



## The discourse of powerlessness and repression: life stories of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong

Sabrina Marchetti

To cite this article: Sabrina Marchetti (2018) The discourse of powerlessness and repression: life stories of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 39:8, 754-755, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2018.1429209](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2018.1429209)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2018.1429209>



Published online: 19 Jan 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




Article views: 27



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Dewaele's observation provides an appropriate conclusion here: 'the present book has the potential to light up a storm of new research on swearing across disciplines, combining a variety of epistemological approaches, methodologies and target groups' (262).

Timothy B. Jay  
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, North Adams, MA, USA

 t.jay@mcla.edu

© 2018 Timothy B. Jay  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2018.1429208>



**The discourse of powerlessness and repression: life stories of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong**, Hans Ladegaard, Routledge, Oxford and New York, 2017, pp. xi +229, £110/\$160 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-138-64047-4

This book is the result of research undertaken in a Hong Kong shelter for migrant domestic workers, where they wait to be repatriated after having quit their jobs and, in some cases, denounced their employers for mistreatment. Volunteering in the shelter since 2008, Ladegaard went on to conduct more than 60 therapeutic sharing sessions for small groups of women, in which they could share their stories and emotions. From more than 90 hours of recordings, 60 excerpts were selected for this book. The analysis is organised into Chapters 3–9, with the second chapter providing the theory and methodology underpinning the work.

The book contributes to the debate on the violation of rights of migrant domestic workers – from a sociolinguistic perspective, and by focusing on what Ladegaard calls 'trauma narratives'. Such accounts are characterised by the fact that speakers are often unable to tell exactly what has happened to them, with a consequent gap between the actual experience and its description. Moreover, the flow of the story is often interrupted by crying or laughter.

A linguistic approach to 'trauma narratives' is particularly apt for the analysis of personal accounts of suffering, fear and repression. First of all, it helps us to realise how oppression can be articulated in interpersonal relationships, especially in abusive relationships with women employers – often seen as the main reasons for leaving the job. Ladegaard emphasises the importance of understanding the roots of the violent and dehumanising behaviour of middle-class women employers from a psychoanalytic point of view. He argues that this behaviour is a reaction to a loss of status within their households, for which they seek to compensate by humiliating another person. The privacy of the home permits abusive practices that could not occur in public.

Secondly, such an analytic approach is also useful for exploring the question of intercultural discourse and the special role of 'linguistic and communicative inequalities' in the abusive relationships described here. Foreign domestic workers, mainly Indonesians and Filipinas, tell how employers seized upon their poor Chinese ability in order to demean them. Likewise, miscommunication and prejudice between cultures contribute to mistreatment rooted in the demonisation, stigmatisation and 'othering' of the domestic workers. In these respects, this book is a useful contribution.

However, its contribution is weaker in relation to the structural analysis of the exploitation which takes place in this labour sector – in Hong Kong, as in other parts of the world. The author starts by writing that 'this book is about a group of people who have become victims of globalisation' (1), thus echoing Rhacel Parreñas' view of Filipina domestic workers in her 2001 book, *Servants of Globalization*. Yet, while Parreñas and most of the other recent writers on migration, gender and labour have pointed to migrant domestic workers as the quintessential figures in a global care market that seeks flexible, ethnicised and gendered skills, Ladegaard goes in the opposite direction. He notes that these


women 'do not possess the resources and qualifications that are sought in the global economy' (1). In other words, he does not seem to take adequately into account how factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, citizenship and language on interact in the realities of the transnational division of reproductive labour. In fact, rather than being 'without skills' and thus 'excluded from globalisation', Indonesian and Filipino women in Hong Kong can be seen to embody the working profile that best suits the marketisation of care, making them more employable than others. Their vulnerability to abuse and mistreatment is part of this process, not outside it.

This difficulty in grasping the intersectionality of social divisions in shaping the experience of migrant domestic workers is reflected in the pages where Ladegaard discusses questions of poverty and choice. His approach is to propose poverty and race-based discrimination as opposite explanations for mistreatment. Of the two, he chooses poverty as the 'main cause', since it is the one that workers tell him is most referred by their abusive employers. The argument is rather problematic, however. First, it neglects the intersectionality of class-based differences with other sources of inequality, by not recognising that economic poverty never comes alone, but is always intermingled in some way with other factors, racial discrimination among them. Thus, the supposed opposition between race and class is an inaccurate starting point. Secondly, the argument relies on the incorrect assumption that women's narratives are representative descriptions of the reality in which their experiences take place. Indeed, the frequency with which the question of poverty emerges in their narratives tells us a lot about its role as a means of describing feelings of powerlessness and lack of choice. Here again, however, it would be important to consider factors other than those mentioned by the women themselves. The difficulty they encounter vis-à-vis rights to stay and work in Hong Kong is perhaps paramount here, with the interruption of employment contracts being cause for forced repatriation. Such other factors are neglected in Ladegaard's interpretation of the phenomenon in more structural terms.

I have also found that the discussion of migrant women's agency – as being simply between choice and necessity – does not take fully into account the complex and multilayered views that have emerged from feminist scholarship. This leads me to add that a lack of reflection on gender and ethnicity issues is probably a characteristic of the entire volume. This is especially worth mentioning in connection with Ladegaard's concluding remarks about the difficulty in reconciling activism and research, where I find that he fails to effectively discuss his own positionality as a white man in the relationships that he established with the interviewees.

Sabrina Marchetti

*Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy*

✉ [sabrina.marchetti@unive.it](mailto:sabrina.marchetti@unive.it)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5765-9522>

© 2018 Sabrina Marchetti

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2018.1429209>



**Canadian English: a sociolinguistic perspective**, by James A. Walker, Oxford, Routledge, 2015, xiv + 147 pp., £80.00/\$154.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-415-53536-6, £29.00/\$48.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-53537-3

The English spoken in Canada is quite similar to what can be heard south of the border, so similar in fact that it is not always easy to spot the Canadian variety, despite some telling characteristics (including lexical choices and the pronunciation of certain vowels). However, the homogeneity myth – that there is no real difference between Canadian and American English, and not much variability within Canada – is proven wrong in this book. Walker provides many details on typically