CHAPTER 7

Narratives and Practices of Work and Identity

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

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” (Andall 2000, 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.

1 Everyday (Domestic) Practices and Identity

I believe that if anyone listens to recordings of in-depth interviews with domestics or home-carers, s/he might be surprised by the great amount of talk involving detailed, lengthy lists of what they had to do for madam/sir. Through this

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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.
specific recollection, the interviewee is usually describing what it meant to her to be a domestic worker. Such a catalogue of domestic and caring actions, gestures, chores and duties contains in a nutshell all the ingredients that 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, 179). Here lies her conceptualisation of performativity as recitation and repetition, as a practice which “enacts or produces what it names” (Butler 1993a, 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 posses a contestatory value. In Butler’s view, performances can challenge the fixed and stable definition of the same identities that they are enacting. Thus, 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 1, 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.