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A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EMOTIONS: THE LOVE AND LABOUR OF FILIPINA MIGRANT CARE WORKERS IN CANADA

Dani Magsumbol

My mom came to Canada as a labour migrant through Canada's Live-In Caregiver Program (1992–2013). When she was finally able to send for my brother and I in 2009, we were met with a whole new family: my mom's friends, who became and are my titas. For children of the labour diaspora like myself, the importance of collective care cannot be overstated. The generational trauma of labour migration that we experienced—a trauma imposed on families in the global south to fulfil the care needs of the global north—was met with generational care. I consider my titas to be part of my family, and they consider me part of theirs. Home is each other, and membership in families includes the relationality of giving and accessing. Family and familial love is what started this migration and academic journey, and it is family and familial love that my doctoral research turns back towards.

For my master's degree in urban planning, I examined the differential nature of privacy that exists in the intimate spaces of homes that employ care workers from the global south, a privacy that protects families of employment but allows for the exploitation of live-in care and domestic workers. The privileging of the home as a "private" space is selective only to the homeowner, and not to the temporary migrant worker residing in the same space.¹ Even as the relationship between the employee and employer, and to some extent Canada and the migrant worker, is informed by the materialities of locks and doors, they are also necessarily "underpinned by relations of power."² Space, therefore, is both an artifact of spatial arrangement, and "itself a social construct."³ As experienced through the Live-in Caregiver Program, the home becomes "the site where the body is border, where one nationality polices another in overlapping home/work spaces."⁴

1. Dani Magsumbol, *A Peculiar Infrastructure: Privacy in Homes Employing Live-in Care and Domestic Workers* (Society and Space: Investigating Infrastructures forum, 2018).

2. Gemma Burgess, *Planning and the Gender Equality Duty – Why Does Gender Matter?* (People, Place & Policy Online, 2009), 113.

3. John R. Parkinson, *How is space public? Implications for spatial policy and democracy.* (Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 2012), 683.

4. Alison Mountz and Jennifer Hyndman, *Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate.* (Women's Studies Quarterly 34, 1 & 2), 455.

I interviewed my mom and my titas, and asked them how they experienced safety and unsafety in the homes that they were employed in, at three different scales: the scale of the body, the city, and the nation. Throughout the conversations that we had, the language that they used incorporated family and familial love, not only when they spoke about their own kin, but also when they spoke about their interactions with the families they were taking care of. One of the main questions that I encountered then, and that I continue to ask now, is this: what does it mean when employers say that a live-in care and domestic worker is “part of the family”? I frame my analysis of this question using the case study of Filipino labour migrants in Canada, specifically those who, like my mom and titas, came to Canada through the Live-in Caregiver Program, which ran from 1992–2013.

There are two parts to this presentation paper: first, I expand upon my theory of the “migrant as part of the family” model of care, and second, I examine the affective memberships of labour migrants and their families, broadly understood.

“Migrant as Part of the Family” Model of Care

I follow Bettio et al.⁵ in their evaluation of the models-of-care work provision for the elderly in the Mediterranean: that there has been a “transition from a ‘family’ model of care to a ‘migrant in the family’ model of care”⁶. I extend their analysis to care work in Canada, and I propose that there is a transition into a third model of care provision: the “migrant as part of the family” model of care.

I broadly define the “migrant as part of the family” model of care to be the amalgamation of the wage relationship between the families of employment and the migrant care worker, and the affective expectations and exchanges that flow between and among members of a family. This is influenced by the spatial intimacies that are propagated in live-in care work. The process of familial inclusion whereby migrant workers are named “part of the family” is an act that is often presented and received as positive, both by the employers as well as by some of the migrant workers themselves. Some of my research participants said that they preferred to be treated like family members, and when I asked what that meant for them as live-in care workers, the answers were emotional and complicated. The examples that they gave ranged from eating with their employers at the same time and at the same table, to being allowed to take vacations when they requested time off. One of the participants expressed the consequences of family treatment in the simplest manner, and one that is perhaps most revelatory of what

5. Francesca Bettio, Annamaria Simonazzi, and Paola Villa. *Change in care regimes and female migration: the ‘care drain’ in the Mediterranean* (Journal of European Social Policy, 2006).

6. Bettio, Simonazzi, and Villa, “Change in care regimes,” 272.

happens within the “migrant as part of the family” model of care: for her, being treated like family meant that she was happy with them, and so she didn’t mind her work hours being extended, even without pay.

