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Book Review: Working feminism. By Geraldine Pratt

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Working feminism. By Geraldine Pratt. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2004. 218 pp. £14.99 paper. ISBN 0 7486 1570 9.

Working feminism puts feminist theory to work on the concrete struggle of Filipino domestic workers caught up in a global chain of feminized and racialized exploitation. Geraldine Pratt insists that feminism be understood in the historical context of colonialism, as well as highly uneven global economic development. A 'cosmopolitan feminism' is advocated which engages 'real situations' and worlds beyond 'the west' (p. 13). The author situates Filipino migration to Canada in a process of 'collaborative empire'. This sees national debt propel Filipino workers overseas, chasing the prospect of a better future, at the same time as the receiving country offers immigration as a means of plugging persistent labour shortages (primarily in health care), as well as presenting middle-class families with affordable private child care as partial compensation for a diminishing welfare state.

Working feminism provides rich detail and soul to the bald story told by labour market statistics of migrant women ghettoized in jobs for which they are overqualified. The author draws on in-depth interviews with government officials, nanny agents, family employers and migrant domestic workers to illustrate how Filipinas are produced as long-term, low-paid caregivers through powerful local cultures of racialized power. State immigration policy is not alone responsible for perpetuating unequal tiers of citizenship. Family employers, for example, absorb from the nanny agencies the distinction between 'passive and loyal' Filipino 'housekeepers' as compared to 'educated' European 'nannies' (who may command \$150 more per month and assume superior rights for the same job). This way the Filipina domestic is depicted as someone 'who is loving and hard-working but will let your children pee in the park' (p. 53).

This book powerfully reinforces evidence of a global chain of exploitation. This global care chain binds middle-class women's participation in employment to the subjugation of migrant female labour, (re)producing middle class women 'in relation to their female counterpart, the racialized servant' (p. 32). In this respect, the author candidly admits that she turned to look at the case study of domestic workers in Vancouver precisely because of the discomfort it created for her – as a middle-class white woman with a young child – where she recognized that her gains in gender equity in the labour market (such as they are) rest on the availability of low-waged women of colour and unpaid grandmothers.

Far from shunning the provocative question of why some academic researchers may choose never to leave the safe confines of the university library, Geraldine Pratt uses the dialogue between feminist theory and practice to reflect on the problems of political engagement as a critical geographer. She is disarmingly honest about the 'messiness of social engagement'. The book's energy and passion owes much to her collaboration with an activist group, the Philippine Women's Centre, yet this engagement is not without contradiction and compromise. One of the most important issues this book raises, therefore, is the question how the academy can contribute more meaningfully to grass-roots transformation. One way is to disseminate research more

widely, beyond the narrowly elitist publications deemed suitable output for the purpose of justifying funding, to give something back to the communities under scrutiny. In this I fervently endorse the author's plea for applied research to be valued more highly in terms of academic career development.

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