

E1. Nursing, Labor, and Collective Action

E1:1 Reynaldo Capucao, *Matters of Discipline: Unrest at the Philippine General Hospital, 1910–1916*

Under the US Insular Government, the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) opened in 1910 as a colonial symbol of progress and benevolence. It extended the US policy of benevolent assimilation, which, aside from justifying colonization of the islands, promised to discipline and rehabilitate Filipinos into a more fit race. The hospital served as a disciplinary instrument aimed at eradicating diseased bodies, inculcating proper hygienic behaviors, and training nurses. The success of the latter was internationally disseminated by colonial administrators as a sign of progress, but it precluded PGH's racialized culture of discipline. Filipino nurses remained relegated to American nurses under the colonial hierarchy of the hospital. They were expected to conform to the professional character of the nurse, which reflected the abilities of the white feminine modern subject. This impossible ordeal fostered unrest, wore down health, and made melancholy endemic at PGH. On August 29, 1916, student nurses reached a boiling point over discipline, with over 100 walking out of the hospital. The walkout lasted for two days and was the largest strike in the Philippine Civil Service at the time.

Drawing on extensive records from the National Library of Medicine, National Archives, and University of the Philippines Manila, this paper explores the culture of discipline at PGH as an allegory for Philippine self-government. It foregrounds the non-linear narrative of progress around Filipino nurses, who simultaneously became trophies for American exceptionalism and hindrances in maintaining the colonial order. The paper examines these impossible positions and their psychological impacts by analyzing the entwined, disabling processes of abstract labeling and material injuring. It reveals how collective action and the suicidality of Filipino nurses disrupted structural inequalities by risking their livelihoods and lives.

Learning Outcomes

- Deepen understanding of disability as a mode of analysis.
- Recognize how the relationship between ability and the trained nurse illuminates the capacity for nursing and modern womanhood.
- Understand the history and coloniality of Philippine nursing within the unevenness of the present global healthcare arena.

E1:2 Hafeeza Anchrum, *Exploited, Still: Black Women's Care Labor from Domestic Service to the Professional Workforce*

This paper examines the continuity of Black women's care labor in the mid-twentieth century through the experiences of nurses trained at Philadelphia's Mercy Douglass Hospital. Drawing on archival records and oral histories, it traces how race and gender shaped the conditions, expectations, and valuation of their labor across three interrelated contexts: domestic work in White households, training in a Black-run nursing school, and employment in traditionally all-White hospitals. Although professionalization and institutional access were viewed as pathways to freedom from exploitative labor, racialized and gendered power structures adapted by reconfiguring the terms and sites of exploitation to accommodate these new conditions. Training at Black-run Mercy-Douglass offered partial reprieve from the most demeaning aspects of domestic labor, yet it remained constrained by structural racism, gender subordination, and limited institutional power. Access to mainstream hospitals was cast as professional equality, but Black nurses continued to face inequities in recognition, pay, and working conditions, even as they surpassed professional expectations. The experiences of these nurses reveal that professional credentials and racial inclusion did not significantly transform the material or structural conditions of their labor but instead became new sites through which racial capitalism was sustained and legitimized.

Learning Outcomes

- Describe the intersecting forms of labor undertaken by Black women across domestic, educational, and clinical settings during the mid-twentieth century, and how their working conditions were shaped by race- and gender-based hierarchies.
- Examine how processes of professionalization and institutional inclusion were sites through which racial capitalism was reproduced within educational and hospital systems.
- Assess how the historical entrenchment of racial and gender labor stratification informs current disparities in care work, including wage gaps, job precarity, and occupational exposure.

E1:3 Bradford Pelletier, *Striking for the Patients: Medical Civil Rights & Labor Equity at the South Carolina State Hospital (1964-1984)*

The twenty-nine grievances submitted by the unionizing employees of the South Carolina State Hospital (SCSH), a psychiatric facility, included how Black employees were “kept ‘running,’” while whites were “permitted to take breaks,” and that Black patients only received medical attention after whites. The list of grievances, compiled in 1970 by nurses, highlighted the hospital’s non-compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Their collective action serves as a poignant example of the ways in which Black nurses served their communities as both “patient and race advocates,” as Darlene Clark Hine has shown. Analyzing the nature of the nurse-community relationship, this paper illustrates that both labor activism and patient advocacy extended beyond the psychiatric clinic and that labor organizing was as much about worker equity as it was about patient conditions.

Studies of medical civil rights tend to focus on physicians and/or community activists, but nurses were also on the front lines, exposing the issues within their institutions. While Black nurses are underrepresented in the historiography of American medicine, Black psychiatric nurses remain more so. This is despite their deep knowledge of the race, class, and environmental issues facing their patients, which made them uniquely suited for activism.

A study of the SCSH from 1964 to 1984, this paper demonstrates that, in the absence of a federal mechanism ensuring CRA compliance and hastened by the duplicitous deal-making and subterfuge of state administrators, labor organizing among southern nurses in the 1970s directly stemmed from the desegregation efforts of the 1960s. Leveraging records from civil rights activists, the Local 1199 United Healthcare Workers Union, administrative files from the SCSH, and the Office of the Governor of South Carolina, this study examines how a predominantly female group of medical laborers, in conjunction with local activists, fought to liberate themselves and their patients through collective action.

Learning Outcomes

- Deepen our understanding of the experiences of medical laborers in psychiatric hospitals, especially Black nurses, during the latter half of the twentieth century.
- Examine how the struggle for medical civil rights in African American communities in the South, which extended well beyond the 1960s, was led by a predominantly female coalition of nurses and lay activists.
- Analyze the notion that the physical well-being of psychiatric patients is directly connected to the socio-economic well-being of the non-physician medical laborers responsible for their care.