Tender Labour

Migrant Care Work, Filipina/o Young People, and Family Life across Borders

Jennifer E. Shaw

UBCPress · Vancouver

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Contents

List of Illustrations / viii

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 3

1 Precarious Childhood / 37

2 Tender Labour / 62

3 In the Meantime / 84

4 Troubled Reunions / 107

5 To Make a New Life / 135

6 The Future / 164

Conclusion / 195

Appendix: Ethnographic and Participatory Encounters with Young People / 214

Notes / 223

References / 227

Index / 248

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Migration is nothing but a bird travelling from place to place trying to find the best place that will fit his needs and demands. Migrating here to Canada is a tough decision to make. I have to leave the culture and the friends that I live with just so I can be in a place where I get to fulfill a life that is supposed to be for me. Just like a bird, my family migrated here so that we don't have to face the struggles of worrying about what to eat the next day or the fact that we might not even think about eating because we don't have the means to. Leaving the Philippines is a choice that is necessary to make. There is no other alternative. Either my family lives or dies.

– Vea, age 17

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Introduction

FIGURE 1 Bird. | Photo by Vea, 2015

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

VEA[1] IS THE CHILD OF A former migrant worker. It was October of 2015 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, when Vea and I sat down to look through some photographs that she took of her life around the city. These images captured both ordinary places of her daily activities as well as representations of a nostalgic past and hopeful future. By this time, we had spent several months getting to know each other, and I learned about her life before and after her migration to Canada through stories, images, and participant observation. Having arrived in Vancouver less than a year before we first met, Vea's memories of her childhood home and a more familiar life were still visceral. She missed home. However, she continued to pursue the path her mother forged for her as she tried to figure out how to live in the unfamiliar place of Vancouver – a place that was supposed to be full of promise for her and her family.

Vea was less than two months old when her mother, Mama, left the Philippines to return to China where she was a domestic worker. Mama later moved to Canada under what was the federal Live-in Caregiver Program. She worked for several years in Canadian homes until she attained permanent residency. With her permanent residency status, she was able to also bring her husband and daughter to Canada after nearly sixteen years apart – almost the entirety of Vea's life.

Knowing that her mother worked hard to ensure her family's well-being first in the Philippines and now in Canada, Vea repeatedly expressed to me how she was trying to make a life for herself amid the challenges of migration and family separation: "It's all for our own good, to make a new life, because now that I've realized it's what it is. It's life, it's to establish a life, make a new life." Life was not just a matter of living day to day, although that was often a struggle, but a matter of sacrificing the present to build something more for oneself and one's kin. Acknowledging how persisting through present conditions can feel like a temporal and material sacrifice begs the question: What kind of life do these young migrants imagine is possible and hope to build? Vea, once certain, now seemed to be continually trying to reconcile why her path towards betterment felt so full of loss.

Growing up, Vea was surrounded by those whom she considered her closest family: Tita (aunt), Nanay (aunt[2]), Kuya (cousin[3]), Ate (sister), and Papa. When she and Papa moved to Canada, they initially revelled in the feeling that the life they had always waited for was coming to fruition and that they would finally reunite with Mama. They also had the difficult realization that this meant leaving everything and everyone familiar to them

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

– the only life they had ever known. As Vea sat with me, she choked back the tears, reflecting on how living apart from the rest of her family caused her to feel incomplete since "my whole self depends on my whole family." The separations she underwent signified a rupture in life, ironically to make a life, that Vea could not reconcile despite her reunion with Mama and the start of her new life in Canada.

She mourned the loss of those who were not here with her, especially Ate who was not permitted to visit Canada. According to Vea, the Canadian government recently rejected Ate's application for a visitor's visa. This news shocked Vea, and she wept thinking that her family would never be together again, at least not in this country. She dwelled in the deep sense that even as she fulfilled the life her mother worked so hard to secure, she was being torn apart. Through tear-filled eyes she told me of the grief she perpetually endured. Life is not what she imagined it would be, but it is "a life that is supposed to be for me."

Precarious Life

This book reflects a fifteen-month ethnographic study conducted throughout 2015 and part of 2016 in British Columbia's Lower Mainland, the ancestral and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples of the Tsleil-Waututh, Skwxwú7mesh, Musqueam, and Kwikwetlem Nations. Doing migration research on stolen land reflects what legal scholar and activist Harsha Walia (2021) argues to be the intersecting histories of colonialism and imperialism – border-making through displacement and dispossession. In order to investigate arrivals and experiences of belonging on these lands, I draw from life stories, visual representations, and participant observation with Vea and nine other Filipina/o Canadian[4] young people who were born in the Philippines, lived apart from a parent who worked abroad, and then experienced family reunification in Canada. These parents were migrant mothers who performed domestic labour in Canada and who sometimes lived in intermediate locations before arriving in Canada. These intermediate locations included China, Singapore, and Hong Kong – locations that also have a high demand for migrant domestic workers (Constable 2014; Parreñas 2015).

As with most ethnographies, the stories shared in this book are not generalizable examples; rather, they are intimate illustrations of the dynamic and agentive ways young people lived in and persisted through the

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

kinds of precarity that rupture families and remake worlds across borders. I ethnographically explore how global socioeconomic and geopolitical inequalities penetrate families in ways that draw upon both paid and unpaid labour from young people as they grapple with the precarity of home, attempt to hold their families together over time, and commit to the collective life-building projects that mark their sense of kinship and envisioned futures.

Particular kinds of ontological fragilities, uncertainties, relationalities, and significations of hope drive migration, as do the politics of how lives are differentially sustained, valued, and made mobile (Fassin 2012; Jackson 2011, 2013). Drawing from Judith Butler (2009, 25), I argue that "precariousness" is the underlying fragility of life, whereas "precarity" is the uneven distribution of precariousness that makes some lives more susceptible to injury, violence, or death. Butler argues that it is particular political conditions – in this case, shaped by gender, class, racialization, and migrant status in a political economy of migration – that render some lives more precarious than others.

Speaking specifically about the domestic labour often performed by migrant mothers to maintain other families, feminist scholars importantly point to the imbalanced value placed on familial lives, leaving some parents and children more precarious for the sake of benefiting others (Colen 1995; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Parreñas 2005a; Pratt 2012; Tadiar 2009). Among wealthier women, reproductive labour is sometimes handed down to racialized women. This was the case among Caribbean nannies working in wealthy New York households when anthropologist Shellee Colen (1995) coined the term "stratified reproduction" and has been further identified among Latina women in the United States (Boehm 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), Southeast Asian women in East Asia and the Middle East (Oishi 2005; Silvey and Parreña 2020; Yeoh 2006; Yeoh and Huang 2008), and Filipinas in Canada (Barber 2009; Bonifacio 2013; Davidson 2012; Pratt 2012). For Colen (1995, 78), stratified reproduction is a concept that speaks to these inequalities, reflecting how "physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished differentially according to inequalities based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, placed in a global economy, and migration status and that are structured by social, economic, and political forces." Vea's mother's life, and subsequently Vea's own life, reveal how these hierarchies in motherhood and family life unfold for those who have endured the consequences of being on the providing end, rather than the receiving end, of

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

the global migration of domestic workers and the uneven distribution of care work.

There are intersections between precarious labour and precarious life: while many scholars characterize precarity according to the decentralized and insecure labour of the neoliberal era and its associated economic conditions, ethnographers also point to a kind of social precarity as the tenuousness of economic and material stability reconfigure the relations of home and family (Allison 2013; Han 2012; Millar 2014; Muehlebach 2012). In other words, migrant-mother families show us that precarious labour can make desired kinds of kinship hard to maintain. The material, temporal, and relational uncertainty of life in capitalist labour markets not only shapes how and why migrant parents perform labour away from home but, as we will see, affects how their children live in the aftershocks of familial rupture, recognize the tenuousness of the kinds of kinship for which they hoped, and engage in life-building projects for themselves and their loved ones.

