(Un)folding places with care: Migrant caregivers ‘dwelling-in-folds’

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Abstract

This paper is based on longitudinal ethnographic work among Bulgarian migrant women who work as live-in caregivers and domestic workers in Italian households and explores the analytical potential of place and place making for transmigration literature by conceptualizing the co-production of place with subjectivities. Such approach sensitizes to mundane practices of care and belonging, which actively create migratory lives of meaning. Drawing on Deleuze’s concept of the fold as subjectivity and Clifford’s notion of dwelling-in-travelling, I propose the term ‘dwelling-in-folds’ – and its mechanism ‘folding place’ – in order to make sense of temporary migrants’ experience of place(s) that foregrounds their ability to connect and reconcile fractures and discontinuities, particularly when doing transnational motherhood. In doing so, the paper folds place empirically – showing how ‘dwelling-in-folds’ is achieved and unfolds place analytically – demonstrating the potential of this concept for sociology and transmigration studies.

KEYWORDS
care, Europe, gender, global care chains, transnational families

1 WHY (UN)FOLD PLACE?

In the famous madeleine scene, Marcel Proust takes a bite of a sponge cake, which triggers a process of remembering that brings his childhood vividly to life. The taste, smell and feel of the madeleine cause a strange sensation, which

I carried to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had let soften a piece of madeleine. But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake-crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening to me.

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leads him down the vicissitudes of memory and places him squarely into the past. The celebrated passage provides a
description of the evocative power of memory to ‘fold’ time. This paper takes its point of departure from this ‘Proustian
moment’ in describing a similar folding: that of place, in order to enrich and nuance the narratives of transmigrant
gendered lives, argue against the notion of liminality in conceptualizing such ‘in-between’ lives, and add to debates on
‘dwelling’ as a particular mode of care.

This paper engages with, and contributes to, two distinct academic discussions: sociological debates on placemak-
ing as subjectivity and transmigration studies. These debates have related to place in different ways, often implic-
tly. Yet, as Casey (2001, p. 684) argues, there is no self without place; sociality is always emplaced and embodied. To
address this, ideas on place as relational, open and unfixed were developed in the 1990s (Massey, 1994, 1995). These
ideas are particularly relevant for studying migration practices and transnational migrants, as within transmigration
studies ‘more may be said about the theme of place’ (Rogers, 2005, p. 405). The paper takes up this challenge by zoom-
ing in on mundane practices of care and placemaking and contributing ethnographic detail to the topic of gendered
temporary labour migration in Europe.

Secondly, I relate to sociological literature on subjectivity as ‘dwelling’. I build on Latimer and Munro’s (2009) notion
of ‘relational extension’ as a particular way of making home through caring and ‘keeping’ things. To do this, I sketch the
living and dwelling practices of Bulgarian women migrants in Italy (called badanti\(^1\), who work as live-in caregivers
and domestic workers in Italian households. Describing the intricacies of their transnational lives, I focus on the micro
level of this migration pattern, nuancing their subservient positioning in the international division of care labour by
emphasizing practices of placemaking and showing how they actively build their world through a process I call ‘folding’.

My argument draws on two sources – Deleuze’s concept of the ‘fold’ (1993) as production of subjectivity, and
Latimer and Munro’s (2009) notion of dwelling as ‘relational extension’. Both are pivotal in troubling the notion of
place, and home, in the production of subjectivities. Following this blueprint, I focus on the co-production of place and
subjectivities among migrant women caregivers, in order to show how they live complexity through placemaking. This
paper takes on three tasks: it offers an alternative narrative of the lives of live-in migrant caregivers that goes beyond
the conceptualization of liminal lives; disrupts, expands and enriches place as a concept in migration literature; and
proposes ‘dwelling-in-folds’ as an analytical frame for studying unsettled, de-territorialized, liminal lives. In doing so,
the paper folds place empirically – showing how ‘dwelling-in-folds’ is achieved and unfolds place analytically – demon-
strating the potential of this concept for sociology and migration studies.

2 | THE ‘DWELLING’ OF MIGRANTS

The traditional approach to migration, which considered people moving from point A to point B, was increasingly found
lacking in the 1990s, as migration studies began to deal with enduring and continuing bonds between people and
places. A reconceptualization of migrants coined the term transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al., 1992), contributing to
an understanding of migration as an ongoing process, requiring work and the maintenance of relationships (Butcher,
2009). Important work has been done on cross-border families (Baldassar et al., 2007; Constable, 2018; Kilney &
in mobility’ to draw attention to practices of transnational entrepreneurship among women migrants in East Europe.
In the global context of female migration, transnational motherhood and its consequences for mothers and chil-

\(^1\) The terms ‘badante’ (singular) and ‘badanti’ (plural) are Italian for domestic workers, most often migrants, but not exclusively so. I use these terms throughout
this article for two reasons. Firstly, the women migrant workers I spoke and spent time with used the term unproblematically, even preferring it to ‘caregiver’
or ‘domestic worker’, which they deemed too simplistic for what they do. According to them, ‘badante’ is a profession; it is more than ‘just making the bed’.
Secondly, during my fieldwork I did not come across the term being used in a derogatory way. I therefore use it here, just as my informants used it in the field
– as a descriptive term of a job.
Parrenas, 2001; Urbanska, 2016). In particular, the role of technology in long-distance mothering has proved a fruitful avenue for critically re-thinking the notions of both motherhood and place (Constable, 2018; Wilding, 2006).

