderen en toch netjes zitten, en wachten, en met elkaar praten [whispers] niet luid. Dat had ze nog nooit gezien. Ja ja 'zo zijn wij'...».

## 6. THE CASE OF FOOD AND COOKING

Food-related practices can be seen as moments of negotiation of status between employers and employees, at the level of gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity. In this section, therefore, I will look at narratives referring to food (preparing, cooking and consuming) and to differences between Dutch-Italian and Surinamese-Eritrean relations concerning food. Speaking about food is indeed an identity marker, a frame to narrate cultural differences and similarities. Here, I refer in particular to what Andrea Petö calls *food-talks*, when she says that «talking about buying, preparing and consuming food – what I call 'food-talk' – is part of what constructs identity and imaginary belongings» (2007, p.152). Petö argues that the preparation, the consumption, and the symbolism of food are defined by gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity, in specific cultural contexts. In particular, she analyses interviews with migrant women in order to understand the identity negotiations which they enacted between different traditions of food systems.

In the case of black women, I am also following Marvalene Hughes (1997) in addressing the identitarian components which enter the preparation of every meal performed by them in the United States. Their capabilities for nurturance ground these women's identities, allowing them to reverse the hierarchies at play. Although, black women's dominant presence in United States' kitchens was due to a role assigned to them by slave masters, Hughes celebrates the phenomenon of «informal Black kitchen network that subtly penetrates White America» (p. 275). For Hughes, it is indeed a reason of great pride for black communities that *their* food is appreciated and adopted by non-blacks.

In the light of these considerations, I will take the case of 'cooking' as an opportunity to show narrative tactics that people can enact to resist, challenge, or confirm and reproduce their positionality within a certain construction of power, through everyday practices.

### *Eritreans*

For Eritrean interviewees talking about food-related practice was often an opportunity to illustrate their experience of exposure to and contamination from Italian culture, as had already taken place in Asmara. We will see that the reversal tactic which Eritreans try to enact is very different from the one the Afro-Surinamese use. This is in line with what I already said in this chapter in showing that Eritreans hoped to receive better treatment for being good *as* Italians.

The following excerpt is from the interview with Lemlem, a woman who arrived in Rome in 1972. Like many other Eritrean domestic workers in Rome, she had previous work experiences in Italian households in Asmara. This fact constitutes the 'cul-

tural capital' which equipped her for the life in Italy, as she tries to emphasise during the interview. She describes cooking in Italian fashion as an example of the level of absorption of Italian cultural practices on the part of Eritreans:

*At home [in Asmara] we cooked the same things. We also did gnocchi, home-made pasta, some small things. At that time I used to work as a cook, a bit, as help[cook]. Like that. [...] How I learnt [things] there, with them, at work, then I did it at home. Sometimes, when I went home.*

*And where did you buy the ingredients?*

*You could buy [them]! The flour: we had it at home; the potatoes: we cultivated them in our land. We made everything: fried potatoes, mashed potatoes...<sup>19</sup>*

The recipes she learnt at the workplace in Asmara as a (help)cook for an Italian family were then replicated in her own household. The point here is that her family status is described as *empowered* by learning Italian recipes: the family's garden was producing the flour and potatoes which were then used for cooking simple but tasty dishes.

After her migration, Lemlem tried to negotiate a better status in the relationship with employers showing skilfulness in cooking Italian food, *not* their traditional Eritrean food. Her aim was to gain better recognition and appreciation as a cook, escaping probably the condition of a maid-of-all-work in which her 'racial'/ethnic background might have cast her, in comparison with Italian domestic workers. In Lemlem's narrative, however, the tactic seems to fail: the effort was not properly understood by her employer, who took her skilfulness as one more occasion to exploit her.

*But at the end as I was then cooking there, I was doing the same here. It is not that here... you work, work and they don't give you any medal. "Good, do this" and "Good, do that."<sup>20</sup>*

Lemlem is echoing a general complaint made by her colleagues: the disregard for their know-how coming from the cultural affiliation with Italy. The *italianisation* of Eritreans was dismissed as a valuable element, normalised and — as we will see in the next chapter — superficially taken for granted.

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<sup>19</sup> *From the original:* «In casa [ad Asmara] cuciniamo le stesse cose. Si facevano pure gli gnocchi, [la] pasta [fatta] in casa, qualche cosetta. Allora un pò ho lavorato come cuoca, un pò come aiuto[cuoca]. Così. [...] [Sic]come ho imparato lì con loro, al lavoro, così poi lo facevo a casa. Qualche volta, quando andavo a casa. /E **dove comprava gli ingredienti?** / Si compra[no]! La farina ce l'abbiamo a casa, le patate: le coltiviamo dalla terra nostra. Facevamo tutto: le patate fritte, il purè...».

<sup>20</sup> *From the original:* «Però alla fine io come cucinavo una volta là, facevo [altretta]tanto qua. Non è che qui... lavori, lavori e non ti danno nessuna medaglia. "Brava, fai questo", e "Brava, fai quell'altro"».

Different, however, is the account of Semira, for whom the reference not to Italian food, but to the traditional Eritrean dish (*zighini*) is a reason for *pride* and success. As I said already, Semira worked for the Corradi family for some years, soon after her arrival in 1973 and before entering the sector of cleaning in offices. In her interview, she often takes the opportunity to praise her employers, describing them as generous and very human people. This attitude can be seen also in talking about food, when I asked her if she ever cooked traditional Eritrean dishes for them. She explains that she did so, but she substituted the traditional Eritrean bread (*'nghera*) with Italian white rice:

*When we had guests, I used to make zighini with rice<sup>21</sup>, it had become famous. [...] Because when I cooked for the children they liked it, especially one of them, instead the others were not so interested in it. When we tried to make a bit of it for the guests, the guests liked it a lot and 'we' made always more and more<sup>22</sup>*

For her enjoyment of the children and the guests' compliments, Semira echoes Hughes' description of black women's pride in 'feeding whites'. The cooking is also described as an occasion of harmonious negotiation between herself and the employer: when I directly asked *who* took the initiative to prepare it, she started to talk with the plural verb, in order to stress the convergence of hers and the employer's wishes.

The attitude of Eritreans towards the contact between their own and Italians' food culture is radically different from the attitude of the Surinamese. Wider cultural and social meanings entered the Eritreans' experience, involved in the dominant character of Italian food-culture and the 'minority feeling' of East African traditional cooking. From the interviews, the main tactics at play seem to be the willingness to satisfy employers' wishes in the performance of food practices: learning Italian recipes, hiding their own, or modifying the meals to suit Italians' tastes. Yet, the preparation and the consumption of food, for the employers or in their co-presence, offered them the opportunity to play out some adjustment of hierarchies between them, yet, not always in a successful manner.

### *Afro-Surinamese*

A more successful result is obtained by Afro-Surinamese interviewees, if we look at the way food became, in their hands, an instrument to reverse their subordinated po-

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21 *Zighini* is the traditional Eritrean dish made by mince meat and spicy sauce. It is usually eaten together with a soft and aromatic bread called *'nghera*.

22 *From the original*: «Quando avevano gli invitati, facevo lo zighini col riso, era diventato famoso. [...] Perché quando cucino io ai figli piaceva, soprattutto a uno di loro, invece gli altri non erano tanto interessati. Quando abbiamo provato a farne poco per gli invitati, agli invitati è piaciuto tantissimo e 'abbiamo' sempre aumentato di più».

sition in Dutch households. The differences between the Italian and the Dutch cases are naturally connected with general features which go beyond the specific cases I analyse here. It is true indeed that Italian and Dutch food cultures are very different since, if in the Dutch, case the traditional cooking is very simple, the Italian tradition is instead very rich. This aspect cannot be forgotten when looking at the differences between the integration of Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese in the food-culture of their countries of arrival. Moreover, while in Rome, the Eritrean restaurants are few and attended by a very restricted audience; in Rotterdam, Surinamese restaurants and takeaways are all over the place. You can find in any Dutch supermarket some basic ingredients to cook the most famous Surinamese recipes and many Dutch, especially young people, try to experiment with a Surinamese-cooking book at least once in their life. The same cannot be said for Eritrean food in Italy.

However, one has also to bear in mind that this familiarity with Surinamese food in the Netherlands is a relatively recent phenomenon, which came years after the arrival of the interviewees. It is thus possible that, in the 1970s, they were really pioneers in 'importing' Surinamese food into Dutch homes. In this paragraph I will illustrate some features of this process and how it interconnected with the organization of material and symbolic hierarchies in those households.

As I said, Hughes argues that cooking is a powerful instrument in the hands of black women in the United States. She talks about an 'invasion' of black women in the nation's kitchens, from where these black cooks enacted a double sided strategy: to nurture the American population, thus making them happy; but also to make Americans *dependent* on good black food so as to, in a sense, enact power over them. Similarly, as I already discussed, Afro-Surinamese women can be seen as pillars of Dutch society in terms of providing care and nursing services. Here, I contend in particular that preparing food is an important part of interviewees' positive self-representation concerning their working experience in the Netherlands. Indeed, food is a major instrument for a reversal of the relationship with the employer at least in two ways: first, several interviewees like to prepare Surinamese food as a way of expressing an aspect of their cultural background which makes them feel superior to the Dutch. Secondly, others use it as a *personalised* way to bring comfort to the patients with some «good creative Surinamese cuisine»<sup>23</sup>, as one interviewee said, and thus make their working life a more fulfilling experience.

First of all, interviewees see food as a matter of 'cultural encounter'. Food is an easy and widely appreciated matter of cultural exchange, wherein white people can somehow really 'taste' the cultural differences of the worker. In this sense, we find an example of the marketing of their own 'ethnic identity' by Afro-Surinamese women. Ilse, a woman who arrived in Rotterdam in 1974, explains:

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23 *From the original: «Lekker creatief Surinaams koken».*

*It's also to get the 'Surinamese feeling'. That they say "How do you do that?!" [...]. And then you make them so happy<sup>24</sup>*

In these lines, one can see that the easy success of Surinamese food gives to people like Ilse an opportunity to show their expertise and to confirm their personality as good, careful and attentive workers. In fact Ilse, like some other interviewees, tells of having decided spontaneously to cook Surinamese food for their patients at *Home Care*, in order to provide a 'special service' to them.

The example of cooking as part of the wider emotional labour that care and domestic workers provide can be found also in the interview with Marita. Thinking about one employer, she remembers:

*She asked once if I could prepare something for her. You know. Suppose you love tasty kouseband<sup>25</sup> [laughter]. So when I was cooking, also the children joined me to watch. Yes. [Laughter] So, I did it of course<sup>26</sup>*

Another woman, Sylvia, who worked as a nanny in the Van der Vliet family, addresses the relationship with her female employer, when it came to preparing food:

*I was sometimes cooking something Surinamese: brown beans, I would also cook, you know. And sometimes she had a recipe and she then used to say: "Well, do you want to prepare that?" You know. Like that. 'Cause, look, for example kip kerrie<sup>27</sup>, which she had read about in a book<sup>28</sup>*

In these two last quotes we find again the question of the *comparison* with the female employer who is depicted as a woman demanding care and cleanness, but never working for it herself. The employer is indeed only demanding certain meals, suggesting a dish, but never sharing the domestic function with the employee.

To conclude, I wish to summarize the continuous doubleness and *ambivalence* that the tactics adopted reveal. These women have at their disposal a great capital of skills, which are shaped by their gender and 'race'/ethnicity. It is something that they are able to 'offer' to the care sector and which characterizes their position in the niche of domestic work. Yet, here we find again the trap of an unavoidable fixation of roles

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24 *From the original:* «Dat is toch het 'Surinaamse gevoel' krijgen. Dat ze zeggen van "Hoe doen jullie dat nou?!". [...] En dan maak je ze zo vrolijk».

