

# Intersectionality on screen. A coloniality perspective to understand popular culture representations of intersecting oppressions at work

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## Abstract

The article examines popular culture representations of Global South migrants' work through combining a coloniality perspective with an intersectional analysis. In doing so, we analyze two award winning films depicting the experiences of women migrant workers (*Fatima* and *Bread and Roses*) in France and the United States of America. The analysis reveals that representations of the effects of intersecting power structures should be understood as a dynamic phenomenon, embedded in different coloniality regimes. Furthermore, it shows how popular culture representations of oppression are multifaceted and reflect stereotyping but also the victims' responses to oppressive conditions. These are represented as opportunities for change, but can, sometimes, contribute to reproduce oppression. The article theorizes the social and discursive (re)production of intersecting oppressions in popular culture by embedding these within coloniality regimes. It discusses how this coloniality perspective can bring to the fore the complexity of intersecting oppressions and the limited, but significant, forms of agency exercised by colonial subjects.

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## KEYWORDS

coloniality, filmic representation, intersectionality, migrant workers, popular culture

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Women workers from the Global South are often employed in low-paid and low-skilled jobs in the Global North (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). A significant part of this workforce frequently performs precarious and invisible work, involving little or no contact with customers, for instance working as cleaners in hotels or office buildings (Dyer et al., 2010) and other gendered roles connected to care work. Various studies have explored the context of gendered low-skilled and precarious work (Kalleberg, 2011; Vosko et al., 2009), also documenting the experience of individuals whose status as migrants contribute to the 'precariousness' of their situation (see, Ressia et al., 2017). While there is a significant literature studying intersectionality in work and organization (e.g., Acker, 2012; Holvino, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2016), understanding the ways in which multiple, intersecting forms of power interlock, complicating and entrenching oppressive conditions of these workers, could benefit from a consideration of how popular culture informs imaginaries about Global South workers.

As Komporezos-Athanasios and Fotaki argue, the imaginary—which manifests through representations—is a condition of possibility of work and organizational practices because 'organizations are defined by both the imagining process and its outcome (comprising individuals' desires and affects and socially established norms, narratives, and discourses) \_ they are products of the imagination of societies at any given time.' (2015, p. 334). Furthermore, popular culture products reflect the context and the power structures in which they are created; films are 'interpretations of working life in the modern social' (Brewis, 1998, p. 84), while they simultaneously contribute to shape public discourse and imagination. By analyzing a form of popular culture, we follow Pullen and Rhodes (2012, p. 52) who mention that 'popular culture, while potentially being a vehicle for the perpetuation of oppressive and repressive gender norms in relation to work, also contains within it the resources for the critique, and even subversion of those norms'. Examining 'popular culture is a valuable exercise for organizational critique' in that it enables the 'connections between systems of cultural meaning' in relation to gender, work, and organization. Furthermore, using popular culture as text allows to perform interpretations of workers' experience of intersecting oppressions as 'popular culture is not an unambiguous site for the perpetuation of patriarchal, sexist and heteronormative values; it also contains within it the possibilities for resistance to and transgression of those values and their associated practices' (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012, p. 52).

In our attempt to better understand imaginaries of intersectionality at work, we contend that *coloniality*—intended as the power of inequalities sustained by a Eurocentric/white cultural hegemony (Quijano, 2000)—frames the meaning of intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989) along the lines of particular historical *regimes*. These regimes reproduce over time context-specific forms of gender, race, and class oppressions (Grosfoguel et al., 2015). In this article, we analyze how intersecting oppressions, as represented in films, are embedded in coloniality regimes. In doing so, we offer a twofold contribution: first, by using filmic representations as popular culture texts, we show how, in deploying an intersectional analysis that takes into account the articulation of coloniality, we can achieve a deeper understanding of how interlocking oppressions unfold within a particular historic-colonial context, that is, a *coloniality regime*. Secondly, the analysis of popular culture representations enables us to emphasize that in the face of intersecting oppressions, workers can exercise some form of *agency* (limited but significant) (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019).

Current intersectional studies on work and organizations (e.g., Acker, 2012; Holvino, 2010; Ressia et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2016) analyze intersectionality as embedded in structures of oppression and contribute to enhance knowledge on the experiences of low skill and precarious work. We build on this literature by integrating a coloniality perspective to explore how popular culture products such as films represent intersecting oppressions and the possibilities of agency of individual subjects (Acker, 2012; Holvino, 2010; Knight, 2016). Drawing on work in postcolonial feminism (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lugones, 1992), feminist organizational studies (e.g., Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019)

and in line with popular culture studies of work and organization (see, Pullen & Rhodes, 2012), we argue that experiences of oppressive conditions (and their representations) are complex and multifaceted. In fact, oppressed workers can and do have an active role, 'fighting back', creating spaces for resistance, which, however, can also reproduce other oppressive conditions (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Mumby, 2005; Zanon & Janssens, 2007).

We understand agency as the capacity of individual actors to not only 'resist control' in social and organizational lives (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019, p. 4), but also to act against intersecting oppressions—embedded in discursive and material processes—through conscious 'strategies of defense' (Lugones, 1992, p. 32). We also recognize that agency is not always radical transformation, such as the 'absolute chasm [...] between the emancipatory moment and the social order that has preceded it' (Laclau, 1992, p. 122), and that it may not always correspond to the ability to transform one's condition in the world. While individual agency is the recognition that things can be different, it interacts with intersecting oppressions as a dynamic phenomenon (Rodriguez et al., 2016). By taking into account both the structural and the agentic sides in analyzing intersecting oppressions, we argue that a more processual and dynamic understanding can be achieved (Boogaard & Rogeband, 2010).

In this article, we analyze two films as popular culture texts to scrutinize how coloniality is embedded in representations of intersecting oppressions and agency in precarious occupations. Analyzing popular culture representations in films (see, Czarniawska et al., 2013; Griffin et al., 2017; Pullen & Rhodes, 2012; Rhodes & Lilley, 2013; Tyler & Cohen, 2008) allows to understand how imaginaries (Komporezos-Athanasidou & Fotaki, 2015) enable specific social, work, and organizational discourses and norms to be (re)produced and resisted culturally in and beyond organizations (Bal, 2003, 2011; Krawczyk & Barthold, 2018). Methodologically, we use a multisite popular culture analysis, based on two award winning films: *Fatima* (2015) and *Bread and Roses* (2000). This allows us to analyze and discuss contexts of coloniality regimes within representations of migrant workers' experience of intersecting oppressions among Latin Americans in USA and Algerians in France. Both *Fatima* and *Bread and Roses* are influential films that resonated with broader popular culture processes, as the former was given the César award for the best French film in 2016 and the latter was nominated for the Cannes festival Palme d'Or in 2001. Despite a gap of 15 years between the two films, we regrettably argue that, on a general level, the conditions of migrant workers in both countries have changed little during this period of time.

