

# REVIEWS



***Care Activism: Migrant Domestic Workers, Movement-Building, and Communities of Care* by Ethel Tungohan. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2023, 232 pp. \$28.00 paper, ISBN 978-0-252-05478-5.**

In *Care Activism*, Ethel Tungohan theorizes on the praxis of care activism. By focusing on acts of care and communities of care in local, national, and transnational migrant care workers' organizing, she challenges conventional knowledge of social movements and the sociopolitical location of migrant care workers, primarily women, in unequal global structures. Her work establishes a novel way of analyzing the functioning and success of social movements by expanding the focus from whether and how the group achieves policy goals intended to affect material conditions to how they attend to their care needs. Care, in Tungohan's conception, aims to rehumanize the dehumanized through interconnecting cultural, economic, political, and social actions. Tungohan does not refute that some organizations may pursue specific policy goals like most social movements. Indeed, several of the organizations in the book actively interact with the state as an advocating body, such as Migrante, albeit in unconventional ways sometimes. Instead, their main objective is to provide networks and spaces for themselves, their fellow migrant care workers, and their families to feel joy, be loved, and remain supported in a time of extended deprivation, isolation, and separation.<sup>1</sup>

Employing extensive ethnographic and feminist methods and fruitfully bridging conversations on migrant labour, democratic engagements, and social movements, *Care Activism* contends that the affective dimension of activism (i.e., an activism of care) and its sites of resistance should not be dismissed as mere "distractions' from the larger fight," as mainstream academic analyses would often do in favour of more discursive-oriented and politically-engaged organizing.<sup>2</sup> For Tungohan, this narrow focus on the political side of activism neglects the group's internal dynamics as a community. She aims to illuminate the centrality of relationality in the form of attending to the needs of, and being responsible to, others in migrant organizing, specifically, and social movements, more generally.

---

1. Ethel Tungohan, *Care Activism: Migrant Domestic Workers, Movement-Building, and Communities of Care* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

The book introduces readers to several stories of migrant care workers from different political contexts to examine the diverse manifestations of care activism. The first chapters focus on migrant care work in Canada, outlining its historical development in relation to the evolving socioeconomic landscape of Canadian society, the changing demographics of migrant care work and the increased presence of Filipina women, and the current situation of migrant domestic work organizing. The middle chapters follow migrant care organizations as they act to legitimize domestic work and advocate for issues affecting migrant care workers in different contexts, comparing their policy goals and strategies as each organization navigates the sociopolitical terrain of their respective sites. The final chapter examines local care activism, narrating the diverse but often ignored ways migrant care workers resist their paradoxically invisible and hypervisible existence, such as through beauty pageants, flash dances, and workplace humour. Together, these chapters embody an ethic of care as they articulate the emotional complexities of being a migrant care worker and care activist (sometimes both) in varying circumstances.

Woven throughout Tungohan's beautifully-written excerpts, interviews, and case studies is the importance of care in migrant domestic workers' actions and intentions toward themselves, each other, their families, and the larger transnational community of migrant workers. Following Filipino- American transnational feminist scholar Valerie Francisco- Menchavez's work, Tungohan details how migrant care workers collectively cope with the stresses, precarity, and liminality of their work by expanding their ruptured relationships of care to include other migrant care workers (and migrant workers).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, each migrant domestic workers' organization and individual mentioned in the book acknowledges that the collective experience of discrimination, family fragmentation, devalued work, and labour abuse, as well as the overall lack of support from sending and receiving states, encourages migrant care workers to identify each other as *kasamas* (individuals journeying together), often replicating and extending familial dynamics. According to Tungohan, these acts of care form communities of care and foster bonds of solidarity. She contends that these communities of care ensure that members and their families feel secure and supported and, if applicable, act as advocacy organizations.

Tungohan's comparison of migrant movements in Canada, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Singapore compellingly illustrates the influence of endogenous circumstances, such as political and policy restrictions, group ideologies, and normative visions of social justice, on possible advocacy and organizing strategies.<sup>4</sup> Some groups emphasize economic empowerment, offering employment opportunities and workshops on financial management, while other groups focus on social and political education, emphasizing the importance of a progressive and transnational voice for Filipina women. Regardless of their ideological differences, which as the book presents, are frequently set aside when confronted with issues gravely affecting migrant care workers, Tungohan identifies that the desire to care for others drives

---

3. Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

4. Tungohan, *Care Activism*, 163–164.

these activists to organize and support each other as a community and, in turn, their actions serve to empower other migrant domestic workers.

Her insistence on a care-focused analysis of public organizing constructively resists established understandings of migrant activism. Rather than solely focusing on the group's discursive and sociopolitical goals, Tungohan situates migrant activism within a diverse set of relations and activities that attend to the collective needs of these racialized and gendered migrant workers. Tungohan adeptly demonstrates how these women's locus of power is in their solidarity and the acts of care that they do for one another, establishing that community fosters activism, and activism is about community.

