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### **Greek employers and Albanian domestic cleaners: “we” and the “others” in the space of house**

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After more than one decade since the first massive influx of Albanian migrants in Greece started, their presence is now an unquestionable part of the contemporary Greek society. Out of models and issues of border control or of labor market, this paper will focus on relationships, as these are shaped in a specific context, in a social space and in a particular time period, revealing that migration is not a “faceless” and out of context phenomenon. In particular, this paper is about the relationship - and the social projections inherent in it - between the Albanian women working as domestic cleaners in Greece and the Greek women/housewives that employ them.

Gendered and multiple divisions shape this relationship; today divisions of nation and citizenship are also increasingly salient.

In many countries relationships between domestic employees and employers have been imbued with racial meanings: white “masters and mistresses” have been cast as pure and superior, and “maids and servants”, drawn from specific racial-ethnic groups, have been cast as dirty and socially inferior (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001: 13). Today this occupational racialization draws to a much greater extent on globalization and immigration – rather than on difference in race; paid domestic workers usually come from poor nations reflecting, thus, the subordination of nationality/immigration status.

In the present paper the place of the house is treated as the social conjuncture where the two groups meet and through every-day practices related to the organization and management of the domestic labor, old and new divisions according to gender, nationality and migrant status, are reinforced or renegotiated. Therefore, the place of the house, traditionally related to the private sphere, works as a microcosm to examine whether and how dominant concepts and discourses of the public sphere related to the migrants’ presence are reflected in the relationship between the Albanian woman and her Greek employer, also a woman. The two groups of women,

the Albanian domestic cleaners and the Greek employers, act and speak from different positions and their roles and attitudes should be seen also in the context of a migrant-native encounter and relationship.

My interest is to study how divisions in the base of nationality and immigrant status determine the relationship between these two groups of women. Are the ethnic categorizations of Albanian and Greek significant in the way the two groups interact and negotiate with each other and what form do they take in the specific context? Paid domestic work is governed by the parallel and interacting networks of women of different ethnicities and citizenship statuses that meet at multiple work sites in isolated pairs. I argue that while employer and employee individually negotiate the job, their tactics are informed by their respective social settings.

Having said that, I will try to unfold this relationship in two levels: first in the level of a working relationship and secondly in the level of a relationship between a Greek native woman and Albanian migrant woman. In the first occasion I will try to see how both sides perceive and “incarnate” their roles as employer and employee respectively and how they treat each other in the base also of these terms. Do we have to do with another typical employer/employee relationship or there are issues that differentiate it and cause another kind of relationship to be developed? Which are these issues, how much they are related to the fact that the housecleaners are migrants, and how they shape this relationship? In the second level, I will attempt to illuminate how much ethnic stereotypes matter in an interpersonal relationship and what form do they take. Furthermore, what perceptions are expressed by the Greek employers towards the Albanian “other”, when the latter is not anymore an abstract entity but a very specific person that enters their houses and with whom they have a constant contact? On the other hand, how the “other” – the Albanian housecleaner – perceives these attitudes and how she chooses to negotiate in this interaction? Finally, because I understand perceptions and attitudes as dynamic processes influenced by the changing context, I am interested to examine whether concrete things in this relationship have changed through time; the above might be caused by as well as perpetuate in their turn differences in attitudes.

The findings that I am going to present here are based in ten unstructured interviews that I conducted in the city of Volos; five with Greek employers and five

with Albanian housecleaners<sup>1</sup>. Although, I acknowledge that this is a very small sample, I believe that some interesting issues can be revealed that might work as useful hypotheses for more extended researches.

Albanians stand for almost 50% of the migrant population in Greece and of all females, the Albanians also top the list (44% according to the 2001 Census in Greece). Similarly 52% of the Albanian women that were registered in the Census declared the category “other” as their occupation, presumably mainly domestic cleaning and help.

The Albanian women with whom I spoke started working some months after their arrival in Greece and their first job, except of one’s, was that of the housecleaner. This kind of job seems the only “choice” for these women in Greece. They told me: “What other kind of job does it exist for us here?” This phrase clearly shows the ethnic and gender divided Greek labor market that is constantly reproduced (Lazaridis, 1999: 112). Regardless of a person’s human capital, his/her status –migrant/native, illegal/legal, outsider/insider – and his/her sex determine in a great degree his/her position in the labor market.

