

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

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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.*

Keywords ABANDONMENT, CARE CRISIS, CARE OF THE ELDERLY, FAMILY SEPARATION, GLOBAL CARE CHAINS, GLOBAL NORTH, OUTSOURCING, SEDENTARISM, THAILAND

Around 2012, the German-language media began to follow a small and controversial trend: outsourcing care of the elderly from countries in the Global North (in particular Germany and Switzerland) to places such as Poland or Thailand, where care is more affordable.¹ This trend is but one instance of new spacings of care and intimacy made more possible by advanced communication and biomedical technologies,² made more

probable by neoliberal economic pressures of market principles throughout social life, and made more necessary by the crisis of care in the Global North.

This trend differs from conventional retirement migration (Allan et al. 1997; Hall and Hardill 2016; Ormond and Toyota 2017) because it excludes the so-called ‘young’ seniors who resettle in retirement communities with warmer climates when they are still active and healthy. Instead, the debate centres on ‘old’ people who are in need of care. Many of them are frail or suffer from forms of dementia, like 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 care home abroad.

While it is a familiar approach for countries in the Global North to address 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 people in need of care to countries where wages are low and care is less expensive, is a decidedly novel approach to this old problem (Horn et al. 2016: 163). It acknowledges that not only caregivers but also the cared-for can be mobile (Raghuram 2012).

It is perhaps not surprising that transporting ageing loved ones hundreds, even thousands, of kilometres to be cared for by strangers for the remainder of their lives, often because of the high costs associated with caring for people with Alzheimer’s disease or some other form of dementia, has attracted media attention and created controversy. Outsourcing care for the elderly 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,³ are complex and contradictory sites of criss-crossing discourses, not only of personal autonomy and choice but also of kinship, blood relations and social obligations (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 the tendency of political economists (and of almost 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, then caring for the elderly, who are also 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 et al. 2004). If Nancy Fraser (2016: 99) is right in saying that ‘no society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long’, debates on 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 care for the elderly has some interesting particularities compared with debates on 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. Parreñas (2013) has written extensively on the ‘vilification’ of mothers who leave their children to work abroad not only in the Philippines, but also in Poland (where such children are termed ‘euro-orphans’), Romania (where mothers working abroad has been framed as a ‘national tragedy’) and Sri Lanka. As Dreby (2010: 204) notes in relation to Mexican migrant mothers, ‘migrant mothers bear the moral burdens of transnational parenting.’ However, debates on these moral burdens shouldered by migrant mothers rarely travel to the Global North, 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).⁴

Further, migrant mothers and outsourced elderly people have a different relationship to the future – literally so, with significant implications for debate. In the 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 (namely the child or disabled or elderly person for whom she cares in the Global North); in fact, *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 away from an ethical debate about social harm. The geographies and temporalities, as well as the vulnerabilities and dependencies, of ageing people from the Global North who migrate for long-term care differ and, importantly, there is no recuperative future to deflect ethical attention away from the present. In other words, they invite debate in potentially productive ways.

There is a further way that debates about family separation tied to migration for care for the elderly 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 (Lorente 2017; Parreñas 2013), but the management of discourse

likely takes shape differently for outsourced care for the elderly, especially when concerning anxieties of families in the Global North. Because long-term facilities for caring for elderly people abroad are in the business of attracting clients, they are especially attentive to anxieties about such long-distance care. As Horn et al. (2016) note, the care 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 for medical tourists.) The debate, therefore, is to some extent already managed by those who profit from providing care for the elderly abroad.

We now turn to examine the debates that have emerged about the outsourcing of care for the elderly 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 care for the elderly abroad framed in German-language newspapers and news magazines? What are the implications of and the limits to the debate as it currently circulates within conventional print media? In this way, we seek to understand what is so unsettling about elderly people moving or being moved to countries where more affordable care workers reside. On the one hand, our analysis shows that the German-language media debate on care for the elderly abroad is infused with a profound fear of being abandoned – abandoned not only by one’s family but also by the state. The articles evoke a scenario of being forced to emigrate in old age to spend the last days of one’s life far from home, utterly alone and in a place where no one even understands one’s language. On the other hand, drawing on press reports and fieldwork in Thailand, we find that both media representations and those who run the facilities address these fears and reverse them. In these instances, the facilities abroad appear as ‘care paradises’. The care homes abroad are contrasted against a scenario of stressed-out families and clocked care workers in the German-speaking countries. By 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 media representations, we explore the unacknowledged assumptions built into them, as well as their implications and limits. We argue that the media discourses built on culturized imagery and on an unquestioned wage differential allows the portrayal of facilities in eastern Europe and Asia as care paradises. Comparing care for the elderly 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 privileged 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 care for the elderly is organized under neoliberal governance. We are not claiming that the media discourse lacks complexity but rather 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 reinscription 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 analyse how the novel phenomenon of care for the elderly abroad is currently framed in the German-language press.

