

Book Review: Performing intimate inequality

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Abstract

Review of the book *Intimate Inequalities: Performing Migrant Domestic Work* by Ella Parry-Davies, Northwestern University Press, 2025, ISBN: 9780810149090, 232 pages.

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What might a performance researcher contribute to the study of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and the United Kingdom? Ella Parry-Davies's *Intimate Inequalities: Performing Migrant Domestic Work* shows that the answer is: quite a lot. Bringing together theoretical and methodological insights from performance studies, migration studies, feminist scholarship, and labour history, Parry-Davies has written a book that advances questions of method, reflexivity, and the production of knowledge in important ways.

As Parry-Davies writes in the introduction, 'intimate inequalities' name both the 'object of study' and a 'methodological inquiry'. On the one hand, the phrase refers to the unequal intimacies that structure domestic labour: bodily proximity, care, dependency, and the language of family, all of which are shaped by race, gender, class, and migration status. On the other hand, the phrase directs attention to the conditions under which research itself takes place. Research, too, is structured by intimacy and inequality. In this sense, Parry-Davies treats performance as both a 'method of collaborative practice research' and a lens through which to examine the 'intimate inequalities of research itself' (p. 5)—'researching (through) performance' (p. 10). In this sense, collaborative research itself can also be understood as an intimate research practice.

In her book, Parry-Davies explores how migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and the UK navigate and portray their lives shaped by various practices of unequal intimacies, including singing, dancing, listening, gossiping, caring, cleaning, protecting, joking, teaching, flirting, sharing meals, protesting, worshipping,

walking, recording, and editing. Rather than uncovering authentic experiences, the author is interested in how workers intentionally represent their lives—how they tell, stage, edit, and frame their stories. Additionally, she explores insights from performance-based collaborative research, focusing on aspects that traditional policy analysis, legal critique, or standard ethnography often miss. These questions link her work to scholarship on the global care chain, social reproduction, migrant domestic work, Philippine labour brokerage, and activism against the *kafala* migration sponsorship system in Lebanon and the UK overseas domestic worker policies. Her approach shifts focus beyond employers' homes and courtrooms to sites like nightclubs, churches, marches, markets, beaches, and artistic projects—places where domestic workers build social worlds during their days off. These spaces reveal forms of labour, mobility, and politics that vanish when domestic work is studied solely inside the household. Churches offer routine, safety, and community; markets transform global labour relations into sensory exchanges; beaches and parks highlight leisure, rest, and public visibility; marches make domestic workers visible as political agents. Through these settings, Parry-Davies reconstructs the urban spaces inhabited by migrant domestic workers in Beirut and London, demonstrating that domestic labour extends beyond the private homes where it occurs.

Using co-created 'site-specific soundwalks' as her preferred method, Parry-Davies turns performance into both archive and analysis.¹ The soundwalks demonstrate how migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and the UK tell, stage, and interpret their own lives beyond policy discussions and humanitarian frames. This method also shapes the relationship between the researcher and the subject of their study. Parry-Davies does not see herself as separate from the field she examines. Instead, she critically reflects on how academic knowledge is produced and on her own role in this process. The book conceives of research as a performative practice characterised by intimacy and inequality, in which all research encounters are performances structured by roles, expectations, access, and power, creating their own form of intimate inequality. Therefore, Parry-Davies considers researchers and universities as part of the field and even as resources that collaborators can use for their own purposes—such as advocacy letters, payment, conference appearances, documentation, references, or public exposure. This is one of the book's most powerful methodological contributions, where reflexivity is not just a brief statement of positionality but an integral part of the methodology and analysis.

¹ The recordings and transcripts of the soundwalks can be found here: <https://homemakersounds.org>. See also E Parry-Davies, 'Modern Heroes, Modern Slaves? Listening to Migrant Domestic workers' Everyday Temporalities', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 15, 2020, pp. 63–81, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220154>.

Parry-Davies does not treat intimacy as synonymous with embodied proximity or sexual closeness, nor does she confine it to the private sphere. Instead, she argues that the idea that intimacy naturally belongs to the private household is itself a historical construction and that intimacy is ‘fully bound to material and political conditions’ (p. 8). This is where the book’s engagement with feminist scholarship on social reproduction helps illuminate how domestic labour sustains life, households, and the work of others yet is often devalued because it is labelled as natural, feminine, familial, and private. Parry-Davies draws on this scholarship while also expanding it through performance studies.