25 *Kouseband* are very long green beans that are typical in Surinamese cooking and are also called snake beans or yardlong beans.

26 *From the original:* «Maar toen vroegen ze een keertje of ik wat voor haar klaar wilde maken. Weet je. Stel je houdt van lekkere kouseband [*gelach*]. Dus als ik zo kookte, dan kwamen die kinderen ook erbij. Já. [*Gelach*]. Dus dat deed ik wel».

27 *Kip kerrie* (Chicken curry) is a Caribbean dish which is very popular Suriname.

28 *From the original:* «Ik kookte soms ook iets Surinaams: bruine bonen, kookte ik ook, weet je wel. En soms had ze dus ook een receptje en dan zei ze: "Nou, wil je dat klaarmaken?" Weet je wel. Zo. Want, kijk bijvoorbeeld kip kerrie, [die] had ze in een boek gelezen».

and social positions. Afro-Surinamese women, as modern-day Mammies in Dutch homes, can *only* hope to be praised for their tasty dishes, while opportunities to get out of the niche are more and more restricted.

#### CONCLUSION

In these pages I have tried to answer the question: what are the skills that Eritreans/Afro-Surinamese believe characterise 'their' work? In answering this question, I looked at the specificities of their domestic/caring skills, specificities which they tend to see as key ingredients for their success in the given working niche. In particular, I contend, assumptions regarding interviewees' 'racial'/ethnic background have been fundamental for their success and integration into this job market, as a tool which they were able to use in order to reverse the hierarchy towards the employers or to strengthen their bond with them. In one way or another, they were able to pull out from their identity as postcolonial women those elements which could improve their migratory experience, making it more sustainable and less degrading.

Here I have shown, as well, that interviewees have a very *ambivalent* attitude towards this ethnicisation. The fact of being good, versed, skilled in care/domestic tasks is generally reason for pride. Their capability of infusing their ethnic backgrounds in the form of a 'personal touch' is seen as a precious ingredient of the professionalisation of their caring skills. Both in the case of the Surinamese, as in that of the Eritreans, these elements work towards their empowerment as workers, in the light of upgrading their status, through a more fulfilling, richer, self-representation. These remain however intrinsically ambivalent: the same features reproduce again and again the colonial legacies, in the hierarchies between black and white, white mistress and black servants, and so forth.

Such a phenomenon is, in my view, functional to a permanence of those groups in the niche of private care/domestic work. In some cases, it allows them to experience their working integration and the performance of the job, not as elements of marginalisation, but rather as symptoms of migratory success.

## Chapter 10

### RACISM AT WORK, UNDER COLONIAL LEGACIES

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In this chapter, I shall look at cases in which, in interviewees' memories, their 'racial'/ethnic identity was straightforwardly connected to experiences of oppression and discrimination. I will take in particular the case of the racist offences and statements inflicted by employers on their workers. Thus, while in the previous chapter one's 'racial'/ethnic background was described by the interviewees in positive terms, here it was seen as a heavy burden on their shoulders. Their background is used by employers, just as in Italian and Dutch societies at large, in order to subjugate migrant workers to the lowest strata of society, playing on gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity together in order to reinforce the existing conditions of inequality. Thus, although I try to avoid an interpretation of employer-employee interactions in domestic work which might overshadow the capacity of these women to make it a worthwhile experience at the professional and personal level, I will here discuss the power asymmetries affecting this working sector, in particular for their race-based discriminatory character.

When looking at the issue of racism, I find it important to connect it with the question of Black Europe and African Diaspora which I outlined in the first chapter. In this perspective, indeed, I find that Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese women arriving in Europe before 1980 had in common the fact of having faced the early times of the anti-black discrimination which still today positions blacks at the lowest level in Europe's social and economic system, together with Muslims, Roma and other minorities. I argue indeed that, despite the differences in the histories of their countries and in their migratory patterns, both Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese interviewees share a very significant perspective on the difficulties encountered by the formation of an idea such as 'Black Europe' in the early stage. From their point of view, this idea appears to be grounded in the troubling relationship between whites and blacks, between former-colonisers and colonised and, finally, between migrant workers and their employers, in Italy as in the Netherlands.

I will begin with a brief discussion of the interrelation between racism and colonialism in today's Europe and of its relevance for black people's everyday lives. The first paragraph will illustrate scholarly literature on the issue of *ressentiment* and on the connection between racism and slavery-like treatment. In the following paragraph, I will suggest that care work in private households can be an opportunity for the perpetration of race-based discrimination, as interviews with Afro-Surinamese home carers can demonstrate. In subsequent paragraphs, I will discuss the postcolonial

dimension of these women's experiences of oppression and discrimination in more detail. In the third paragraph, I will demonstrate the importance of representations and symbols taken from the time of slavery as tools used in the hands of employers to subjugate their workers. Indeed, from interviews with Afro-Surinamese women, the question of slavery emerges as a powerful rhetoric device used by employers in their interactions with employees. Then, on the basis of interviews with Eritreans in Rome, I will illustrate how inferiority and segregation marked workers' bodies and the space where they used to live. The first example I will bring concerns the compulsion for workers to wear uniforms; another example is their spatial confinement in the most small and hidden areas of the house. These two paragraphs thus illustrate the existence in migrant domestic work of a system of confinement, control, policing, regulation and objectification similar to the one to which servants in colonial settings were subjected. In these paragraphs, however, I will also try to illustrate subjects' capacities to use narrative construction as a means of allowing them to endure and resist conditions of abuse and distress.

#### 1. RACISM, RESENTIMENT AND SLAVERY

Black migrant domestic workers can often encounter mistreatment and abuse which one can define as 'racist expressions', i.e. individual or collective «beliefs and verbal outbursts (epithets, slurs, etc.); acts and their consequences; and the principles on which racist institutions are based» (Theo-Goldberg, 1990, p.296). If we focus on this aspect of workers' stories, paid domestic work appears as *inherently* based on racial hierarchies inasmuch as these hierarchies are always latently present in the job performance and they can, now and then, come to light as manifest mistreatments. Thus, the institution of paid domestic work can be seen as embedded in a 'systemic domination' in which white people dominate over black people (Fay, 1987, p.123). But how do we characterise this racism which permeates the experiences of migrant workers in Europe?

I find interesting the fact that, during recent years, the European debate on racism and anti-migrant discrimination has been concentrated around the notion of *ressentiment* (Delanty *et al.*, 2008). This a Nietzschean notion which has been successively applied by various scholars to issues of intra-group hostility feelings, as in the case of Max Scheler's work on slave-master morality (1912), of Jean-Paul Sartre on Judaism (1943). Through these different uses, the notion of *ressentiment* has been the object of differently nuanced definitions. Amongst them I find particularly poignant that offered by Wendy Brown (1995) who sees the formation of identities as based on at-

tachments to past sufferings and injustices<sup>1</sup>. These attachments «promote not only a psychological but also a political practice of revenge, a practice that reiterates the existence of an identity whose present past is one of insistently unredeemable injury» (Brown, 1995, p.73).

*Ressentiment* is thus, in my view, an important notion in describing the postcolonial subjectivity in particular for what concerns the issue of the re-enactment of oppressions experienced in the past. Moreover, I find *ressentiment* to be a key term for its potentiality to explain the sentiments of the dominant *and* the dominated group alike. In relation to the first perspective, I am taking into account the fact that the recent xenophobic tendencies of both Dutch and Italian people have been seen as propelled by *ressentiment*-like feelings. If the Dutch columnist Sjoerd de Jong (2005) suggested the notion of ‘regret-revenge’ (*spijtwraak*) in order to account for the backlash of Dutch renowned ‘tolerance’, similarly, the Italian anthropologist Annamaria Rivera (2009) has accounted for Italians’ discriminatory behaviour speaking about a ‘moral resentment’ (*rancore*<sup>2</sup>). Thus, while Rivera sees in the xenophobia spreading through Italy today a sort of ‘coming back’ of Italians’ fascist identity and their revenge for their poverty (also as migrants); De Jong rather argues that the Dutch are now taking revenge on their earlier position of tolerance towards immigrants, in the 1970s, which left them powerless and alienated.

Yet, if we look at the issue of racism from another perspective, that of the subjugated groups, we find that the notion of *ressentiment* was taken up a long time ago in the debate on paid domestic work. The Afro-American scholar Judith Rollins (1985), following on Theresa McBride (1976) and Max Scheler (1912), demonstrated *ressentiment* to be at play in domestic workers’ feelings towards their employers. She defines *ressentiment* among domestic workers is a «long-term, seething, deep-rooted negative feeling toward those whom one feels unjustly have power or an advantage over one’s life» (Rollins, 1985, p.227). These are the feelings which for Rollins characterise Afro-American domestic workers’ endurance of demeaning treatment and their awareness of white employers’ unearned privileges as based on class and ‘race’/ethnicity differences.

In this context, I found very interesting that the interviewees expressed some form of *ressentiment* feelings when talking about racism *as* inheritance of slavery. This connects to the fact that both interviewee-groups described the racist discriminations, offences or abuses received from white employers as something which echoes, in their views, forms of slavery-like oppression. In this sense, their stories contribute

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1 I am indebted to Shireen Ally for having suggested the relevance of Wendy Brown’s thinking for my work.

2 Rivera connects this term to Ernesto De Martino’s theory of regret (*rimorso*) which refers to the reiteration of the ‘bad past’ in choleric forms. (De Martino, 1961).

to the vision of contemporary forms of paid domestic work as 'modern-day slavery', a job in which racist abuses are the norm (Wijers & Lin, 1997).

This position echoes Basil Davidson (1994) saying that just as racism was the excuse for slavery's excess, slavery gave birth to modern racism. However, the association between racism and slavery, as a descriptive tool or as a rhetorical device, is not an easy one, especially when this association is made in contemporary Europe, as David Theo-Goldberg (1990) and Philomena Essed (1991) remind us. For instance, one has to be conscious that the images Europeans possess of slavery refer to a repertoire based on United States' history: films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Color Purple* greatly influenced the understanding of slavery-like practices for those who did not have direct access to them. Similarly, we can say that anti-black discrimination in general is, in most people's minds, associated with the case of Jim Crow Laws, the Ku Klux Klan, or, finally, South African Apartheid. And indeed, images associated to these forms of anti-black discriminations are a recurrent trope in most interviewees' narratives. Through these images, interviewees give expression to their standpoint on the experiences of racial discrimination, servitude and apartheid which took place, although in different forms, in both Italian and Dutch colonialism.

In the following pages, I will analyse how the intertwining between racism and colonial legacies is constructed in interviewees' accounts. In so doing, I will consider paid domestic work as one of those situations in which, behind what seems to be a 'normal' routine from the perspective of the dominant groups, racist practices take place everyday. In so doing, I follow Philomena Essed's suggestion that, in order «to expose racism in the system, we must analyse [also] ambiguous meanings, expose hidden currents, and generally question what seems normal and acceptable» (Essed, 1991, p.10).

## 2. HOME CARE AS A 'SCENARIO OF RACISM'

Women workers in the home care sector can usually retell countless episodes in which they, or their colleagues, felt offended and mistreated for 'being black'. Often these episodes describe an encounter between a white elderly person and a black woman who has to take care of him/her. This encounter is told as being far from easy: fear, distrust and anxiety are the feelings that the white elderly person repeatedly express when meeting a black person. In these encounters, phenomena of postcolonial 'othering' and stigmatisation of blackness are at play, in my view.

In this paragraph, I will briefly illustrate different dimensions of these troublesome meetings as I understand them through my interviewees' descriptions of the difficulties experienced by white elderly people in meeting black persons, and in letting them enter their houses and take care of them. Thus I contend that several moments of these encounters can be seen as moments, situations, conditions which are stored in

black people's memories as what Philomena Essed calls 'scenarios of racism' (Essed, 1991, p.293).