To do this, we searched *LexisNexis* and *Factiva*, the two media databases that include most of the German-language newspapers and news magazines, for any articles relating to care for the elderly abroad. We identified a total of 133 news articles published over a 15-year period between 2001 and 2015 and noted a marked increase in such publications from 2012 onwards. We analysed the texts with the technical support of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, using Waitt's (2010) guidelines on how to conduct a Foucauldian 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 care destinations located in either Asia (with Thailand mentioned in 78, India in 15 and the Philippines in 7 articles) or 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 to be substantial differences between the care facilities in different places, our focus is on the 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 away Asian ones on the other. On the contrary, numerous articles did not meaningfully distinguish between the European and Asian destinations. While the marketing strategies of the resorts and their

costs and approaches to care might differ (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 collecting field material from two facilities in Thailand that specialize in caring for German-speaking seniors with dementia. The research trip 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 advertised their services for German-speaking seniors and because they repeatedly featured in the news articles. The field material was collected in the summer of 2015. It includes field notes from participant observation and interviews with a total of 15 resort managers, carers and the family members of some German-speaking elderly people who were staying at the two resorts during Jill's visit – for more information on methods of data collection and analysis, see Brüttsch (2016). In this article, the field observations do 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 5 February 2014, the Swiss press featured a supreme court verdict against Marianne N, a 66-year-old woman sentenced to four years imprisonment for abduction. Marianne N had taken her partner who suffered from dementia out of a Swiss care facility, purportedly to care for him at home. Instead, she had flown with him to Bahadurgarh in India, where she left him to be looked after by two day-labourers who had neither medical training nor competency in either English or German. He 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 facility where her partner had previously received care had cost \$6000 a month, while the care arrangement in India amounted to \$2400. On his death, Marianne N's daughter inherited the deceased man's considerable assets of several hundred thousand dollars.

The Swiss press followed Marianne N's story about abducting an elderly person with dementia for several years. The news items were sensational titled – 'Retiree supposedly "disposed of" her partner in India' (*Blick* 2012) and 'Dementia patient abandoned in India' (Fassbind 2013) – and the journalists revelled in the details of the old man's last months surrounded by open sewers and rubbish. While convictions for abducting an elderly person with dementia might be rare, in recent years the German-language press has featured an increasing number of stories on care for the elderly abroad.

Prominent among media representations is a discourse of abandonment, as exemplified in the case of Marianne N. For example, as the *Berliner Morgenpost* (Dowideit 2012a) reported:

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) featured 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 nine-hour journey from his home in Germany to an old-age home in Slovakia, which neither he nor his daughter had ever seen. According to Arthur Frank, the care agent who mediated the placement, this is not unusual. Only a fifth of the customers who decide to place a family member in one of his care homes, he says, visits the place in advance.

According to the *Stern* (Himmelreich 2012), Mr Frank is an entrepreneur in the budding market for old-age care abroad and, when interviewed in 2012, was about to open a new home in Slovakia with more than a hundred beds for elderly German and Austrian people. 'More and more care 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 *Kölner Express* (2012), 'there is a huge interest among elderly people in need of care and their families in securing a place in a care facility in Thailand.' The *Berliner Kurier* (2012) states that, 'to escape poverty in old age, thousands of pensioners are fleeing to cheaper places abroad.' Winroither and Özkan (2013) from *Die Presse* agree that 'more and more Austrians and Germans are placing their relatives in eastern neighbouring countries because they can no longer afford their care at home.' The articles typically compare the costs of the two arrangements – \$8000 a month in Switzerland, \$3000 in Thailand (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag* 2004).

