“Our World Is Small”

Transformative Behavior and Filipina Au Pairs' Everyday Practices of Collectivism in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The premise of “cultural exchange” has Filipina au pairs in the Netherlands performing care labor and navigating citizenship regimes with little institutional support or visibility. Existing literature rarely explains how au pairs express collectivism given this gray area, and a focus on Filipina au pairs in the Netherlands, given the Philippines’ unique history of care labor export and the Netherlands’ particular regulatory context remain unexplored altogether. This thesis aims to understand how Filipina au pairs express worker collectivism as de facto yet unrecognized workers who simultaneously tread the public and the private spheres. Anchored in a dialectical approach, it explores these different contradictions, especially with regards to the resulting “transformative behavior” (Harvey 1996) that Filipina au pairs express in their collectivism. To unpack how Filipina au pairs creatively articulate their practices for collectivism, the analysis considers processes across space and time that continually create, sustain, or challenge collectivism, showing how au pairs can both impose upon and be imposed upon by a broader global care economy historically characterized by gender, race, and class. Participant observation and interviews in physical and online spaces where Filipina au pairs gather uncovered how they harness transformative behavior to deploy or withhold intimacy, become visible or hypervisible, and enact a “collectivism of the everyday” (McBride and Lucio 2011) to negotiate their places within the global care economy. Given their temporary and atomized experience, Filipina au pairs form small groups in dynamic au pair networks to share material objects, opportunities, and knowledge that are crucial within and beyond the context of work. Their “collectivism of the everyday” forges links between individual and collective aspirations, creating nonlinear, network-oriented trajectories. This thesis thus expands on how collectivism is nurtured outside its formalized manifestations, and informs further research on au pair collectivism in other regulatory contexts.

Keywords: Filipino migrant workers, au pairs, worker collectivism, care labor, global care economy

I have read and understood the UvA rules regarding fraud and plagiarism [https://student.uva.nl/en/topics/plagiarism-and-fraud]. I declare that this written paper is entirely my own work, that I have carefully and correctly indicated all the sources I have used, including ChatGPT or other forms of Artificial Intelligence, and that I have quoted according to the rules. I have not previously submitted this paper, in this or an amended version, for another subject or as part of another paper.

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Introduction

Althea planned to go to the *Weggeefwinkel* (freeshop) *Baarn*, where each person takes ten free items. She likened it to a practice similar to thrifting in the Philippines, *ukay-ukay*[1], except "if you want anything, you can just get it!" When I agreed to come with her, she boasted, "On Saturdays from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm, all you'll see are Filipinas. Au pairs."

As she confidently led the way to the store, a group of four other loud, excited young women walked in our direction. Our ears perked up at the sound of Tagalog being spoken. With our naturally converging paths, we started talking to each other like we knew each other. This was the first time any of us had met.

The women — Liezel, Ynah, Joyce, and Nikki — were going to the free shop as well. They asked if we were also au pairs. Althea said yes, while I explained my fieldwork. They talked about their agencies (including which ones were a hit or a miss), as well as our hometowns across Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao until we reached the store. Liezel introduced the store to her group much like I had only learned about it through Althea. It seemed Filipinas spread knowledge of the store among friends. The Dutch storekeepers had even begun greeting Filipinas in Tagalog phrases they learned from previous shoppers. "If you come here on weekends, you'll see a line of Filipinas before the store even opens," Liezel told me, confirming Althea's intel. "They're the first one in but the last to go."

The store had everything: clothes, utensils, mugs, toys, appliances, accessories. I did not know where to start, but my companions immediately got to perusing the wares. They took thick sweaters or long-sleeve shirts — all things they could not have brought from their tropical home country. Everyone took their time stocking up their overflowing baskets and suggesting clothes to each other. Althea and Liezel were also picking men's clothes to send back home in their *balikbayan*[2] boxes.

Inside the shop were four more Filipina au pairs. It felt like we had multiplied! Now a group of ten, I turned to a taciturn au pair named Jessa. We talked about her host home in Aalsmeer as we watched her peers scour a box for secondhand belts with Althea, who they quickly befriended. Humor about their host families abounded in this larger group: one made jokes about being "forced"

[1] *ukay* "to dig" through piles of clothes (in this context)

[2] From *balik "*return*" + bayan "*homeland*" ;* a practice mostly done by Overseas Filipino Workers where they stock up on foreign or branded goods, pack them in a large box, and send them to the Philippines

by host parents to go out, and another about accidentally seducing her host father as she presented a skimpy dress she found. These candid jokes and laughs were exchanged with near-strangers.

Eventually, we had our items counted by the shopkeepers and walked to the station as one big group, huge bags filled with secondhand finds in tow. Baarn locals passing by would stare at us, to which Ynah would say in Tagalog, "Haters can't say anything! Fly high, *Pinay*[3]!" Over the fieldwork period, I would come to realize that small bonding moments like these are one of the ways Filipina au pairs expand and sustain their "networks" in the Netherlands.

Named after the French phrase for "on equal footing," an au pair is intended to be a guest or a member of a host family as part of cultural exchange (Cox and Busch 2018). The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) (2024) reports that since 2018, Filipinos consistently comprise the largest group of au pairs in the Netherlands per year. Young women do light housework, babysit, and receive an allowance to explore their host country (IND 2024; Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007) under the program. Both the European Agreement and the Netherlands' own au pair guidelines acknowledge that an au pair is in a "special category" of their own — not as a domestic worker, lodger, or student but on "equal basis with the host family" (Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007).

Despite explicit prohibition of work contracts under the au pair scheme, it became ripe for misuse (Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007). With every passing year and change in policy, the reality where Filipina au pairs enter for "cultural exchange" yet assume "insecure domestic work" remains unresolved (Boncodin-Isip 2020). Previous studies characterize au pairs in "gray areas" as migrants on the basis of "cultural exchange" and a short-term contract period; the unrecognized labor they perform; and the exploitation they face as part of a tangled web of host families, agencies, and governments (Boncodin-Isip 2020; Cox and Busch 2018; Stenum 2010; Anderson 2009). Au pairs' position could benefit from labor recognition and improved work conditions as bargained by unions throughout time (D'Art and Turner 2002). Filipino domestic workers, for instance, have been able to self-organize in Hong Kong (Constable 2007), as well as in the Netherlands, where they later joined FNV[4] to establish the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union (Jansen 2024, 6). Within formalized collectivism, however, care laborers traditionally organized along fault lines between genders; ethnic

[3] Tagalog slang word for Filipina

[4] The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions is the largest trade union in the Netherlands. The inclusion of the migrant domestic workers in 2006 was an unprecedented move at the time since this included undocumented domestic migrant workers whose arrangement often may be closer to self-employed rather than based on an employee contract (Eleveld and Van Hooren 2018, 6)

groups; paid and unpaid labor; and citizens and foreigners (Van Walsum 2011, 142). Adding to these existing complications for au pairs are their assumed roles as host daughters instead of workers, and their live-in residence arrangement that must end within a year.

A Filipina au pair's unique positioning as short-term, de facto care laborers is rich in contradictions: they are outsiders yet part of the family, overworked yet seek or create more opportunities for work hypervisible online yet invisible in most legal frameworks, and are homesick Filipinas with aspirations of permanent migration. Given these many tensions, my research question is **"How do Filipina**[5] **au pairs create their forms of migrant worker collectivism amid the contradictions inflecting their experiences in the Netherlands?"**

Broader studies investigating the different institutions au pairs are embedded in have briefly touched on what a study on au pair collectivism might look like, though not explicitly geared towards researching collectivism. Oosterbeek-Latoza (2007) mentions how FNV took some au pair abuse cases to court, which helped inform au pair regulations. Boncodin-Isip's (2020) study on Filipina au pairs' different "social protections," meanwhile, noted that au pairs were more likely to access "informal" social protections through their "social network."

Looking into how au pairs might express collectivism themselves remains unexplored in literature, but studies on migrant workers in general identify potential obstacles to collectivism. Organizing migrant workers is impeded by layers of mobility, precarity, and identity that used to be less variable, which is why formal collectivist groups such as trade unions have typically constructed dichotomies between labor and migration issues (Alberti, Holgate, and Tapia 2013). Refslund and Sippola (2020) argue that while both "workplace" and "sector" collectivism are indeed challenged by labor migration, a dynamic framework of collectivism measured in "workers' closeness, feeling of unity, shared problem perception and reference groups" can remedy this issue. Even the now-highly organized Filipino domestic workers in London found collectivist beginnings in "communities of coping" rooted in socialization, mutual trust, and safe spaces for sharing work grievances (Jiang 2018). It is important to see how these changing conceptualizations of collectivism apply to au pairs in the Netherlands, especially considering how their short-term "cultural exchange" differs from both live-out and live-in nannies or cleaners.

[5] I acknowledge that "Filipino" as a word is gender-neutral and can encompass even female-identifying "Filipinas." Yet I have chosen to use "Filipina" instead of "Filipino" to refer to my interlocutors throughout this thesis to account for what they use to refer to themselves and each other.

While there are studies on Filipina au pairs around the world (Isaksen and Bikova 2022; Hansen and Pedersen 2019; Cox and Busch 2018; Stenum 2010; Anderson 2009), few focus on the Netherlands and its particular social, legal, and political landscape informing au pairing in practice. Research on how Filipina au pairs in the Netherlands express collectivism, in particular, is a glaring gap that my research can fill. In filling this gap, broader discussions and practical considerations regarding au pairs' forms of collectivism can take place to develop more effective worker movements as a whole (Radice 2008, 61). Gaining insight into how Filipina au pairs organize informs strategies for empowering them as workers, and including them in a wider ecosystem of support in the Netherlands without supplanting the forms of collectivism they may already have.

Theoretical Framework and Concepts

My overarching framework is rooted in **dialectic principles** developed by Harvey (1996) based on dialectic scholarship throughout time, both in philosophy and historical materialism. Emphasizing spatio-temporality in my analysis is crucial to see how mobility and long-standing global connections inflect au pairs' experiences of collectivism.

Previous literature has narrowly framed care labor migration in terms of flows between households, overlooking external agents and institutions that contribute to such flows (Kofman 2014). Framing actors as products of "processes, flows, and fluxes" (Harvey 1996) curbs this tendency as I interpret au pairs' collectivism as born from interactions with different actors in the au pair industry and beyond. This approach also steers away from "methodological nationalism," (Zontini 2010; Glick-Schiller 2012) which overlooks the interconnectedness of the global political economy and assesses experiences within the borders of individual nation-states, whereby its members are assumed to share common history, values, and customs. With the understanding that au pairing is in flux is the possibility to discuss collectivism as not "existing" or "existing as-is," but created and continuing to be created.

By understanding au pairs and the broader global care economy to be "mutually constituted" (Harvey 1996), I deconstruct depictions of migrants such as au pairs as "objects of public policies rather than political actors in their own rights" (Zontini 2010, 106-107). While an overarching domestic labor market (Lindio-McGovern 2013) shapes au pairs' experience in the Netherlands, so do their actions and experiences shape that same labor market. These interactions between flows of people, goods, or ideas result in contradictions or tensions between fields of experience (Harvey 1996). Contradictions breed "**transformative behavior**" (ibid.), which refer to the creative ways actors like au pairs can restructure processes surrounding their experience. By focusing on transformative behavior, I employ a Gramscian perspective of agency: collective action exists beyond its institutionalized forms, yet is also in negotiation with power structures. I avoid simplifying ideas of "structure" and "agency" by appreciating how these concepts are instead "relational" and "historically and geographically situated" (Crehan 2002, 199; Streinzer and Tosic 2022, 4). Transformative behavior, then, is "defined, constrained, and realized" in light of historical structures and material conditions (Ayers 2008, 5).

Global care economy

Analysis on the level of a "system" (Harvey 1996) parses the "macro-level" origins of Filipino au pair collectivism. This means looking into how historically, varying flows between broader institutions are involved in shaping au pair status and therefore, the way they organize. Filipina au pairs thus can be seen as mutually constitutive of: 1.) the larger au pair industry in the Netherlands, and 2.) broader global free market of labor (San Juan 2011), including care labor.

Scholars conceived of the global care economy in varying terms such as the "global care chain" or "circulation of care," harkening to how in today's age of global capitalism, care labor resembles a "supply" or "product" to be imported and exported (Sabio and Parreñas 2024; Gotehus 2022; Hochschild 2000). Within my framework, I use "global care economy" to refer to the movement of care labor from poorer nations to wealthier nations, including the citizenship regimes and gender dynamics governing this movement (Parreñas 2008b). This situates Filipina au pairs' experiences in a broader spatio-temporal context, bringing forth questions about the collectivism that may or may not be present in their lives. Workers in other industries use their place in a specific sector or supply chain in their collective bargaining and narrative-building (Refslund and Sippola 2020), spurring reflections on whether au pairs can build a worker identity the same way from within the global care economy.

Taking cues from Bikova's (2017) consideration of "the particularities of the local contexts of the sending and receiving societies," my analyses accounts for the Netherlands' particular au pair regulations, as well as the state's decreasing role in regulating economies that rely on migrant care labor[6] (Barber and Lem 2008; de Lange 2011; Zontini 2010). At the same time, I can examine the Philippines' pioneering role in facilitating care labor export and establishing Filipinas as leading, low-cost export "products" (Gueverra 2014; Lindio-McGovern 2013; Constable 2007; Ally 2005). I also consider the Philippines' policies to "mitigate" yet implicitly encourage Filipina au pair exploitation within this prevailing context of gendered, racialized labor policies (Barber and Bryan 2012, 220).

To understand what processes are responsible for creating a care economy driven by migrant women (Parreñas 2000), I draw from Davis' (1981) discussions on how issues of gender are

[6] In larger Dutch cities, non-subsidized care labor almost exclusively consists of migrant workers (Van Walsum 2011, 148).

interconnected with issues of race and class[7] as capitalist modes of production build on domestic labor carried out by racialized, working-class women. Gender is "partially recast to meet the emerging demands of capital accumulation," with women encouraged to migrate for paid employment in domestic service deemed inherently "for women" (Barber 2012, 220). This explains how migrant domestic work becomes and is maintained as an industry in view of global capitalism, precipitating in the "au pair business" as conceived by Hess and Puckhaber (2004). They argue that socio-economic processes worldwide and the "disarticulation of work" have left young women vulnerable to exploitation, helping shape the au pair program into a form of "live-in migrant domestic work."

"Collectivism of the everyday"

Incorporating analysis at the level of an "element" (Harvey 1996) gives insight into the "micro-level" origins of collectivism. This perspective zooms into my main research focus: how au pairs' build and enact practices for collectivism outside of unions or associations. A crucial concept for understanding these practices is transformative behavior, which emerges from tensions between informal and formal collectivism, doing domestic work yet not being recognized as "workers," and being "part of the family" yet still othered. As Filipina au pairs field and reconcile these tensions, they "apply one's will" to create a "new equilibrium" (Gramsci 1971, 172), transforming conditions to create new "imaginaries," "rituals," "modes of social relating," and "material practices" (Harvey 1996, 105).

Such transformative behavior can be channeled into "collectivism of the everyday" (McBride and Lucio 2011; Stephenson and Stewart 2001) or "everyday politics" (Yates 2015; Quinsaat 2024), referring to "quotidian activities" that maintain social bonds, collective identities, and lines of mutual support. To account for complexities in au pairs' experiences that formal collectivism cannot capture (Refslund and Sippola 2020), I extend collectivism to other social, political, cultural, and global dimensions (McBride and Lucio 2011). While "trade union collectivism" is typically viewed as "the defining characteristic marker of worker collectivism," Stephenson and Stewart (2001) identify forms that can exist alongside it via "social relations both inside and outside the employment relationship." Barber and Zontini (2010) similarly call for an understanding of Filipina care laborer's agency that notes not only the disincentives to organization (i.e.: the absence of shared workplaces,

[7] With livelihoods are complicated by migration, I understand class as a "relational concept" whereby migrants' class "acquires a different social and material complexion in one location relative to another" (Barber and Lem 2008, 5; Tilly 2001)

and dependence on host family/ies for both finances and residence), but also a transnational view of the multiple social fields in their lives.

By foregrounding how au pairs articulate their experiences and form social bonds with each other, I emphasize the construction of memory and personal dynamics in collectivism (McBride and Lucio 2011). Quinsaat (2024) emphasizes the role of memory and shared experiences in her discussion of how Filipino migrant worker mobilization in the United States was historically entwined with issues of race or imperialism. This origin of collectivism is different from clear-cut "workplace" and "sector" unionism or "old labor" as typically conceived in literature (Refslund and Sippola 2020; Kalb and Mollona 2018), and offers insight into what manifestations of collectivism might exist for Filipino au pairs in the Netherlands.

Migrant aspirations and trajectories

Situating Filipina au pairs in their spatio-temporal context means considering their imagined futures in connection to their imagined pasts or memory. My research thus interrogates what "possible worlds" (Harvey 1996) exist for an au pair community in flux owing to its members' dispersed and temporary stays in the Netherlands. "Possible worlds" are "potentialities for change, for self-realization, for the construction of new collective identities and social orders" (ibid., 56). I build off this definition by looking into how au pairs articulate their aspirations and plot their trajectories, which I use to refer to "multiple journeys in various directions over a long period of time, including possible longer periods of residence in a country before people decide to move on" (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3211).

I interpret "possible worlds" as encompassing aspirations, which refer to an imagined future that an individual can act upon themselves (Gorbachev 2022). Aspirations simultaneously guide and transform according to a migrant's trajectory (Van Meeteren, Engbersen, and Van San 2009; Van Meeteren 2012). Au pairs typically cannot stay as long as other migrant workers and their end destinations are not necessarily the Netherlands — yet this does not necessarily make their "transitory" stays devoid of substance (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020). Breaking down dichotomies of "origin vs. destination" and "temporary migration vs. permanent settlement" (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020) exposes ties between a lived present and an imagined future (Fischer 2014; Bryant 2016) by highlighting the practices and relationships au pairs continually cultivate.

Setting, Access, and Population

My research sites were where Filipina au pairs gathered outside of their work hours, whether these were cafes, groceries, parks, or virtual group pages[8]. The case of Filipino au pairs in the Netherlands was not contained within the boundaries of a particular city[9] (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) since my research investigates how they gather despite their insular, private "workplaces." While the dispersed nature of their stay could be solved by travel and online communication, the main barriers to accessing au pairs were their busy schedules and short-term contracts with varied start and end dates[10]. I learned that the best way to reach Filipina au pairs was through a snowball method, relying on "friends of friends" as I expanded my "network" the way my interlocutors expanded theirs.

All 40 Filipina au pairs I met were women[11], aged 22–26[12]. I encountered au pairs from seven agencies, some of whom changed agencies in the middle of their stay[13]. Since most agencies require at least a high school diploma, most of the au pairs I met were college-educated[14] and all were high school-educated in the Philippines. Where my interlocutors varied was in terms of wealth, political leanings, as well as their hometowns in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. While this painted a more complete picture of my research population, it came with a few challenges: all my interlocutors fluently spoke my first language, Tagalog, but some au pairs from Visayas and Mindanao might have been more at ease speaking their first language, Cebuano or Hiligaynon.

