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## **Sending Granny to Chiang Mai: debating global outsourcing of care for the elderly**

Schwiter, Karin ; Brüttsch, Jill ; Pratt, Geraldine

**Abstract:** This article ties in with existing discussions on global care chains, family separation and the devaluation of social-reproductive work. We explore the new trend of outsourcing care for the elderly to countries with lower wages. We base our analysis on the debate in the German press and supplement it with insights from ethnographic field observations in two care homes in Thailand. We identify a discourse of abandonment, which shows how outsourcing the care of the elderly unsettles the privilege of sedentarism that is often taken for granted in the Global North. Furthermore, the newspaper articles tend to villainize people who seek care for their loved ones abroad. We argue that both discourses foster a neoliberal rationale of individualized responsibility and obfuscate the deep systemic roots of the care crisis in the Global North. However, by extending the discussion on outsourcing care for the elderly beyond the dominant media discourses, we envisage a rich potential for provoking political debate on the revaluation of care.

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## **Abstract**

Our paper ties in with existing discussions on global care chains, family separation and the devaluation of social-reproductive work. It explores the novel trend of outsourcing eldercare to countries with lower wages. Our analysis is based on the media debate in the German language press and supplemented with insights from ethnographic observations in two care homes in Thailand. We identify a discourse of abandonment that indicates how outsourcing eldercare unsettles the privilege of sedentarism that is often taken for granted in the global north. Furthermore, the news articles villainize families who seek care for their loved ones abroad. We argue that both discourses foster a neoliberal rational of individualized responsibility and obfuscate the deep systemic roots of the care crisis in the global north. However, in extending the discussion on outsourcing eldercare beyond the media discourses, we envisage a rich potential to provoke a political debate on the revaluation of care.

## **Introduction**

Around 2012, the German language media began to follow a small and controversial trend: outsourcing eldercare from countries in the global north (in particular Germany and Switzerland) to places such as Poland or Thailand, where care is more affordable.<sup>1</sup> This trend is but one instance of the reterritorialization and new spacings of care and intimacy made more possible by advanced communication and biomedical technologies<sup>2</sup>, made more probable by neoliberal economic pressures and the saturation of market principles throughout social life, and made more necessary by the crisis of care in the global north.

It differs from conventional retirement migration (cf. Allan et al. 1997, Hall and Hardill 2016, Ormond and Toyota 2017), because it does not entail the so called ‘young’ seniors who resettle to retirement communities in warmer climates when they are still active and healthy. Instead the debate centers on ‘old’ seniors who are in need of care. Many of them are frail or suffer from forms of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease and therefore can no longer arrange their care for

themselves. Their care needs are complex, extensive and expensive, and it is often family members who decide to place them in a seniors' home abroad.

While it is a familiar approach for countries in the global north to assuage their 'care gap' by attracting care workers from the global south (Yeates 2012), reversing the directionality of the mobility in what Arlie Hochschild (2000) has termed the global care chain, by sending elderly persons in need of care to countries where wages are lower and care is cheaper, is a decidedly novel approach to this old problem that has so far received scant attention by scholars (Horn et al. 2016, 163). It acknowledges that not only care-givers, but also the cared-for might be mobile (Raghuram 2012).

It is perhaps not surprising that transporting aging loved ones hundreds and even thousands of kilometers to be cared for by strangers for the remaining duration of their lives, often because of the high costs associated with caring for persons with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, has attracted media attention and created controversy. Outsourcing eldercare raises key questions and anxieties about intimacy, family, obligations of care, personal autonomy, abandonment, and our capacity to experience a 'good death' (Hart et al. 1998). Families, even in western societies in which the autonomy of the individual and freedom from the constraints of inheritance are foundational values<sup>3</sup>, are complex and contradictory sites of crisscrossing discourses, not only of personal autonomy and choice but of kinship, blood relations, and social obligation (Foucault 1978; Povinelli 2006). The family is a key site for experiences of and debates about what Povinelli (2011: 27, paraphrasing Foucault) identifies as "late liberal ways of making living, making die and letting die."

This debate is of more than ethical consideration. Feminists have long criticized a tendency for political economists (and most everyone else) to hive off the family, and social reproduction more generally, as non-economic or non-productive. If the activities of social reproduction are devalued in general, the care of elderly, who also are viewed as non-productive, is doubly so. In the words of Sylvia Federici (2012a: 237), "elder care suffers from a double cultural and social devaluation." The care deficits that countries in the global north are struggling to manage are a current manifestation of a fundamental contradiction within capitalist economies. That is, while social reproduction is essential, it is often viewed as non-productive and many have argued that this devaluation is essential to the profitability of capitalist enterprise. Materialist feminists argue that conditions that sustain the profitability of capitalist enterprises tend to destabilize processes of social reproduction and the economy and society as a whole: "destroying its own conditions of possibility capital's accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail" (Fraser 2016: 103). In the current period, increasing social

polarization, employment precarity, household reliance on two wage earners, the weakening of networks of mutual aid through processes such as gentrification, and government disinvestment from social welfare provision deplete the capacity of individuals, households and communities to care for themselves (Federici 2012a; Folbre et al. 2007; Glazer 1993; Meehan and Strauss 2015; Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2004). If Nancy Fraser is right that, “No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long” (2016: 99), debates surrounding the management of the care gap have profound and widespread economic, social and political implications.

