Affects of unease: mother–infant separation among professional Indonesian women working in Singapore

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Abstract  The extent of systemic forms of mother–child separation has received insufficient attention in research on migrant families. In this article, I explore the little-studied phenomenon of mother–infant separation among professional women migrants. I draw from in-depth interviews with Indonesian professional women working in Singapore who have lived apart from their infant children to pursue work and education. Narratives of separation illustrate a complex transnational network of care built around an availability of support offered by spouses or extended kin. Women experience unease about separation, which emerges in how they talk about their absent infants. Mothers articulate ambivalence about the potential cost of their decisions, positing infants as able to pass judgement on them, with potential rejection and disengagement causing them potent concerns. The unease of these mothers moderates claims that transnational separation is readily managed and highlights the ambiguity embedded in an increasingly common form of transnational mother–child separation.

Keywords MOTHER–INFANT SEPARATION, SINGAPORE, SOUTHEAST ASIA, TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES, TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL RELATIONS

Introduction: mother–infant separation in contemporary migration

Field research in Singapore in 2015 revealed a wide range of transnational mother–child separations in homes across the country. The global statistic that in 2002 one child in ten did not reside with a birth parent (Ensor and Gozdziak 2010) only hints at the complexity of these separations. Singapore patterns of mother–child separation echo global trends, such as well-documented separations between transnational migrant mothers and their stay-behind children (Graham et al. 2012; Parreñas 2005). Also present are cross-border formal and informal fostering by kin and non-kin, international adoption, and children boarding with families or at educational institutions to attend school. Despite the scope of observed separations, research on mother–child separation
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has typically focused on children or young adults who are old enough to communicate
verbally with researchers and whose experiences have helped shape understanding of
the impact of migration on family lives (Dobson 2009). Practices of transnational
separation where the mother leaves an infant in the care of another, by contrast, have
received far less attention.

Within a context of transnational family migration, surprisingly few studies of con-
temporary transnational migration describe separation between birth mothers and
infants (namely children under the age of 18 months) (but see Bohr 2010; Madianou
and Miller 2011; Whitfield 2014). Researchers tend to lump infants in with older
children, and pay surprisingly little attention to the place infants might hold in migrant
family practices. This gap is problematic because the total physical and material
dependence of an infant creates a magnified version of the concerns shaping decisions
about children in family migration more generally, such as workload negotiations,
affective relationship disruptions, worries about quality of care, and anxieties over
children surviving, growing and thriving. Cultural narratives about the importance
of migration can play a strong role in shaping a mother’s decision to separate from her
infant. In Bohr and Whitfield’s (2011) pilot study of Chinese mothers in Canada who
separated from their infants, for example, financial need and family expectations were
strong drivers of mothers’ decisions to live away from their infants. Values of duty and
sacrifice can also encourage migrant women to leave their infants with kin to uphold
obligations to parents, siblings and other relatives (Åkesson et al. 2012; Butt et al.
2016).

In addition to the information gap about infants in transnational families, a similar
lacuna prevails about the experience of infant–mother separation for mothers who
navigate transnational social fields. Nonetheless, infants’ experiences, like those of
children more generally, vary historically and culturally, and any notion of a ‘global’,
‘universal’, or even regional infant–parent norm presumes ‘a false commonality of
experience’ (Ansell 2004: 194). While a research focus on mother–infant bonding
offers evidence of universal infant physiological responses and needs related to the
primary caregiver, usually the biological mother, infants are nonetheless typically
depicted as passive recipients of nurturing and as persons subject to family decisions
rather than actors with a social role in the family. Despite their powerful and urgent
bodily needs and their demanding presence in terms of caregivers, infants are often
ignored in tallies of persons, viewed as ‘persons in the making’ rather than ‘fully
fledged persons’, and not factored into scholarly explanations about migration.

Far from being passive, infants in many cultural contexts are viewed as forces to be
reckoned with (Gottlieb 2000). Infant bodies are particularly potent sites for the
ascription of cultural meaning. Lupton (2013) reminds us that infants are relational:
their bodies are experienced and conceptualized in relation to other bodies, as well as
to discourses. The absent mother has a relationship with her infant, but not one
embodied through physical contact. She does not experience skinship – the relational
states created by close physical proximity, touch and intimacy (Tahhan 2008). The
visceral realities of infants, and the relentlessly bodily ways infants enact agency
through requiring care and nurturing from others, can only be experienced second hand
by migrant mothers. Because infants are so resolutely bodily, focusing in transnational social fields on how migrant mothers talk about their infants, sheds light on their management of emotions surrounding physical distance from the care-dependent very young. Infants may exert agency and power, but to comprehend how conditions of transnationalism shape perceptions of infants’ place in the lives of their mobile mothers, we need to turn to the words mothers use. Current global conditions promoting educational achievement and competitive participation in the paid workforce have become increasingly idealized at the same time shifting forms of parenting increasingly expect mother–infant togetherness and bonding (cf. Lupton 2013). How mothers pulled in two directions talk about their infants and their infants’ bodies sheds light on the challenges they face.