As such, I acknowledge Filipino au pairs are not a monolith and can vary in multiple social categories. For my research, however, the social categories most relevant are their occupation as au pairs; gender as women thus comprising the overwhelming majority of au pairs per Lepianka et al. (2016) and Bahna (2006); and ethnicity as Filipinos who likewise comprise about 36% of all au pairs in the Netherlands (IND 2024).

[8] I accomplished forms to join relevant Facebook groups, expressing my intent to meet interlocutors and observe the community for research.
[9] I met au pairs based in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Den Haag, Aalsmeer, Leiden, Huizen, Baarn, and other cities 2-3 times a week.
[10] Some au pairs I met were on their way out of the Netherlands and instead connected me to their friends who were still in the Netherlands.
[11] None of the au pairs I met were married or had children, departing from discussions of a global care chain hinging on the migration of Filipina mothers specifically. They still, however, assume care labor — at times "motherly" roles — in their homes in the Philippines, as I will discuss in my thesis chapters.
[12] Filipinas tended to be on the older side of the au pair age range, as au pairs in the Netherlands must be 18-25 at the time of application.
[13] Some host families who are already used to having au pairs tend to be patrons of a specific agency. If they find an au pair through Facebook or referrals, they will often ask the au pair to transfer to their preferred agency.
[14] A handful have licenses in teaching, accountancy, and psychology on top of their degrees.

Methodology

My ethnographic approach combined physical fieldwork with digital methods as a recognition of how social media's ubiquity in people's lives blurs distinctions between "online" and "offline" (Airoldi 2018). Over the fieldwork period, online communication was crucial to forging bonds among au pairs who were dispersed across households. My mixed method enabled me to see bonding moments: 1.) planned online, 2.) unfold "in real life," and 3.) portrayed and documented online.

My leading method was physical participant observation, which gave insight into au pairs' practices as they happened. I joined au pairs on their hangouts, meals, varied errands[15], *ukay*[16] excursions, international and local trips, and at their host home or neighborhood with their host family. I also attended an agency-led welcome event with an extensive information session, games, and lunch with 23 au pairs[17]. As part of physical participant observation, I took note of numerous conversational interviews that offered access to cultural meanings (Driessen and Jansen 2013). Being around naturally occurring groups of au pairs also meant I conducted group interviews. Au pairs interacted, recounted shared memories, and built on each other's ideas in ways one normally could not in smaller, structured interview settings. I pursued 12 semi-structured interviews alongside these other approaches to give au pairs space to expound and recount their personal experiences at length. I transcribed these interviews verbatim, which I used alongside my field notes.

In line with scholars conceptualizing fieldwork "as a mixture of online and offline observations" (Airoldi 2018), I extended participant observation to Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. I joined Facebook groups that were broad in scope, such as groups for Filipinos in the Netherlands and au pairs in the Netherlands. These groups contained Filipina au pairs' interactions with other au pairs, host families, and Filipino migrants. What turned out to be more relevant for Filipina au pairs were their Instagram and TikTok accounts. I approached digital technology as a "medium or tool for networked connectivity" (Markham 2017, 7), focusing on how Filipino au pairs' practices and bonds are facilitated by these sites in different ways: Facebook groups were more impersonal and often anonymous, Instagram accounts were the primary way au pairs updated their peers on their lives, and TikTok[18] was how they created influencer personas (Chee 2023; Kaur-Gill 2022) and built public

[15] Errands include doing groceries for themselves or their host families, and shopping for gifts to send back home shopping in *balikbayan* boxes.
[16] Word they use to refer to their excursions to free shops, based on a similar practice in the Philippines.
[17] Excluding me, nearly half of the attendees (11 out of 23) were Filipina.
[18] TikTok was built to prioritize content creation over interpersonal interaction (Zhao 2024), which likely factored into how au pairs used it.

narratives (Darvin 2022; Cabalquinto 2024) surrounding au pairing.

Ethics and Positionality

My research intentions were clear in Facebook screening questionnaires, and I only observed groups where moderators had granted me access. I also introduced my research to my interlocutors, explained physical and online participant observation, and anonymized them in the thesis itself. Beyond these basic research practices, a big point of consideration was ensuring referenced online posts were not traceable back to my interlocutors. In my descriptions of online posts, I used "composite accounts" (Markham 2012, 342) or reconstructions including different elements or stories so they cannot be traced back to one poster[19]. Aside from issues related to digital ethnography, I ensured that if sensitive topics came up, my interlocutors were voluntarily sharing these stories with me[20].

My positionality affected how I conducted the research itself, my interpretations, and how I navigated these ethical considerations. Since I am a Filipino woman in my 20s who is similarly in the Netherlands on a short-term residence permit, I shared traits[21] with au pairs that created a sense of ease in connecting with them. Bucerius' (2013) discussion of a researcher's positionality determining "the extent to which a topic, or certain information, is considered sensitive by research participants" rang true as many au pairs talked about sensitive topics with me — whether it was about the exploitation they faced, visa problems, or secret work they had on the side. At the same time, I have a responsibility to be thoughtful about how I discuss their stories.

Researching "clandestine labor" can have unintended consequences such as investigations or stigmatization, especially for racialized minority groups (Hiah 2022). Other than anonymizing the au pairs themselves, their agencies, and their employers for the au pairs' safety, I also avoided leading

[19] While I recognize this runs the risk of generalization or idealization (Markham 2012, 344), I also know that all ethnographies involve some level of abstraction from "reality" given the anthropologist's position as a subjective observer. I mitigated these risks by ensuring I paid attention to the selected elements' original contexts and maintaining a narrative that does not contradict or obscure what I have observed.

[20] I had one interlocutor who initially consented to be part of my research, and then backed out at the last minute. I do not reference her at all in this thesis, acknowledging that this is the nature of informed consent: it can be revoked at any time.

[21] I simultaneously acknowledge that I held traits that differed from my interlocutors. As mentioned previously, I am from the Tagalog region of the Philippines that not all of them were from, which definitely influenced conversations in some way. In this paragraph, I am speaking more generally on why I was viewed as approachable enough to share sensitive topics with: they often saw a Filipina as shorthand for a new friend, which I will discuss in the following chapters.

with the assumption that “Filipina-ness” had obvious connections to clandestine labor or undocumented migration. I noted its relevance when my interlocutors themselves framed their situations accordingly. Even then, I made sure to show Filipina au pairs’ varied experiences and narratives to counter reification. My positionality also affected how I portrayed my data as I conducted interviews in Tagalog and translated them to English. In cases of code-switching, casual speech or slang, and words with no direct translations that English could not fully capture, I included further explanations from my position as a Metro Manila and Bulacan-raised Tagalog speaker, recognizing there is “non-representability” (Kothari 2015) in translations of any language or interpretations of any social event.

Thesis Chapters

I discuss my findings in three separate chapters on different yet interrelated themes, all working to paint a cohesive picture of Filipina au pairs’ collectivism in the Netherlands. **Chapter 1** sets the groundwork by characterizing Filipina au pairs’ care labor and position in the global care economy; **Chapter 2** discusses how they create and sustain their forms of “collectivism of the everyday”; and **Chapter 3** takes a forward-looking view into their trajectories and aspirations as individuals and as a collective.

Chapter 1: Filipina au pairs as care laborers in the global care economy

On Mondays, Liezel tidies the house in the day and cooks dinner for her host family in the evening. After dinner, she plays with the two children, reads them a story, and puts them to bed. Tuesdays are whole-day babysitting affairs for the youngest daughter, Emma, who is aged 3. The eldest daughter, Nora (aged 5), has started attending classes. This means Liezel babysits Emma for the first half of her Wednesdays, picks up Nora from school, and dedicates time to Nora for the rest of the day. She must split her time because Nora gets jealous of the time Liezel spends with her little sister. Thursdays look about the same, but Fridays are by far her longest days as she spends eight hours on her responsibilities. By the weekend, she is free. As an au pair program participant, she is not in the Netherlands for work necessarily but for "cultural exchange" so weekends are significant to her stay. They are ideally reserved for her *gala*[22] around the Netherlands with her many au pair friends.

Her contract details household tasks she can spend a maximum of 30 hours on throughout the week. Her agency even calls her to check what she has done for the week to assess if her workload exceeds what is outlined in her contract. These contracts and check-ins do not capture everything, however:

> "On Wednesdays, my duties end by 6:00 pm. My host parents don't require me to cook that day or clean up after dinner, but I still help with the dishes **because it's shameful if I don't.**"
> — Liezel, a 24-year-old au pair from Luzon, currently based in Utrecht

I would come to learn that the shame attached to leaving tasks outside their agreements with the host family undone was far more consistent among Filipina au pairs than the actual nature of their workloads or schedules. An au pair's schedule and workload vary wildly, especially in comparison to more regimented formal jobs. In reality, some have Mondays as days off instead of Saturdays, and some work from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm while others end their day at 11:00 pm. Contracts outlining these workloads exist, as Liezel confirmed, but whether or not they are accurately monitored depends on the au pair and the host family. Althea, a 25-year-old au pair in Huizen, was given an iPad to log her hours:

[22] Tagalog word for "*trip*" or "*travel*"

> "There's a schedule on the iPad. You input what time you started and what you did. Did you pick the kids up by 4:00 pm? Did you get back home and have your break from 12:15 pm to 1:00 pm? What I've learned from this is that I have to be honest about my schedule and time, because they *(the host parents)* test you if you're honest or not."

Through these acts of surveillance, mechanisms of control are at play on the side of agencies and host families who monitor au pairs' activities or track their hours the way employers from other sectors do for "security grounds; health and safety; performance management; protecting organisational resources and interests and compliance with legal and regulatory requirements" (Lockwood 2018, 205). Althea does not mind the practice since she earns €7.5 for each hour logged beyond the 30-hour work week. "It's not bad at all," she said. "Unlike other Filipina au pairs who are paid €4 per hour. Or are only given a *thank you*. That makes me feel bad."

Since au pairs are part of the host family, their tasks are often characterized as "chores." Au pairs are permitted to do light chores (e.g.: preparing meals, small errands, simple cleaning or tidying), and prohibited from heavy ones (e.g.: tasks that involve lifting furniture, deep cleaning, gardening). In writing, au pairs must not be the only ones responsible for child care or cleaning, which is why many host families simultaneously employ formal workers such as nannies or cleaners. In practice, lines between light "chores" and heavy "work" become blurred, causing overlaps between an au pair's responsibility and a nanny's or a cleaner's[23]. Au pairs receive an allowance of €300-€340 a month, not as a salary for their work but intended for expenses incurred as part of their cultural exchange in the Netherlands. The allowance is not meant to be enough to sustain themselves in a country where the cost of living is among the highest in Europe (Nakamura et al. 2019), making au pairs essentially sign on to be the host parents' dependent. Their shelter, food, and residence permit are all attached to their host family, which is why host parents must establish they are financially capable[24] of supporting an au pair.

Such an arrangement places much power in the hands of au pairs' hosts, as they can influence an au pair's stay and their configurations of labor. Teresa, a 25-year-old au pair who hails from Mindanao, has had vastly different experiences with her first host in Hoorn and her current host in Haarlem. "I was unlucky with my first host. I was like a full-time cleaner and my breaks were inconsistent," she

[23] Such overlaps become grounds for an au pair assuming out-of-contract work, as I will discuss in this chapter.
[24] In au pairs' applications for a residence permit, host families are required to submit salary slips, proof of employment, benefit statements, etc. that demonstrate they meet specific income requirements: €3,287.70 for couples and €2,630.16 for single parents without holiday pay, per IND (n.d.)

said. “With my current host, I tidy up for an hour in the morning. From 9:45 am to 2:00 pm, I’m free to rest. Then I go get groceries and fetch the kids from school.”

It is difficult to systematically assess an au pair’s work when it is so variable, with some parts of their labor going unpaid or unnoticed. Work responsibilities are hard to define even in the presence of contracts, which in au pairs’ case, are explicitly non-work contracts. Yet what au pairs do is labor nonetheless. Coe and Glaser (2024) argue that having contracts be the sole basis for what is and is not labor is restrictive and ignores the multitude of contexts in which labor, especially informal labor, takes place. To account for these discrepancies, I view au pair’s “chores” or “responsibilities” as forms of work in line with Coe and Glaser’s (2024) assertion that “all forms of energy expended, both paid and unpaid, should be considered forms of work” (59).

Au pairs perform de facto care or reproductive labor, which refers to “labor needed to sustain the productive labor force” (Parreñas 2000, 561). For au pairs, this encompasses how they prepare their host family’s food and clothing, tidy the area, and look after the children so that the host parents can spend time away from the home and do their jobs (Brenner and Laslett 1991, 314). Au pairs’ tasks even extend to emotional labor, with countless stories of Filipina au pairs disciplining their host children; teaching them English or Tagalog words; providing support or solutions when the children are anxious; maintaining communication with attached children even when they are away; and doling out affection in the form of pet names, hugs, or kisses. Brenner and Laslett (1991) say that this emotional labor is necessary for the family to function thus falling within the umbrella of care labor.

Au pairs are typically hosted by dual-income households with host parents in varied high-earning sectors[25], harkening to the idea of a global care chain that transfers care duties from working women in “rich countries” to migrant women who occupy less privileged economic and residence statuses (Parreñas 2000; Hochschild 2000; Nguyen et al. 2017). The relationship between host parents and au pairs, then, is characterized by the movement of care along “power axes such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and place of origin” (Orozco 2010).

[25] I heard about or met host parents working in what are considered high-earning sectors (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2024) including IT, fashion and merchandising, healthcare, and real estate, among others.

Disarticulated labor: The au pair industry in the Netherlands

"There are actually many au pairs in our neighborhood. It's like a family neighborhood. Many au pairs. Many children." This is what Teresa once told me of her stay at a residential area in Haarlem. Where there are families or children in the city, it seems there are au pairs.

This illustrates a need for the services au pairs offer — and what au pairs offer is an affordable alternative to expensive child care services in the Netherlands (Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007). As au pairs offer care labor at lower than "market rate" without entitlement to benefits, the difference between the value they produce and what they receive in wages is stark, thus generating "surplus value" (Barber 2010; Joseph 2003, 7). Agencies have tapped into this need and opportunity, building what Hess and Puckhaber (2008) call the "au pair business." IND-recognized agencies profit from host families who come to them to match with an au pair, and unrecognized freelance agents profit from aspiring au pairs[26]. Yet often there is a disconnect between the work expected of au pairs and how profiting agencies advertise au pairing as cultural exchange (Hess and Puckhaber 2008). Au pairing becomes work in practice, all while shared narratives among au pairs, agencies, and host families remain far removed from work. Hess and Puckhaber (2008) assert that "disarticulating" the work that goes into au pairing is precisely what makes young women, who are "big sisters" and "part of the family," vulnerable to exploitation.

My findings confirm that reproducing filial types of relationships while simultaneously doing labor is a source of mismatched expectations at best and exploitation at worst. Teresa moved on from her first host family for exactly this reason:

> "My first host parents told me, '*I think you have a commitment issue.*' They backstabbed me, telling the other au pair in the house that I was '*entitled, arrogant, and not humble*.' All because they'd ask '*Can you help with gardening? Can you wash the car?*' and I'd say '*I don't really want to do outside work. It's not part of what we* (au pairs) *do.*' And they said I was entitled!"

[26] Filipino "agents" may or may not currently be based in the Netherlands and identify potential host families for exorbitant placement fees (reaching €1,500-€2,000 in some cases). There are agents who were previous au pairs, using their experience as a "selling point." Relationships between these "agents" and aspiring au pairs are colored by cultural ideas of *utang na loob* (a "debt" of gratitude or sense of obligation) such that au pairs who end their engagements with unrecognized agents and sign on to recognized agencies are subject to public shaming online for their ungratefulness.

Bea, an au pair in The Hague, is experiencing a reality similar to what Teresa has fortunately left behind. She began her stay without her room and her own space. This cultivated an atmosphere where she was on standby for anything the family needed. Her host parents would bring her along to their weekend activities, having her babysit on her weekends and leaving no time for herself or her friends. Any excess hours spent on babysitting was merely referred to as "bonding." When she approached her host parents to ask for some time and space alone, she was told, "this is just work to you? I thought this is what you wanted *(to belong).*" From these exchanges, we can see that a narrative where au pairs are "part of the family" enables host families to weaponize a sense of guilt or affection to benefit from au pairs' extra work. When the idea of counting hours and paying according to the excess[27] was brought up, Bea was told: "We don't believe in that *(paying for her time)*."

"Filipinas are excellent caretakers": Situating Filipina au pairs in the global care economy

Having established that Filipina au pairs *are* doing care labor while simultaneously contending with actors such as families and agencies within the Netherlands, how can one make sense of a Filipina au pair's experience within its broader spatio-temporal context? This can be done by framing Filipina au pairs' experiences in light of different processes and relations. Parreñas (2014) discusses how the construction of domestic workers as "one of the family," for one, has justified low wages and unpaid labor. This type of relationship not only characterizes an au pair's working conditions but also their migrant and legal status. They are bound to a "sponsoring employer" in the form of their host family, exacerbated by live-in residency requirements, which in turn restricts an au pair's labor market and overall mobility (Parreñas 2014). Care laborers such as au pairs are further "invisibilized" by the fact that they are not citizens and only have residency rights insofar as their host family or agency permits it (Orozco 2010). Au pairs must have a host family to stay in the Netherlands and can only stay until the end of their contract in a year — lest they risk deportation and a Schengen ban.

The interplay among these varied actors such as agencies, host families, the Dutch state, and au pairs themselves is characterized by the increased privatization of migrant care labor in the Netherlands. Au pairs can only come to the Netherlands via agencies, who then also become solely responsible for their well-being as the IND and immigration police frequently forgo the responsibility of checking on abusive host families (de Lange 2011, 197). Agencies serve multiple roles as

[27] This is a common arrangement among host families and au pairs including Althea, Teresa, and Liezel.

middlemen to both au pairs and host families, as well as a way for either to interface with the Dutch state.

A neoliberal policy landscape where government entities relinquish duties of child care and regulation to market interests has palpable consequences on the au pairs I met. An au pair's agency frequently factors into au pairs' discussions, identification, and networking — likely because the agency is often the only part of the overall au pair industry au pairs interact with. Since the agency is the only formal organization easily accessible to au pairs, it holds twin images as arbiters of order and as a "one-stop shop" for their needs. At the same time, the agency having dominion over what happens during an au pair's stay can have problematic implications. With agencies as "care brokers," Van Walsum (2011) discusses how migrants like au pairs are brought into dependent positions while agencies have a "vested interest" in controlling the behavior of "their" migrant (160). I previously demonstrated examples of Filipina au pairs facing exploitation as a result of "weaponizing" sentimental or filial relations on the part of Dutch citizens. The power imbalance in these cases is clear, given the profile of a usually white, high-earning, Dutch citizen. Yet the au pair industry has also opened up novel ways for Filipinos to exploit fellow Filipinos.