They found their first job either through relatives and acquaintances or through their husband that was already working in Greece and had a substantial network. Until today, the social network is playing the most important role in finding their jobs. Their biggest capital is their good reputation, which will bring them the next job offer. They are most of the times dependent on the women they are working for, for introducing and recommending them to more women. This fact seems to make their position even more vulnerable. These women do not work as live-in domestic servants. Furthermore, they don’t work only in one house. Within the week they go into more houses and they have different employers. The housecleaner works for five to seven hours approximately and either cleans the entire house or does more “hard” and difficult stuff that don’t need to be done every day and are more time-consuming. As Romero (1992) has written, housecleaning represents the “modernization” of paid domestic work. Women who clean different houses on different days sell their labor services, she argues, in much the same way that a vendor sells a product to various

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<sup>1</sup> I have to make clear that I decided not to take interviews from immigrant women and their respective Greek employers, or the other way around, so that I have the same “pairs” of relationship. That would be too problematic and I don’t find it necessary for the aims of this research. Instead, I decided to interview Albanian women working as domestic cleaners, and separately and totally unacquainted with these women, Greek women that are employing Albanian women as their domestic helpers.

customers (Romero, 1992). Moreover, because they work for different employers on different days, they are not solely dependent for their livelihood on one person whom they see every single day. Consequently, their relationships with their employers are less likely to become highly charged and conflictual; and if problems do arise, they can leave one job without jeopardizing their entire weekly or monthly earnings.

One might wonder: what is the need or social importance of paying separate attention to the work relationship between a domestic cleaner and her employer? As in every other employer/employee relationship, it is taken for granted that notions of power asymmetry will come to characterize this relationship as well. What is so special about it then, and why do more and more contemporary researchers turn their attention to this particular working regime? I argue that it is the specific context of this relationship that differentiates it and makes it easily more exploitable. In an attempt to illuminate this context, I will touch upon two issues: the space of the house as a special working environment strictly related to the housewife's identity, and the fact that because it is a one-to-one working relationship, it might easily deviate from the context of a job in a state in that not the worker's labor power, but rather her "personhood" is negotiated (Anderson, 2000: 2). The latter becomes even more easily materialized exactly because of the migrant status of the worker.

In Greece, the house and the children are the vital concerns around which married women organize their lives. The status of a woman is indissolubly related to her good or bad performance of her role as the "mistress of the house" (*nikokira*). Therefore, even though the importance of women's paid employment is recognized nowadays, her essential family and house-role is equally important. The house continues to be the place where the woman employer "reigns" and this should not be contested in any way. The housecleaner is just the "hands" that perform the job, some kind of a physical extension of the housewife herself. After all, the housewife is the one to be judged for the good or bad condition of the house, which is transformed into a showpiece as Romero supports (Romero, 1992: 69).

Sofia, a Greek woman employing an Albanian housecleaner, told me that when the woman is coming to clean, she tries to be present as well. When I asked her if she also helps the Albanian woman with the tasks, she replied: "Yes, I help her. Actually, she helps me." There is an undisputable hierarchy within the house: Sofia bears the role of "the mistress of the house" and the housecleaner just holds an "auxiliary" position. As my phrasing could be perceived as offensive and degrading to the Greek employer's

status, she hastens to set things in the right order and guard her higher position in the hierarchy.

Many of the Greek women, by employing a housecleaner, automatically had to view themselves as employers, and to certain degree as “bosses”. Because the arrangements inherent in the relationship between the housewives-employers and the housecleaners are often likened to master-servant relations, women who are aware of this notion feel uncomfortable with their role as employers. Ntina, a Greek employer, was from the very beginning hesitant in accepting to speak to me, stressing that she wasn’t “the representative type of employer of a housecleaner”. Obviously, Ntina was trying to differentiate herself from these widely held images; besides, throughout all the interview she kept stressing to me that her relationship with her housecleaner was clearly a friendly one and that she sees Eleni (the housecleaner) like a friend that is visiting her in the house. Moreover, in another point of the interview she says: “She is like being my mom, that’s how I feel about her.”