This article brings absent infants to the fore by focusing on how mothers articulate their relationship to their infants in their accounts of transnational migration. Rejecting the idea that smallness and an inability to verbalize makes the absence of infants from scholarship unproblematic, in this article I argue that within migration studies, infants are rendered invisible, parts of their bodily experience ‘conjured away’ (Moore and Casper 2009: 183) within a larger narrative of migration. This process of rendering invisible, of having infants ‘hidden in plain sight’ (Moore and Casper 2009: 183), results in a downplaying of the complexity of experiences of mother–infant separation within migration. It minimizes the political, economic and cultural conditions within which such separations occur, which helps create a perception of transnational migrant mothers as successfully managing relations at a distance. This gap contributes to scholarship supporting migration as a shared, managed project within which caregivers, mothers and children engage in a cooperative, supportive triangle and where absence is described as an acceptable social condition (Åkesson et al. 2012; Hoang et al. 2012). This vision obscures the global economic and political conditions structuring the separations, the potential affective consequences for mothers leaving their infants to pursue education or work, and the complex ways mothers view their infants when they are separated transnationally from the work of caring for them.

The experiences of professional Indonesian mothers who live apart from their infants offer a means of understanding the everyday impact of migration in Indonesia, a country rapidly entering transnational networks and where female transnational mobility is increasingly normalized. At the same time, deeply entrenched Indonesian cultural expectations of infant care, gender roles and the place of extended kin in childrearing endure, and mothers need to reckon with them (Chan 2014; Williams 2007). In accounts given by educated, relatively affluent migrant professional women about their experiences of separation from their infants, women’s talk about their infants draws out the depth and historical roots of the challenges they face. Far from invisible in their mothers’ lives, absent infants live large in women’s emotional landscapes. Longstanding practices of fosterage are being reimagined to deal with both changing employment and residence patterns and an emerging global endorsement of child-centred, heteronormative families.

The interviews at the core of this article are drawn from a wider study on professional Indonesian transnational migrant women living in Singapore and
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Respondents who self-identified as educated, professional Indonesian women answered our outreach efforts disseminated in professional, religious and cultural associations and within the author’s existing networks. In Singapore, we conducted nine in-depth interviews in 2015; seven of the women were mothers. Of these Singapore-based mothers, three of the seven had experienced separation from their infant as part of their family history of transnational mobility.

A close reading of the language, symbols and themes used by three Indonesian women in Singapore to talk about their absent infants reveals ambiguities about experience that filtered through to colour transnational women’s parenting stories. The bodily metaphors the mothers used offer insights into values about obligation and expectations. Understanding values about infants among transnationally mobile women needs to go beyond place-based childrearing ideals or cultural constructs of infant bodies and potentialities despite the complex nature of cultural understandings of the reproduction, nurturing and growth of the very young. Understanding absent infants in the global era calls for concepts of culture that can discern the complex relationships between disruptive pasts, politics of self and historical imagination, as well as contemporary threats, new conflicts and individual trajectories contributing to the conditions of parent–child separation (Beneduce 2016). Exploring meanings about infants’ presence and absence draws out migrant women’s backgrounds, which, notwithstanding the relative affluence of the mothers interviewed, can include histories of trauma or oppressive cultural norms, themes underexplored in studies of affluent and professional migrants, where a glib capacity of ‘resilient’ affluent women managing family separation is often assumed (for example, Ley 2010: 201; Waters 2002). The affective repercussions of separation, a ruptured attachment and guilt associated with separations lived in a transnational social field make the infant a topic potentially ‘unspeakable and unspoken’ (Good 2012) for working mothers, where the infant’s absence creates an affect of unease that emerges in the coping stories women tell about their babies.

