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Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

ISSN: 1369-183X (Print) 1469-9451 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjms20

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To cite this article: Matt Withers & Jessie Liu (2026) Lost in space (and time): the disrupted intimacies of Pacific and Timorese guestworkers in Australia, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 52:10, 2634-2653, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2026.2628464

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2026.2628464

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Published online: 25 Feb 2026.

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JOURNAL OF ETHNIC AND MIGRATION STUDIES
2026, VOL. 52, NO. 10, 2634–2653
https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2026.2628464

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Lost in space (and time): the disrupted intimacies of Pacific and Timorese guestworkers in Australia

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Abstract

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is Australia's first long-term guestworker migration scheme. In recruiting workers from nine Pacific Island Countries and Timor-Leste to perform low-wage work for periods of up to four years, it leverages uneven regional development to create racialised and gendered situations of exception within Australia's migration regime. PALM workers encounter exceptional spatial and temporal restrictions on their personal lives in Australia, which have to date been under-examined in a literature on migration and intimacy privileging the experiences of 'middling migrants'. The 'intimate chronomobilities' of Pacific and Timorese migrant workers are constrained by relative immobility and extended periods of transnational family separation that impair the maintenance and navigation of personal relationships and family ties. Drawing on a combination of in-depth and semi-structured interviews with migrant workers, their family members and government stakeholders, this article reframes these experiences as 'intimate chrono*immobilities*' to emphasise the restrictive interplay of space and time in PALM workers' lives. By examining overlapping expressions of biographical, institutional and everyday space–time, we demonstrate how the scheme produces a spectrum of inequitable affordances for intimate life that jeopardise the welfare of workers and their families, standing as discriminatory aberrations within Australia's migration regime.

KEYWORDS

intimate chronomobilities; im/mobility; transnational family life; guestworker migration; Australia; PALM scheme

Introduction: intimate family life in the PALM Scheme

Fetia[1] works as a personal care assistant in a residential aged care facility in a small regional town on the outskirts of a major Australian city. She has been in the job for four months, having arrived from Kiribati as one of the first participants in what was then known as the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), now the long-term stream of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. She lives in a small house with three other I-Kiribati women, all of whom have left their families for the opportunity to work in Australia for three years. In describing her initial experiences under the

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scheme, she briefly discusses aspects of her new job: the need to schedule her life around rostered shifts, dealing with occasional instances of racial abuse from care recipients or interpersonal tensions with Australian-born co-workers, and feeling unable to turn down requests to work overtime. On the whole, though, she has few complaints about her work. Rather, ongoing relationship problems with her partner who remained in South Tarawa are a more pressing concern:

> I'm here in Australia, but my partner is back home. Every day we're talking to each other, but when I'm busy we can't talk, because I'm at work at that time. Otherwise, we just talk all the time. But sometimes we kill each other, because – when I'm told I must go to work – he'll say, 'you are a liar'. He doesn't trust me, and I have to tell him, 'Oh, don't worry, I have no-one else here' … it's very hard for me.

Over 4000 kilometres away, in a remote West Australian town adjoining a dusty highway, Sione has just completed his first month working at the local abattoir. Far from any major city and further still from his family home in Tonga, his new life in Australia is tightly structured around the schedule of the van hired to ferry him and seven other workers to and from the local abattoir. Working long shifts, he departs before 8am and returns by 4pm, but has little opportunity to make use of free time upon his return or during his days off. The town has a petrol station-cum-supermarket, a bakery and café, a rickety pub, and not too much else. Without access to a car or public transport, he has far fewer opportunities to socialise or access community services than his peers arbitrarily 'deployed' to work at an abattoir in a larger regional town an hour's drive to the north. As with Fetia, intimate family relationships weigh heavily on his mind:

> It's a sad story: three of my boys are back home. We're trying to work things out, so they can come and see me, or I can come and see them … Sometimes when you are working and you are worried about your kids, it means you aren't working properly. You can get in accidents and stuff, you are not in a good mind to work, you are worried.