By "life-building," I do not mean the childhood developmental perspective that assumes children's physiological and cognitive immaturity and their progressive growth as a biological fact.[5] Instead, I draw from anthropological concerns with life amid adversity as "the processes through which communities cope with various forms of social suffering" (Das et al. 2001, 3) and the "hope that our lives may be made more abundant, for ourselves and those we love" (Jackson 2013, 6). I take the position that children and young people are actively engaged in these processes of coping and hoping in ways that are informed by, but not always congruent with, conventional expectations based on neoliberal capitalist ideas of educational attainments, career paths, and self-sufficiency. Rather, their visceral experiences of racist immigration, labour, and education systems along with senses of obligation, love, and longing towards family and home reflect a dialectic between dominant institutions, entrenched cultural values, and more personal drives and desires that often include but also critique the valorization of work and economic success.

Constructed Childhoods

Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have long argued that childhood is a culturally constructed and socially mediated phase carved out of the life course (Aries 1965; Cook 2020; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1999; Stephens 1995; Webster 2021; Zelizer 1994). Childhood is differently

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

constructed across time and place according to notions of dependency, capacity, development, and morality. This phase of life is also diversely defined according to boundary-making and phase-defining processes. For instance, psychological approaches to childhood tend to mark it according to cognitive, psychological, and psychosexual stages as influenced by the early work of G. Stanley Hall (1904), Jean Piaget (1964), Erik Erikson (1950), John Bowlby (1969), and Mary Ainsworth (Bowlby and Ainsworth 1965). Similarly, medical approaches tend to focus on the physical development of a human, including normative and non-normative growth and development (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1995). Both medical and psy-based paradigms tend to assume a linear, normative, and measurable child across time and place.

Conversely, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists illuminate diverse constructions of the life course, denoting the emergence of childhood as a distinct and protected phase of life between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries among bourgeoisie Victorians (Aries 1965; Cook 2020; Zelizer 1994). Class disparities in the idea and practice of childhood intersected with racialized inequalities in the eigthteenth and nineteenth centuries; Crystal Lynn Webster (2021) points to how African American children were positioned outside of the cultural boundaries of a white bourgeoisie childhood and adultified during the Antebellum period in the United States. Political-economic analyses illuminate how inequalities persist in old and new forms today, making Eurocentric idyllic notions of childhood financially unattainable or culturally incompatible despite being enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Inequalities in childhood are particularly visible on a global scale and are often exacerbated by the uneven effects of globalization (Parreñas 2005a; Stephens 1995), differing access to education (Shange 2019; Sojoyner 2016), and involvement in waged and unwaged labour (Estrada 2019; Sanghera 2016; Taft 2019).

The experience of childhood as a distinct, protected, and coveted stage of life may be difficult where familial precarity impinges on education, play, and cohabitation with siblings and parents. Researchers have shown, for example, that formal education is not always an option nor desirable for children when other life skills may be more significant to their survival and everyday lives (Campoamor 2016; Estrada 2019). Similarly, waged or unwaged work may not be understood as solely the domain of adults when engagement in tasks associated with production is integral for all community

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

members (Lancy 2018). Culturally situated understandings of the life course that align or diverge from Eurocentric ones, along with social relations and economic precarity, lead to very different experiences of growing up. In the case of my research, childhood as an experience of being cared for, going to school, and abstaining from work was confounded by mother-led migrations and uncertainties surrounding care and economics in the household during times of family separation.

The field of childhood studies has primarily been concerned with understanding and asserting children's capacity for agency as if agency was some*thing* children could have and exercise (Kontovourki and Theodorou 2018). In terms of migration research, seeing children as agentic has been an important step towards acknowledging not only their copresence in migration processes but also their distinct thoughts and actions along the way. This attention to children's agency, emerging from the "new childhood studies" (James and Prout 1997) of the late twentieth century, was significant in migration research that tended to focus primarily on the lives of adults as the main migration actors. Consequently, children were routinely considered secondarily, relegated to the domestic space of "family" and considered passive in parents' decisions rather than regarded as competent, knowing, thinking, and feeling actors (Orellana et al. 2001). Following the notion that children also are full and competent "beings," new childhood studies sought to bring fuller attention to children's voices and perspectives in all realms of research connected to their lives, including migration (see Coe et al. 2011 and James 2007).

While the child-as-agent concept has gained prominence since the 1990s, some childhood researchers argue it overlooks the broader influences on and by children. Spyros Spyrou, Rachel Rosen, and Daniel Thomas Cook (2019), for example, caution against fixating on the independent and agentic child, which slips too easily into neoliberal discourses of autonomous subjects. These authors, along with others whom I will engage, propose a more complex approach where children are always and only agentic in relation to others. These scholars suggest revitalizing the child-as-agent perspective with a relational ontology, recognizing the constant co-creation of childhood within living, shifting, and transforming networks of human and nonhuman actors. Migration is one such site to consider children's expressions of agency within myriad relations and influences, collectively assembling conditions, limitations, possibilities, and choices surrounding migration contexts.

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Migration and Segmented Labour in Canada

The channels through which people immigrate can tell us much about the conditions that define life both before and after the physical move takes place. Further, the racialized, classed, and gendered ways to enter Canada shape life inside the borders not only for adult migrants but also for their children and subsequent generations who inherit similar subject positions (Farrales 2017; Pratt 2012).

Chain migration, where one family member migrates after another to the same destination, occurs as Canada's current labour and immigration systems construct people as individual workers who are here on a provisional basis to fill a temporary need. It is part of the growing trend towards precarious labour and precarious lives across borders as migrants are denied labour mobility, citizenship rights, and regular access to their families while filling labour shortages and supporting national economies (Bonifacio 2013; Constable 2014; Eric 2012; Lan 2006; Parreñas 2015; Sharma 2006; Yan 2008).

Geographer Philip Kelly (2006) notes that large percentages of Filipina/o Canadians live in major Canadian cities, with nearly half of the total population of Filipina/os in Canada living in Toronto (43 percent) and nearly one-fifth living in Vancouver (18 percent). Since the time of Kelly's writing, when there were just over 300,000 Filipina/o Canadians in Canada, Statistics Canada (2023) data reveals that this number has nearly tripled, with "957,355 Canadians with Filipino roots who proudly call Canada home" as of the 2021 census. This high number makes the Philippines the third largest source country for immigrants to Canada, following India and China. Nearly one-third of this population has lived in Canada for less than ten years, with 757,410 people having been born in the Philippines (Statistics Canada 2023).

Several waves of Filipina/o migration to Canada have been recounted by scholars, who point to earlier migrations of professionals in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by the recruitment of Filipina/os for lower-paid positions in the 1970s onward (Barber 2009; Bonifacio 2013; Damasco 2012; McElhinny et al. 2012). As Valerie G. Damasco (2012) illustrates, healthcare professionals originally recruited to work temporarily in the US in the 1960s migrated to Canada thereafter, filling jobs as nurses, doctors, and medical technicians while gaining permanent residency. The introduction of the points system to Canada's immigration system in 1967 was an attempt to

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

liberalize immigration and reduce racial bias in the selection of immigrants, paving the way for this flow of workers from the Philippines to Canada while also filling nursing shortages (Damasco 2012). Starting in 1978, the creation of the family sponsorship immigration class introduced more Filipina/os into Canada through means other than labour, shifting the demographics from a professional class of workers to a wider range of Filipina/o Canadian family members of varying ages, education levels, and class positions.

The 1970s and 1980s, however, saw a different demographic of Filipina/os entering Canada; rather than professional workers filling healthcare positions, Filipina/os were now entering into "lower-skilled" and lower-paid positions in care provision, customer service, and manufacturing (McElhinny et al. 2012). This was the result of two shifts – one from the Philippines, with the introduction of then-president Ferdinand Marcos's labour export policies, pushing for more emigration of workers to help support the Philippines economically, and another from the Canadian state that was now embracing temporary worker programs, such as the Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program. While there were some moves toward permanent residency sparked by migrant-worker advocacy leading to the Foreign Domestic Movement (Tungohan 2023), temporary labour rather than permanency was now becoming the focus of an increasingly neoliberal labour and immigration sector (McElhinny et al. 2012).

Vea's mother was one of approximately 175,000 domestic workers in Canada between 2009 and 2013 under what was then the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) and later became the Caregiver Program (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2014a).[6] Each year, several thousand children joined their mothers after long waits to migrate to Canada and reunite with family members (Kelly et al. 2011). Despite the programs' two-year labour requirement before workers could apply for permanent residency, delays in the process meant that the median length of parent-child separation was eight years (Pratt 2012, 17). Factors that extend the length of time families spent apart include mothers moving to and working in intermediate destinations first (Barber 2009; Constable 2014; Parreñas 2005a, 2015), uncounted time in Canada resulting from any lag caused by switching employers, or difficulty obtaining medical certificates of health and permissions from estranged parents for the child's move (Pratt 2012; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005).[7] Vea's separation from her mother for sixteen years was lengthier than most, though not entirely uncommon amid this form of

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

chain migration and Canada's problematic system that propels families to live apart for extended periods of time.