According to Rollins (1985) and others (Romero 1992, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) however, this is one of the trickiest issues in the relationship of employer-employee in household work environment. The precise element that makes this occupation so unique, its highly personalized nature, is one of the causes for making it so exploitive. First it reinforces once more the perception that it is not a “real” job and that it is a working environment that doesn’t fall into the same rules and regulations designating any other job relation. Although Ntina might see her housecleaner as a friend, I am not sure whether her housecleaner would agree or whether she would rather prefer to be treated as any other employee. The appeal on characteristics that determine an interpersonal rather than a job regime might have further implications for the negotiation of this relationship and the expectations held by the employer’s side. A friend, for example, can work extra hours without demanding to be paid but do it as a favor or come over when she is asked, even if it is not arranged from before. Furthermore, when she compares her housecleaner with her mother, this implies two things: first that gender-specific characteristics equating the work of the housecleaner with homemaking are generated and reproduced (Romero, 1992: 130); secondly that she accepts to be treated and looked after in a unconditional way. It is a situation far more demanding than a common job experience.

Housewives who become employers fail to recognize that once another woman is hired to do the housework, their homes become an employee’s workplace and that this

woman is a worker rather than an extension of the housewife (Romero, 1992: 130). The use of the family analogy distorts and masks this fact. Personal relationships between employer and employee blur the distinctions between paid and unpaid housework, and weaken the worker's ability to maintain the initial arrangements, object to an unfair job setting or an irrational demand, ask for a raise and even quit working for a certain employer for any reason. For instance, Katerina is an Albanian woman who is working only in one house where she goes every day for about eight hours. Her job is more than a housecleaner as she also cooks, takes care of an old couple, keeps them company and in general does what she is asked each time. Compared to the other women-housecleaners I talked to, she seemed to be the most satisfied with her current job. She said that she likes working for the specific family and it appears that she has built a close relationship, especially with the woman of the house, an old lady. It was evident, though, that she wasn't very satisfied from the paying agreement. Through her discourse it is clear that reasons related to the "family analogy" and the personal relationship deter her from asking a better payment or from leaving the job. "They all love me like their daughter now. The money that they don't give you is an issue, but what should I do?"

Although one would expect that an employer who tries to build a closer relationship with the housecleaner is less affected by hierarchical terms of any kind and in fact acts beyond them, this is not always the case. It depends on the way the woman employer approaches the housecleaner, the terms she chooses to negotiate with her, and the "hidden" meanings in them. As Barrie Thorne says, "boundaries can be created through contact as well as avoidance" (as cited in Lan, 2003:532). In the same way, the employers of housecleaners can choose to verify and validate power and position differences by either "avoiding or enhancing personal contacts" with their housecleaners (Lan, 2003: 532). In her research on Taiwanese employers and Filipina migrant workers, Pei-Chia Lan found that some women employers, instead of disregarding their domestic helpers and restricting their relationship only to the necessary strictly professional context, tend to display a "maternalistic attitude" towards their housecleaners, aiming to stress once more their own superiority. When we speak of maternalistic practices, we mean actions on the part of employers that manifest an attitude to protect, influence and guide their housecleaners' life (Romero, 1992:110). Sofia, one of the Greek employers, was the only one who evoked so openly her middle or upper class position. She is an educated woman, taking great

pride on it and displaying it in different ways. Referring to her previous housecleaner, she told me that she was very disappointed with her attitude, in contrast to her own good will and efforts to help her and to influence for the better her way of life.

In connection to that, when I asked her about her current housecleaner and if they have closer relations she replies: “With her no, our relationship is not like this. But I see that she herself also wants to finish; she is much more professional. She wants to finish her job as soon as possible and leave...The truth is I don’t like it.” Tactics like this, covered behind claims of assistance and generosity, is just another form of power. It might also be more effective, considering that a denial of this kind of “help” from the housecleaners’ part engenders stereotypes, and accuses these women of being ungrateful. Therefore, in the end speaking with Sofia about her experience with employing Albanian housecleaners, she pointed out that they seem not to appreciate and acknowledge the help that they have received, and moreover they don’t do anything to reciprocate this help.