As I said, many of the stories I collected talk about problems arising at the first appointment, after the domiciliary care agency sends its new worker to a new address. How will the old/sick person react to an unexpected meeting with an Afro-Surinamese woman? Wilma remembers an episode which today makes her laugh, but which signals the atmosphere of racial tension in which she had to carry out her work. In Wilma's words:

*I had to do home care for a lady. But yes, the people were not used to see dark persons. [...] Then, once I got the address, I went. I rang the doorbell. And the woman came to the door and:.... [Laughing and making a scared expression]. Then – yeah – then she was scared! 'Cause she didn't expect that she would get a dark person at the door<sup>3</sup>*

I find the image of this encounter very telling about the forces affecting the care provided by Afro-Surinamese women to white Dutch people. One can imagine the black woman in front of the door, ringing the bell, longing to start a new job, and the other woman cautiously opening, scared of this 'alien' black person threatening to enter her house. The scene thus reveals a fundamental dimension of the dyad between *being needed* and *being inferior* as I described it in the first chapter, and which is here powerfully at play. Here we see that, despite her fear and her anxiety, the Dutch woman needs 'someone' to help her, just as the Afro-Surinamese woman needs a new job opportunity. One can find in Wilma's words the paradox of one's feeling of being, at the same time, *rejected* and *desired* by the former coloniser. Once again, the dominant group needs someone to take care of their elderly and sick people, but this someone has to be always reminded of her inferiority, through the display of repulsion for her person.

It is interesting also to notice that Wilma tells the story in an amused tone, finding today the reaction of the old lady just silly and exaggerated. I noticed several Afro-Surinamese interviewees to have this attitude, recounting episodes of discrimination as something funny, as an occasion for mocking the Dutch as more culturally backward than they expected them to be.

However, another interviewee, Francisca, has a more aggrieved tone, when telling of her constant feeling that white people never really trusted her. Being black seemed to be enough of a reason for suspicion, lack of trust, and worry on the part of the Dutch. In Francisca's words:

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3 *From the original:* «Ik moest thuiszorg bij een mevrouw. Maar ja, die mensen waren niet gewend om donkere mensen te zien. [...] Dus, het adres gehad, dus ik ga daar naar toe. Ik bel aan de deur. En die mevrouw kwam naar de doer en die:... [Lachen en schrikken]. Dus – já - dus ze schrok! Want, ze had niet verwacht dat ze een donkere aan de deur zou krijgen».

*They start to take a [certain] attitude. I don't know where it comes from. I think that they had never seen so many dark coloured people and then they get the idea: 'they are bad people'*<sup>4</sup>

In Francisca's view her uneasy feeling of being the constant object of prejudice is due to her employer's ignorance. Like Wilma, Francisca refers again to the fact that, during the 1970s, Dutch people were not used to 'seeing' blacks. Again, I suggest that Afro-Surinamese women did not expect Dutch people to be so encapsulated in their white and provincial world, which, in their views, was thus culturally behind the already multicultural Suriname.

Another example of the paradoxes intrinsic to the condition of 'being needed, yet inferior' is given by Georgina. She remembers an episode which took place soon after her arrival in Rotterdam (1972) when she was working as carer. One of her new patients used to make her work almost impossible because of her fear of being 'touched' by a black person:

*But she, a woman, when I went to work there, I wasn't allowed to touch her. No. I first had to put my hand in a washcloth and then lather that soap. And then she would tell me where I was allowed to wash her. "Here" she would say. [...] And then she said: and... "Je should only wash me with the palm of your hand". Yes. [...] And then she said: "But how is it possible that there it's so black and there so white?" And that made me jump. I didn't know how to answer. I had only just arrived*<sup>5</sup>

Because of the 'racial'/ethnic hierarchies affecting the encounter between the two women, the intimacy required by the performance of care work is turned into rejection and revulsion. Here, again, one can see at play the automatic and unconscious aversion towards black bodies as 'ugly', 'disgusting' and, as in this case, 'dirty'. This links to the seemingly naïve question of the old lady, revealing something Georgina could not yet imagine: the palm of her hand was preferable to its back because the skin was there of a lighter colour. A lighter colour being the symbol of cleanliness, white people preferred to be touched only with this, as if they dissected her body into a hierarchy of more or less 'polluting' zones. As I illustrated in chapter one, practices based on the dyad attraction/revulsion that mark, stereotype, devalue or degrade cer-

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4 *From the original:* «Ze beginnen een houding te nemen. Ik weet niet waar het vandaan komt. Ik denk, dat ze nooit zoveel donkerkleurige mensen hebben gezien en dan hebben ze een idee van: 'het zijn slechte mensen'».

5 *From the original:* «Maar die, een vrouw, toen ik daar ging werken, toen mocht ik haar niet aanraken. Nee. Ik moest mijn hand eerst in dat washandje zetten en die zeep smeren. En dan zei zij waar ik mocht wassen. "Hier" zei ze. [...] En toen zei ze: en... "Je moet me wassen met alleen de binnenkant van je hand". Ja. [...] Toen zei ze: "Maar hoe komt het, dat daar van jou zo zwart is, en daar zo wit?" En toen schrok ik even. Toen had ik er geen antwoord op. Ik was pas hier».

tain groups were a major phenomenon in colonial settings. I consider the repetition of these practices in Afro-Surinamese women's working experience as an important element of *continuity* concerning the master-servant relationship from colonial into post-colonial times.]



FIG. 15 Picnic at the Kralingse Lake, Rotterdam, 1980s. (From private collection).

### 3. SPACIAL CONFINEMENT

Most of the Eritreans were employed during the late 1960s/1970s as live-in domestic workers in the most exclusive neighbourhoods of the city of Rome: in the historical centre or in the more peripheral areas like Parioli, Eur, Casal Palocco, to mention but a few. The architectonic design of the apartments in these areas, Parioli especially, reflected the typology of bourgeois family expected to live there. These families were expected to hire at least one person as live-in staff for cleaning and cooking, serving at the table, or taking care of young babies<sup>6</sup>. Therefore these apartments were all provided with a small servants' side, which, following bourgeois prescriptions, minimised the contact between employers' family and workers. Thus the workers had to spend their day in the least comfortable areas of the house: the kitchen, a small dormitory room, or the laundry area. This is the way Haddas describes her bedroom and the toilet she used in the house of her first employers, the Locatelli family:

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6 On the interrelation between urban formation of upper-middle class neighbourhoods and the labour conditions of domestic workers, see the study by Gul Özyegin on Istanbul (Özyegin, 2002).

*My room was just big enough for me, it was possible only for me to enter, only for me, can you imagine? 'Cause it was very tight, just next to the kitchen. Did you have space for clothing, for [your] stuff? Yes, a little bit. There was a small wardrobe, for me. [There was] a small bathroom like that, so, rounded [simulating the size of it]: I entered with these long legs of mine and I washed myself. The tight bedroom. A small wardrobe. I keep my suitcase above the wardrobe and that's it. I didn't have much stuff, nor money to buy it<sup>7</sup>.*

The room was so small as to allow 'only the body' of Haddas to enter. Equally tight was her toilet, so small that she, being a pretty tall woman, found difficulty in entering. Moreover, the fact she had to put her suitcase on top of the wardrobe symbolised how her condition of scarcity of living space was connected to her mobility, as migrant who had to be always ready to move towards other destinations. It also points at the fact that, for people like Haddas, personal possessions were so few, that a very small wardrobe was just enough for them<sup>8</sup>.

The following excerpt is from the interview with Luisa, a woman who arrived in Rome in 1978. She remembers the striking difference between the abundance of space for the family and the small size of the 'servant-room'. In her words, the segregation of workers' living space, in opposition to the abundance of space for the family members, emerges as a great source of frustration:

*[This small room] was 2m50 by 1m80 – 1m90. And it had a bed-wardrobe that you pull to make it into a bed. [...] And how many rooms did the others have? It was really: the study room, the sitting room, the 'double' living room [...] And then there was the madam's bedroom, the kid's bedroom, his study room... All those rooms! [...] [But] they put their winter clothes, their coats, there, inside [in the small room]! Jesus Christ - I say - with all those rooms, just put a wardrobe somewhere [else]! No?! [Laughing]<sup>9</sup>.*

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7 *From the original:* «La mia camera era stretta come me, poteva entrare solo per me, solo per me, pensa un pò. Perché era molto stretta, attaccata con la cucina. / **Aveva spazio per i vestiti, per le [sue] cose?** / Sì, pochino. L'armadio piccolo, per me, questo c'era. Il bagno piccolo così, rotondo così [*facendo il gesto delle dimensioni*]: entrando con queste gambe lunghe e mi lavo. La camera stretta. Un armadietto piccolo. La mia valigia la tengo sull'armadio e basta. Non avevo tanta roba e soldi per comprare»

8 The scarcity of living space and of room for personal objects or clothing is found to be one of the most common forms of abuse suffered by paid domestic workers (Wijers & Lin, 1997).

9 *From the original:* «[La cameretta] era 2.50 per 1.80/1.90. E in questa c'era un letto-armadio che dovevi tirarlo per fare il letto. [...] E quante camere avevano gli altri? Era proprio: lo studio, il salotto, il 'doppio' soggiorno. [...] Poi c'era la camera da letto della signora, la camera da letto del ragazzino, lo studio suo... Tutte queste camere! [...] [Ma] i vestiti invernali, i cappotti,

In my view, interviewees' descriptions of these living environments recall what Freud calls the difference between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* i.e. between 'homey' and not-homey' (in Blunt & Dowlings, 2006, p.26). These women often lived for years, if not decades, in small places that they called 'homes', but which did not possess the character of what a 'home' should be.

This *confinement* was extended to the whole servicing activity that took place in the building. For example, these buildings had a secondary staircase which served the apartments' service-side through a small door placed next to the kitchen and the 'servant-room'. Again Luisa describes the situation:

*You could enter from two sides, 'cause there was the service-staircase which was in the inside. There were all these windows which looked out onto — it was not really a courtyard — a kind of tube where you found all these service-bathrooms, service-rooms, box rooms, and the lift with the staircase. [They] looked into this thing inside where the sun never got in. Also in the service-room the sun never got in<sup>10</sup>*

In this narrative, the description of this small service-courtyard condenses the experience of spatial segregation of domestic workers: the uneasiness in using the staircase, the lack of sunlight in the courtyard and the rooms looking over it, the restriction of space, and the proximity between rooms, toilets, and garbage bins.

One could explain the confinement experienced by Eritreans as being due to the spatial arrangement of these apartments, as 'unavoidable' external conditions. Here, however, I contend that interviewees use these narratives to characterise their relationship with employers *as based on* 'racially'/ethnically and classed systems of control and surveillance. In my view, these narratives refer to social and cultural values which reproduce the same system of confinement between 'purity' and 'dirtiness' which has been observed in colonial settings. There, indeed, in order to secure the minimal contact between families and workers, a cordon sanitaire relegated servants in specific precincts of colonial houses. Back-entrances, halls, rooms, and stairs were more or less elaborated devices to render the service staff invisible, and to protect white families and their guests from inconvenient or unwanted proximity to the native population. This was a major issue in colonial cities and domestic colonial spaces where the fear of inter-racial contact was exemplified by the widespread belief that a simple touch from the 'indigenous' person would bring infections and food pollution

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venivano messi là dentro [nella cameretta]! Dico io, Cristo, ci sono tutte queste camere, appoggia un armadio da qualche [altra] parte! No?! [Ridendo]».