Affect and transnational mothering

Early research conducted after the increase in labour migration by women for work quickly established a dominant truism: caring for a child from whom one is separated transforms culture-specific mothering ideologies and ideas about best care for children (Boehm et al. 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Many women who cross national borders experience, contest and change their expectations of gender, intimacy and child care. One result is a form of ‘hybridized parenting’ described by Holmes and Mangione (2011), whose ethnographic research with migrating mothers reveals a shift in cultural values concerning parenting resulting from exposure to new ideas where ‘mothers narrated a complex set of parenting beliefs, practices and identities that went beyond a simple acceptance or rejection of their heritage and receiving cultures’ (Holmes and Mangione 2011: 36–7). Compromises in parenting strategies occur and a sense of parent identity shifts with the parent’s social environment.

Mothers shift their perceptions of traditions of fostering. According to Coe (2014: 5), many migrant families bring ‘repertoires’ – existing beliefs, practices and resources
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of family life – to assist in coping with separation. These repertoires affect how they feel about separation and how they separate. For some families, Coe suggests, lengthy separations between mothers and young children are socially and historically constructed as a normal aspect of transnational lives: a painful necessity, but not automatically assumed to be traumatic. Ideally in these contexts, the biological and foster mothers play complementary roles in what is described as a ‘transnational fostering triangle’ (Åkesson et al. 2012; Graham et al. 2012).

However, fostering patterns change over time. Binational flexibility can now be trinational. Grandmothers or aunts are not necessarily available at home to help, as in the past, and other kin or non-kin may take on new roles. New models of family alter educational and occupational goals, and women do not necessarily seek fostering as a resource in constructing new forms of global householding. As Thelen and Haukanes (2010) argue, developments in global models of healthy, engaged children are paralleled by an emerging global parenthood shaped by media, international legislation, shifts in ideas of charity and compassion, and educational and child protection policies. As a result, in-family fostering may be viewed as less desirable than mother–child togetherness or child care by non-kin.

Accompanying these shifts in values about infant care are changes in ideas about children more broadly. Along with a heteronormative nuclear family as a hegemonic feature of global societies (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004), families are becoming more child centred. Children are increasingly conceptualized as human beings with wills and voices of their own, and are increasingly viewed as competent actors – in utero, in infancy and throughout childhood – while parents are seen as less and less capable. Infants are viewed as wise persons whose bodies lag behind their intellectual abilities, with a developed capacity to judge and make decisions, part of a growing ‘ontology of the perfect child’ (Buchbinder and Timmermans 2011: 63). Within this value set, ‘ideas about proper childhood invariably entail corresponding notions of proper parenthood’ (Thelen and Haukanes 2010: 26). Mothering takes on newfound importance, where the child’s optimal development will occur under the mother’s bonded care. Multiple prolonged separations from primary caregivers, and the resulting losses and disruptions to affective relations, are typically thought to produce a poor prognosis for the child’s later socioemotional development (Bohr and Whitfield 2011; Vanore et al. 2015).

At the same time, hybridized parenting strategies that may lead to parent–infant separation appear to create profound emotional challenges for the transnational mother. Limited literature suggests that migrant mothers express deep ambivalence about separation from their infants. Yoshikawa (2011) documented the negative feelings of Chinese immigrants to New York who sent their infants to grandparents in China after they were born in the USA. Bohr and Whitfield’s (2011) pilot study found extreme ambivalence about forfeiting care of one’s child for the sake of the family’s economic well-being. The ‘tolerated ambivalence’ of separation (Bohr and Whitfield 2011: 167) and the ‘everyday ruptures’ (Boehm et al. 2011) described in families conditioned to migration over multiple generations appear insufficient to explain the scope of affect expressed through mothers’ depictions of infant separation. For Boccagni and
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Baldassar (2015), emotional dimensions are inescapable complements of mobility; ambivalence is more complex than straightforward delineations created between ‘home’ and ‘away’. Kwon (2015) lucidly highlights the waiting of families separated by transnational labour as a distinct kind of affective labour within the market economy. She suggests that waiting is an inmaterial yet significant form of unwaged, profit-producing labour necessary to the larger work project. Building on the notion of powerful, silent and seemingly passive acts as part of the labour involved in migration, I suggest that the affective experiences of mothers separated from their infants are a form of labour. Migrant mothers endure physical separation from their infant, with rationalizations, discomfort, insecurity, tears and self-recrimination shaping forms of performative affect. The affective labour of separating from the complicated, visceral, demanding, highly material and embodied act of child care engenders ideas about infants and infant capacities that reveal deep longings. Through separation, emotions are disembodied and re-embodied – out of place and re-emplaced – in response to migrant life trajectories.

