

Reviewed by

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***Families Apart: Migrant mothers and the conflict of labor and love* Geraldine Pratt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.**

By taking the case of Filipino women, Geraldine Pratt bravely addresses some of the most troublesome issues in the globalization of care: the separation of families due to the departure of migrant mothers, and the difficulties in their later reunification in the destination country. In so doing, she contrasts spreading discourses that portray Filipino migrant mothers as heroic “entrepreneurs” and reunified migrant youngsters as “failed.” Such problematic representations are promoted by the Filipino government, in the former case, and by countries of destination, in the latter.

The specific context for this book is the Canadian legislation about a temporary labor scheme called the “Live-in Care Program” (LCP), which permits permanent residency for foreign workers only after two years of continuous live-in employment in Canadian households. These requirements heavily prolong the time needed by migrant domestic workers to reunify with their family members. When their children finally rejoin them, these mothers have been separated from them for an average of eight years. The book also powerfully describes how settling in Canada is generally the reason Filipino teenagers experience profound distress. First of all, they have to leave their dear ones in the Philippines in order to reunify with a, by then, stranger mother. Moreover, their life in Canada is usually very hard: their financial means are reduced in comparison to what they had in the Philippines (thanks to their mothers’ remittances); their working mothers leave them alone for most of the day; and the new language and culture challenge their integration both into school and into society in general.

The author is keen to explain how this publication is the result of many years of collaboration with several Filipino Canadian individuals and organizations that participated in the gathering and in the interpretation of the interview material, or who are the protagonists of some of the events that she analyses. These groups include the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia, the Filipino Canadian Youth Alliance, the Philippines-Canada Task Force on Human Rights and several theater artists based in Vancouver.

This plurality of “voices” is reflected in the variety of sources and materials that one will encounter in reading this book, making it a fascinating example of intermediality. Through the chapters, Pratt goes from testimonials based on in-depth interviews with Filipino domestic workers and their children—provocatively intertwined with photos of her own son; to the art exhibition *Maleta* and the film *When the Rain Stopped* (in Chapter Three); to the performance of the theater play *Nanay* and the subsequent debate with its audience (in Chapter Four).

It is against this background that this book brings an important contribution to current debates on several levels. First of all, it makes a clear intervention into academic and policy discussions on temporary labor schemes. Pratt argues against a win-win-win view on temporary labor migration by destabilizing the notion of temporariness, i.e. by showing how these schemes have a substantially long-term impact on the workers as they often radically reshape their entire family life. From this standpoint, she wonders how to “evaluate” different national migration schemes: Are these really fair opportunities for migrant workers? How should the life and work conditions that they are offered be judged? By comparing them with similar schemes in other countries, or with universal standards of human rights, or with migrants’ conditions before their departure? For Pratt, we find ourselves in a situation that Nancy Fraser defines as “abnormal justice,” and it is therefore possible to answer these questions only by acknowledging that domestic workers and their families have a moral standing and should thus participate equally in debates about temporary migration programs.

Secondly, an important contribution offered by this book has to do with an original refashioning of the question of separation of migrant families from the interrelated perspectives of ethics, governance and citizenship. In order to do so, the first step is the redefinition of the notion of “distance” in common thought concerning transnational motherhood. This relates to Pratt’s criticism of the generally shared assumptions (amongst Canadians) that long distance mothering is more “natural” for Filipinas than for others and that the life conditions of women during LCP are better than those they had in Philippines before their departure. The author thus describes the experiences of children left by Filipino women working in Canada, integrated with information on the political situation in the Philippines. Chapter Four, in particular, illustrates the persecution of civilians in the country, especially in Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog, as an effect of the ongoing armed struggle between the Filipino government and the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People’s Army. Through these examples, and by remodeling Sara Ahmed’s view of history in a more human-geography kind of approach, Pratt is pushing readers to reformulate their relationships with remote locations in the global South (as the towns where Filipino women workers come from) and acknowledge that these are *never simply* distant from the space that they themselves inhabit.

The awareness of the events taking place in the countries of origin of workers enrolled in the LCP scheme is a fundamental ingredient of Pratt's view on global interdependency. Canadians, for Pratt, need to ask themselves what is their individual and their state relationship to the structural conditions that force emigration from the Philippines. This puts Canadians in a "relation of justice" with people in the Philippines and questions the benefits that they "enjoy because so many Filipinas come to Canada to care for our children and seniors" (133). In the Filipino Canadian activist scene, interdependency means that campaigns for migrant workers in Canada—as the one against LCP—should parallel the fight for popular democracy in the Philippines. It is of the foremost importance to recall that it was indeed the regime of Marcos that, in 1974, inaugurated the Labor Export Policy, which is the primary root of contemporary forms of overseas labor contracting for Filipinos.

Finally, I conclude by pointing at a third dimension which powerfully emerges from this book and which is the one of citizenship. The fact that workers registered in LCP are not-yet-Canadians poses ethical challenges regarding their membership position in relation to the many people they relate to every day, especially in the workplace. A double-sphere notion of citizenship falls back on Filipinas in Canada, as they have duties and responsibilities as part of the Canadian "community," but they are not entitled to full citizenship when considering Canada as a "nation." This prepares the ground for Pratt to say that "Canadians consent to the violence of importing women to care for their families not only because it is in their immediate interests to do so but also because of their inability to see noncitizens as fully deserving of the intimacies they take for granted as integral to family life" (xxiii–xxiv). The distinction between full and "partial citizenship" (in Rhacel Parreñas' words) is pivotal in the relationship between Canadian employers and the Filipinas working for them, by creating a "difference" between the rights and life conditions that are conceived as appropriate to the one or the other.

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