The study addresses the following aims: (a) theorize the social and discursive (re)production of intersecting oppressions through embedding a coloniality approach in the intersectional analysis of oppressions in films; (b) analyze how popular culture products representing the complexities of the social, work, emotional, and intimate lives of migrant workers, reproduce intersecting oppressions as grounded on coloniality regimes; (c) understand popular culture representations of possibilities of agency by precarious migrant women in films. The article contributes to the work and organization literature on intersectionality by embedding a coloniality perspective in the intersectional analysis. This enables the understanding of how different coloniality regimes (in our case multiculturalism in the United States and assimilation in France) frame representations of intersecting oppressions based on historical processes. Furthermore, it contributes to the gender, work, and organization literature by troubling and critiquing intersecting oppressions through the analysis of popular culture as means of buttressing gendered and racial norms, but also demonstrating the possibilities of agency.

The paper is organized in five sections. First, we examine the literature on intersectionality in work and organization studies and then explore its links with coloniality, postcolonial feminism, and postcolonial organization studies. Secondly, we expose our chosen methodology. Thirdly, we offer the synopsis of the films. Fourthly, we analyze how *Fatima* and *Bread and Roses* represent the way experiences of intersecting oppressions are embedded in regimes of coloniality and how these representations shape possibilities for agency. Finally, we offer a conclusive discussion of the contribution.

## 2 | AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO WORK AND ORGANIZATION

Drawing on black feminist literature (e.g., hooks, 1977; Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984), Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in a seminal article in which she discussed how African American women were subject to multiple, aligned forms of oppressions: patriarchy, racism, and the class system (1989). Black feminist scholars (e.g., Hill Collins, 2001) argue that the emancipatory struggles of African Americans should specifically account for African American women experience. An intersectional approach, thus, supports the analysis of several interlocking elements limiting the agency and self-determination of women of color (Hurtado, 1989).

The idea that women workers' agency is not just limited by organizational hierarchies and class divisions, but also by the gendering of work has informed gender, work, and organization studies since the 1980s (for a review see Healy et al., 2019). In particular, Acker's notion of 'regimes of inequality' (2006, p. 441) recognizes how race and class, in addition to gender, align to reproduce inequalities in workplaces, thus reflecting intersecting elements of oppression. Despite its recognition in work and organization studies, intersectionality as an analytical concept 'remains at the margins of dominant work and organization narratives of equality and inclusion' in the workplace (Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 202). Several studies have explored how an intersectional analysis can support the understanding of experiences and subjectivities in work and organizations. This includes the experience of Muslim entrepreneurs in the Netherlands (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Essers et al., 2010); the identity of South African Indian managers (Mohamed et al., 2016); of professionals (Atewologun & Singh, 2010) and academics (Johansson & Šliwa, 2014); the realities of skilled women migrants in the Australian labor market (Ressia et al., 2017, p. 373), and of disabled workers in sheltered employment (Bend & Priola, 2018, 2021). These intersectional analyses support the understanding of how structural forms of oppressions, based on discrimination, constrain individual action and expose individuals to unfair practices.

These disempowering effects are thought to be particularly intense when several factors determining oppression and/or discrimination, such as race, class, and gender are at play at the same time (Knight, 2016) 'through simultaneous processes of identity, institutional and social practice' (Holvino, 2010, p. 248). An intersectional approach enables scholars to understand a cumulative process in which race, gender, and class—in addition to other dimensions such as age (Mooney et al., 2017) or disability (e.g., Artiles, 2013; Bend & Priola, 2018; Zanon, 2011)—are aligned in order to produce a compounded discrimination. For instance, Muslim women in the West are shown to be affected by multiple levels of discrimination in the workplace, resulting from intersections of gender, race, religion, and often class, which reconfigures their identities and experiences of oppression (Tariq & Syed, 2018).

While most of these studies analyze intersecting systems of oppression focusing on interlocking dimensions of power, it is important to highlight that, paradoxically, as oppressive forces cumulate, spaces for individual agency reemerge. For example, Carrim and Nkomo (2016) show how race, class, and gender intersections are further compounded by corporate attempts to regulate managerial identities of Indian women managers in South Africa. However, despite this overpowering combination of forces prescribing and limiting their subjectivities and practices, these women show a capacity to—at least partially—negotiate and resist these sources of identity. This has also been shown by Wasserman and Frenkel (2019) and Priola and Chaudhry (2021) who, in different studies, explore the intertwining of intersecting oppressions, agency, and power in the work lives of women who face religious 'patriarchal authority' (albeit different religions) in addition to organizational power. Accordingly, they show how the experience of interlocking oppressions can be a dynamic and 'fluid' phenomenon (Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 202), in which the 'victims' can actively participate, and reconquer spaces of agency by navigating between the gazes of various 'contradicting visibility regimes: managerial, peers and religious communities' to pursue personal and organizational objectives (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019, p. 1). The intersection of gender and religion involved in 'the reproduction of minorities' marginalization' (p. 1), is mobilized by the women in these studies to serve their professional stands within skilled work (high-tech organizations in one study and banking in the second). While we acknowledge that several studies deploying an intersectional analysis show that often a level of agency is preserved at an individual level despite multiple oppressive structures, we argue that such complexity is not always represented in popular

culture. Our analysis of filmic representations of colonial intersecting oppression of low skill migrant workers not only enables us to focus on those popular culture representations that display multiple oppressions and some space for agency, but we also link this to different contexts characterized by specific coloniality regimes. By deploying the notion of coloniality regimes, we will deploy a 'historicizing' of intersectional analysis (Mohanty, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 211). This will enable us to foreground that the intersecting of class, gender, and race operate differently according to historic-colonial contexts. For example, in relation to racial oppression, there are 'diverse forms of racisms' which, '[d]epending on the varying colonial histories in a number of world regions, the hierarchy of human superiority/inferiority can be constructed through various racial markers [including] [...] color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion' (Grosfoguel et al., 2015, p. 635).

### 3 | GENDER, AGENCY, AND (POST)COLONIALISM IN WORK AND ORGANIZATION

Through coloniality—at a global scale since the beginning of Western colonialism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century—capitalism produces an ontological, epistemological, and racial hierarchy between Eurocentric white populations and other races (Limki, 2018; Manning, 2021; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007). The colonial logic of power has survived the end of European colonial empires in the 1950s and is now reflected in the specific way in which a hegemonic discourse operates, defining legitimate behaviors and shaping individual subjectivities and desires—in particular by interlinking gender and race, and placing women of color at the bottom of social and work hierarchies (Lugones, 2010). The ways in which coloniality's 'model of power' (Quijano, 2000, p. 533) continues to operate in today's world, beyond the administrative historical event of decolonization, has been defined as postcolonial.<sup>1</sup>

The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and race<sup>2</sup> is shaped and reinforced by their situatedness in a (post)colonial context (Baines, 2010). There is an extensive literature on postcolonialism in work and organization (for a review, see Jack et al., 2011) that analyzes, for example, globalization (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001), the imposition of Western knowledge management on the Global South (Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Yousfi, 2014), power and resistance in work and organization (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011), and organizational space (Ashley, 2016; Frenkel, 2008). We argue, however, that the role that gender plays in colonial processes is still often neglected (for a notable exception, see Manning, 2021), even though coloniality is specifically patriarchal and engages with women and men of color in different ways<sup>3</sup> (Lugones, 2010). For example, this might involve favoring men's occupation or attempts to 'emancipate backwards' women through a 'civilizing mission' targeting colonized households and sexualities. Limki (2018) draws on the work of Quijano (2007) to analyze the case of women from the Global South who act as surrogate mothers for women from the Global North. In particular, she notes how colonial logics have played a central role, historically, in producing a view of 'gender, sexual and racial Others as ontologically, and hence ethically, different' (Limki, 2018, p. 327). This useful interpretation is nevertheless limited by two assumptions: the notion that victims' agency (in this case Indian women acting as surrogate mothers) is irremediably stunted by the alignment of oppressive forces and that all postcolonial contexts follow similar logics.