Furthermore, feminist literature on global labour migration has provided an important lens for analysing gendered practices of the transnational care market (Hondagneur-Sotelo & Avila 1997; Keough, 2006; Lutz, 2008), linking transnational care practices to neoliberal forms of exploitation and experiences of partial citizenship (Constable, 2007; Parrenas, 2001). The notion of liminality has been particularly conducive in analysing transnational lives as precarious. The analytical strength of liminality is to point out the partiality of migrant lives (for an example on displaced people, see Brun, 2015) in a neoliberal global economy of exploitation, which is gendered and racialized. While certainly valuable, this liminal perspective is incomplete, as it does not attend to the ways, in which existing in liminality may be productive, even desirable. This paper therefore focuses on the flip side of living ‘in-between’ and builds on Killen and Merla’s call (2014, p. 225) to ‘acknowledge the agency of migrants in configuring care arrangements.’ I show how migrant mothers overcome liminality and reach a place that ‘feels good’ through navigating spatial and temporal constraints.

Such an explicit focus on the subjective experience of place draws on a tradition of radical re-thinking of place within human geography. Beginning with Tuan’s (1977) innovative conceptualization of place as experience (and thus subjectively produced), the 1990s saw a placial turn in geography (Casey, 1993; Ingold 2000; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1996), which opened up the concept of place, unfixing it from locality and arguing for places as relational and co-productive of social reality (Massey, 1994, 2004; Cresswell, 2004). Such an unmoored ontology of place parallels Clifford’s call (1992) for unravelling travelling cultures and their dwelling practices. He argued for delocalizing cultural practices with the term ‘dwelling-in-travelling’ (p. 108). In contrast to geography, in anthropological analyses place has always had a localizing function – studying the island, the laboratory, the city. ‘Dwelling-in-travelling’ (Clifford, 1992) invites a different type of examination: one that attends to both movement and attachment and is therefore well suited to studying transmigration practices. This is valuable, because within transnationalism literature, place is often used as a common-sense word, related to belonging or home (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016), never specifically unpacked or problematized.2,3

An open and experiential ontology of place on the one hand and a focus on dwelling as a set of practices on the other converge in Latimer and Munro’s (2009) notion of ‘relational extension’ (see also Latimer, 2001). Latimer and Munro consider dwelling (by way of Heidegger, 1971) to be an action of affectively relating: ‘our argument is that dwelling is not only grounded within locales’, but also ‘takes place’ as and whenever relations are formed in the here and now’ (Latimer & Munro, 2009, p. 318). They argue that to dwell is to care and to keep, to give room to relationships. For Latimer and Munro, people perform relational extension in ways that help them feel at home (Latimer & Munro, 2009, p. 329), as opposed to the notion of home as a constant locale. They present a different ontology of home, and therefore of place – one that is born through (care) relations. Places are therefore relationally produced not only through experience – as demonstrated in human geography – but also through subjectivities and (maintaining) affective relationships. This does mean that places cease to be material or that they are unattached to locales, but rather that there is more complexity and richness to place – and thus to existing with and within places.

Bringing these discussions on place as relational and dwelling as a practice of relating, I draw on Deleuze’s notion of ‘the fold’ (1993) in making an argument about migrants ‘dwelling-in-folds’. Such a view allows for considering place as a multitude of folds in a topology of endless possibilities folding into each other. The value of such an ontological approach is the affordance of theorizing place and subjectivity together. In many ways, the concept of the fold is a critique on traditional readings of subjectivity – those of strictly separate inside and outside. In Deleuze’s words: ‘The outside is not a fixed limit, but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside’ (1993, pp. 96–97). If subjectivities are only outside folded in, then places (as understood by Casey, 1993; Cresswell, 2004; Massey, 1994)

2 With some exceptions, for example Bosco (2009), who argued for a relational view on place.

3 Recently, Perez Murcia (2018) has taken a promising step in this direction by showing that places can be experienced as fractured and unfixed in his analysis of the liminal positioning of displaced people.
1994) too are produced through folding and unfolding. This is important, because migrants do not only live in place (as traditional migration literature assumes), nor are they constantly moving (as much transnational literature describes) or locked in a state of liminality (refugees and displaced people). Transnational lives are a messy mixture of places, networks and relationships, which can be explored in depth by analysing the ways in which places are produced subjectively. I therefore suggest that Deleuze’s notion of ‘the fold’ allows for zooming in on migrants’ mundane practices of care and belonging, which I will analyse here as acts of ‘folding place’.

3 | METHOD

This research is based on more than eight years of interrupted, interval study in Italy and Bulgaria. My engagement with this topic began as an undergraduate project in 2009, which expanded to six months fieldwork in Italy in 2010 and another nine months three years later. In the context of my interest in place, I revisited Italy for a two-week immersive fieldwork in 2016. Since then, and in-between periods of fieldwork (2009–2011, 2011–2013 and 2013–2016), I have stayed in touch with the majority of my informants through social media and online conversations. The fieldwork periods in Italy can be roughly divided into three cycles: early (2009, summer of 2010), main (all of 2013) and late (summer of 2016). The fieldwork periods in Bulgaria took place in the winter of 2013 and fall of 2016. These were intense and immersive engagements with the field, while the periods in-between can be characterized as slow and incidental data collection. I have spoken informally and conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 badanti, more than 20 family members, friends and dependents of theirs in Bulgaria, as well as 8 Italian employers and 2 Bulgarian embassy officials.

