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## The embodied crises of neoliberal globalization: The lives and narratives of Filipina migrant domestic workers

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## SYNOPSIS

This paper theorizes the lives and working conditions of Filipina migrant domestic workers in Taiwan. To do so, I focus on the life stories of two migrant women—their struggles with exploitation and care, and their contradictory relationships with home and nation in transnational labor migration. These narratives detail crises of bodily sickness, racialized surveillance, and gendered violence across individual, social, and transnational scales, demonstrating the architecture of neoliberal globalization as a whole. These “embodied crises”—at once personal troubles and structural disasters—show how an overburdened care enforced through the labor of women of color violently affects their very own bodies, with ever-lasting consequences. Thus, using feminist analytic approaches of “critical bifocality” and “countertopography”, I argue that these narratives are not *individual* tragedies, but rather circulate across places, bodies, and time, crafting a structural critique of neoliberal globalization that demands fundamental social transformation.

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Over 213 million migrants have been estimated to cross national borders annually, with a significant flow from the Global South to Northern capitalist advanced regions ([United Nations Population Division, 2012](#)). Within this cross-border movement, it has been estimated that there are around 53 million domestic workers worldwide, of which 83% are women since 2012. The stratified relations of care absorbed by the bodies of economically marginalized women are a result of the neoliberal dispossession of people's public goods and means of subsistence by state policies and multinational corporations. [David Harvey \(2003\)](#) has termed the process in which public assets and services are converted into privately owned goods “accumulation by dispossession”. Social reproduction, as in the human need for welfare and the practices of caring, becomes a site of profits as neoliberal capitalism extends its territory by privatizing the sphere of care as private personal responsibility. Particularly, migrant domestic workers fulfill the social reproductive needs of families in capitalist advanced countries when the nation-state withdraws from public care.

Feminist scholars such as [Glenn \(2000\)](#), [Parreñas \(2000\)](#), [Hochschild \(2000\)](#), and [Katz \(2001b\)](#) have intervened in this

discourse of “crisis in care” that only emphasizes the need for care of working families in Global North and neglects the crisis in care of migrant care workers themselves. While the migration literature has predominantly theorized this transnational movement through the unit of an aggregated migrant body, adopting a critical psychological lens of “bifocality”, introduced by [Lois Weis and Michelle Fine \(2012\)](#), can contribute to the literature through situating the lived experiences of migrant women in the political-economic landscape of dispossession in care, highlighting the crises migrant women face and feel intimately as being inflected by structural crises of care. Within this approach, not only are the obstacles they encounter individualized tragedies, but they also represent the problematic architecture of global capitalism as a whole.

This paper is an attempt to theorize and empirically document the complexity of individuals moving across space and time in the context of neoliberal globalization, where women from the Global South are recruited to perform the reproductive labor of the Global North as low-wage workers. In this transnational movement, the collateral damage is deeply

classed, gendered, and racialized, enabled by the sharp power asymmetries between nations and driven by capital's interest to accumulate more and more on an ever-widening scale, with increasingly severe social and individual consequences. Following the traditions of Kurt Lewin (1943), who has called for a topographical analysis of lives across space and time, the project places the narratives of these migrant women workers in the holistic landscape of capitalist globalization to excavate the roots of their obstacles and dilemmas as well as the embodied evidence of this global crisis. This approach echoes Marie Jahoda's (1982) interrogation of how the working-class body carries structural oppression and history, simultaneously being influenced by a situational force and becoming a force that acts upon it. Finally, the study attempts to recenter the narratives of working-class women who are migrants providing care in Taiwan while compromising their own and their families' needs in the Philippines.

For the migrant women workers who transgress national boundaries and the divisions of public and private through transnational care work, the scales of the global and the intimate constantly intersect and blur (Pratt & Rosner, 2006). The impacts of neoliberal dispossession thus function on multiple scales in the circuits of the labor migration landscape. While the sites of nation-state and home traditionally provided subsistence and a safety net for their constituents who were exploited and alienated under class inequalities, now migrant workers become dispossessed by these institutions, providing care at the cost of their own needs as well as their participation in the public as full citizens (Parreñas, 2001a).