From 1992 to 2019, Canada's caregiver programs fell under the broader Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP).[8] The TFWP allows people to apply for temporary work permits in the general categories of "high wage" or "low wage" positions (Economic and Social Development Canada 2016).[9] The temporary status of those occupying low-wage positions, also referred to as "low-skilled occupations" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2014d), renders them an exploitable second class who contribute to the Canadian economy without receiving the benefits of citizenship (Pratt 2012; Razack 1999; Sharma 2006; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005).

The Government of Canada has long divided classes of temporary migrants according to distinct labour channels – the International Mobility Program (IMP) and the TFWP. The IMP has an objective "to advance Canada's broad economic and cultural national interest" (Economic and Social Development Canada 2014, 1). The IMP comprises workers who are in Canada as a result of bilateral agreements with sending countries or under circumstances of "significant benefit," "reciprocal employment," "competitiveness and public policy," or "charitable or religious work" (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada 2015). More plainly, the IMP accounts for situations such as intra-company transfers, entrepreneurial endeavours, or academic-related positions. International Experience Canada also falls under the IMP, where young people may come to or leave Canada to "travel and work" through a kind of exchange system (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2014c).

Alternatively, the TFWP, which included Canada's LCP and CP for nearly thirty years, comprises workers fulfilling far fewer desirable roles in industries such as fast food, caregiving, manual work on construction sites, meatpacking, and agricultural work. These industries and their reliance on temporary workers are often hotly reported and debated in the media for their depressive, exploitative working conditions (Carman and Meissner 2014; Canadian Council for Refugees 2016; Thompson 2016). The poor working conditions in these sectors were an issue prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and were exacerbated by the spread of coronavirus in 2020 and thereafter (Grez 2022; Macklin 2022; Weiler and Grez 2022). Workers under the TFWP have always been considered vulnerable to workplace exploitation given that they are usually subject to closed work permits that disallow job mobility and rely on positive employer reviews to continue existing contracts or receive new

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

ones (Grez 2022; Walia 2021). The devaluation of yet heavy reliance upon migrant workers became all the more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic as these workers were rendered simultaneously disposable through their harsh workplace treatment yet essential to maintaining Canadian systems of food production, care provision, and access to everyday services. Walia (2021, 137) illuminates the "manufactured vulnerability" of these workers that are necessary to the functioning of everyday life in Canada yet are suspended in the precarious status of being always and only temporary, low-paid, and easily replaceable.

Significantly, the TFWP has not been considered a welcoming avenue for those who will come to stay in Canada but rather a "last resort for employers to fill jobs for which qualified Canadians are not available" (Economic and Social Development Canada 2014, 1). Unlike those conventionally in the IMP, who received the heightened flexibility and freedom of open or partially open work permits, those under the TFWP have long been subject to the confines of closed work permits,[10] meaning their stay in Canada has often been contingent on working for a single employer. As many scholars, activists, and journalists have noted, closed work permits foster harsh conditions because they render people disproportionately subject to workplace abuse due to the power imbalance between employer and employee (CBC News 2015; Canadian Labour Congress and Flecker 2011; Galerand, Gallié, and Olliver 2015; Lowrie 2017; National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada 2009; Pratt 2012; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; United Food and Commercial Workers 2009).

There is a clear distinction between these two segments of workers: IMP workers are largely valued and have a place in the nation as contributing and welcomed desirable subjects, while TFWP workers, which long included domestic workers, are positioned only as economic and temporary – a last resort to fill sectors that are unappealing to Canadians (Sharma 2006). This occupational scheme is not only segregated by class and citizenship potential; statistics demonstrate how the divide is cast racially: in 2013, as Vea's mother worked as a live-in caregiver, the IMP's top two source countries included the United States (34,398) and Australia (17,311), while the TFWP mainly drew from the Philippines (40,655) and India (7,930) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2014b, 17–18). Many critics argue that despite Canada's official multicultural policy, racism is embedded in the country's historical and contemporary forms of the work-migration nexus as migrant workers help build the nation yet are systematically excluded from becoming part

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

of it (Agnew 2007; Bannerji 2000; Coloma et al. 2012; Davidson 2012; de Leon 2009; Lee and Lutz 2005; Razack, Smith, and Thobani 2010; Thobani 2007; Walia 2013).

Much of the Canadian nation-state was built on the backs of migrant workers whose labour was expropriated to uphold the privilege and sense of belonging of white European settler populations (Bannerji 2000; Sharma 2006; Thobani 2007). From the time of early colonization and the dispossession of land from Indigenous Peoples, the import of racialized people has been a means to build the nation by using migrant labour to construct infrastructure and transport goods. In other words, temporary migrant workers have experienced a history of exclusion from that which they helped to create; they were "rendered foreigners within the spaces that the free claimed as their home" (Sharma 2006, 61). As a key example, Sunera Thobani (2007, 92) reflects on the fact that fifteen thousand Chinese workers constructed the Canadian Pacific Railway – a touted symbol of national pride that was critical for building infrastructure to serve white elites. At the same time, the perceived threat to the white nation posed by Chinese migrants meant that Chinese people were then systematically rejected from becoming part of the nation through head taxes starting in 1885 and near total exclusion resulting from the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act (Sharma 2006; Thobani 2007; Yu 2009). Reaping the human labour of migrant workers yet systematically rejecting them from the prospect of citizenship has been repeated throughout Canada's history with examples that include the 1950s Caribbean Domestic Scheme, the 1966 Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, the 1973 Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program, the 1981 Foreign Domestic Movement, the 1992 Live-in Caregiver Program, and the 2014 Caregiver Program (Sharma 2006; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; Tungohan 2023).

The LCP, part of the TFWP, began in 1992 to meet the growing demand for domestic workers in wealthier Canadian homes (Davidson 2012; Kelly et al. 2011; McElhinny et al. 2012; Pratt 2012; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005). Racist Canadian policies restricted immigration from most regions other than western Europe until the 1950s, but as the demand for domestic labour grew, Filipinas were increasingly commoditized in the global labour market as ideal immigrants to fill racialized, classed, and gendered domestic roles (Barber 2009; Eric 2012; Pratt 1999; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; Tungohan 2012, 2023). This follows what Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2004) note to be the "global woman" – women who are drawn into the

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

global labour market through processes of globalization, the uneven distribution of capital, and stereotypes concerning the character of women from the Global South.

Canada has witnessed decades of contestation from migrant rights and labour activists who arduously challenged the Canadian government to eliminate or change the LCP, identifying it as inherently exploitative towards racialized migrant women. Staunch opponents demanded the LCP be entirely abolished and replaced with a means to immediately provide caregivers with permanent residency and the same rights and protections as other landed immigrants (National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada 2009, 2014; Pratt 2004; Tungohan 2012). More moderate opponents called for the LCP to be changed by removing what many considered to be its harshest requirement: the "live-in" component (Tungohan 2012; West Coast Domestic Workers' Association 2014). It was this aspect of the program, some argued, that made women most unfree, as they had to reside with their employer with limited privacy and autonomy from their employer – those whom they depended on for their work permits (Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; West Coast Domestic Workers' Association 2014, 26). The live-in component of Canada's program also contravened the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2011 Domestic Worker Convention (no. 189), which states in Article 9 that domestic workers "are free to reach agreement with their employer or potential employer on whether to reside in the household." Although Canada has not ratified C189, it reflects mounting recognition and pressure around the world to provide domestic workers with more freedom from their employers' households.

The Canadian government overhauled the TFWP and LCP in 2014, creating the CP in its place and introducing two new caregiving streams: caring for children and caring for people with high medical needs. As noted in the name change, the live-in requirement was removed after decades of care worker activism to allow caregivers to maintain their own residences (Tungohan 2023). This shift came at an immense cost, however. While the LCP had no cap on the number of permanent resident applications it would accept (potentially extending permanent residency to all eligible applicants), the CP had a cap of 5,500 accepted applications per year, which unfortunately reduced the guarantee of permanency for many workers. New Labour Market Impact Assessment and work permit requirements also caused less certainty and more delays for workers who were already in Canada and who either wanted to renew their work permits or change employers (Drolet 2016).