10 *From the original*: «Si poteva entrare da due parti, perché c'era la scala di servizio che era interna. C'erano tutte queste finestre che davano [su] — non era proprio un cortile — un tipo di tubo dove c'erano tutti questi bagni di servizio, le camere di servizio, gli sgabuzzini e l'ascensore con la scala. Davano su questa cosa interna dove non entrava mai il sole. Anche nella camera di servizio non entrava mai il sole».

(Mills, 2005, p.117). In other words, I suggest that a form of *abjection* inherited from the colonial mindset finds its contemporary expression in the regulation of the space as described above by the interviewees. This makes the position of black domestic workers as paradigmatic for what concerns the principles regulating European societies when comes to the representation of those social groups which are relegated into low level jobs, exposed to discrimination and confinement into hidden locations.

#### 4. BODIES: WEARING INFERIORITY

Elisabeth O’Leary (1996) made a careful analysis of the representation of Irish and Afro-American domestic servants in the 19th century United States. Her study starts from the observation of paintings from that period which portrayed high class families in their stately homes. In these paintings, she contends, the absence or presence of servants is a telling sign of their role not simply in the maintenance of the households – servants were indispensable in such big houses – but especially of their symbolic function. In the appearance of servants in these family portraits, *liveries* were a crucial element of their representation. It basically meant that servants had been transformed into luxury commodities - status objects with the primary function of signifying a family’s power and position. In other words, uniformed workers were clearly displayed in the paintings as ‘properties’ that enhanced the affluent status of the principal figures. Yet, as these uniforms highlighted the status of these families, they conversely marked the subordinated social position of black, immigrant and working-class men and women working for them.

The United States at the time of slavery is just one example among many. The custom in high-class households to prescribe uniforms to their employees was, and still is, a widespread practice in most countries. Uniforms not only signal the status of the family towards the outside, but they also administrate the internal hierarchy between servants covering different roles inside the house. For these reasons, in Europe *as* in the colonies, cooks, nannies, cleaners, attendants, gardeners, or drivers had uniforms with different fashions and styles<sup>11</sup>. Also, the same person could wear a different outfit depending on the purpose and the context of her specific task. We find an example of that in the interview with Haddas when she remembers her job at the rich Locatelli family:

*For when I was with the children, they gave me a very beautiful apron, pale blue, which you could button all the way up. Anyway I always wore a*

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11 One can find an example of it in the illustrations of Elsbeth Locher-Scholten’s book on domestic servants in colonial Indonesia. There one can see that the nursemaid (*babu*), the cook (*kokki*), the houseboy (*jongos*) a gardener (*kebon*) someone for sewing (*jahit*) or a choachman (later a driver) wear very different sets of clothing (Locher-Scholten, 2000, p.90 and p.111).

*beautiful outfit. They were really keen on that, yes. When I was serving at the table [...] then the apron was white, in front, [while] underneath was always sky blue<sup>12</sup>*

So, Haddas can wear two different sets of clothing: the most beautiful one for when she is outside, in order to confirm the family's status in the outside world; and the classic white small apron fastened around her waist when serving at the table. In my view, this narrative from Haddas is also very interesting since one can find in it an example of what Erving Goffman called 'conversion' i.e. the situation in which «the inmate tries to act out the role of the perfect inmate [...] someone whose institutional enthusiasm is always at the disposal of the staff» (Goffman, 1961, p.63). Haddas, in fact, seems to have been enthusiastic in adapting to her employers' requests and to have been aware of the function they conferred to her. This has to be seen in the light of the internal hierarchy in the house between herself and another Eritrean woman who was relegated to lower level jobs and who remained back in the kitchen for the whole day. In this context, I read Haddas' narrative as an attempt to emphasise the upgrade of social status thanks to her working experience. Probably Haddas, previously employed as a shoe-factory worker in Asmara, saw her job as a nanny in a rich Italian family in Rome as a sign of social success.

However, that was not the reaction of all the Eritreans I interviewed to the obligation to wear uniforms. Other women, probably coming from different class and social backgrounds to Haddas, found in the dress code the concretization of the inequality that they were experiencing in Italy. People like Mynia, for example, a woman who arrived in Rome in 1975 to escape political persecution, had a different opinion. She saw in the compulsion to wear white gloves when serving at the table, a direct reference to a form of race based discrimination:

*[We had to wear] white gloves, especially when we served at the table [...] We had to wear gloves: this is racism! Maybe because I am black...<sup>13</sup>*

She finds gloves as a sign of humiliation, as something made to control, police, disguise her black skin. In the prescription of white gloves in order to cover the black skin of the people serving food, one can find again the enactment of the opposition of pure/dirty femininity that I discussed in the previous pages. Here one finds a further example of how black women's bodies were treated as 'inscription' surfaces (Grosz, 1994), which you can dissect and arrange as if moral prescriptions (good/bad, clean/

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12 *From the original:* «[Per] quando sto con i bambini, mi hanno dato un grembiule molto bello, celeste, che si abbottona tutto. Comunque io portavo sempre un vestito bello. Loro ci tenevano proprio, sì. Quando faccio tavola [...] a quell'ora avevo il grembiule bianco, davanti, [mentre] il sotto rimaneva sempre azzurro».

13 *From the original:* «[Dovevamo stare] con i guanti bianchi, specialmente quando si serve a tavola. [...] [Ci] si metteva i guanti: questo è razzismo! Forse perché sono nera...».

dirty) could be translated into various geometries of bodily appearance. Therefore the compulsion to cover parts of one's body, such as black hands serving food to white people, refers to the avoidance of the 'pollution' associated with blackness, which I discussed in the case of Georgina.

In an excerpt from the interview with another woman, Zufan, we find the illustration of the way different 'instruments' — hats, aprons, ribbons, gloves, of different colours and shapes — were used by Italian employers to 'regulate' the workers' bodies. Zufan emphasises, in particular, the process of 'objectification', associated to a 'commodification', which accompanied these practices. In her words:

*[One day] 'she lent me' out. I went there, to a friend of hers, who prepared me: [pointing to parts of her body:] the apron first, the white shirt, the white apron, a hat here, a white one, here the gloves. [...] If it was today, I wouldn't go. I'm [working] at your place and I'm not an 'object' that you can lend. But at that time I didn't know anything, I was very scared and I went<sup>14</sup>*

The fact the one can be dressed up as a doll, as a puppet that can be exchanged, and 'sent' from here to there, is for Zufan due to the lack of respect and professionalism in the employment relationship.



Fig. 16 Eritrean domestic workers gather at Piazza Indipendenza, Rome, 1977. (From Federico Bruno *et al.*, 1977).

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14 *From the original:* «[Un giorno] 'mi ha prestato'. Sono andata lì, da questa sua amica la quale mi ha preparato: [indicando le parti del corpo] il grembiule prima, la camicia bianca, il grembiule bianco, un cappello qua, quello bianco, qui i guanti. [...] Se fosse adesso io non ci andrei. Sono venuta a casa tua e io non sono un 'oggetto' che lo presti. Però a quell'epoca non sapevo niente, avevo tanta paura e sono andata».

The interviews with Zufan and Mynia demonstrate that liveries were not understood as simple practical protections from dust and dirt, but rather as powerful markers of their inferiority, separateness, and deviance from the 'white' norm. In fact, as Nicole Constable (1997) argues in the case of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, workers see the dress code as an instrument in the hands of employers to police, discipline and regulate the 'danger' represented by an 'unwanted' bodily presence. While in the case of Filipinas in Taiwan the 'danger' is constituted by sexual threat, in the case of Eritreans in Rome the danger had more to do with the fear of inter-racial contact, and the stigma of 'pollution' attached to blackness. Nirmal Puwar (2004) would here argue the fact that black/migrant bodies are always categorised as 'bodies out of place' which have to be regulated and disciplined. As in Zufan's experience, clothing practices are inscribed in a process of objectification which reinforces the position of servitude wherein postcolonial subjects are cast.

## 5. RE-ENACTING COLONIAL TIMES

During the fieldwork in Rotterdam, I experienced how many Afro-Surinamese women living in the Netherlands are confronted on an everyday basis with the survival of colonial hierarchies. Their grandmothers' stories, which are still very much relevant to their family memories, can often make their life in the land of the former slave-masters emotionally challenging<sup>15</sup>. In particular, in the case of women working as home carers and cleaners, the 'ghost of slavery' (Sharpe, 2003) is an ever present matter. Having to cook, clean and serve for white Dutch people gives to many the impression of a painful re-enactment of the colonial past.

Some Afro-Surinamese care workers explained to me that even if slavery was not present in their minds 'everyday', as soon as they felt mistreated in one way or another, they *again* felt that they were 'slaves for the Dutch'. As proof, they said that some of their colleagues could not emotionally bear such a condition, and left this labour sector after a short time of work. Those who remained in the sector tell of having learned to 'get over it', to avoid looking back in time, and to 'think only about the present'.

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15 One day, during the contacts-making phase of the Rotterdam fieldwork (summer 2008), I visited a bar attended by several people from the Caribbean together with my assistant Eleanor. There we approached two women sitting at one of the tables. Eleanor started to say something along the lines of «Hello, we are making an inquiry about the experience of Surinamese women in the Netherlands...» when one of the women vehemently interrupted her saying: «Do you really wanna know what our experience was?! Look, take your grandmother and my grandmother: yours was the master and mine was the slave!». We later interviewed this woman in a private appointment and she explained her thoughts to us in more detail.

Thus, they generally distance themselves from those who, they say, wallow in negative feelings about the past and cultivate unnecessary resentment against white people.

I am arguing here that these women employ emotional tactics in order to avoid sentiments of revenge against the Dutch, which would frustrate their working life. The simple *need* for these tactics, successful for some and not so for others, demonstrates that the wound of slavery is not completely healed and creates *ressentiment* towards white employers in the working relationship.

Here I want to offer some examples from the interview with Georgina. Her interview is particularly interesting because of the explicit character that the *re-enactment* of slavery takes in her story. Her employer, Ms. Van der Meren, seemed to straightforwardly want to provoke her inferiority feelings *as* based on the colonial past. The employer did not generally mistreat her, but she rather ‘offended’ her on some very specific issues. For example, she forbade Georgina to take a shower in the house, accusing her of ‘dirtying the bathroom’, and compelled her to sleep in the living-room instead of in a more private room. These are cases of spatial and bodily constraints that summarise well what I discussed in the previous two paragraphs. Moreover, this woman was pushing Georgina’s psychological endurance of the situation with a distinct ritual: she would buy history books that spoke about the slavery-time, and ask Georgina to read them aloud for her. This is the way Georgina tells the story:

*They had a very bad life [...] then they want to play being the ‘grand dame’ that they had never been! But it turns sour. It turns sour. ‘Cause they still ‘dream’ of having a black working for them, and everything that is in those books, what the slaves then did. But those slaves...now... there are not slaves any more!*<sup>16</sup>

Georgina describes the fixation of her employer as something so absurd as to be pitiable. Yet, in her narrative today she tries to express her anger toward the fact that, at that time, she did not have great possibilities to change the situation due to economic need.

In the first part of this dissertation, I mentioned the fact that Georgina is the only Afro-Surinamese interviewee who already had a direct experience of paid domestic work in Dutch households in Suriname. In chapter six, I have commented on an excerpt from her interview in which she briefly describes her experience as a domestic worker in Paramaribo. She then stresses the fact that her relationship with her employers was very good and she never felt they treated her ‘as a slave’ (see chapter five). Now, I can suggest that such a positive description of her job in Paramaribo

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16 *From the original: «Ze hebben een heel slecht leven gehad [...] dan willen ze die ‘hoge vrouw’ gaan spelen die ze nooit geweest zijn! Maar het pakt verkeerd uit. Het pakt verkeerd uit. Want ze ‘dromen’ nog van dat ze een zwarte bij zich hebben werken en wat in die boeken stond wat die slaven toen deden. Maar die slaven... nu... er bestaan geen slaven meer!».*

serves in her narrative to emphasise the contrast with the experience she had later in the Netherlands. Paradoxically, it is only *after* her migration that the colonial past affected her life in the most troubling way, when in her work as carer and cleaner in Dutch houses, hospitals and nursing homes, the image of slavery was suggested to her several times.