Elsewhere, in Australia's tropical north, Tarariki, an I-Kiribati man who had been working as a kitchen assistant at a tourist resort for the past one-and-a-half years, explained how he returned home to be present for the birth of his child:

> So the story goes like this. Second week here, my wife, she found out she was pregnant. I said alright, I will come home at the end of Jan. So, I went back home. One week with her, when she went to hospital, that's when she delivered the baby. So, one week after that time with my baby, then I came back here [to Australia].

Since that time, Tarariki had relied on video calls to communicate regularly with his young family. Though he avoided the marital problems and breakdowns that many of his colleagues had experienced during their years in Australia, he also expressed regret at having to witness key milestones of his daughter's development – her first words and steps – through the virtual intermediation of choppy 'FaceTime' video.

***

These three vignettes offer glimpses into the varying experiences of everyday life within the PALM scheme – Australia's first long-term guestworker migration scheme, promoted as a 'triple win' labour mobility arrangement with nine Pacific Island countries[2] (PICs) and Timor-Leste (Payne 2021). The scheme, which emerged

as the culmination of a broader paradigmatic shift within an Australian migration system pivoting from permanent to temporary admittance (Wright and Clibborn 2020), places unique constraints on participating workers. PALM workers are subject to a series of restrictions that are notably more stringent than those placed on other temporary migrant workers in Australia and even those labouring in other guestworkers schemes globally (Chien 2026): they are limited to 'low-skill' jobs located in rural and regional Australia, are unable to change employers for the four-year duration of their visa, and – in contrast to most migration pathways in Australia – lack rights to family accompaniment (Australian Government n.d.). In addition, workers have no meaningful say about where they will work. Instead, within this employer-sponsored scheme, selected Pacific and Timorese workers are 'mobilised' and 'deployed' to worksites across the vast breadth of rural and regional Australia (Figure 1), often at very short notice.

These constraints have very real consequences for PALM workers' personal lives and transnational family relationships. Indeed, the intimate lives of guestworkers have been overlooked and understudied, particularly in the Australian context, in a manner that risks implicitly reifying Pacific and Timorese migrants as 'labour' and not 'people'. As we see from Fetia, Sione and Tarariki's stories, the restrictions

