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# Analytical Book Review

*The Maid's Daughter: Living Inside and Outside the American Dream* by Mary Romero chronicles the life of Olivia, a Mexican American girl who grew up in an exclusive area of Los Angeles. As the daughter of a live-in maid to a wealthy family, Olivia was raised alongside the children of her mother's employer and had access to certain privileges and opportunities. In spite of this, Olivia never felt like a true member of the family. Indeed, Olivia confronted unique challenges because of her racial identity. Mary Romero documents these challenges in *The Maid's Daughter*, and shows Olivia's journey toward independence and her eventual success in creating a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Olivia's point of view is shaped by her racial identity and gender, and her experiences growing up in a predominately white, upper class suburb. Because of her mother's employment with the Smiths, Olivia has the opportunity to attend private schools and to participate in certain extracurricular activities. Consequently, Olivia conceptualizes "her descriptions and accounts from the standpoint of the maid's daughter" (Romero 16). Olivia's unique perspective illustrates a concept discussed by Patricia Hill Collins in an "Excerpt from "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment." In the excerpt, Collins asserts that "ideas that are validated as true by African American women, African American men, Latina

lesbians, Asian American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoints … become the most "objective" truths" (Collins 75).

In other words, Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges that every group of people has a distinctive standpoint; therefore, "each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge" (Collins 75). This principle is illustrated in *The Maid's Daughter* when Olivia reflects on how she is different from other Mexican American students at UCLA. Indeed, while at UCLA, Olivia "(re)discovered that she was quite different from other first-generation Mexican American students from working class backgrounds" (Romero 171). Because she grew up in a gated community like Liberty Place, Olivia had social networks and cultural capital that "did not blend in easily" with that of other first-generation Mexican American college students (Romero 171).

When she first moved to Liberty Place, Olivia only spoke Spanish. While living in the Smith's house, Olivia learned English and became bilingual. In Chapter 2 of *The Maid's Daughter*, Olivia reveals that "her accent became the basis for laughter and teasing by the employers' children, and sometimes by the employers themselves" (Romero 53).The fact that Olivia was teased for her accent relates to Whitney Pow's discussion of stereotypes about Asian Americans. In "That's Not Who I Am: Calling Out and Challenging Stereotypes of Asian Americans," Pow talks about how Asian Americans are "often characterized by "unassimilated" or "exotic" stereotypes, like Asian accents" (Pow 84). Pow explains how negative stereotypes about accents reinforce the notion that Asian Americans are foreign or alien. The same is true for Mexican Americans like Olivia who learn English as a second language.

The teasing Olivia faced because of her accent demonstrates the prevalence of negative stereotypes about people of Mexican ancestry. Olivia herself states that "she experienced treatment as "the other" — the little, working-class, Spanish-speaking, Mexican child among the upper-middle-class, English speaking, white employers and their children" (Romero 52-53). Indeed, even after she became fluent in English, Olivia wasn't considered fully "American" because of her accent. Consequently, Olivia chose to continue speaking Spanish when conversing with her mother and her Catholic school friends. By actively using her native language, Olivia was able to resist conforming to the monolingual environment and to successfully assert her Chicana identity.

The community fostered by Olivia's mother and the other maids in Liberty Place allowed them to maintain their ties to Mexican culture. In their weekly get-togethers, the women created a space "that was Mexican and not white, Spanish speaking and not English speaking, female dominated rather than male dominated, and working class instead of upper middle class" (Romero 88). This corresponds to Loan Tran's discussion of sub- and countercultures in "Does Gender Matter? Notes Toward Gender Liberation." Indeed, Tran emphasizes that communities that exist on the margins often "create sub- and countercultures that allow people to exist as their truest selves in the world, as much as this is possible" (Tran 41). These communities are based on shared identities and generate a sense of solidarity among their members.