There are Filipino-owned agencies in the Netherlands dedicated to placing only Filipina au pairs. In their marketing narratives across social media and their websites, they promise a year of "adventure" for Filipinas and "excellent caretakers" for host families. Narratives about the inherent quality of Filipina au pairs as caretakers justify a racialized business model and encourage clients to take on a Filipina au pair. Au pairs shared stories about an agency that downplays their au pairs' work conditions. Appealing to culturally held ideas of *pakikisama*[28] and shame gets au pairs to accept contentious relationships with host families. When au pairs bring up cases of overwork, they are assured it is "normal" in au pairing. Responses such as this compound existing tensions between au pairs and agencies in general. Agencies are meant to respond to all au pairs' needs yet many au pairs feel that agencies tend to "side" with their client, the host family, for profit motive[29]. These tensions come with what Hess and Puckhaber (2008) call the "racialized economization of the private sphere and care work."

Harvey (1996) explains that systems at one level of analysis become but a part of a larger system at another level. As such, I understand the au pair industry to be one of the systems inscribed in and

[28] Filipino word for "getting along" or "going along" with other people

[29] Agencies need to cultivate good relationships with host families so that they become patrons and contact the same agency for au pair services yearly.

that sustains the broader global care economy (Williams 2011; Yeates 2005) beyond the Netherlands. Applying Harvey's (1996) emphasis on how flows or processes "give rise to, sustain, or undermine" systems across time, I turn my attention to the racialization and gendering of domestic work throughout history. These are interlinked, triggered by the shift towards a capitalist production system that first created the distinction between the "private" and "public" and then commercialized the private via "colored" subjects (Davis 1981). Parreñas' (2000) approach that considers both a racial division of reproductive labor and an international division of labor can explicate this perspective.

The understanding that care labor in one area is tied to care labor in another in the era of global capitalism (Parreñas 2000) is in line with a dialectical view where flows across space and time are critical to understanding phenomena (Harvey 1996). This way, I similarly interpret women's migration to "connect systems of gender inequality in both sending and receiving nations" (Parreñas 2000, 569). My conception of Parreñas' (2000) two-pronged drivers of women's migration, however, varies. While she says such migration is driven by capitalism on one hand and gender on the other, I have a slightly different perspective as I understand these drivers to be far less disparate: the division of labor and gendering of domestic tasks, in a view more similar to Davis' (1981), comes *with* changes in economic systems towards increased privatization (i.e.: capitalism).

Filipina au pairs already experienced a gendered division of labor long before they joined the au pair program. As daughters and sisters, many have assumed unpaid caretaking roles in the Philippines before they even came to the Netherlands. Shay, a 25-year-old au pair currently based in Amstelveen has experienced this exact transfer of care throughout her life in the Philippines:

> "I didn't get to finish college. I was studying nursing in the Philippines, but my dad suffered from a stroke at the time. I'm the youngest daughter, and all my elder sisters all had jobs. **It was like there was no one left but me.** I just had to make sacrifices. [...] So, I said, '*Okay, leave it to me* (to take care of him.)' I'm still young anyway."

Because all of Shay's sisters had to work, she viewed taking on care duties as the logical conclusion. Such experiences become crucial to au pairs' applications[30] to various agencies to prove they are qualified or fit to be an au pair. Shay's experience taking over her family's care duties is precisely

[30] Application processes are lengthy, laden with bureaucratic processes, and resemble a job application with its multiple-round (and at times panel) interviews and rigorous resumé checks.

why she wound up at her current host family. Her host family consists of a single father, his toddler daughter, and his adult son who no longer lives in the same house. She remembers distinctly why he ended up matching with them:

> "It was like I knew his struggle as a single parent because one of my sister's partners also died. As I was applying to the agency, I was the one looking after her child. The child was with me 24/7. **I felt like I was also her mother.** You see, my elder sister works as a medical sales representative — she's busy and needs to travel. **I was doing everything: I fed her child, bathed her, brought her to school, picked her up from school, attended parent-teacher meetings, attended school events, took her on trips. Everything.** So, when I talked to my host father for an interview, he would see my sister's child peeking from the corner and whispering things to me. I think he saw that I was close to children."

Though family composition differed across au pairs, stories about "naturally" taking on caretaker roles abounded. This was true for Hazel, a 23-year-old au pair based in Amsterdam. She cleaned up after and looked out for all her siblings and parents at home in Luzon, so she believes she does significantly less work now that she is an au pair in the Netherlands. She had no sisters but took care of her unemployed brother's child, Jasmine. On her social media accounts, Hazel laments watching Jasmine grow up from afar and watching other family members attend school events in her stead. Her au pairing in the Netherlands — no matter how short-term — affects how Jasmine is growing up in the Philippines and how Hazel's family has to divide her previous responsibilities. Care labor in the Philippines is affected as much as Hazel is currently affecting care labor in the Netherlands per Parreñas' (2000) idea of an international division of labor.

Hazel's case shows how women take on caretaking roles regardless of whether the rest of the household had other responsibilities to attend to. Even if child's father had no job, she was the one in charge of care labor. A transfer of care, then, is governed by notions of femininity and domesticity that the Philippines' labor export-driven economy has fully utilized. Filipinas' migration towards jobs that "maintain notions of women's domesticity" paired with a division of care labor concentrated among the women who remain in the Philippines explains why fathers like Hazel's brother are excluded from care labor: "society continues to accept the notion of women as the proper nurturers of the family" (Parreñas 2008a, 172–173). Sullivan (2021) found that even women who work or earn more end up doing more housework, which is in direct opposition to the idea of "economic bargaining" that traces further gendering of domestic versus productive work due to how women

have less time to develop employable skills or work experience. Origins of gendered roles are less rational or causal, and are more constructed. Gendered care can instead be attributed to how individuals "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), emphasizing how interactions form the way gender is ultimately practiced. In both Shay's and Hazel's situations, interactions with families and agencies shaped why they both took on caretaker roles in the Philippines and the Netherlands.

There are many different ways gender is "done" in au pairing — from agencies that market women explicitly in words or implicitly in photos that only feature women to individual resumés by aspiring au pairs highlighting "feminine qualities" to find host families posted across Facebook groups[31]. The au pairs I met have never encountered male au pairs themselves, but have heard of at least one or two in their respective agency's intakes[32]. The role gender plays in care labor is even sometimes viewed as "natural" by au pairs, which factored in their decisions to pursue au pairing. Shay and her friend Joanne are from different agencies but shared the same view on gender, echoing discussions on Philippine notions of femininity and care:

> **Shay:** Au pairs are mostly women because kids become attached and connect more easily to them. And mothers are the ones left to do household work so I think parents trust an au pair more if it's a woman. And women are just more reliable in the kitchen and the home.
> **Joanne**: I feel like it's really in girls' nature to be more nurturing and caring. Especially when it comes to dealing with kids, right?

Gender ideologies attached to care persist in the Netherlands, as au pairs and other care laborers confirm that Dutch families or employers preferred women care laborers (Kofman 2014; Van Walsum 2011). This perspective, though accepted as "natural," was ultimately born out of many different processes and can therefore be subject to negotiation. Shay and Hazel's roles as caretakers were in part results of dynamics within the family and their agencies. Bea, meanwhile, rejects the idea that domestic work is necessarily a woman's domain even as she carries out care labor. As this chapter has so far shown, ideas of "femininity" or "labor" are in reality variable (Harvey 1996, 54).

[31] They create written posts, graphics, or at times, videos that highlight feminine qualities along with constructed racial qualities (as I will discuss later in this section), aligning with Zontini's (2010) findings that Filipinas "play" with the "stereotype of Filipinas as being docile, hardworking, and dedicated domestics" as a "marketing strategy" (117-118).
[32] This observation seems consistent with how from 2013 to 2023, only 2.4% of all outgoing au pairs in the Philippines were male (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2023).

Race and “Filipina-ness” are also ideas that are cultivated rather than discovered. One such way these concepts are reproduced is in active labor export campaigns that rely on racial branding (Guevarra 2014). Lindio-McGovern (2013) credits the Philippines’ “aggressive implementation neoliberal policies of globalization” for “gender-race-class inequality in the global political economy” (2). Constable (2007) similarly points to a history of colonial and neocolonial policies that govern labor migration in her discussion of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong:

> “By the early 1990s, the term “Filipino” had for some people become synonymous with ‘domestic worker.’ Since then, as the nationalities of domestic workers have diversified, ideas about their ‘traits’ and the differences between Filipinas, Indonesians, and other nationalities have been further naturalized and essentialized (43).”

The idea that care labor, especially child care, is “logical” or “natural” work for Filipinas (ibid., 43) similarly persists in the Netherlands’ au pair industry. Between au pair agencies dedicated to placing only Filipina au pairs and host families posting on various Facebook groups to look for Filipina au pairs specifically, the image of the Filipina as a caretaker remains potent. Many host families have even had multiple Filipina au pairs in succession:

> **Michelle:** My host family mostly looks for Filipina au pairs. They had a nanny in Dubai who was also Filipina. They are partial to Filipinas.
> **Maita:** Why is that?
> **Michelle:** Because with us if it’s work, we really work! Filipinas don’t complain. We just talk to our friends like, “my host mom did this and that to me” but we won’t tell our host parents directly. It’s like we just keep saying “yes.” Which isn’t always a good thing but it’s what we’re used to. It’s difficult to change.

Within this “trade of workers,” Constable (2007) explains, it was the interest of agencies to keep Filipinas docile — which might explain why a similar dynamic exists with select au pair agencies in the Netherlands. Ironically, the state-sponsored image of Filipinas as domestic workers has influenced how receiving countries view Filipina au pairs, increasing the possibilities for out-of-contract work or exploitation. It is for this reason that Filipina au pairs typically have extra steps and requirements in their application process, and are required to attend a pre-departure Country Familiarization Seminar (CFS) that emphasizes what the au pair program is or is not, and warns against predatory agencies or host families. Such policies by neoliberal states attempt to solve a

problem they have helped create in the first place, demonstrating how the global free market of labor maintains unequal relations among nations via neoliberal policies that move assets such as labor (San Juan 2011).

Connections throughout time such as these, as well as the nuances involved in socially constructed "opposing forces" (Harvey 1996, 54) make it important to situate "micro-processes" such as global care chains (i.e.: how care is transferred) in the larger global or transnational care economy. By taking au pairs' experiences in view of the many different processes that govern racialized, gendered labor export, we pay mind to "the significance of meso/macro relationships — that is, of the political, economic, and social relationships that belong to and connect differently situated national and supranational states" (Williams 2011, 21).

Navigating gray areas: Are Filipina au pairs undermined or bolstered by contradictions?

The movement of care across borders, the relationship between host family and au pair, and the agency's middleman role prove that au pairing is in flux and is informed by varied interactions and processes across "levels of analysis" (Harvey 1996, 49): the au pair herself, the household, the au pair industry, the and global care economy. In light of these many different processes, heterogeneity between fields of experience exists across levels (ibid., 51).

The process of short-term labor migration, for one, problematizes not only au pairs' being a "worker" but also their being a "migrant." Au pairs contend with a landscape of differential inclusion and access to social benefits: despite performing de facto work, the context of being part of a host "family" as part of "cultural exchange" excludes au pairs from the formal labor market and from securing residency rights (Lepianka et al. 2016). Lepianka and Martin (2016) also note the "significant differences between the legal position of EEA[33] and Third Country national (TCN) migrant domestic workers," adding another layer of exclusion for Filipina au pairs. In general, these "immigration controls" create different "types of labour with particular relations to employers, and types of resident with particular relations to citizens" (Anderson 2009, 1).

Anderson (2009) unpacked why differences in immigration status led to differences in how domestic workers and au pairs imagine their tasks and relationships despite having overlaps in their tasks. This

[33] European Economic Area (EEA)

corresponds with my research that draws attention to the "gray area" au pairs find themselves in socially and legally, affecting how they make sense of their stay in the Netherlands and how they pursue collectivism. Born out of these migratory processes are au pairs' realities as workers who are not meant to be workers; residents of the Netherlands but not citizens; and "part of the family" yet outsiders.

Yet it is not in a dialectical perspective's interest to maintain a cause-and-effect relationship among elements "by virtue of embeddedness in flow of continuous processes" (Harvey 1996, 54). Instead, the interaction between forces is what continually shapes fields of experience. What I have found is that Filipina au pairs impose upon processes much like processes impose upon them. In fact, it is in these abundant contradictions that au pairs harness potential for transformation:

> "In the dialectical view, opposing forces, themselves constituted out of processes, in turn become particular nodal points for further patterns of transformative activity" (Harvey 1996, 54)

While previously I have discussed the ways au pairs are subjected to broader systems and the exploitative mechanisms within them, the succeeding subsections will illustrate the different ways au pairs configure work and how they exert themselves in light of their unique position in the global care economy.

Extra work for respective host families

Liezel had been complaining about the work she had to do before her host family returned from South Africa when Jennalyn said, "You don't have to do all of it in one day." Her advice was this: do one task one day and finish up another task the next day. The host family was away on vacation so there was no way of knowing what Liezel did or did not do. Yet Liezel maintained that she *has* to get the house tidy enough and ready for the cleaner. "They're going to hire a cleaner," she emphasized.

"Tell them not to! Take over the cleaning," Jennalyn said.

"The house is huge!" Liezel exclaimed.

Jennalyn continued to press, believing this was a great opportunity for Liezel. Her stubbornness gave Liezel pause to think about her travel expenses. “Fine, and I could charge them 20 per hour,” Liezel conceded, to which Jennalyn guffawed.

Discussions such as these were common with Filipina au pairs. Overlaps between the care labor they perform and the care labor nannies or cleaners perform give au pairs opportunities to take over the additional work for additional pay. Althea’s host family has no nanny so she earns from doing extra babysitting for her host family. Joanne likewise has taken an additional role as a cleaner and is in cooperation with her host family to keep it a secret:

> **Joanne:** I do housework all day because my host family doesn’t have a cleaner.
> **Maita:** Is that part of your contract?
> **Joanne:** No, they offered the work to me. And I agreed because they give me a big allowance. A lot more than what’s on the contract. It’s just that we can’t let the agency know.
> **Maita:** Doesn’t the agency monitor you?
> **Joanne:** Sure, they do, but whatever the host family sends my bank account is the exact amount as stated on the contract. The excess is given to me in cash.

I found that Filipina au pairs are able to negotiate terms with more ease this way as changes in official au pair contracts typically pass through the agency with each amendment. Liezel, for instance, had fully-booked weekends due to extra babysitting engagements with her host family. When I asked if she was paid for the additional work, she said: “I won’t do it if I’m not paid.” Her host parents believe that even though the additional work is not allowed, it would be better that Liezel babysits at theirs rather than at another house. For her extra babysitting, Liezel earns €5 per hour. She is generally able to negotiate how she is compensated for excess hours. “If I work for an additional 1 hour and 30 minutes, I would get a little over €5. What can I do with that?” Liezel said, explaining why sometimes she would negotiate to offset the hour on another day instead. If she works an hour past 6:00 pm on a Wednesday, she can ask to end her day at 7:00 pm on Fridays instead of the original 8:00 pm.

KK or *kuskos*

> "I was having a hard time adjusting, and the allowance here is smaller than the salary I had as a call center agent in the Philippines. Earlier in the year, my mindset was just to go home. But at that time, I didn't know about the *kuskos* here. It's illegal but it's what inspired me."
> —Cora, a 24-year-old au pair from Visayas, now based in Amsterdam

KK or *kuskos* comes from the Tagalog word for "scrubbing" likely due to how these often refer to cleaning work done outside the host home. These are illegal work arrangements au pairs typically do on weekends when they are free. Many earn €15-€20 per hour, while their exact work hours and "shifts" in a month are their prerogative in conversation with their employer. In Facebook groups dedicated to Filipinos in the Netherlands, posts by au pairs looking for KK opportunities or leads are common. The most reliable way to find KK engagements, however, is to inherit them from another Filipina au pair — typically outgoing au pairs. This was true for Cora, and is true for Liezel who works for an elderly man she calls "Tatay[34] Luuk" twice a month on Saturdays. She dedicates around four hours to cleaning his home, where he lives alone after his wife passed away. He picks her up and provides free breakfast and lunch. Reflecting Brenner and Laslett's (1991) assertion that care labor enters emotional territory, Liezel spends an hour of "work" merely eating with and talking to Tatay Luuk. Establishing rapport with Tatay Luuk has an unintended benefit of helping her negotiate schedules: she only has to send him her available days and he typically can adjust to her availability due to a sense of trust.

Filipina au pairs also send small amounts of money back to their families in the Philippines. They are told by their agencies that this is not allowed to maintain the "cultural exchange" aspect of the au pair program[35]. Liezel, too, sends back around €100 to her family, but leaves her KK earnings for her travels. For most au pairs, Cora confirmed, this is what KK is truly for — to fund their travels across Europe. To field these different clandestine wages, some au pairs open a separate account on top of the Dutch bank account where they receive their allowance from their host parents.

[34] Tagalog word for "father," which can be used for any elderly man as sign of respect and/or closeness
[35] Au pairs are usually told that allowances are to be used up in the Netherlands, not to be a source of breadwinning via remittances.

In/visibility as both opportunity and limitation

Filipina au pairs undertake multiple configurations of care labor and navigate varied layers of secrecy to perform them. These include: 1.) the above-the-board au pairing; 2.) the extra work given by host families, kept secret from the agency and IND; and 3.) their KK, kept secret from the agency, IND, *and* their host family. Despite the inherent invisibility associated with some of their work, Filipina au pairs are hypervisible on social media. They post about "days in the life of an au pair," and all the cities they visit. Some reach over 700,000 views on TikTok, and are actively taking the steps to become monetized influencers. Althea is an avid TikToker who followed suit by creating a TikTok account solely for her au pair content and persona. She explains her reasoning:

> "I want to have content and platforms that show who I am. They first have to know: who are you? What do you do?"

Au pairs take about 45 minutes to an hour[36] to edit their vlogs, TikToks, or reels, and schedule their posts to account for when people will be awake in both the Netherlands and the Philippines. Videos show them cooking, cleaning, spending time with their host children, and traveling to other cities. This meticulous construction of their au pair identity is a form of "self-branding" (Arvidsson et al. 2019) often found in freelancing.

Yet in other cases, having a sense of invisibility offers Filipina au pairs more agency and mobility. The lack of contracts or regulation on au pairs' secret KK arrangements has better positioned them to negotiate higher rates, flexibility in schedules, and allocate more earnings to their travel funds. This resonates with Coe and Glaser's (2021) discussion on the "symbolism of contracts" (61–62): while recognition via formal contracts is a way to legitimize invisibilized labor and offer worker protections, contracts uphold a liberal fiction that employers and employees possess equal "bargaining power" in crafting these contracts. This is why au pairs found power in situations where they are not bound by a contract. In a contract's absence, au pairs establish relationships where they can set their terms from a more equal, agentive position.

[36] Some au pairs post nearly every day, while some post every week or so. The time and effort that goes into their posts, especially when accrued, resembles a type of work on its own — and is likely more literally the case for those au pairs who use their posts to network and/or become influencers.