We problematize both assumptions in our analysis, acknowledging ethnographic work of postcolonial feminist scholars in anthropology, who criticize the idea that women in the Global South are perceived passive according to Western feminism standards. In a seminal article, Abu-Lughod (1990) highlights how young Bedouin women are able to resist the traditional norms of Bedouin society and the norms of mainstream Egyptian society, by enacting an Islamic identity deployed in everyday life linked to the Islamist renewal movement, as opposed to the traditional Bedouin's way of practicing Islam. For example, as soon as they marry, young Bedouin wear a new form of 'Islamic dress' to signal publicly their rejection of both the traditional Bedouin dress—which deploys modesty in a different way—and Western, secular clothing promoted by mainstream Egyptian society. Women's agency and power are intertwined with wider structures and these women managed to deploy agency by moving between different sets of norms and so are able to advance micro changes. Furthermore, this is in line with the work of Mahmood (2009, p. 14) who explains that Egyptian Muslim women in the context of an Islamic movement promoting modesty and submission

to men can still deploy a form of agency through 'gather[ing] in mosques to teach each other about Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment... that had been the purview of learned men'. Thus, Mahmood argues that an alternative articulation of agency and power is needed to understand 'the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions' (p. 15).

Acknowledging the interplay between oppression and resistance at the intersections between cultures, a Chicana scholar, Anzaldúa (1987), developed a theory about the borderland thinking (she grew up on the border between Mexico and Texas) in which the dialectical relationship with oppression is not only about the US white colonial world and its racism against a Chicana, but also about the oppression of the Mexican world and its homophobic stance toward a Lesbian (Lugones, 1992). Anzaldúa's work resonates with the experience of migrants caught between two cultures with different sets of contradictory norms that double-bind them. Anzaldúa's agency strategies involve the embrace of a borderland 'mestiza consciousness' (Lugones, 1992, p. 31), which combines and resignifies elements of both the United States and Mexico; for example, by writing texts combining English and Spanish. The borderland and the migrant experience is, thus, a relevant site to denaturalize coloniality in that it allows to create a connection between different experiences and different spaces, whereas 'ontological separations are technologies of [...] coloniality' (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 30). It is easier to naturalize coloniality in homogenous spaces whereby the Western experience is not confronted to its Others. However, contrary to women migrant workers in *Fatima* and *Bread and Roses*, Anzaldúa's resources lent her the possibility to deploy agency through creative writing and thereby not only to escape power but to disrupt it by narrating her own experience.

In advancing the contributions of postcolonial feminism (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 1992) and intersectionality studies in work and organization (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019), we analyze popular culture representations of interlocking oppressions, taking into account agency and how it can, sometimes, reproduce oppression, within colonial contexts in France and the United States.

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

Work and organizational practices require the use of imagination to give them form, and make sense of them, in particular through representation, narratives, and discourses. As Komporzozos-Athanasios and Fotaki argue that "imagination is 'where it all begins', an inexhaustible psychosocial force driving organizations and organizing" (2015, p. 322). Studying popular culture products about work and organizing is a way to analyze this imaginary (Bell, E. & Sinclair, 2016a). Films are objects of popular culture, constituting a vehicle of a sociocultural imaginary, including gendered discourses, narratives, and representations. Films do not only provide visual content but can involve multiple senses through sound and text as well as transfer emotions to the viewer (Marks, 2000). The study of films (Bell, 2008; Parker, 2018) and television series (Bell & Sinclair, 2016b; Ellis, 2008; Rhodes, 2001) is central in the analysis of the influences of popular culture on work and organizational practices. 'Film analysis can provide insights into the "simultaneous production and subjugation of subjects" (Butler, 1993, p. 130) and the mechanisms that sanction certain imaginaries as "real" and others as "fantasies"' (Griffin et al., 2017, p. 870). As asserted by Pullen and Rhodes (2012, p. 56), 'in management and organization studies there is a growing awareness of the productive possibilities of studying organizations through popular culture'.

Notably, films have also been used as popular culture texts to illuminate issues of gender construction and doing in work and organizations: such as the role of animation in the reproduction of 'gender inequality' through stereotypes conveyed by manga (Matanle et al., 2014, p. 472), Disney (Griffin et al., 2017), soap operas (Czarniawska et al., 2013), and series such as *The Office* (Tyler & Cohen, 2008). Furthermore, the construction of representations of hegemonic organizational masculinities at work through the figure of 'Macho managers' has been analyzed through the textual material provided by popular culture films (Panayiotou, 2010, p. 656). Films are rhetorical artifacts that affect viewers, but at the same time their interpretation is performed and contested according to a variety of different processes of social construction of meaning. They are not only images or descriptions of the world but

have performative effects, both shaping and becoming constituent of social reality. Films provide a narrative for specific social discourses and are constitutive of popular culture, as mass media form of cultural production (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). Films assume a pedagogical role in the lives of many people, teaching us about race, sex, and class, despite the original intent of the filmmaker (hooks, 1994). Importantly, films as texts of popular culture are not only a 'means of propagating dogma and cultural common sense, [but] can also be something that critical approaches to studying gender and organizations' might use (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012, p. 62). Furthermore, popular culture is not unitary and could either reinforce hegemonic discourses, or, by contrast, enable to 'denaturalize it'. For example, in a comedy, '[w]hen we laugh at masculinity and patriarchal power in popular culture we are acknowledging the existence of that power, and making a critical judgment that the exercise of that power is ethically conspicuous' (p. 61).

In our specific case, we examine two films representing the experiences of precarious migrant women workers in order to theorize the social and discursive (re)production of intersecting oppressions within diverse colonial contexts. We are not representing the views of the filmmakers, not of the fictional characters, neither are we suggesting that viewers passively absorb the filmmaker's perspective. Instead, our analysis aims to dissect how popular culture texts representing the complexities of the social, work, emotional, and intimate lives of migrant workers deal with intersecting oppressions and how they (as narratives) are embedded in coloniality. Thus, the two films, *Fatima* (2015) and *Bread and Roses* (2000), are analyzed as popular culture texts, which have a specific sociocultural sense and are enmeshed with the sociomaterial (Bal, 2003, 2008; see also, Krawczyk & Barthold, 2018).

