“MY CULTURE WHERE THEY WORK”.

GENDER AND “RACE” IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN ITALY AND IN FRANCE

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Feminist scholarship has started to bring to the fore the centrality of domestic labour in our understanding of migrations as highly gendered phenomena. In recent years, throughout the European Union there has been a substantial increase in demand for private domestic services. This demand is mainly fulfilled by migrant - often undocumented - women working in the informal sector. The analysis of interactional and discursive treatment of migrant domestic workers constitutes one area where the interplay of gender, class and “race” relations is highly evident. My current ethnographic study takes into account these intersections in both professional practices and the social construction of these migrant workers in two very different fields of study, Italy and France. Despite French government’s policies concerning standardisation of the domestic labour market, the State remains reluctant to recognise the need for migrant labour in this sector. Also, little attention has been paid by French scholars to the evident racialisation of the “emplois familiaux”. Recruitment and training activities are nevertheless set on the basis of racialising criteria. The Italian attitude to the treatment of domestic work sets out, on the contrary, a strategy based on cyclical regularisations, thus acknowledging the need for migrant domestic workers while stressing their dependence on the employers. In this context, reference to the presumed culture of migrants is often explicit in recruitment activities. In these practices domestic work is constructed according to the “cultural predisposition” of migrant women to assume caring roles. Beliefs whereby Peruvian women are suited to caring for the aged, or that Moroccan women are predisposed to cleaning tasks. At the same time, national identities are constructed in terms of domestic service relations. In this perspective, successful integration of live-in domestic workers depends on their being protected and controlled by the Italian family for which they work.