Georgina does not minimise the offences that she received from her employers, and she understands them as parts of a wider trend in Dutch society. In the following excerpt she explains her standpoint on the fact that Dutch elderly people grew up 'dreaming' of having someone that would ease them and serve them: a black person to whom they could feel superior, she says. In her words:

*They have a very bad life [...] then they want to play at being the 'high lady' that they had never been! But it doesn't suit them. It doesn't suit them. 'Cause they still dream of having a black working for them, and everything that is in those books, what the slaves did then. But those slaves...now... there are not slaves any more! So you are going to react differently to them!<sup>17</sup>*

Once again Georgina's feelings are based on the contrast between past and present, between life in Suriname and life in the Netherlands. The two countries live in a knowledge gap: white Dutch people believe that slavery is still on going, and that Surinamese people are still potentially their servants.

Georgina sees the behaviour of Dutch employers as belonging to a sequence of discriminations perpetrated by white people towards blacks, in a history which leaves very little space for individual reaction, and thus frustrates her sense of justice. Her everyday life is understood in connection with the history of Afro-Surinamese people's enslavement, and in particular the struggle of Afro-Surinamese women rebelling against abuses and oppression suffered at the hands of their white mistresses, as in the example of Slavin Alida that I mentioned in chapter three. The everyday re-enactment of slavery to which Georgina is exposed illustrates the importance of feelings of *ressentiment* for the formation of collective identities, as Wendy Brown says. In this process narratives and memories have a crucial role in shaping postcolonial identities, as I demonstrated to be the case in the realm of paid domestic work.

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17 Georgina: «Ze hebben een heel slecht leven gehad [...] dan willen ze die *hoge* vrouw gaan spelen die ze nooit geweest zijn! Maar het pakt verkeerd uit. Het pakt verkeerd uit. Want ze *dromen* nog van dat ze een zwarte bij zich hebben werken en wat in die boeken stond wat die slaven toen deden. Maar die slaven...nu, er bestaan geen slaven meer. Dus je gaat anders reageren tegen hun!».

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I came to terms with issues that have been variously addressed during this dissertation and which find here their final outcome. I am thinking of the potentiality of oppression and discrimination which I mentioned several times in previous chapters and which is here finally fully developed. I have also shown that the *ambivalence* affecting postcolonial identity, which in some cases can be used by migrants to negotiate a better status (as I have shown in chapter nine), in other cases opens the way to various forms of discrimination against which it is not easy to rebel.

As I have said, two contrasting endings await postcolonial migrants: positive recognition in one case, a strangling bond in the other. Thus, if in the previous chapter I looked at the first side of the possible outcome, in this chapter, my aim was instead to show the vulnerability and the compulsory submission of interviewees to the discrimination taking place in such a low level and stigmatised job as domestic work. My point is that discriminations which generally pertain to this sector assume a peculiar character in the narratives of postcolonial migrant women which thus illuminates the whole debate on contemporary forms of paid domestic work. What are generally called 'slavery-like practices' correspond to representations, at the level of meaning construction, which today affect probably all migrant domestic workers independently of their national background, but which have been crucial in the experience of the first domestic workers. These representations have an important function in formerly colonised subjects' understanding of their own migratory and working experience in the domestic sector.

Following on from that, in this chapter I concentrated on a few elements which appear to be *continuities* between the period before and after colonialism, and in the experience between colonial peripheries and metropolis. It emerged that what happened during slavery and apartheid can still be very telling for today's forms of labour. Together with representations from colonial sources, I have also investigated the importance of representations coming from the time of slavery in the United States, which I believe to be particularly important in shaping a racialised imagination, both in the case of employers and employees. Furthermore, these images supported interviewees in commenting on discriminatory representations.

Another crucial element which comes back repeatedly is the question of the dichotomy between *clean* and *dirty* in the employer-employee relationship as far as it channels a series of representational devices from the colonial times into contemporary migratory regimes. This issue has been illustrated in the occurrence of degrading stereotypes against blacks which play a role in the very embodied, physical encounter between black workers and white Dutch/Italian women. What makes the meeting of employers and employees a 'scenario of racism' is rooted in the sentiments of hostility and distrust which have been experienced during colonial times.

Equally the regime of *abjection* and surveillance against possible 'pollution' brought by the servants, which was a recurrent issue in the colonial setting, returns in the narratives about the regulation of domestic space and the codification of workers' clothing. I have shown how these regulations combine different necessities, from the side of employers, concerning not only 'racial'/ethnic boundaries but also, and especially, class.

Finally, another element of continuity has been found in the feelings of *ressentiment* that both employers and employees express and which are grounded on their common past history. I have shown that employers adopt specific discriminatory measures which *re-enact* the colonial time, in particular the 'ghost of slavery' in the Afro-Surinamese case. Employees try to resist, at the narrative level, digging into their historical consciousness and their ancestors' struggle. The question of the re-enactment of colonialism is crucial in understanding the function of narratives as tools of resistance, but also in gaining awareness of the way postcolonial subjects can easily be subjugated by the inheritance of colonial discourse when this is a tool of symbolic and material oppression in the hands of their employers.

## CONCLUSIONS

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«Why? Simply because I am interested in the past?  
No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present.  
Yes, if one means writing the history of the present»  
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*

In this dissertation I aimed to contribute to what I said in the Introduction were for me the two most relevant research streams in the migrant domestic work debate: the globalisation of care and the micro-politics of (paid) domestic work in western households. With respect to the first stream, I demonstrated how a postcolonial perspective can enrich our understanding of the division of care work at the global level. From my study it emerged that what western countries are draining from the global south is something more complex than simple 'love' or 'care'. Rather, it is a complex combination of symbolic and material entities which are first *historically* determined and only then are embodied by postcolonial female subjects. In relation to the second research stream, my work explains some features of the relationship between employers and employees such as replication of behaviours and representations from the colonial time in present migratory settings. On the whole, my study may offer grounds to argue for the *continuity* between colonisation and globalisation, between colonial regimes and contemporary paid domestic work and, finally, between the colonial white mistress-black servant dichotomy and the relationship between native and migrant women in Europe today.

At a more general level and from a theoretical standpoint, my contribution to this debate progressed in five steps. First, as a novel approach to issues of migration, I developed the combination of the framework of *postcoloniality* with *intersectionality*. This experiment was grounded on the acknowledgement that the way we talk today about social divisions (gender, age, class, 'race'/ethnicity, etc.) cannot be fully understood without considering the historical context in which they have been shaped. This brings our attention to colonialism, seen as a political and economic project which was accompanied by a process of cultural, social and moral categorisation. My study demonstrated how differences along intersecting axes such as gender, class, and 'race'/ethnicity have to be considered in the light of the processes which shaped them within colonial discourses and of the normative value ascribed to them.

Secondly, in this dissertation, I came to consider interviewees' caring and nurturing skills, which they learned during their youth, as a specific articulation of cultural capital, shaped under colonial legacies, in which gender and class features are combined with 'race'/ethnicity. I thus talked of a gendered *postcolonial cultural capital* as a resource which is first shaped in the colonial setting and is then permanently present in the trajectory of female postcolonial migrants once in Europe. The crucial role of this colonial feature reminds us of the importance of colonial history in shaping contemporary European identities. For this reason I believe it to be important to contribute strongly to the project-idea of Black Europe which, as I explained, gives voice to the need of a new European configuration which acknowledges its past of colonialism, enslavement and oppression.

Thirdly, my research took *narrative tactics* as a meaningful object of analysis as far as they reflect processes of identity making and knowledge production at the level of representation. In particular, I demonstrated interviewees' narratives to be a tool of negotiation of hierarchies between workers and their employers. Moreover, I demonstrated interviewees' *narrative tactics* to be tools of micro-resistance for postcolonial subjects wherein they are able to put to a different use the knowledge and the skills they *accumulated* under colonial legacies. Thus, despite the impossibility to (always) change subjects' positions within the broad postcolonial and patriarchal order, narratives emerge as a tool which can still bring to individual subjects a sense of self-fulfilment and self-esteem. Another important contribution of this dissertation to the debate comes from taking *narrative tactics* as a relevant object of analysis for the understanding of migrant domestic workers' subjectivity. In this present work, indeed, I can say that through an analysis of the narrative devices adopted by the two groups, differences and similarities emerge in the relationships of Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean women with the former colonisers *as* employers. First, they had in common the enhancement of their skillfulness in practices related to the above mentioned post-colonial cultural capital in order to achieve better life and working conditions from their subjective point of view. Their positive depiction of their work was functional to a narrative made to 'sustain the difficulties' of a migratory destiny marked by a job which is otherwise stigmatised as 'dirty', degrading and servile. Secondly, they both made reference to the colonial past in order to gain better socio-cultural inclusion, in comparison with other migrants. With that purpose, interviewees provided a narrative which contrasts the dominant representation that, in their view, conceals colonial legacies in Afro-Surinamese/Eritrean domestic and care workers' experiences, and sees them as migrant workers 'like any other'.

If we look instead at the differences between the two groups, we can see that Afro-Surinamese and Eritrean interviewees 'use' the historical bonds with former colonisers in different ways. On the one side, Afro-Surinamese seem to challenge the hierarchy between themselves and the white Dutch, condemning overt racism and distancing themselves from the past experience of slavery. At the same time, however,

they consider as essential their contribution to Dutch society precisely *because* of their difference from Dutch women. On the other side, the Eritreans instead emphasize a *privileged* bond, based on a kinship relation, between Eritrean and Italian people, which recuperates and idealises colonial servitude and domesticity. Differently from Surinamese interviewees, in so doing they aim at a better inclusion in Italian culture without emphasising their 'difference' from Italians, but rather via an enhancement of the similarity with them as expressed in the relationship with Italian employers.

In these narrative tactics, postcoloniality emerged in its intrinsic *ambivalence*. Indeed, I demonstrated that representations attached to postcolonial migrant women led to contrasting endings: they eased their entrance into the former colonisers' society but, at the same time, they relegated them to the lowest strata of this same society. The interviewees have been living a life on the edge of this *ambivalence*, where being Eritrean/Surinamese was simultaneously their tool of resistance, and the reason for their subordination. Postcoloniality, in this sense, is a double sided relationship between colonised and colonisers, oscillating between a positive recognition and a strangling tie.

Finally, the importance of the contribution of my study to the debate of paid migrant domestic work has also to do with my discussion of the formation of a *post-colonial domestic worker's* subjectivity, an issue that I addressed throughout the entire thesis but, in particular, in chapter eight. There I defined the subject-position of postcolonial migrant women in domestic work as an unstable, never fixed identity, yet characterised by the ability to negotiate wider power dynamics through the individuation of one's cultural, gendered, ethnic competences - grounded in the history of colonisation - and put them forward for the purpose of enhancing one's fulfilment and self-representation.

The formation of the figuration of a postcolonial domestic worker is determined by several elements typified by the *continuity* between the time 'before' and 'after' the colonisation, as before and after the migration. The employer-employee dualism descends from a pattern inaugurated in the colonial setting, where the normative character of the relationship between native women and bourgeois Europeans was established. This pattern can be summarised in the following elements of continuity:

1. The reproduction, in the relationship between white Italians/Dutch and the Eritrean/Afro-Surinamese migrant women, of the dichotomy between coloniser and colonised. This recurrent dichotomy is particularly evident in the fixity of the roles between the one who *has to care* and then one who is cared *for*, where the first takes charge of the *necessary* and yet *abject* chores for the comfort of the latter.