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

The response to the changes from activists and labour organizations was mixed but largely one of disappointment; many advocates agreed with the decision to drop the live-in requirement but were dismayed by the addition of the cap and remained dissatisfied that caregivers were still only granted temporary status and closed work permits for the duration of their stay (Caregivers' Action Centre 2014; Friesen 2015; Philippine Women Centre of Ontario 2014; Tungohan 2014). On a broader scale, scholars Ethel Tungohan, Petronila Cleto, and Conely de Leon (2014) argue that the changes to the LCP were unhelpful because the labour market segregation and deskilling that punctuate many of these workers' lives continue regardless of the 2014 program modifications. Natalie Drolet (2016), former executive director of the Migrant Workers' Association, argues that, overall, these changes made permanence harder to attain and precarity much more persistent for such care workers, who have had their paths to permanent residency eroded under the new requirements and the new obstacles they present.

It was no surprise that when then-minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada Jason Kenney held a press conference about changes to the LCP, he chose to do so at Mount Zion Filipino Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Toronto (Tungohan 2015). Filipina/os comprise the largest category of temporary migrant workers in Canada at 41 percent in 2014 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2015, 11) and nearly 90 percent of caregivers (Kelly et al. 2011, 5–10). Notwithstanding its framing as a lower-skilled occupation, most LCP entrants were highly educated, with 63 percent holding a bachelor's degree (Kelly et al. 2011, 12). In fact, LCP entrants were one of the most highly educated groups in Canada, far exceeding the mere 26 percent of Canadian adults holding any university education, according to the 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada 2011). Despite high levels of education, research shows that these caregivers continue to be underemployed in domestic work even after they complete the LCP (GABRIELA-Ontario 2014; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005, 91; Zaman et al. 2007, 27).

In 2019, the CP changed yet again. In response to care worker activism and perhaps a bid for Filipina/o Canadian votes by the Liberals leading up the federal election, as of June 15, 2019, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada launched the newest version of the program, now titled Home Child Care Provider Pilot and Home Support Worker Pilot. The cap of 5,500 applications remains, with 2,750 allotted to each stream (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2022). In 2022, the cap for the Child Care Provider stream was reached very early, with the application portal

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

closing on January 17 of the same year after receiving the maximum number of applications (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2022). While applications were limited under the pilots, the conditions seemed much more favourable in terms of implications of permanency and migrating with family members. First, applicants were promised a direct path to permanent residency once they completed their work requirement. Second, workers were given an open work permit that was occupationally restricted to caregiving. Third, the live-in or live-out option was retained. Fourth, open work permits and study permits were potentially provided for immediate family members upon an applicant's acceptance to the program. This meant that families could more plausibly migrate together, although their children were considered international students and required to pay international student fees. Under the earlier program, a care worker could only bring her family members if she could prove her capacity to financially provide for them since they were not allocated work or study permits upon entry. Given that care workers receive only slightly more than minimum wage, this financial burden may be untenable in most cases, thus effectively blocking family migration. While the 2019 pilots seemed better in some respects, unfortunately, permanent residence, while supposedly guaranteed at the start of one's contract, was not actually granted until the work was completed and the application for permanent residency reassessed. Furthermore, only a limited number of caregivers benefitted from this program annually due to application caps, processing delays, and backlogs at IRCC (Bagon et al. 2024; Massie, Minh, and Shaw 2024; Shaw, Massie, and Minh 2024; Shaw et al. 2024).

What research on caregiver programs in Canada indicates is that labour regimes in Canada channel racialized migrants, and Filipina/os in particular, into sectors of the labour market that deny their education and credentials. This propels them into a scheme of deskilling that is difficult to escape because it is structurally created to economically benefit the Canadian economy, families, and employers through low-paid, poor-conditioned service work (GABRIELA-Ontario 2014; Pratt 2012; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005). Thus, despite what appears to be a promise of inclusion, research shows that Filipinas in caregiving roles face systemic and blatant racism inside Canada's borders because they are often denied credential recognition, are subject to low-paying and exploitative jobs, lack political recognition, and are faced with multiple forms of social exclusion (Arat-Koç with INTERCEDE 2001; McElhinny et al. 2012; Pratt 2012; Sharma 2006; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005).

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Research also shows that the labour experiences of migrant Filipina mothers in Canada profoundly impact their children's lives upon reunification; feminist geographer Geraldine Pratt (2012, 28) argues that "intergenerational hauntings" occur for Filipina/o Canadian young people whose lives in Canada are often compromised by the conditions set before their parents. Young Filipina/os who later join their parents in Canada often struggle to gain political recognition (Balmes 2012; Largo 2012), combat racist stereotypes perpetuated through public discourses (Catungal 2012; de Leon 2012), resist the alienation that denies them a sense of belonging (de Leon 2009; Pratt in collaboration with Ugnayan Ng Kabataang Pilipino Sa Canada 2003), and, consequently, struggle to complete high school and access postsecondary education (Abada, Hou, and Ram 2009; Abada and Lin 2014; Farrales 2017; Farrales and Pratt 2012; Kelly 2014; Mendoza 2012). Not only are Filipinas disadvantaged through the undervaluation of their education and work experience in Canada, but their children are also effectively disadvantaged through racialized stereotypes, education (mis)placements in the school system, and denial of their existing educational credentials (Farrales 2017). Geographer May Farrales (2017) importantly analyzes the educational experiences of Filipina/o students in the Vancouver School District to find that

> the process of deskilling stretches across spaces, seeping into the lives of children of first-generation Filipino immigrants even before they leave the Philippines to migrate and be reunited with their mothers. The youths' encounters with temporary labour migration processes and policies highlight the ways in which their own previous knowledge and education are worn away while they wait in the Philippines. The negative effects of such disrupted education are eventually brought to bear when they continue their formal education in Canada. (212)

From a critical race perspective, the deskilling of both Filipina/o adults and young people in Canada is no mistake. Rather, as anthropologist Damien Sojoyner (2016) points out regarding Black students in the United States, it is a means to enclose racialized young people in structures that reproduce their subordination, stream them into vocational channels, delimit their human capital, and segment them into low rungs of the employment ladder. This is a function of racialized segmented labour that has long existed in Canada based on white supremacist and capitalist exploitation of workers – and prospective workers – predominantly racialized.

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Care and Tender Labour

The "migration crisis" of the twenty-first century is illuminating how global economic inequalities and political turmoil in many regions make for desperate situations, where one's only option may be to leave to make a life elsewhere (Fernando and Giordano 2016). According to the United Nations (2016), international migration in 2015 rose by 41 percent since 2000, making the number of migrants worldwide 244 million. Amid the rising flow of migrants in an unsettled world, states increasingly fortify their borders as debates rage on about their sovereign power to decide who enters and under what conditions they are permitted to stay (Walia 2021).

To control immigration in economically specific ways, receiving countries like Canada increasingly shape their immigration policies around labour market demands by creating restrictive labour channels for temporary workers (Choy 2003; Damasco 2012; Eric 2012; Straehle and Lenard 2012; Yeoh 2006). These regimes extract human labour from the Global South without fully recognizing workers' social lives and political rights, thus drawing people into the Canadian economy while at the same time inducing new forms of precarity for them and their family members. Temporary labour programs thus have far-reaching effects that go beyond borders and crosscut multiple geographies and generations.

The feminization of labour is also reflected in temporary labour regimes that call upon women to perform gendered labour. Gendered labour is reflected the global care chain (Hochschild 2001), which represents a flow of women around the world as they fill the demand for domestic labour. The ILO (2015) estimates that there are at least 67 million domestic workers worldwide.[11] The gendered nature of this labour is demonstrated by the fact that 80 percent of domestic workers are women and that most of these women come from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia (ILO 2013, 2015).

