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### Migration, precarity and the gender violence of domesticity and care

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## MIGRATION, PRECARIITY AND THE GENDER VIOLENCE OF DOMESTICITY AND CARE<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses migration, precarity and gender violence in the context of domestic and care work arguing that gender violence can be best conceptualized and understood from the theoretical perspective of precarity. Precarity becomes from this perspective a double-edged concept describing both the precariousness of life and the forms of escape that may emerge from it. This perspective is contrasted to the dominant anchoring of migration and gender violence to anti- and counter-trafficking discourses that silence the agency of migrants in general and migrant women in particular. Taking as its starting point the narrative of a migrant woman from Zimbabwe living as a domestic and care worker in Greece, the paper focuses on precarity as it is produced in the seemingly “private” and feminine spaces of domesticity and care, and highlights the role of networking and acting together as a strategy of actively enacting labour and political rights where they do not exist.*

**Keywords:** *precarity, gender violence, migration, trafficking, domestic work*

*“For it seems like she can be anything,  
any kind of creature she wants to be”  
Flaming Lips, “I can be a Frog”*

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### 1. A FALSE PROMISE

There was a promise that brought Lia to Greece from Zimbabwe; a promise that she would study in a hand-craft school and work in the tourist business. This promise was made to her by a Greek family that also paid for her travel expenses. When Lia arrived in Greece, the promise was broken. She was told that she could not study because she did not have a residence permit and she was locked inside the family house in Athens in order to work as a live-in unpaid maid. Her passport and salaries were withheld; she was not allowed to have any contact with anyone in Greece or in Zimbabwe. Whenever she left the house, she had to be accompanied. As she explained: “Me I will be walking, eh, I’ll be walking in front and they will be in the back of me, you know watching me as if they were walking a dog. You know when you are walking a dog ... so they had to control me. If I see a black person, they never allow me to talk to anybody, because they knew that the people maybe they can tell me, you know ...”

If Lia’s narrative was cut at this point, her story could have been used for a textbook on trafficking or a leaflet for a counter-trafficking campaign.<sup>2</sup> If this fragment was selected, Lia’s story could have been treated as a didactic tale to deter other powerless female victims from migrating and sensitize public opinion in receiving countries about trafficking networks. But her story neither started nor ended with a fake promise made by a Greek family in Zimbabwe. Choosing this particular fragment of the narrative that begins and ends with captivity imposes a framework that effectively silences migrant agency and captures her in a moment of extreme vulnerability into the fixed identity of the female migrant victim. On the contrary, what this article will intend to do is to “explore the issue of migration in terms of necessity, but also in terms of dream and narration: desires and expectations before departure and actual conditions of arrival” (Coppola et al., 2007: 87). Taking as its starting point Lia’s narrative, this article will argue that rather than understanding it in the context of the hegemonic discourse of trafficking, gender and migration, violence can be conceptualized and understood from the perspective of precarity that enables every day acts of normalization and escape enacted in the spaces of domesticity and care.

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2. “By offering potential victims false promises, traffickers paint a rosy picture of better life, such as a good job, educational opportunity or marriage. If a potential victim falls for the false promises, the trafficker transports the person to another place or country for exploitation. The person becomes a victim of human trafficking” (IOM SACTAP, 2010: 3).

## 2. TRAFFICKING, MIGRATION AND VIOLENCE

As Judith Butler (2004a: 22) argues, “to the extent that we commit violence, we are acting upon another, putting others at risk, causing damage to others. In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, but this vulnerability becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions”. While violence may be a physical act of “doing harm”, it is simultaneously constituted as an act embedded into social and political practices that make it intelligible. This distinction reflects also diverse representations of some victims of violence as worthy of grief and others as “unrepresentable” or “ungrievable” (Butler, 2004b).

Among the discursive formations that make intelligible contemporary forms of gender violence are those of the trafficking discourse. Having (re)emerged during the 1990s after the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, anti- and counter-trafficking discourses produced a set of practices that enabled a gendering of the post cold war security crisis. The gendered figure of the white, young and pure Eastern European prostitute became emblematic of the European crisis of borders, identities and citizenship (Berman, 2003).