Relational reconfigurations of "work"

The relationships Filipina au pairs build with their host families and employers are by no means static. They reconfigure these relationships as needed by distancing themselves from the intimate or familial aspect of their work. They invoke this strategy when contracts get breached resulting in overwork or when host families exert dominance over them via verbal abuse. In doing so, they make "sophisticated political and historical calculations about whether to deploy or denounce affect- and kin-based relationships" (Coe and Glaser 2021, 65).

Shay and Joanne are au pairs who show two sides of the same coin. Shay enjoys an experience she truly recognizes as "cultural exchange," receiving calls of appreciation from her host child's grandmother and having the room to ask her host father for favors outside the standard au pair benefit inclusions. Joanne, on the other hand, toils beyond her work hours at her current host after having withstood verbal abuse from her previous host. Of this experience, Joanne said: "I'm tired but it's okay. I persevere. Because I don't have a choice. I can't go through a rematch again. If I do, they might say *I'm* the problem."

Shay views au pairing purely as an experience and does not shy away from affection in her dealings with her host family, while Joanne, like many others, has taken to distancing herself and rationalizing au pairing as "just a job" and "being professional." This is a common situation for Filipina domestic workers:

> "Filipina domestic workers draw on idioms of care and reciprocity to determine which employers deserve to be considered kin, yet often find such characterizations ultimately disappointing, finding refuge in more distant and formal relations" (Coe and Glaser 2021, 65).

Topali (2021) claims these "relational models" are produced in an "ambivalent legal environment." She found that when Filipino ideas on reciprocity and kinship "fail," Filipinas turn to professionalizing their work and even attempt to reinforce the "private/public split." In the case of Filipina au pairs in the Netherlands, diametrically opposed poles of these relational models co-exist among peers:

> **Maita:** Is being an au pair work for you?
> **Shay:** Not at all.
> **Joanne:** For her, it isn't — but for me, it *is* work.

Being made aware of other au pairs' situations likewise puts their own situation into context, pushing them to arrive at conclusions they might not have or would have taken for granted otherwise: "When my friends complain about their day, I feel bad because I'm not going through the same thing," Shay said. "But that's why I realized that my situation is what being an au pair actually *should* be like."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that Filipina au pairs and the broader global care economy are mutually constituted, with au pairs influencing processes associated with labor export the same way these processes influence their experience as short-term de facto care workers. With the "interdigitation of parts and wholes," au pairs become both objects *and* subjects of processes of social change (Harvey 1996, 54). While interactions across levels (i.e.: with their host families and agencies on one level, and the Dutch state, Philippine state, and broader labor market on another) shape their volatile, contradictions-ridden experience, so too do au pairs reclaim a sense of control and transform their situations in active, creative ways:

> "Human individuals, furthermore, have a remarkable capacity to capture and reorganize energy and information flows in ways which are creative rather than passive" (ibid., 51).

While burdened by the gray area they find themselves in, au pairs simultaneously take advantage by using their invisibility as a means to find other opportunities and negotiate better work conditions, as well as invoke or revoke filial bonds to deal with their arrangements.

Chapter 2: "Collectivism of the everyday" in dynamic au pair networks

According to McBride and Lucio (2011), collectivism is built on workers' "understandings of their position in the labour market," as well as how they perceive class structures and changes in their situations (797). Having established that au pairing is ultimately in flux, however, we encounter a new question: can Filipina au pairs build narratives and collectivist groups predicated upon their place in a specific sector (Refslund and Sippola 2020)? Althea offers a peek into the answer:

> "It's necessary for me to make friends with other au pairs. Sometimes I'll go, '*Can you bring Dirk to your house for a playdate?*' One day, it's her responsibility, and then next time, it's mine. There are days when I'll have many kids at home at a time. We just switch. We need it because **that's what being an au pair is**. There are times when you're tired. Whether or not you've done a lot that day, **I feel like you need other au pairs.**"

What Althea describes is the practice of sharing the "load" of child care with other au pair peers. This takes many forms for different Filipina au pairs, whether it is taking turns hosting playdates or gathering at a park to watch over their host children together. In this instance, we see glimmers of Davis' (1981) idea of moving care from the confines of the private sphere to something shared (128).

Because au pairing means one becomes "part of the family," most Filipina au pairs believe issues can be handled on their own or through other interpersonal means such as by befriending peers. Many are not familiar with trade unions or Filipino migrant organizations, and are ambivalent about approaching government bodies such as the IND or the Philippine Embassy. Nearly none would think to approach their agency, though agencies attempt to foster a sense of community. Agencies create intricate "issue escalation[37]" mechanisms to mediate conflicts with host families, resembling how managers create "direct forms of communication with workers and to bypass embedded and institutionalized systems of worker representation" (McBride and Lucio 2011, 796). Whether or not these are deemed effective or in use at all depends on the agency. Apart from these communication

[37] Some agencies have communication tools modeled after corporate issue escalation systems, where concerns or conflicts are first handled between au pairs and host families. If no resolutions can be made, it will be escalated to an au pair's specific manager, and then a regional/program director (if applicable), before it reaches the involvement of the highest level of leadership.

schemes, there are also agency-led events for au pairs, whose participation is sometimes funded by their host families.

While agencies do factor into how au pairs identify each other, it seems this is still as far as it goes for many au pairs who reject formalized or imposed collectivism by their agencies. Hazel has a relatively good relationship with her agency yet believes it is only her friends and herself she can trust to solve her problems:

> **Hazel:** I honestly wouldn't think of going to my agency or IND for my problems.
> **Maita:** Why is that?
> **Hazel:** *(laughs)* What would they do? I don't see how they can help.

To help account for what type of collectivism *does* exist and make sense for au pairs, Stephenson and Stewart (2001) conceive of other types alongside trade union-based collectivism: 1.) **workplace collectivism**, where employees give each other practical and emotional support within their working environment; and 2.) the **collectivism of everyday life**, which refers to "networks of support" that have implications for both "home and work life" (6.5). With Stephenson and Stewart (2001) conceding that overlaps exist between these two types, I argue they are essentially the same for au pairs, who do not have shared workplaces and whose labor is founded on the muddled distinctions between home/work, private/public, and labor/filial duty.

Factors particular to an au pair's situation shape their experiences of collectivism. Teresa explains that the nature of the au pair contract results in small groups rather than a large, encompassing au pair community:

> "There are mostly just small groups of friends because in the Netherlands, you *(as an au pair)* only have one year. People come in and out. It's hard to maintain big groups when they're always coming and going."

Their gatherings are also influenced by their varied work schedules, as evidenced by Teresa's experience:

> "When I first arrived, my friends here were at the end of their contracts. So, I befriended three new au pairs who I could only see on the weekends. It's hard to see each other in the

middle of the day because my free time is 10:00 am until 2:00 pm, while my other friend babysits from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. Our schedules rarely align, especially if someone has extra babysitting that day."

The following sections take this context into account by showing how Filipina au pairs build and sustain their own forms of collectivism. By the end of the chapter, I demonstrate that Filipina au pairs' unique situation sets them up to harness transformative behavior in their changing networks of support for what can be considered "collectivism of the everyday" (Stephenson and Stewart 2001; McBride and Lucio 2011).

"On weekends, we *gala!*": Moments of bonding as "collectivism of the everyday"

It was a cold winter day at Zaanse Schans where Ynah, Hazel, and Lea and I gazed at windmills in awe. The strong winds did not deter Hazel and Lea from taking pictures just about anywhere. I saw how they edited their vlogs and posted upwards of 15 Instagram story updates at Zaandam earlier that day so I knew this to be standard procedure at this point. As Ynah and I watched Hazel and Lea pose for each other, Ynah told me in a tone that read more fond than derisive, "This is all au pairs do. Going on *gala*."

Gala turned out to be crucial to each of the 40 Filipina au pairs I met. They do household work from Monday to Friday[38], but the weekends are dedicated to their *gala*. Gala is a Tagalog word that means "travel" or "trip." To au pairs, however, I learned it can refer to anything from taking a bus to Germany to meeting up at a cafe in Amsterdam.

"My weekends are already full of *gala*," Liezel had told me as we arranged our next meeting. She showed me her calendar for March. She had a trip to Eindhoven and Luxembourg, dinner in an Asian restaurant with friends, and an excursion to Keukenhof Gardens all planned. For most au pairs, taking these trips is the reason they chose to become au pairs at all. They wish to explore the Netherlands and Europe at large. *Gala* starts taking a slightly new shape and meaning once they get settled into the country and confronted with the labor that goes into their day-to-day schedule. *Gala* can now encompass a simple walk in the park with their Filipina au pair peers — a communal respite from the often insular or atomized housework they normally perform. Possibilities of collectivism are

[38] Some au pairs indeed have different designated work days and work weeks, as discussed in Chapter 1. Since most are free on the weekends, however, they tend to coordinate with each other accordingly.

confined to gatherings on au pairs' limited time off, with public spaces substituting for a shared workplace (Barber 2010, 146), which is why I hone in on "bonding" moments (Stephenson and Stewart 2001) such as the *gala* in my discussion of au pair collectivism.

There is a sense of community even in the planning stages of a *gala*. On Instagram or Facebook chats or video calls, au pairs align schedules and send each other ideas of what to do next. They take these online plans to the "real world" with their peers, venting about grueling workloads or rocky host family relationships in between activities. As my trip with Ynah, Hazel, and Lea has demonstrated, they will then display an idealized, meticulously curated online post of that day. These posts highlighted historical architecture, vast tulip fields, museums, and featured them donning trendy clothes in the foreground. Glamorous updates of their *gala,* as depicted online, present a narrative of Filipina au pairs as explorers and travelers — a narrative well-aligned with the au pair program's original purpose of "cultural exchange." These posts help cultivate an image of their lives in Europe for their loved ones back home in the Philippines, but also serve the purpose of keeping their peers in the Netherlands updated:

> **Ynah:** You can't continue connecting with people if you don't see their Instagram or Facebook posts. It's fun because you see their updates and go, "Ah, she went to so-and-so place. She went to Amsterdam. She attended Tulip Day."

What these curated images do not show is the labor occurring for at least five days in a week before their two days of *gala*. Neither do these show exchanges about their personal and work problems, which they have behind the scenes nearly every time they meet. Such *galas*, then, constitute worker collectivism, which "stems from the common experience of the capitalist labour process" (Stephenson and Stewart 2001, 6.5). According to Stephenson and Stewart (2001), a view of collectivism limited to achieving a defined work-related goal is restrictive and cannot account for situations like that of the Filipina au pairs':

> "Since collectivism does not solely equate to employees acting as a collective entity in order to achieve a particular goal, collectivism, we contend, may also refer to employees' commitment to the welfare of their colleagues" (6.5).

Filipina au pairs undoubtedly exhibit "collectivism of the everyday" as they foster mutual support in tackling work issues and beyond, for which *gala* normally set the stage. A *gala* likewise represents a

cathartic break from everyday expectations and responsibilities. Although a *gala* is originally meant to be a break or vacation of sorts, there is interestingly a sense of pressure to have them — almost as if *gala* have become a duty or expectation in itself. Even when they are tired from work, au pairs strive to go on *gala* on weekends because it is their only opportunity to do so. This feeling is compounded by a common sentiment that the au pair program is the only way they (or anyone in their families) can go to Europe:

> "I want to explore. See Europe. And *(becoming an)* au pair is the easiest way to do that because your host family takes on everything."
> —Mikaela, a 26-year-old woman from Visayas, now an au pair in Amsterdam

Other than the pressure of making the most of opportunities not afforded to everyone in the Philippines, *gala* has become a way to reclaim all the time and effort Filipina au pairs spend on weekdays. I recalled Ynah, who I joined on those day trips to Zaandam and Zaanse Schans, telling me that she did babysitting on weekends and cleaning work not outlined in her contract. "I am so tired," she said. "But I have a *gala* again tomorrow. While I'm here in the Netherlands, it feels like I have to go on a *gala*. Otherwise, I'll go crazy."

"Our world is small": Small groups of mutual support in changing au pair networks

> "Usually on Saturdays, we go to Baarn to get free clothes. There, you'll see people you know with other au pairs. **That's how we meet each other. Through mutual friends.** Or sometimes, if you pass by someone or see someone in line, we go '*Ah, you're an au pair? Where in the Netherlands are you based?*' and then we exchange socials. We're super warm. It's like you don't need an introduction. **If we find a Filipina au pair here and there, we'd instantly connect.**"
>
> —Ynah, a 23-year-old au pair from Luzon, now based in Utrecht

Just as Ynah described, Filipina au pairs expand their networks online, through chance encounters during *gala*, and most especially from "friends of friends." They keep close to small, overlapping *barkada*[39]. These *barkada* are amorphous and intersecting, given their short-term stays and the ease at which they connect with other Filipina peers. The insular nature of their work and their clashing schedules make coordination on a larger scale complicated, and are likewise why social media is prominent as a "medium or tool for networked connectivity" (Markham 2017, 7) for varied contexts. Broader Facebook pages, for instance, are used for finding fellow Filipina au pairs and mostly anonymous one-off crowdsourcing[40], while Filipina au pairs use personal Instagram accounts to maintain their relationships — mirroring their smaller, more personal *barkada* of support. Cora and Michelle, two au pairs based in Amsterdam, had this exact experience. They planned a trip to Paris with peers even before meeting each other in the Netherlands. Their first friends left the Netherlands in the middle of Cora and Michelle's contracts, and Michelle says she has since relied on Cora for her network:

> **Michelle:** I arrived a little after Cora so she was the one who introduced me to people. Her friends become my friends. She's like a bridge.
>
> **Cora:** It's like networking.

[39] A word for "group of friends," "gang," or "clique" more generally, but can also sometimes refer to people who take trips together. It has its roots from the Spanish word for "boatload" *(barcada)* due to how Filipino prisoners from the provinces were shipped out to the penitentiaries in the cities and formed cliques mostly according to their ethnolinguistic backgrounds over the course of the boat ride (Dumont 2012).

[40] In this case, crowdsourcing refers to a large, dispersed group of people contributing to a particular question or need via ideas, information, and at times services voluntarily via online platforms like Facebook groups. Au pairs will pose questions (often anonymously) and get multiple responses in the comments section.

> **Michelle:** And it's good because her friends are helpful to me, too. **One person or group meets another's "friends of friends." In that way, it seems like all Filipina au pairs know each other. Our world is small.**

Within these *barkada*, Filipina au pairs share meals, attend mass, go shopping, and *ukay* in their own displays of "collectivism of the everyday." These displays maintain their social bonds and collective identities (Yates 2015; Quinsaat 2024) since these are where they can meet other au pairs, vent about their problems, and ask for help from people who have had similar experiences or distinct insights on their situations. Althea and Shay actively seek au pairs and create ways to meet them for this purpose since other channels are simply not as effective or holistic in their eyes:

> **Althea:** When I have a problem, I'd go to an au pair. Not really the agency. I tell you what my problems are, and then you tell me yours. Yes, we chose to enter this line of work, but it's okay to rant. I need someone I can tell all these things to, especially the heavier stuff.

> **Shay:** Well, other agencies are not as hands-on as mine. But when I have problems other than regarding my host family, I have her *(Joanne)*.

Shay also feels the need to support Joanne regarding her troubled situation even as Shay feels satisfied with her own. This shows how individual and collective struggles are interlinked, which can then lead to organization and intervention (Lucio and Stewart 1997) as I will explain in this chapter. For Filipina au pairs who enter a foreign country, some struggles have to do with adapting to an entirely new environment — which has implications not only for their work but for every part of their lives. This was the case for Ynah, who remains thankful to Hazel for "showing her the ropes" not just about au pairing but about life in the Netherlands in general:

> **Ynah: It's the other Filipina au pairs who helped me the most when I first arrived here.** I was overwhelmed by everything. It's good I knew Hazel from our pre-departure seminar[41]. She replied to my Instagram story like, "Oh, you're already here! I'll go to you. I'll go with you to your appointment at the IND." And she did. I didn't know how to go about my commute or how anything worked here yet. I was still scared. But Hazel guided me by showing me the route to my appointment and my commute. I was so relieved after that. I

[41] One requirement au pairs from the Philippines must fulfill that no other au pairs are required to do is attend a pre-departure seminar in the Philippines where they are given information about the au pair program, including how to avoid exploitation.

thought, "**Oh, it's so nice to have a companion because it's hard to navigate all this alone.**" I wouldn't have been able to do it if there was no one helping me.

"Collectivism of the everyday" encompasses mobile or virtual conversations off-hours, both work or non-work advice, and contact with colleagues that smoothen one's entry into a "new world" (Stephenson and Stewart 2011, 6.15), as in the case of Ynah and Hazel. According to Yates (2015), people are connected, stimulated, and politicized through "common understandings" and "compatible types of performances" of social practices (238). This aligns with how au pairs go on *gala* where they share their thoughts and feelings with peers, as well as how they do errands together to adapt to the Netherlands. It can further be seen in how au pairs advise and support each other by spotting host family "red flags," learning where and how to KK, and giving recommendations or warnings regarding certain agencies. Búriková's (2015) study on Slovak au pairs' practice of gossip resonates with my findings on gossip's empowering quality for au pairs. For Filipina au pairs, gossip about even *others'* host families and agencies reaffirms boundaries and keeps them "vigilant." A conversation over dinner with Liezel and Gela, a neighboring Filipina au pair, demonstrated this:

> **Liezel:** The reason Bea couldn't come with us today is because she was told to go "bonding" with her host child. But it's the weekend! So, I said, "*they're manipulating you!*" You know, before Bea moved in, they were in a rush to put their previous au pair in a hostel. They didn't want Bea to meet the previous au pair because Bea might "absorb her bad energy."
> **Gela:** Uh-oh, they just don't want Bea to be warned about them!

Bea's story, as relayed by Liezel and Gela, is a recurrent one among au pairs. Certain families prevent Filipina au pairs from meeting their previous au pairs who are typically also Filipina. This is widely regarded as one "red flag" because other host families are usually amenable to connecting au pairs, with some even arranging a transition period where the previous au pair "mentors" the new au pair. Filipina au pairs suspect some host families avoid this arrangement because the previous au pair will give insight into their negotiated rates or workload — or more gravely, potential overwork, abuse, and manipulation. In response, au pairs like Ynah and Teresa go to the lengths of searching for a host family's previous au pair online to be able to speak to them about the host family. Filipina au pairs thus rely on their own networks and on each other's memories to gauge how they ought to approach their workplace, in line with how McBride and Lucio (2011) argue for the critical role

memory plays in collectivism, emphasizing how memory factors into "informal networks and self-organizing" borne out of traditional collectivism's "gendered or ethnic identity limitations" (799).