Viewed as a reversal of the mobility in already existing global care chains, public discussion about outsourcing eldercare has some interesting peculiarities relative to debates about migrant care workers. In the case of care workers who leave their children behind to provide care in wealthier nations, certainly there is controversy in their home countries. Parrenas (2013) has written extensively about the ‘vilification’ of mothers who leave their children to work abroad not only in the Philippines, but in Poland (where children left by mother labor migrants have been termed ‘euro-orphans’), Romania (where the fact of mothers working abroad has been framed as a ‘national tragedy’) and Sri Lanka. As Dreby notes in relation to Mexican migrant mothers, “Migrant mothers bear the moral burdens of transnational parenting” (Dreby 2010: 204). Debates about these moral burdens shouldered by migrant mothers rarely travel to the global north, however, where (often naïve) assumptions are frequently made about the capacity of extended families in non-western societies to absorb a mother’s absence (Pratt 2012).<sup>4</sup>

While this differential concern about family separation undoubtedly reflects geopolitical and economic disparities between global north and south, migrant mothers and outsourced elderly also have a different relationship to the future – literally so, with significant implications for debate. In global south and global north alike, the burden of family separation experienced by migrant care workers is weighed against its economic benefits and recuperated by images of a hopeful future and the rewards of self-sacrifice. As Povinelli (2011: 160) writes: “To care for others is to make a claim; it is to make a small theoretical gesture. To care is to embody an argument about what a good life is and how such a good life comes into being.” In the case of a migrant caregiver, her vision of the good life might have very little to do with or not be exclusively tied to the direct recipient of her care work (i.e., the child or disabled or elderly person for whom she cares in the global north), and *leaving* her child in the care of others to migrate abroad may in itself embody an argument about how to bring the good life into being. In the future. Povinelli draws attention to the significance of this temporality, arguing that

sacrificial redemption is a technique of social tense that is frequently used to deflect attention from and ethical debate about social harm. The geographies and temporalities, and the vulnerabilities and dependencies, of aging persons from the global north who migrate for long term eldercare differ and, most importantly, there is no recuperative future to deflect ethical attention from the present. They invite, in other words, debate in potentially productive ways.

There is a further way that debates about family separation tied to migration for eldercare differ from those associated with the migration of care workers. Certainly, debate about the export and import of migrant domestic workers is carefully managed by the state (Parrenas 2013; Lorente 2017), but the management of discourse likely takes shape differently for outsourced eldercare, especially anxieties of families in the global north. Because long-term facilities for eldercare abroad are in the business of attracting clients, they are highly attentive to anxieties about such long distance care. As Horn et al. (2016) note, eldercare facilities targeting international clients are attuned to potential concerns and construct their advantage in relation to them. Astute management of relational geographies is an important way of managing anxieties about the new extended spacings of intimacy and care. (See also Holliday et al. 2015 for an analysis of the relational geographies built into the websites aimed at cosmetic surgery medical tourists.) The debate, therefore, is already managed to some extent by those who profit from eldercare abroad.

We turn to examine the debates that have emerged about the outsourcing of eldercare in the German language press, in relation to care facilities mostly in Eastern Europe and in Asia. Based on a Foucauldian discourse perspective, we ask: How is the phenomenon of eldercare abroad framed in German language newspapers and news magazines? And what are the implications of and the limits to the debate as it currently circulates within conventional print media? Thereby, we read closely for an understanding of what is so unsettling about elderly people moving or being moved to the countries where more affordable care workers reside. One the one hand, our analysis shows that the German language media debate on eldercare abroad is infused with a profound fear of being abandoned – abandoned not only by one’s one family, but also by the state. The articles evoke the scenario of being forced to emigrate in old age and spend the last days of one’s life far away from home, utterly alone and in a place where no one even understands one’s language. On the other hand, drawing on the media articles and on fieldwork in Thailand, we find that the media representations and eldercare facilities take up these fears and reverse them. In these instances, eldercare facilities abroad appear as ‘care paradises’. The seniors’ homes abroad are contrasted to the stressed-out families and the clocked care-workers in the German speaking countries. In comparison, this discourse argues,

facilities abroad offer what the global north has lost: ample time for care in a surrogate family.

In our discussion of the media representations, we explore the unacknowledged assumptions built into them, as well as their implications and limits. We argue that the media discourses build on culturalized imagery and on an unquestioned wage differential that allows for portraying facilities in Eastern Europe and Asia as care paradises. Comparing eldercare abroad to care migration, we highlight the one-sidedness of the anxiety: While the former creates a profound unease, the latter is often discussed as a win-win situation. In this sense, the discourses bring to the fore how the global north counts on the mobility of others to ensure their own privilege of sedentarism. Finally, we problematize the frequent vilification of the family in media representations. We argue that it serves as a powerful means to individualize responsibility and obfuscate the systemic failures of how eldercare is organized under neoliberal governance. We are not claiming that there is no complexity to media discourse but argue for tendencies that silence a richer and politically vital discussion of social care. We suggest some ways that the debate needs to be broadened to tackle fundamental questions about the burden and possibilities of care in neoliberal societies. Our hope is that discussions and worries about exposed and abandoned lives provoked by the outsourcing of eldercare might help us to reimagine an ethics of sociability beyond market logics, in ways that move beyond the re-inscription of predictable gender norms and all too familiar relations of social reproduction.