The migrant women I spoke to were working in Italy as a result of having lost their job in Bulgaria and – in the majority of cases – were unable to find other work back home. They had migrated to a particular place and most often having a job arranged through family members of friends, who already worked in Italy. Working as a badante meant living in the employer’s home and maintaining both the home and the health of the employer. The employer was either the individual receiving care or his/her family member. The workers were often responsible for providing medication and even administrating some injections, none of which they were educated for (with the exception of one informant, who was a nurse). All badanti in Nettuno that I spoke with had a free Thursday afternoon, during which they tended to gather at the beach or at a favourite café. They received room and board separately from their monthly salary and in most of the cases that I observed were free to shop and cook to their liking, as long as they respected the wishes of the person they cared for.

The research has benefitted from a long-lasting engagement with the same group of migrants, which allowed excellent rapport. Most of the data are based on informal interviews and observations, as well as participant observation in both countries. The majority of the research was done in Italy, with two to three weeks of fieldwork in Bulgaria in 2013 and 2016. In the first two fieldwork cycles, the data were collected through unrecorded informal conversations, as many of my informants did not wish to be recorded discussing intimate information. In the latter cycle, most of the conversations were recorded, although this altered the dynamics slightly in favour of formalization. All interviews were semi-structured and based on topic lists, prepared in advance, yet the majority of the data were gathered through

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4 The social media engagement consisted of Skype calls (x 13) with five of my informants, who remained in Italy, and two, who had returned to Bulgaria. These calls were ad hoc and not recorded, resulting in fieldnotes. I also gathered photos and videos which were sent to me. This ‘keeping in touch’ helped me re-enter the field rather easily at the third cycle, even though this was not a strategy. At my re-entry, I provided my informants with new informed consent forms in Bulgarian and information about the research goals, also in relation to earlier data.

5 As I do not speak fluent Italian, these engagements were fleeting and not of high quality. I was able to communicate some simple things in Italian and could conduct two interviews in English. The other conversations I had with employers were mediated by the badanti or in one case, a Bulgarian friend who lived in Nettuno.

6 This rapport resulted in very frank and open conversations, which often turned intensely personal. Both my informants and I shared personal information, which allowed us to develop a relationship of trust. The quotes and information that I share in this article were agreed upon with my informants in advance, sometimes making the decision to keep stories out of the text.
informal conversations, which were unscheduled and took place while I participated in daily activities. I often recorded parts of conversations or spoke into a recorder, detailing what had happened that day. These data were reworked into fieldnotes as soon as possible (in Bulgarian) and analysed through coding. No ethical approval was required for this research. I informed the research participants of the purpose of my research and provided informed consent forms in Bulgarian, which specified their anonymity and my subsequent usage of quotes.

It should be noted that my initial focus was not on placemaking, but on migration and gendered work. My analysis on place came only at the last fieldwork cycle, when I adjusted my lens to focus on the experience of living and dwelling within transnational lives. I therefore went back to my initial data and recoded these, according to this new focus.

Any current research on migrants is in practice multi-sited (Marcus 1995). The fieldwork was focused on a small town south of Rome, yet I also visited Brescia, Venice, Milan, the Amalfi coast, Napoli and Rome. In Bulgaria I spent time in the southeast and northwest of the country. The decision to do work in both countries, or what Anthias and Lazaridis (2000, p. 10) call the dual perspective on migration, proved valuable, as I was able to understand how these places come together in making up transnational lives. I interviewed the family members of my informants in Italy, getting to know my informants’ homes ‘back home’. These places are sketched below, yet in other ways they are ‘folded’, in order to fit within this article. The local diversity of Italy folds on itself, becoming ‘Italy’ in this text, just as Bulgaria becomes ‘home’ and losing much nuance of place.

In what follows, I position badanti geographically: where they are, where they come from and what tensions this engenders. Next, I show how folding is done and the efforts this requires. In a third step, the notion of place is reconstructed, and an argument is made for badanti ‘dwelling-in-folds’. The concluding discussion reflects on this differently understood notion of place, as well as on ‘folding’ as a mechanism, which opens up space for new research concerns in both sociology and transmigration studies.

4 | BETWEEN FOLDS

The palm tree trunk is uncomfortable, and I move my back up, checking my watch. When will this bus arrive?! People around me are just as impatient and sit on the cool ground, because the heat is palpable despite it being seven pm and the end of October. ‘I just spoke to him’ – Denis shouts so everyone would hear. ‘He’s in a traffic jam, but he’ll be here soon.’

Like much else in Nettuno, bus services to Bulgaria are family affairs. Two buses cross the 1600 km every Thursday and Saturday, transporting people, luggage, money, Bulgarian cheese and other much-missed, much-loved delicacies between Nettuno and Bulgaria. The bus drivers are young men from the migrant community, handling informal money transfers between migrants and their families at home. Ivo, the driver of this delayed bus, is Denis’s cousin’s boyfriend. ‘He drinks on the job’ – Denis tells me later. ‘It’s not about any traffic jams...’

As the small, dilapidated bus bearing the Bulgarian, Italian and EU flags finally arrives, chaos descends. Irma, a badante in her seventh year in Nettuno, grabs a suitcase her husband had sent. She tells me excitedly that there must be a present inside, as she had just had her 44th birthday a week ago. Others are asking the price of cheese and peppers. I notice three women descending the bus, looking tired. ‘How are the children?’ – someone asks them. ‘The baby’s getting big!’ says Eva, who is returning from a home visit. She had left Italy on the same bus two weeks ago. An hour later the parking lot is almost empty. I offer Eva to help carry her bags home. ‘Home is the other way’, she says.