Anthropologists have identified an uneven distribution of reproductive labour, where its demands are so often delegated to women (Colen 1995; di Leonardo 1987; Stack and Burton 1993). Reproductive labour is that which includes "purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and community ties" (Glenn 1992, 1). Marxist theory of labour is primarily concerned with work's "productive" forms, including commodities that reflect use value and exchange value (Weeks 2011). Use

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

value is attributed to the need for and use of particular commodities, while exchange value is a representation of the labour time that goes into its production (Marx 1976). Without concrete, tangible commodities, reproductive labour falls in the Marxist realm of "unproductive" labour. Yet, Marxist feminists such as Heidi Hartmann (1979) and Kathi Weeks (2011) have worked hard to illustrate how reproductive labour *is productive* – supporting the ability for people to go out and engage in wage labour by meeting the necessities of life and producing the next generation of workers through rearing and socialization. It is reproductive labour that underpins and permits capitalist wage labour to persist, despite Marx's problematic distinction between productive and unproductive labour.

Hartmann (1979) asserts that capitalism and patriarchy have evolved together, bending towards the other in a "capitalist patriarchy." Hartmann argues that while capitalism would like all people to be workers, patriarchy privileges men with the most economic opportunities and urges women to stay at home doing the underrecognized and uncompensated work of living. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) and Rhacel Parreñas (2015) show that, as capitalism bends to patriarchy, feminist movements in the West bend to racism. According to Glenn (1992), wealthier white women in the US tend to shake off the responsibilities of domestic work by handing it down to less class-privileged racialized women. Kate Manne (2017, 161) refers to this phenomenon as "leaning down" domestic responsibilities onto the backs of more marginalized women in terms of class position and racialization. Rhacel Parreñas (2015) argues that there is a classed and racialized divide not just within the US but *internationally* in what she calls the "international division of reproductive labour," which she defines as:

> The three-tier transfer of reproductive labor among women in sending and receiving countries of migration. Whereas class-privileged women purchase the low-wage household services of migrant Filipina domestic workers, these women simultaneously purchase the even lower-wage household services of poorer women left behind in the Philippines. Considering this transnational transfer of gender constraints, the independent migration of Filipina domestic workers could be read as a process of negotiation for different groups of women in a transnational economy. In both sending and receiving countries, most women have not achieved a gender-egalitarian division of household work; instead, they have used

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

> their race and/or class privilege to transfer their reproductive labor with responsibilities to less privileged women. (29)

In 1991, Arlie Hochschild popularly coined the term "the care chain" to identify the way that care is handed down from one woman to another. But Parreñas (2015) is critical of this "care chain" terminology, finding the richer concept of the international division of reproductive labour to be a more appropriate means of describing the inequality among women. Parreñas describes the terminological shift in this way:

> I originally introduced the concept of the international division of reproductive labor in my dissertation (Parreñas 1998), which Arlie Hochschild later renamed "the care chain." Although that iteration has brought greater attention to the concept, it has unfortunately eliminated the political-economic foundation of my original analysis by narrowing the framework to the distribution of care and redirecting the focus away from reproductive inequalities … A return to reproductive labor inequalities in our discussion of the "care chain" allows us to better account for the constitution of transnational, regional, and local inequalities in the commodification and racialization of the household division of labor in globalization. (30)

My reading of Parreñas' reinsertion of the international division of reproductive labour into the discussion importantly highlights not individuals connected through a chain of care but a larger political-economic structure that divides and differently values care workers along the lines of geographical location, class, and racialization alongside gender.

Furthermore, reproductive labour as "the labor needed to sustain the productive labor force" (Parreñas 2015, 29) not only contributes to the creation of workers and is thus productive of and for capitalism, but it is also generative of kinship as the foundation to human bonds and relationality. Reproductive labour provides us at times with the ability to cope with precarity through sites of care and mutual dependency. "Matters of care," according to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 17), can foster an ethics of disruption amid alienating, individualistic capitalism and enable other worlds to flourish by "caring for neglected things" or, in the case of this book, things neglected by capitalist erasure, including the expropriation of migrant domestic labour and feminized forms of "unproductive" labour.

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

Further theorizing reproductive labour, Micaela di Leonardo (1987) links this kind of work with social networks through her concept of kin-work. Kin-work involves remembering, maintaining, and celebrating activities concerning the family. She observes in her study of families in the United States that this work is primarily performed by women for others who benefit from the maintenance of their familial connections. Such connections are fostered, according to di Leonardo, through initiating holiday celebrations, sending greeting cards, gift-giving, arranging visits, and making telephone calls. For di Leonardo, kin-work involves fostering, maintaining, and ultimately "intensify[ing] particular ties" (443). While these tasks are often perceived as ordinary occurrences (as if they are not work at all), di Leonardo observes that their significance comes into view when they are left undone, such as after a divorce in a heterosexual relationship; in these instances, men's familial bonds may then be neglected due to cultural expectations that kin-work is women's work.

Within transnational families, kin-work takes on new geographical, temporal, and generational dimensions. Anthropologists Parin Dossa and Cati Coe (2017, 2) extend the concept of kin-work to consider transnational households and "the work that enables a family to reproduce and regenerate itself across the generations" through transnational practices, memories, and relations. Grandmothers, they argue, play important roles in intergenerational care, especially for children whose parents emigrate for work. Under these circumstances, a grandmother may enact the role of a mother and help to facilitate the connection between distanced kin (Rae-Espinoza 2011; Yarris 2017). Dossa and Coe (2017, 2) further argue that kin-work among dispersed households also "includes more subtle forms of care such as memorializing efforts" that bridge memories and practices across multiple generations. These authors show how music, food, and art can help to recreate home after displacement. Sharing photographs and migration narratives can transmit familial histories and knowledge. Thus, Dossa and Coe illuminate how older women can be central knowledge holders and transmitters across time and space in transnational families as they work to foster the material and immaterial bonds of kinship.

Together, reproductive labour and kin-work highlight the ways the family is not a natural unit but – as feminist scholars have long argued – something that is constructed through often unacknowledged, unremunerated labour that is divided and delegated along the lines of gender, class, racialization, and age. While women's – and notably migrant racialized

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

women's – contributions to this realm of work have been carefully identified by feminist scholars for decades, the roles children play in their families reflect not only their socialization into dominant notions of kinship but also their efforts towards familial maintenance, especially in precarious times.

I employ concepts such as tenuousness, tenacity, and tenderness to illuminate the ambivalence that arises when the insecurity of home merges with a driving desire for a better life, all in the context of intimate family relations. *Ten-,* deriving from the Latin "to hold," is useful for thinking about precarious attachments that are made weak in global labour and migration systems tied to gender, race, and class, where lives are unequally valued and where livability is made ever more difficult. It is also useful for thinking about the will to grip and cling to that which we believe is possible. This root word speaks to precariousness, when life is stitched together *ten*uously; to hope, when future possibilities are gripped *ten*aciously; and to care, when people hold together *ten*derly.

Through anthropological and ethnographic lenses, this book centres the stories of ten young people who lived apart from and later reunited with a migrant working parent. In considering the life-building projects taken up by parents and their children, one of the main concepts I apply is that of labour, but not in the conventional sense studied by so many who focus on migrant mothers' work. Rather, this book is an exploration into the kinds of day-to-day labour – or *tender labour* – that children and young people perform to help remedy familial rupture induced by the violence of capitalism. Other scholarship has variously theorized care that flows between children and parents, and nonfictive and fictive kin, as an "ethics of reciprocity" (Alipio 2015), "vectoral flows of care" (Wise and Velayutham 2005), a "plurality of care" (Graham et al. 2012), and "multidirectional care" (Francisco-Menchavez 2018). However, these studies do not specifically examine such labour from the perspective of children, illuminating their positions on the margins of capitalism as the starting point of inquiring into migration and care.

Young people's labour in the Philippines and upon reunification in Canada is distinctly shaped by registers of precarity, yet their labour often goes unnoticed because young people are usually perceived as not-yet-wage-workers or as mere domestic helpers performing "unproductive labour." This book forefronts the work of family, especially from its young members, and is an investigation into how the lived conditions of precarity shape material, geographical, relational, and temporal worlds. Sensing and

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

responding to precarity also inform the imaginings and hopes that underpin young people's quest for betterment. Thus, precarity and tender labour are affectual and affective in the project of life-building not only for parents who seek labour opportunities abroad but also for children who tend to the world they would like to maintain or create.