While both directors have publicly expressed their programmatic intent to show characters rarely shown in films, we realize that these are colonial, gendered, and racialized representations produced by white men. Ken Loach (director of *Bread and Roses*) reported that they 'wanted to make a film that showed the other side of the city [Los Angeles] to tell a story about the Mexicans and ignore Beverly Hills, the swimming pools, the fast cars, and the police chases' (Loach & Smith, 2001, n.p.). Similarly, Faucon (director of *Fatima*) stated that he wanted to film 'characters who are never shown in movies, and who like Fatima wake up at 5 a.m. in order to collect garbage' as opposed to 'caricatural representations linked to gangs, drug-trafficking', or terrorism (Faucon & Gester, 2015, n.p.).

These programmatic intents remain problematic and subjected to a widely shared postcolonial critique (e.g., Bloom, 2008) that argues that the colonizer—i.e., white researcher or filmmaker producing popular culture—continues to exploit the colonized, racialized, and gendered subject, viewed as raw material for their 'knowledge production'. It is also likely that the fact that these films are produced by privileged white, male subjects has determined their influence as popular culture productions. While we analyze the filmic representation, overlooking the directors' programmatic intents, we aim to deconstruct coloniality and patriarchal discourse, and identify spaces of agency and resistance, associated with the ambivalence of popular culture texts (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). Our analysis is, therefore, also an exploration of the white, patriarchal representations as we reflect on the lives of many postcolonial migrants who have to deal with the representations constructed by the hegemonic and patriarchal discourse of postcolonialism on an everyday basis, because they are in the colonial metropole. Furthermore, we have chosen these two films because, while immersed in coloniality, they attempt to represent the complex interface between intersecting oppressions and agency, as experienced by women colonial subjects, in line with studies of popular culture emphasizing resistance (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). In fact, most representations of colonial popular cultures tend to present women of color predominantly as visible, sexualized, and passive objects, outside of the world of work and production (e.g., French artist Delacroix's orientalist paintings of Arab women in *harems* (see Said, 1978); the stereotype of the Arab woman in French porn (Fassin & Trachman, 2013); and the American sexualization of Latin American women's seductive dances (Paludi et al., 2019)). We feel that the films chosen offer rich and multifaceted representations of intersecting oppressions in relation to gendered precarious migrant workers. The women workers represented are mostly invisible in popular culture, because precarious, racialized work and the related organizational practices are rarely represented in films.

## 4.1 | France and the United States as coloniality contexts

In both films, the main characters are women cleaners who migrated from the Global South to work in the Global North. They are both racialized subjects, reproduced as inferior others by colonial hierarchies (Quijano, 2000). While these are common features, the films also present dissimilarities as they document different postcolonial contexts. Both France and United States belong to the Global North and are capitalist societies with a significant historical involvement in slavery and imperialism; however, their traditions of dealing with colonized 'Others' are different. From a postcolonial perspective (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001; Ibarra-Colado, 2006), these correspond to different regimes of coloniality (Limki, 2018; Lugones, 2010; Manning, 2021; Quijano, 2000), embedded in local histories of colonialism and the ways racial, gendered, and class were framed in such contexts (Grosfoguel et al., 2015). In France, during the 20th century, many Arab, African, and Indochinese workers were 'imported' from the colonies to provide a cheap, mostly unskilled workforce (Boubeker & Hajjat, 2008). On the other hand, Mexicans impoverished due to Spanish colonization migrated to the United States, since the early 20th century, in search of economic opportunities in the agricultural sector. These laborers 'required' the supervision of white (mostly male) managers, who needed to control them using both formal authority and other means. They are objects needed to sustain the capitalist expansion of European and American powers.

The main difference between the two contexts is concerned with the logic that underpins colonial oppression. In the United States, coloniality reproduces racial hierarchies through the acknowledgment of social inequalities, while pretending to accept cultural differences (Melamed, 2006), whereas in France coloniality reproduces racial hierarchies by explicitly refusing to recognize other cultures (Bancel et al., 2005). These differences are further explored in the analysis.

## 5 | SYNOPSIS OF *BREAD AND ROSES* AND *FATIMA*

The story of *Bread and Roses* (2000), directed by the UK director Ken Loach, is set in Los Angeles and was inspired by real facts—a strike campaign involving migrant workers throughout the United States at the end of the 1980s. It represents the struggle of an unlawful woman worker in a cleaning service company called Angel. The film opens by showing a group of illegal Mexican migrants as they attempt to pass the border to the United States. The protagonist, Maya, a young, quick-witted Mexican girl, has had her passage paid by her older sister Rosa who lives in Los Angeles. However, Rosa does not have the money to pay the balance to the smugglers, who decide to 'keep Maya' as a sex slave. Maya cunningly manages to escape them and joins Rosa at her house. With the help of her sister, Maya finds a job at 'Angel', the company where Rosa works as a janitor to support her family (her husband, who has diabetes, is unable to work). The company acts as a subcontractor, providing cleaning services for high-rise corporate buildings in downtown Los Angeles. The majority of workers at Angel are women, Latinos or African American, in their 50s or 60s; they are supervised by a foreman, Perez, a Latin American man in a security guard uniform. The management style of Perez is tyrannical and abusive. He publicly humiliates cleaners for the minimal infraction, arbitrarily dismisses staff, and even blackmails them, using their illegal status as a weapon to further exploit them. His coercive capacities are built on a mixture of bureaucratic controls (represented by his uniform, his function as a 'gatekeeper' rigidly controlling work times, and his role as a payroll officer) and copious use of discretionary power, which he uses to stop the janitors from joining the union. It is revealed that Rosa had to comply with his sexual proposals to obtain a job for Maya, who, in addition to this, also has to kick back her first month's salary. At Angel, Maya becomes friends with Ruben who has the ambition to study law at the university; she also meets Sam, a white middle class American union activist who seeks her help to organize workers at Angel to obtain healthcare insurance and better working conditions. Maya is instrumental in convincing most women workers to strike and participate in a rally. This creates a fracture with her sister Rosa, who is afraid that clashing with management will put her job at risk. The true reason behind her reticence is that she had to become a sex worker in order to support her family: losing her job would

mean both compromising her capacity to provide for her family and nullify her past sacrifice. Maya is further divided between the idealism of Sam and the pragmatism of Ruben, who does not want to join the industrial action because he cannot jeopardize his life plan to go to university to study law. In the end, some improvements in the workers' conditions are achieved, thanks to the strike and protest; however, Maya cannot fully enjoy her success. She commits a theft in order to procure Ruben the money he needs to enroll in University, thus fulfilling his 'American Dream', but she is eventually caught and deported back to Mexico.