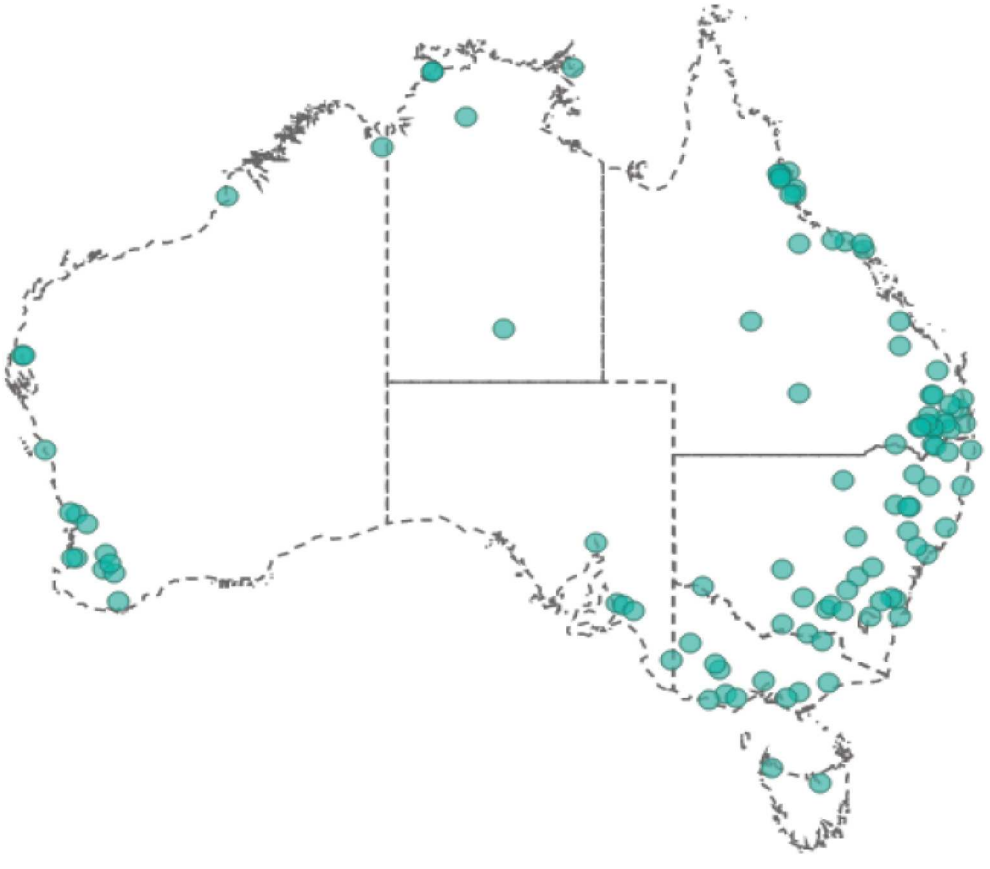


Figure 1. Distribution of Pacific Labour Scheme worksites as of September 2021.

imposed by the PALM scheme have profound impacts upon workers' everyday lives, including significant challenges in negotiating and maintaining kinship and family ties, which remain largely overlooked and understudied. While the navigation of intimate relationships is something that all temporary migrants face (Yi and Paul 2026; Nguyen, Turnbull and Baldassar 2026), we suggest that PALM workers face particular challenges as a result of the exceptional *temporal* and *spatial* constraints and demands placed upon them. Indeed, as we argue, the pronounced *immobility* of PALM workers contrasts with the dominant framing of migration as synonymous with 'mobility'. This, in turn, diverges from recent literature that foregrounds 'being on the move' as a pivotal dynamic within transnational migrants' navigation of intimate relationships (Robertson 2021). We thus emphasise the power geometries of 'im/mobility' (Bélanger and Silvey 2020) to consider how PALM workers' *capacity* to maintain transnational intimate relationships operates within the confines of discriminatory migration policies and associated labour processes designed to situate Pacific and Timorese migrants as guestworkers.

In examining PALM workers' navigation of intimate family life, we extend Shanthi Robertson's (2020) concept of *intimate chronomobilities* by attending to overlapping registers of institutional, biographical, and everyday time – but also demonstrating how each of these temporal domains is entangled with exceptional spatial constraints (Prasetyo 2026). Reconceptualised as *intimate chronoimmobilities* to emphasise this restrictive interplay of spatial and temporal circumstances, we draw on in-depth interviews with PALM scheme workers and their family members, as well as government staff administering the scheme in PICs, to demonstrate how important aspects of intimate family life can become 'lost' across space and over time. The vignettes that open this article each speak to the collision of institutional, biographical, and everyday renderings of space and time that varyingly shape experiences of *dislocation* and *disconnection* while working in Australia. In our analysis, we attempt to disentangle these distinctive renderings of space–time to isolate specific challenges to participants' relational navigation of transnational family separation. Doing so reveals how the policy parameters of the PALM scheme interface with differing life stages and geographic parameters to produce inequitable circumstances for maintaining intimate relationships in place and across borders. Disparities in the spatial and temporal affordances for intimate life were found to be significant factors shaping participants' ability to manage their personal relationships – with outcomes ranging from virtually mediated co-presence with remaining families, to the fracturing and dissolution of long-term relationships, and the impairment of household and communal care practices.

The article opens with a brief overview of Australia's temporary migration regime, providing policy context to the PALM scheme and reviewing the existing literature concerning the experiences of workers and their families. It then provides a conceptual engagement with intimate chonomobilities to establish the importance of reconciling spatial immobility within the entanglements of biographical, institutional, and everyday time that comprise Robertson's (2020) framework. We structure our empirical findings according to these three space–time domains, drawing on participant narratives to demonstrate how differing life stages, shared visa constraints, and regimented labour temporalities intersect to inform inequitable affordances for intimate life.

The emergence of the Australian guestworker state

As a settler-colonial state with a long history of encouraging permanent migration, albeit under an overtly racist guise until the early 1970s, Australia has historically eschewed guestworker migration (Wright and Clibborn 2020). In 2006, a full decade after the Howard government reformed the Migration Act to reorient towards temporary and skill-based migration, then-treasurer Peter Costello maintained that:

> Australia has never been a guest-worker country. We've never been a country where we bring you in and ship you out. I don't think Australia will be a guest-worker country and I don't think Australians want to see that (cited in Gordon 2006).

