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Recommended Citation

Valerie Francisco. "When Caring Hurts: The Work of Strained Relationships in Transnational Families" *American Sociological Association Annual Meeting* (2014).

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When Caring Hurts: The Work of Strained Relationships in Transnational Families

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The normative conception of care work is described through qualities of nurturance, love and warmth in the intimate relationships of family members. However, the work of caring for family draws from a range of affects, from warmhearted to reticent. Applied to studies of transnational families, scholars have shown that children of migrants demonstrate resentment and indignation towards their parents abroad because of their absence. Based on the definition of care work as nurturance, transnational children narrate the emotional distance to their migrant parents with cynicism. Yet, children left behind still attend to the necessary work needed to keep their families functional despite emotive dissonance. This paper explores the labor of maintaining transnational families in spite of the positive or negative emotional charge of caring. Adding nuance to the literature on care work within the transnational family, I argue that care work is still work even if family members do not express that work with love. I seek to untangle the idea of care work as nurturing or loving; and instead present examples where care work is cold to establish the idea that caring is work that is allocated no matter the moral underpinnings. To offer a different framework to understand hostility in the care work transnational families, I use a social reproductive labor framework to analyze the emotions involved with caring in a transnational family. I provide evidence from my multi-sited ethnography of care work in Filipino transnational families to demonstrate care work carried out within strained relationships.

Althea and Olivia

Althea told me that she is not close to her mother, not like how other girls are with their mothers. At the time of our conversation, Althea was 23 years old, living in Manila and struggling to finish college, as her mother would like her to. She was currently living with her boyfriend's family and is frustrated with the task of finishing college because all she wanted to do was work. But since her mother's wish is for her to obtain a college diploma, Althea had been trying very hard to stay committed to her college courses and her major, nursing. Her irritation with college comes from feeling constrained in her decisions as an adult. Althea believed that if she were to discontinue her education, her mother would stop monthly remittances. Even without her mother being present in the Philippines, her mother Olivia assigned aunts and cousins the responsibility to track Althea's progress in school. Several times, Althea tried to escape from her mother's designated caretaker by moving out of shared residences and transferring schools but she said that they always caught up to her. It seems that Althea could never get far enough from her mother's watchful (third or fourth) eye.

Although Althea acknowledged that her mother's migration has helped her live a more comfortable life, amenities such as shelter, clothing, food and education at her reach, she lamented the costs of those comforts. In her 23 years of life, she has only seen her mother for a total of eight months. One month when she was three, another month when she was six, eight, and thirteen, two months when she was fifteen and the last time when Althea was 18. Even when Olivia came home to spend time with Althea, Althea commented on the fact that those some few days did not make up for the years of absence, she says, "I mean I'm not that close with my mom, not even when she came here. Because when your

mom is far, you don't...its like you don't feel a nature sense that she's your own mama. Not like with other moms who live close to their kids and they're glad to be together because your mom is right there. We didn't get along." Althea's mother's short stints in the Philippines in between labor contracts in different countries stopped when she was able to land a temporary visa to the U.S. Since then she has not been able to come back home because of her undocumented status in the U.S. Even though Althea did not express a loving emotional attachment to her mother, she tears up about how grateful she is for her mother paying for her bills diligently and so Althea ensures that she calls her mother once a month.

Olivia's side of the story starts as she told me about the biggest sacrifice she made: migrating abroad for work when Althea was only 6 months old. Olivia tells me that Althea's father left soon after he found out about her pregnancy. She remembers being devastated when she had to leave her baby girl, knowing that if she stayed in the Philippines that they would live in a state of poverty. Although painful, Olivia said that she pursued any and all opportunities to work abroad, knowing that earning a living abroad would be the only way to provide a better future for her daughter. Olivia believed that she made the best decision she could for Althea.

As Althea grew into adulthood, Olivia admitted that she has been disappointed about her daughter's decisions. She has been hurt on the times that Althea lied to her about transferring schools and moving in with her boyfriend's family. Olivia turned to her sister, nieces and nephews to keep an eye out for Althea. She instructed them to disburse her monthly allowance to Althea only when she obeyed Olivia's rules and report to her what Althea's daily actions and movements were. Feeling betrayed, Olivia gave Althea an ultimatum, remittances and financial support would cease if Althea dropped out of college.

