

|Book Symposium|



Glimpses of agency

Comment on HAN, Clara. 2012. *Life in debt: Times of care and violence in neoliberal Chile*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Women's relational modes

Life in debt is a thorough book about everyday struggles in a low income neighborhood in Santiago de Chile. As Clara Han writes, the book consists of an “extended meditation” on both “boundaries between past violence and the present social arrangements of care,” as well as on the textures of care in everyday relations (Han 2012: 4–5). Specifically, she problematizes care and its limits in circumstances of poverty and economic precariousness (22). The book opens a wide range of inquiries into how political and economic forces are lived in peoples’ everyday lives in a context in which violence, drug addiction, and economic scarcity are ubiquitous. It also provides rich insight for a reflection on Chilean recent history and change, and how gender, intergenerational relations, and the moral economy of low-income households have developed along Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973–1989) and the governments of the Concertación coalition (1990–2009).

In her prolific ethnographic account, Han unfolds the boundaries and bridges between the intimate relationships of kin, friends, and neighbors as identifiable modes of relatedness. At times she acknowledges the fact that the bulk of the analysis has women, and more specifically mothers, as main characters along which the complex threads of relationships, their contradictions, materiality, and fluxes of uncertain time converge or collide. As I see it, these stories of “relationships in time” not only deal with the complexities of care under precariousness, but also very much so with a specific kind of agency of women as normative engines of intimate life in La Pincoya. So, if the book tackles the difficulties and achievements of “being in another’s present” (28) it is mostly women who embody such challenges. The rest of the participants, even if fundamental along this monograph on relationality (233), hardly outstand enough for the author to consider their stories. For instance, men are mostly presented as secondary characters or antagonists at most in Han’s cast: the affected, the indifferent, the problem, the vio-

lent, the collaborative, the abandoner, or the abandoned. For example, the story of one of the men we get to know further, Lalo (225–30), narrates a devastating story of addiction and death. It is a story of neglect and abandonment by his family, specifically by his mother, as his godmother and neighbors claimed.

In the following lines I reflect upon how in Han's book, along the complete and textured picture of everyday life and struggle in La Pincoya, we encounter *glimpses of agency* that are, I believe, important for understanding the normativity of mothering in this *población*, as well as ontological premises that inform the dramatic cases of suffering, violence, and indebtedness to which the book is devoted. I will make use of three features of women's relatedness or, more specifically, glimpses of agency that are salient in different moments in the monograph. First, the relationship with the house; the enduring and silent care of loved ones, and women as both a starting and ending point of intimate relationships. Second, women's active and creative coping and caring strategies, including a range of activities such as participating in *la polla*. Third, I will consider the underpinnings of the almost invisible, disinterested, and silent acts of kindness towards neighbors.

Maternal enduring

In her introduction Han describes how the very construction of the neighborhood and houses by *pobladores* in the late sixties and early seventies consists both on the construction of the material house and *la casa*—i.e., family and intimate relations. *La casa* demarks the fundamental division of realms of the known place of intimacy and expected commitment and that of the unknown and truly dangerous (47),¹ while the material house objectifies the achievements and disconnections of relationships.² The material house and *la casa* are far from being stable; rooms are literally added or taken away, and refurbishment and appliances appear and disappear as they may be sold or stolen following scarcity or addictive behaviors of family members.

In this context, Han introduces the reader to a range of women who may only be understood as deeply enmeshed in their kin and intimate relationships. As I see it, these women themselves embody the house and the domestic itself, operating as the reference point or pivot for this precarious stability, similar to the achieved piece of land or the basic home infrastructure. These women conceive of themselves, on the one hand, as strong, hard-bodied, and prepared for enduring at any cost. On the other hand, their mental and physical suffering—from depression and anxiety induced weight gain to strokes—reveals the extremes to which such endurance and sacrifice may lead. As Ana puts it while explaining how she was starving, yet always allowing food for her granddaughter: “I grew up with cow's milk. I am strong. At times, I think that God is testing me, but then I think, how long the test. . . .” (56).

1. See Da Matta (1985) for a similar argument in Brazil under dictatorship.

2. Han does not make use of the concept of objectification; yet, her analysis resembles Daniel Miller's (1988) analysis of appropriation and transformation of council estate kitchens in the United Kingdom as the objectification of success or failures of social relations.