Yet, in recent years, there has been growing recognition that Australia's migration regime has gradually come to resemble that of a guestworker state. De facto labour migration schemes – including international student and working holiday maker visas with attendant working rights – have proliferated alongside the expansion of increasingly restrictive temporary skilled visa admissions (DHA 2020).

Parallel to this broad reconfiguration of Australia's labour migration policies has been the introduction of two smaller schemes – the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) – that are exclusive to PICs and Timor-Leste, and more archetypal of the guestworker model (Surak 2013). These schemes have since been amalgamated as short-term and long-term streams within a single PALM scheme. Guided by World Bank policy rhetoric (World Bank 2017), both schemes have been framed as development initiatives intended to deliver a mutually-beneficial 'triple win' – i.e. by addressing labour shortages in Australia's economy, relieving unemployment and generating remittances for PICs, and boosting the skills and incomes of migrant workers (Petrou and Connell 2025). 'PALM Long' was officially introduced in 2018 and differs from the agricultural 'PALM Short' stream in several key aspects: it allows workers to remain in Australia for periods of up to four years rather than nine months; it broadens the scope of eligible occupations to include non-seasonal employment across all industries in rural and regional locations; and it covers a broader range of occupational skill classifications. In all other respects, however, the visa restrictions remain the same: workers cannot change employer for the duration of their employment, cannot access a pathway to permanent residency, and cannot bring family members while living in Australia.[3] Though PALM workers are entitled to the same statutory leave provisions as other workers, including four weeks of annual leave, their wages are among the lowest in Australia and travel costs can prove prohibitive for many workers.

The implications for transnational family life are profound. Living 'together, apart' for four years is a qualitatively different prospect than navigating the eddying personal and emotional ties of seasonal migration punctuated by periods of annual return at least three months in duration. By retaining the restrictions of PALM Short but extending the duration of migration across multiple years, PALM Long entails a paradigmatic shift to a long-term guestworker model – bearing closer resemblance to highly-restrictive schemes in place across West Asia (Kwon 2026), East Asia (Chien 2026), and Southeast Asia (Prasetyo 2026) than to any other visa stream within Australia's migration regime. Decades of research within those contexts demonstrates that guestworker migration

places substantial strain on the personal relationships and gendered care practices that constitute transnational family life (Jayaweera and Dias 2009; Parreñas 2005; Yeoh 2009). Much of the international literature has been explicitly concerned with continuity and change in the performance of gendered work and care roles (Haagsman and Mazzucato 2021; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Locke 2017), the potential for polymedia to collapse space and mediate relationships (Acedera and Yeoh 2020; Cabalquinto 2022), or the health and wellbeing of children 'left behind' (Asis 2006; Lam and Yeoh 2019).

However, as yet, little academic or policy attention has been paid to the intimate relationships of Pacific and Timorese guestworkers and how they manage their transnational family lives alongside the expansion of the PALM scheme. Instead, the majority of literature has clustered around the industrial relations of Australia's horticultural sector (Campbell 2019; Curtain et al. 2018; van den Broek et al. 2019) and developmental outcomes for PICs (Brickenstein 2017; Holani 2017; Farbotko et al. 2018; Gibson and Bailey 2021). Empirical studies foregrounding the experiences of Pacific Island workers have covered a more diverse range of topics, spanning racialisation and placemaking (Stead and Altman 2019; Stead, Taula, and Silaga 2022), the precarity of migrant livelihoods (Petrou and Connell 2018; 2019; Stead 2021; Withers 2024), worker welfare and wellbeing (Bailey and Bedford 2022; Kanan and Putt 2023; Stead 2023), and transnational care practices (Chattier 2019; Withers 2022; Petrou and Withers 2024; Withers 2024). While the intimate relationships of Pacific and Timorese guestworkers cut across many of these studies, they have to date not occupied a central focus of research.