2. The repetition of symbolic and material boundaries of inclusion/exclusion which pushes migrants/colonised in vulnerable and oppressive social roles. We find again the fixation of the position of those who are considered as 'subaltern and yet necessary', who have been object of 'othering' during colonialism and are today alienated objects of commodification in global markets. Here the pattern of 'colonial servi-

tude' which affects the representation of white bourgeois women in counter-position with black native women finds its origin, and reinforces degrading stereotypes against blacks which are rooted in the dichotomy between *clean* and *dirty* female models.

3. The re-proposition of specific representations about black women from the time of colonisation and African slavery conveys ideals of racial segregation and gendered exploitation of black women for sexual and care services. In particular, in the comparison between the Netherlands and Italy, this continuity is made visible in the survival of images relating to concubinage, domestic slavery and, in the case of Eritreans only, military recruitment.

4. Finally, the possible parallelism between the specific conditions of education, domestication and disciplining for women in colonial settings, and their channelling into specific work sectors in the countries of settlement. The process of labour niching, enacted along the axes of gender and 'race'/ethnicity, is a process of determination of the social position, behaviour and, ultimately, identity of the foreigners in a way that echoes dynamics of categorisation of people into different socio-economic groups as inaugurated in colonial times.

The emergence of these characteristics sets the case of women coming from former colonies to work in the land of the former colonisers as unique, or at least very different from the case of other groups. Going back to my previous research experiences on Filipino domestic workers, for instance, I cannot say that I find in their experience any of the features of the figuration of a postcolonial migrant domestic worker. This acknowledgement invites further research on the way other postcolonial groups might have experienced and narrated their working relationship with the formers colonisers, beside Eritreans and Afro-Surinamese.



BY WAY OF conclusion I would like to explore the repercussions of my study on the wider context in which my study finds itself, beyond the specific debate on (paid) migrant domestic work. As we know, the last decades have seen the increasing relevance of the participation of migrant women in a labour market which is, at the same time, more transnational than at any time previously. These changes pushed me to investigate their consequences for the power relations affecting this realm, with particular attention to the question of conflict between masters and workers, and to the struggle for equality and dignity of workers. What do the experiences of postcolonial migrant domestic workers tell us, in a wider context, about the transformation of the master-servant labour relationship, from a transnational perspective?

To summarise, my work supports the analysis of what the subjective conditions are that may (or may not) keep together the classic Hegelian dialectic between master and servant, a relationship with otherwise tends to be disrupted by conflicts and instances of change. Further studies are welcomed on how different factors related

to transnational workers' identity – e.g. postcoloniality, faith, migrancy, nationalism, etc. – affect the master-servant relationship in the present configuration of the global labour market. Among these factors, postcoloniality emerges from my study as a factor which, through daily negotiations and micro-resistances, results in the master-servant tension being, in the end, *maintained* rather than radically overturned.

Moreover, my study draws attention to three major features that, in my view, require further consideration when looking at contemporary forms of labour. First of all, the transnational character of the labour market today invites us to consider (self) representations which pertain to workers not only with reference to the actual location where they work and live, but also to their background, to the time of their youth and to the cultural-social context in which they have been raised. Here, a background shaped by a postcolonial relationship with the country of settlement has been seen as motivating the acceptance of hierarchies which pertain to those jobs, as paid domestic work, which are intrinsically based on class and 'race'/ethnic inequalities between masters and workers.

Secondly, within the expansion of the service economy and processes of feminisation and ethnicisation of labour markets, for which soft skills are privileged over hard skills, the importance of workers' *personalities* in sustaining the master-servant tension deserves greater attention. It is indeed thanks to the fact that cultures and behaviours are increasingly considered as sources of important competences and skills, that workers can promote their *whole* biography and background in order to achieve a win-win situation. In the case I analysed, the win-win situation entails high costs in terms of stigmatised labour and social positioning which are, however, compensated by a successful self-representation as migrant subjects.

Finally, one needs to further explore the capacity of migrant workers for match-making between their own background and the requested gendered and ethnic job profiling – especially in the case of labour niches. Through an auto-biographical approach I demonstrated this capacity to be an important characteristic of labour participation in a transnational dimension. It is through workers' personal narratives, indeed, that the *holding together* of the employer-employee dialectic can be accounted for, combined with the formation of particular subject-positions in globalised, post-colonial and fundamentally unequal worlds.



MY LAST WORD goes back to Diouna and how her story represents the failure of the hopes of Senegal in finding a better economic life in the hands of their former colonisers. In her story, as the director Sembène tells it, Diouna is not able to find the resources to sustain the migration and the new setting of the working relationship with the French family. The clash with her expectations is too strong, resulting in a trauma to which she eventually succumbs. In the light of what I discussed in these pages, the

women I interviewed give us, instead, examples of subjects who were able to use the resources they had accumulated for the improvement of their own and their family's living conditions. They have shown that they are able to sustain the difficulties of their migration and of the racism they encountered. In this sense, Sembène's pessimistic view of the outcome of a decolonisation process can be softened by the stories of the many who finally made it, and to whom I here tried to give voice.

## APPENDIX I

### *Profiles of the Afro-Surinamese interviewees*

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All the names of interviewees, employers and agencies are pseudonyms.

#### ANNEROSE

I conducted the interview with Annerose in July 2008 together with Gladij, in Annerose's apartment. Annerose arrived for the first time in the Netherlands in 1970, at the age of 22 and alone, but did not settle down until the end of the 70s. In Suriname she studied to be an accountant and dietician. In the Netherlands she combined administrative work with home care and some other jobs until she retired in 2003. She is divorced and she has two children. She is Catholic.

#### CYNTHIA

She arrived in Rotterdam in 1976 from Paramaribo, following her husband. She was working in different nursing homes and also as a domiciliary carer for the elderly for short periods. In the last years she has been working in a kindergarten. The interview was held at her workplace during her lunch break, at two different appointments, in the autumn of 2007. On this occasion, my assistant was Eleanor.

#### ELFRIDE

She arrived in the Netherlands in 1970, following her husband, at the age of 40. She has four children. She was mainly working as a cleaner and as domiciliary carer for the elderly in a small town outside Rotterdam. She is Protestant. The interview took place in her daughter's apartment in October 2007 on the outskirts of Rotterdam. On this occasion my assistant was Sophie.

#### ETTIE

She arrived in Rotterdam in 1972, from Paramaribo, at the age of 28. She also came following her husband, leaving her job as a customs-officer as well as her children behind. She was working in the home care sector during in the first years of her stay, while studying as a social worker. She later worked in the social sector, but not with elderly any longer. Later she was able to reunite with her children and had two more babies. The interview took place in her apartment in July 2007. Eleanor was my assistant in this case.

FRANCISCA

She arrived in Rotterdam in 1975 from Paramaribo, after the divorce from her husband, together with her two daughters. In the Netherlands she had three more children. She was working in nursing homes and as domiciliary caretaker. She is now retired. She is Protestant. The interview took place in September 2007 in her apartment. Eleanor was my assistant on this occasion.

GEORGINA

She arrived in Rotterdam in 1969, from Paramaribo, following her husband. She was mainly working in nursing homes, but she also worked as a domiciliary carer for the elderly, either through *Home Care* or on an independent basis. She is the only Surinamese interviewee who already had previous working experience in the sector in Suriname. She is now very active in the Afro-Surinamese community and she conducts a radio programme. The interview took place at her home in September 2007. My assistant was then Eleanor.

ILSE

Ilse arrived in Rotterdam at the age of 14, in 1974, and she was then hosted by her aunt. During secondary school she met a Dutch man whom she eventually married. They had two children. She started to work for *Home Care* in the 80s and is still working for it. The interview took place in her apartment in July 2007. Eleanor was my assistant on this occasion.

HORTENCIA

Hortencia is a 'specialized' home carer, in the sense that she could do more medical tasks than the other interviewees could do. In Suriname, indeed, she took a diploma in Post-natal and sick-care. She arrived in the Netherlands in 1970 at the age of 27. She is divorced and has a son. She is Roman Catholic. She is still working in the home care sector. The interview took place in November 2007 in a room at a neighbourhood centre and my assistant on this occasion was Gladij.

JOSEPHINE

I interviewed Josephine with the assistance of Eleanor in November 2007, in a community centre. She arrived in the Netherlands in 1967, at the age of 22, to reunite with her husband. In Paramaribo she had been studying until the age of 17 and received a teaching diploma. In the Netherlands she has worked as a nanny or did cleaning jobs. For a long time, she worked as a babysitter for the children of a Dutch woman called Suzanne. Josephine is Protestant, is divorced and has three children.

#### MARITA

Arriving in the Netherlands in 1980, Marita is the last migrant to Europe among the Afro-Surinamese interviewees. She arrived at the age of 27, leaving her son in the hands of her sister. She then had another child in the Netherlands. In Suriname she studied until the age of 16 receiving a one-year diploma in child-care. She was employed as a domestic worker soon after her arrival in Rotterdam. I conducted this interview together with Gladij at Marita's place in June 2008.

#### MONIQUE

Monique left Suriname in 1975 at the age of 24. She has a Mulo education ['(meer) uitgebreid lager onderwijs': '(more) extended primary education'], plus a diploma in sick-care in her country. After her arrival she continued her study in combination with a job in the home care sector. She was a private care-giver for all of the 1980s. From then on, she started to work, and still does, in nursing homes. She never married and she has a daughter. She is Protestant. I held this interview together with Gladij at Monique's place in September 2008.

#### RAURETTE

She arrived in the Netherlands in 1965 from Paramaribo, in order to follow her husband who already had settled in Rotterdam. Despite being highly educated, she decided to look for a job in the care sector after some disappointing experiences in factory and office work in the Netherlands. She is now retired, she has two children and she is Protestant. The interview took place at her home, in July 2007. My assistant in this case was Eleanor.

#### SYLVIA

Sylvia is the one who arrived first, in 1962, at the age of 30, following her husband. In Paramaribo she had been studying until she was 21, getting a diploma as a preschool educator. In Rotterdam she was mainly working as child-carer for the family van der Vliet. Sylvia is Protestant, is married and has two children. She is still working. I conducted the interview together with Eleanor at a community centre in January 2008.

#### TON

Born in 1951, Ton travelled to the Netherlands in 1970. In Suriname she studied until the age of 16, receiving several specialisations in sick care, psychiatric care and assistance. She later married and had two daughters. In the Netherlands she worked initially in nursing homes, but from the 1990s she started to work more in the home care sector. She is Protestant. I held this interview together with Gladij in Ton's house in September 2008.

#### WILMA

Wilma arrived in the Netherlands in 1974, at the age of 29, and was then hosted by her brother who migrated years before. In Paramaribo she had attended the housekeeping school until the age of 17. From her arrival until 2007 she combined work in nursing homes with private home care. She is Protestant, has two sons and she never married. I held the interview together with Eleanor at Wilma's place in June 2008.

## APPENDIX II

### *Profiles of the Eritrean interviewees*

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Also all the names of the Eritrean interviewees are pseudonyms which I chose myself. In making up the pseudonyms I wanted to keep the difference between the Eritrean and Italian names as they used in introducing themselves to me. Some women, indeed, commonly use an Italian name which is, in some cases, their real first name, but, in some others, is a nickname made by an 'italianisation' of their original name.

#### AATIFA

The interview with Aatifa took place in her house in December 2008. She is a Christian Orthodox woman who arrived in Italy in 1979 at the age of 21. She is now divorced and has two sons. In Eritrea she studied until the age of 13. She had a small shop there, but with the escalation of the war she decided to leave everything and travel to Italy. In Rome, she has always been working as a domestic until the present moment. The interview took place at a café.