In the 1990s large scale IOM anti-trafficking campaigns promoting images of Eastern European migrant women as “beautiful”, “powerless”, “victimized” and “static” bodies played a double role at once criminalizing migrant border crossings of non EU citizens and questioning women’s autonomy in migration (Adrijasevic, 2007; Adrijasevic, 2010). Although in the 2000s these representations broadened in scope to include women of different nationalities, colours, races, ages and ethnic origins, the production of female migrants as victims continues to constitute a persistent feature of anti-trafficking discourses. In fact, the victimization “trend, which began as a way of drawing attention to specific forms of violence committed against women, has now become a way of describing everyone on the lower rungs of power” (Augustin, 2003: 30).

The (re)invention of “trafficking” condenses the social dynamics and political dilemmas of gender, migration and violence. At once too broad and too narrow, the discourses of “trafficking” set the norms that dictate which migrant lives are to be represented as vulnerable to violence, worthy of recognition, protection, and assistance and which are unrepresentable. In anti- and counter-trafficking policies, states are called upon to act simultaneously as protectors of national borders from illegal migrant flows and

as protectors of migrant lives from transnational criminal networks (Araud, 2004; Adrijasevic, 2010; Augustin, 2007). This contradictory “duty” describes in effect the need to establish the norms that determine the line separating those who will be recognized as victims of violence worthy of state protection and those who will remain in the grey area of the unrecognized and the unrecognizable on which state-sanctioned violence can be legitimately exercised.

In anti-trafficking law in many EU states, in which the victim must denounce the traffickers to the police and testify against them in judicial hearings in order to receive recognition, protection and residence permit. If the victim decides after a period of contemplation that she or he is not able or willing to collaborate with the police, then the “trafficking victim” status and all the entitlements that accompany it are automatically removed, leaving the migrant in question in a position of illegality and vulnerability to state sanctioned violence, such as detention, repatriation or deportation.

Lia’s narrative can be understood as either failing or escaping anti- and counter-trafficking representations. After two years of enclosure, the son of the family lost his keys. Lia took them and left the house. After drifting away for a day, she asked two African street vendors to help her. Through a network of other African migrants, she found a job, a house and got back in contact with her relatives. Lia never became a “trafficking victim” for two reasons. First, she was never recognized as a trafficking victim, never testified against the traffickers, never received any legal, psychological or economic protection and assistance from the state or any other anti-trafficking institution. In fact, when we met, she continued to live without a residence permit in Greece, although she was a resident for the past 15 years. Furthermore, Lia was quite successful; she rented her own flat in the centre of the city and worked as a domestic worker in an upper class household in the affluent northern suburbs. In parallel, she sold in private her own hand-made crafts and was very active in African community politics. Her children lived in the home country with relatives, but she fully provided for their upbringing. Her own desire was to become a full-time businesswoman. Finally she had set up with other migrant women a network that helped other domestic workers to escape.

Second, as Lia’s narrative unfolded, she explained that in Zimbabwe she was recognized as a “national hero”. At the age of 15, she had joined the revolutionary army and fought as a guerrilla fighter. Her husband was a journalist, whom she met when he was filming a documentary about her life. She worked as a history teacher, when he was killed and after family and financial difficulties, she decided to migrate. Her plan was to work

for a while in Greece, get a diploma in hand craft and then move back to Zimbabwe to start her own business. Although she was not recognized as a guerrilla fighter in Greece, she was an activist and continued to work on her plan to become a full-time business woman. In Lia's non-linear narrative, there was need and vulnerability to violence, but there was also desire that led to multiple transformations. Her narrative represented multiple positionalities that were not hierarchically or linearly organized: she could be a migrant woman, a guerrilla fighter, a mother, a teacher, a public figure, a business woman and a worker in the private sector of domestic work. It is precisely because of these transformations that Lia's narrative would have had to be suppressed and reduced to a mere expression of extreme vulnerability in order to fit the anti-or counter-trafficking framework.

### 3. VIOLENCE AND THE THREAT OF DEPORTABILITY

Amongst Lia's transformations, her war experience as a guerrilla fighter prompts us to rethink the notion of violence in relation to gender and migration. How is it that a person who was previously able to fight in conditions of extreme violence, such as a war, found herself imprisoned by a Greek middle class family that used only minor physical means to push her into this situation? As Hannah Arendt argues, violence should not be conflated with power. Violence is always instrumental and never a cause in itself. It is an instrument of power, an instrument used at the last instance, when all other means, such as persuasion or force, have been exhausted. Violence cannot in itself justify or legitimize anything (Arendt, 2000). This analysis implies that acts, like Lia's enforced captivity, do not take place in a vacuum, neither are they enacted outside or despite of normal power relations. More specifically, being in captivity was, as Lia explains in the following fragment, a condition prompted by the threat of being arrested and deported back to Zimbabwe.