Intimate chronoimmobilities in the PALM Scheme

Our work fills an important empirical gap concerning intimate family life in the PALM scheme, but also makes conceptual advances by foregrounding how the unique temporal and spatial constraints of the PALM scheme shape possibilities for intimacy that are experienced differentially according to the life stages of participating workers. Our analytic engagement with space and time draws on a growing body of work that explores how 'institutional forms of temporal control structure migrant experience[s]', including their intimate relationships (Robertson 2019: 173). Part of a broader temporal turn in migration studies (Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013), this work underscores the now-ubiquitous understanding that migration regimes are not only governed through spatial regulation – who is allowed to cross national borders, where they must live to comply with visa conditions – but equally through the imposition of temporal restrictions, such as limits on duration of stay and working rights, the length of time required to transition between visa categories, and the number of hours they are permitted to work (Baas and Yeoh 2019; Yi 2026).

The liminal experience of temporary migrant workers in Australia has received significant academic attention (Velayutham 2013; Li and Whitworth 2016; Ang 2022; Hastings et al. 2023; Barry and Azeredo 2025), including with respect to the navigation of spatial and temporal constraints on intimate relationships (Robertson 2014; 2021; Ang 2022). Emerging from this context, Robertson's (2020) concept of *intimate chronomobilities* has become central to a more general body of literature on temporality and migrant intimacies. Exploring how young 'middling migrants' – that is, educated migrants typically

from the middle class of their home country (Ang 2022) – navigate their personal romantic relationships, Robertson operationalises the concept in two distinctive ways. First, it is used to capture the intersecting *temporal* regimes that migrants must navigate, spanning biographical time set by gendered or familial expectations, institutional time set by the Australian state, and the lived and embodied everyday time as migrants in Australia (Robertson, 2019: 173). Second, it captures how these temporal demands intersect with the ever-changing migration system's demand for *spatial* flexibility – what might also be termed 'hypermobility' (Robertson, 2019:174) – and how this can interrupt or compete with the demands of middle-class migrant biographical timescales, which frequently aspire to and emphasise linear progression, biographic milestones and 'settling down' (Robertson 2021, 148).

We adapt Robertson's tripartite framework of temporality (the institutional, biographical, and everyday) to explore what we term the intimate chrono*immobilities* of PALM workers. While Robertson's original concept recognises the tensions residing between episodes of movement and stasis, as the staging and staggering of complex migration pathways frequently entail (Robertson 2020), for the most part, her participants' 'middling migrant' journeys are premised upon a sense of hypermobility accompanying relatively privileged positions within Australia's migration regime (Robertson, 2019). In this context, it is the capacity to be *mobile* – whether across national borders, state lines, employers, or visa categories – that enable migrants' navigation of the temporal restrictions imposed by Australia's migration policies. By contrast, the nature of living and labouring within PALM necessitates a reconfiguration of this schema to foreground the constraints, stagnancies, and *immobilities* reported by PALM workers and reflected in their visa conditions (Withers 2024). This seemingly contradictory state, of being simultaneously mobile and immobile, reflects the concerns of a growing body of research that situates involuntary fixity and 'being stuck' as a central characteristic of temporary labour migration regimes (Bélanger and Silvey 2020; Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020; Scott and Rye 2023). Indeed, the almost carceral spatial constraints imposed on PALM workers exemplify Bélanger and Silvey's (2020) important foregrounding of 'immobility in mobility', which shifts emphasis from mobility as the opportunity to migrate (Carling 2002) towards a greater attentiveness to power relations that govern the circumstances of movement *within* those migrations. At the most constrained end of this im/mobility nexus, Toomey (2022) frames instances of 'forced mobility' as inextricable from the racialisation that enduringly pervades settler-colonial logics of accumulation. In the context of the South Pacific, the exceptional immobilisation of PALM workers echoes colonial histories of indentured labour – so-called 'Blackbirding' (Banivanua-Mar 2007) – as the region is again configured as a devalued labour reserve for rural Australia' (MacWilliam 2022). In this respect, the chronomobilities framework fails to capture the overbearing spatial rigidity that guestworker policy settings impose on PALM workers and their intimate lives at each of the temporal registers.