Similarly, *Fatima* (2015), directed by French director Philippe Faucon, describes the life and toils of a migrant woman employed as a cleaner. Fatima is a 50-year-old divorced Algerian woman who lives in a small French town where she raises on her own two teenage daughters, Nesrine and Souad, and works as a cleaner in a school and in a private house. The film depicts some sensory striking oppositions between mother and daughters: Fatima wears a headscarf, whereas her daughters do not; she speaks to them in Arabic, whereas they exclusively respond to her in French. Despite some personal tensions, her daughters are clearly at the center of Fatima's life: she sacrifices everything in order to give them a better future. She is particularly concerned with their studies and worries about Souad's school results. Indeed, the 15-year-old often plays truant, wandering in their neighborhoods with male teenagers and entering in an unstable relationship with one of them. The older daughter, Nesrine, is in the first year of a medicine degree. While a good student, very committed and methodical, she is extremely stressed as she needs to pass a very competitive test, which will determine her possibility to continue her medical studies. Most of her fellow students are white and of upper middle-class background. Throughout the movie Fatima has moments of introspection, as she writes a diary in Arabic about her feelings and difficulties in integrating, so seeking for a space of freedom outside of work. Like her mother, Nesrine often laments that she does not have time for emotions and fun. Her otherness also emerges when compared with the life of a white upper middle-class woman student she shares her apartment with, who is much more relaxed about her studies and conducts a more enjoyable life characterized by sexual freedom. Nesrine's life changes after she meets a French white young man who convinces her to enjoy life despite the stress of studying medicine. Winning Nesrine's initial reluctance, he becomes her boyfriend. As a consequence, Nesrine must face the hostility of other Arab women from the neighborhood: she is stigmatized for her decision to study, and she is explicitly told that she should do manual work instead. Her position is further compromised by rumors about her sexual life: as an unmarried Arab woman she is supposed to behave modestly and avoid unsupervised contacts with men. This also leads to a tense confrontation with her father. A key moment in the life of Fatima is when she falls down the stairs at the school where she works, experiences pain for several months and is referred to a specialist doctor. The film ends with Nesrine's happiness in finding that she passed her examination. Fatima's sacrifice for her daughter has paid off, she feels fulfilled through her daughter's success.

## 6 | FILM ANALYSIS

In the following three sections, we adopt a coloniality perspective (Limki, 2018; Lugones, 2010; Manning, 2021; Quijano, 2000) to analyze how popular culture films represent migrant workers' experience of intersecting oppressions based primarily on gender, race, and class. In the first section, we focus on the commonality of intersecting oppressions in the representations of experiences of precarious work across the two colonized environments. In the second section, we analyze the specificities of different coloniality regimes (assimilationism and multiculturalism), showing how they differently affect representations of experiences of intersecting oppressions. In the third section, we analyze how these coloniality regimes also affect representations of possibilities for agency for the women in *Fatima* and *Bread and Roses*. Please note that the distinctions between sections is for analytical purposes and that these areas overlap.

## 6.1 | Intersecting oppressions in filmic representations of migrant workers

Fatima, Maya and their family members experience several intersecting elements of oppression, which result from and are embedded in coloniality. Working-class women of color from the Global South (e.g., from Algeria and Mexico) in core-capitalist metropolises are in situations of disproportionate vulnerability, vis-à-vis other populations such as working-class white women or working-class men of color (Crenshaw, 1989). This is connected with a global *colonial division of labor* whereby business organizations in the capitalist Global North take advantage of the vulnerability of these women to perform the most precarious jobs (Manning, 2021; Quijano, 2007).

First, Fatima and Maya both experience *racial oppression* (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2016) as represented in the racial stratification of work (Lugones, 2010). Most cleaners and janitors at Angels belong to racial minority groups, Perez's social status—despite his supremacy over the janitorial staff—is quite low, in comparison to the true decision-makers, the corporate lawyers who employ Angel's services, and set the rules by which the other actors have to play (such as paltry salaries and lack of social protection). The union, which has a paternalistic undertone, is managed by white Anglo-American organizers, indicating the exclusion from the union's hierarchy of the majority of workers they represent. Such racial stratification of work (Lugones, 2010; Manning, 2021) in general is nuanced by Maya's relationships of solidarity and support with Sam (an Anglo man) and her African American coworkers, while male members of her ethnic group (Perez and the smugglers) are predators and adversaries. Symmetrically, Fatima's coworkers are also either Arabs or blacks, even though management roles are performed by white women. This racial stratification of work is deployed along colonial lines that appear to distinguish between jobs (positions of authority and power) for the white majority and jobs (precarious and low skill) for the historically colonized groups (Bouamana & Tévanian, 2013; Boubeker & Hajjat, 2008; Limki, 2018; Quijano, 2007).

Secondly, Fatima and Maya both experience *class oppression* (Crenshaw, 1989; Rodriguez et al., 2016), linked to the fact that they have to accept a low pay, low skill cleaning job to survive. As suggested by Holvino (2010, p. 252), women of color 'have been generally confined to secondary labor markets and to positions at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy'. Fatima works in precarious, unsecure employment (Kalleberg, 2011) and has to divide her time between two separate cleaning jobs, at a school (a public sector bureaucratic organization) and with a bourgeois family. In *Bread and Roses*, Maya is an illegal migrant whose labor is precarious and whose migration status makes her more vulnerable to exploitation (see, Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Ressia et al., 2017). Maya and her colleagues, on the other hand, are deprived of employment rights and supervised by a tyrannical line manager who, despite his status as a migrant himself, impersonate the repressive mode of the colonizer (see Parker, 2003). Class oppression linked to precarious work is thus represented in Fatima and Maya's subjection to strict workplace surveillance as well as their social invisibility, which illustrates their marginalization. Differently from the skilled workers in Wasserman and Frenkel's (2019) and Priola and Chaudhry's (2021) studies, both Fatima and Maya are not able to mobilize their marginalization to improve their professional position. The intersection of class oppression with race and gender oppressions are represented as limits to the possibilities of advancement within the workplace.

While in *Fatima*, the main characters appear to be isolated from their cultural community, in *Bread and Roses* the humanity and solidarity among the workers is well illustrated. This contrasts with their social invisibility; in a scene, Ruben, a male Latino cleaner, is showing Maya how to clean the skirting board: the attraction between the two is palpable, and a romantic liaison is developing. In the midst of this interlude, a group of lawyers passes by the two cleaners kneeling down on the floor, without paying any attention to them, clearly considered part of the furniture. Yet, the director turns the idea of 'social invisibility' upside down: the camera remains on Ruben and Maya and only the legs of the lawyers, dressed in elegant garments, are visible. Despite this attempt to turn social invisibility upside down, the class privilege of the middle-class professionals is enhanced by their position (standing up), their clothing (smart attire) which clearly contrasts with the crouching down position, and the cleaner's uniform of the working-class woman of color (Holvino, 2010). Fatima works alone in the school, apparently without supervision, but one day she leaves early because of an emergency with her younger daughter, to be reprimanded by her manager the following morning, when she also learns from a colleague that the supervisor has spies among the cleaners. Flexible,

autonomous work in organizations solely remains the privilege of white middle-class women (and men) who perform managerial or professional roles that enable them to have some control on when to complete the work and attend to an emergency if needed (Hurtado, 1989). This form of coercive power and control (attached to precarious work conditions which are accepted because of class oppression) is also visible in the private home, where the employer (a woman) tests Fatima's honesty and checks the thoroughness of the cleaning, while attempting to establish a personal connection with her, as both have children in their first year of medical studies. It is clear that the attempt to establish familiarity is distant and fake, as the employer's complaint about the cost of supporting their son's studies, obviously neglects the totally disproportionate amount of sacrifice that Fatima needs to do in order to support her daughter's studies. The pretense of informality and familiarity is a form of control based on emotional manipulation and colonial hierarchy, whereby white women can be complicit in and benefit from the reproduction of oppressions (Lugones, 2010).