The accomplishment of the tasks related to the sustenance of the house and the functions that are performed within it has been characterized as reproductive work because it is further related to the social and cultural reproduction of human beings; therefore, the actual doing of the work, who does it, when and where is a crucial part of meaning. More than a reflection, the context of the performance of this work is an expression and reproduction of social and gender relations. In the case where migrant women are hired to do this work, I argue that it is also an expression and reproduction of ethnic relations. Women who are defined as the “other” in relation to native women are employed for domestic work. As different meanings are assigned to different jobs, so notions of what is appropriate in terms of gender, but also of ethnicity are played out; moreover the identities of employers and employees, as well as of natives and migrants are confirmed in relation to one another. While there are economic and demographic reasons for the demand for cheap domestic helpers to perform “necessary work”, migrant domestic helpers or housecleaners also reproduce and confirm the status hierarchy perceived in ethnic terms.

Usually members of the group that is considered to be in power – in our case the native people – avoid closer contact with members of the “other” group, often because of fear, but also as a reflection of their superiority. They deprive the “others” of any value that would justify an encounter with them. In many cases therefore, exclusion

and minimal interaction is the response to the presence of the “other”. What happens however when there is considerable interaction between the members of the two groups, and when the alleged order is put at stake? What strategies and mechanisms are mobilized to justify and preserve power relations, and what processes go on around the boundary itself?

When I started this research, I was triggered by the fact that although there is a general negative image about the Albanian migrants in Greece – especially related to criminal activities - families employ Albanian women to work for them; moreover it is not another typical working relationship but it entails the admission of the Albanian women into Greek houses, one of the most private spheres of social life. As Pei-Chia Lan notes, borrowing the metaphor of Erving Goffman (1959), “family life can be described as a “backstage area” that harbors secrets and behaviors only accessible to insiders” (Lan, 2003: 527). What happens when this domain is opened to people belonging to a group widely perceived as “outsiders” in different aspects? Can we speak of a loosening of the boundary or of an acceptance altogether? I believe that conclusions like this are too naïve or simplistic and lie far beyond the usually more complex reality.

The elements and aspects of identity selected each time to stress and enhance the difference between two groups - or two individuals representing certain categories – should be meaningful to the specific social situation. Therefore, in the encounter of the Greek employers and the Albanian housecleaners, excluding the reproduction of already existing stereotypes, there is the invention of new ones that are relevant to the specific context and the roles that these two groups of women hold. Besides being members of specific groups – Greek/Albanians, native/migrant – they are also women who meet in the space of the house with a very gender-specific reason: the accomplishment of the household tasks.

I have already pointed out how important the woman’s role as the “mistress of the house” (“nikokira”) is for Greek norms. I often heard the Albanian housecleaners speaking about the women they are working for in a demeaning way. Being aware of the significance of the concept of “nikokira” for the Greek society, it is a valid accusation used by the Albanian housecleaners to counter the stigmatization of the dominant group. By stressing their own qualities as good and capable housewives and mothers contrary to the Greek women, they try to counter their inferior position and any stereotypes that concern them. They criticize the Greek women’s practice of



employing another woman to do the household tasks, which means that they are not willing or able to fulfill one of their basic roles as women.

Instead of gender functioning as a unifying category against inequalities and “duties” related to the assumed “natural” roles of women, we should always take into consideration cultural and ethnic variables which differentiate these women and place them in opposed settings. The Albanian women defend their housewife role and speak against the Greek women who don’t substantially fulfill this role anymore. They thus reproduce rhetoric and argumentations based on patriarchal ideologies, instead of identifying with the Greek women and positively evaluating any effort to escape oppression originated in systems of patriarchy. What they blame the Greek women for is that they are too selfish, care more having fun and not looking after their family; moreover, that they spend too much time outside their house.

“The only thing the Greek women know is coffee, frappe, and cigarette!  
And some lover!”(Tina).