While PALM workers – like other guestworkers globally (Acedera and Yeoh 2020) – exercise agency in negotiating intimacy around these spatial and temporal constraints, our use of *immobility* highlights how they are differentially constrained in their ability to do so. As we show below, attention to the simultaneous spatial and temporal regulation of PALM workers reveals how individual circumstances and policy settings

intersect to produce acute experiences of dislocation and disconnection between guest-workers and their families.[4]

The transnational lives of PALM workers: methods and findings

Between 2019 and 2023, the lead author conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews with: I-Kiribati, ni-Vanuatu, and Tongan workers at differing stages of their participation in PALM Long (n = 56); a smaller number of family members (primarily romantic partners) of ni-Vanuatu workers who had remained behind in Port Vila (n = 22); and government staff administering the scheme in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu (n = 18). The fragmented nature of this data collection was in large part an unanticipated result of COVID-related research disruptions, particularly border closures that impeded planned interviews with the family members of I-Kiribati and Tongan participants. However, it also reflects some of the challenges associated with recruiting workers that are often time-poor, reluctant to discuss their personal lives and experiences with outsiders, and potentially hesitant to disclose hardship due to the dependent nature of their employment and visa status. During each field visit, the lead author introduced themselves to a group of workers on their day off or between shifts, explained the nature of the research, and extended an invitation to participate in an interview loosely structured around their experiences living and working in Australia. While only a few individuals opted to participate on each occasion, those who did often expressed a willingness that their voices be heard and used to inform the policy settings that have outsized bearing on their lives in Australia.

Though men make up approximately 80 per cent of PALM workers in Australia (Australian Government n.d.), the research was purposefully attentive to gendered experiences of intimate life and achieved a roughly even gender split across both workers and remaining family members. Workers interviewed in Australia were employed across a range of industries (meat processing, tourism, aged care, and horticulture) and located in a total of six small to medium-sized rural towns in four states (NSW, QLD, VIC and WA). Interviewees ranged in age from 22 through to 57, with the majority of workers in their 30s; most were married and had dependent children. The data thus present a broad cross-section of experiences and perspectives that are suitable for examining diverse expressions of dislocation and disconnection that characterise the intimate chronoimmobilities of PALM Long workers.

The following sections of analysis consider how PALM Long workers and their remaining family members navigated and negotiated their intimate relationships while living 'together, apart' in transnationally separated families. We have arranged these findings in relation to the different registers of spatial and temporal meaning described in the previous section: the institutional, the biographical, and the everyday. It is important to note that these temporal–spatial registers are likely experienced quite differently by PALM Short workers, not interviewed in this study, whose intimate lives take shape around the cyclicality of seasonal agricultural employment (Stead 2023).

Institutional space and time

Institutional space and time refer to the formal conditions of migration that are established as a process of *governance* (Robertson 2021, 27). In the PALM scheme, the

regulation of space and time is jarring, entailing abrupt dislocation during episodes of 'mobilisation' and 'deployment' juxtaposed against the stagnancy of being fixed in place for contractually determined periods of time, with prospects for even local mobility determined by the lottery of employer location and the space–time infrastructures manifested in those places. These discordant expressions of mobility and immobility are, furthermore, overshadowed by the inevitability of return at the end of four years, given the terminal nature of the visa (unless workers risk 'absconding'[5] into irregular status).

The process of becoming enfolded into the institutional space and time of the PALM scheme begins with a highly competitive application and screening process that occurs within PICs. Significant income differentials between the South Pacific and Australia have conditioned scenarios in which there are huge pools of applicants from which only a few individuals are ever offered contracts. There is, at this stage, an indefinite waiting period for interviews – sometimes lasting months or even years – that contrasts sharply with the speed of deployment following successful selection. The rhythms of intimate life are ruptured upon contract offer, as employers demand rapid mobilisation of workers, and the bureaucracy of the scheme whirrs into gear: scheduling health checks, conducting pre-departure briefings, and overseeing the necessary logistics of travelling to rural Australia. Jasmine, a ni-Vanuatu woman recruited to work in horticulture, explained that this rapid shift left little opportunity to prepare families for impending separation:

> If we got interviewed today, they will say the following week we'll be leaving. And then I told them, 'Can you just, at least, give us a week to spend time with our family and that, before we leave?' … With the pre-departure, they should do it, like break all of these sections down to maybe a week and then maybe give the employees, maybe two weeks or three weeks before they depart.