The theme of abandonment emerges again in this consideration of costs. Wolfgang Brunner's story, for instance, begins with the statement that 'he cannot afford a care 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 a month. A common narrative suggests that a growing number of elderly people are being 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 care home' (Posener 2014).

The narratives often suggest that this mobility in old age is not entirely voluntary – 'put bluntly, 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 about being abandoned extends beyond loved ones to the state. Already in 2003, *Spiegel* (Wagner 2003) and *Taz* (Herrmann 2003) had picked up on the Japanese finance minister's proposal to disencumber the Japanese state budget by 'exporting' Japanese elderly people to care 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 to save costs reappeared repeatedly over the period of our media analysis. The press mentioned that, to date, both EU and Swiss law prohibits cities or health insurance companies from establishing contracts with care homes abroad. Currently, if an elderly person in need of care has no financial means and no family to step in, the state has to cover the costs of 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) cited a care expert in the ruling conservative party who argued that the impending care crisis in Germany demands considering care abroad as an alternative model. Similarly, *Basler Zeitung* (Sambar 2013) reported that some Swiss cantons and cities had already shown interest in placing elderly people in care facilities in Thailand. *Die Presse* (Winroither and Özkan 2013) presented a report on a care agent who claimed that he was already negotiating with Austrian social services about covering the costs of care for the elderly in his new care homes in Hungary.

Several articles about the state actively outsourcing care for the elderly cite experts who judge such endeavours as highly problematic and unethical. A commentary in *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* (Gajevic 2012) reads, 'we do not manage to organize affordable care here, so we export our elderly people? That is outrageous and cynical. One can only hope that such experts never convince our politicians.' Although they criticize the idea, most articles imply that this is precisely what the future will bring. According to *Berliner Morgenpost*, 'the care industry is already discussing how the public care insurance scheme could cooperate with care 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 is just that so far nobody dares say this publicly' (Dowideit 2012a). Indeed, *Die Welt* (Gray 2014) reports that 12 million Germans are already considering care homes abroad as a solution to the care crisis. *Berliner Kurier* (2012) predicts, 'what will happen to us, when we get older? For many of us, there will not be a place in Germany.' Overall, the media reports insinuate that it is only a matter of time until governments start placing people in care homes abroad in order to save costs.

In sum, the media expresses popular fears that not only families, but also the state are planning to send elderly people 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 suggest that the number of elderly people placed in care facilities abroad is still low (Ormond and Toyota 2017), 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 only subsidize the costs of a care

home in Poland or Thailand?’ ‘Where, by whom and under what conditions will I be cared for?’ The news stories on elderly people being ‘deported’ to care homes abroad emphasize that they are being ‘uprooted’ and cut off from their social contacts. They are often portrayed as alone, thousands of kilometres from their loved ones, in foreign environments, and being cared for by strangers who in some cases do not understand their language. This discourse thus focuses on the monetary reasons why elderly people are denied staying at home and are displaced to places 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 care 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 care 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.’

According to the care-paradise discourse, having time is the key ingredient that distinguishes these care homes from their counterparts 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 for a guest to clean his teeth or eat his muesli. If Victor feels like making an excursion, we order a tuk-tuk.’ Similarly, *Die Welt* (Gray 2014) portrays an old man in Thailand reclining in a deckchair while his personal carer gently massages his legs.

In the news articles, the question of time appears most prominently when care homes abroad are compared with the ones in German-speaking countries. *Märkische Allgemeine* quotes the husband of Irene Seidel, who suffers from dementia, saying that ‘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, an elderly man with dementia who now lives in Thailand, who says that ‘in the care 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 stressed by the managers of the care homes abroad. Martin Woodtli, the founder of one of the homes in Thailand, who is often quoted in the articles, argues that he did not try to recreate a Swiss care home in Thailand. Unlike in Switzerland, he argues ‘we have carers who have time for them [the residents]’ (Neumann 2009). Arthur Frank, who places people in care homes in

Slovakia, states that the ‘time-limits like in Germany do not exist [in Slovakia]. Allocating only 20 to 25 minutes for bathing a person? That is unthinkable’ (Bock 2012). In a similar vein, *Stern* (Himmelreich 2012) published the following comment:

If one asks Tatjana [a care worker in Slovakia] how much time she can spend every day taking care of Wolfgang Brunner [one of the senior residents], she is taken aback: ‘as long as needed,’ she answers, as if that were self-evident. However, it is not. In German care homes, the lives of the inhabitants are regulated according to allocated time slots. Bathing – 20 to 25 minutes; combing hair – one to three minutes; changing incontinence pads 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 with 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 ones abroad, this discourse contests the idea that families necessarily spend more time with their relatives if they remain in their home countries. *Nürnberger Nachrichten* (Kasperowitsch 2013) argues, ‘whether one does not visit grandpa in a care home close by or not visit in a home farther away does not make a difference.’ Likewise, *Die Presse* (Winroither and Özkan 2013) quotes Paul De Coninck, manager of a care 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* argues that in Germany it is not the families who look after the elderly relatives anyway. Thus, the idea of placing elderly family members abroad is not a far cry from how Germany already places the burden of caring for the elderly on foreign shoulders by recruiting care workers from abroad. The *Taz* article questions whether there is such a big difference between the two. *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (2010) cites a care worker asking, ‘is it better if 100,000 women from eastern Europe leave their families to care illegally for German elderly people around the clock in Germany?’

While the families of the elderly 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 argument is that these lost family relations are recreated in care homes abroad:

She cares for Kurt Häusermann as if he were 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 elderly people and carers sit together at a long table in the garden to eat dinner and it feels ‘just like being in a large family’. *Berner Zeitung* (2014) and *Tagesanzeiger* (Kessler 2014) also describe care homes in Thailand ‘as large families’. *Berliner Zeitung* (Wenderoth 2013) calls it ‘a kind of surrogate family’, and *Thüringische Landeszeitung* (Goldberg 2014a) quotes a pensioner saying of his Thai care home, ‘I have become part of a large family here.’ In contrast to care homes in German-speaking countries, this discourse suggests that the facilities in eastern Europe and Thailand create familial relationships and place the elderly people 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 that ‘after a few days, he was just like my own grandfather for me. I feel part of his family.’ The news magazine went on to explain how the ‘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 will improve their starting conditions into the next life.’ Often, these 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.’ *Blick* (Bertolami 2007) quotes the manager of a care home saying that, ‘for the sick, non-verbal communication is much more important – the loving, tender care, the physical contact is just like in a family. Thai women are predestined for this natural way of caring.’ This cultural propensity to care for and respect elderly people, along with intact family values, are attributed equally to women from Thailand, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. Wherever the care home is located, the carers are portrayed as having a cultural background that makes them especially loving and able to relate to older people just like family.

These descriptions circulated in the field as well. The manager of one care home visited in Thailand, for example, argued that, ‘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 elderly people can find a familial setting abroad, which is just as, or even more, caring as their own family.

Does place not matter at all? *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Hehli 2015) writes, ‘a person suffering from dementia knows no place in the world.’ As Bender (2015) has pointed out, this argument potentially reframes dementia as a resource insofar as it enables the person so afflicted to live anywhere in the world – far from any friends or family – and yet to feel equally at home. The argument counters concern about people with dementia being placed in a foreign environment and eases the decision to seek care for the elderly abroad.

In sum, this second discourse unsettles the outrage about placing elderly people abroad and replaces it with a more positive image. It suggests that, in case of dementia, the care home and the family in the north Global 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 now turn to reflect on these media discourses together with our supplementary field observations, to suggest the extent to which strands of these discourses are grounded in cultural and gendered assumptions about who performs the work of care within families and communities. On the question of time, when one of us (Jill) spent two-and-a-half weeks in the summer of 2015 as a participant observer, joining the residents and their caregivers in their daily routines at two care homes in Thailand specializing in patients from German-speaking countries with dementia, time did stand out as a key aspect differentiating care homes in Thailand from comparable institutions in Switzerland. Indeed, residents in care facilities that Jill visited in Thailand had at least one personal care worker to herself or himself at all times. If the senior resident felt so inclined, the two would go on extended walks or day trips. If he or she felt like sitting at the pool, they would sit there together for the day. The one-to-one care arrangement allowed for slow-paced daily routines that were flexibly adjusted to the person’s momentary preferences and they were never rushed 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 elderly people from the Global North to pay for this level of care in Thailand reflects global disparities in wages and wealth (Kolářová 2015).

