

Review of 'Caring for Strangers', by Megha Amrith (ed.2017)

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Abstract

Caring for Strangers (2017) takes the reader on an interesting journey to the everyday lives of Filipino migrant nurse workers based in Singapore. It does so by focusing on the narratives and the frequent encounters that anthropologist Megha Amrith had during her fieldwork in Singapore. The result is a rich compilation of the social, political, and economic factors that lead many men and women in the Philippines to undertake nursing education, with the purpose of migrating to work abroad. This review focuses on three aspects of the book that the present author found to be of great importance in the contemporary anthropology of economy and labour: the political economy of global capital, the marketization of care work, and the ways in which these migrant workers build their subjectivities.

Keywords: political economy, global capital, capitalism, care work, subjectivities.

Resumen. *Reseña de 'Cuidando a Desconocidos', Megha Amrith (ed.2017)*

Caring for Strangers (2017) ofrece un interesante viaje a las vidas cotidianas de los emigrantes Filipinos que trabajan como enfermeros en Singapur. Este libro lo logra enfocándose en las narrativas y los encuentros frecuentes que su autora, la antropóloga Megha Amrith, mantuvo durante su trabajo de campo en Singapur. El resultado es una rica descripción de los factores sociales, políticos y económicos que llevan a un gran número de hombres y mujeres en Filipinas a cursar estudios de enfermería para poder trabajar después en el extranjero. Esta reseña se centra en tres aspectos recurrentes del libro que la autora considera significativos para la antropología del trabajo y del capitalismo: la política económica del capital globalizado, la mercantilización del trabajo de los cuidados y las formas en las que se construyen las subjetividades de los trabajadores emigrantes.

Palabras clave: economía política, capital globalizado, capitalismo, trabajo de los cuidados, subjetividades.

Introduction

Megha Amrith's ethnographic research followed the lives of Filipino migrant workers doing care work in Singapore and the precariousness they encountered along the

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way. Her research took place in Singapore between 2008 and 2009 and it included two additional months in the Philippines. She did participant observation in two institutions: a government hospital and a Buddhist nursing home. Her book roots itself, in a very anthropological manner, in the participant observation she undertook, providing excerpts and anecdotes from her fieldwork. As she states, she met with nurses at fast-food restaurants, food courts, outdoor parks, malls across Singapore and in nurses' apartments in public housing, as well as making extensive use of the internet to communicate with informants. By immersing herself in the busy lives of these workers, she became aware of the irregularity of their schedules and the different amount of work they do per week: a fact which complicated her own entrance into the field. Despite such difficulties, the book successfully explores all the elements that make migrant working a way of life; both in terms of subjectivity and socio-economic structures.

If I were to point out the most striking finding of the book, I would suggest it is the *quiet* character of the transience experienced by nurses in their highly mobile lives. Silence, and keeping quiet as a result of alienation; shame for the ways in which their work is valued, and pressure to keep up with family expectations. The individualized lives of these nurses are revealed as middle-class imaginaries accompanied by digitalized social realities in a transnational field, in contrast to the noisy, more collective social realities of domestic workers.

Inequality and Global Labour Chains: The Political Economy of Care

Amrith shows us how the contemporary labour situation in emergent economies of the Global South reveals key processes of inclusion and exclusion that have accompanied neoliberal deregulation since the 70s. Certainly, one of the most striking features of capitalism's development in recent decades has been the uneven distribution of wealth that has accompanied it, and the increasing precariousness of workers.

Perhaps the most striking observable feature of such growing disparities has been how market liberalization and global governance have reallocated, reorganized, and

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informalized labour markets. This is precisely the underlying theme in *Caring for Strangers*, where the author shows how unequal capitalist development accelerated labour migration in Southeast Asia, specifically in the Philippines, in the context of high rates of unemployment and debt after the 70s. In the alliance between capital and the state (Harvey, 2005; Pikkety, 2014), governments of the Southern periphery became active agents of privatization, migration policies and social programmes that responded to the demands of structural adjustment loans. Economic growth under neoliberalism went hand in hand, as Amrith describes, with deep changes in labour regimes that resulted in increased vulnerability for workers.

In the case of the Philippine nurses who enter recruitment agencies, Amrith tells us, and migrate to improve their life in foreign countries, these workers' integration into global capitalist labour chains also means a reconfiguration of previous cultural and structural elements that suddenly become marketable. This is by no means an insignificant project. As Megha shows, the state's apparatus mobilizes a variety of resources for 'the branding of Filipinos as a particular type of labour migrant' (10). Her explanation of how nurses attempt to differentiate themselves from the 'servants of globalization' (such as domestic workers), reveals the production of hierarchies and status in mobile workers, through the acquisition of residence and/or citizenship. The state therefore has a key role, as a regulatory body and guarantor of rights and opportunities, in the constitution of the citizen-worker.

Despite the socio-economic differences and privileges separating nurses and domestic workers, they both fall under the rubric of 'care labour'. Nurses aspire to more rights and privileges, which they hope to get through the institutionalized pathways that professionalization brings them.

There is, therefore, a two-stage process at work in the migrant-worker context described in *Caring for Strangers*. At the beginning of the process, there are nurses and domestic workers in their home settings, in the context of 'normalized migration', who aspire to get a better life in the places they migrate to. At the subsequent stage, there are nurses and domestic workers living in the receiving countries, who now hold different rights and work in precarious conditions. Amrith herself, nonetheless, takes care not to polarize these two ends, as she cautiously

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mentions, instead placing the lives of her informants in a spacio-temporal location of transience.