On the other hand, constructed under the capitalist mode of production as the "private" sphere, the site of "home" is often articulated as a place of belonging and of psychological stability and security. However, for migrant women who have left home to work abroad, the material burden of reproductive labor located in the patriarchal household in the home country is not discontinued—instead, it is intensified through their transnational care work (Parreñas, 2008). As a form of deeply affective labor (Boris & Parreñas, 2010; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004; Pratt, 2012), domestic work often requires workers to act and care for their clients as "part of the family". Nicole Constable (1997) and Pei-Chia Lan (2006) noted that in the Chinese cultural context, the family analogy indicates not only respect but also responsibility for duties associated with traditional Chinese household. This analogy therefore becomes a coercive tool to frame all duties—physical tasks and the construction of emotional relationships—as "nonwork" and thus unlimited. In the two narratives of Filipina migrant domestic workers I will discuss in the paper, Elsa exchanged her own physical health and Jocelyn suffered from severe sleep deprivation to care for their clients' wellbeing. Their seeming inclusion in the domestic workplace therefore serves to disguise or justify migrant domestic workers' exploitative working conditions. In the landscape of globalization, home is not a place of belonging but rather of comfort and exploitative labor—a dialectic that is concealed at this intimate scale.

### Methodology and context

This study of migrant women workers' lives is part of an ethnographic research project on Southeast Asian labor migration located at the migrant labor NGO, Taiwan

International Workers Association (TIWA).<sup>1</sup> TIWA aims to advance migrant laborers' rights through legal advocacy and workplace organizing but also provide legal services and a grant-funded shelter for migrant workers.<sup>2</sup> I used a multi-method qualitative research approach, which incorporated ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured individual interviews, and archival research, allowing me to document a wide range of data regarding the structural conditions of labor migration, public discourses about migrant workers, and the vibrant and intimate lives of the workers. I conducted a total of seven in-depth life story interviews with migrant workers, including five Filipina and two Filipino migrant workers.<sup>3</sup>

To invoke narratives beyond the immediate circumstances in which the workers were located, I asked them questions regarding their motivation to find jobs abroad, family background, working conditions in both the Philippines and Taiwan, communication methods with family, networks in Taiwan, and future plans. Through examining life deeply in multiple contexts, these narratives traversed the themes of structural constraints of globalized poverty, national policies, paradoxical feelings about families in the home country and employers in the workplace, and a sense of belonging in the NGO shelter alongside an urgency to move on. As I bore witness to their struggles and dreams, I was politically and ethically compelled to highlight my informants' lives within their repeatedly articulated moving circuits of constraints and possibilities, care and exploitation, which occurred at multiple scales.

This paper focuses on two in-depth life stories of Filipina domestic workers, to address the themes surrounding the dilemmas of the nation-state and home that emerged in all seven interviews. These two particular stories are emphasized because they represent the most extreme consequences of neoliberal dispossession among the migrant workers I interviewed, and they cover the widest extent of the scale that spans from the body to the nation-state. Their narratives illustrate the moments of rupture in which the combination of crises accumulated in the circuit of dispossessed needs was no longer resolvable through individual means, where the individuals' survival instead demanded structural transformation.

The migrant narratives are certainly gendered, not only regarding the nature of work but the concept of family. Among the female migrant workers I interviewed, all of them addressed their continual reproductive labor that extended from their domestic workplace to their families back in the Philippines, not only as a financial burden but indeed by psychologically sustaining their own survival under the adverse and isolating conditions in Taiwan. The two male workers I talked to ascribe labor migration to their extending of their personal life exploration and achievements. While they also support their families in the Philippines with their salaries, their narratives show little conflict between personal wellbeing and care for family members. The narrative of exploitation is inarguably a gendered one, but so is the strength that grows from a sense of interconnectedness between self and family, as the women's narratives do—circulating across places, bodies, and time, crafting a kind of transnational structural critique through their affective and physical embodiment of reproductive labor.

Due to the factor that the interviews were conducted at the NGO's shelter, the narratives portrayed some of the most drastic examples of labor exploitation, but also the ones from

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