## **Methods and Data**

Our empirical analysis is based on a Foucauldian discourse perspective. Foucault (1972) emphasized that meaning and knowledge is produced through language, broadly conceived. He argued that how we speak and write establishes what is considered 'normal' or 'self-evident' and what is deemed 'problematic' or 'deviant', in ways that structure the material conditions of our worlds. These patterns of speech form specific discourses that govern how a topic is discussed in a particular historical and geographical context and the spatial configurations that structure our everyday lives (Hall 2001). We apply Foucault's approach in order to analyze how the novel phenomenon of eldercare abroad is currently framed in the German language news press.

In order to do this, we searched *LexisNexis* and *Factiva*, the two media databases which include most of the German language newspapers and news magazines, for any articles relating to eldercare abroad. We identified a total of 133 news articles that were published within the last 15 years (2001 to 2015), with a marked increase in publications from 2012 onwards. We

analyzed the texts with the technical support of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, using Waitt's (2010) guidelines on how to conduct a Foucaultian discourse analysis in human geography. Waitt suggests an iterative coding process. We started out with descriptive codes that helped us organize the texts. They laid the foundations for developing analytical codes. Based on the coding, we then identified the discursive structures that appeared repeatedly across texts and defined what is perceived as 'true' in our context of the German language news press. While there is considerable complexity within any discourse, we focus on the two strands of discourse that appear most prominently. Often, they occur juxtaposed and entangled within the same texts.

The news articles were printed in a broad range of daily and weekly newspapers or magazines, such as *Spiegel*, *Bild*, *Focus*, *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Blick*, *Tages-Anzeiger* and others. Primarily, they referred to eldercare destinations located either in Asia (with Thailand mentioned in 78, India in 15 and the Philippines in 7 articles) or in Eastern Europe (with the Czech Republic mentioned in 25, Slovakia in 22, Hungary in 15, Poland in 10 and Ukraine in 7 articles). While we recognize that there are likely substantial differences between eldercare facilities in different places, our focus is on media representations. We encountered no relevant differences in the discursive framing of the geographically closer Eastern European destinations on the one hand and the farther Asian ones on the other. On the contrary, there are numerous articles which enumerate the European and Asian destinations in one go. While the marketing strategies of the resorts and their costs and approaches to care might differ (cf. Horn et al. 2016, 169), the media representations often lump them together and draw the primary demarcation between care in the home country and care abroad.

In addition to our analysis of the news articles, one of us (Jill) spent two and a half weeks in two facilities in Thailand that specialize in caring for German speaking seniors with dementia to collect ethnographic material. The research stay was organized as part of the field work for a dissertation project, funded by the University of Zurich. The two facilities were chosen because they specifically advertised their services for German speaking seniors and because they repeatedly featured in the news articles. The ethnographic material was collected in summer 2015. It includes field notes from participant observation and interviews with a total of 15 resort managers, carers and family members of German speaking elderly, who stayed at the two resorts during Jill's visit (for more information on methods of data collection and analysis see (Brütsch 2016)). In this paper, the ethnographic material does not serve as a primary data source equivalent to the news articles. However, we draw on insights from this

research because they supplement our argument and help us reflect upon the discourses we identified in the news press.

### **Abandoned by the family**

On February 5th, 2014, the Swiss press featured the supreme court verdict against Marianne N., a 66-year-old woman who was sentenced to four years in prison for abduction. Marianne N. had taken her partner who suffered from dementia out of a Swiss eldercare home, purportedly to care for him at home. Instead she had flown with him to Bahadurgarh in India, where she left her partner to be looked after by two day-laborers who had neither medical training nor competency in English or German. Her partner died under unknown circumstances a few months later and was buried without family present, as Marianne N. had instructed before returning to Switzerland. The Swiss eldercare home where her husband had previously received care had cost 6'000 \$ per month, while the care arrangement in India amounted to 2'400 \$. After his death, Marianne N.'s daughter inherited the deceased senior's considerable assets of several hundred thousand dollars.

The Swiss news press followed Marianne N.'s story of abduction of a senior with dementia over a period of several years. The news items were sensationally titled: "Retiree supposedly 'disposed of' her partner in India" (Blick, 2012) and "Dementia patient abandoned in India" (Fassbind, 2013) and revealed in the details of the senior's last months, surrounded by open sewers and garbage. While convictions for abducting a senior with dementia might be rare, in recent years, the German language press has featured an increasing number of stories on eldercare abroad.

Prominent among media representations is a discourse of abandonment, as exemplified in the case of Marianne N. For example, *Berliner Morgenpost* (Dowideit, 2012a) writes: "her son and her daughter in law put the elderly lady in their caravan and drove her to Zlatna na Ostrove near the Hungarian border. Her new home lies 700 km from her home town in Bavaria. The ride took an entire day. When all the administrative details were settled, the two boarded their caravan and drove away." In a similar vein, the German news magazine *Stern* (Himmelreich, 2012) features the story of Wolfgang Brunner. We are told that his daughter handed Mr. Brunner his belongings in three plastic bags and said goodbye without a hug when a van picked him up for a 9 hour ride from his home in Germany to a seniors' home in Slovakia, which neither he nor his daughter have ever seen. According to Arthur Frank, the care agent who mediated the placement, this is not unusual. Only every fifth of the customers who decide to place a family



member in one of his seniors' homes, he says, visits the place in advance.