In the dramatic story of Flora we encounter a long-term struggle and domestic violence beginning in her own childhood. Now, her daughter Florcita and live-in son-in-law Kevin, both alcoholic and *pasta base* (unrefined cocaine) addicts steal house objects in order to buy drugs, also filling the house with a range of violent performances. Han shows how, within eight years, this household oscillates from short periods of relative peace—usually when the couple is living out—to long periods of scarcity and problematic debt as the family makes use of credit. Along the acrobatics to fight against chaos, Flora makes use of commercial credit, and we hear how, at some point, she decides to buy a stereo for Kevin—silently and on credit—in order to calm his nerves. Her noble conduct matches Maya Mayblin’s (2012) description of mothers’ “madness” in Northeast Brazil as discussed further on. These efforts, mostly silent and creative—including paying department store bills without others noticing—require a clever and pragmatic sense of problem solving. Her daughter Florcita, also a mother of two, finds ways to care for Kevin’s nerves by silently selling the home’s foodstuffs in order to buy him *pisco* (a Chilean spirit).

This women’s sense of committed care and endurance is present in several other examples in the book, reminding this reader that women’s care, silent suffering, and enduring have traditionally been explained along the lines of *marianismo* in a range of Latin American contexts (Stevens 1973; Montecino 2010), in which the “mater dolorosa” and their devotional care are also synonyms of moral superiority.³ Plus, caring and enduring only seem to be possible under the maternal physical present. Han refers, on several occasions, to women suffering for having to leave the neighborhood in order to work outside, highlighting the precarious kinds of jobs they are able to get. In this difficult process, their own reluctance and strong necessity of present care, intrinsic to their self-understanding as mothers, may be taken into account.

A counter-example to the normative expectations on mothers is that of Leticia—an exiled and recently returned woman—and her daughter Julieta. At her kin home, Leticia receives all kinds of complaints by her children, who hardly consider her as a mother and accuse her of betrayal and abandonment (131). Han emphasizes the generational misunderstanding and difficulties of empathy on both the communist mother and the daughter’s “liberal imagination” (133), in which conflicts arise as Julieta’s feeling of abandonment in the sake of *lo social* cannot be overcome. How are rooted meanings of motherhood in La Pincoya somehow present in this kind of conflict? Agency?

Coping and *la polla*

La Pincoya is a place in which piecemeal work such as sewing, hours of childcare, cooking or cleaning for neighbors and family, selling clothes and various objects, and asking for *fiado* (informal credit) in kiosks and surrounding shops⁴ are part of everyday strategies. These—at first glance lonely and even alienated—strategies take

3. This concept is usually rejected by anthropologists due to its overgeneralization. Still I believe it requires further consideration when studying low income women in Chile (cf. Murray 2013).

4. These women’s strategies may be compared with those taking place in a rather different context such as Cuba, for example, in the work of Anna Pertierra (e.g., 2009).

place alongside solidarity and cooperation, such as in the example of Luz buying marmalade from Florcita for the sake of helping her, or the range of collective activities such as bingos organized in order to assist someone.

One of the fascinating activities for coping in La Pincoya and other low-income neighborhoods in Santiago is *la polla*, outstandingly described by the author. *La polla* consists of a collective saving strategy in which women pay a certain amount of money to a leader on a weekly or monthly basis (in this case *dos mil* and *cinco mil* pesos respectively; more less four and ten dollars). The leader then distributes this sum to one of the participants. As Han notes, *la polla* has the same name as a national lottery: La Polla. Yet, we may add, it could be considered as consisting of exactly the opposite principle. If buying La Polla tickets is about chance and fate, *la polla* is more about control over fate in a way that may only take place collectively.

La polla consists of a more recent collective economic strategy that, Han observes, consists of a different rationale and collaboration compared to the *ollas comunes* (communitarian pans) or *comprando juntos*—in which people put money and one buys wholesale achieving the best price—both widespread in the old days.⁵ In the group of *la polla* studied by Han, it is not one of the women of the previous generation and the aura of solidarity and communality that leads this important activity, but a woman in her thirties who assumes this leader role. Still, it indexes interdependency between these neighbors who set aside what they call “sacred money” (72), an amount that is always taken into reserve.⁶ The concrete aim of participating in *la polla* is to satisfy the needs of domestic relations. At the same time it may provide a sense of wholeness in a context in which everything is managed in bits and pieces of money and time. It is also a clear manifestation of women’s complicity regarding their roles of care, one which requires commitment and a small space for the management of fate.

Subtle acts of kindness

Han’s description of pretending and concealing when it comes to subtle acts of generosity beyond the intimate circle is one of the highlights of the monograph. The author accounts for micro acts of kindness in which the boundaries between the intimate and the neighbor are considered and nourished. This behavior usually includes pretending not knowing others’ “critical moments.” For example, Susana, after listening to an argument at her neighbor’s house, tells her she has prepared enough food, and invites her children to have lunch. Han realizes that Susana has not prepared food yet; she was just trying to be helpful. Han is right in suggesting that these acts are indicative of individual salvation following Jonathan Parry’s “ideology of the free gift”: gifts which are “ideally given in secrecy without expectation of worldly return” (Parry in Han 2012: 83).