As Chapter 1 has shown, Filipinas make judgments on how they invoke or retract intimacy in their work as a means to take control of their situation. Relying on the memory of previous Filipina au pairs helps inform their judgment and strategies. Memory is crucial to Filipina au pair's "collectivism of the everyday" as they not only "build trust between employees" but also develop a "collective understanding of the nature of the workplace" (Stephenson and Stewart 2011, 7.2). Joanne's experiences with the rematching process[42] and navigating extra work with her host family, for instance, have put her in a position to advise other au pairs who find themselves in similar situations:

> **Joanne:** I told Shay that she's the first au pair I've heard of who is in a good situation with her host family. I hear from many au pairs, and they're also having a hard time. People who I wasn't even close to are approaching me now because they know I went through the rematching process. They chatted with me and asked how the process was because they're planning to do the same. So that's how I knew that they were having a hard time like I was.
>
> Our friend, Nadine, also approached me with a different problem. She's been doing extra work that the host family doesn't want to pay her for because additional payments are "not allowed." So, I told her to tell them, "Well, I'm not allowed to do extra hours, too."

Recalling "past occupational experiences," "local community pasts," and "the legacy of workplace exploitation" in the way Joanne and other au pairs do is necessary to develop a "collective character" that workers can draw from (McBride and Lucio 2011, 800). Teresa was similarly able to tap into shared memories and experiences to create tangible outcomes. When Teresa left her first exploitative host family behind, she was able to still contact her replacement, Divina, because she used Teresa's old Dutch mobile number. From then on, they became friends. Teresa, however, was

[42] Rematching occurs when an au pair's stay with the current host family is no longer tenable. Au pairs are particularly vulnerable since they only have a set period of time to find another family before their visa gets revoked. If they are unable to find anyone, they can be sent back home. In the meantime, rematching au pairs typically stay with a host family that they may not have a good relationship with, making daily life uncomfortable. Some also have their transport cards cut off since host families no longer feel obligated to keep funding them, adding yet another layer of vulnerability.

not pleased to learn Divina was facing the same exploitative conditions. This shared experience was the catalyst for Teresa and Divina to report the family:

> **Teresa:** I really look for the host family's previous au pairs to get to know them. When they're Filipina, you can talk to them in earnest. But sometimes, they're scared to tell the truth. That's what was happening with Divina at first. But I told her, "Tell them what actually happened." [...] So we reported the family to the Philippine Embassy. Now, no other Filipina au pairs will get 'scammed' by them anymore.

In choosing to "tell the truth" and becoming visible to both the host family and the Philippine Embassy, Teresa and Divina exhibit a "commitment to the well-being of others" that required them to "be visible and take risk for their colleagues" (Stephenson and Stewart 2001, 6.17). Teresa's encouragement and support enabled Divina to overcome her initial fear: she started maintaining a diary where she wrote about her daily tasks and filed a formal complaint to her agency to serve as evidence for their report. As the family's previous au pair, Teresa provided a testimony letter confirming she had gone through the same circumstances. Teresa and Divina commented about their situation on a post by a Filipina au pair going through a similar problem, who then directed them to a Filipino social worker to assist them in filing their report to the Philippine Embassy. The support Teresa and Divina had for each other is a show of collectivism instrumental to gaining justice for employees (ibid.).

Through the development of a shared understanding of what au pairing is and is not, we see that Filipina au pairs come to realize how things "should be" as they talk to peers and share "associated knowledge and competence" (Yates 2015, 238). This way, Filipina au pairs also start to form ideas on transformations they want to see in their work:

> **Ynah:** It's so important to hear from other au pairs. If you don't, agencies can just brand being an au pair as a travel experience and nobody would know anything about what actually happens here. But I think the most important change that has to happen is an increase in au pairs' allowance!

Social media is similarly leveraged for this purpose as in the case of Althea, whose TikToks paint a curated picture of being a Filipina au pair. In her efforts to "self-brand" (Arvidsson et al. 2019), she is reflexive about the narrative she "puts out there," which corresponds to McBride and Lucio's (2011)

assertion that collectivism shapes workplace identity and its interactions with "individual experiences and projects of individualization" (797):

> **Althea:** I help my friends on Facebook especially if I know the host family around here *(Huizen).* I tell them, "I will contact someone so I can find out what kind of family this is." I vet them. If I don't learn good things, I say, "Don't go to this one." You know, there are au pairs who just receive *thank yous* in exchange for extra hours. They work until 10:00 pm. That's so sad. When I end my day at 6:30 pm, they say, "That's so early, Althea," and I realize that there are au pairs who do too much. It's abusive.
>
> [...] I prefer to help people through private messages, and they reach out that way, too. I also have friends who want to apply *[to an agency]* and I always say, **"I have a good host family, but that's just what *I* show you. Not all families are like this."** I want them to be careful. I don't want them to get hurt.

It is for this purpose that Althea's influencer persona not only focuses on her loving relationship with her host family, her cooking, and her travels but also on helping other au pairs. Like other Filipina au pair TikTokers, she takes questions, gives informative responses, and posts "real talk" TikToks describing the "uglier" side of au pairing and the importance of creating an au pair "support system." Sharing knowledge this way is a key piece of "collectivism of the everyday," as collectivism must also be seen through the lens of how "supportive mechanisms" emerge in the workforce to deal with change and exploitation (McBride and Lucio 2011, 800). As knowledge and solutions are shared within the au pair "gray area," we see Filipina au pairs act in line with Harvey's (1996) idea of transformative behavior:

> "Out of these oppositions, themselves constituted out of the flow of process, creative tensions and transformative behaviors arise" (54).

Knowledge is shared among Filipina au pairs even beyond the context of work, as they spread information about free shops where they *ukay*. Free shops are hotspots for meeting fellow Filipina au pairs across all walks of life, as the shop is often filled with multiple Filipina au pairs at a time. In Yates' (2015) study of free shops as "social centers" for collectivist groups in Barcelona, he argued that while acquiring these unwanted goods without cost was chiefly conceived of in terms of their practical advantage, it held meanings beyond mere practicality for practitioners. Filipina au pairs

indeed attached other meanings to these free shop excursions. These were a way to provide for loved ones back home, a way to save up for their aspirations of travel, and a time for meeting and bonding with fellow au pairs.

Filipina au pairs circulated not just their knowledge and experiences but also material goods like food and clothes, and non-material things like work engagements. Liezel recounted what I eventually learned was a common practice among au pairs: she, Jennalyn, Bea, and their other au pair friends pass around boxes of clothes left behind by outgoing au pairs and give each other shoes that no longer fit them. "I'll have my turn with Toni's box after Nikki, and then I can pass it to you," Liezel had told me after Toni left to continue her au pair journey in Denmark. "We au pairs just give each other things," she said, sharing stories about how Ynah and Nikki, who are also based in Utrecht, go *mangapitbahay*[43] at her place. They make Filipino food for each other and trade food "just like you would do in the Philippines."

Toni not only gave Liezel her winter clothes, boots, and bags — but also her KK engagement at Tatay Luuk's. Since Toni was set to leave, she suggested Liezel as a replacement for herself. Tatay Luuk was in talks with another Filipina au pair at the time. Since the other au pair was new to the Netherlands and he trusted Toni, he went with Liezel instead. Liezel promised the other au pair that if she found another job elsewhere down the line, she would pass it on to her in exchange. Passing opportunities this way is usual among au pairs. Liezel would also take on some of Jennalyn's KK shifts on weekends when she is free and Jennalyn is not.

As au pairs find other au pairs during *gala* and in free shops, as well as "collectively source and share" tools needed to live in the Netherlands, we find what Yates (2015) describes as "the political logic of communality" (249–250). He argues that such practices build an alternative to "individualism and the privatization of resources." Despite mechanisms in the global care economy that force Filipina au pairs to become more attuned to individualism[44], they leverage transformative behavior for their "collectivism of the everyday" to "reorganize flows" in ways that better suit them and their peers (Harvey 1996, 51). Small groups of Filipina au pairs in dynamic networks, then, rely on "collectivism of the everyday" in line with McBride and Lucio's (2011) point that this form of

[43] Tagalog verb for visiting one's neighbors

[44] This encompasses the short-term or precarious nature of their work and immigrant status; the atomized care labor they perform and the absence of a shared workplace; and the variability in their schedules, among other things discussed in Chapter 1.

collectivism holds more importance to those whose experience of labor is complicated by other identities and issues (237).

"It's just *sariling sikap*": Transformative behavior and the tensions alongside collectivism

To save costs, Liezel, Bea, and I booked a shared house and packed our lunch for our weekend trip to Luxembourg. We reheated our chicken adobo, which we could not eat just yet. Liezel and Bea had to first take their photos: of the food, of each other, of the view over the terrace. These photos were promptly uploaded as Instagram stories. As we finally started eating, a little blond child came charging through the doors.

She seemed excited by the view from the terrace, looking at the garden below as her father took his turn to cook her lunch in the shared kitchen. Liezel and Bea talked to her of their own volition. The girl, Martina, spoke English and declared she also wanted to eat by the terrace. The two made space for her at our table.

Her father emerged from the kitchen with a plate of pasta, seeming exasperated at Martina's imposition. Liezel and Bea reassured him in English. "It's okay, we are au pairs — you know about au pairs?" Liezel asked.

"I've heard of the program," the father, Boris, responded.

"We are au pairs in the Netherlands. And we're from the Philippines so we are very good with kids," Liezel added. "Don't worry."

He then let Martina eat with us, retreating into their bedroom to be with his pregnant wife. In between bites, Martina told Liezel that she wanted to see the garden.

"Okay, but you should finish your food first," Liezel brought attention back to Martina's plate. This deal proved acceptable for Martina, who gobbled up her pasta, took Liezel by the hand, and led her down to the garden. They spent a few minutes there before Liezel took Martina back up safely.

Liezel re-joined our table with a wry smile, hand-in-hand with Martina. "I thought I wouldn't have to speak English today," she joked in Tagalog.

Moments passed before Boris came to take a stubborn Martina back. We had planned to tour the city center by 3:00 pm. It was well past 3:00 pm at this point, but Liezel and Bea seemed perfectly fine looking after Martina. The two au pairs cooed, endeared by how attached to them Martina had already gotten. Bea promised her we would see her tonight or tomorrow morning. Only the promise of seeing us again was enough to get Martina back to her father.

That weekend was Liezel and Bea's time off from childcare-related duties, and yet they had voluntarily taken to tending to Martina. When we finally parted ways with Martina, I asked if it was alright that they spent a considerable amount of time looking after Martina instead of sightseeing, which they originally set out to do. Bea replied, "It's okay. I wanted to do it, too." I then recalled how Shay cleaned up even when she was not asked or expected to:

> "When I see dishes in the sink, I can't sit still. If I see toys lying around, I will put them away. Otherwise, I'd get bothered. It'd stay on my mind. So, I have to clean it for my own benefit."

Perhaps taking care of Martina was similarly something Liezel and Bea wanted to do for their own peace of mind or sense of fulfillment. This signaled a contradiction in the ways Filipina au pairs took control of their work hours and free time. In the previous chapter, I explained how contradictions are important to how they perform care labor. My findings demonstrate that this situation extends to their expressions of collectivism. In fact, many tensions exist *alongside* their collectivism. I will demonstrate these tensions throughout this section, including: 1.) the exclusivity borne out of identities (other than being an au pair) that work to connect certain individuals while isolating others; 2.) the clashing narratives surrounding Filipina au pairs; and as described above, 3.) the ways au pairs actively pursue additional unpaid work even when amongst peers in acts of "collectivism of the everyday." In Liezel, Bea, and Shay's case, I learned that au pairs often opt to do the extra unpaid work for reasons relating to their own standards, values, or sense of fulfillment. Althea had similar experiences:

> **Althea:** When it was my host kid's birthday, I told my host father, "I invited 2 au pairs so we can help you with the balloons and everything. But it's okay, don't pay them. It's their day off and they just want to spend time with me. And I'm spending time with my family. We already talked about the set-up and we'll all help out. It's really okay with us." To convince him, I even said, "We're Filipinas. We just want to do something good for other people." He

must've appreciated my friends' effort to vacuum the confetti and everything because he still paid us €50 each even though we didn't ask.

Interestingly, *gala* and other manifestations of au pairs' "collectivism of the everyday" can be employed to conceal additional work. Certain au pairs maneuver their particular brand of hypervisibility to keep their KK secret. They post photos of *gala* with their friends where they know their agency will see or send photos to their host families. Photos representing just a few minutes of their day act as "proof" they were spending their days off normally, when they were actually working. As au pairs exchange KK shifts and tips with each other, so too do they cooperate on manufacturing "proof."

These situations resonate with Coe and Glaser's (2024) discussion of how "visions for liberation and equity exceed the category of worker or are at odds with formalization of their employment" (63). People who have KK, for instance, thrive on the lack of formalization that comes with their work and cooperate with their peers to further gain or at least maintain these opportunities. Coe and Glaser's (2024) point especially applies to how au pairs like Althea do some forms of labor as service or as part of her own values system (63).

Exclusivity and processes of selection in open networks

Despite the openness at which au pairs "instantly" connect, many layers of exclusion are present in their manifestations of collectivism. Filipino au pairs often seem to comprise the majority in agency-led events or general au pairs in the Netherlands Facebook groups and group chats. Au pairs from other countries feel out of place since Filipinas speak to each other in Tagalog in these shared spaces. While less of an issue in physical spaces, the prevalent use of Tagalog in Facebook groups meant for all au pairs has led to conflict between au pairs from the Philippines and au pairs from other countries. Au pairs from other countries are barred from understanding firsthand information delivered in Tagalog, which might have helped them as many Filipinas have had previous experiences of au pairing.

Filipina au pairs have friends from other countries but connect better with Filipinas because they believe they understand each other both experientially and linguistically. This is something other au pairs have verbalized to Filipina au pairs:

> **Teresa:** I have non-Filipina friends — but not a lot. It's funny because some other au pairs ask me, "How come Filipinas don't really befriend other races?" They say Filipinas are always with other Filipinas. There would be four to six au pairs — all of them just Filipinas. And they don't go out of their way to mix with others as much.

While they generally gravitate to each other on the basis of being Filipina, exclusion also occurs among Filipinas themselves. More consistent groupings are based on Philippine ethnolinguistic background and/or class: Bisaya[45] au pairs tend to be with Bisaya au pairs, Tagalogs[46] with Tagalogs, wealthier au pairs with other wealthy au pairs who have more money to spend, and au pairs who are restricted by low funds with other au pairs in the same boat. I have both observed and heard from the au pairs themselves that Filipina au pairs remain friendly with their acquaintances but will maintain a sense of distance from those who seem to not completely fit into their lifestyle.

Within these ever-changing and expanding au pair networks, we see a type of selection occurring on the level of those closer, smaller *barkada*. Multiple au pairs speak about "picking" their friends, and referring "friends of friends" almost like one would refer an agency, prospective au pair, or host family. Outgoing Filipina au pairs, for instance, "pass" their host families and their KK arrangements to their friends or family as in the case of Liezel and Toni. While au pairs support each other in ways described in previous sections, many like Teresa and Althea expect reciprocity and do not want to feel one-sidedly "used" by friends:

> **Teresa:** I turn to Filipinas when I have a problem, but you have to be lucky. Or you have to pick the right friends. You can't just pick anyone.

> **Althea:** I try to connect with everyone but I pick my actual friends. I invest time in my friends. If they need me, I'm there. But some don't do the same for me. That's when I get offended and upset. If they call me, I pick up like it's an emergency. But when I call, they're not there.

[45] Umbrella term to refer to the Bisaya group of languages (e.g.: Cebuano and Hiligaynon) and its speakers. These languages are spoken in Visayas and some parts of Mindanao (Zorc 1977).
[46] Refers to Tagalog speakers who typically live in Central Luzon or Metro Manila. Tagalog also serves as the basis for "Filipino," the standardized national language of the Philippines as taught in schools and used in legal processes (Schachter and Reid 2018).

Mutual support and reciprocity in expressions of "collectivism of the everyday" are crucial to building a shared set of values and understandings (Stephenson and Stewart 2001). McBride and Lucio (2011) claim that notions of reciprocity are common features in multiple approaches to collectivism, and I argue are particularly salient for the Filipina au pairs':

> "This reciprocity is premised on memory and recollection of previous actions and relations. It therefore becomes clear that within the broader social relations and dynamics of collective relations, ongoing support and personal relations appear to be an important configuring feature" (800).

Tensions surrounding Filipina au pairs' reputation

Host families on Facebook often post positive experiences with Filipina au pairs or specify them in their search for a new au pair, confirming the "high demand" for Filipinas in care labor (Van Walsum 2011, Zontini 2010). Some Filipinas take pride in how host families seek the Filipina brand of agreeability and work ethic that has long been constructed (Constable 2007; Guevarra 2014), even facilitating this narrative by making related content. They film themselves going above and beyond as they lift furniture and "deep clean." In their captions, they explain that host families "prefer" Filipinas due to their hard work. Yet this sentiment is not universally accepted. Other au pairs flood comments sections to refute such TikToks, proving there are tensions in forming the "reputation" or "image" of Filipinas. Since TikTok is popular with Filipina au pairs, I have met several of them who have come across this type of narrative. Abi, for instance, is engaged in refuting them:

> **Abi:** I comment on those because I hope au pairs don't do more work than they are expected to. It hurts all of us in the long run. It sets unrealistic expectations for host families that they're full-time cleaners, not au pairs. Like, why do they pick Filipinas? Because we're very hardworking? The Dutch start to think, "*since she's a Filipina, all types of work are okay with her.*"

Other au pairs take a more accepting view than Abi, identifying with such content:

> **Shay:** We're not supposed to do that, yes, but as Filipinas, we don't like messes.
> **Joanne:** Yes, yes! We like to clean things up!
> **Shay:** We just have that personality. I got used to it at home *(in the Philippines).*

In either case, Filipina au pairs have competing views on their "Filipina-ness" and express them in different ways. Another prevalent image is that of Filipina au pairs as *takas* or runaways. While others have empathy since sometimes these situations involve fleeing a seemingly "impossible" situation at the host home, others flag that some au pairs are in fact "users." The runaway au pair's intentions are also seen to have secondary importance to how the act affects the image or reputation[47] of all Filipina au pairs. "Filipina au pairs really suffered when news of the au pair who fled to Spain spread on Facebook," Ynah said, as she discussed her entry into the Netherlands. "I felt like nobody would take us."

Curating an image of Filipina au pairs on online spaces, especially Facebook or TikTok, can reinforce or undermine sentiments of Filipinas as hard workers or as runaways. Filipina au pairs navigate experiences of class subordination through "gendered cultural idioms" that can simultaneously permit and restrict critical action to transform Filipinas' conditions (Barber 2010, 146). This aligns with previous studies about the role performance on social media plays in crafting a narrative for workers (Cabalquinto 2024; Chee 2023). In these conflicting narratives about Filipinas, as well as in the varied lines of identification and reciprocity that factor into au pairs' expression of collectivism, we see that workers will have "various responses to the indignities and inequalities of domestic work," proving that forms of collectivism, like other interventions, only function insofar as they speak to "workers' complex identifications" (Coe and Glaser 2024, 63).