"The time I went for war it was war, it was war, it was war. So it was over, it was over. If I wanted to deal with them I could deal with them because for me they were just taking me as a fool but I knew what I was doing. So I just say. "OK, let them do whatever they want to do. I am in their country. I was in their country. I didn't know where to go because the problem was language. And the papers at any time... We didn't know that what they were doing was illegal because they were threatening us; that is the reason why you are not going out because you don't have papers. But when I came out, when I was leading my independent life I saw a LOT

of black people without papers and they were walking, they were selling, they were doing this and I never had a problem with the police... Because or even if I want to be violent against them and I'll end up being in prison again and my children will suffer. So I just decided that: OK, the time shall come when I will, when I will escape. So I managed to escape them and then I left them. I'm still OK (laughing). I'm surviving."

Violence, as Lia describes it, lies simultaneously in the physical act of captivity but also in the act of being defined as an illegal migrant by a law, which in a Kafkaesque manner she does not know or comprehend. The richness of this fragment can be opposed to the banality of fragments about violence reproduced in anti- and counter-trafficking narratives, because it makes the critical distinction between an act of violence, i.e. in war, and the normalization of power relations through a threat that looms in every-day life. However, contrary to Arendt's sharp distinction between violence as a physical act that reinforces strength and force as a "natural" or "social" relation, this fragment also points out to the entanglement of force as a social relation and violence as a physical act into the same discourse.

According to Nicholas De Genova (2002), legalization functions as a normalizing mechanism that regulates relations between citizens and aliens. Physical acts like Lia's captivity are conditioned by state policies and every day practices for the control of migrant border crossings. Once the territorial border is passed, illegal migrants go through a process of learning how to identify themselves as illegal migrants. The paradox here is precisely that the inclusion of migrants into "host" societies materializes in their illegalization.

The threat of deportability, therefore, is an omnipresent condition that makes meaningful the social inclusion (rather than exclusion) of migrants as legal/illegal labour. To be more precise, the distinction between legality/illegality is always fluid and constantly re-negotiated in every-day and bureaucratic practices. The succession from illegalization to legalization is not a linear process: legalizations become instances in migrant lives, during which vulnerability is reduced to a mere threat, but they presuppose processes of illegalization, during which acts of physical violence by the state and other actors are enacted.

#### 4. PRECARITY, DOMESTICITY AND CARE

Rather than a didactic tale about false promises and trafficking networks, Lia's narrative of captivity, can be understood as paradigmatic of migrant

precarity and precarious networks. The “precarisation of existence” refers to a “tendency that traverses all of society” and “feeds and feeds upon the climate of instability and fear”. Precarisation is produced by a “macropolitics of security” translated into “a micropolitics of fear”<sup>3</sup> that overtakes everyday life (Precarias a la Derriva, 2006: 39). Proliferating through the deregulation of labour relations and the dismantling of welfare structures, precarisation is not limited to migrant women, but is historically prevalent in migrant and women’s lives. As Angela Mitropoulos (2006) argues, the concept of “regular, full-time, long-term employment” presupposed “vast amounts of unpaid domestic labour by women and hyper-exploited labour in the colonies...The unpaid labour of women allowed for the consumerist, affective ‘humanisation’ and protectionism of what was always a small part of the Fordist working class”. In the contemporary world, according to Sandro Mezzadra (2001), the control of state borders from migrant movements becomes the principle means by which labour mobility is controlled. Practices of precarisation and labour mobility of migrant labour are gradually extended to include all labour. The migration regime employs strategies and methods of control that are increasingly used for citizens and nationals. The migrant is the emblematic precarious worker. Furthermore, domestic and care labour is still for the most part assigned to women. Even when it is paid, it is considered precarious undervalued, uncertain and contingent to specific family arrangements (Precarias a la Derriva, 2006).

