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Book Review of, Calling Family: Digital Technologies and the Making of Transnational Care Collectives

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Book Review

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In *Calling Family*, anthropologist Tanja Ahlin reflects on a conversation with a senior colleague who asked, “So people pick up the phone and call each other. What is so special about that?” (13). This engaging, sophisticated book unpacks answers to this deceptively simple question. Ahlin makes a significant contribution to science and technology studies and medical anthropology by exploring how migrant nurses from Kerala, India engage in digitally mediated care practices and communication about health with their families while living abroad in a variety of destination countries, including Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the U.A.E., Guyana, the Maldives, Germany, South Africa, the U.S., the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia. The book relies on both anthropology and science and technology studies (STS) to explore everyday forms of telemedicine, including those administered informally by migrant nurses for their parents back in India using a smart phone and a common app such as Skype, WhatsApp, or FaceBook. Ahlin introduces the concept of “care collectives” to describe assemblages of people and technologies, such as phones and webcams, which allow migrant Christian nurses to provide care at a distance for their aging parents.

The book is well written and descriptively rich. For example, gripping vignettes in Chapter one, of visiting Sara’s family in Kerala and Sara herself in Oman, left me eager to learn ‘what happens next’ in each story. Here as elsewhere in the book, Ahlin makes excellent use of her detailed ethnographic observations to anchor cutting-edge theories in relatable and memorable stories. Fieldwork for this monograph took place between 2011 and 2022, with the bulk of physically co-present interviews done in Kerala and Oman in 2014-2015. The material also considers how the COVID-19 pandemic generalized many practices of caring at a distance not only among migrants but also between those living in proximity to one another during the time of mandatory social distancing.

In the second chapter, Ahlin provides background information on the Indian state of Kerala, noting its status as a developed “model state” (21) with high literacy, including digital literacy. A large proportion of the Kerala population is Christian. Christians, who make up three percent of the population of India, are over-represented as thirty percent of the country’s nurses (27). Kerala has a large percentage of migrants involved in global care chains, and their remittances spur local social mobility. This chapter also contains a thought-provoking methodological reflection on what makes a digital ethnography ‘good.’ Ahlin’s interlocutors in India put her in touch digitally with their kin working abroad. The author reflects on the benefits and detriments of remote interviews and considers how to define a field

site when virtual interviews or “field events” (36) can take place through digital technologies that connect every part of the world instantaneously.

In Chapter three, the author discusses what counts as good or bad elder care in contexts of physical proximity, thus providing a foil against which readers can judge digital care at a distance. Local ideas of care focus on embodied practices enacted through physical presence, sharing of food, and co-residence; clearly, migrant children cannot fulfill these moral imperatives. Media stereotypes condemn migrants as “materialistic and individualistic” (47) individuals who abandon their lonely elders. Ahlin explores the general situation for older adults in Kerala who are unable to remain in their own homes with kin as they age. Such elders can stay in pay-for-stay elder care homes for middle-class residents or free “orphanages” (53) for destitute residents who have no kin. Residence in either kind of facility indicates that children have failed to provide the morally necessary “seva” or service to elders (49) through the household. Ahlin deftly scrutinizes and critiques the stereotypes of selfish migrants and abandoned elders by explaining how, through care collectives, migrant children offer seva from a distance. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the possibility of elders feeling lonely and receiving less-than-perfect care even while living with kin. Throughout this chapter, Ahlin challenges the too-simple expectation that all in-person care is satisfactory and shows that care at a distance can be not only adequate but also good.

In Chapter four, Ahlin explores in detail the nature of care collectives, one of the book’s key theoretical contributions to discussions of STS care studies. Care collectives consist of both devices and humans. Digital technologies in the care collectives include landlines, simple handphones, and smartphones; tablets, laptops, personal computers, and webcams; internet connections; and apps such as Skype, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Humans include not only the migrants and their parents, but also siblings, close friends, shopkeepers, and others who repair or maintain the technologies or assist elders in making connections. Establishing calling routines involves tinkering with communication technologies and experimenting with scheduling to coordinate work shifts and activity patterns across multiple time zones. Ahlin outlines how, in the absence of physical co-presence, people learn now to be together at a distance. Digital contact allows people to enmesh themselves in the mundane and trivial details of each other’s lives through frequent phone calls (“sharing everydayness”) or to hang out together, often in silence, while connected by webcam (“spending time together at a distance”) (88).

Considering the non-human actors in care collectives, Ahlin highlights not only digital technologies but also money. In Chapter five, she discusses how financial transactions in transnational care collectives – including loans and remittances – have changed the expectations of daughters in Kerala. Parents sacrifice financially to give their daughters an education in nursing and English, resulting in unmarried daughters and, increasingly, married daughters who become migrant laborers, sending remittances to their parents as a form of filial piety. This new transnational financial arrangement increasingly presses against older Kerala practices that daughters transfer their loyalties to their husband’s family after marriage. Ahlin discusses the demands daughters feel to do well in their studies and find employment in well-paying destination countries that offer the opportunity for permanent residence (104). Concomitantly, roles for stay-at-home husbands change to encompass physical care for parents and children, thus challenging older gender roles. Drawing on Jeanette Pols’ idea of empirical ethics (2013), Ahlin shows that people in transnational families engage in “tinkering, exploring, and modifying” (90) existing social structures and relationships, thus transforming what it means to be a good son or daughter.

Ahlin’s contributions to medical anthropology and the anthropology of aging shine through in Chapter six. Here, the author discusses how migrant nurses “do health” (116) for and with their aging parents,

paying particular attention to the role of money and digital technologies. Migrant nurses monitor their parents' health through frequent calls and photographs and also often send funds or medical devices to assist with chronic conditions. When confronting illness, a wider range of machinery, including medical devices and cars, and a wider range of individuals, such as siblings, friends, neighbors, technicians, and medical practitioners, enter the transnational care collective. This chapter also illustrates the multiple flows of care between members of care collectives. For example, during the travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents in Kerala worried about how occupational hazards would affect their children's health and the intense desire to socialize with absent grandchildren motivated grandmothers to learn how to master the digital devices that kept them in contact with their absent kin. When parents suffer acute difficulties, migrants activate their wider networks in Kerala or even return home, though usually not permanently. Few participants in Ahlin's study relinquished the employment opportunities and higher quality of life in their host countries (142). The book concludes with reflections on care collectives, digital ethnography, and the importance of studying grassroots forms of telemedicine.

Calling Family is easy to read. Ahlin's detailed, richly descriptive, often-humorous, always-touching vignettes ably and memorably illustrate important theoretical points. The book will spark lively conversations in an undergraduate classroom and fruitfully engage graduate students and academics interested in South Asia, science and technology studies, medical anthropology, gerontology, migration, digital ethnography, and the anthropology of aging.

References

Pols, Jeanette. 2013. *The Chronification of Illness: Empirical Ethics of Care*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press.