Each chapter uses one or more soundwalks as a starting point to analyse a different dimension of migrant domestic workers’ lives. By bringing the analysis of the soundwalks into conversation with media discourse, NGO reports, policy documents, and other archival and political material, Parry-Davies shows how performance can function both as a method and as an analytic frame. The chapters move between questions of labour, migration, urban space, disability, queerness, politics, and justice, while repeatedly returning to the book’s central concern: ‘how the unequal intimacies of domestic labor are navigated and represented by migrant domestic workers themselves’ (p. 11). Chapter 1 lays out the comparative and historical frame of the book by placing Philippine labour export, Lebanon’s *kafala* system, and the UK’s overseas domestic worker visa in one analytic field. Here, Parry-Davies develops the arguments that Lebanon and the UK should not be treated as opposite cases, since both systems tie workers to employers and restrict access to settlement, and both emerge from longer colonial histories shaped by British imperialism. Chapter 2 turns to dominant representations of Filipino migrant domestic workers as either ‘modern heroes’ or ‘modern slaves’, and shows how both frames flatten workers’ own acts of self-representation. Chapter 3 shifts to urban space and movement, examining the ‘storied spaces’ through which migrant domestic workers move in Beirut and London as workers, activists, pilgrims, and travellers. Chapter 4 brings disability studies and crip theory into the analysis of domestic labour, showing how bodily pain, injury, and exhaustion are central to the experience of care work. Chapter 5 turns to homemaking, solidarity, and politics in moments of crisis, especially Lebanon’s 17 October Revolution in 2019 and the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, before the epilogue returns to the problem of justice and the limits of legal recognition.

Chapter 2 most directly addresses the concerns of this issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review*, as it delves into how Filipino migrant domestic workers are portrayed through two main figures: *bagong bayani*, representing the Philippine state’s depiction of migrant workers as ‘modern heroes’, and the ‘modern slave’ prevalent in humanitarian, media, and legal discourse. Parry-Davies argues that these figures function similarly, both depicting migrant workers as symbols of sacrifice and shifting focus away from labour as a structural relationship. She demonstrates how the discourse of *bagong bayani* situates migrant workers within narratives of

service, suffering, and patriotism promoted by the state. Evidence of abuse does not weaken this heroic narrative but often reinforces it, as suffering becomes a testament to sacrifice for family and nation. In this context, Parry-Davies critically engages with the ‘modern slavery’ discourse, which, even as it has contributed to exposing exploitation in Lebanon and the UK, particularly through campaigns against *kafala* and tied visa regimes, constructs narratives through highly individualised stories of suffering. In this context, she introduces her concept of ‘dramaturgies of identification’ (p. 65), which are representational forms designed to elicit identification with suffering individuals by asking viewers, readers, or listeners to relate emotionally. Building on existing scholarship on humanitarian and anti-trafficking discourse, Parry-Davies argues that these narratives often focus on pity, shock, and rescue, which can unintentionally overlook broader issues of labour and migration. She illustrates this with her analysis of the UK’s National Referral Mechanism, where workers must demonstrate abuse in ways that meet bureaucratic standards of authenticity. Recognition depends on convincingly showing injury to satisfy officials, caseworkers, and immigration authorities. The chapter’s main case study is Amara’s soundwalk, ‘we are workers’, where Parry-Davies’s methodological approach is particularly effective. Amara selected Piccadilly Circus because she had once slept there after fleeing her employers and finding herself undocumented and homeless in London. However, she does not address the listener as a victim seeking sympathy; instead, she addresses the listener as someone who might become an ally. Consequently, the soundwalk fosters a different dynamic between speaker and listener. By shifting the focus from individual suffering to a collective political message, it resists both the nationalist rhetoric of heroic sacrifice and the humanitarian language that frames victims as passive, even though the tensions created by the hero/slave dichotomy are never fully resolved.

Overall, *Intimate Inequalities* is a methodologically ambitious and intellectually generous book. It offers a conceptually and narratively dense reading to which this review can only do limited justice. Its strength lies in how it combines performance, domestic work, unfree labour, and researcher reflexivity without reducing migrant domestic workers to victims or symbols. It provides a compelling way to think about trafficking, coercion, and constrained labour while also taking seriously the forms of agency, representation, and self-fashioning through which workers navigate the world. As a historian, I especially valued the book’s broader temporal scope and its sociohistorical grounding. Parry-Davies places migrant domestic worker migration from the Philippines within histories of colonialism, neoliberal restructuring, dictatorship, and labour export. She also presents a strong comparative argument about Lebanon and the UK. Instead of treating the *kafala* and British visa systems as separate or opposing cases, she shows that they both share colonial roots in British imperialism and obscure the intimate nature and inequalities of domestic work across the private–public binary. By situating current migration regimes within longer histories of empire, labour control, and uneven mobility, this historical perspective greatly strengthens the book’s overall argument about the political nature of intimate inequalities.

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