This woman disputes Greek women’s integrity and attributes to them accusations that in the context of the Greek society receive additional importance. Too much “looseness” and individualism of women is blameworthy and negatively valued in Albanian as well as Greek society, according to their respective morals and behavioral patterns. In spite of the similarity of the two cultural systems in their way of life, it is interesting how this issue is stressed and projected to mark the separating line between Greek and Albanian women, employers and housecleaners. It precisely concerns the point made by Barth in his path-finder essay (1969), that in a process of boundary setting and maintenance it is not ‘objective’ differences that matter, but the actors’ perception of these elements as different and their tendency to attribute distinctive significance to them (Barth, 1969: 14-15).

Some of the Albanian housecleaners told me that “‘we’ are not so individualistic (in contrast to Greek women), we are good housewives and look after our family” while some of the Greek employers said about the Albanian women that “‘they’ don’t know to do the household tasks as well as ‘we’ do...all these girls, the Albanians, you have first to train them”. Statements like these based on a ‘we/they’ distinction serve to keep the necessary distance and reflect the different positions from which these women speak and stand for. However, as I have already stressed, statements and

attitudes like these are highly situational; that is, they should be seen in relation to the context to which they belong. Furthermore, they shouldn't be treated as rigid and fixed categories, but as constantly changing and reinterpreted in different settings.

Having said that, it is interesting to watch how the discourse around the issue of 'nikokira' (mistress of the house) changes content and orientation once the Albanian housecleaners start telling me about the changes in their life after they migrated in Greece. Especially concerning changes in their personal lives and in their roles as women, they often refer to an 'improved' every-day reality, as they perceive it. Many times in our discussions they projected an image close to that of 'the modern Greek woman', which was realized through everyday practices and behaviors. They took pride in their change and tried to impress me by stressing elements of their 'new' identity. These concerned mainly matters of clothing, initiative taking, going out more often, and going out alone with other women without male company. The aforementioned changes were presented in contrast to their previous life in Albania, and specifically to other Albanian women that haven't migrated. On the other hand, these changes presented the Albanian women in Greece as approaching more the behavior and way of life of the Greek women.

The specific pattern of behavior is not exceptional at all in the context of an inter-ethnic relation. It evokes exactly the nature and function of the concept of ethnicity. The boundary is not set once and for all, but constantly shifted according to who is on the other side and what is negotiated each time. Thus, when the Albanian migrant women need to differentiate themselves from their employers and Greek women in general, they stick to their role as good housewives and family-sustainers. When, on the other hand, the context changes and the boundary loses its ethnic connotations, they try to reverse the previous image adding to it the dimensions of 'modernity' and emancipation; subsequently, the distance with the Greek women seems to become closer. It becomes evident then, that what is most important are not actual differences that cause the boundary to be erected; but the exact effort from both sides to present these differences as significant enough for the boundary to exist and be preserved.

In the same context we should consider any attempt from the part of the Greek employers to reinforce their position as the dominant group, by devaluing and inferiorising the Albanian housecleaners; and of course the housecleaners' retaliation and resistance. Through the interviews, the concepts of 'clean' and 'dirty' were dominant in the discourse of both sides; because we speak about a relationship

established precisely for reasons of ‘cleanliness’, this discourse becomes even more complex but also extremely interesting to watch in my opinion. They accuse the Albanians of being “dirty” and “infectious” and at the same time they employ them in their houses and appoint to them the maintenance of cleanliness and order inside of it.

However, because the appointment of the cleanliness of the house to the Albanian women could turn their stereotypes invalid and put into risk the power hierarchy which they serve, the Greek employers adopt an alternative argumentation to devalue their housecleaners’ contribution. They support that it is only out of need that they employ Albanians, as nowadays it is difficult to still find Greek women doing this highly stigmatized job. Moreover, two of them told me that they would prefer Greek housecleaners, because they are not really satisfied with the “cleaning techniques” of the Albanian women. Sofia, told me that the Albanian housecleaners don’t follow the basic precepts of hygiene and so you have to train them in the job and constantly watch them around the house: “She might let’s say mix the cloths of the kitchen with those of the bathroom; this, ok is inconceivable for me! It is in that kind of matters that I particularly draw their attention”.