#### ANNA

Born in 1930, she arrived in Italy in September 1966 and worked as a domestic until 1993, when she retired. In Eritrea, she was already doing housekeeping for Italian missionaries, who later organized her migration to Italy. She never married nor had children. She never went to school. She is a devout Catholic. This interview took place in Anna's house, with Haddas and other people present, in February 2007.

#### AZZEZA

She travelled to Italy in 1975 at the age of 18, soon after having finished her study in Asmara. As a child, she attended Italian schools. She arrived in Rome with an on-call contract and she has always worked as a live-in domestic until now. She is Catholic, is divorced and she never had children. The interview took place in a cafeteria in the centre of Rome in August 2007.

#### BERHARE

She arrived in Italy at the age of 11, in 1960. She came with an Italian family that flew from Eritrea after the end of the British protectorate. Before 1960 she was working as a cleaner in a missionary in Asmara, thus she seldom attended school as a child. She is

still working as a live-in domestic. She never married nor had children. The interview took place in the shop of an African hairdresser in the centre of Rome, in April 2007.

#### HADDAS

Born in 1941, she arrived in Rome in 1975, with an on-call contract. In Asmara she used to work in an Italian factory. She attended the state primary school and she can speak some English. Now, she lives together with Anna and occasionally does cleaning work. She was married for a short time during the 80's, but never had children. In her free time, she assists the parish in the organisation of the Mass and other celebrations. The interview took place in her house, with Aurora and Lina also present, in March 2007.

#### LEMLEM

Lemlem was born in 1950, and in 1972 she travelled to Italy thanks to an on-call contract. In Asmara she already had experience in working for a rich Italian family, as a kitchen-help. All her life, she worked as a domestic in Rome. She is divorced and has a daughter. She is of Christian Orthodox religion. The interview with Lemlem took place at a café in December 2008.

#### LINA

After having worked as a domestic in an Italian family in Asmara for many years, in 1974 she decided to leave, at the age of 40, leaving her son behind. In Rome she continued to work as a live-in domestic until her retirement. She lives together with Anna and Haddas on a temporary basis. She is Christian Orthodox. She never went to school. The interview took place at Anna's house in August 2007.

#### LUAM

Born in 1946 in Asmara, she arrived in Rome in 1979, after a period in Sudan. Since then, she has worked as a domestic in different households. In Asmara, she was educated in Italian schools until the age of 15 and she then worked as an accountant at an international company. She flew from Eritrea with her husband and three children, because she was persecuted as a political activist. Two of her children now live abroad. The interview took place at my house in March 2007, with a follow-up meeting in April.

#### LUISA

Born in 1962 in Cheren, she arrived in Rome in 1978, after a period in Sudan, where she went at the age of 16. In Eritrea she was raised in an Italian household and she attended Italian schools. She decided to leave because of the political instability in the country. In Rome, she worked as a live-in nanny for a couple of years, while continu-

ing her studies. She is Christina Orthodox. The interview took place in two parts, at her house, in March and April 2007.

#### MADIIHAH

I interviewed Madiihah in December 2008. She is a Christian Orthodox woman. She arrived in Rome at the age of 23, with an on-call contract organised by her former Italian neighbours in Asmara. In Italy she worked as a domestic all her life and she had a son. She attended some years of primary school. She is now very active in the Coptic Orthodox Church for Eritreans. The interview took place at a café.

#### MINYA

She arrived in Italy in 1975, in her twenties, from Asmara. Since then she has done domestic work, first in Bari and later on in Rome. She later married an Eritrean man and had two children. She is Coptic Orthodox. She was always very active as a member of the Eritrean diaspora, during the different stages of the Eritrean liberation war. She is currently active in the organization of Eritrean women in Rome. The interview with Mynia took place in April 2007 in the garden of a square.

#### SEMIRA

Was born in 1941. She arrived in Rome in 1973 together with her cousin, Olga. She was educated in an Italian religious primary school and employed at an Italo-Eritrean household for cleaning work. She met her husband (also Eritrean) in Rome, where she worked as a domestic for many years. Later on she started working as a property caretaker and cleaner. She is still working as a cleaner of bank offices. She has two daughters, both University students. She is a devout Catholic. The interview with Semira took place at her house in March 2007.

#### OLGA

Born in 1951, Olga arrived in Italy in 1973, together with her cousin Semira, through the mediation of an Italian man living in Asmara. In Italy she met her husband, an Italo-Eritrean, and she had her second child. The first child was raised in Asmara by her mother. In Asmara, Olga was working in an Italian textile factory. She learned how to read and write in Italy. Once in Rome, she became very active in the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), which is now the opposition party. She is now working as a cleaner in offices. The interview took place at a café-restaurant in March 2007.

#### ZUFAN

She arrived in Rome in 1975 from Asmara. Escaping from an abusive husband, she went to Addis Abbeba, where she met an Italian journalist. He took her with him to Rome, found her an employer and instructed her on how to behave. She later on changed jobs, and married an Italian. She is now retired. She has two daughters living

in other European countries. She is Catholic. The interview took place in her car in March 2007.

ZULA

She arrived in Italy in 1976, at the age of 31. She has worked as a live-in domestic worker. In Eritrea she attended school until 10 years of age. She never married nor had children. She is Christian Orthodox. The interview with Zula took place in December 2008 at a bar in the centre of Rome.

## APPENDIX III

### *Questionnaire*

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This is the translation in English of the semi-structured questionnaire I used in Italian and Dutch.

#### **Opening question:**

Since we still don't know each other, could I ask you to tell me a bit about yourself?

#### **Migratory history and pre-knowledge:**

How was your life in Suriname/Eritrea before you left?

From which city/area are you?

How did you start thinking about going to the Netherlands/Italy?

When you were still in Suriname/Eritrea, what did you know about the Netherlands/Italy?

By whom and in which way had you been informed?

(school, workplace, cinema and music)

Did you personally know some Dutch/Italians who were living in Suriname/Eritrea?

When did you arrive in the Netherlands/Italy?

How old were you? Were you married? Did you have children?

Did you already know what kind of job you were going to do?

#### **In the Netherlands/Italy:**

At the beginning of your life in the Netherlands/Italy, what was your first impression of Dutch/Italian people?

Which role did the knowledge you already had about the Netherlands/Italy play?

Have you ever had experiences of racism?

What did it mean to you that Suriname/Eritrea was a colony of the Netherlands/Italy?

#### **Working history and context:**

When did you start to work in Dutch/Italian houses?

Why did you start this type of job?

What was your first impression of this job?

What is it that you like in this type of job? What don't you like?

For how long have you been doing this job?  
Have you ever done a 24-hours/live-in job?  
Did you work on a private basis or through an agency?  
Did you ever search for another job? And why?  
Was it common, at that time, for Surinamese/Eritrean women to do this job?  
In your opinion, what is most appreciated by the Dutch/Italian employers about Surinamese/Eritrean women? What the least?  
How has the relationship between Suriname/Eritrea and the Netherlands/Italy influenced your working life?  
[In the Netherlands:] Some women have told me that something about the work for Dutch people makes them think about the time of slavery, is that also your experience?

**Focus on one working relationship:**

Is there one (or more) employer/patient that you remember particularly well and that you would like to tell me about?

*The following questions have to be repeated for each employer/patient they want to describe:*

Can you remember how this person/family was?  
(How many, profession, living area)  
What did you have to do during a regular working day?  
What did you like to do most? What the least?  
In your opinion, is there a difference between the Dutch/Italian and the Surinamese/Eritrean way of doing cleaning or caring chores?  
Did you also cook? If yes, did you cook Dutch/Italian or Surinamese/Eritrean food?  
Did you have to wear a uniform? If yes, was this a problem for you?  
Who was checking your work?  
What type of person was your employer/client?  
How was your relationship with him/her/they?  
Is there a moment of this job which is still impressed on your memory?  
Do you have the feeling that your relationship would have been different if you were also Dutch/Italian? And if you were coming from a country different from Suriname/Eritrea?  
Did you have the feeling that she/he/they were informed about the Surinamese/Eritrean history?  
Did you used to talk about Suriname/Eritrea with him/her/they?  
Did he/she/they have a direct relationship with Suriname/Eritrea?  
How was the house? Can you describe it?  
Did you used to be alone in the house or was there someone else?

Were there areas of the house where you couldn't go?

*[For live-in:]* Did you have enough space for your personal items? Could you use the telephone or receive visitors?

**Closing questions:**

Do you have other remarks?

Do you have the feeling that we spoke about everything that is relevant for understanding the experience of the women who did your job?

What do you think of this interview?

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#### FILMS, VIDEOS AND PHOTOS

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## SUMMARY

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During the last decades, migrant women have been carrying out an increasingly important role in supporting many European households in their deficit of care and domestic labour. This phenomenon has caught the attention of political scientists, economists, sociologists, and historians, together with gender and migration experts. Yet, in my opinion, the colonial roots of the symbols and of the representations which surround migrant domestic workers in Europe have remained largely unexplored.

For this reason, my present work is dedicated to the understanding of how colonial legacies affected the experience of the first postcolonial female migrants who arrived in the former colonising country and worked there as domestics and care workers. On the basis of interviews with Afro-Surinamese women in the Netherlands and with Eritrean women in Italy – all of them migrated before 1980 – I thus show how pervasively postcoloniality affected the identity formation of these migrants throughout their experience as domestic workers. In this light, colonial legacies emerge as crucial in shaping the social positions of migrants and their relationships with the former colonising country.

In the first three chapters of this thesis, I outline the historical, theoretical and methodological background of my work. In particular, I introduce the notions that structure my understanding of the relationship between colonialism, women's labour and migration in the contemporary world. This is a world which I see as imbued by postcoloniality i.e. the material and symbolic inheritance of colonialism, which shapes at the same time global labour markets and individuals' identity formation. In order to explore this realm, I suggest that peoples' narratives are a precious resource material for investigating the subjective understanding of the way postcoloniality directly affect their lives. Focal points of my framework are also the notions of African Diaspora and Black Europe, of homes *as* workplaces and of 'body work' which I consider to be crucial in understanding the articulation of postcoloniality in the relationship between migrant domestic workers and their employers. Here I also illustrate my conceptualisation of a specific type of gendered cultural capital which I call 'postcolonial cultural capital' and which constitutes, in my view, an important resource for postcolonial migrants, if not for the advancement of their social positions, surely for the improvement of their self-representation through narrative tactics.

The remaining chapters analyse the interview material and, in so doing, their order follows the development of the relationship between colonisers and colonised through the successive phases of interviewees' lives: the growing up in the colonial setting of Paramaribo and Asmara, the arrival in Italy and the Netherlands, the entrance in the niche of domestic work, and finally the taking place of everyday labour experiences.

This biographical approach to the experience of migrant domestic workers brought me to do something unusual for a study on this subject. In chapters four and five, indeed, I look into interviewees' narratives which start at a time before they had acquired their common identity as care/domestic workers in Europe. I so doing, I show that they already had much in common, being all young girls growing up under the hegemonic cultural influx of the European country which turned out to be their country of destination and settlement. Thus, in these two chapters, I outline the normative implications of the fact that Italian and Dutch cultural practices have such a predominant role in other colonised peoples' culture and I analyse the association between cultural hegemony and the performance of domestic and care work in the colonial setting.

In chapter six, the interviewees' arrival in Europe is taken as a turning point in their experiences, a paradigmatic moment in which the clash takes place between the Italy/the Netherlands they had *imagined* during their youth and the one they actually encounter with their migration. This same moment marks, in my view, the beginning of the experience of non-recognition, on the part of the former colonisers, of the ties between colonies and colonisers, which conversely had profound importance from the interviewees' perspective, and which would affect the entire working experience of the interviewees in the country of settlement. Thus, in the remaining chapters of the dissertation, I illustrate interviewees' resistance to this devaluation in the tactics used everyday in the relationship with the employers as former colonisers and in the formulation of their own self-representation.