The young people I met, I will show, attempt to mitigate precarity at multiple scales: by holding their families together in the most intimate enactments of care as well as through reconfiguring life across borders via transnational ties and movements. I consider what young people told me about the labour they performed to hold their families together. They identified their work as the ordinary yet deeply significant labour necessary for living, often obscured from purview in broader discussions about migrant work that makes life possible by living through precarious times.

"To hold," a verb, implies action. I draw from nuanced theorizations of agency in relation to context – both "lateral" as in the mundane carrying that takes place in the everyday (Berlant 2007; Pratt 2010) as well as more intentional strategies to reconfigure the course of life by asserting a direction towards that which is imagined to be better (Ahmed 2010; Olwig 2007, 2011; Ortner 2006). As anthropologists have argued, capacities to act are always mediated within a sociocultural framework of what is defined as action and what kinds of actions are available under particular circumstances (Ahearn 2001; Ortner 2006). As I explore further in Chapter 1, childhood studies scholars have recently encouraged the reconsideration of agency in the "post-agency era," whereby children have been problematically seen as singular acting subjects following liberal logics (Kontovourki and Theodorou 2018, 154). Rather, the view that children are entwined social beings among other social beings points attention to how agency, like Foucauldian theories of power, is not a thing one has or holds. Rather, agency, like power, manifests as forces, affects, and processes among and between people, places, and objects that operate intersubjectively and interstitially.

For families coping with the uneven impacts of capitalism, including labour export and expropriation in the global market, life-building is captured by Vea's invocation of "to establish a life" and "to make a new life." These utterances reflect her active understanding of both her mother's efforts to build a life in Canada as well as her own sense of care and obligation to fulfill her mother's sacrifice and what she believes will be her future. These utterances also reflect a kind of rupture, where she senses that she must

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

begin again, finding her footing and starting anew in ways that are both grievous and hopeful as she embarks on a life in Canada.

In what follows, I consider how families navigate precarity through efforts to hold together with work, love, and hope, even as things seem to fall apart. I draw from young people's life stories from before their parents moved abroad, to their time spent separated, to family reunification in Canada, to what they believe their futures hold, specifically examining how they ground their experiences through a lens of purpose that gives them a hope to grip onto amid uncertainty. As I will show, the meaning of a good life for my young participants was contingent on intersections of their past experiences, their current circumstances, and what they imagined could ensue in the future. In particular, the meanings of family, home, happiness, and well-being shifted over time, and thus, what young people ultimately aimed for was also altered through emergent situations and understandings. Notions of betterment also shifted for young people upon facing pragmatic economic realities and recognizing the losses that came with leaving loved ones behind. Attention to young migrants' ambivalence enables a critical examination into the tensions of growing up with multiple attachments – thin and thick, tenuous and tenacious – to people, places, and possibilities, as well as to the labour that goes into coping with precarity by redefining the contours of what a good life entails.

In Vancouver's wealthier westside, it is an everyday occurrence to see a middle-aged Filipina pushing a double stroller with two light-skinned children with blonde or sandy brown hair. My neighbourhood at the time, on the outskirts of a lush university campus, holds a high number of rental apartments but is also home to multimillion-dollar houses with views overlooking English Bay. As Bonnie McElhinny and her colleagues (2012) suggest, these women are hypervisible in their expected roles as caregivers, while the structures that underpin their migrations and histories remain invisible, as do their everyday lives working for Vancouver families. This hypervisibility/invisibility follows what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011, 76) refers to as "the dynamics of recognition." Povinelli argues that there is a "social spacing" at work that temporarily pauses the capacity to see another – "a bracketing of the other in a no-man's land of having been neither recognized nor denied recognition" (77).

Under the TFWP, workers are bracketed from recognition in Canada according to their temporary status while their family members have no

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

space to exist in Canada at all – they are left behind not by parents who leave but by a state that fails to recognize the long shadow of global inequalities and people's vital attachments to each other. Povinelli (2011, 77) critically questions what can be known when we look to the voices that are left out, asking, "But what if we opened these brackets? What conditions of life would we find in these suspended zones?" Butler (2009, 13) similarly argues that an ethical recognition of life implies recognition of precariousness. What follows centres the stories of those who most intimately feel the impacts of global capitalism and perform the living labour that goes into holding everyday life together while reimagining and redefining the contours of a better life for themselves and their loved ones in ways that conform to but also defy neoliberal capitalism.

This book etches new insights by engaging concerns about how young people who live at the crux of global inequalities work to hold life together and persevere through precarious times. It addresses questions such as: What can young people's memories of childhood, relations of kin and care, and ambivalent senses of loss and hope reveal about the ways they register and persist through precarity? How are children's social worlds and subjectivities reconfigured through their particular migration routes that result in staggered family migrations and prolonged times of waiting? How does the uneven global distribution of gendered and generational labour impact young people who must contend with a reconfiguration of care and labour within their households? Finally, what constitutes a good life or a better life for young people labouring on the hypermargins of capitalism?

The pursuit of a better life takes centre stage in familial movements across borders, and Vea emphasized this construction through her narration of what she believed awaited her and her family in Canada. She clearly articulated what migration scholars have theorized regarding the driving desire migrants have when they give up a familiar life for the prospect of something better, not solely for themselves, but also (and perhaps mainly) for those they love (Abrego 2014; Ahmed 2010; Baldassar, Baldock, and Wilding 2006; Boehm 2012; Coe et al. 2011; Coutin 2016; Dreby 2015; Kwon 2015; Parreñas 2005a; Pratt 2012).

This book puts Filipino/a Canadian young people's life stories in conversation with theoretical discussions of what migration and the search for a better life entail. The young people that I will introduce strive to remain committed to their families' dreams for a better life, yet they do so among the contradictory experiences they had as children in transnational families

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

and in a Canadian society that fails to fully recognize and include them in spite of extracting their mothers' care work and, as a consequence, also extracting children's living labour. For them, a "good life" is contingent and deeply problematic – they struggle to negotiate what a good life means in relation to its neoliberal constructions associated with working hard in Canada while simultaneously identifying with the driving desire to return home because life after migration was not what they thought it would be.

The larger familial quest for a good life also had significant implications for young migrants' everyday lives as they grappled with the unexpected and emergent hardships that continued to create geographical, temporal, and relational ruptures. For Vea and her parents, committing to their family's life-building project in spite of the new hardships they faced after reuniting is an enactment of a hope that defies present conditions, yet those present conditions are still *present*. They are felt. Thus, the themes of reaching towards the "life that is supposed to be for me" and making "a choice that is necessary" reemerge through the book as central tropes that signify sacrifice and an attachment to the possible as a means of understanding and enduring uncertain times.

Working with Stories, Voice, and Memory

I draw on storytelling to explore young people's perspectives on their lives. Michael Jackson (2002) argues that stories help people understand and order their lives. Stories, he suggests, are not factual reflections but sensual, experiential narrations of private life. Many participants shared stories they had never spoken of, attempting to articulate their inner experiences. Tadiar (2009, 38) highlights how experience mediates between self and environment, connecting subjective activity and socioeconomic structures. Storytelling bridges subjective experience and the world, making oneself known. It is a political act that brings together diverse experiences to reveal the impacts of socioeconomic structures. Storytelling also asserts agency through the collective generation of knowledge (Arendt 1958; Das and Kleinman 2001; Dossa 2004).

Stories, memories, and emotions are central in this book. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996, xii) view memory as practice, produced out of experience and reshaping it, linking memory to identity. Soibam Haripriya (2020, 69) defines memory as organizing past experiences and engaging in varied recall (see also Berliner 2005). Remembering creates meaning, giving

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

a narrative sequence to our lives (Haripriya 2020, 70). Anthropologists argue that memory and remembering create continuity in lives – through times, places, relationships, and identities (Röttger-Rössler and Seise 2021). The retelling of the past can also bring coherence to otherwise messy or transitional stages of life.

Individual and collective memory are co-constitutive, Hapipriya (2000) argues. Individual memory is shaped by larger collective and social processes of remembering, and collective memory is shaped by individual – albeit uneven – contributions to narratives and archives of the past. Röttger-Rössler and Seise (2021, 104) speak to "memory talks" as "early childhood conversations with parents" that "shape how participants report their own memories, decisively impacting autobiographical memory. Memory talks initially sensitize participants to a familiarity with narrative structures (how something is told), help convey the prevailing understanding of time, and raise awareness of one's own experience." While this research points to the importance of memory as socially constructed, it also raises questions about the role of memories in the absence of one or both parents, who may not engage with their children in memory talks and whose absence may itself come to punctuate what is memorable about childhood.