I do not discount the fact that in some cases, the affection between a family of employment and a migrant worker is very real and can continue until after the terms of employment. But the incorporation of an employee as a member of the family often creates conditions that subsume labour that is paid for by a wage into labour that is expected as part of the social, affective relationship between and among family members, transforming the nature of familial affection in family units into one that incorporates affective expectations into the paid-for labour of domestic and care work. The literature that documents worker exploitation and precarity within the Live-in Caregiver Program is well-documented,^{7 8 9} and I encountered examples of this as well in my own research and discussions with the participants.

Membership in the family unit as “part of the family” is one that can be capricious, where belonging is conditional and can be given or withheld based on how the employer perceives the affective relationship between themselves and the worker. This conditionality is at odds with the expectations that constitute a wage relationship, which have nothing to do with love or affection, and the expectations of love and affection in a familial relationship, which are not expected to be paid for with a wage. The “migrant as part of the family” model of care is one that serves to create an affective relationship, expectations of love and affection as a one-way stream from the migrant to the employer, with no assured reciprocity of the same from the employers to the migrant worker.

The Affective Memberships of Labour Migrants: A Political Economy of Emotions

Academic literature often speaks of labour migrants from the perspectives of their states of employment, a perspective which paints a picture of incomplete personhood wherein migrants are portrayed as unable to socially integrate or politically engage with the new state of employment due to their lack of citizenship status as temporary migrant workers. This portrayal is inaccurate: migrants are participative, political beings who seek out and form communities,

7. Bernadette Stiehl and Kim England, *Domestic Distinctions: constructing difference among paid domestic workers in Toronto* (Gender, Place, and Culture 4:3, 1997).

8. Geraldine Pratt with the Philippine Women Centre and the Filipino-Canadian Youth Alliance, *Separation and Reunification among Filipino Families in Vancouver*, (Montreal: Canadian Issues, 2006).

9. Ethel Tungohan, Rupa Banerjee, Wayne Chu, Petronila Cleto, Conely de Leon, Mila Garcia, Philip Kelly, Marco Luciano, Cynthia Palmaria, Christopher Sorio, *After the Live-in Caregiver Program: Filipina Caregivers' Experiences of Graduated and Uneven Citizenship*, (Canadian Ethnic Studies 47:1, 2015).

who take care of each other and each other's kin, who can be and are politically engaged¹⁰¹¹.

Live-in migrant care workers do not cross oceans and time zones as citizens-in-waiting for their states of employment. Their lives and loves extend beyond the physical boundaries of the homes where they are employed, oftentimes extending beyond the geographic borders of the states of employment and beyond the temporal boundaries of time zones. Their decisions to leave are not merely economic rationalities, but are often bound up in familial responsibilities, and feelings of love as well as hope. The labour migration cycle of the Filipino citizen is characterized by the imperatives of departure and return, and in these cycles we see the material impacts of the political economy of emotions: the country saw 9.7% of its national GDP in 2020 as personal remittances according to the World Bank¹². I broadly define the political economy of emotions to be the powerful emotional cues of responsibility, guilt, love, and affection that power the Philippine labour brokerage system, and deployed by the nation-state to ensure the imperatives to leave and to return. The political economy of emotions that propels Filipino citizens across the world as labour migrants does not propel individuals without ties. It propels members of families and members of communities, people who have and maintain kin relationships, people who themselves create families and communities of their own, then they land and acclimate.

To tell the story of care work and labour migration only from the perspective of the state of employment is to present a fragmented narrative, is to understand the labour migrant as a solitary individual. Instead, approaching it from a framework that is embedded in collective care and making room for a labour migrant that exists simultaneously in both the extractive and sending states is to remember the wholeness of a person: a fully social and political being, with all of the complexities that this entails. An analysis of labour migration should not preclude love from the labour—it should be love and labour. In contrast to research focused only on how the access to care enjoyed by labour extractive states as dependent on the market deprioritisation of the care needs of families in the global south, the collectivity of care as a methodology reminds us that care is indeed multidirectional.

10. Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* (University of Illinois Press, 2018).

11. Ethel Tungohan, *Temporary foreign workers in Canada: Reconstructing 'belonging', remaking 'citizenship'*, (Social and Legal Studies 28:2, 2018).

12. World Bank. Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) – Philippines. World Development Indicators, The World Bank Group. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=PH>.