CHAPTER 8

Ethnicisation of Care and Domestic Skills

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 ‘postcolonial 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.¹

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.² 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 7) and, later, discrimination at the workplace (chapter 9).

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 section 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’

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 1, in the fourth section.
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” (Hall 1996, 446).
self-representation of what they call ‘characters’ and which, I believe, closely resembles what Beverly Skeggs defines as ‘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.

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