For the highly mobile Indonesian women interviewed in this study, affective experiences go beyond an everyday ambivalence and a managed separation that have been identified as hallmarks of transnational parent–child separation. Separation can be deeply traumatic, even when there are multiple coping mechanisms in place with strong support networks that make the ruptures feel inevitable. Some feelings are heightened and not easily managed through everyday continuities. Affects of guilt can be heightened because migration places women in a difficult moral bind, where the demands of economic contribution and cultural expectations contradict the potent moralities enmeshed in maternal nurturing narratives. Similarly, anxieties about exclusion are a powerful source of affective response. People fear exclusion by significant others, and any threats to their sense of belonging and attachment are likely to result in feelings of guilt (Baldassar 2015: 84). Infants may be targets for expressions of guilt by mobile mothers, conveyed in an idiom bound by maternal obligations and expectations and situating mothers within particular political, economic and cultural conditions.

Transnational Indonesian mothers and fostering

For Indonesian mothers, compelling transnational opportunities mix with local expectations around childrearing, fostering and mothering. Indonesia has a long history of valuing ‘model mothers’, women supporting their husbands’ success and their children’s development (Dewi 2011). Motherhood is embedded in longstanding state institutions such as wives’ organizations for military and civil servant families. To this day, ‘all these organizations ideologically, politically, socially, and strategically, mould women into the ideal model of staying in the nuclear family, ikut suami (following the husband), being domesticated and supporting their husbands through the role of “good housewife”’ (Dewi 2011: 212; see also Graham Davies 2015). But mothers are also increasingly considered foreign-exchange heroes (Chan 2014) for working outside the country to send remittances, or for pursuing state-run opportunities to study and gain skills overseas.
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Such seemingly incompatible versions of motherhood sustain their legitimacy by depending on longstanding traditions of fostering in Indonesia (Beatty 2002). Fostering is enmeshed within kinship and housing traditions, and children are often cared for by grandparents, older sisters, or aunts and uncles. Grandparents on either side or a mother’s sister are regarded as having particularly strong claims to a child if they themselves have no young children (Carsten 1991).

In Java, Newberry (2014: 81) has described ‘foundational flexibility’ as a cultural disposition evident in the widespread fostering practice of moving infants and children between households. In Java, relations of affect and of economic need are often blurry (Newberry 2014). The term anak angkat (fostered child) is about class mobility, and the movement of children because of economic need was frequently described. Newberry (2014: 84) states that the circulation of children ‘produces and reinforces pathways of exchange’. This characteristic of mobile children finds its echo in the flexibility required by a global political economy. For potential transnational families, the capacity to foster is associated with successful overseas initiatives, thus tying family success to a tradition of mother–infant separation.

For women from Indonesian families, pursuing education or work overseas builds on this foundational flexibility around childrearing. Separation from children is accepted within the family, the nation and transnationally. Family goals combine with structured opportunities in economically dominant countries such as Singapore. Students at elite Indonesian schools wishing to attend university in Singapore are recruited for scholarships. Preferential work visas and Indonesians’ privileged access to permanent resident status in Singapore have long helped create a perception that Singapore offers accessible opportunities for rapid family- and self-betterment. Within these conditions, aspiring and ambitious Indonesian women feel pressure to build on opportunities for mobility and to draw on traditional fostering patterns of grandmother care to help with their infants while they pursue opportunities in Singapore and other locations overseas.

Research results

The three Indonesian professional women whose stories are discussed all had similar trajectories. All were raised in urban settings on the island of Java, had a university education, had travelled widely, were married, were working at the time of the interview, and had Singapore permanent residency (PR) status. None had chosen to be a citizen of Singapore, and all clearly indicated their wish to remain Indonesian citizens even if the opportunity to change citizenship were presented to them. All three women had spent time apart from at least one of their children while the child was under the age of 18 months. Reasons offered for the separation included career aspirations, citizenship and residency restrictions, personality factors, job restrictions and requirements, family expectations and political conditions. Persons taking responsibility for the infant’s care included maternal and paternal grandmothers, the father, the grandmother’s maid, and the mother’s siblings. For two of the mothers, the infants, rather than the parents, were mobile, travelling from country to country. In the third case, the
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infant was as mobile as the parents. The respondents viewed infant mobility and mother–infant separation within the larger cycle of movement and separation that characterized their family relations generally.