*Fieldnote by author, 2010*
Nettuno is a small coastal town of about 50 thousand inhabitants, where I often overhear Bulgarian speech when walking down the street. Although I met migrant waiters in pizza places and men working hard-to-find construction jobs, the overwhelming majority of Bulgarian migrants in Nettuno are women, who work as live-in domestic workers/caregivers in Italian homes. Italians call them ‘badanti’.

The phenomenon of migrant caregivers exploded in Bulgaria at the turn of the century, as more and more women left their homes for temporary care work in Italy (Komandarev, 2009). The structural conditions, which allowed for this migration pattern to develop, were the dismal financial situation in Bulgaria and the strong demand for migrant female labour in Italy. The Communist Party ruled Bulgaria until the end of 1989. In the beginning of the 1990s, shock therapy commenced, aiming to reconstruct the economic sector and introduce market economy. Bulgaria ‘experienced one of the steepest declines in employment in the region: a 25 per cent in jobs, and nearly double the unemployment rate relative to other countries in the region’ (Glass, 2008, p. 760). This ‘transition’ period was especially hard on women, since the state provided administrative jobs to them, which were the first to be lost due to privatization and welfare policy reform (Haney, 1997).

The unemployment in post-socialist Bulgaria coincided with Italian families’ need for migrant female labour to fill the gap in elderly care left by the entry of Italian women into the labour force (Andall, 2000). Care for the elderly in Italy7 ‘is delegated almost entirely to the family’ with little participation from the state8 (Bettio et al., 2006, p. 272). Exacerbating this issue are the overwhelming demographic changes taking place in the last 40 years. As absolute fertility rates have dropped dramatically and longevity increases, Italy’s family structures ‘will come to resemble an inverted pyramid, with an ever-smaller cohort of youth at the bottom and a mass of old people at the top’ (Ginsborg, 2003, p. 70). Commodification of care work – a process Lyon (2006, p. 213) calls the ‘defamilization of care’ – was born of necessity, as families could not cope with the burden of their elderly. This led to ‘a new division of labour’ in Italy, where ‘female migrants [are] gradually replacing unpaid care by native women’, constructing a ‘new, immigration-based care model’ (Bettio et al., 1993, pp. 271–272).

Despite the clear logic of these push–pull factors, the decision to leave one’s home is taken within different considerations (cf. Urbanska, 2016, for a further discussion on forced migration). The majority of my informants left in search of possibilities for life advancement. In fact, as Parrenas (2001) shows, it is not the poorest women who leave, conceptualizing the network of women and care as care chains. Filipinas leave the Philippines, working as live-in caregivers, hiring poorer women to care for their children. These global gendered care chains point to the trade-off my informants faced: care by staying or care by leaving.

Care by staying is the preferred, idealized version; it is ‘warm’ care (Pols & Moser, 2009) and it is physical, immediate and unambiguous. Staying seemed to be a choice, discursively anchored in love. Nina decided to return to Bulgaria as soon as possible:

‘They [the children] are too young. I cannot abandon them. Maybe when they are older. Then they will need other things…now they need me.’9

Conversation with Nina, Fieldnotes 2013

When making the decision to stay or to go, being a ‘bad mother’10 was always given as the main reason. As discussed by Butt (2018), migrant mothers ‘sit at the intersection of multiple moralities’ (p. 25). ‘Good motherhood’ is done in place and is a physical, affective confirmation of love. ‘Bad motherhood’ is being away from place and is seen as cold,

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7 It should be noted here that care arrangements differ substantially within Italy, particularly between north and south.
8 It should be noted here that although the Italian state does not have infrastructures of collective provisions for elderly care (for example, nursing homes or municipally funded care arrangements), it supports elderly with financial allowance, which permits Italian families to hire migrant domestic caregivers.
9 All quotes are translated from Bulgarian by the author.
10 For a valuable analysis of transnational motherhood, see Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997). They explore how ‘the meanings of motherhood are rearranged to accommodate spatial and temporal separations’ (p. 548).
disaffected and distanced. The first one is correlated to staying and the latter with leaving. This dilemma sets up a dichotomy of place – stay or leave, here or there, good or bad – which is inextricably linked in ‘times of migration’ (Cwerner, 2001). If one is here, one cannot be there. The migratory trajectory promises benefits, but it also demands losses (of time). Physical presence is by far perceived as the greatest loss. This loss is palpable on many levels – many caregivers worried about how distance is affecting their marriage; others regretted not being able to spend time with an ill or dying parent. Yet, children were the most pronounced subjects of discussion. Often, there were not many family members who could effectively care for the children in their stead. Fathers, in particular, were considered unable to care well. In Alena’s words:

‘Naiden [her husband] is doing his best, but he’s a man. He doesn’t know what to do [with the children]. My oldest does most of the cooking and cleaning, but children need their mother. He doesn’t know what to say to them... how to [show] love.’

Conversation with Alena, interview 2013

Such negotiations of hybridized parenting strategies are practical, yet they lead to a ‘deep ambivalence’ (Butt, 2018, p. 9), which has elsewhere been analysed as a ‘tolerated ambivalence of separation’ (Bohr & Whitfield, 2011). Children’s age is seen as a qualifying break in the ‘being there’ discourse (cf. Butt, 2018). When children are young, they need their mothers to ‘be there’. When they are older, however, they need ‘things’. This is where ‘good motherhood’ – an otherwise very clear concept – becomes muddled and confusing, often indistinguishable from ‘bad motherhood’.