Contradictions sustaining Filipina au pair collectivism

Flows of migration control and labor export bring forth contradictions in an au pair's experience and "splinters" Filipina au pairs into their smaller groups, thus influencing their expression of collectivism. Yet we have established that Filipina au pairs assert transformative behavior to forge such bonds regardless of any "barriers" imposed upon them, per Harvey (1996):

> Transformative behavior — "creativity" — arises out of the contradictions which attach [...] to the internalized heterogeneity within elements and systems (54)

Heterogeneity, then, need not be a setback as Yates (2015) argues that everyday practices like the Filipina au pairs' *gala*, shared knowledge, and shared goods build "closer relation between political values and lifestyles for individuals and collectives, tackling inequality, individualism and

[47] This appears to be consistent with Zontini's (2010) findings on Filipinas in both Bologna and Barcelona who preserve the good reputation of Filipinas to secure work engagements and better work conditions (177-178).

relationships of exchange on a small scale" (253). The case of Filipina au pairs demonstrates that considering labor as a domain of action distinct from au pairs' other identities and roles in their families, households, and communities disregards other modes of assertion (Coe and Glaser 2024, 65) that may not be as cogent as formalized collectivism. Filipina au pairs exhibit transformative behavior by carving out ways of being and connecting despite (or in some cases, thanks to) the "gray area" in which they find themselves. They attribute their practices to their being "Filipina" and thus "resourceful." They also often invoke the concept of *diskarte,* a Filipino slang word with no direct translation, encompassing "resourcefulness; hustle; an angle or advantage; determination to thrive; strategizing; and a combination of discretion, competence, and ability." (Tagalog.com 2025). In the face of atomizing and restrictive processes in the global care economy, they also rely on *sariling sikap,* a phrase used for taking matters into one's own hands or doing something with minimal or no external push.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that au pairs' contradiction-ridden position leads them towards a "collectivism of the everyday." Such collectivism is an expression of transformative behavior per Harvey's (1996) dialectical view that contradictions borne from processes stimulate patterns for transformative activity (54). Their *gala*, acts of reciprocity, and social media curation are practices that "simultaneously stage enactments of values and politicized identity" (Yates 2015, 238). Through them, they reach shared understandings of au pairing and find outlets for intervention or mutual support.

Rather than an organized, discrete "whole" driven by outlined goals expected of formal collectivism (McBridge and Lucio 2011; Stephenson and Stewart 2001; Refslund and Sippola 2020), Filipina au pairs' collectivism is fluid and occurs within small, intersecting *barkada* of Filipina au pairs. These small-scale expressions of collectivism are partly results of Filipina au pairs' precarious legal status and isolating workplaces. Their collectivism instead takes place at "the interstices between the public and the private sphere," given how migrant women's struggles are connected to their everyday lives (Zontini 2010, 107). This is a manifestation of McBride and Lucio's (2011) idea to approach collectivism by drawing from both the "diverse experiences within work and the external social and spatial dimensions of work" (800). The case of Filipina au pairs demonstrates that collectivism takes multiple forms: collectivism can be elaborated within as well as outside the "workplace," and it can involve visibility or direct confrontation, as well as be invisible or go unnoticed (Stephenson and Stewart 2001, 2.6).

Filipina au pairs' "collectivism of the everyday" internalize "discursive effects of political economic power and spatio-temporal relations" (Harvey 1996, 222) across the global care economy to enact changes on the level of their *barkada*, their host home — and in some cases, their agency or the Philippine Embassy. As transformative behavior imbued in "collectivism of the everyday" both reproduces oppositions and restructures physical or social interactions, we see that along with contradictions, another feature characteristic of all elements is change (ibid., 54).

Chapter 3: Au pair aspirations and network-oriented trajectories

Content by Filipina au pairs flourish on TikTok's #aupair tag, with many trends to express their collectivism or display their "journey to Europe." They create video compilations of their *barkada*, and slideshows where they pose in the Philippines and replicate the same pose by a European landmark like Amsterdam Central Station to captions that say "*You made it.*" Filipina au pairs' TikToks give ideas on how their expressions of collectivism factor into their personal and collective "journeys," and whether such "journeys" converge.

With Harvey's (1996) conception of "possible worlds" as potentialities for change, self-realization, and new collective identities (54), this chapter employs a transnational perspective to unpack Filipina au pairs' aspirations and trajectories both as individuals and as a collective. Filipina au pairs' dynamic networks of *barkada* and the global flows of care that govern their dispersed, temporary stays necessitates focusing on the movement of people rather than using nation-states as discrete units of analysis. Throughout this chapter, I view au pairs' trajectories in light of connections amongst themselves and across the global care economy to better understand how au pairs' collectivism transcends borders.

Going worldwide: Nonlinear, network-oriented au pair trajectories

Cheska's[48] TikTok profile shows the Dutch flag for her current residence and other flags for countries she has visited: Belgium, Germany, Denmark, and France. Her TikToks range from comedy on how her au pair allowance disappears as she sends money home to more serious subjects like the perseverance involved in continuing her "path" amid "redirections." Teresa herself has gone back and forth between Iceland, where she previously was an au pair, and the Netherlands. Her immigration application to the Netherlands was delayed, so she stayed with a host family in Iceland from February to September before returning to the Netherlands. These nonlinear, dynamic paths highlight how au pair trajectories are "created and continued in the context of transnational networks and migration control" (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3209).

[48] A composite profile of an au pair "TikToker" based on traits from the many Filipina au pairs I met.

With network-oriented trajectories (Boyd and Nowak 2015), connections made in one location extend across borders and shape placements elsewhere. Some Filipina au pairs like Hazel and Ynah meet at the CFO[49] pre-departure meeting and stayed connected in the Netherlands even while based in different cities. Others like Michelle and Cora actively look for incoming au pairs like themselves in Facebook groups, start online friendships, and meet in the Netherlands. Most au pairs who find new friends in the Netherlands keep their network when they move on to a different country.

All these cases show that au pairs' interpersonal relations are not bound to a single space and that their lives exist across borders (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3214–16). Many au pairs are like Teresa, whose notion of going abroad is informed by someone in their circle with direct experience of migration. Teresa envied her brother who traveled because of his job on a cruise ship. It was only after she got a degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management that she realized she did not want to work in the travel industry — she just wanted to experience traveling. She learned about the au pair program from friends and convinced her best friend to join. They, along with her friend's eldest sister, looked for host families in Iceland together.

Groups of friends typically introduce the au pair program to each other and maintain the same network in a new country. Bal and Willems (2014) discuss how existing migrant networks factor into the formation of aspirations among those "at home," in line with the idea that linkages between places structure processes such as labor migration (Harvey 1996; Parreñas 2000). Hazel had a similar introduction to au pairing:

> **Hazel:** I didn't know anything about au pairs. I only learned about it from my mother. Her co-worker had a daughter who was an au pair and she said, "Hazel, try that thing my co-worker's daughter is doing. She's in the Netherlands." She wasn't sure what it was exactly, so I was the one who researched it. But I was working as an ESL[50] teacher so I set it aside. Over time, my FYP[51] on TikTok kept showing me au pair content. So, I approached my mom's co-worker's daughter about her agency. That's my agency now.

[49] Commission on Filipinos Overseas; a specialized government unit for all Filipinos who migrate abroad. The official narrative is that the department arose because of the increase in migration among Filipinos (CFO n.d.).
[50] English as a Second Language
[51] Refers to TikTok's "For You page" where recommended videos are collated on a user's feed based on tailored algorithms

Hazel became an au pair as her family, social media algorithm, and connections "stimulated" her migration aspirations, and "provided relevant information and support" (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3213). Au pairing in the Netherlands, however, is not often a Filipina au pair's ultimate destination. This entails going beyond analyses based on a "sending country" and a singular, final "receiving country" (Bal and Willems 2014, 252).

A typical path after their contract is to go to Denmark, Belgium, or Luxembourg as an au pair. They count how many countries they visit, planning to au pair in at least two to three countries before they settle and work a "real" job. Au pair conditions are different per country: some countries do not offer all expenses paid intakes, age limits vary, and countries like Denmark have unique rules that state it must be an incoming au pair's first or second country. Nations like the Philippines, the Netherlands, or Denmark are "transformed within global fields of power" (Glick-Schiller 2012, 41-44) that produce these changing regulations and configurations of au pairing. Filipina au pairs' trajectories are thus not only formed according to the regulatory context of their current country of residence, as they contend with these varied policies through transnational processes and relationships.

Ynah, for instance, originally planned to go to Germany and was already taking language classes when the Philippine Embassy in Germany suspended au pair contract processing[52]. Her life was put on pause, having already planned extensively for her stay in Germany. She fortuitously met a classmate with the same problem, who told her that her sister was an au pair in the Netherlands in 2019. Ynah quickly pivoted to the Netherlands and started applying to multiple agencies. Au pairs like Ynah "improvise, adjust their journey and sometimes their intended destination, and mobilise new sources of support" (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3210) when confronted with unforeseen obstacles like the banning of Filipina au pairs in Germany until further notice.

Such varied policy landscapes influence trajectories beyond decisions to pursue au pairing, given how spatio-temporality can define and set up "radically different identifications of entities, places and relations" (Harvey 1996, 284). This is reflected in choices to work in other countries, and in how Filipina au pairs assume different configurations of care labor depending on their surrounding contexts:

[52] The Philippine Embassy in Germany announced on 15 July 2024 that it would halt all au pair processing due to overwhelming reported cases of abuse (Philippine Consulate General in Frankfurt 2024; Casucian 2024).

> **Althea:** There are no au pairs in Spain. After my contract ends in June, I'll be a nanny. I'll have to work really hard. There, it's an actual job and you can get papers. Unlike here. There's bigger money to be made if I work in the Netherlands or Denmark but it's harder to get your papers. I want to become a resident. You can have more money in the Netherlands or Denmark for two years, and little money in Spain but get your papers in the same amount of time. **You have a future there.** Here, you work, work, work. And then nothing. You could even get kicked out. At least as a resident of Spain, I can go visit home in the Philippines and come back to Spain without problems at the border. It's amazing. **And what if my hard work pays off and I can bring my siblings to Spain?**

As Althea described, pathways to permanent residence status are highly regulated and limited in countries like Denmark or the Netherlands compared to places like Spain, where amnesty or regularization programs are available (Siruno 2021). The promise of stability and a "future" that encompasses her loved ones was crucial to Althea's decision, showing how types of "bureaucratic regimes" shape "aspirations and moral projects" (Fischer 2014, 214). The "high demand" for Filipina care laborers (Van Walsum 2011, 152) also factors into their next steps towards becoming a nanny in Spain or Germany's Ausbildung[53] program. Au pairs who are interested in the Ausbildung program specifically want to enter the healthcare sector, which is also a major part of the Philippines' labor export projects (Parreñas 2000).

These multi-directional trajectories require understanding au pairing in the Netherlands not merely as an intermediate stage between departure and final arrival (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3210). While it is a "stepping stone" for many au pairs, they are laden with aspirations and relationships that go beyond the limitations of "temporary" versus "permanent" migration, as I will explain in the following section. Au pair networks, for instance, persist in new ways across borders. Filipina au pairs keep contact with friends who have gone on to places like Iceland and Belgium, and let each other know "how things are" abroad, revealing how global ties "concretise themselves not only through the flow of remittances and goods, but also through the flow of information" (Bal and Willems 2014, 252).

[53] The Ausbildung program is a 3-year dual vocational training program that combines classroom learning and practical on-the-job training. It covers trades jobs, the IT sector, etc.

Imagined futures “away from home”: Aspirations configuring trajectories and vice versa

Not all au pairs necessarily wanted to migrate to the Netherlands or Europe. Some merely wanted to travel and eventually return “home.” In either case, their nonlinear trajectories took shape as their aspirations — which are potentialities an individual “strives” towards (Fischer 2014; Gorbachev 2022) — developed according to their circumstances. Much like how there is no such thing as a “fixed trajectory,” there is no “strict hierarchy” of aspirations that necessarily prioritizes legalization, permanent residence, or economic prosperity (Van Meeteren, Engbersen, and Van San 2018, 890):

> **Michelle:** My friend told me about the existence of au pairs. She knew someone whose au pair contract in the Netherlands was ending and asked if I wanted to replace her. I asked, “How much is the salary?” She told me about the allowance, I converted it to peso, and I said, “I earn that much here anyway. Why would I travel far for that?” But then I searched about au pairs and their experiences. So, I told myself, “You get paid the same salary, but experiences are something you can’t pay for.” **Yes, it’s the same as my salary in the Philippines — but my experience here is something I can’t get from the Philippines.**

Michelle’s sentiment is one shared by many au pairs who travel across Dutch cities and various European countries, often with other au pairs. Travel thus becomes an “object of aspiration” (Gorbachev 2022), rooted in exploring an idealized, “first world” Europe. As aspirations open individuals up to act for themselves, au pairs chart their paths, network, and gather resources accordingly. These open-ended stays abroad and aspirations of mobility counter the “integrationism” expected by receiving states (Glick-Schiller 2012). At times, this disposition is even at odds with their host family: Joanne recalls being mocked by a previous host mother for “wanting to travel the world” — to which she thought, “Obviously! Why else would I come here?”

Ynah is one of those numerous au pairs who came to the Netherlands due to aspirations of travel and a sense of “self-realization” that Harvey (1996) says “possible worlds” encompass:

> **Ynah:** I’m here to explore the country — to travel. I feel fulfilled that I can reach all these different places. I take pictures, look back, and feel so happy. I realize, “I’m getting closer to my dreams.” This is proof of my hard work and the months I’ve waited for my visa. I document and savor each moment.

Au pairs like Ynah post about local sights and infrastructure in Europe, where a feedback loop with others' curated content potentially affects their trajectories. Joanne, for instance, regretted the timing of her rematch as her previous host family initially invited her to go skiing in Germany. After seeing trending skiing TikToks, she said she should have rematched at least until after the skiing trip. This represents a central tension in how social media is used by Filipina au pairs: while I have previously shown that social media has connected Filipina au pairs to collectively solve problems or resist poor work conditions, constant reminders of the collectively cultivated desires that compelled their migration (i.e.: travel) (Barber and Lem 2008, 7) make some au pairs consider "putting up" with unsatisfactory conditions for a grander personal plan or outcome down the line.

The audience for au pairs' posts not only includes their peers but also their families and friends back home. Filipina au pairs derive a sense of fulfillment in being known as the jet-setting relative or friend living in and exploring Europe. Building a worldly identity this way aligns with Fischer's (2014) view of aspirations in terms of "aspects of personhood and its social production" as au pairs prove that there is an "aspirational process to identifying oneself in a certain way" (212). This leads into what Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden (2021) call "cultures of mobility": social groups in the Philippines frame mobility positively via ideas of adventure and responsibility, regardless of whether au pairs achieve permanent settlement abroad. This same sense of responsibility to their family back home, however, factors into Filipina au pairs' sense of dissonance or guilt that only they can experience the "possible worlds" mobility has to offer, while their loved ones cannot:

> **Hazel:** I feel… guilt. That I'm experiencing and I can see all this while my family is having a hard time. I'm happy but there's always guilt mixed in there.

In a "globalizing world," individuals like Hazel imagine futures "away from home" as part of the belief that viable lives are better found elsewhere (Bal and Willems 2014, 250). These aspirations are linked to the wider "sociocultural, political, and economic transformations" (ibid., 249) in the Philippines and across the world. As the neoliberal logic of labor export persists and widens disparities (Lindio-McGovern 2013) between countries like the Philippines and the Netherlands, au pairs believe the Netherlands (and Europe) can offer what the Philippines cannot:

> **Hazel:** It's so fun to see different places and cities in the Netherlands. It's amazing. With every new location, I have a new feeling like, "Wow, so this is what it's like here. Very advanced. So far from the Philippines."

Most Filipina au pairs echo Hazel's thoughts, actively comparing the Philippines and the Netherlands and citing their differences as reasons for leaving the Philippines. They cite the Netherlands' walkability, public transport, and healthcare as foreign but "impressive" features of "Dutch life" they wish they could experience in the Philippines. This perceived gap drives their aspirations to come to Europe. The possibility of aspiration, as Gorbachev (2022) argues, is precluded by "the imaginary and awareness of absence" and fueled by the potential to attain what is lacking:

> **Ynah:** When I see the way they live here, my standards go up. I think, "If I'm to have a family in the future, this is what I want." Living in a city that's walkable, has social services, offers free education to your children… I realize, "So this is the way life *should* be." A life you won't ever experience in the Philippines. Especially if you aren't rich. **Being here broadens your perspective like, "This is how big the world is. I didn't know this life was possible."**

Au pairs internalize these complex, contradicting positions. Their guilt, homesickness, and strong attachments to the Philippines coincide with imagined better lives abroad and aspirations framed as "escaping" from the Philippines. Contrary to common assumptions surrounding their passive victimhood, Filipina au pairs often undertake fraught trajectories with a "clear emancipatory goal" as they exercise their agency and work to fulfill personal objectives they feel they cannot "at home" (Zontini 2010, 113-114).

On one hand, Filipina au pairs' aspirations and actions contradict the rhetoric that informed the Netherlands' tightened au pair regulations[54], which were meant to dissuade au pairs who join the program primarily for economic reasons. Filipina au pairs subvert even global care economy scholars' (Parreñas 2008b; Hochschild 2000) presupposition that women's migration is driven by cultural expectations to provide for the family. Many single Filipina au pairs enter the program to "explore" foremost and not necessarily to provide for their family. Yet cultural obligations, classed understandings, and the realities of a thriving care labor market still plague their stays. Au pairs send remittances as part of a filial Filipina daughter's obligations; reflect on how fulfilling aspirations to

[54] Stricter rules were imposed on the au pair scheme in the Netherlands in 2021, including lowering the age limit and requiring au pairs to declare that they are single and have no children (IND n.d.). Extensions beyond the 1-year contract are also not allowed. These rules supposedly prevented au pairs from becoming financially dependent and getting exploited. As my research has shown, however, these added regulations and au pairs' own emphasis on "cultural exchange" has not stopped exploitation. The nature of the program is also such that au pairs are financially dependent on their hosts to begin with.

come to Europe and travel for leisure would be financially impossible if not for the au pair program; and discard licenses acquired in the Philippines across sectors like education or accountancy for an "ethnically marked" (Van Walsum 2008, 152) career in care labor.

Teresa felt especially conflicted earlier in the year as she dealt with anxiety and grief. Her travel back to Philippines to attend two relatives' funerals unearthed complex emotions:

> "I felt so many things. I got worried about the future. I felt depressed with this one single visit because… I saw life in the Philippines again. But I know I *have* to be happy because I found an opportunity here *(in the Netherlands)* while it's so hard in the Philippines."

She explained that being confronted with these deaths increased her anxiety and frustration given the Philippines' "poor" healthcare system[55] because she did not know what could happen to her parents. Echoing Van Meetereen's (2012) study on irregular migrants' motivations to stay in Belgium, Filipina au pairs generally aspire to be in places like the Netherlands despite being subject to limited rights in the Dutch system because they do not have similar rights in the Philippines. Filipina au pairs' pessimistic view of the Philippines versus an idealized Netherlands has roots in how Philippine care labor migration is built upon "regional and global inequalities" fueled by "the indelible expansion of capitalist modes of organization and accumulation" (Barber and Bryan 2012, 215-219).