After reflecting on the state of her relationship with her daughter, Olivia expressed her regrets about having to migrate, wishing that she could reverse her migration so that she could be on better terms with her daughter. *“Sana nga, malapit pa siya sa akin. Pero ginawa ko ang kailangan gawin para sa amin dalawa. Kahit na di kami nagkakasundo, pamilya pa rin kami.* I wish we were close. But I did what was best for the both of us. Even if we don’t get along, we are still family,” says Olivia. Even with the threats of cutting off Althea’s monthly allowances, Olivia still sends money back bi-monthly, pays for basic necessities like rent, tuition and food, and plans to go back to see Althea as soon as possible.

Althea and Olivia’s story is mired with hurt feelings and betrayal of trust. The only cohesive thread in their family narrative is a feeling of bitterness both from abroad and the place left behind. Both Althea and Olivia base their comments about their current relationship on an idea of what a mother-daughter relationship is supposed to be, their internalized understanding of being “close” as the only productive way of being mother and daughter often disregards productive aspects of their, otherwise dysfunctional, relationship. Both Althea and Olivia have been and continue to disappoint each other, they harbor feelings of resentment and distrust, yet they both still attend to one another’s needs for care, almost more diligently when under great pressure and stress. This mother and daughter dyad continue to do care work in their family despite their churlish manner with each other, whether its Althea’s phone calls once every third Sunday of each month exactly at 8:00 am Eastern Standard Time or its Olivia’s bi-monthly remittance to pay for Althea’s rent, utilities and food expenses. In this paper, I mean to make room for the predictable emotional distance that is created by migration in transnational families, but I also wish to highlight that care work is still taken up under these thinning emotional conditions.

Their stories are hard to unravel as one story of betrayal triggers a story of lashing out, from daughter to mother and vice versa. Like any other parent-child dyad, transnational dyads also experience trying emotional times. However, transnational families are navigating those difficult periods with the challenge of separation, therefore they must figure out how to manage their relationships from afar. For Althea and Olivia, finding out how to trust one another again, given their thinning relationship means that they have to redefine what types of communication and connection they can and want to maintain in their transnational arrangement. This requires a mutual understanding that their experience as a dyad is always happening in Manila and New York City at once. I approach exploring this dynamic by considering, “transnational belonging and emotional attachment is not to be understood as belonging in two separate places, but rather as an intensification of experience that forges new connections as it nurtures the old ones”(Svasek, 2008, p. 224). For Althea and Olivia, the emotional attachments in their transnational family are based on the existing emotional distance in their relationship and intensified by physical distance they must navigate. And still, they must continually negotiate their intimacy, or lack thereof, by forging new connections and meanings of how to be in their family.

In this paper, I will make two interventions in the sociology of the family and in the application of care work in studies of transnational families in sociology. First, I argue that the sentimentalization of the affective ties in the transnational family limits what we interpret and analyze as care work. The labor in keeping a family together can already be dysfunctional and painful when they live under the same roof, the same city or in the same nation. Transnational families are not exempt from this dynamic. In past studies of

transnational families, when scholars expose narratives of children who are resentful of migrant parents or migrant parents outraged at spoiled children in their place left behind it is easy to conceptualize these dynamics as rooted in migration and separation. While some of these social interactions can be produced and triggered by separation, transnational families continue to maintain family operations like communication or payment of bills regardless of bitterness and hurt. When the definition of care work is defined solely on sentimental character of nurturance and warmth, we fail to see the other types of labor that continues in the family.

Second, this dynamic of indignation and resent is rightfully represented across many studies of the transnational family (Parrenas 2005, Dreby 2010). Scholars have described a whole relationship in its totality with negative emotional charges. Like Althea and Olivia, a majority of their lives has been spent negotiating anger, disappointment and betrayal with each other. However, these types of emotional distance can also describe temporary periods of time in the lives of transnational family members. In this paper, I want to provide evidence that it is absolutely true that children left behind feel abandoned and migrant parents feel taken advantage of, but I want to contextualize that inside of family histories where abandoned children and taken-advantage-of parents are also children who finish school in honor of their parents' sacrifice and parents who buy expensive present to express their pride over their children's accomplishments. This paper attends to the contradictions that live in the bodies of children left behind and migrant parents, it assumes that the dynamic of transnational families occurs in simultaneity and the contradictions that arise are often actions and reactions.

This chapter is contributing to a literature in the sociology of the family that is pulling apart the concept of “care work” from nurturance, love and warmth. Scholars have argued that the work of the family must happen whether we feel up to it or not. For transnational families these periods of emotional strain is compounded by separation over long periods of times and long distances, however, transnational family members continue perform acts of care despite contradictory emotions, define care work in terms of both giver and receiver and consider familial well-being before individual desires to participate in care work.