

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## *Book Review Symposium*

**Geraldine Pratt**, *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-8166-6999-8 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-6998-1 (cloth)

### **Sowing seeds**

Imagine sitting at a child's eye level watching a figure disappearing into a lush green tropical landscape. It's your mother setting off for distant shores, hunched over her suitcases. It's raining endlessly. You wait, and wait, and wait. This is just one of the lasting images from Geraldine's painstaking research into the lived realities of transnational labour migration as experienced by Filipino workers in Canada and the families they leave behind in the Philippines. *Families Apart* explores the dynamics and impact of one specific initiative - a temporary work visa programme called the Canadian Live-in Caregiver Programme. It enables Filipino women to work as short-term domestic workers caring for children and the elderly in homes across Canada, and to apply to bring their families to join them as immigrants after a period of time. This often works out as five/six years of separation. Geraldine focuses specifically on the difficulties Filipino mothers and children face in maintaining intimate relationships during their time apart, the sense of loss this entails, and the social and economic exclusion they experience in Canada. More broadly the book is about injustice in the global care labour market and the undervaluing of care work carried out by migrant workers. Although Geraldine draws on geographical scholarship, the book is accessible to researchers across the social sciences, and readers interested in collaborative activist scholarship and the dissemination of academic research through story-telling, art, film, and theatrical performance.

Geraldine builds on her long-term collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia and pieces together interviews with 27 families, perspectives from employers,

school workers and policy-makers, and ‘a patchwork of official statistics’. She shows how the women, many of whom have degrees, struggle to accumulate not only financial but also human capital. They are de-skilled through low wages and low status. This pushes some of them into taking on extra jobs and working long hours in order to be able to save and remit, rather than investing their time and money on re-training, building up their professional standing, and increasing their earning power. When their children finally arrive in Canada, often as teenagers still learning English, many also experience downwards educational mobility, and find themselves in low waged work supporting family members in both Canada and the Philippines. De-skilling is not new in the literature on globalisation, labour migration, and remittances, but the power of the book lies in the ways Geraldine interweaves analysis of de-skilling with testimony of family separation. Instead of focusing on the educational and labour market outcomes of guest-worker migration, and running the risk of turning the Filipino families into ‘the problem’, she carefully guides readers into reflecting on the families’ suffering.

The findings and analysis in the book and linked theatrical and artistic projects stir intense debate about transnational labour migration. They also achieve Geraldine’s aim of ‘destabilising complacency’ about Canada’s Live-in Caregiver Programme. Compelling arguments have been made about the trade-offs and win-win benefits of the scheme. In a nutshell, Canada gains labour and the Philippines gains finance. However, caregivers are not just commodities or sources of finance. Geraldine makes an equally compelling argument about the need to give them a voice and weigh up the human costs of family separation. There are no easy answers, as shown by the different perspectives within the Filipino community in Canada. One group calls for an end to the Live-in Caregiver Programme, while another takes a less critical stance on the basis that the scheme gives some families an opportunity to escape grinding poverty and political violence in the Philippines. Geraldine re-frames the debate by taking it beyond the ‘migrant as rational economic actor’ scenario and asking whose children Filipino caregivers would care for, given the choice. She turns the spotlight on the ways in which different groups of parents have different rights and capacities to care for their children on a daily basis. It makes for uncomfortable reading.

As a first-year PhD student with a background in the communications sector, the book speaks to me in one particular way. I was trained to use the ‘news triangle’ - sum up the story in one line and put it at the top of the page in case there is only space for a NIB (‘News In Brief’).

In contrast, this book illustrates the beauty of a well-constructed argument. The key point - the need to 'foster opportunities for skilled Filipinos to migrate to Canada through more appropriate permanent family migration policies' - comes at the very end.

The book has also prompted me to re-think my research into transnational Polish migration, and to explore the discourses around mothers who leave their children in Poland while they work in the UK. I'm hoping that multi-sited ethnography in the UK and Poland will help me 'draw out whole stories'. Geraldine is honest about the difficulties she faced doing this. She waited in vain for full and vivid descriptions of family separation and reunification from the young people she interviewed. She gradually came to recognise that 'words cannot easily fill these spaces of absence and loss' - a poignant insight. I wondered if further insights would emerge if she followed the 'global care chain' and travelled back to the Philippines with some of her interviewees. Admittedly it would be a huge challenge, not least because many Filipino workers earn low wages and return infrequently. However, visits to some of the family members left behind could shed light on the social texture of the migration and remittance process in the Philippines, and add to the research in Canada.

Lastly, I wondered what Geraldine pictures in her mind's eye when she envisages her readers outside Canada who are not really in a position to lobby Canadian politicians about improvements to the Live-in Caregiver Programme. With my community activist rather than my academic hat on I'm seeking a clear message. I've done two things. I've talked to a Filipino nanny I've been exchanging pleasantries with at the school gate for six years. She said she is fine because she is childless, but her friends with children back home weep buckets of tears. I've looked up migration rules for nannies in the UK. It came as no great surprise to discover they are becoming more restrictive. If Geraldine put the boot on the other foot and asked me to come up with the message for her I would say 'it's complicated'. Perhaps the final message is that all she - we - can do is sow the seeds of socially useful knowledge that might inspire positive political action in the future. The seeds might fall on barren earth, but at least we have tried.

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*April 2013*