The following case studies highlight specific strategies and actions taken by the three respondents about separation from their infants. Their accounts illustrate the intersection of feelings of guilt, grief and discomfort, rationalizations associated with infant separation, and the insidious ways family and work demands filter through and shape how women view their infants and their infants’ bodies. Despite languages of personal responsibility and shifts away from perceived traditions of fostering, women expressed through their talk about their babies’ bodies an ambivalence about the various ways in which care patterns wove through their life choices.

Case 1: Rani

Rani, age 36, has been employed in Singapore for three years after spending several years studying in the Netherlands. Rani and her husband have travelled back and forth intensively between Indonesia and the Netherlands. She currently lives apart from her husband, although they are an intact couple.

Rani’s son Raffi was born in 2010 in the Netherlands. For much of his life, he has travelled back and forth between his parents, cared for by one parent at a time. Rani’s son was under her care at the time of the interview, but he had just returned from a prolonged period living with his father. This family schedule was devised because Rani obtained a job in Singapore after finding it difficult to find employment in the Netherlands due to what she perceived as low-grade discrimination. Her husband, who is from the United Kingdom, retained his job in the Netherlands, and the couple also frequently travels to the UK. Currently, their son has three passports and can communicate in four languages because his parents wish him to have ‘options’ when he grows up. When Raffi is with Rani, he is actively cared for by his grandmother, who regularly travels from Indonesia to Singapore to look after him while Rani works full time.

In her interview, Rani naturalized this lifestyle by emphasizing her child’s capacity for travel and mobility, seeking flexibility in the baby’s personality and body from an early age. Rani and her husband have cultivated an idea of a baby who does not mind being absent from his mother. This language of cultivating an infant’s capacity to travel is a strategy for reframing the emotional costs of decisions, or at least the emotional complexities and challenges of decision making by parents, as a part of the infant’s personality.

Rani describes Raffi as flexible and easy-going, ‘a lovely child’ who accommodates their travel needs:

Yeah, well, he’s fine. Um, in the beginning it took. … He was surprisingly quite easy to adapt to life in a different environment, so he’s not highly sensitive when it comes to change, environment change and all that. Mhm. Um, we travelled with him since he was four months old to Indonesia and then England after that, um, but also short distances. Um, and we travel not just … not for work, uh, but more for a hobby.
Their son’s development rhythms could be adapted to their travel agenda:

Um, six months breast feeding, but after that we realized, you know, that it’s just another couple of months before we have to travel, so why don’t we just stick to that and just wean him off after we finish all this travelling. So, that actually worked really well. Um, he was in fact weaned at 13 months. Basically, on the twelfth month he wasn’t interested anymore. [R laughs]. So, you might ... yeah, yeah! But we were in England and we had to fly for 22 hours to Australia, so I just used the boobs. It was not time to ... to change to make it be all new again.

The child can be reasoned with to support their future travel plans and flexible family structure:

And then we’ll go to England for a couple of weeks, um, and then after that we’ll go to the Netherlands for a couple of weeks and then I have to go back here and start working and he’ll stay there. Yeah. So, that’s his big holiday and he’s ... you know, we ... we are selling that to him. You know, after [current] separation [of mother and father] we have a big holiday [together], and then we split up again.

Rani cultivates travel in her young son by marketing intimacy, ‘selling him’ on ideas. She cultivates flexibility by assuming her child’s ability to accept dual households, mobility, an ease about travel schedules, and a capacity for emotional fluidity. Rani consistently describes her son as delightful and easy-going and as displaying resentment about separation only in a limited manner and for a limited time.

The case also shows a strong focus on bringing the child’s physical needs into sync with the family’s larger mobility needs. The baby’s body is to be moulded, and can be moulded, around the family’s many travel plans, international separation, multiple caregivers, and multiple households. With mobility embedded into assumptions about her child’s body, Rani expresses a managed affect where possible feelings of guilt and longing about separation are reduced by imputing an inner emotional toughness and external physical resiliency onto her very young child.

Case 2: Jersey

Jersey, aged 31, and her husband Rocky relocated to Singapore semi-reluctantly after a long, fulfilling period as students living as a couple in the USA. After marrying and taking up jobs in Singapore, Jersey and Rocky purchased a government housing apartment and tried to settle into life in Singapore. Unlike Rani, Jersey struggled with parenting from the outset. After her daughter was born, she found herself unable to maintain the work demands of her job alongside the care of her daughter. She had been granted 12 weeks of maternity leave. Her mother came to help for the first month. After she left, Jersey was overwhelmed by caring for her child without help: ‘I couldn’t
handle her here alone’, she said. In a moment of crisis, she flew to Indonesia, leaving her husband behind in Singapore, and spent the remaining eight weeks of maternity leave with her mother. When she returned to work in Singapore, she left the infant behind with her mother in Indonesia.