According to *Stern* (Himmelreich, 2012), Mr. Frank is an entrepreneur in the budding market for eldercare abroad and when interviewed in 2012 was about to open a new home in Slovakia with more than a hundred beds for German and Austrian seniors. "More and more seniors' homes in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, but also in Spain and Thailand offer places for German seniors", writes *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* (2012). According to the *Kölnner Express* (2012), "There is a huge interest of seniors in need of care and their families to get hold of a place in a seniors' home in Thailand." *Berliner Kurier* (2012) states that, "In order to escape poverty in old age, thousands of pensioners flee to cheaper places abroad." Winroither and Özkan (2013) from *die Presse* agrees that: "More and more Austrians and Germans place their relatives in their eastern neighbor countries, because they can no longer afford their care at home." The articles typically compare the costs of the two arrangements – 8000 \$ per month in Switzerland, 3000 \$ in Thailand (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag*, 2004).

The theme of abandonment emerges once again in this consideration of costs. Wolfgang Brunner's story, for instance, begins with the statement: "He cannot afford a seniors' home in Germany and his daughter does not want to bear the costs. So she sends him to be cared for in Slovakia." According to *Stern* (Himmelreich, 2012), this arrangement saves them 860 Euro a month. A common narrative suggests that a growing number of elderly are sent away by their children because they do not want to "sell granny's cottage to pay for granny's care" or "cannot afford the costs of a local seniors' home." (Posener, 2014)

The narratives often suggest that this mobility in old age is not entirely voluntary: "Bluntly put one could say that an increasing number of Germans deport their parents to cheaper places abroad and forget about them there." (Dowideit, 2012a) "Quite a few don't leave their home country voluntarily." (*Express*, 2012) "Many who can no longer decide for themselves due to dementia are being deported." (*Hamburger Morgenpost*, 2012) Although some media coverage is no doubt attentive to the complexity of family decision-making, the news stories nonetheless create a feeling of profound unease about the vulnerabilities of old age. They raise for the reader questions such as: What will happen to me, once I can no longer decide for myself? Would my children or my relatives place me abroad, too?

### **Abandoned by the state**

The anxiety of being abandoned extends beyond loved ones to the state. Already in 2003, *Spiegel* (Wagner, 2003) and *Taz* (Herrmann, 2003) picked up on the Japanese finance minister's

proposal to disencumber the Japanese state budget by “exporting” Japanese elderly to seniors’ homes in the Philippines, where care is much cheaper. In these early articles, the idea of the Japanese government is presented as absurd. However, the theme of exporting elderly people in order to save costs reappears repeatedly over the period of our media analysis. The news press mentions that EU as well as Swiss law up until now prohibits cities or health insurance companies to establish contracts with care homes abroad. Up until today, if a senior in need of care has no financial means and no family who can step in, the state has to cover the costs for a care arrangement within the country. However, most news articles suggest that this will not be the case for much longer. *Welt am Sonntag* (Dowideit, 2012b) cites a care expert of the ruling conservative party who argues that the impending care crisis in Germany demands considering care abroad as an alternative model. Similarly, *Basler Zeitung* (Sambar, 2013) reports that some Swiss cantons and cities have shown interest in placing elderly in seniors’ homes in Thailand. *Die Presse* (Winroither and Özkan, 2013) presents a care agent who claims that he is already negotiating with Austrian social services about covering the costs of eldercare in his new seniors’ homes in Hungary.

Several articles that report on the idea of the state actively outsourcing eldercare cite experts who judge such endeavors as highly problematic and unethical. A commentary in *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* reads: “We do not manage to organize affordable care here, thus we export our seniors? That’s outrageous and cynical. One can only hope that such experts never convince our politicians.” (Mitteldeutsche Zeitung, 2012) Although they criticize the idea, most articles imply that this is precisely what the future will bring. According to *Berliner Morgenpost* “The care industry already discusses how the public care insurance scheme could cooperate with seniors’ homes abroad.” The newspaper cites an insurance lobbyist who states that “it should be simple to change our laws so that such contracts become possible. It’s just that so far nobody dares say this publicly.” (Dowideit, 2012a) Indeed, *Die Welt* (Gray, 2014) reports that already 12 million Germans are considering seniors’ homes abroad as a solution for the care crisis. And *Berliner Kurier* (2012) predicts: “What happens with us, when we get older? For many of us, there won’t be a place in Germany.” Overall, the media reports insinuate that it is only a matter of time until governments start placing people in seniors’ homes abroad in order to save costs.