What enabled Lia’s violent transformation into a “family pet”<sup>4</sup> in the first place was the precarious gendered political economy of domestic and care work. As the feminist literature has emphasized, by being naturalized as private and feminine, domestic and care work have been historically devalued as “non-work”. In an increasingly globalized world, however, this private and feminine “non-work” becomes the site for the production and reproduction of migrant labour (Salazar-Parenas, 2003; Anderson, 2000). While for employers, domestic and care work is mostly consid-

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3. More specifically, the securitisation of migration as a societal “threat” (Waeber, 1993), potentially endangering national sovereignty and social cohesion of migrant-receiving states is the historical sociopolitical context within which the precarization of migrant lives becomes meaningful. A macropolitics of security is translated in the everyday lives of -especially new coming- migrants into a micropolitics of fear

4. This transformation that challenges the normalised conception of the family pet as a symbol of the excess of domestic care and protection that goes far beyond humans into the realm of animal. In this case, however, the excess of care was normalized as a form of control over a human conditioned by the micropolitics of fear.



ered as “help”, for migrants themselves this is clearly a field of work that also provides the means to reduce the risks of illegality and deportability (Kambouri, 2006). The threat of an arrest, police detention, lack of legal documents, unemployment, or the absence of social security, all render the work and social life of domestic workers contingent to temporary, uncertain and insecure arrangements.

Although captivity is an exceptionally violent practice, the power relations that made it possible are not. In fact, working with no contract, no specified working hours and no determined duration of employment is a common practice in the political economy of domesticity and care. In this context, many migrant domestic workers enjoy temporary or contingent residency, social protection and welfare rights, which mostly depend on their ability to pay themselves through various administrative arrangements, for their entitlement to these rights (Anderson, 2000)

There is one statement in particular in Lia’s narrative that best captures her precarious escape. While she was describing the reasons for her captivity, she exclaimed: “OK, let them do whatever they want to do. I am in their country. I was in their country”. The repetition of the same sentence first in the present and then in the past tense seems paradoxical, given the fact that Lia never left Greece since she migrated. But it captures a transient moment: Lia is no longer “in their country” but is neither in her country. She has refused to integrate by learning Greek or applying for a residence permit but is part of social relations that redefine what being a stranger in Greece is or may become. This denial to “integrate” into the linguistic and legal norms is not a denial of her own personal entitlement to rights, but rather an enactment of rights in a different language and an exercise of rights that do not exist. As Butler argues, what is at stake in such practices of denial to adhere to the established linguistic norm is precisely the active production of rights by those who are not normalized as citizens (Butler, 2009: vi).

Yet, following Arendt, Butler (2009: vi) also argues that such an act cannot be performed by an individual, but “has to be an action with others”. This assertion leads to another one of Lia’s transformations: her becoming part of a network that actively and collectively resists gender vulnerability to violence in the spaces of domesticity and care. Although this network rests on intimate, private, informal ties of care, its aim is to oppose its collective forces to both gender violence and the state as a source of assistance, protection and legitimacy. By its very aim the network transforms its participants’ labour into a question of politics and work and the private spaces

of domesticity and care into public spaces of struggle for labour and political rights. These practices are practices of translation, not only because the network operates in English, but most importantly because it strives to “translate into the dominant language, not to ratify its power, but to expose and resist its daily violence, and to find the language through which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled” (Butler, 2009: x).

This process of enacting rights is manifest in Lia’s narration from the moment when she becomes entrenched into the narratives of other precarious domestic workers that are part of the network. “Their” –no longer “her”– activist work consists of helping other precarious domestic workers –especially new ones– to renegotiate contracts, salaries, compensations, health care costs and labour relations that included mainly informal pressure calls and visits to employers and “freeing operations”. The network is not “public” and its activities are strictly kept to the domestic and care sector.

As Lia explained, “we learn about those women because they are employed in the houses of relatives or friends or sometimes they are simply women who are found on the street crying. A Zimbabwean was left on the motorway from Salonica to Athens as she was irritating her employer –a popular singer– when she was crying in the car for the death of her brother. She had no phone and, well...you know, in the highway, you do not even know in which direction Athens is. We contacted her employer and she took her back with a proper salary this time and leave off days. We threatened her to go to the police. Then a girl found another house for her to work and she dumped the singer”. The reversal is obvious in this story, since the aim of the network is not to collaborate with the state in order to combat different forms of violence against migrant domestic workers, but to initiate mechanisms that challenge established hierarchies within domestic spaces and reinstate domestic workers as workers entitled to specific labour and political rights. Through this process, the private, feminized spaces of domesticity and care are transformed into public spaces of labour and political activism.

In addition, the network operates on an ad hoc basis, “whenever there is need”. Then it dissolves, and then when another case crops up it is once again recomposed. Its ephemeral and dynamic structure reflects and mimics the contingent precarious labour relations in domestic and care work. There is no appeal to legalization – neither an appeal against it. Since most of those involved in the network operate under the threat of deportability and have no or temporary residence permits, it does not collaborate with the police; if it is necessary to call the police against an employer, they

simply use fake names or Greek friends to make the claim. Instead the precarious network intersects and collaborates with other networks of precarious migrants, such as those of the street vendors. There are no demands for integration or against integration. There is no funding, but the network survives of the labour produced in the domestic sector. Finally, even though the network protects women who have fallen victims of violence, it has no formal representatives and no access to state or NGO professionals specializing on “rescuing”, protecting or assisting migrant women to combat violence or trafficking.