The cultural assumptions about the intimate nature of the labour that the Thai caregivers provide also require closer examination. On talking to caregivers in the two care homes that Jill visited in Thailand, the constructed nature of the care-paradise discourse was made evident. The caregivers did not see their hugging and caressing of old people as typically Thai behaviour. Indeed, as one carer explained, ‘Thais don’t do this, they don’t touch.’ She argued that the Thai generally do not 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 behaviour with Swiss culture, stating that she had to learn it when she started working for the Swiss dementia centre:

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 centre in Thailand] you have to change your life. That is what I did. [Anticipating criticism for this level of bodily intimacy, she said] 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 often 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 possibly has as much 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 care homes to promote their care as a new family for elderly people in need of care. 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 caring for their elderly relatives abroad and in some cases draw on gendered and culturalized stereotypes to dispel them.

The media discourses on caring for elderly people abroad, along with our field 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 migrating *for* care unsettles the privilege of sedentarism that is often taken for granted in the Global North. Care of the elderly abroad shares many similarities with the migration of care workers to the Global North. Both arrangements share the goal of providing adequate, 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 distances 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 caregiver or the care recipient? Sending people abroad reverses the mobility and it is this reversal that people in the Global North often find alarming.

Placing an elderly parent in a care home abroad creates a lot more concern in German-speaking countries than does care workers’ migration. While the latter is often seen as 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 the media coverage of the issue discloses a profound anxiety in German-speaking countries about 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 power inequalities, 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 ageing 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 caregivers in the care 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 relatives. These families are presented as so unable to provide care that vulnerable ageing parents and spouses may be better replaced by a paid 'foster' family in a care home in the Global South.

We think that it is imperative to extend the conversation beyond this discursive villainizing of families in societies like those in 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 relative in a care home abroad, we need to ask why families in the Global North are forced into this difficult decision matrix. We argue, along 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 labour 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 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 old-age care 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 care 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 care home abroad thereby masks the crisis of care inherent in the current neoliberal regime.

The debate about care for the elderly abroad draws attention to how our societies deal with the 'most disposable of disposable populations'. Analysing the media reports, we find 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 them will still be there in the future. On the contrary, media reports tend to present further reductions in state services as a matter of course. According to them, readers cannot expect public funds for care homes in Germany, Austria and Switzerland to provide for the growing number of elderly people who cannot afford to pay for themselves and who will most likely be put in care homes abroad 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 in public services and no expectation that the state will fund sustainable care for the elderly in the future. The lack of alternatives discussed resembles what Keil has termed ‘roll-with-it-neoliberalization’ – a mindset that has accepted neoliberal government as inevitable and that has 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 programmes? 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 care 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 racialized women from the Global South. The 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 the feminist concerns and struggles of the 1970s (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Federici 1975) – to what Silvia Federici (2012b) termed 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 recentring and reframing care throughout the social sciences (Barnes et al. 2015; Baumann et al. 2013; Fraser 2016; Waidelich and Baumgarten 2018), and increasingly also in economics (Fraser 2016) as an important first step in that 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 arrangements is open to and deserves debate (Federici 2012a; Green and Lawson 2011). We offer no clear alternatives in this article. Rather, our purpose is to challenge current discursive framings and the unquestioned acceptance of a retrenched welfare system in order to open up the scope for reimagining other communities of care, including a state that puts care for its inhabitants centre stage. We believe that the crisis over care for the elderly, encapsulated so vividly by the loss of the rights of relatively privileged older people from the Global North who need care to remain where they are, has a rich potential to provoke such a political debate if pushed beyond the boundaries of contemporary discourse, as exemplified by the mainstream media.

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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 countries respectively).
2. New flows of consumers towards the Global South, of course, extend beyond caring for the elderly and involve many kinds of medical care. As a measure of how extensive this trend is, Greenhough et al. (2015), quoting KPMG International's figures for 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. Looking after the elderly is only one form of such medical care.
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. As Povinelli (2006: 189) put it, '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'.
4. Parreñas's (2013) claims about the vilification of migrant mothers in the Philippines are not uncontested. Aguilar presents evidence from Batangas Province in the Philippines 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' (Aguilar 2013: 352). He also claims that there is no stigma attached to being the child of migrant parents, 'as may be the case elsewhere' (Aguilar 2013: 352).

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