In sum, the media expresses popular fears that not just families, but also the state is planning to send elderly to care homes abroad to save public funds. Being placed in a care home in Slovakia or Thailand is presented as an impending scenario for an increasing number of people. Although the available statistical data suggests that the number of seniors placed in

eldercare facilities abroad is still low (cf. Ormond and Toyota 2016), it is the debate that is of interest to us. Readers are enticed to ask themselves: By the time I need care, will the state subsidize only the costs of a seniors' home in Poland or in Thailand? Where, by whom and under what conditions am I going to be cared for? The news stories on seniors being 'deported' to care homes abroad emphasize that the elderly are 'uprooted' and cut off from their social contacts. They are often portrayed as alone, thousands of kilometers from their loved ones, in foreign environments, being cared for by strangers who in some cases do not understand their language. This discourse thus focuses on the monetary reasons that seniors are denied staying at home and are displaced to where care is cheap. It kindles fears of being forced to migrate alone in old age.

### **Having time for care**

Alongside this discourse of multiple abandonments, however, is a second strand of thought that challenges the above assumptions and presents care abroad in a different light. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag* (2004), for example, writes about one of the senior's homes in Thailand: "If there is a paradise, it is called Chiang Mai." In a similar vein, a news article in *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (2010) titled "in care-paradise" tells the story of Victor Schumacher, a Swiss former restaurateur who moved to a seniors' home in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where three personal carers look after his wellbeing around the clock: "Victor Schumacher waves bright-eyed and bushy-tailed from the back seat of a bright red Tuk-Tuk, one of the motor-rickshaws common in Thailand. He rides to town to buy postcards and fresh fruit. Gift, his carer, is snuggled up to him. (...) Gift laughs and tenderly caresses the 80-year-old's hand."

Having time, the care-paradise discourse argues, is the key ingredient that distinguishes these seniors' homes from institutions in Germany or Switzerland. *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (2010) quotes one of Victor's care workers: "Drugs are the exception. The factor of time and loving care are crucial. It does not matter if it takes an hour until a guest cleaned his teeth or ate his muesli. If Victor feels like making an excursion, we order a tuk-tuk," Similarly, *Die Welt* (Gray, 2014) portrays a senior in Thailand as reclining in a deck-chair, while his personal carer subtly massages his legs.

In the news articles, the question of time appears most prominently when seniors' homes abroad are compared to the ones in the German speaking countries. *Märkische Allgemeine* quotes the husband of Irene Seidel, who suffers from dementia: "The carers here [in Germany] don't have the time to care for each person individually." In Thailand, however, "It

does not matter how much time Irene Seidel needs until she has eaten enough. Time has no meaning here ” (Goldberg, 2014b). Likewise, *Basler Zeitung* (Kistler, 2010) quotes the wife of Justin, a senior with dementia, who now lives in Thailand and states: “In the seniors’ home in Switzerland, Justin only ever sat at the table, his gaze fixed downward. If he couldn’t sleep, he got a sleeping pill. Or two. The carers were lovely, but they had too little time.”

Furthermore, having time is often used as the selling point by the managers of the seniors’ homes abroad. Martin Woodtli, the founder of one of the seniors’ homes in Thailand who is often quoted in the articles, argues that he didn’t try to recreate a Swiss seniors’ home in Thailand. Unlike in Switzerland, he argues “we have carers who have time for them [i.e. the seniors]” (Neumann, 2009). And Arthur Frank, who places people in seniors’ homes in Slovakia, states: “Time-limits like in Germany don’t exist [in Slovakia]. Allocating only 20 to 25 minutes for bathing a senior? That’s unthinkable” (Bock, 2012). In a similar vein, *Stern* (Himmelreich, 2012) writes: “If one asks Tatjana [a carer in Slovakia] how much time she can spend every day for taking care of Wolfgang Brunner [one of the seniors], she is taken aback: ‘as long as needed’ she answers, as if that was self-evident. However, it isn’t. In German seniors’ homes, the lives of the inhabitants are timed according to allocated time slots. Bathing: 20 to 25 minutes; combing hair: one to three minutes; changing diapers after defecation: seven to ten minutes.” The discourse on time thus criticizes streamlined and clocked care in the neoliberalized health systems in the global north and compares it to care abroad, which is portrayed as free of all time constraints.

### **Caring like a family**

In addition to the distinction between the pressed-for-time carers of the German speaking world and the ever-present carers abroad, this discourse contests the idea that families necessarily spend more time with their relatives, if the seniors stay in their home countries. *Nürnberger Nachrichten* (Kasperowitsch, 2013) argues: “Whether one does not visit grandpa in a seniors’ home close by or in a home farther away does not make a difference.” Likewise, *Die Presse* (Winroither and Özkan, 2013) quotes Paul De Coninck, manager of a seniors’ home in Hungary: “In Austria, the family does not visit more often either. People just don’t have time anymore.” In this sense, it is not just the care homes in the global north, but also the families themselves, who are presented as lacking time for care.

In a similar vein, *Taz* for example argues that in Germany it is not the families who look after their elderly anyway. Thus, the idea of placing the elderly abroad is not a far cry from how

Germany already dumps the burden of caring for the elderly on foreign shoulders by recruiting care workers from abroad. The *Taz* article questions, is there such a big difference between the two? And *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (2010) cites a care worker asking: “Is it better, if 100,000 women from Eastern Europe leave their families to illegally care for German seniors around-the-clock in Germany?”