The unrepresentability of this form of networking raises two interlinked questions. Would this practice qualify as an escape from or a reproduction of the established norm? Would this practice, confined as it is to the seemingly “apolitical” and “secret”, everyday spaces of domesticity and care, qualify as a form of political action? As Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos (2008: xiii-xiv) argue, escape from established power relations is enabled in a first instance through practices that deny every day processes of normalization.

The network of precarious domestic workers actively asserts the claim that domestic work is work rather than an extension of the unpaid care practices of families. The interventions of the network bring what would normally be attached to public space (political and labour demands and rights) into the domestic realm. This transformation creates labour rights entitlements for domestic workers (with regards to payment, duration of work, work hours and labour relations etc) that may not be formally or entirely recognized and even if they are recognised they are not implemented in practice with regards to illegal migrants, since they do not constitute, strictly speaking, citizens with full rights.

Also the network is based on an acknowledgment of the social productivity of care. While care may be attached to multiple practices, from paid to unpaid, from private to public, from intimate to detached, it is a unifying practice that cuts across these distinctions. “Care makes newly manifest that we cannot clearly delimit lifetime from work time, because the labour of care is precisely the manufacture of life” (Precarias a la Derriva, 2006: 41). There is a thread of affective ties that unites work, labour and politics: the “private duties” of migrant women caring for their own children and relatives in the country of origin become entrenched in labour practices of caring professionally for the homes and relatives of employers and caring politically for other victims of violence and exploited domestic workers. These affective ties, in turn, become the means by which the network com-

municates and becomes operative. In effect, care does not only become visible as a field of struggle but also as a field of creation of economic, social and political relations that escape the micropolitics of fear and the processes of precarization manifesting “the politically radical character of care” (Precarias a la Derriva, 2006: 40).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although migrants and domestic workers have received a lot of attention as emblematic figures in the theory and political action of precarity, the forms of resistance usually presented as exemplary of their transformative agency consist mainly in making visible forms of labour that were previously silenced or hidden. For example, Butler and Spivak use the example of migrants singing the national anthem in Spanish during a public protest to analyze translation as a form of resistance (Butler and Spivak, 2008; Butler, 2009), while Brett Nielson and Ned Rossiter (2008: 61-62) use the examples of domestic workers “occupying” on their day off public “non-spaces”, like parks, road fly overs, bridges and cultural centres funded by corporate banking. Both public protest and “occupations” of public non-spaces, however, make precarity meaningful in the context of broader strategies of resistance that rely upon visibility and the performance of rights in public. This makes possible the inclusion of migrant domestic workers into the realm of the politics of precarity that assumes a broader and cross-cutting alliance or strategic connectivity with other precarious workers who are already visible and recognizable in the public sphere, most notably those in the new media and cultural industries. As Mitropoulos (2006) argues the anticipated visibility and public character of precarious escapes often obscures past and present escapes that emerge and emerged in the “invisible” and private spaces of domesticity and care. “But rather than shaking assertions that the ‘precariat’ is a recent phenomenon, through the declaration that such work was previously ‘invisible’, the apprehension of migrant, ‘Third World’ and domestic labour seems to have become the pretext for calls for the reconstruction of the plane of visibility (of juridical recognition and mediation) and the eventual circulation and elevation of the cultural-artistic (and cognitive) worker as its paradigmatic expression. The strategy of exodus (of migration) has been translated into the thematics of inclusion, visibility and recognition”.

The tendency to silence these forms of escape largely obscures a politics of precarity that may be kept strategically invisible, secret and outside

the “public” domain in order to escape control. By emphasizing solely practices of alternative visibility and representability in public space, there is a risk of failing to recognize political action and resistance that transform private spaces, such as those of domesticity and care, into a secret but intense terrain for political struggles. These practices rest on subjective transformations and collective tactics of moving across the private and the public, the visible and the invisible. As the above analysis has strived to show, it is often through such practices of acting together performed at the spaces of domesticity and care that forms of escape from the precarisation of existence emerge. Since these spaces are common to almost all of us, such practices open up a very different terrain for strategic interconnections between the struggles of different precarious workers.

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