According to Constantino (1978), ideas of colonial superiority persisted in the Philippines long after the Spanish or the United States' rule through products and media deemed superior by virtue of being "Western." This is seen in the case of Filipina au pairs online who further validate these post-colonial hierarchies through idealistic portrayals of European lifestyles and worlds on their feeds. Au pairs' firsthand experiences then enable them to cement the Philippines as "backward" or "stuck in the past" and places like the Netherlands as inherently superior in their imaginaries. Yet the idea of "fleeing" the Philippines to a more "progressive" and "developed" nation is only possible due to a history of colonialism worldwide: colonial regimes that extracted resources and stifled Philippine "development" (Rodriguez-Fransen 2025, 113) still characterize flows of labor today.

[55] These comparisons allude to how Philippine healthcare facilities' lack of financial resources and equipment, all while remaining excessively expensive for the average Filipino citizen (Dela Cruz and Ortega-Dela Cruz 2019) versus the basic health insurance package available to Dutch citizens (Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport 2016), for instance.

These gaps between neoliberal states facilitate the movement of cheapened, racialized labor, with Filipina au pairs' experiences getting spatially reconstituted once they move abroad and risk getting confined to "deskilled, racialized labor markets" (Barber and Lem 2008, 5). Filipina au pairs valorize nations where they must assume these ambiguous configurations of labor and citizenship, as they can justify the trade-off given the lower "quality of life" in the Philippines. This substantiates Bal and Willems' (2014) point on the nuanced ways aspirations are formed in practice:

> "The way in which people assess their circumstances, give meaning to their lives, perceive of needs and develop desires cannot be understood without taking both the local and the global into account" (253).

Since aspirations are ultimately created, cultivated, and adapted to surrounding circumstances (Bal and Willems 2014; Fischer 2014), Filipina au pairs entertain multiple flexible futures simultaneously:

> **Teresa:** I could be a student in Spain, work in Spain, or continue au pairing in Luxembourg. Those are my Plans A, B, and C. But I want to do at least one more country as an au pair. It's hard when you're a student and you want to travel. It's the same with work responsibilities. Maybe I'll want to continue au pairing first.

Teresa weighs her options, re-prioritizes if needed, and plans accordingly. Not only are aspirations imaginations, then, but they are also "strategic elements of choice" and adjusted to "the present" (Fischer 2014, 6). Situating Filipina au pairs' "possible worlds" in their ever-changing present is therefore crucial. A major part of their present is the care labor they perform as au pairs, which greatly influences their trajectories and more abstractly, their aspirations. Their experiences with care labor are ripe with "possible worlds" that encompass changes they want to see in the au pair scheme.

Higher allowances, more freedom to negotiate contracts, and clearer definitions of what their responsibilities entail to avoid overworking are all desired changes Filipina au pairs expressed, which are not only based on their own experiences but also on what they hear from their peers. These form part of au pairs' aspirations, given they are imagined futures motivated by actionable, perceived gaps (Gorbachev 2022; Fischer 2014). Through a collectively constructed discourse, Filipina au pairs perceive a gap between what au pairing *should* be versus how au pairing currently is, finding pathways for action in between. This is consistent with Gramsci's idea of "political action"

as something aiming at "what could/ought to be" but on the basis of "what is" (Scharzmantzel 2008, 80; Gramsci 1971, 172). In the following section, I examine how Filipina au pairs' "collectivism of the everyday" becomes instrumental to attaining individual aspirations of mobility, as well as cultivating aspirations to transform au pair conditions.

The "possible worlds" of au pairing: Individual aspirations and collective futures

Once au pairs' contracts end in the Netherlands, they often go their separate ways to pursue their aspirations without losing their *barkada*. They strategize on their next steps together as they assess labor markets in a different location — an act that, according to Zontini (2010), is its own form of "political engagement." On Michelle and Cora's *gala* to the Albert Cuyp market, their conversation turned to choosing from various regulatory contexts across Europe, discussing what they know from au pairs who have gone on to different countries[56]:

> **Michelle:** I used to consider the Ausbildung program.
> **Cora:** You have to study German for that.
> **Michelle:** Oh, Cecil! She's in Belgium.
> **Cora:** She told us that her host family liked her and processed her working visa as a nanny there.
> **Michelle:** Another option is Denmark. Many of us go to Denmark because the allowance is bigger than in the Netherlands. It's over 40,000 in peso[57]!
> **Cora:** There's also Ireland.
> **Michelle:** Well, the age limit is 30 in Ireland. I'm staying in Schengen so I can *gala* around here first. I'll get to Ireland next time. It'll be a long time before I reach 30 anyway!

These exchanges encapsulate Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden's (2021) "mobility perspective," founded upon "multi-local mobile lives" and a sense of belonging that transcends national borders (3294). A sense of belonging transcends borders as au pairs maintain contact with each other the way Cora and Michelle have with Cecil in Belgium. For au pairs on the move, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are "lifeline tools" that according to Godin and Donà (2020) let migrants follow their

[56] Other considerations when strategizing within their *barkada* include the extent of the host family's monetary support and length of contract.
[57] Au pairs in Denmark have an allowance of about €670 (compared to the Netherlands' au pair allowance of €340)

peers' journeys step-by-step. Variable, highly regulated contexts thus do not render au pairs inactive, as they "take advantage" of windows of opportunities in different ways (Van Meeteren, Engbersen, and Van San 2018, 887).

Given how au pairs' "collectivism of the everyday" encompasses experiences beyond the context of work alone, their commitments to each other as au pairs extend to support for each other's individual aspirations. While close friends are sources of "emotional and material support," even more distant connections such as "friends of friends" can "help change their opportunity structure through access to resources in other social circles than their own**"** (Van Meeteren, Engbersen, and Van San 2018, 885). With links between the personal and collective, as well as a shared understanding of what au pairing entails, Filipina au pairs have started to conceive of "possible worlds" not only for themselves as individuals but for fellow Filipina au pairs. Au pairs do not need to have firsthand experience of exploitation to fuel this imagined future. Others' memories and experiences can drive these imaginations:

> **Shay:** If it were just me, I wouldn't change anything because I've got the best experience in my *barkada*. But I want them to experience what I'm experiencing. I think the program has to be like this. I want their experience to be good like mine. And I think that's a change they want to see, too.

Some Filipina au pairs are even willing to take risks themselves to set the future they envision for their peers in motion. Ynah plans to create online content about the realities of the au pair program even if the public nature of such posts means her previous host family or agency might see them:

> **Ynah:** I really think sharing my experiences can improve the experience of future au pairs. I want to make it more humane and more like a cultural exchange. The way they advertise the program is about travel, travel, travel. But when you come here, sometimes you don't want to go out anymore because your host family tired you out the whole week.

As she discussed her plans, she accounts for added difficulties for Filipinas, who she says are "very agreeable" and "say yes to additional tasks in the moment." She believes Filipinas will be more equipped to stand up for themselves if they learn more about the reality of the program and have examples of how an au pair handled arising issues. Ynah only has so much time to physically stay in the Netherlands as an au pair, so her steps toward a future where au pairs have higher pay, defined

tasks, and more negotiating power involve publicly speaking on her experiences and stances to influence au pairs who come across them online. Building a new narrative for Filipina au pairs this way can be a building block for change and for "the construction of new collective identities" (Harvey 1996, 54). Au pairs like Ynah exhibit transformative behavior as they "develop and execute their own plans and strategies" even in the face of constrained opportunities (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020, 3210) like that of their short-term stays.

The same transformative behavior goes for those "multi-stranded" networks of mutual support that au pairs forge and sustain largely through their daily activities (Van Meeteren 2012, 315-316) or their "collectivism of the everyday." As discussed in Chapter 2, Filipina au pairs circulate goods, knowledge, and opportunities; see various places across Europe together; and maintain relationships across borders. Such practices interact with and transform Filipina au pairs' imaginaries and current conditions in varied ways, in line with Harvey's (1996) claim that transformative material practices produce spatialities, express social relations, and are manifestations of desires (112). These practices, as well as their aspirations for themselves and for each other are in constant dialogue with their changing situations:

> "Uncertainty problematizes the future, makes it a point of inquiry and brings it into the present, since aspirations, visions, knowledge systems, projects, plans and life itself are being interrupted, fragmented and transformed (Bryant 2016, 20)."

Amid Filipina au pairs' states of uncertainty, their imagined futures are entwined with their present practices of collectivism. As Katz (2002) points out, material social practices are not only "historically and geographically specific," but bear "contours and requirements" that are "the outcome of ongoing struggle" (711). This is true for Filipina au pairs, whose transformative behavior is articulated in the context of broader global processes like that of the gendered, racialized movement of labor under global capitalism. Their dynamic networks and the ways they actively oscillate between two sides of a contradiction are how they work towards their "possible worlds" within their similarly fluid experiences in the global care economy. Rather than navigating the global care economy in static, conventional ways, au pairs exhibit agency that changes complexion in relation to other "forces in continuous motion" (Gramsci 1971, 172).

Conclusion

By applying a transnational view to how au pair trajectories take shape, this chapter demonstrated that au pairs' trajectories are nonlinear (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2020) and network-oriented (Boyd and Nowak 2015). While aspirations stimulate their trajectories, these aspirations also develop according to their circumstances (Gorbachev 2022; Bal and Willems 2014) amid highly regulated labor and migration controls. Commonly held personal aspirations include creating online and offline identities built on travel and mobility, and in some cases, migration for better lives "away from home." These aspirations are formed in the context of the Philippines' labor export policies, which have, in part, turned mobility into a normative cultural expectation (Barber 2010, 148).

Yet their "successful negotiation" of challenges along their trajectories, as well as their capacity to organize in varied informal ways (Barber 2010, 156) are manifestations of their transformative behavior. Their personal aspirations, after all, are not only in constant dialogue with the broader context of the global care economy but also with their collectivism: au pairs exhibit transformative behavior as they inform each other's trajectories and support each other in achieving their aspirations even from miles away. Filipina au pairs have likewise started conceiving of "possible worlds" for themselves and their au pair peers in terms of improving their work conditions.

Filipina au pairs offer a peek into how individual and collective transformative behavior might coalesce — albeit on a small scale. While states exert power by limiting the trajectories traversable to au pairs and by facilitating their economic exploitation, Filipina au pairs build strategies and lasting connections that transcend borders, allowing them to "partly bypass" these mechanisms of control (Zontini 2010, 122). This view of Filipina au pairs' transformative behavior recognizes "the dialectic between the dependent element of labour vis-à-vis capital," while regarding the "potential agency that lies in the spaces of autonomy that workers manage to retain for themselves" (Smith 2022, 67).

Filipina au pairs' "possible worlds," then, are entwined with their expressions of labor and collectivism per Bryant's (2016) point on how imagined futures are constantly being articulated and re-articulated in present practices. By demonstrating that personal aspirations are not necessarily incompatible with collectivism, Filipina au pairs prove that differences or personal stakes do not devalue collectivism (Stephenson and Stewart 2001). If anything, making space for these discussions unearths forms applicable to unique situations such as that of Filipina au pairs. In Barber's (2010) discussion of the powerful disincentives for migrants to "translate their class expressions into

political mobilization," she writes that exploring unconventional ways actors like Filipina au pairs act upon their conditions is necessary to understand mobilization "beyond shop floor politics" and "into the terrain of social reproduction" (155). In times of increasingly fragmented workforces (Bauman 2000), Filipina au pairs show that their aspirations and corresponding plans can simultaneously hold personal and collectivist qualities. While capitalist flows exert upon "the body, the imagination, and the self," they do not exhaust all possibilities (Harvey 1996, 260) — as in the case of Filipina au pairs who carve out their paths in creative ways.

Conclusion

Our group split up at our respective train platforms — but not before exchanging Instagrams. Althea and I boarded the same train as Jessa and her friends, Cora, Michelle, and Kristine, who eagerly told Althea they recognized her from au pair TikToks and that they would repost them. Althea's eyes lit up, appreciative, and she later made an Instagram update about how happy she was that other Filipina au pairs watch her TikToks.

"This is the one I saw," said Michelle, flashing her phone screen at us. The TikTok featured a farewell party, with a Filipina au pair at the end of her contract crying with other equally teary-eyed au pairs. Althea was in attendance. "Everyone there was Filipina, too," she told me, rewatching the TikTok with a solemn smile on her face.

I recalled that Althea was set to leave the Netherlands in June. She had plans to relocate to Spain as a nanny, yet was emotional at the idea of separating from her host children, Dirk and Sophie. As our train approached her stop, I pondered how Althea would traverse the rest of her journey in Europe.

Today, I know that she instead got a job at the Malta International Airport. It is not quite what she planned but she is proud of her achievement nonetheless. She still posts tips for au pairs even though she is no longer one. Most importantly, she maintains close contact with her *barkada*, some of whom still reside in the Netherlands while the others are all over Europe. Like other au pairs, her aspirations and trajectory were not static. They were instead constantly negotiated through her own actions and *barkada* of mutual support.

Filipina au pairs like Althea and her *barkada* channel transformative behavior, which arises from contradictions, to create their own forms of migrant worker collectivism. Their unique position as short-term de facto care laborers sprouted contradictions in how they perform "Filipina-ness," visibility, labor, and collectivism. Some contradictions were self-imposed while others were imposed by the broader care economy landscape, in accordance with McBride and Lucio's (2011) point that social and personal dynamics are "open to contestation, competing approaches, and political tension" (802). These result in small groups in dynamic Filipina au pair networks, dispersed much like the atomized care labor they perform. The case of Filipina au pairs demonstrates that collectivism is created simultaneously in multiple contexts: the workplace, the labor market, and within social and personal relations and differences among workers (ibid., 800) through "collectivism of the everyday."

With experiences that appear too fluid for sustained organization, Filipina au pairs have alternative ways of taking control of their situations — in part due to the contradictions inflecting their stays. McBride and Lucio (2011) point to how a range of institutional (e.g.: unions) and informal processes can modify the character of relations established in the workplace, the labor market, or social arenas in general (800). Filipina au pairs modify such relations on a small scale by invoking or withholding familial bonds; claiming or rejecting Filipina subservience and femininity; manufacturing invisibility or hypervisibility; and forming small groups that transcend contract periods and borders to share knowledge, opportunities, and material objects. While flows of global capitalism shape au pairs' configurations of work and collectivism, Filipina au pairs can also partly "reorganize flows" in creative ways (Harvey 1996) to champion themselves or their peers. In doing so, Filipina au pairs prove the crucial role that memory, the personal, and the informal play in both the "the occupational and social aspects of collectivism" (McBride and Lucio 2011, 800).

Since Filipina au pairs' experiences of care labor are complicated by matters of migrant status, gender, and race, their expressions of collectivism are woven into other facets of their lives. They blur lines between public/private and have their individual identities influence their "collectivism of the everyday." The transformative behavior inscribed in their "collectivism of the everyday" actively involves: 1.) the construction of a shared sectoral identity (i.e.: what au pairing is and is not), 2.) collaborative "possible worlds" (i.e.: aspirations and trajectories), and 3.) a commitment to peers that helps transform their situations within the global care economy in small but meaningful ways. By understanding "political engagement" beyond its institutionalized forms (Zontini 2010), we appreciate how Filipina au pairs challenge power relations within their homes and workplaces — which for Filipina au pairs are one and the same — as well as societal notions of Filipina passivity.

Exploring the ways Filipina au pairs are mutually constitutive of the global care economy via their "collectivism of the everyday" expands discussions of collectivism by subverting dominant narratives on Filipina au pairs' victimhood and paying attention to their unique spatio-temporal contexts. Zontini (2010) argues there are a multitude of ways in which "seemingly powerless" actors engage with power relations in multiple spheres (122). This is true for Filipina au pairs, as the "social embeddedness" of their lives and collectivism did not translate into "stasis" (Barber and Lem 2008, 9): Filipina au pairs are engaged, independent actors who can bring forth important changes on a case-by-case basis.

An important question to consider is how Filipina au pairs' "collectivism of the everyday" might convert into change on a systemic level. Beyond modifying relations on the level of the household or agency to advocate for themselves and their peers, Filipina au pairs do conceptualize improved au pair schemes and plans to invoke social media to shed light on their working conditions — though these are projects seemingly in their infancy. While they exert their agency as care laborers in transformative ways, it remains to be seen whether scattered efforts by themselves can result in a consolidated demand for change in the au pair scheme as a whole, especially considering the varied, personal priorities among Filipina au pairs.

A fluid approach to collectivism is how its dual "conscious and explicit" yet "personal and reflective" characters can flourish (McBride and Lucio 2011, 800). While an emphasis on structures indeed unpacks the devaluation of specific kinds of work and laborers, it should not obscure the agency laborers actualize in their specific contexts (Smith 2022, 67). Validating Filipina au pairs' "collectivism of the everyday," then, does not work to supersede other existing forms of collectivism. Instead, this possibly inspires ways to strengthen collectivism, as widening the scope of collectivism beyond the conventional is ultimately necessary for movements to be "effective" (Schwarzmantel 2009, 82). Within Filipina au pairs' collectivism lies the potential of building upon the nuanced realities of those historically excluded from its formalized counterparts.

Further research could explore how collectivism manifests for au pairs from other countries, similarly paying mind to their respective spatio-temporal contexts. Research on what au pair collectivism looks like in regulatory contexts other than the Netherlands (e.g.: Luxembourg or Belgium) could also help further explain au pairs' position within the global care economy, which can inform context-specific programs or interventions aimed at empowering au pairs. Another valuable angle could focus on au pairs' relationships with cleaners and nannies with whom they have overlapping tasks, looking into forms of collectivism (and tensions) among them as care laborers in light of their differences in contract, visas, living arrangements, and wages. Adopting digital ethnography more prominently in a study's analysis and methodology could also uncover interesting insights on the digital worlds au pairs occupy. My research focused on social media affordances, discussing how they are used in or affect Filipina au pairs' lives. I observed interactions, as well as explicit and implicit rules of behavior within those general Facebook groups but ultimately did not delve into them deeply within this thesis as these concerned groups were broader than my research population. Succeeding research can enrich how Filipina au pair collectivism is understood vis-à-vis the broader au pair or Filipino migrant community.

As Filipina au pairs have proven, the nature of seemingly incompatible "contracts, labor process, geographic displacement, and social fracture" did not impede the formation of shared understandings of empowerment and exploitation, and their translation into expressions of collectivism (Barber 2010, 146-147). In attempting to plot practical implications of my findings *(See Appendix for applied outputs)*, I return to my conundrum: as Filipina au pairs actively make changes for themselves, their *barkada*, and their networks, what can be done for overarching, structural change? On the other hand, what can be done for the "decline" in formalized collectivism (McBride and Lucio 2011, 800) as informal collectivism thrives?