While the seniors’ families are thus portrayed as lacking time for care and even lacking time to visit their elderly relatives in local care homes, the care-paradise discourse argues that these lost family relations are recreated in the seniors’ homes abroad: “She cares for Kurt Häusermann, as if he was a member of her family. While she says this, she affectionately holds the old man’s hand. This way of thinking is deeply rooted in the lives of many Thais. (...) Dow [the carer] puts her right arm around Häusermann’s shoulder and leans against him. ‘I have never experienced people being so nice to me’ says Kurt Häusermann quietly. (...) ‘I live like in paradise here and I’m very happy.’” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag* (2004) continues with a description of how seniors and carers sit together at a long table in the garden to eat dinner and it feels “just like in a large family”. *Berner Zeitung* (2014) and *Tagesanzeiger* (Kessler, 2014) also describe seniors’ homes in Thailand “as a large family”. *Berliner Zeitung* (Wenderoth, 2013) calls it “a kind of surrogate family”, and *Thüringische Landeszeitung* (Goldberg, 2014a) quotes a senior saying about his Thai seniors’ home “I have become part of a large family here.” In contrast to seniors’ homes in the German speaking countries – this discourse suggests – the homes in Eastern Europe and Thailand create familial relationships and place the seniors in a kind of surrogate family.

The reports often associate this way of caring with understandings of culturally-specific familial values and practices. *Focus* (Zastiral, 2014) quotes a carer saying “After a few days, he was just like my own grandfather for me. I feel part of his family”. The news magazine goes on to explain: “The personal engagement of the staff has deep cultural roots. (...) Most Thais are Buddhists. This means doing good deeds. According to their belief, these will be added to their karma-account – which improves the starting conditions into the next life.” Often, the described traits are naturalized. *Berner Zeitung* (Sommer, 2006) writes: “In Thailand, the family is the core of society, the respect for seniors is impressive. (...) Caring is in their blood.” And *Blick* (Bertolami, 2007) quotes the manager of a seniors home saying: “For the sick, non-verbal communication is much more important – the loving, tender care, the physical contacts just like in the family. The Thai women are predestined for this natural way of caring.” This cultural propensity to care and to respect the elderly, along with intact family values, are attributed equally to women from Thailand, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. Wherever the seniors’ home

is located, the carers are portrayed as having a cultural background that makes them especially loving and able to relate to seniors just like family.

These descriptions circulated in the field as well. The manager of one the seniors' homes visited in Thailand, for example, argued: "Of course, it is the abilities of the Thai. The mentality is certainly key (...) the[ir] caressing, bodily, close approach to people is also very distinctive and very important. (...) The Thai love families. The Thai seek the familial." In sum, the care-paradise discourse suggests that the seniors find a familial setting abroad, which is just as – or even more – caring as their own family.

Does place not matter at all? Martin Woodtli, a manager of a Thai seniors' home explains in *Basler Zeitung* (Kistler, 2010): "For people with advanced dementia, places do not matter much. To them, the foreign often seems familiar, the familiar feels foreign.", and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Hehli, 2015) writes: "A person suffering from dementia knows no place in the world." As Bender (2017) points out, this argument reframes dementia from a burden to a resource. The illness is presented as a blessing that enables the person to live anywhere in the world – far from any friends and family – and feel equally at home. The argument serves to counter concerns about seniors being placed in a foreign environment and contributes to legitimizing elder care abroad.

In sum, this second discourse unsettles the outrage about placing the elderly abroad and replaces it with a more positive image. It suggests that in the case of Alzheimer's disease and dementia, the care home and the family in the north – both very much pressed for time – can be replaced by a new 'family' of carers in the global south who have all the time in the world.

### **Extending the Conversation**

We turn to reflect these media discourses together with our supplementary ethnographic observations to suggest the extent to which strands of these discourses are grounded in orientalizing and gendering assumptions about who performs the work of care within families and communities. On the matter of time, when one of us (Jill) spent two and a half weeks in summer 2015 as participant-observer, joining the seniors and their caregivers in their daily routines at two seniors' homes in Thailand, which specialize in patients with dementia or Alzheimer's disease from German speaking countries, time did stand out as a key aspect differentiating seniors' homes in Thailand from comparable institutions in Switzerland. Indeed, seniors in care facilities visited in Thailand did have at least one personal care worker to her- or himself at all times. If the senior felt inclined, the two went on extended walks or day trips.

If the senior felt like sitting at the pool, they sat there together for the day. The one-to-one care arrangement allowed for slow paced daily routines that were flexibly adjusted to the seniors' momentary preferences and never rushed the senior in their preferred activity. Low wages in the global south and the disparity of wealth between global north and south that allow for such time-intensive care do, however, demand critical consideration. The capacity of seniors from the global north to pay for this level of care in Thailand reflects gross global disparity in wages and wealth (Kolárová, 2015).