Thirdly, Fatima and Maya both experience *gender oppression* (Crenshaw, 1989). Inequalities are well manifested across gender, racial, and class differences in that most of the precarious coworkers of Fatima and Maya are women (Vosko et al., 2009), with a few exceptions, such as Ruben (who is also the only one who achieves redemption in virtue of Maya's sacrifice). In the case of Fatima, although the manager is a woman, she is formal, directive, and detached, displaying little emotions or empathy, and conforming to a stereotypical masculine ideal of management, including in her attire of short hair and formal suit. Fatima's other employer is also an emotionally detached woman, who tests her honesty by leaving a banknote in a trousers' pocket. While she attempts to build some familiarity and camaraderie with Fatima, her behavior appears fake and aimed at ensuring her commitment and compliance. Fatima's relationship with these women remains submissive and docile, as both have on her the advantage of being white, French, and middle class. In both cases, in fact, class differences and racial hierarchies play a determinant role in her oppression. The portrayal of a woman of color managed by privileged white middle-class women represent the 'simultaneous forces of privilege and oppression' (Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 204). These aspects clearly supersede any form of 'gender' solidarity between white women and women of color (inexistent in the case of the bureaucratic environment of the school and purely manipulative in the family house). Moreover, the absence of male managerial figures points at the low status of the cleaning services sector in which Fatima works, as white women are themselves subordinated to white men. In *Bread and Roses*, most women are also represented at the bottom of social and work hierarchies, oppressed by colonial structures that contribute to maintain them as others in virtue of their race, class, and gender (Lugones, 2010). While some of the corporate lawyers shown are women, they are barely evident and none of them is represented in positions of authority, as opposed to the owner of the building and the leader of the union, who are all men. Men of color, too, such as Fatima's husband, Ruben, or Perez, all appear to be in better social and work positions compared to women of color, replicating how many men of color are co-opted in order to reproduce colonial hierarchies (Quijano, 2007).

Another intersecting factor is *age*, and the young bodies needed to engage in physical work. This is evidenced by Maya's youth, which is a burden for her (Paludi et al., 2019; Said, 1978), as she becomes the object of unwanted sexual attention, but it also provides her an (economic) asset she can leverage upon. As Perez comments: 'It's about time we got someone young in here, got rid of some of these old fucking hags. They're worthless.' In *Fatima*, the intersections between age and gender (see also Mooney et al., 2017; Riach et al., 2014) are represented in the physical and mental troubles encountered by the protagonist when she is physically incapacitated to work following a fall at the school she cleans. It is also evident in generational differences, with older first-generation migrants holding on to aspects of their cultures (i.e., language and dressing) that younger and second-generation migrants appear to lose in the name of assimilationism, thus further succumbing to colonial oppression.

This analysis shows that the colonial hierarchical system that established racial repression clearly buttresses the intersecting oppressions of race with gender, class, and age. Gender-based oppression is fully integrated into the race and class system of domination, revealing how the capitalist system of labor remains rooted in the racist and patriarchal logic of colonialism (Lugones, 2010). As stated by Quijano (2007), the colonial structure of power produced the specific social discrimination later codified as racial and alleged as 'objective' and based on 'scientific'

differences among the races. It operates through cultural repression and control over authority, labor, sexuality, and subjectivity. Interactions between European culture and colonized cultures, in fact, were based on relations of externality between 'subject' and 'object', where any exchange of knowledge and modes of production was blocked (Quijano, 2007, p. 169). We now move on to analyze how two different coloniality regimes affect the representations of workers' experiences of intersecting oppressions.

## 6.2 | Coloniality regimes and representations of workers' experiences of intersecting oppressions

Both films represent experiences of intersecting oppressions that, we argue, are specific to the colonial histories of the countries on which the films are based, that is, French assimilationism and US multiculturalism. US coloniality can be defined as characterized by *multicultural individualism* (Melamed, 2006). In its extreme form it leads to segregation as represented in the Indian reserve system and Jim Crow laws. In multiculturalism, there is an emphasis on cultural separation with no attempt to encourage assimilation; since the 1960s minority groups in the United States can maintain their own culture as long as they do not contest the hegemony of the mainstream white capitalist culture. The underlying assumption is that any individual can succeed irrespective of their race (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014); however, this possibility is also associated with an absolute belief in the power of individual agency. Each person is seen as the maker of their own destiny, and failure can only be blamed on individual shortcomings. Moreover, even if the market is 'color-blind', the socioeconomic prominence of white people (due to unacknowledged social inequalities) encourages other ethnic groups to conform to the white norm (Roediger, 1999).

By contrast, France can be defined as a *republican assimilationist* postcolonial state (Bancel et al., 2005). This hegemonic discourse assumes that colonized others should assimilate to the universalist principles of the French republic as well as French culture, including language and social norms, and abandon their cultural identity. Accordingly, the French republic would have a 'civilizing mission' in relation to other non-Western cultures that would be allegedly inferior, justifying French colonial violence as a legitimate attempt to civilize primitive societies. For instance, during the French occupation of Algeria, Algerians who did make the clear decision to become French citizens—and abandon the system of Muslim regulations linking them to their community—were effectively treated as second-class citizens according to the *code de l'indigénat* (Le Cour Grandmaison, 2010). Perversely, Algerians were made responsible of the oppressive colonial system: if they were not treated as French citizens, it was because they refused the universalist principles of the French republic. Despite the end of the colonial era, this cultural model is still present, and it is now performed through softer forms of institutional racism (Bouamana & Tévanian, 2013).

Despite the fact that political colonialism has ceased between Europe and colonized countries, relationships between many of these countries continues to be based on colonial domination (Manning, 2021; Quijano, 2007). In *Bread and Roses*, the overlap of social conventions (implicitly justified as a need to organize otherwise uncivilized subjects) and the coercive power built on illegality and under the table deals is emblematic of relations of power in the multicultural individualistic context of coloniality (Melamed, 2006). In the case of the relationship between France and Algeria, colonial domination is illustrated by the subordination of Arab culture to the European, which in the film takes the form of an identity struggle for Fatima and a more evident repression of images, symbols, language, and modes of lives for her daughters.