These evaluations were further accompanied by comments on the poor housing conditions in Albania and the lack of certain appliances and luxuries compared to the ‘modern’ Greek houses. They were in a way trying to attribute the diminished sense of cleanliness of the Albanian women to the ‘backwardness’ of their culture, in the sense of way of life. In her book on domesticity and dirt, Palmer writes that people “tend to believe that attitudes toward dirt and hygiene result from the logical unfolding of precise scientific knowledge about cleanliness and health” (Palmer, 1989: 139). This, in relation to Mary Douglas’ suggestion that dirt is not a scientific fact but a principal means to arrange cultures (Douglas, 1966), explains why we tend to perceive cleaning practices different from ours as backward and superstitious; moreover, to categorize people practicing them as being less advanced and also inferior in terms of culture.

On their part, the Albanian housecleaners find ways to hit back and “correct” the image that the Greek society tries to create and project for them. In an attempt to safeguard their dignity and to boost their inferior position, they highlight their neatness and cleanliness contrary to the mess and the dirtiness they come across in the houses they work at. One Albanian woman openly stated to me: “If a woman is so clean she won’t employ another woman to clean for her”. This statement is practically

turned against all the Greek employers, accusing them of being dirty. While the employment of a housecleaner could be interpreted in a different way - that is that you employ someone exactly because you like cleanliness, otherwise you wouldn't bother - by the Albanian housecleaners it is interpreted differently; so that it serves a very particular scope: to take back some of the dignity that they automatically lack by first doing this highly stigmatized job and additionally by their migrant status in the host society. In this game of power between the two women, Greek employer and Albanian housecleaner, which is also perceived as a rivalry in terms of culture, cleanliness is the marker contested by both sides and on the other hand dirtiness is the marker ascribed to the 'other' in each case. The same line of argumentation is put forward with a difference in scope: in the case of the Greek employers to preserve their advanced position in the power hierarchy; for the Albanian housecleaners to try to resist and go beyond the inferior position in which they are placed. Despite the fact that Albanian women's stigmatizing terms don't 'bite' as hard because of the power unevenness, the fact is that the boundary is clearly there, and processes like this one serve to further maintain it and make it meaningful for the everyday social interaction between these two groups of women.

It is made clear I believe that entertaining negative ethnic stereotypes does not stop people from engaging in close relationships with those who are being stereotyped: relationships often cut across ethnic division and boundaries. However, that doesn't mean also that stereotypes lose their meaning. On the contrary, it is exactly when boundaries are perceived to be under threat that people refer to stereotypes and make them relevant in social interaction. The rigidity of stereotypes and the porousness of ethnic boundaries should be seen in a relation of dialectical interaction with one another: one provides the context in which the other is made possible. Especially, in the case of the Albanian migrants a great similarity has been observed with the Greek people in cultural and social norms. This, was also evident from the interviews with the Greek and Albanian women; they were speaking about similar issues in similar terms, although presented in contrast to the "other" in each case. Maybe then, it is exactly because of this similarity that the great need for differentiation comes and the boundary has to be constantly validated.

Relations and attitudes evolve through time; they are transformed, renegotiated, set into a different base, abandoned all together. The terms of a relationship as well as the according attitudes are not once and for all given. Time and changes in the personal,

social and legal context, influence how relations are negotiated and what form they take. My experience was a reality that goes beyond a victimized image of the Albanian housecleaners who passively accept any exploitative and diminishing situation. Depending on their degree of “empowerment” these women try to improve the terms of the job that concerns them and show greater self-confidence to leave a job environment where they are being insulted or treated discriminatory because of their nationality and their migrant status. Consequently there is also an empowerment in identity assertion and projection: “Now? Now I am neither ashamed nor afraid of! I am from Albania and it is not a shame, as you (the Greeks) say. I am from Albania, you are from Greece, I say! What is the difference?” The element of national identity that might be deliberately silenced or at least not openly played out in the first period, because of its bad connotations and the discrimination that followed it is now defended against the dominant society. Thus, even in the case where some negative attitudes towards them by the Greek women that employ them - or to generalize some perceptions from the Greek society – haven’t substantially changed, I support that we can look also in the, in a certain degree, changed position of the Albanian women which might permit them to negotiate in a different base.

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