So too, cultural assumptions about the intimate labor provided by Thai caregivers require closer examination. Talking to caregivers in the two seniors' homes visited in Thailand, the constructed and orientaling nature of the care-paradise discourse was made evident. These caregivers did not see their hugging and caressing of seniors as typically Thai. Indeed one of the carers explained: "Thais don't do this, they don't touch." She argued that the Thai generally don't show much bodily contact in public: "Thais don't do this, even with their husbands. Yes, we do not touch each other". On the contrary (and ironically), she associated this behavior with Swiss culture, stating that she had to learn it when she started working for the Swiss dementia center: "Abroad you can embrace or kiss your girlfriend. Thais don't do this, don't do this. And if you come here [to work in the Swiss dementia center in Thailand] you have to change your life. That's what I did. [Anticipating criticism for this level of bodily intimacy,] I don't care what others think about me if I touch him or embrace him [her patient]." Thus, the touching, hugging and caressing that Thai carers perform at work and that is advertised and naturalized by the care homes as 'the Thai way of caring' does not necessarily have much in common with how the Thai carers would care for their own elderly family members, and likely has much more to do with how the German speaking world imagines Thai intimacy. As Horn et al. (2016: 172) write: "The concepts and ideas of 'good care' are 'exported' to Thailand (along with the old-age home as an institution, a rarity in Thailand) and attempts are made to implement these ideas by referring to specific structural conditions (low costs of living and low wages), cultural stereotypes and climatic conditions." This use of cultural stereotypes allows the seniors' homes to promote their care as a new family for the seniors. Creating and fostering discourses of a cultural propensity to care thereby serves as a selling strategy. As mentioned in the introduction above, facility managers anticipate potential concerns of families in the global north about eldercare abroad and often draw on gendered and culturalized stereotypes to dispel them.

The media discourses on eldercare abroad and our ethnographic observations raise a number of important issues that point both to the implications of and to the limits to the debate

as it currently circulates within conventional print media. In the first instance the media debate does helpfully signal assumptions about mobility. It articulates the extent to which migration *for care* unsettles the privilege of sedentarism that is often taken for granted in the global north. Eldercare abroad shares many similarities with the migration of eldercare workers to the global north. Both arrangements share the goal of providing adequate and affordable care to an elderly person in the global north, and both require a person to migrate and live abroad. Both produce global care chains (Hochschild 2000, Yeates 2012) that disperse even nuclear families around the world so that loved ones must travel long distance to see each other. Moreover, in both arrangements (mostly female) care workers from the global south look after care recipients from the global north. The key difference between the two arrangements comes down to who has to be mobile: the care-giver or the care-recipient. Eldercare abroad reverses mobility and it is this reversal that is often perceived as alarming from the perspective of countries in the global north.

Placing an elderly parent in a seniors' home abroad creates a lot more outrage in the German language public debate than care workers' migration. While the latter is often presumed a win-win situation (Bachinger 2015: 477; Hochschild 2010; Karakayali 2010: 6; Schilliger 2013), the former is often framed as deportation and abandonment. A close examination of media coverage of the issue discloses a profound anxiety in the German speaking countries of being forced to migrate in old age in order to receive adequate care. This one-sided anxiety exposes the extent to which the global north relies on workers from the global south for their social reproduction and how it takes their mobility for granted to guarantee their own sedentarism. People in the global north expect other people to migrate and spend years of their lives abroad to provide care for them, but recoil from the thought that migrating might be required of them to receive care. In our current global configuration of inequalities of power, the privilege of immobility for some thus relies on the mobility of others.

Alongside this disparity, however, the discourse of abandonment and the care-paradise discourse share an important commonality that points to the limit of the media debate: They both tend to blame the family. In the first strand of discourse, the media reportage implies that many families in Germany, Austria and Switzerland coldly dispose of their elderly relatives abroad. The fact that they would rather inherit 'granny's cottage' than pay for her care intimates an avaricious disregard for the aging dependent family member in need of familial care. The latter more positive discourse of care-paradise is no more flattering to the Swiss or German family insofar as the time pressured and uncaring family of the global north serves as the antithesis to the care-givers in the seniors' homes abroad who are presented as both loving and



having all the time in the world to provide superior care. In both discourse strands, the family in the German-speaking world is pathologized as not willing or not able to care for their elderly. These families are presented as so unable to provide care that vulnerable aging parents and spouses may be better replaced by a paid 'foster' family in a care home in the global south.

We think it is imperative to extend the conversation beyond this discursive villainizing of families in societies such as Switzerland, Austria and Germany. Framing family members who seek care for their loved ones in the global south as uncaring and selfish individualizes responsibility and obfuscates the deep systemic roots of the issue. No matter whether families employ a migrant care worker or place their elderly in a seniors' home abroad, we need to ask why families in the global north are forced into this difficult decision matrix. We argue with Fraser (2016) that the dilemma faced by individual families is symptomatic of a deep-seated social-reproductive crisis that stems from the invisibilization and devaluation of care labor in a regime of globalizing financialized capitalism. Neoliberal governance "externaliz[es] carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it" (Fraser 2016: 112). With the rapid expansion of service sector jobs that pay little but require the workers to be highly flexible regarding shifts and working hours, increasing numbers of families need to rely on two incomes to make ends meet and lack the dependable, regular time frames required for caring for an elderly person. Commodified eldercare then appears as the solution, because it allows for outsourcing care work to a person whose time is even 'cheaper' – in most cases a woman from the global south who either migrates to the global north or works in a seniors' home abroad. Both cases create a geography of outsourcing from the global north to the global south that builds on and exacerbates existing global inequalities. Blaming the families for choosing to place their elderly relatives in a more affordable seniors' home abroad thereby masks the crisis of care inherent in the current neoliberal regime.