Aspects of sexuality clearly intersect with gender and racial oppression differently in different contexts. In the United States, in the context of *Bread and Roses*, colonialization is objectification (see, Paludi et al., 2019), as Mexican women migrants, like Maya and Rosa, are viewed as powerless sexual objects abused by men, including their compatriots. In the context of Arab migrants to France, colonialization takes the form of religious and cultural repression, as sexual emancipation is presented as a form of liberation from the Islamic patriarchy (Guénif-Souilamas, 2008). As shown in the film, Nesrine is caught in a paradox, wherein she has to accept a form of colonial oppression (becoming a subject of republican assimilationism) in order to attain personal sexual emancipation and ultimately feel a sense

of belonging. Strikingly, for Nesrine moving away from the precarious work performed by her mother Fatima, and becoming a highly skilled professional—a doctor—involves embracing sexual emancipation and abandoning Muslim modesty. In particular, she adopts the same type of Western sexuality as her white female roommate by starting a relationship with a white boyfriend. In so doing, she signals that positionality in the labor stratification is articulated within a colonial hierarchy of cultures within which skilled and well-paid jobs are linked to Frenchness and white privilege (Holvino, 2010). By contrast, in *Bread and Roses*, Maya is perceived as a sexual object by men of similar ethnic backgrounds as her.

Furthermore, the centrality of gender oppression in its intersections with racial and class subjugation is also reinforced by the juxtaposition between Fatima's (and Nesrine) struggles and her former husband's more positive character, relaxed attitude, and relative confidence. He has remarried and has a friendly relationship with the younger daughter, Souad. Coloniality of power determines a social hierarchy in which women of color are placed at the bottom, viewed with indifference, or as sexual objects by both women and men, including men of color (Lugones, 2010).

Fatima's and her daughters' stories, like Maya's and her sister's, are exemplary of the life of subjects whose oppression is produced by the intersection of gender, class, and race (Rodriguez et al., 2016), and of the relevance of a particular colonial context (republican assimilationism or multicultural individualism) in shaping the relationships of power in which they are implicated. The racial lines along which work hierarchies are structured, the implicit assumption that migrant can only perform unskilled tasks (and that they need strict supervision in this, to limit their 'uncivilized' tendencies to cheat and steal) encapsulate the sociopolitical dynamics of both republican assimilationism and multicultural individualism (Melamed, 2006). However, racial and gender asymmetries can rhetorically be removed by renouncing to one's 'backward' culture and beliefs and surrender to the 'superior' French culture in one context or by following entrepreneurial and individualistic dreams of success in the United States.

Strikingly, the American dream consumeristic aspirations typical of middle class (such as owning a car and a house in the suburbs) are pivotal to *Bread and Roses* characters' ambitions: paradoxically this becomes a form of subjectification (Fleming & Spicer, 2014) that reproduces a model that keeps migrant workers oppressed, offering them hard work in exchange for derisory remuneration, and practically trapping them at the bottom of society. For instance, a Russian women janitor justifies her lack of solidarity with her coworkers (to whom she feels superior on account of her race, a belief supported by the supervisor's favoritism) with her choice of pursuing her individual success. Joining their industrial struggle would mean to admit she is 'just' a blue-collar worker fighting for her rights, not a future businesswoman who is building her success on hard work (Melamed, 2006). Even the choice of Maya to use her wits to commit a crime is a perfect embodiment of the reckless 'entrepreneurial' attitude that is required to succeed in the United States; it is only by means of her act that Ruben can materialize his dream of becoming a lawyer, a dream destined to remain out of reach because his inadequate income would never have allowed him to pay the entry fee to university. Also, Maya's decision to participate in the industrial action betrays her fundamental belief in the possibility of changing structural constraints by means of individual action. Beyond this insubstantial dream, material traces of the US colonial past abound: the African-American janitors who are still carrying the stigma and structural disadvantage inherited from their slave ancestors; the different treatment reserved to a Russian (never a colonial subject of the United States, differently from Latin American). Next section analyzes the possibilities of agency represented in both films.

### 6.3 | Representations of possibilities of agency

The two films represent the nuanced experiences of individuals who are subject to intersecting oppression. As popular culture texts, they reproduce some ambivalence and also represent space for resistance and critique (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). Rather than being helpless victims, Fatima, Nesrine, and Maya are represented in their efforts to recover their agency with sacrifices and losses. Fatima speaks mostly in Arabic and dresses and behaves as a modest Muslim woman, in doing so she resists French colonial assimilationism (Guénif-Souilamas, 2008). However,

she is divorced, she takes evening French classes, and tries as much as possible to improve her mastery of the French language, recognizing that only when she speaks French fluently, she can better relate to her daughters and make them proud of their mother. Furthermore, Fatima invests her energies and accepts personal sacrifices to support her daughters' studies and independence (she helps to pay for Nesrine's apartment) enhancing their future opportunities—thereby resisting Islamic patriarchal norms, in spite of the criticisms she receives from other Arab women from her neighborhood. Fatima does not seem particularly eager to assimilate, although she makes a friendly attempt to engage with the mother of a school friend of Souad when she meets her at the supermarket—only to be coldly dismissed. She also does not object to her daughters exclusively addressing her in French and not wearing the headscarf. Even more significantly, she never opposes to her daughters having non-Muslim boyfriends. This latter decision is not uncontroversial: indeed, Fatima must endure a lot of criticism from other Arab women who, instead, insist on their daughters marrying Muslim husbands. All this could be construed as her 'giving in' to the pressures to assimilate through colonial discourses (Guénif-Souilamas, 2008); however, in line with postcolonial feminism (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019), we interpret it as a mechanism through which she regains some control over her life by choosing what to change to be closer to her daughters. Fatima is, therefore, not an agency-less subject. She chooses to bear the burden of her condition while working to unbind her daughter from patriarchal oppression, for instance, when she suggests to Nesrine to get her own apartment (rather than keeping her in the family house, as required of an unmarried Muslim woman) and later faces the racism of a landlady who refuses to rent them an apartment. We should, therefore, view Fatima not as a passive and submissive woman, but a woman of color (Holvino, 2010) whose life is more complex than what a Western feminist analysis would suggest (based on the grand narrative liberal discourse of autonomous subjects underpinned by the experience of white middle-class women), as some of her actions appear in conflict with both Islamic orthodoxy and liberal norms (see Priola & Chaudhry, 2021). The meaning and effects of Fatima's agency is paradoxically about resisting either a patriarchal or assimilationist form of oppression, while reproducing either form. However, she is never fully subjugated by any of those oppressions.