Jersey feels that her newborn infant interpreted her state of mind and responded negatively to her stress levels during this crisis:

For the first month, the first 30 days, my mom came here to help me because she knew I was a first-time mom, and then she helped me, teach me to do this, to do that, and then after 30 days then she went back. And then during that ten days period I did it alone, then it’s very struggle for me.

Yeah, the baby can see also I was very stressed, and then she just went to Indonesia and then after that, see how it goes.

Away from her infant in Singapore, Jersey could relax, pumping and saving breast milk for her. The infant’s body, according to Jersey, did not tolerate the offering of her breast milk.

LB: And then after that, when the baby was about, what, three months old, you came back here. Did you stop pumping [breast milk] at that point?

J: That time I still got some pumping but not every day. More relaxing, which is, I didn’t … I just did the pumping about three or four times in a week, yeah, and then the next month when I went back to Indonesia, I offered my breast milk to her, she got diarrhoea. Then I have to throw all the breast milk away.

Jersey asserts that the infant could feel her stress levels even when the infant was in Indonesia and she was in Singapore. ‘Whoa. Of course, I was so sad. Um, I keep crying the whole time, like for her. Every time when I just cry, every time like, pray for her and see any kids, I always cry. I think she was stressed also because of me.’

Jersey returned to Singapore primarily because of the demands of her job. Part of the couple’s Singaporean earnings paid for a maid in Indonesia to help Jersey’s mother. Thus, the infant received care from Jersey’s parents, extended relatives living in the same home, and a full-time maid. Jersey said she missed her infant terribly while she was in Singapore and flew to Indonesia to visit her on average once a month for ten months. Jersey’s husband, who visited his daughter ‘once or twice’ during the ten-month separation, described Jersey as crying constantly when separated from her daughter, and filled with misgivings daily. At the age of one, the infant returned to live permanently with the couple in Indonesia, and Jersey gave up her job to care for her daughter.

Jersey’s case illustrates the mundane nature of much transnational mobility, with working professionals taking advantage of discounted airfares and low-cost household help in one country to counter the high costs of living in another. The case also
illustrates the impact of maternity leave policies on mother–child separation, where a longer leave might have created fewer challenges for the new mother. The case further shows how Jersey viewed her infant’s body as highly porous, responsive to her feelings of stress even from a distance. Jersey interpreted her breast milk as making her infant sick, which suggests that she viewed the infant’s body as a device for communicating negative responses to her, rejecting her efforts to parent from a distance.

Jersey’s intense crying and negative interpretation of her infant’s body highlight an aspect of fostering’s emotional complexity. Giving a child to be fostered in Java is said to involve feelings of malu, an Indonesian word for ‘shame’, which combines shyness, embarrassment and guilt. Being malu creates a degree of social avoidance that can stretch beyond a person to extended family. Malu can function as a regulatory mechanism to protect the family’s reputation in the wider community (Graham Davies 2015). Jersey’s affective unease, expressed as feeling bad, as having no choice, and as failing to provide ease and comfort for her infant, suggests transnational feelings of shame, related in part to her falling short of ideals about motherhood as articulated in a wider cultural sphere.

Case 3: Ida

Ida is 38, with two children. She cares for her younger child in Singapore, and her husband cares for their older child in Australia. They are an intact family. Ida obtained her undergraduate degree in Europe. While in Singapore for work in the late 1990s, Ida obtained permanent residency very quickly because the Singaporean government quietly gave preferential treatment to Chinese Indonesian families disrupted by the 1998 race riots. Ida was unable to find work in Australia due to what she described as low-grade racism preventing her from obtaining work commensurate with her training. She has been separated from both her children for extended periods because of her decision to accept a meaningful job that builds on her skills and training.

Ida described her decision to foster her first child with her mother-in-law from the age of ten months to three years while she pursued a doctorate in Australia, though travelling back and forth on several occasions:

You know, my husband, my mother-in-law and I, we were close, so when we decided to do a Ph.D., you know, it was somehow a natural, a natural, how do you say, a natural arrangement. And then … and she didn’t hesitate to say yes. Um, for some reason I didn’t feel horrible about it, but now I … looking back it was horrible … but I had to do it, I had to do it! I had no choice.