Interviewees' self-representation, in particular, is at the centre of the phenomenon I illustrate in chapter seven, where I look at the commonalities between the gendered segregation and the 'racial'/ethnic segregation present in labour markets. These lead to the formation of labour niches, resulting in postcolonial migrant women being placed in sectors at the lower end of the job market, as is the case with domestic work. Here I contend that the entrance of postcolonial women in the niche of paid domestic work is crucially conditioned by the colonial past, not only in structuring personal contacts and networks which facilitate their entrance into the niche, but also in affecting the representation of those skills which are considered as necessary for access to the labour sector. Moreover, I argue that gendered and 'racial'/ethnic representations which surround postcolonial migrants have a fundamental role in the experiences of these women, inasmuch as they can be important tools in reversing the hierarchy towards the employers, or in strengthening bonds with them.

In chapter nine, I take this argument a step further arguing that the 'ethnicisation' of domestic skills, a phenomenon which takes place through the 'relegation' of paid domestic labour to being a job for black and migrant women, is functional to Eritreans and afro-Surinamese women remaining in the niche of domestic work. It is interesting to notice, moreover, that this 'ethnicisation' also allows workers to see the performance of these jobs as a feature of migratory success, and to produce a positive

representation of their role in the host society. However, I also contend that such a positive self-representation remains intrinsically ambivalent as far as it is based on the reproduction of colonial legacies for what concerns the hierarchies between Europeans and black migrants.

Finally, in the following chapter, I show how, in some cases, this ambivalence can open the way to various forms of anti-black discrimination. Returning to the idea of a Black European identity, I try to analyse this form of racism, showing the legacies of this phenomenon from the colonial time. Domestic work, indeed, can be seen as a stage for the re-enactment, in practices pertaining to domestic workers' experience, of sentiments grounded in colonialism and slavery. These practices include, from the employers side, the adoption of specific discriminatory strategies, as in the strict regulations pertaining to workers' living space and their dress code; while, from the workers' side, these practices have more to do with a specific form of resistance grounded in the consciousness of their ancestors' struggle against colonial oppression. Thus, the question of the re-enactment of colonialism illustrates the importance of narratives as a tool of resistance, but it also offers an example of the way postcolonial subjects can easily be drawn into a symbolically and materially oppressive condition.

## SAMENVATTING

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In de afgelopen decennia hebben migrantenvrouwen in toenemende mate voorzien in het tekort aan zorg- en huishoudelijke arbeid waar vele Europese huishoudens onder gebukt gaan. Dit verschijnsel heeft belangstelling getrokken van politicologen, economen, sociologen en historici, en eveneens van deskundigen op het terrein van gender en migratie. De koloniale herkomst van de symbolen rond en de representaties van gemigreerde huishoudelijk werksters in Europa zijn echter nog nauwelijks onderzocht.

Daarom is deze studie gewijd aan het inzichtelijk maken van de invloed van de koloniale erfenis op de ervaringen van de eerste postkoloniale vrouwelijke migranten die naar het land van de voormalige kolonisator trokken en daar als hulp in de huishouding gingen werken. Op basis van interviews met Eritrese vrouwen in Italië en Afro-Surinaamse vrouwen in Nederland, die allen voor 1980 migreerden, toon ik aan hoe indringend postkolonialiteit heeft ingewerkt op hun identiteitsvorming gedurende de tijd dat zij werkzaam waren als huishoudelijk werksters. Hieruit blijkt dat de koloniale erfenis een cruciale factor is in de totstandkoming van de sociale positie van migranten en hun verhouding met de voormalige kolonisator.

In de eerste drie hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift zet ik de historische, theoretische en methodologische achtergrond van mijn studie uiteen. In het bijzonder besteed ik daarbij aandacht aan de ideeën die mijn visie bepalen op de relatie tussen kolonialisme, vrouwenarbeid en migratie in de wereld van vandaag. Deze wereld is doordrongen van postkolonialiteit, dat wil zeggen de materiële en symbolische nalatenschap van kolonialisme, die tegelijkertijd mondiale arbeidsmarkten en de identiteit van individuen vormgeeft. De verhalen die mensen hierover vertellen zijn een belangrijke bron als men de subjectieve betekenis van de directe invloed van postkolonialiteit op individuele levens wil onderzoeken. Centraal in mijn benadering staan verder de noties van de Afrikaanse diaspora, Zwart Europa, het huis als werkplek en 'body work'. Deze inzichten zijn onmisbaar om te begrijpen hoe postkolonialiteit in de verhouding tussen gemigreerde huishoudelijk werkers en hun werkgevers tot uitdrukking wordt gebracht. Tot slot illustreer ik mijn conceptualisering van een specifiek type gendergebonden cultureel kapitaal, dat ik 'postkoloniaal cultureel kapitaal' noem. Dit type kapitaal vormt in mijn optiek een belangrijke hulpbron voor postkoloniale migranten, zo niet voor de verbetering van hun sociale positie, dan toch in ieder geval voor de verbetering van hun zelfrepresentatie door middel van narratieve strategieën.

In de overige hoofdstukken wordt het interviewmateriaal geanalyseerd. De ontwikkeling van de relatie tussen kolonisatoren en gekoloniseerden in de opeenvolgende levensfasen van de geïnterviewden wordt daarbij als leidraad voor de volgo-

rde gebruikt: het opgroeien in de koloniale omgeving van Asmara en Paramaribo, de aankomst in Italië en Nederland, de toetreding tot de niche van het huishoudelijk werk en tot slot de alledaagse werkervaringen. Deze biografische benadering was aanleiding om iets te doen wat ongebruikelijk is in studies naar dit onderwerp. In hoofdstukken vier en vijf kijk ik namelijk naar de verhalen die de geïnterviewden vertellen over de periode vóórdat zij hun gemeenschappelijke identiteit als huishoudelijk werker in Europa verkregen. Zodoende kan ik aantonen dat zij ook toen al veel met elkaar gemeen hadden: ze waren allen jonge meisjes die opgroeiden onder de hegemonische culturele invloed van het Europese land dat later hun land van aankomst en vestiging zou worden. In deze twee hoofdstukken beschrijf ik de normatieve implicaties van het feit dat Italiaanse en Nederlandse culturele praktijken zo een overheersende rol spelen in de cultuur van gekoloniseerde volken en analyseer ik de samenhang tussen culturele hegemonie en de uitoefening van zorgtaken en huishoudelijk werk in de koloniale omgeving.

In hoofdstuk zes wordt de aankomst van de geïnterviewden in Europa beschreven als een keerpunt, als het paradigmatisch moment waarop de confrontatie plaatsvindt tussen het Italië c.q. het Nederland dat ze zich in hun jeugd hadden *voorgesteld* en het land dat zij daadwerkelijk aantreffen na hun migratie. Dit is tevens het moment waarop de beleving van miskennen begint. De voormalige kolonisatoren erkennen de oude koloniale banden niet, terwijl deze vanuit het perspectief van de geïnterviewden juist van het grootste belang zijn. Dit beïnvloedt de werkervaring van de geïnterviewden in het land van vestiging verregaand. Daarom beschrijf ik in de laatste hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift het verzet tegen deze devaluatie door middel van strategieën die dagelijks in de relatie met de werkgevers gehanteerd worden. Ook komt verzet tot uitdrukking in de formulering van hun zelfrepresentatie.

De zelfrepresentatie van de geïnterviewden in het bijzonder vormt de kern van het verschijnsel dat ik in hoofdstuk zeven beschrijf. Hier bestudeer ik de overeenkomsten tussen de gendersegregatie en de 'raciale'/etnische segregatie op de arbeidsmarkt. Deze vormen van segregatie leiden tot het ontstaan van arbeidsniches, die resulteren in de plaatsing van postkoloniale migrantenvrouwen in sectoren aan de onderkant van de arbeidsmarkt, zoals huishoudelijk werk. Ik betoog dat de toetreding van postkoloniale vrouwen tot de niche van betaald huishoudelijk werk op doorslaggevende wijze wordt bepaald door het koloniale verleden. Deze geschiedenis heeft niet alleen effect op de structurering van persoonlijke contacten en netwerken die toegang tot deze niche mogelijk maken, maar ook op de representatie van de vaardigheden die voor deze arbeidssector noodzakelijk worden geacht. Bovendien beargumenteer ik dat representaties van gender en 'ras'/etniciteit die postkoloniale migranten omringen een fundamentele rol spelen in de ervaringen van deze vrouwen, aangezien het belangrijke instrumenten kunnen zijn om de hiërarchische verhouding met de werkgevers om te keren of de band met hen te verstevigen.

In hoofdstuk negen ga ik nog een stap verder. Ik beargumenteer dat de 'ëtnisering' van huishoudelijke vaardigheden, een verschijnsel dat plaatsvindt door de bestempeling van betaald huishoudelijk werk als een baan voor zwarte en migrantenvrouwen, functioneel is voor Eritrese en Afro-Surinaamse vrouwen die binnen deze niche blijven. Het is bovendien interessant om op te merken dat deze 'ëtnisering' de vrouwen in staat stelt om de uitoefening van dit werk te zien als een teken van succesvolle migratie en zich een positief beeld te vormen van hun rol in de ontvangende samenleving. Niettemin toon ik ook aan dat een dergelijke positieve zelfrepresentatie intrinsiek ambivalent blijft wanneer die, wat betreft de hiërarchie tussen Europeanen en zwarte migranten, gebaseerd is op de reproductie van de koloniale erfenis.

Ten slotte beschrijf ik in het laatste hoofdstuk hoe deze ambivalentie in sommige gevallen de deur kan openen naar verschillende vormen van antizwarte discriminatie. Teruggrijpend op het idee van een Zwart Europese identiteit, probeer ik deze vorm van racisme te analyseren en aan te tonen dat dit verschijnsel wortels heeft in de koloniale tijd. Huishoudelijk werk kan beslist worden gezien als het toneel voor de heropvoering, in praktijken die betrekking hebben op de ervaring van huishoudelijk werksters, van sentimenten die hun oorsprong vinden in kolonialisme en slavernij. Onder deze praktijken valt onder meer dat de werkgevers specifieke discriminerende strategieën toepassen, zoals strikte regels ten aanzien van het onderkomen van de huishoudelijk werksters en de kledingvoorschriften. Voor de praktijken van de werksters geldt dat hun specifieke vorm van verzet gevoed wordt door kennis van de strijd die hun voorouders voerden tegen de koloniale onderdrukking. De vraag naar de heropvoering van het kolonialisme illustreert met andere woorden het belang van verhalen als middel van verzet, maar biedt tegelijkertijd een voorbeeld van de wijze waarop postkoloniale subjecten eenvoudig in een symbolisch en materieel onderdrukkende situatie kunnen worden gedrongen.

## SHORT BIOGRAPHY

After graduating in Philosophy at Sapienza University of Rome in 2002, Sabrina Marchetti undertook postgraduate courses in Gender and Ethnicity, at the University of Siena and later at Utrecht University. In 2006 she accomplished her Research Master thesis with a comparative research on Filipino migrant domestic workers and their employers in Rome and Amsterdam. The title of her RMA thesis was «We had different fortunes: Negotiations around care, difference and citizenship between Filipino migrant domestic workers and their employers in Rome and Amsterdam». Between 2006 and 2010, she carried out her PhD at the History and Culture Institute and the Gender Graduate Programme of Utrecht University with a project titled «Paid domestic labour and postcoloniality: Narratives of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese migrant women». She published several articles and essays in Italy as well as abroad. During the last years she has also been involved in other international research projects on the topic of female migration in Italy and Europe, hosted by Roma Tre University, University of Bologna, Isfol (Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori.) and the International center for development and decent work (ICDD) of the University of Kassel (Germany).