Similarly, an analysis that moves beyond the binary of 'freedom'—subordination, supports a better understanding of Maya's choices and desires (in *Bread and Roses*). Maya is represented as a victim who tries to escape a life of poverty in Mexico but is ultimately deported and fails to achieve a better life in the United States. However, Maya is not powerless as she cannily escapes the smuggler who wanted to keep her as a sex slave, she engages in the strike action, and plays a key role in its success. Maya is not submissive and does not conform to dominant cultural norms, but actually resists them. The representation of her resistance to American cultural norms can be interpreted differently, depending on the type of authority upon which the norms rely. In fact, Maya's theft, that ensure that Ruben can go to university, can be interpreted as an act of defiance, subverting the capitalist order which oppresses them (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). Her agency, however, is not simply an act of resistance to social norms but a modality of emancipatory action (albeit not her own). As Mahmood (2009, p. 35) suggests 'instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, one's practices and actions determine one's desires and emotions'. Maya's strike action and her theft are not the result of a rebellious nature incapable to adapt to social norms, her actions have ultimately determined her escape from subordination—albeit temporarily as one might envisage—and Ruben's possible 'emancipation'.

Both films also highlight the active role that sometimes 'victims' of discrimination play in reinforcing and reproducing oppressive conditions for other individuals: the women managers assuming an 'ideal' masculine identity, the spying colleagues, Souad's rebellion against those who are actually trying to support her, the Arab women (in *Fatima*), Maya's supervisor, and the smugglers (in *Bread and Roses*). In sum, the films show how the complex dynamics of intersecting oppressions cannot be reduced to a static picture of defenseless victims of oppression, but involve the generative use of multiple and limited acts of agency.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS, COLONIALITY, AND AGENCY

With the intent to analyze popular culture representations of migrants workers' intersecting oppressions in diverse colonial context, we analyzed two award winning films depicting the experiences of women migrant workers in France and the United States. We argued that these films, intended as popular culture texts, inform imaginaries about work and organizations (Komporozos-Athanasidou & Fotaki, 2015) and reflecting the context and power structures in which they were produced. The use of cinematic representations is considered a valuable form of contribution to work and organizational studies (Michaelson, 2016; Rhodes, 2001) in that, as popular culture objects, reproduce the complexities of social, work, and organizational lives as well as influence those lives. As interpretation(s) of working life (Brewis, 1998), popular culture enables to understand both hegemonic discourses and the spaces for potential agency and resistance in terms of representations (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012).

The analysis of the films historicizes representations of intersecting oppressions at work (Mohanty, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2016) by suggesting that coloniality regimes—the outcome of local colonial histories (see Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Manning, 2021; Quijano, 2007)—frame both the meaning of the oppressions represented as well as the conditions of productions of films (whose authors benefited from white, male, and class privilege). For example, the racialization of a religious marker, such as a headscarf in the French coloniality regime, is disconnected from phenotype (Guénif-Souilamas, 2008); when the racialization of black and brown women is centered on phenotype.

The analysis offers two main contributions, supporting a better understanding of representations of workers' experiences about: (i) the way intersecting oppressions are embedded in coloniality regimes that frames them in terms of meaning and (ii) the way subjects' agency relates to intersecting oppressions. First, we contribute to the intersectional studies of work and organization (e.g., Acker, 2012; Holvino, 2010; Rodríguez et al., 2016) by analyzing the intersecting oppressions represented in the films and then show how the way in which their representations operate in practice is strongly linked to different regimes of coloniality (see also, Limki, 2018; Manning, 2021; Paludi et al., 2019). These regimes frame discursively the actions that the different agents put in practice. In the French context, the challenge—offered by republican assimilationism—is to navigate a paradox of intersectionality. In order to get free from the shackles of gender inequality deriving from their society of origin, Arab women such as Fatima are required to surrender to French customs, which also implies accepting a permanent subordinate condition due to their limited skills, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and ultimately, ethnicity and race (Bancel et al., 2005; Guénif-Souilamas, 2008). In the US multicultural individualistic context (see, Melamed, 2006), the paradox manifests as an irreconcilable tension between agency and power structure. Individuals are expected to enter a competition to demonstrate their capacities, with the promise that, if they succeed, they will be given a 'spot in the sun'. Yet, since the competition occurs on a very uneven pitch, it becomes only a way to divert energies that could otherwise be used for collective resistance.

Secondly, our analysis shows that coloniality affects representations of the specific experiences of intersecting oppressions at work. Coloniality does not manifest itself in popular culture as an additional oppressive force; equally, we do not consider regimes of coloniality as a determinant of intersectional oppression, as in Limki's work (2018). Instead, the analysis showed how coloniality can be viewed as a historicized set of discursive and material forces that shapes the sensemaking processes and the repertoire of actions available to those who are subject to intersecting oppressions. This is partly linked to the fact that we analyzed Global North societies involving specific dynamics of assimilation for migrants (see also, Grosfoguel et al., 2015), whereas Limki (2018) looked at women workers in the Global South. We argue that taking a coloniality perspective in the film analysis allowed us to present a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between representations of intersections of oppressive and discriminatory forces and individual agency, in line with views of popular culture (e.g., Czarniawska et al., 2013; Pullen & Rhodes, 2012) as both a vehicle for the reproduction of hegemony and of resistance. Furthermore, by exploring coloniality, we could show how intersecting effects can vary across generations and that the awareness of this interlocking of oppression can influence ways in which individuals deal with their predicament (see also Love et al., 2018).

As highlighted by the literature (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1990; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2019), there remains a need to better explore the power reinforcing aspects of intersectionality, that is, how the agency of oppressed individuals might potentially contribute to recursively constitute the structure of oppression. These aspects become increasingly visible in our analysis of *Bread and Roses*, in particular, where some characters, such as Perez and the Russian woman, attempt to improve their own positionality by oppressing others. Both Maya and Fatima (and other characters in the films) appear to be trapped in an apparent double bind (Tracy, 2004; Watzlawick et al., 1967): if they play by the rule, they condemn themselves to failure; but if they refuse to do so, they end up reproducing oppression in other forms. Both Fatima and Maya find a similar 'solution' to navigate this paradox: sacrificing themselves to enable other individuals they care for (Nesrine and Ruben) to break the vicious circle. These sacrifices become more than an act of defiance in the face of unsurmountable odds: they constitute typical ways for women of color to manifest agency in a context characterized by intersecting oppressions (see, Holvino, 2010). Indeed, there is no guarantee that such an 'altruistic' strategy will succeed: a stark reminder of this is Rosa's predicament, who finds herself trapped in a vicious circle of oppression despite the enormous costs she accepted to pay to support her family in America.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We confirm there is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> While the term postcolonial is widely used, some scholars (e.g., Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007) prefer to continue to use the terms colonial or decolonial to indicate the enduring repression of 'other' cultures by colonial power. When we engage with this literature, we use the term colonial and coloniality.
- <sup>2</sup> Race and ethnicity are both social constructions that reproduce power relations and create social hierarchy in the capitalist system. The idea of race originated in the 18th century and was driven by the triangular trade and the accumulation of wealth. It is commonly associated to physical characteristics such as skin color, hair type, and others. Ethnicity is a more recent concept and is commonly linked to identification and cultural expressions such as language and religion.
- <sup>3</sup> For a colonial history take, see Stoler (2010); for an analysis of gender and colonialism in relation to CSR, see Ozkazanc-Pan (2019).

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