Michael Jackson (2002, 2013), reflecting on his research with migrants and refugees, argues that stories enable people to understand and order their lives by giving words to events that may otherwise be unnamable. He suggests that stories are not reflections of factual content; rather, they are the sensual, experiential narrations of what is often considered private life. Jackson argues, "To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in positivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (15). Thus, he makes the important distinction between stories as representations and storytelling as agentive, transformative, and intersubjective processes of formulating and conveying meaning. Pratt (2009, 2012) similarly suggests that testimonies are layered constructions of the past that are reconfigured when orated, turned into text, and circulated for public consumption. She argues that writers have a responsibility to engage with people's storytelling that "encourage responses that affirm the testifiers' capacity to respond and hence their agency and subjectivity" (2012, 82).

I highlight the oral, embodied, and visual methods that invited multiple modalities of voice. I explore themes of music and poetry that reveal more

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

about young people's experiences of relationships. I draw from anthropologists like Veena Das (2007), Liisa Malkki (1996), and Amanda Weidman (2014), who see voice as a means to express agency and interact with structural forces. Weidman (2014, 38) describes voice as "sonic, material, and literary practices shaped by specific cultural and historical moments." Das (2007) argues that voice includes subtle forms of expression beyond clear speech. Malkki (1996) notes how hierarchical voices can erase certain knowledges, urging researchers to attend to when and how people speak for themselves. These works emphasize human agency, power structures, and diverse modes of expression beyond text. Scholars stress the importance of attending to smaller, often overlooked voices that speak to structural forces affecting loneliness, coping, and everyday enjoyment.

These scholarly insights prompt critical thinking about the forms voice can take and the spaces young people carve out in often unrecognized times. I focus on participants' stories about music, friendships, and love, paralleling their experiences of migration and family separation. Oneka LaBennett's (2011, 9) work with Brooklyn teenagers of migrant backgrounds highlights a "hazy divide between play and labour," where play is "neither idle nor easy" (see also Kelley 1997). The young people I met used music, poetry, friendships, and romantic relationships not just for leisure, but to cope with multiple losses through companionship and creative expression. These outlets helped them make sense of and find solace in their lives, reflecting laborious, grievous, and joyful experiences. By taking their "youthful subjectivities" (LaBennett 2011, 25) and dynamic modes of voice seriously, we learn how they navigated family separation and reunification, living relationally among many others.

Photographs are routinely included in the chapters of this book. It is important to remember that such images are more than facts. They are about creativity and its ambivalences, uncertainties, and ineffable reckonings of the world. Or, as Stevenson (2014, 41) suggests by drawing from Walter Benjamin, an image "is the precipitate of an experience rather than a factual account of events and physiognomies." Education scholar Catherine Burke (2008) and sociologist Marisol Clark-Ibáñez (2004) demonstrated how methods involving photography can reveal the ways young people critically evaluate their worlds and selectively decide on the kinds of images they want to capture and share. Much like other visual methods, photographs are most telling when participants have the opportunity to describe their meanings,

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

such as through photo-elicitation interviews (Moss 2008; Orellana 1999). Thus, the images I present from my participants are often accompanied by descriptions, sometimes in the form of poetry or prose, to give the reader a deeper sense of what the image is revealing about these young people's worlds. This book also showcases young people's creative forms of storytelling through embodied, visual, and sonic means. More specifically, I include their music, poetry, and photographs in various chapters, which they imbued with metaphors to help themselves and audiences better understand the complexities of navigating their transnational lives.

Through oral, textual, embodied, and visual storytelling, I could see my participants trying to actively make sense of their complex and contradictory experiences not only for me but also for themselves, attempting to harness the incoherence of life through the meaning-making involved in hindsight as well as the hope cast through imaginative foresight. Parin Dossa (2004, 37) points to the temporality at work in storytelling, where "complex lives may be captured within a temporal framework: what the past was like, what the present ought to be, and how the future is envisioned." Young people's stories attempted to conjure a kind of justice in this world through time – that their and their parents' labour would amount to a fair, redemptive outcome. Many of them also wanted their hardships and hopes to be known, and thus, they selectively chose what to share and how through multiple modalities. Their stories command our attention in order to bring their perspectives into broader purview and offer a retrieval of the kinds of stories that tend to easily slip away from dominant discourse (Tadiar 2009).

Throughout this book, I attempt to stay close to the words of my participants to convey their perspectives. I offer many of their quotes to highlight their expressions, often retaining their youthful way of speaking, which is not always perfectly reflective of standard English but is still equally worthy of our attention. My analysis of these stories as well as how they are and are not included in this book are of course partial and situated, shaped by my own positionality vis-à-vis these young people. Readers come to know the lives of some participants much more than others. This reflects how I came to know participants in very different ways through the unfolding of the ethnographic process, how they were reflecting on and narrating their life stories to me, and the fact that I spent much more time with some participants than others, upon which I reflect further in the methodological appendix.

Undoubtedly, my identities as a white, middle-class, English-speaking, Canadian-born, and university-educated woman stood out as key differences

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

between myself and those I met. As much as I could never imagine living through some of the experiences my participants shared with me and can only do my best to understand them through careful listening, checking back, and learning through other conversations and literature, there are also points at which the arcs of our lives parallel in unexpected ways. While maintaining accountability to name the structures that shape our disparate social positions of oppression and privilege, perhaps there are times when we can try to understand one another through a shared sense of humanity, allowing not just an informed curiosity but a justice-oriented sense of care and responsibility to motivate our aims. As Jackson (2013, 86) argues:

> To speak of a shared humanity is not to invoke a transcendent category of universal essence but to recognize the extent to which human beings are able to work out ways of communicating and coexisting with one another in the face of seemingly insurmountable differences. That these forms of mutuality are only randomly or rarely attained is no more a proof of ineradicable difference than their occasional attainment proves a common humanity. To invoke the human is simply a way of acknowledging one's potential or capacity for seeing oneself in the other and finding the other in oneself. Such moments are, as Judith Butler observes, often associated with the loss of someone dear to us and the sudden sense of vulnerability that follows. Such grievous loss, [Butler] writes, makes "a tenuous 'we' of us all." And "this is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know."

I end this introduction with a point on the role of witnessing as an important consideration for ethnographers collaborating with people and their stories. Witnessing is a critical epistemological position that ethnographers must take to move away from oppressive acts of othering and appropriation (Behar 1996; Das 2007; Dossa 2004; Jackson 2002, 2013; Ross 2001). Through her work with migrant Muslim women, Dossa (2004, 130–31) first suggests that witnessing involves an imperative to state what happened by conveying testimonies to wider audiences. Second, she suggests that witnessing involves being in a relationship with the storyteller. Behar (1996) elaborates on the intersubjectivity of witnessing by suggesting that ethnographers must be vulnerable, reflecting on and incorporating their emotions in their analyses. Finally, witnessing must also comprise not only hearing what is said but also what is left unsaid, as silence can be a communicative act (Basso

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

1970; Das 2007; Dossa 2004, 2008; Ross 2001). Witnessing, rather than merely observing, thus commands attention, reflection, and action in relation to those we meet and come to deeply care about.

Outline of the Book

This introduction serves to present the problem of long-term family separation amid the global demand for domestic workers. It situates the chain migration experienced by family members who follow one another to their destination country within the context of global capitalism and its uneven effects on women and children. It also highlights the dynamic nature of labour in the twenty-first century, with the rise of feminized labour calling upon migrant mothers and leaving a care gap within the home. The tender labour of migrant mothers' children filled this gap in more ways than one – not only is it productive of household tasks and kin-work, but it also fosters kinship and care by holding family bonds together and holding to hope through difficult times.