The naturalization of grandparent care may be rooted in extensive Javanese, and more broadly Indonesian, traditions of fostering. Fostering is a strategy that can help parents offset economic hardships, access resources available through extended kin networks, and redistribute the costs and benefits of childrearing across the extended family. The gift to the grandmother of care of the child reinforces the social relations of obligation and reciprocity, with significant long-term emotional benefits for all three generations.
The flexibility of mobility and socialization of children also finds an echo in flexibility in the global political economy, where relations of affect and economic need are often blurred.

Ida’s mother-in-law travelled to Australia with the boy at least once. Ida linked this choice to costs and career: ‘had he been with us in Sydney, we would have to pay for child care because otherwise I wouldn’t be able to go to classes and everything, and that was too much work’. She then returned to the ‘natural’ domain of infant body language to reassure herself about her choices.

LB: And when you were there for six months, did you resume a mother role with him?

I: Sort of, sort of. And for some reason he didn’t forget me at all, so I was quite thankful of that. He was a baby, but I remember vividly the first time I saw him after not seeing him for months and he’d just look at me and go, gurgle gurgle. He just went like that. I think he was, I don’t know, one year or something at the time. Uch, anyway, so yeah, I’m thankful that he never forgot me. [laughter] Phew!

Ida uneasily accepts her infant’s bodily reactions as validating her relationship to him. This pattern is also present in how she speaks about challenges for her husband when her infant was young:

[My husband] had a hard time accepting that this little human thing is actually more attached to his mother. So, he was really super eager to help and wanted to be part of it, but he felt that he was rejected. He was just a baby, but he took it really hard!

Ida here accepted the delegation of intimate labour of ‘skinship’, of nurturing, feeding, bathing and tending to the infant, and expressed relief that her infant did not punish her for not carrying out this labour herself: ‘He never forgot me. Phew!’

Wilson (2004) shows how social and cultural meanings of intimacy – specifically our identities and relationships – define markets, and how markets likewise shape intimacy. Economic conditions facilitate the naturalization of grandmothers’ skinship work, as well as the multiple homes and separations Ida’s commitment to her work demanded. Ida’s family may be affluent enough for the grandmother not to work, to travel internationally to bring the child to visit his mother, and for Ida to return home to visit her child, but this ease does not translate to maternal stoicism; rather, unease is multiplied in new and different ways. Ida’s ‘Phew!’”, though, suggests further confluence of emotions: an anxiety over the increasing incompatibility between the fostering system necessary for her academic and career successes, and expectations about maternal labour in the context of transnational childrearing.

Personal (historical) moments when common sense becomes verbalized in commentary – ‘Phew!’ – signal change. Middle-class nuclear-family values of living in one
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place increasingly resonate in migrant family aspirations (Coe 2014). Ida, Jersey and Rani see their children as having personal agency, wills and voices – concepts of selfhood and capacity incompatible with expectations about young children embedded in fostering practices. In addition, an emotional defensiveness arises in Ida in response to shifting expectations from both her country of origin and the country in which her husband works and lives and she herself would like to live. Ida’s ‘Phew!’ reflects the challenges of being a successful international student and professional, achieving the training and skills necessary to thrive in a global work environment.

Ida contextualizes these shifts within a wider framework in which visas and work permits shape capacity and mobility less than perceptions about race and ethnicity. Having been a successful graduate student in Australia, Ida says that she would not stand a chance of getting her current Singaporean job there because of discrimination against minority women in general and a specific denigration of Indonesians in Australia that she finds less prevalent in Singapore. Racialization in one country and the moralities of her country of origin together structure an engagement with a third country and with her child. Ida naturalizes the relationship between markets and intimacy by imputing her infant with the power to pass judgement on her for these decisions, potentially to reject her for her choices in a manner resembling Jersey’s expressed fears. Further, Ida naturalizes the Indonesian tradition of fostering children as distinct from economic conditions that created the need. The narrow threads of logic by which Ida can justify both value sets generate unease and are tenuous, as is the fragile balancing act she has built around flight schedules, grandparents and temporary contracts, a balancing act that her poise, confidence and articulate professionalism on full display during our interview belied. ‘Phew!’ indeed.