The debate about eldercare abroad draws attention to how our societies deal with the 'most disposable of disposable populations'. Analyzing the media reports, we find a widespread concern about abandonment by the state within a pervasive acceptance of its inevitability. Although attempts at placing seniors abroad are criticized, there is shockingly little expectation that today's state services for the elderly will still be there in the future. On the contrary, the media reports tend to present further reductions of state services as a matter of course. According to the media reports, readers can expect that public funds for seniors' homes in Germany, Austria and Switzerland will not suffice for the growing number of elderly people and seniors who cannot afford to pay for themselves will most likely be put in care homes abroad in order to save costs. The framing of elderly people as 'non-productive humans' and 'costly

burdens on society' and the neoliberal rational of individual responsibility and cost efficiency are easily naturalized and retrenching is presented as inevitable and irreversible. The media reports offer no glimpses of alternatives to the ongoing reduction of public services and no expectation that the state will fund sustainable eldercare provision in the future. The lack of alternatives discussed resembles what Keil has termed 'roll-with-it-neoliberalization' – a mindset that has accepted neoliberal governmentality as inevitable and lost a sense of alternatives (Keil 2016).

Reframing and broadening this debate requires a discussion of fundamental questions about who has the right to live and under what conditions, and who takes and shares the responsibility for care. What is our collective vision of the good life, and how will we bring that into being? Who bears the uneven costs of austerity programs? What unexamined gendered, racialized and geopolitical assumptions underlie our existing care arrangements and how must we expand our horizons of accountability? How might socially necessary care activity be accomplished without undue cost to the lives of those who provide this care? Anxieties about abandoned lives provoked by the news press on outsourcing eldercare open an important opportunity to ask these fundamental questions. The media articles contribute to provoking a debate by featuring provocative stories of elderly people being 'deported' from the global north to save time and money and setting them against stories of 'care paradises' without time constraints in the global south. However, the discursive framing of the issue also tends to limit the debate by sending it along well-worn grooves of analysis, that place the burden of care on often female family members or racialised women from the global south. The news press remains largely silent on how we can reimagine care as a creative, and socially and economically necessary activity in the global north.

This brings us back in new ways to feminist concerns and struggles of the 1970s (Da Costa and James 1975; Federici 1975) – to what Silvia Federici (2012b) terms the unfinished feminist revolution – to bring the invisible activity of care into visibility so that it might be revalued, re-imagined and restructured as productive, cooperative and creative activity. We see the growing interest in and the current vibrant debate on re-centering and re-framing care throughout the social sciences (e.g. Barnes et al., 2015; Baumann et al., 2013; Fraser, 2016, Waidelich and Baumgarten, 2018) and increasingly also in economics (e.g. Fraser, 2016) as an important first step in this direction. The role of state welfare, wages, the market and/or more cooperative forms of organization and 'communities of care' in this reimagining of intimate care is open to and deserves debate (Federici 2012a; Green and Lawson 2011). We offer no clear alternatives within this paper. Rather our purpose is to challenge current discursive framings

and the unquestioned acceptance of a retrenching welfare system in order to open up the scope for reimagining other communities of care, including a state that puts care for its citizens center stage. We believe that the crisis of eldercare, encapsulated so vividly by the loss of rights to stay in place by relatively privileged elderly from the global north who require care, has a rich potential to provoke such a political debate if pushed beyond the boundaries of contemporary discourse as exemplified by mainstream media.

## Notes

1. Horn et al. (2016) report that, although internationally-oriented long term care facilities are located around the world, most are concentrated in Poland and Thailand (by their count there are currently 48 and 21 facilities in each of these respective countries).
2. New flows of consumers towards the global south extend, of course, beyond eldercare and involve many kinds of medical care. As a measure of how extensive is this trend, Greenborough et al (2015, quoting KPMG International 2011) report that more than 4.3 million international consumers of medical services have been attracted to Asia in recent years, generating revenues in excess of US \$6.7 million. Eldercare is just one form that such medical care takes.
3. Theorists such as Habermas (1989) and Povinelli (2006) have argued that the freely-chosen, contractual arrangement of the romantic conjugal family, released from the constraints of genealogy and inheritance, is the cornerstone of the autonomous liberal subject and is what has made possible the national mass subject in western liberal democracies. In Povinelli's phrasing: "The humanist subject was forged out of intimate recognition that passed between two people in the conjugal household – a form of recognition that itself depended on the emergence of new organizations of markets and their textual mediations." It transforms "socially thick people into purely human subjects." (2006: 189).
4. Parrenas' claims about the vilification of migrant mothers in the Philippines are not uncontested. Filomeno Aguilar presents evidence from Batangas Province in the Philippines to demonstrate that " Unlike middle-class opinion makers based in Metro Manila," the people in the village in which he conducted his ethnography "refrain from passing judgment on transnational families and their growing children, especially adolescents, saying a lot depends on the individual child" (2013: 352). So too he argues that there is no stigma attached to being a child of migrant parents, "as may be the case elsewhere" (2013: 352).

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