‘Yes, it is good [to be there]. But my children are teenagers now. Do they need me to tuck them in at night? They need to be able to study, go to university and buy clothes. I am a good mother, because I am here.’

Conversation with Irma, interview 2016

The idea of a good life often touched on having ‘things’. A laptop, a phone, books, boots, glasses and backpacks were continuously mentioned in conversations as things that children need. These things were important tools in the women’s placemaking efforts:

‘I want my daughter to have a good home. […] to come back from school and have new books on her bookshelf and a good backpack. She knows she has a good home and […] that she is cared for.’

Conversation with Boyana, interview 2013

The idea of ‘being there’ becomes more complex when understood in the context of transmigrant care. Migrant women were busy with placemaking activities that were happening 1600 km away, such as the colour of the new bathroom tiles or the new sofa. It is temptingly easy to frame these transnational workers as living ‘liminal’ lives. Yet, while in formal interviews informants referred to Italy and Bulgaria as separate places, during informal conversations, it became clear that these were not so separate ‘in practice’. Women often discussed things happening back home as if they were present in the moment; I often had to clarify the ‘where’ of stories:

‘He [her son] is at the shop now, can you take over for me [asking her friend]? I will need an hour or so...’

‘Which shop?’

‘He is picking the tiles for the bathroom.’
‘So he is in Bulgaria?’

‘Yes, but his father is no good at this. I need my friend to cover for me, so I can advise him (...) on the phone.’

*Conversation with Alena, interview 2016*

Distance must be overcome through time; one cannot ‘be there’ and thus cannot always be a ‘good mother’. However, here and there are not so fixed in terms of experience, or what Clifford (1992) and Ingold (2000, 2005), via Heidegger, call ‘dwelling’. Despite being here, in Italy, women seemed to also be there, in Bulgaria. My data suggest that despite the geographical gap in their everyday lives, Bulgarian migrant women caregivers in Italy work with place in surprising ways that allow to care for their loved ones in different ways – by ‘being there’ or by providing ‘things’. This confirms earlier work in transnational literature, which showed how migrants navigate motherhood and caring in innovative ways, discussing poignant themes as mother–infant separation and the affective uneasy it produces (Butt, 2018) and left-behind children (Constable, 2018; Lam & Yeoh, 2019). The struggles of Bulgarian badanti to re-define motherhood and manage emotions are therefore not new. ‘Settled in mobility’ (Morokvasic, 2004) and attempting to reach a simultaneity of being both here and there, badanti construct a place that ‘feels good’ within Deleuzian folds. Time, as conceptualized by Cwerner (2001), is the biggest issue that they must negotiate through folding, as it cannot be undone. Distance may be overcome, but time will always be lost. Meanings are made and re-made between the folds of time – the meaning of good motherhood or the ideal of being there for young children and providing things for older children. The time that is lost is turned into an asset, as women migrants construct places of dwelling by folding here and there into a narrative of motherhood that is good enough, at that time.

5 | FOLDING WORK

Rayna is worried about Angelo (the elderly man she cares for). He is getting weaker, refuses to eat. When I visit them, he sleeps. Rayna tells me that he looks ‘like a child’. ‘Just like Kaloyan [her son]. The other day I went to check on him and I saw Kaloyan, I swear! (...) The body is so small now, he [Angelo] needs me so much. There is a song my son likes. He begs me to sing it over the phone. I sing it to signore Angelo now; it calms him down. Calms us both down.’

*Conversation with Rayna, Fieldnotes, 2013*

A month before Angelo’s passing, Rayna held him in her arms and sang her son’s favourite song. At this point, his body was very small, and he disappeared in her embrace. Rayna’s emotional state was heavy: she spent her days looking after the dying man. She had worked there for two years. Furthermore, she was worried about her job, as it was clear that she would no longer stay employed, once Angelo passed away. She had started to look for a new placement by spreading the word to other badanti in Nettuno and by talking to the local church, which often facilitates badanti jobs. The search had proved unsuccessful. Such periods are especially difficult on badanti, who spend money, living in a rented room, and are away from their families, without earning. The heavy atmosphere in the household was mirrored by Nunzia – Angelo’s eldest daughter – who walked around the house whispering prayers and erupting in sudden, explosive crying spells. Singing to Angelo helped Rayna:

‘I felt so very far away from everything, but then I sang our song [and] I was back home, holding Kaloyan. It was wonderful.’

*Conversation with Rayna, Interview 2013*
If places are experiences and emerge as assemblages of materialities, emotions, imaginings and ideas, then Rayna experienced ‘there’, while being ‘here’. Feelings of loneliness and anxiety, the notes and words of a favourite song and Angelo’s withering body merged to make up a space that is neither here, nor there, but provides comfort. A similar simultaneity of place happened to Nevena, as she was folding T-shirts:

‘Carmela [daughter of Carla, who she cares for] wants me to fold the children’s t-shirts like this (she shows me). This is a stupid way of doing it; it is not how I do it. (...) I am a mother for almost 20 years; I know how to fold t-shirts. My daughter has these horrible Metallica t-shirts – I've folded so many of them. You know, I think of my daughter when I do the ironing... I called her yesterday and asked ‘Are you folding your t-shirts? I know how you are...’ I told her, I'm folding t-shirts now, you do the same...’