Methodologically, Tungohan challenges state-centric analytical approaches to organizing by embracing previously-ignored sites of advocacy, community, and resistance. For example, traditional feminist critiques of beauty pageants suggest that these events perpetuate reductive patriarchal stereotypes of feminine beauty and bodies. However, drawing from queer theorists like queer Filipino-Canadian postcolonial scholar Robert Diaz, Tungohan shows how beauty pageants, such as the Miss Caregiver and Mother-of-the-Year beauty pageant, can be community-building and empowerment projects since they allow migrant domestic workers to express themselves, fundraise as a collective to support various needs, and learn important advocacy and leadership skills.<sup>5</sup> As Tungohan exhibits, decentering the hegemonic state and focusing on internal dynamics productively problematizes established understandings of organizing.

Simultaneously, these organizations' care activities consistently extend beyond national, spatial, and temporal boundaries. Tungohan illustrates how migrant domestic workers' organizations engage in a praxis that considers present and future care needs, motivated by the legacies of past care activists and the prospect of future successes for themselves and their families, especially their children. The book emphasizes these migrant domestic workers' spatial and temporal fluidity through their transnational and intergenerational acts of care. This non-conformity to conventions is equally reflected in Tungohan's attempts to contest established scholarly knowledge and forge a more nuanced understanding of migrant activism.

While deeply embedded in these women's embodied knowledge of global economic inequalities and their marginalized identities of "nanny"/"caregiver," Tungohan alludes to an expansion of the praxis in the conclusion. She maintains that care for others, primarily when it is premised on understanding power relations and its effects on people, can foster "a genuine belief in shared fate and in relationality."<sup>6</sup> Tungohan's belief in a more caring activist world is compelling because, looking at Indigenous governance and constitutionalist scholar Kiera Ladner's work, commonalities exist between migrant and Indigenous organizing.<sup>7</sup> In both migrant and Indigenous organizing, members are responsible to one another in transnational settings

---

5. Robert Diaz, "Queer Unsettlements: Diasporic Filipinos in Canada's World Pride." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 19.2 (2016): 327 – 350; Tungohan, *Care Activism*, 184 – 187.

6. Tungohan, *Care Activism*, 207.

7. Kiera Ladner, "Aysaka'paykinit: Contesting the Rope Around the Nation's Neck," in *Group Politics and Social Movements in Canada*, ed. Miriam Smith (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2008), 227–249.

and enact advocacy and community projects that embody a dream for a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities. Tungohan inspires an understanding that recognizes these similarities, while not losing their contextual complexities, can lead to meaningful solidarity among the marginalized against capitalist, colonial, imperial, and heteropatriarchal global systems of oppression.

Lastly, *Care Activism* is equally accessible to undergraduate and graduate students, scholars, and the general public because it reads conversationally yet intellectually. As Tungohan narrates these migrant care workers' journeys of empowerment, community, and solidarity, she introduces readers to various concepts, such as "communities of care," without being too overburdened with abstractness and superfluous jargon. Tungohan also expertly guides readers through her arguments and evidence despite the broad scholarly engagement. Although it is an academic book, readers will become enamored by the narratives because of how emotionally bountiful and grounded they are.

As a methodological piece, *Care Activism* is an excellent example of feminist and migrant comparative work. While it emphasizes care, a feminist-rooted concept, its clear migrant focus deterritorializes care to demonstrate broader linkages between diverse localities and temporalities as well as local and national actors. The book's ethnographic work similarly exhibits Tungohan's commitment to being an activist scholar. She employs her work to highlight how the marginalized rehumanize themselves and in the process, empower one another through community, in which she partakes. As such, courses on comparative politics, gender and politics, and postcolonialism would truly benefit from the addition of this book to their syllabi, especially with its treatment of a marginalized group and its challenges to traditional political science scholarship.

*Care Activism* unequivocally offers a new way of thinking about and doing migrant activism. It inspires a recognition among students and scholars that a coalition of transnational, transtemporal care is possible once "care" is understood as an inclusive act of solidarity and support and of recognizing the humanity in others in the face of global structural and systemic failures.

Kad Mariano

### **Leeroy New's *Balete Bulate Bituka* at The Bentway**

My first encounter with the work of Filipino artist Leeroy New was on the shores of Urbiztondo Beach in La Union, Philippines. It was the golden hour and I was accompanied by a gracious local surfer, JP. In fact, there were two local surfers who had invited me, separately and mid-surf, to see *Mebuyan's Vessel* (or just "Mebuyan" for short)—this affirmed to me that New's sculptural intervention was indeed a recognized landmark beyond the elite creative class in La Union's surftown community.

From the peak of *Mebuyan's Vessel*—an inhabitable multi-pod environment inspired by a Bagobo death and fertility goddess with many layers of breasts—I played broken telephone through plastic water jugs and admired the filtered light of the sun slipping into the sea. Two months later, I would