Likewise, the weekly gatherings held by the maids in Liberty Place provided opportunities "to build support systems of cultural, economic, and social resistance that addressed their needs as mothers, immigrants, workers, and women" (Romero 88). In addition,

the community created gave them a space to discuss strategies for dealing with employers and tactics for negotiating raises. This was critically important because maids could easily be taken advantage of by employers. Indeed, Olivia recalls "as live-in maids, [the women] always had concerns about dealing with additional labor, [and] limiting the hours that employers expected them to work" (Romero 89). Consequently, the community constructed by Olivia's mother and the other maids in Liberty Place exemplifies Loan Tran's definition of sub- and countercultures.

Olivia repeatedly references the dynamics of "passing" in *The Maid's Daughter*. Passing involves "crossing boundaries of race and ethnicity," and "is tied to one's cultural identity" (Romero 115). According to Olivia, growing up in Liberty Place and attending private schools required her to "pass," and prevented her from openly expressing a Mexican and working-class identity. In "Between Belonging: A Culture of Home," Mariko Uechi refers to a similar phenomenon when she discusses her experiences with racial definitions and boundaries. Uechi, who is half Okinawan and half American, asserts that her "ability to "pass" grants [her] access to powers and privileges," but also "is a source of shame and confusion" (Uechi 127). Uechi's experiences with passing mirror Olivia's because Olivia also "had to function as a competent actor in employers' homes and in their neighborhood" (Romero 115).

In Olivia's case, passing required that she accept a place alongside the Smith family, which placed her in opposition to her mother Carmen. By speaking middle-class English and wearing clothes purchased by Mrs. Smith, Olivia mimicked the behavior of the Smith's four biological children. Doing so allowed Olivia to "continue to participate in the white, upper-middle-class milieu" of Liberty Place (Romero 115). Olivia's adoption of these linguistic and cultural scripts caused her to feel alienated from her mother and the other maids working in

Liberty Place. This alienation was a direct consequence of the "obscene form of salvation that required Olivia to hide many of her cherished memories and relationships" (Romero 115).

As a young adult, Olivia distanced herself from the Smiths. The Smiths did not approve of Olivia's penchant for liberal activism or the fact that she worked for the first Chicana elected to the State Assembly. According to Olivia, "Mr. Smith was really disgusted with the fact that [she] was a Democrat" (Romero 169). Moreover, Mr. Smith suggested that Olivia was betraying the Smith family by "using" her college education to work for a Democrat. The backlash Olivia faced for this parallels the censure Dorothy Allison experienced for her political beliefs. In "A Question of Class," Allison explains that "becoming a political activist with an almost religious fervor was the thing [she] did that most outraged [her] family" (Allison 110). Allison asserts that her decision to become an unapologetic and progressive feminist caused her to feel "a deep estrangement … and gradually a sense of shame" toward her family (Allison 110).

During her college years, Olivia experienced a similar estrangement from her second family — the Smiths. When she left Liberty Place for college, Olivia gained a newfound feeling of independence. On occasions in which Olivia returned home, she became increasingly aware that her brand of political activism was not acceptable to the Smiths. For instance, Olivia recalled how she "pissed the Smiths off when [she] wore this shirt, "Democrat for Assembly" in their presence (Romero 168). For the Smiths, Olivia's commitment to social justice and Democratic politics felt like a repudiation of their contributions to her education. Indeed, Olivia's refusal to "be the Republican that they wanted [her] to be" was perceived as a slight against them (Romero 169).

Overall, I think *The Maid's Daughter* provides an excellent analysis of important issues like race, the meaning of family, and the dynamics between live-in domestic workers, their children, and employers. Olivia's story is especially impactful because it brings together many of the topics we discussed this semester. One area in which *The Maid's Daughter* is lacking, however, is sexuality. Because the book is so focused on Olivia's story and Olivia only talks about dating men, LGBTQ+ sexuality and relationships are not represented. In spite of this, I think *The Maid's Daughter* is a worthwhile read, especially for people who want to learn more about the complexities of race, social class, and social mobility in Los Angeles.

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