Conversation with Nevena, Fieldnotes 2016

Materialities are rightly considered crucial in discussions of place (Thrift, 1999). Places are not abstract; they have a particular feel, smell and touch. The feeling one gets when entering a nursing home has much to do with the characteristic smell of such places. The dunes and wind of an island town are very much part of how this island is a particular place (cf. Ivanova et al., 2016). Yet materialities are not only grounding in the ‘here’, but they can also transport us ‘there’. Proust’s madeleine is a time–place machine that takes him back to his childhood. Nevena lives in a place, which is more than in-between Italy and Bulgaria – it is both. She stops folding and goes downstairs to make lunch, but while cooking, she calls her daughter, asking about the neighbour’s dog (‘Did it stop barking in the evening?’), her daughter's cousin’s birthday (‘Do you have a nice dress to wear? Do you need more money to buy one?’) and, of course, the T-shirts (‘Are you folding your laundry? I know how you are!’).

The ability to call and hear a loved one’s voice, to see their face through a tablet, to have the feeling that they are always reachable has drastically changed the migratory experience. The point of technology, which helps to connect and experience simultaneity of place by allowing a type of ‘being there’, has been discussed at length in transnational literature, delivering important insights of the ways in which it frames transnational intimacy. One of the most poignant points here is how technology not only connects migrants, but it can also fracture place by clarifying one’s absence. What Madianou (2012) has called ‘connected family’ is a two-edged sword; according to Wilding (2006, p. 138), ‘sometimes regular communication served to intensify rather than diminish the sense of distance’. Focusing on technology as affording an ‘always on’ culture, Madianou (2016) has shown that frequent communication (what she calls ‘ambient co-presence’) may lead to come conflict and tensions in transnational families. Building on these insights, I show how folding is facilitated by technology (and differently so, in different ‘times of migration’; cf. Cwerner, 2001), yet leading to ambivalence, even a more intense longing.

Boyana uses a tablet to talk to her daughter daily. She has it on now (summer of 2016), while cutting onions and carrots. This used to be much harder back in 2011, when I first met Boyana. She called from a phone without a screen and was often upset that she is not able to ‘see’ her children. Her daughter is showing her a dance routine she learned in her ballet class that day. ‘Beautiful! Bravo, mila!’ – she says. The tiny nine-year-old screams with pleasure into the screen, as Francesca (Boyana’s employer, whose house this is) changes the TV channels. ‘More salt!’ – she says to Boyana in Italian. The argument is an old one. Francesca’s sons had instructed Boyana to use less salt, on doctor’s orders, much to the annoyance of the burly and glamorous Francesca, who had lived a wonderful life of indulgence – in her own words – and was unwilling to change gears at 88. As Boyana tries to reason with her, her daughter spins out of the screen and we hear collision sounds, followed by anguished cries. Soon after a tear-faced little girl reappears on the screen, as her mother tries to console her. Boyana leaves the room with the tablet and asks me to make sure Francesca

11 The time difference between Bulgaria and Italy is 1 hour.

12 (From Bulgarian) Well done, dear!
does not add salt to the pan. Luckily, only a bruised knee results from this ‘radiator-crash incident’ and Boyana is soon back to serve dinner. I later ask whether she is upset about it:

Boyan: ‘No. Children fall all the time. And mine is definitely a crier.’

Author: ‘But you were not there when she fell.’

Boyan: ‘Of course, I was. You were, too! Besides, if I was back home, I couldn’t have sent her to ballet classes.’

Were we really there? All three of us had gasped upon hearing the child’s screams and Boyana had hurried to console her. Yet, she was not there to kiss the tears away or place a Band-Aid. On the other hand, this nine-year-old can go to ballet classes, because her mother works abroad. There are different modes of care here, all of them requiring choices. These choices are far from ideal, but the ability to choose – to care by staying or by leaving – presents a different view of migrant caregivers. They make decisions and reason them, acting in and with care every day, both in their work and home life. In fact, the two often become one, folding in on each other. Francesca does not mind the tablet being taken around the house, often speaking to the little child in Italian (to which Boyana’s daughter replies in Bulgarian, neither understanding the other). Boyana leaving the room has consequences, too – Francesca may put more salt in the dish (I tried my best to prevent that). Being in Italy allows for ballet lessons, which, Boyana reasons, make her daughter popular at school in Bulgaria. These links between the two countries are not merely connections: they construct a third space, as both are folded onto each other, becoming everyday life. The ability to ‘be there’ enables simultaneity of place.

Importantly, achieving this simultaneity requires a lot of work. Many informants arranged their schedules and the schedules of their children in Bulgaria, so that ‘mama can be there’ or ‘mama can help’. This has a placemaking effect in both countries, in terms of consequences – both places are being rearranged in multiple ways, in order to allow ‘folding’. Folding requires effort – organizational and emotional, as well as help and perseverance, and it is often unsuccessful. ‘Folding place’ is a process of continuing adjustment and adaptation, often paired with disappointment and pain. It is an enormous task: taxing, difficult and often unsuccessful. Although employers did not restrict usage of ICT devices, my informants existed within the folds of ‘badanti time’ – the use of technology had to be negotiated and blend in the daily rhythm of the Italian household they were part of. There were tasks to be accomplished – going to the market early in the morning, the pharmacy closes at 2 pm, dinner should be served on time. When a school recital (in Bulgaria) coincides with a doctor’s visit for her employer (in Italy), a migrant worker cannot freely choose how to use her time. ‘Folding’ means puzzling moments together so that they fit. In the case of the recital, Nina first tried to reschedule the doctor’s visit and when this proved difficult, she asked her sister to make videos and photos of the moment. These different temporalities must be negotiated and made to intersect. Developing a framework for the multiple temporalities of migration, Cwerner (2001) showed how ‘all sets of times bear upon the lives of immigrants simultaneously’ (p. 18; emphasis in original). Building on this insight, I show here that place is being made and remade in the folds of these temporalities, and that this exacts enormous efforts of migrants, particularly transnational mothers.