Han emphasizes how pretending highlights the boundaries of relational modes—sharing intimacy in the case of the family and vulnerability in the case of

5. In my ethnographic research in another low income neighborhood in Santiago, I have encountered versions of *comprando juntos* and different versions of *la polla* or *la lota* organized in lists, as rifle, with and without tea sessions, etc. It is always women who participate and run them, many times involving different generations.

6. See Viviana Zelizer’s (2009) description of how monetary and non-monetary exchange and services take place within the boundaries of intimate relationships.

neighbors (87). Beyond this interesting discussion, I would also like to consider the implications of such a finding in a context in which ontological and moral ideals of motherhood and maternal love can be articulated with pervasive Catholic ethos, to which I now turn.

Mother's "madness" and debt

Han's sensitive analysis allow for a reflection that is somehow distant from her main concern, yet is, I hope, of some relevance for an understanding of the specificities of her findings. Here, what I have called "glimpses of agency" in Han's work in La Pincoya may be read in the light of Maya Mayblin's (2012) analysis of mother love in Santa Lucia, a Catholic town in Northeast Brazil, in which she unfolds its relevance for understanding a range of ontological categories.

After analyzing people's discourses and experiences of mother love, Mayblin concludes that by mother love they understand a specific kind of caring that escapes the romantic love of emotions or romanticism. In a nutshell, it is characterized by: (1) its spontaneity and lack of motivation from worldly concerns; (2) its indifference to value (for example, loving all children equally without judgment of their behavior); (3) its capacity to create proper persons (for instance, the unloved are somehow excluded); and (4) its role as initiator of a person's capacity to show love toward others. These ethnographic findings match the characteristics of *agape* love; i.e., love as a theological principle or as the ontological premise that precedes everything else. In the Catholic ontology, this kind of love is the moving power of life (ibid.: 246). Certainly, this form of love is closer to an ideal than to general fact. However, she suggests, it still operates as a guiding reference of moral and cosmological order. For example, Santa Lucian people mark a division between those who have experienced mother love and those who have not. Women who have not received this kind of love cannot achieve motherhood in a proper way (ibid.: 245).

There is some interesting matching between Han's and Mayblin's findings regarding women's behavior and people's expectations in both contexts. For example, Mayblin accounts for a woman who—after saving money in order to refurbish her home, dreaming of a more comfortable space—ends up spending all her savings by paying off her son's gambling debts in a way that reminds us of, for example, Flora. This is the kind of "madness" that is expected from mothers, because it has some divine dimension to it; they embody an asymmetric relationship towards the rest, bridging competing spheres of value. Otherwise, such a behavior would be considered suspicious or improper (ibid.: 244). In another example, she describes how mother love has the capacity to spill over into what Han calls different relational modes: "the madness of loving thy neighbor," for example by being generous and caring beyond the intimate circle. She describes the case of a woman who always told her how her mother would cook for everyone, welcoming people for lunch. Interestingly, that was a case of ideal mother love that surpassed reality; as the ethnographer encountered, it was sisters and not the mother that were in charge of the cooking.

These accounts invite us to reflect further upon certain ontological aspects at stake in women's strategies, achievements and failures in the overall configuration of everyday life in La Pincoya. They may provide insight at the time of analyzing the specificities of Han's findings in terms of an "ontopraxis of motherhood"—the

situational engagement of agents with ontological categories as well as ways of dwelling on irresolution and doubt (ibid.: 240–41)—taking place, in this case, in the context of institutional violence and neoliberalism that are so acutely studied in Han’s monograph.

To what extent might the women (mothers) present in Han’s ethnography of suffering and everyday violence be considered as an extreme case of motherhood that, at least in some senses, resonates with ideas of maternal love as “madness” (i.e., rooted along complex arrangements with the divine and different spheres of value)? Do the logics of devotional care and divine empowerment play any role for understanding women’s practices of care, including problematic indebtedness? Which are the logics of disproportion and divinity that may be present in the questions of care and its limits in this context of violence? Do the glimpses of agency of the kind described here require further explorations regarding ontological principles of motherhood beyond the *marianista* devotional model in this context? Are the standard opposing concepts of normativity and creative “agency” suitable for an analysis of coping and motherhood in La Pincoya? These are only some of the questions regarding motherhood in La Pincoya that Han’s ground-breaking monograph allows us to formulate.

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