Care work as a commodity

This is a key theme throughout *Caring for Strangers*, which draws an important link between economic and labour structures and the production of individual, migrant, and collective cultural imaginaries. Amrith describes in great detail how the commodification of care results in the reification of nationality, race, and gender boundaries, as well as essentialisms of 'Asian values'. Singaporean perceptions of Filipino labour migrants are often shaped by a view of nursing as 'dirty work' (93), while Filipino migrants give it some moral legitimation by equating it with acts of service and sacrifice, devotion or vocation. It is not surprising that *care*, an activity which evolves around skills such as interpersonal relations, the ability to communicate and to understand the patient's needs, and which is mostly a non-commoditized activity in the domestic realms of Filipino culture, encounters moral dilemmas when exchanged for a wage. In a sense, I learned that experiencing nursing as a sacrifice or as a way to serve God becomes a means of resistance for these migrants, who find their work diminished in the places where they settle. Amrith herself views it, in fact, as a way of adding moral legitimization and professional respectability (95-104) to what they do.

Migrant Workers' Subjectivities

I found Amrith's description of workers' imaginaries of migration and work to be the main strength of the book. The author does an excellent job of capturing how worker subjectivities are built through dreams of professionalization, upward social mobility, and culturally essentialist beliefs, such as the idea that Filipinos are 'inherently caring'. In addition, Amrith completes the journey by contrasting how Singaporeans perceive nursing and Filipino migrants, giving us a clear picture of how the structures that produce and sustain capital globally affect specific socio-historical localities.

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Once again, we learn about the precarious conditions of care work, including long hours, one day off a week, and continuously changing shifts. Workers go from dreaming of glamorous lives to living with stress and mundane routines in hospitals and nursing homes, where they confront misrecognition (29). As mentioned earlier, it is a process through which migrants develop their subjectivities as mobile people with their own hopes, desires and expectations, while also taking with them the expectations and imaginaries acquired at home. Nursing college is expensive, but families know that if they put one child into nursing, they might achieve a return on the investment, and so there is pressure on them to leave. The forces shaping migrant worker subjectivities range from the societal view of nurses as adventurous, to family expectations of building a better future. However, as Megha herself states, these hopes and imaginaries co-exist with the uncertainties and hardships of migrant medical workers' lives (49). In reality, the professionalism attributed to nursing in the Philippines clashes with the stigma of domestic labour and views of care workers as "maids" in Singapore, leaving nurses with a sense of disappointment, and with the urge to draw boundaries whenever "the domestic" intrudes to diminish their work.

Sociality

From Amrith's descriptions of her fieldwork it becomes clear that technology plays an important role in migrants' social realities: Facebook, Yahoo messenger and Skype are all tools that provide evidence of a transnational field of sociality. It was interesting to learn that, because of their busy workdays (six a week with the only day off changing every week), these 'quiet nurses' (132) would stay home in their rest time and establish communication with their families at home or spend time with the children if they had them, rather than building community in their neighbourhoods. Amrith explains that this quiet/private life was perceived as a choice by the nurses, rather than experienced as exclusion. This contrasts with the lives of domestic workers, who are seen more in public and engage more with the Filipino community.

Amrith provides a few explanations for these differences, such as the higher aspirations of nurses, who might see Singapore as a temporary place to work

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(before heading to Europe, for example), and not as a place to build a life. She also suggests that domestic workers' higher levels of social participation could be related to the anti-social character of their jobs during the week, as they have to live in their employers' houses and visa restrictions affect their mobility. Lastly, she mentions the fact that nurses have their own private places to return to after an exhausting week of work, whereas domestic workers do not. For this reason, Megha concludes that domestic workers and nurses do not necessarily cross paths often.

Limitations

The existence of a nurses' black market is introduced, but is not consistently developed throughout the book. The reader wonders about the ways in which the more informalized market of domestic workers benefit both the Philippine and the Singaporean states, and about how these practices affect inequality amongst migrants. I found this to be a key element that, had it been explored, would have enriched the theoretical body of the ethnography. Regulation and informalization are inseparable phenomena in global neoliberal markets, forging inclusion and exclusion and creating identities and forms of belonging (Cross 2000).

In the same vein, I would have liked Amrith's work to focus more on the precarious conditions of commodified labour and how it affects women in other spheres of life than the workplace, as well as patterns of sociality with other migrants and the valuable explanations of society's views of them as migrated care workers (a recurring theme throughout the book). This takes me to the next important point in Amrith's work, which is about gender. Filipino migration was initially dominated by men in the construction sector, but for the past three decades the largest number of Filipinos migrating overseas have been women who go abroad for domestic work. In 2001, they constituted 72% of migrant workers working abroad.

How do long, irregular working hours affect women's ability to carry out their life projects? After all, there is a strong imaginary behind the wish to become care workers. In the same vein, how do women's specific local value systems shape them as migrant care workers, in the case of both nurses and domestic workers?

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These are important elements for the study of gendered work, class and inequality (Mills, 2016, Peterson, 2010), which I thought needed a little more development in terms of theoretical propositions. Similarly, I would have liked to know more about unpaid domestic work and household provisioning from a feminist perspective.

Conclusion

Overall, I found *Caring for Strangers* to be a very rich ethnography with significant details and illuminating explanations of the elements shaping the lives of Filipino migrant care workers based in Singapore. I found the cultural and social aspects derived from transnational labour chains to be one of the work's strong points. The lively descriptions of the imaginaries and hopes of these workers and the ways they build modes of sociality were, for this author, the major strength of the book.

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