It is often forgotten that the famous madeleine moment did not simply happen; Proust had to put much effort into examining his memories. This points to the same necessity, as ‘dwelling-in-folds’ requires – the ability to create.

13 I have heard stories of employers being critical of badanti using the phone, and especially video devices. My informants referred to these jobs as “a bad place to work” and searched collectively for another household. Notably, the employers in this study generally considered it a good thing when women called home and cared for their children. Badante work is intimate work – it means allowing a stranger into one’s home and trusting them to care for one’s elderly parents. Being ‘caring’ is therefore the most sought-after quality in a badante.
6 | DWELLING-IN-FOLDS

Alena: ‘I know I’m supposed to say that I miss home. Of course, I do. But it’s not so simple as going back.’

Author: ‘Is Italy home now?’

Alena: ‘No. Italy allows me to be there for my children... home is home.’

Author: ‘You are away from home; you are here.’

Alena: ‘Yes, but I am much more present at home, because I am here. Everything my children have, the house, my daughter studying...I am much more home than I was before. They feel this, and I feel it too. This [feeling] is a good place to be.’

**Conversation with Alena, Fieldnotes 2016**

For the last seven years, Alena has been living in a town on the Amalfi coast, in the skirts of Mount Vesuvius, called Torre Annunziata. Almost every morning Alena wakes up and walks down the boulevard, along colourful houses and under hanging laundry lines, to the pastry shop of Alberto, where she buys two Napoleon cakes for herself and Rosanella, her employer. They have breakfast, then they watch the news and Alena prepares lunch. In the summer, she complains of the heat around noon and throws a bucket of water on the tiles in the backyard to allow them to ‘breathe’. In the evening, she speaks fast Italian with the neighbour, Silvia, whose eldest son is heartbroken over a girl who left him for his best friend. Alena is here, in the south of Italy. However, every morning, before leaving the house, she calls her husband Naiden, who is at home, in the northwest of Bulgaria, in a small town called Gramada. They talk for an hour; there is much to discuss: her youngest son is allergic to something and they must find out what it is; the roof is leaking and tiles must be replaced; Naiden’s elderly mother is recovering from a heart attack and her medicines are expensive; the oak tree in the back garden must be cut off; Naiden misses his wife and is lonely. While walking down the street to Alberto’s pastries, Alena is on the phone with her sister. When will she arrive? Who will look after the children? After lunch, Alena gives Rosanella her medicines – three blue pills and two white ones – but is thinking about her son’s allergies. Could it be dust, because Naiden does not clean the house as well as she would? Now she is doing the ironing and dictating a list to me – I am writing down all the materials that Naiden will need to fix the roof. We calculate the costs, as she makes piles of clothes – dresses on one side, skirts on the other, blouses sorted by colour. ‘Signora Rosanella likes her clothes strictly separated’ – she says and continues adding numbers in her head.

When Alena says that Italy is not home, she means that it is not a place to belong. However, it is by now a very familiar structure; she feels at ease, she greets the lady at the vegetable stand and the tabaccheria man. She has a favourite spot on the beach; she likes the ice cream stand near the station and avoids the one on the main boulevard. Yet, Torre Annunziata is a place of living, not of dwelling. The village Gramada is where Alena was born, where she grew up and had her family; she knows everyone there, looks forward to every piece of gossip and will one day return. However, when she visits, she is surprised to see a new clothing shop on the main street or to learn that buses are cancelled on Tuesday afternoons. Dwelling, in Heidegger’s sense, is where one is at home, where one has a place, where sense-making practices are located in familiar structures of being (Malpas, 2006). An existential spatiality, a place of being is where Dasein is grounded.

Drawing on Deleuze’s concept of the fold as subjectivity and Clifford’s notion of dwelling-in-travelling, I propose the term ‘dwelling-in-folds’ to make sense of temporary migrants’ experience of place(s) that foregrounds their ability to connect and reconcile fractures and discontinuities. As argued earlier, ideas of settlement, integration and temporary migration are in need of advancement and reconceptualization. ‘Settled in mobility’ (Morokvasic, 2004) is a step toward understanding a different kind of migration, where movement becomes a way of being.
'Dwelling-in-folds' takes this idea further by zooming in on migrant micro worlds and describing how such temporary lifestyles are experienced and accomplished. The concept, therefore, emphasizes a process, as opposed to a state. Dwelling-in-folds implies effort and work and is an ongoing struggle to connect, to feel connected and to 'be there'. As Alena says, this feeling is 'a good place to be.' She does not refer to a specific location, but to an experience, to the fold. The fold allows her to care for her children and achieve her goals, which makes her feel good. She is 'much more present at home', because she can contribute to it; she is a good mother and is able to express her love. This is where she dwells; this is a place where her identity, love and belonging are grounded. If belonging is a grounding feeling of acceptance and affect, then Alena feels it in the fold of both Italy and Bulgaria. Neither place is complete, yet the existence within both – when they are folded in one experience of being – is where she dwells. Dwelling-in-folds may be partial and incomplete in terms of space (the physical reality of where one is), but this analysis shows that it is much fuller and satisfying in terms of place14 (the experience of being emplaced).

