
The Labor of Care

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Abstract

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez's *The Labor of Care* (2018) examines the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in New York City, the family members that they left (and leave) behind in the Philippines, and the multidirectional care labour performed by these transnational families. Francisco-Menchavez tactfully straddles an ethnography of the Filipino transnational family and diasporic kinship resiliencies without obscuring a cognizance of the violent transnational capitalist machinations that produce them. As a racialized care worker in the Canadian settler state myself, I am recommending this book to my care working comrades, accomplices, and kin.

Keywords

care work, Filipino transnational family, migrants

*The Labor of Care:
Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age*
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Valerie Francisco-Menchavez's *The Labor of Care* examines the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in New York City (NYC), the family members that they left (and leave) behind in the Philippines, and the multidirectional care labour performed by these transnational families. My own experiences of racialized migrant care work in the Canadian settler state informed my reading of this text and, I must say, it is a much-needed addition to the care work research canon. In what follows, I illustrate why this is the case, by briefly discussing the author's methodology, citational and narrative practices, and theoretical interventions.

In writing *The Labor of Care*, Francisco-Menchavez locates herself as an insider-outsider Sociologist in order to answer to "the audiences for which" she, "as an academic, writer, researcher, activist, kasama (comrade), and mother" is "accountable" (2018, p. 21). She explains:

I...bring my insight as a member of a transnational family who experienced long-term separation from my father when my mother, siblings, and I immigrated and became undocumented in the United States...[but] I acknowledge that my current documented status and academic position at a university puts me in a very different position from the families in this book; therefore, I prioritize the voices and experiences of migrants and their families to tell a story about their decisions and lives (2018, p. 21).

Beyond providing a mere 'reflective' caveat, however, Francisco-Menchavez's commitment to a reflexive research praxis is then demonstrated in her dynamic multifaceted methodological interventions, from institutional ethnography¹ (IE) to participatory action research² (PAR).

Even the way that the book is written is reflexive, demonstrating a critical citational praxis that is largely uncommon within academia. Drawing from Queer and Feminist of Colour scholarship, Francisco-Menchavez pays citational dues to racialized academics who analyse the intersectional sites of diasporic care relations under white supremacy, transnational racial capitalism, and border imperialism, seamlessly engaging these frameworks to explore the Filipino migrant worker industrial complex. Some noteworthy invocations include Rodriguez's work on the labour brokerage state (2010); Collins' (1995) work on othermothers in Black communities; and Ferguson's (2004) work on Queer of Colour kinship.

Further, in each of the book's four chapters, Francisco-Menchavez offers a theoretical intervention using relatively plain language interlaced with vibrant conversational narratives, thereby rendering it a rather accessible academic read. Chapter one provides historical context for Filipino labour exportation to investigate the construction of transnational Filipino families in relation to the neoliberalization of the Philippine state. Here, Francisco-Menchavez de-centers the dominant narrative of migrant mothers as the only

¹ Francisco-Menchavez uses an institutional ethnography approach informed by Dorothy E. Smith (2005). Institutional ethnography is a form of Sociology and a methodology of inquiry which, "builds knowledges of how the relations of ruling operate from the standpoints of the people participating in them and creates maps whereby people can see the workings of institutions and their own locations within them" (Howard et al., 2005, p.xii).

² Francisco-Menchavez adopts a participatory action research approach, which involves actively engaging research participants in the design of the project, including "methods of observation, construction of the interview guides, research ventures, analysis and products of the research" (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018, p. 19).

care workers in transnational Filipino families by emphasizing the care work done by those left behind in the Philippines. In doing this, she radically theorizes the multi-directionality of care work in transnational Filipino families, as they are produced by state induced serial labour migration and neoliberal border imperialism.

Chapter two of the book discusses social media as pathways for multidirectional care work in transnational Filipino families. Here, Francisco-Menchavez insightfully reveals that technologies of communication have created more accessible remote care work across space and time. She shares that these eroded barriers also shape care relationships in which children and husbands left behind experience the watchful gaze of migrant mothers and wives. However, the author finds that despite discomfort with being watched, children and partners consent to this relinquishing of privacy as a form of care work for their migrant mothers and spouses. This critical intervention honours the essential and unacknowledged care labour by those left behind.

Chapter three then explores how multidirectional care also manifests among Filipina migrant workers residing within NYC. Specifically, Francisco-Menchavez theorizes the homosocial fictive kinships fostered in grassroots Filipino domestic worker organizations like *Kabalikat*³ as a product of transnational family innovation and shared migrant precarity. Such a multidimensional analysis is a significant contribution to the care work canon as it recognizes the often-ignored paucity of discourse engaging intra care work among domestic workers.

Lastly, chapter four offers a valuable intervention of familial and parental love as the overemphasized foundation for care work, integrating the valorization of such love within a proliferating emotional economy that exceeds the limits of romanticized affects. Francisco-Menchavez thoughtfully discusses the complexity that the care labour transnational families featured in her book practice, especially regarding their fidelity around

working through difficult feelings of “anger, guilt, and disappointment” (2018, p.120). The author reasons that overrepresenting love, warmth, and nurturance in affective care economies undermines and displaces other types of labour sustaining the transnational family, such as separated family members continuing to perform care for each other despite emotional strains.

In conclusion, Francisco-Menchavez has set a commendable precedent for reflexive care work scholarship by conducting her own research with care and nuance. The author tactfully straddles an ethnography of the Filipino transnational family and diasporic kinship resiliencies without obscuring a cognizance of the violent transnational capitalist machinations that produce them. As a racialized care worker within the diaspora myself, I resonate with Francisco-Menchavez’s approach. For one, this work has helped me articulate and comprehend the multidirectional caring intimacies I share with my family left behind in India, giving me pause to acknowledge and affirm the care labour that those left behind do for me. It has also shifted my perspective from centering the remittances I send home and the loss of love I grieve, to valuing the ways my transnational family continues to care for each other under ongoing conditions of emotional distress and physical distance. Accordingly, I am recommending this book to my care working comrades, accomplices, and kin.

³ *Kabalikat* (translated as shoulder-to-shoulder) Domestic Workers Support Network is a domestic worker organization in NYC. Francisco-Menchavez worked with Filipina migrants in this organization for her book.

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Author Biography

Sabine is a Mad, Queer of Colour settler, care worker, and Critical Disability Studies PhD student at York University. They try to ground their politics, praxis, and research in disability and migrant justice.