Organizations like FNV have been important allies in claiming domestic workers' rights, and as a platform for visibility and the "political performance of rights" in the past (Eleveld and Van Hooren 2018, 15-16), showing that engaging with au pairs' experiences can result in productive partnerships. What is needed is to clarify au pairs' roles as transnational care laborers, and to conceive of formalized collectivism as primarily a platform for marginalized workers like Filipina au pairs to solidify their claims. Structures of work, family, and nation fluctuate more than they used to, casting doubt onto formalized collectivism as the sole "embryo of a different kind of state" (Schwarzmantel 2009, 86). Taking cues from Filipina au pairs' fluidity can help expand the types of workers involved in union struggle, and give Filipina au pairs an opportunity to be included in formalized collectivism in the Netherlands and beyond.

For local organizations and associations, the first step is to consider au pairs' preferred informal way of communication and gathering when devising interventions or outreaches. There is also a need to revisit inadequate legal frameworks founded on dichotomies between "cultural exchange" and "labor." These work to obscure the labor au pairs do rather than combat potential exploitation, as evidenced by how Filipina au pairs' travels and aspirations to "explore" were concurrent with care labor. In crafting narratives, consolidating demands, and solving work issues, it is crucial to build on Filipina au pairs' conception of care labor as interpersonal rather than strictly professional, as well as their existing networks of mutual support.

Learning from Filipina au pairs' seemingly small-scale collectivism unearths broader collective goals, given that their au pair trajectories and networks extend beyond the confines of the Netherlands alone. Beyond bridging gaps between Filipina au pairs and the wider labor landscape in the Netherlands, changes in local au pair programs must be made in light of global connections between transnational au pairs and au pair industries. Even if improved au pair rights and working conditions are secured in the

Netherlands down the line, the continual movement of au pairs and the thriving global au pair industry necessitates a call for changes that encompass au pair programs across nations.

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Appendix: Applied Outputs Summary

My research project was done in partnership with the Scientific Bureau for the Dutch Trade Union Movement (De Burcht), an institute supported by the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) to conduct research and hold events on labor and employment relations issues. By deepening De Burcht and FNV's understanding of Filipino au pairs' experiences, I aimed to show that au pairs, as de facto care laborers, are relevant to FNV's goals to improve working conditions for all. My findings offer insight into how to best approach or support Filipina au pairs. Filipina au pairs thrive on informal support received anonymously online or via social groups with fluid membership, which seems incompatible with membership in local organizations like FNV. Another source of incompatibility arises from differing priorities: Filipina au pairs' priorities lie in finding pathways into multiple European countries whether by migration or further au pairing, which prevents them from staying in one place to bargain for regularized work conditions[58]. It is, however, worthwhile to engage with au pairs and their issues. Meaningful collaboration may be possible by slightly rethinking an au pair's role and a union's role.

Learning about organizations like FNV is important for au pairs since it is problematic for them to rely on their agency for everything from their visas to complaints regarding their agencies' clients (i.e.: the host family/ies). This is especially true for Filipina au pairs whose experiences are complicated by cultural ideas of shame and "maintaining the peace," as well as still-dominant associations between Filipinas and cheap, subservient domestic labor. Given au pairs' capacity to negotiate their working conditions and invest in each other's well-being in new ways despite these barriers, they could be open to engaging with other forms of collectivism. Some Filipinas also work in the Netherlands indefinitely after their au pair contract period, which means membership at organizations like FNV Migrant Domestic Workers is not out of the question. Beyond membership, Filipina au pairs' unique context lends to conceiving of FNV's role as primarily a platform for different workers to act collectively and/or seek justice.

FNV has assisted with labor abuse cases for au pairs in the past[59], helping inform updates on au pair regulations (Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007; Boncodin-Isip 2020). Dutch labour law generally "lacks clarity on whether au pair agreements constitute employment contracts" (Donkers et al. 2025), making appropriate responses for Filipina au pairs hard to come by, especially on their own. FNV won cases for a Bulgarian and a Polish au pair, and helped secure financial compensation for a Filipina when FNV declared a lawsuit against her host family. A case involving two Filipina au pairs, however, was lost due to "lack of evidence" (Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007; Boncodin-Isip 2020). The successful cases

[58] Van Walsum's (2011) research likewise found that for migrants who come from countries where "self-employment in the informal sector is the norm and state-regulated social security and employment relations is the exception" and have existing networks for survival in the Netherlands, labor rights and social security is less of a priority and only become urgent once/if they settle in the Netherlands.

[59] I note that these cases took place from 1999-2002 before regulations were updated to ensure all incoming au pairs were sponsored by agencies that were then solely responsible for the "duty to inform," "duty to administer," "duty to care" and "responsibility for the foreign national's repatriation" (Stenum 2011, 94). As of writing, I am not entirely certain whether or to what extent the shift to agency sponsorship has changed how these cases take place.

resulted in rulings on when au pair agreements are considered labor contracts. If au pairs perform work, receive remuneration, and have an authority-based relationship with their host family in ways that supersede the "cultural exchange"[60] aspect of the program, then au pair agreements can be considered labor contracts after the fact (Donkers et al. 2025, 17-22). My research, however, showed that it is difficult to distinguish in certain terms when "cultural exchange" ends and "work" begins. Many Filipina au pairs, for instance, enter the program explicitly with the purpose of travel, constantly travel and gain "cultural experiences," yet simultaneously exceed allotted au pair hours or tasks. Nevertheless, interventions along these lines (i.e.: connecting au pairs to local resources and identifying avenues for action within the Dutch labor landscape) will be useful for both Filipina au pairs who can and cannot formally join the union.

If the au pair program as a whole is to prioritize participants' value and dignity, however, changes must be made beyond the Netherlands. Unlike their EU counterparts who access some worker protections as "mobile workers," Filipina au pairs are Third Country Nationals (TCNs) without any worker recognition or rights (Stenum 2011, 44). One of the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers' calls is the ratification of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189), which not all countries (including the Netherlands) have ratified (Siegmann 2024). Between the exclusion of au pairs in the Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) and outdated European Agreements on au pairing from the 1960s (Donkers et al. 2025, 17-22), extending the struggle to au pairs down the line can build a form of collectivism aimed at changing the way care labor is regulated and — perhaps more aptly — empowered.

Other than the research itself, my project involved creating applied products for both De Burcht and the au pairs themselves. Utilizing multiple creative and interactive mediums enables me to offer au pairs a research-informed tool and engage non-academic audiences. Below are summaries, justifications, and visuals *(where relevant)* of my outputs:

I. **Research on migrant worker collectivism**

My thesis contributes to one of De Burcht's main research focuses, **migrant worker collectivism**, which they define as existing within and beyond trade unionism in formal and informal configurations. My research demonstrated how migrant worker collectivism manifests in Filipina au pairs, a group mostly underrepresented in research, legal frameworks, and formal collectivism. The thesis unpacked alternative ways au pairs express collectivism, showing how their unique position in a gray area from both a migration and labor standpoint factored into their orientation towards informal collectivism.

[60] Courts consider whether au pairs overstay their au pair contract; respond to a host family's advertisement for child care and not an advertisement for cultural exchange, receive remuneration (i.e.: allowance) for their work; and have a relationship rooted in the host family's authority (e.g.: coordinating their absences and receiving instructions count as an expression of "authority") (Donkers et al. 2025, 17-22). While it is beneficial for au pairs to have criteria on which to make claims, I must note that they are not infallible, as aspects of work and cultural exchange can happen simultaneously.

II. **Infographic on findings**

I created a visual summary to accompany the thesis for people who do not have time to read the full text. Supplementing my research with graphics communicates my findings in a more engaging, efficient manner. The graphics are also easily shareable on other platforms like on the website for au pairs *(See IV)*.

Note: These compressed screenshots are merely meant as visualizations of the infographic. The infographic is best viewed in its PDF format.

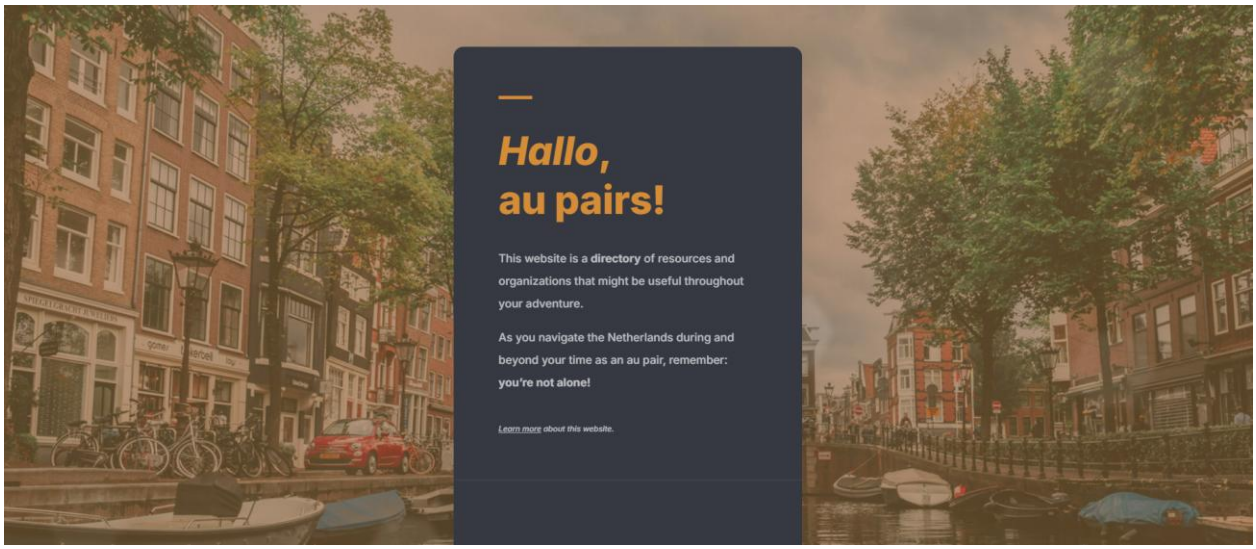
III. **Publication materials compiling resources/contacts for au pair Facebook pages**

My research found that Filipina au pairs are not acquainted with services, associations, or communities they can access while in the Netherlands. Drawing from these findings, I started a compilation of contacts in line with their priorities for travel and cultural exchange; common problems or inquiries during and after their contract period; and desire to connect with fellow Filipinos while abroad. By compiling these resources, they can see their options and decide for themselves whether they want to pursue them. The publication materials are written in a copywriting style to grab attention, and will be posted on Facebook pages many au pairs use during their stay in the Netherlands.

Publication materials to be posted in a carousel[61] post on Facebook

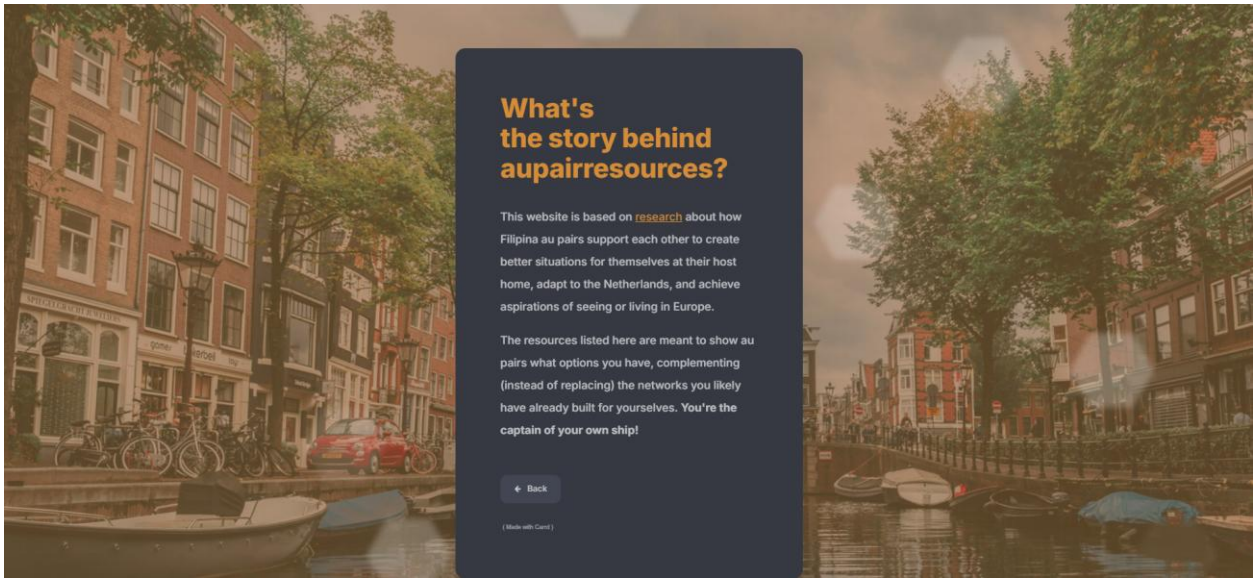
[61] A type of post containing multiple images (or videos). Users swipe left or click next to be taken through the post's messaging step-by-step.

IV. **Simple website serving as a directory of resources/contacts for au pairs**

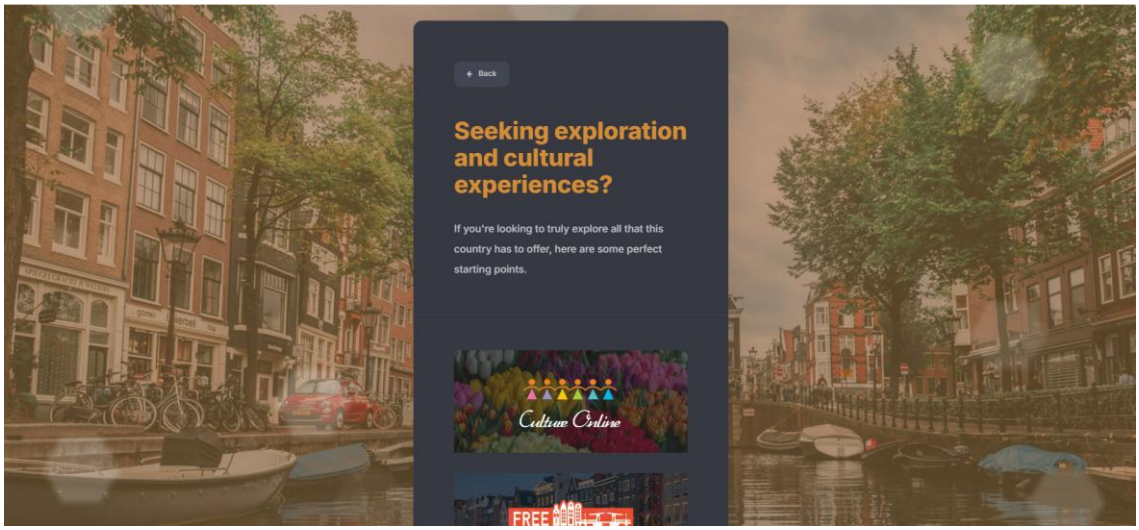


The website's home or landing page

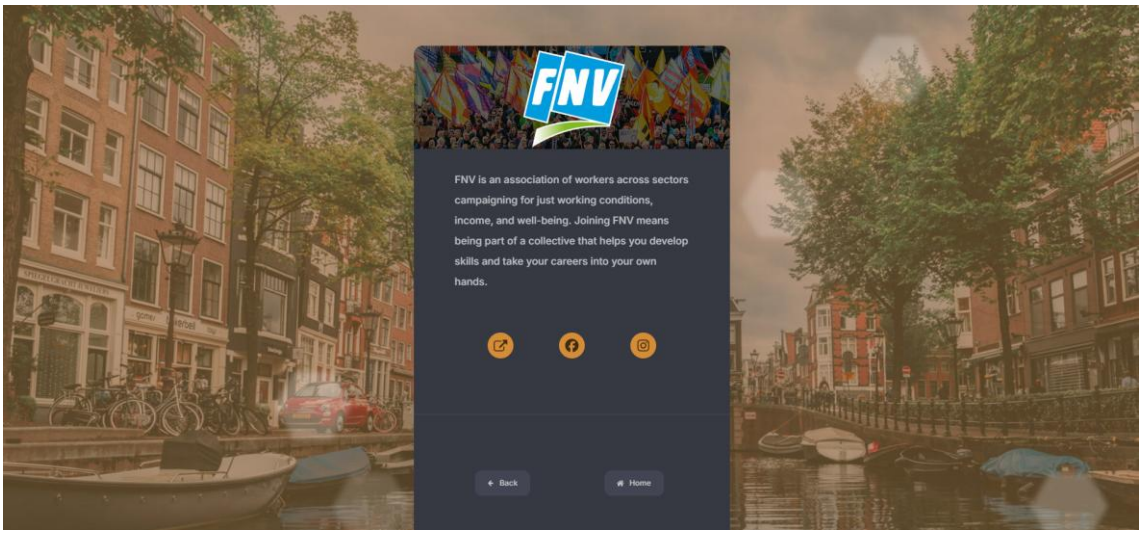
Having a simple website is a more convenient way to view their different resources. This way, au pairs can easily click links and access the website since it will always be attached to the same recognizable URL. The website can also be accessed by succeeding groups of au pairs — not only those who are currently in the Netherlands. It is functional on desktop and mobile, and includes a Contact Form page so au pairs (anonymously or otherwise) can give suggestions on resources they might know, and note problems or needs the directory does not currently cover. This website is meant to be a live resource so it can be constantly updated according to the responses.



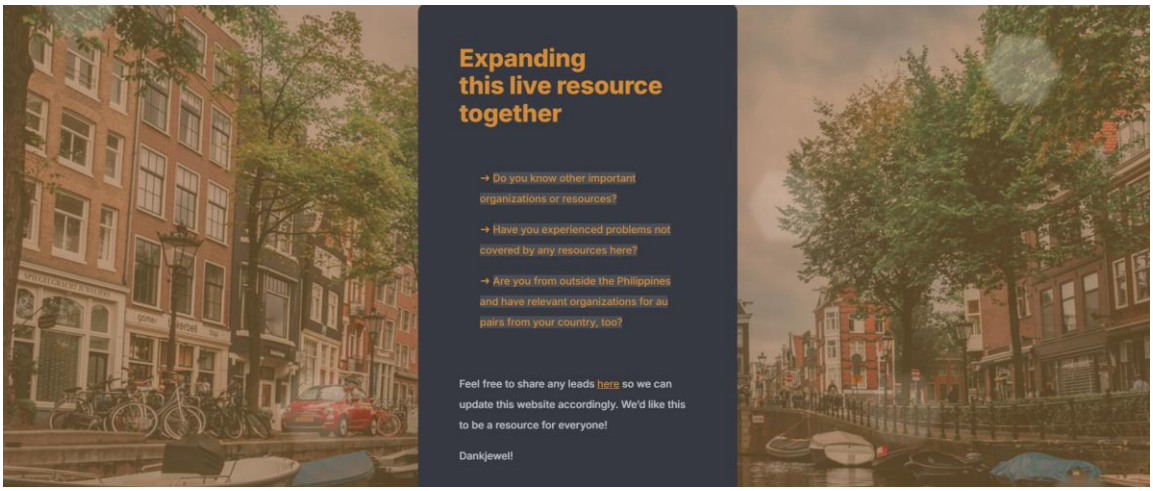
The website's About page, which includes a link to the research infographic (See II)



Example of directory page



Example of organization profile



Page with link to Contact Form and call to action to expand the directory