This does not mean that dwelling-in-folds is unproblematic, or even that it is – or should be – desirable. The notion of dwelling-in-folds does not seek to romanticize migrants' lives. What it offers is another way of thinking temporary living arrangements in a global economy of flows and movement: one that takes experience of and belonging to place as its unit of analysis.

7 | DISCUSSION

This paper presented an ethnographic account on how women transmigrants construct a place of belonging, where they 'feel good' by 'being' in both home and host country. This is what I called 'folding place', resulting in an ontological condition of 'dwelling-in-folds', or folding/moulding/bending both home and host country into a place of migrant existence. The paper 'folded' place by an empirical analysis of how badanti dwell-in-folds and 'unfolded' place by re-conceptualizing place as 'dwelling'.

In 'folding' place empirically, I consider migrant women's positioning in the global care economy differently. Acknowledging their precarious situation and the good work that has been done on this subject, I try to go a different route by attending to how migrants construct meaningful lives of self-acceptance, beyond analyses of liminality and partiality. The concept of liminality assumes rootedness in two different places and constructs the transmigrant as caught in-between, while the concept 'dwelling-in-folds' overrides the boundedness of places as locale, acknowledging that dwelling is an ontological state. An analysis of folding and dwelling-in-folds sheds light on how women transmigrants live complexity.

In 'unfolding' place, I presented an analysis of place as co-produced with subjectivity, allowing for a deeper examination of unsettled, de-territorialized, liminal, transnational lives. Following Latimer and Munro's analysis of the home as a practice of dwelling, my analysis confirmed their argument that 'dwelling is better understood today as that which takes place in terms of relations, rather than be defined in terms of a fixed abode' (2009, p. 328, emphasis in original). Building on this understanding of place as relationally produced, I add a temporal dimension to this process: not only does dwelling take place 'as and whenever relations are formed in the here and now' (Latimer & Munro, 2009, p. 318), but also as they are formed in the 'then and there'. Migrant women's dwelling is produced through 'keeping with' (ibid.) both here and back home, now and back then. Managing the 'making room' for these temporalities is a particular mode of dwelling – 'dwelling-in-folds'. This analysis contributes to sociological debates on troubling the notion of home and place further, while also suggesting that 'relational extension' (Latimer, 2001; Latimer & Munro, 2009) may be achieved as relations ‘take place’ at a distance, through memory and in the imagination, as well as through objects and place.

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14 The literature makes a distinction between space and place, defining space as an impersonal, physical reality and place as the lived experience of that reality. For more see Cresswell (2004). The exception to this is De Certeau (1984), who made the exact same distinction, but flipping the term space; to him space is 'composed of intersections of mobile elements' and 'a practiced place' (p. 117).
Furthermore, the analysis deepens our understanding of global flows by complicating the notion of place and place-making within the context of transmigration and highlighting the importance of ICT infrastructures in leading migrant lives. While simultaneity has always been part of transnationalism literature debates and the role of technology herein has been discussed very productively (Constable, 2018; Madianou, 2012; Wilding, 2006, among others), this analysis shows how technology is an infrastructure of care that affords constructing a place of ‘dwelling’. The emphasis here is on the experience of place – and home, showing how ICT both aids and hinders connection. Importantly, I analyse technology not as a way of connecting over distance, but rather as a (crucial) element in experientially inhabiting a third space of ‘the fold’. This change of perspective on the role of technology has consequences for how we understand ICT in transnationalism discussions: not as a digital bridge between places, but as a way of folding into a place of ‘dwelling’.

What do we learn from ‘folding’ place empirically and ‘unfolding’ place theoretically in this paper? Firstly, the notion of the ‘fold’ allows for a deeper examination of the co-production of temporary (migratory) places and subjectivities. Such an examination presents rich accounts of how migrants actively create lives of meaning, contributing to transmigration literature that go beyond victimization and/or empowerment. The ‘fold’ foregrounds temporary migrants’ ability to connect and reconcile fractures and discontinuities, particularly when ‘doing’ transnational motherhood. Secondly, ‘dwelling-in-folds’ captures a simultaneity of being that is emplaced differently – as a third (imagined) space of belonging, and it is a process that draws on digital infrastructures, affective memories and everyday relational practices. The paper thus contributes to the burgeoning work on digitalization and IC technologies in transmigration literature by showing how these are intimately interwoven with ‘dwelling’ as a form of agency. Finally, this paper attempted to show how rich and multifaceted the concept of place can be, and how it can be fruitfully employed in both sociological discussions of subjectivity and transmigration studies. Not only are places open, ephemeral, unfixed and emerging; they are also bendable, foldable and mouldable. Their multiplicities should be unfolded with care.

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**REFERENCES**


(Un)folding places with care: Migrant caregivers ‘dwelling-in-folds’


**APPENDIX**
Badanti women who ‘spoke’ in this article (names have been altered):

**Irma** 44 years old; from Bulgaria’s north-western region; village near the Danube River

Three children in their teenage years – two daughters and a son; divorced

**Alena** 46 years old; from Bulgaria’s north-western region; village; married to husband Naiden for 24 years; three children – daughter (18) and two sons (12 and 14)

**Boyana** 41 years old; from the northeast of Bulgaria; divorced; two children: a son (18) and a daughter (9)

**Rayna** 42 years old; from the capital Sofia; married to husband Ivan for 15 years; two children: sons Kaloyan (11) and Kiril (15)

**Nevena** 52 years old; from Bulgaria’s north-western region; small village near Vidin town; one daughter (25)

**Nina** 42 years old; married; two children Lili (3) and Katya (6).

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15 This biographical information refers to the time I first met with these women.