Together, these three cases illustrate strong associations between mobile professional women and how they express emotions about their infants’ abilities to manage separation from them. The cases show parental affect about infants shaped by the distance between mother and infant and by the high demands of transnational mobility. Infant bodies range from easily flexible, as Rani’s son, to porous and easily poisoned by a mother’s stress, as with Jersey’s daughter. Ida’s story shows her struggling with waning ideas of ‘natural’ child fostering within her transnational lifestyle, articulated through an infant with a capacity to choose and enact rejection, or not. Strategies and struggles for coping emerge through a strongly expressed unease about the powers of absent infants, an affect only somewhat tempered by the resources and economic benefits available.

Discussion

Transnational migrant mothers separated from their infants sit at the intersection of multiple moralities. The ambiguous social positions of mobile working mothers, already both romanticized and denigrated, are intensified when mothers separate from their infants. Mothers legitimate their choices within the context of a public narrative of ‘good mothering’ that increasingly idealizes the co-presence of mother and child. The mothers interviewed respond to these discourses by enhancing a personal narrative
about their infants that accords with their own responses to the exigencies of their situations. Throughout, the infant’s body is a central symbol used to articulate the mother’s feelings about transnational mobility.

For the women interviewed, separation means not carrying out the intimacy of skinship and other labours required to look after a baby. Intimate labour involves dependency and trust (Zelizer 2010). Between infants and caregivers, it entails a host of daily bodily rituals, bodily care, routines, caresses, eye contact, and other verbal and nonverbal communication. The mothers interviewed did not talk about their infants in the visceral terms other interviewed mothers in our study used when talking about the children they had in their care at the point of interviews, where the mundane everyday acts of child care occupied conversations. In the profiled interviews, the infant body was abstracted and simplified, revealing ambivalence and longing. The women presented their separation in a way that minimized the potential of a rebuke for being mobile, for working, and for fostering their child. Women project their fears onto their infants’ bodies, using infant bodies as a rich symbolic site for trying to come to terms with their situations and to assuage their fears and insecurities. The uneasy compromises they strike are echoed in the ways they talk about their infants. Their emotional labour transforms their infants into the flexible child they require, one who reflects increasingly ubiquitous global ideas about infants’ personality and capacity, and positions them as responsible, loving mothers, despite the demands of a transnational professional lifestyle and the renegotiation of cultural caregiving dynamics.

These women struggle to succeed within global conditions affecting their everyday lives with their children. The histories of national child care policies, economic cooperation between nations, and essentialized traditions of family fostering trickle down, inflecting the tone and language women use to talk about their infants. If, as Reddy (2001: 124) has suggested, ‘any enduring political regime must establish as an essential element a normative order for emotions’, the ‘emotional regime’ associated with contemporary global capitalism expects a normative order of not minding mother–child separation. Where minding occurs, women diffuse it, translating their affect of unease into explanations and justifications that do not necessarily absolve them of guilt, and that rely for their legitimacy on an absent infant who ‘talks back’, giving the mothers a means to express their own emotions through talking about their infant’s body.

Conclusion

For the professional Indonesian women interviewed, in the name of ‘family’ and ‘career’, parent and child are separated and people do not live together as a family. The triangle of grandmother-caregiver/birth-mother/child is being redrawn, not as a two-location transaction and not as a three-person relationship, but rather as a three- or four-location relationship, with multiple caregivers, where fathers and professional nannies replace grandmothers and infants do the commuting, reinforcing a lifeway of multiple, prolonged separations for professional women. The interviews suggest the merit of further exploring the breadth of experiences hidden in the category ‘children not raised by parents’ to render more visible professional mothers’ struggles to maintain family
goals within the context of increasingly challenging global fields where stability and mother–infant nurturing remain the gold standards for childrearing. Moral models of family circulating in Indonesia, embedded in visa policies in Singapore, and expressed in the patterns and routines of daily life in Australia, Europe or the USA, continue to privilege mothers who raise their children themselves, in fixed locales. This issue is exacerbated by the ongoing tendency to reduce the issue of mother–infant separation to a problem about mobility rather than one about separation. A fuller understanding of the costs and challenges of migration needs to address the complex ways women struggle to cope with a pattern in which an absent infant is still vitally present in the emotional and strategic landscape of the mobile mother, profoundly shaping her actions, personal goals and emotional well-being.

Notes

1. This research formed part of a larger study entitled Southeast Asian Women, Family, and Migration in the Global Era, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Grant #435-2013-0079. Ethical consent was obtained from the Ethics Review Board of the University of Victoria.

2. All names are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been changed.

3. Maternity leave in Singapore is more generous for citizens than for permanent residents. Citizens enjoy 20 weeks of maternity leave. There is no paternity leave currently in place.

References

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