“Outlaw Motherhood on a Moral Frontier: Migrant ‘Illegality’ and the Pursuit of Dignity on Israel’s Margins”

This talk asks what we can learn about unauthorized transnational migration and migrant “illegality” by peering into the tumultuous lifeworld of Marlene, a Filipina woman and unauthorized migrant to Israel who is also a single mother, an abandoned lover, a victim of harassment, and an outlaw denied the possibility of police protection. Viewed in ethnographic context, Marlene’s experience illuminates three dimensions of this contemporary mode of abjection. Illegality is not only a form of juridical status, but also a sociopolitical condition and a mode of being-in-the-world. The talk considers three questions. First, how is migrant illegality configured – especially in Israel, a country whose citizens bear their own complicated histories of marginalization, othering, and exclusion? Second, how does illegalization impinge upon migrants’ existential and moral realities? Finally, how do migrants like Marlene actively pursue groundedness, meaning, and dignity within fraught and rapidly changing sociopolitical contexts?

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