Chapter 1 focuses on precarious childhoods, including historical-structural conditions and the circumstances of everyday life. This chapter first speaks to longer histories in the Philippines that gave rise to widespread poverty and the political push for labour emigration. Then, by focusing on affect and agency, it reveals how children and other young people are often acutely aware of the economic conditions that propelled their mothers to work abroad. I demonstrate this through migrant young people's stories of the limits of everyday life, including the precarity of housing and food. These limits signified the challenges their families faced in their daily struggles to survive. Houses and food were not only indicative of economic precarity but also social precarity punctuated by strains on familial relationships and changes in care. Who was present at home and around the dinner table are memories that index young people's broader sentiments about living with and apart from their mothers. These registers were not only meaningful at the time of mother-child separation in terms of understanding why mothers left but also constituted new meanings as young migrants grapple with the arc of care throughout their young lives, including the acutely felt presence and absence of vital people and things. I argue that the material conditions of daily life are registers of precarity and changing life conditions as young people live and act relationally among others. This awareness of their precarious circumstances is informative of how children know about, sense,

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

and respond to their worlds as actors and agents, and it is the basis from which these young people respond to present hardships and future hope through tender labour.

Extending from feminist insights that are attentive to how migrant mothers care for their children from afar, in Chapter 2, I consider children's perspectives concerning their parents following their mothers' emigration. When their fathers' work and earnings were displaced through the demand for feminized domestic labour, children often watched their fathers struggle to respond to their changing roles and responsibilities. The change in parenting dynamics following family separation significantly impacted how family members managed the household and enacted care, practising what feminist theorists have argued to be an ethics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993). I show how older siblings were often acutely aware of their parents' marital strife and the different challenges they faced based on their positions in the family and labour market. More specifically, these young people's stories reveal how they labour amid patriarchal expectations and failures as they emotionally care for their fathers, who often seemed at a loss in the family without their role as a breadwinner. They also sought to emotionally care for their mothers, who often seemed to suffer while working abroad within larger global structures that commoditizes Filipina provision of care. I discuss the complexity of care from a political-economic perspective – one that leads to the separation of families for care work yet also is a deeply relational activity that seeks to counteract the strains of living apart as care is redistributed and exercised among family members. This chapter provides the most acute example of the tender labour that young people exuded in their families when precarity reshapes gender roles and kin relations domestically and across borders.

Chapter 3 addresses the ambiguities and ambivalences that young people experience through the course of transnational family separation. I demonstrate how young people experience waiting and reconstitute family and home when a mother moves away. I argue that the time children spent waiting to reunite with their mothers in Canada was productive of other kinds of relations and life experiences that reconfigured their youthful subjectivities. I incorporate the dynamic and sensory modes of storytelling these young people evoke to represent relationships through art. Young people reveal deeper metaphorical significances by using their passions and talents to give voice to their losses, frustrations, and dreams through the course of waiting. Tellingly, their creative outputs do not focus exclusively

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

on their thoughts about their parents but also on friendships and romantic relationships. Through storytelling and art, participants redirected my attention towards less language-bound modes of expression to reveal their senses of heartache and nostalgia.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrate that while the migration literature on family reunification often focuses on the mother-child dyad, this can obscure other relationships young people form in the course of waiting. Cared for by grandmothers, aunts, or siblings as well as becoming closer to best friends, romantic partners, and confidantes means that the time young people spend apart from mothers is utilized to cultivate vital connections. These connections were often quite painfully ruptured upon emigration. Thus, while reunification can signify a reconnection with one family member, paradoxically it may also involve a rupture in other relationships that constitute young people's everyday lives and senses of self in the Philippines. These ruptures are all the more difficult amid the resurgence of precarity in Canada. The perils of educational upgrading, the demands of work that impinged on family time, and their senses of the enclosure, isolation, and loneliness in their new homes profoundly challenge the joys of family reunification. In other words, life in Canada was not what many young people hoped it would be. Ultimately, maintaining relationships with loved ones in the Philippines is significant for these young people in terms of social continuity and remembering a sense of belonging amid hardships and disappointments in Canada.

Chapter 5 expands on the challenges of settling into life in Vancouver after family reunification. Importantly, it extends insight into life beyond family by examining young people's relations outside of the home. This includes their experiences meeting peers and attempting to find friends, which was often challenged by a sense of alienation in their schools, including not being seen or understood or not feeling like themselves. I also speak to my participants' polarizing experiences of either being tossed into entirely unfamiliar academic challenges or being underchallenged in repetitive schoolwork they felt they had learned years prior. In both cases, attempting to make friends in alienating circumstances and navigating misaligned academic placements, participants were led to a kind of inferior subjectivity and exhaustion beyond what they experienced in their homes and families. While friends and school had once been solacing for many of the young people I met, these were now arduous new challenges among so many others. Finally, I speak to the significance of youth workers and services that perhaps

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

offered glimpses of home, family, and belonging. I inquire into the blurry boundary between leisure and labour, where afterschool programming is both a site of support as well as a place where the ethos of work trickles in through notions of volunteerism and looking to build merit for the future. Through stories of academic misplacement, social alienation, and glimmers of belonging, I illuminate the fraught present conditions of life beyond family in the early years of settling in Canada.

Chapter 6 focuses on how young people plan for and enact the future. Migrant young people's dreams of a better life are not so much for themselves (as their parents hoped) but rather, reciprocally, for their parents. While the literature often points to parents' sacrifice for their children, my research finds that children, in turn, hope to sacrifice through labour and money for the sake of their parents – *to give their parents a better life*. Some participants I met flipped the narrative entirely; they hoped to attain a career that would allow them to send their parents back to the Philippines to enjoy the life they left behind or never had. Through these narratives, they revealed how life-building is about much more than a one-way trajectory, geographically and generationally. These mutual forms of care and sacrifice speak to Tagalog concepts of will and fulfillment through interdependent types of care but also interrelated senses of *being*, where one's life is inherently tied to another. Further, this chapter elucidates how many participants define a good life, often valourizing family and relations over work or money. Well-being for these young people concerns happiness defined by the presence of loved ones and a familiar home and not luxurious lifestyles or wealth.

I conclude by reflecting on how these young people construct senses of hope as a means of imaginatively manifesting a future that constitutes the life they believe they could and should have. It is an image of a life they are supposed to have, that is supposed to manifest from all of their tender labour, to which they grip tenaciously. Their narratives of effort, purpose, and home propel them through hard times with a driving desire to be with and care for their family members, just as their family members have done for them. This future, I suggest, is elusive and seems to constantly escape their grip, yet it is an alluring destiny – "a life that is supposed to be for me," explained Vea. I end by asking questions about how we, as audiences and readers of these young people's experiences of precarity, migration, kinship, and labour, can make space for their dreams to be known and manifest. I remind readers of the injustices these migrant families experience through histories, migrations, and labour conditions that make their lives

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

hard. In conclusion, I amplify the practical, loving, and hopeful aims that migrant young people put forward and ask that readers consider their stories and dreams with practical, loving, and hopeful responses in return. I wonder how we can make space for these dreams to be known, for if we know, perhaps we can also make space for them to manifest, as we might hope for our own children. My hope is that this book carves out some of these spaces for Vea and her friends to put their experiences and hopes out into the world.

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025

© UBC Press 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without prior written permission of the publisher.

UBC Press is a Benetech Global Certified Accessible™ publisher.
The epub version of this book meets stringent accessibility standards,
ensuring it is available to people with diverse needs.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Tender labour : migrant care work,
Filipina/o young people, and family life across borders / Jennifer E. Shaw.

Names: Shaw, Jennifer E., author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20250111713 | Canadiana (ebook) 2025011190X |
ISBN 9780774871303 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774871327 (PDF) |
ISBN 9780774871334 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Children of foreign workers—British Columbia—Case studies. |
LCSH: Children of immigrants—British Columbia—Case studies. | LCSH: Immigrant
nannies—Family relationships—British Columbia—Case studies. | LCSH: Child
care workers—Family relationships—British Columbia—Case studies. | LCSH:
Filipinos—Family relationships—British Columbia—Case studies. | LCSH: Children
—Family relationships—Philippines—Case studies.

Classification: LCC HQ792.C3 S53 2025 | DDC 305.23089/99210711—dc23

Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des arts du Canada

Canada

British Columbia Arts Council

British Columbia

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support
for our publishing program of the Government of Canada, the Canada Council
for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for
the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Scholarly Book Awards, using funds
provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

*UBC Press is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory
of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people. This land has always been a place of learning for
the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, who have passed on their culture, history, and traditions for
millennia, from one generation to the next.*

UBC Press
The University of British Columbia
www.ubcpress.ca

Sample Materials © UBC Press 2025