Here we see how, in *becoming* a PALM worker, Pacific and Timorese people within the scheme come to be governed through the Australian state's institutional time and space, demanding their bodies to be transnationally mobile and ready for work at a rapid speed; no time is provided for the about-to-be transnational family and the challenges that this can create. Instead, the PALM worker is treated as an individual unit, rather than a member of a family, of a community, of kinship networks with responsibilities that must be redistributed in their absence.

For many workers, this rapid entry into Australia provoked a sense of dislocation and confusion. As Felicia, a 27-year-old horticulture worker from Vanuatu, shares:

> We did not expect it … the food is one of them, the weather, and also like the surroundings – they don't give us proper information about where things are – like clothing shops, groceries, and um like directions of where to go, so it was really hard … We had to figure it out ourselves … Some of the workers that came to Mildura and they got lost. On top of that, none of them speak English, none of them have a phone and it's hard to track them down.

Felicia's comments on the very literal spatial disorientation that workers felt also highlight an important point: that these institutional demands on workers' mobilities and, as we later discuss, labouring bodies, are not coupled with an equal investment in institutional support. Interviews with government staff in PICs, for example, showed that while there were mechanisms of support built into the scheme, the vast distances

between worksites meant that welfare teams and liaison officers were severely limited in the time they could spend in a given location.

Across interviews, these stories of disorientation also accompanied, again and again, participants' difficulty with long-term separation from their families, particularly those with children. Several participants raised their confusion as to why they, as Pacific Islanders, were unable to be joined by their families while co-workers on other visa sub-classes were permitted to.[6] Importantly, the desire for family accompaniment was not necessarily expressed in terms of seeking permanent relocation in Australia: workers were generally aware of the rigid visa conditions of the scheme and primarily articulated a desire for connection and shared living before returning to their countries of origin. Importantly, participants recognised that the institutional nature of these separations – and the temporal disconnections with family time – is not an inevitable aspect of migration but rather part of policy design that could be changed. Ameria, a 41-year-old I-Kiribati worker, saw injustice in the different institutional rules that governed PALM workers' rights to family accompaniment relative to those of workers on other visa categories:

> And why not us? That's why we are still asking... not like the other workmates, they are here with their family and they're happy because they are together with their family. Not like us, we are far from them, and I hope that one day there will be a chance for us that we could invite our family to come and be with us in Australia.

Together, these comments speak to broader inequities that operate at the heart of a scheme that institutionally demands Pacific and Timorese workers be spatially and temporally mobile upon deployment, but immobile during employment. It also shows that, in contrast to middling migrants, the chronoimmobilities of PALM workers entail an altogether more violent reorganisation of family life as it is made subordinate to the spatial and temporal imperatives of an unabashedly extractive labour process (Withers 2024). Physically dislocated from their friends, family, and kin, PALM workers thus experience a severance of proximate relational ties and – depending on the location of their employment in Australia – may likewise encounter few possibilities to forge new intimacies. At the same time, the rhythms of existing intimate relationships that were previously afforded temporal synchroneity by virtue of common locality require reconnection across borders, between time zones, and amid discordant daily routines.

Biographical space and time

The institutional sense of space and time described in the previous section can be thought of as the governance structures that situate Pacific and Timorese migrants *as* guestworkers by orchestrating mobility in a manner that circumscribes individual and collective agency over movement. These policy settings are evidently not conducive to the spatialities or temporalities of family life and echo all too clearly Max Frisch's famous condemnation of European *Gastarbeiter* schemes: 'we wanted labour, but we got people instead' (cited in Merz 2024). However, despite the universality of the visa parameters structuring the PALM scheme, there is little uniformity in the ramifications these have for individual workers' personal lives. Instead, institutional constraints can become amplified as they intersect with participants' differing life stages and the temporal expectations and demands accompanying participants' navigation of biographical space and time.

Biographical time, as articulated by Robertson (2021, 26–27), refers to the manner in which the sequenced time of an individual's lifecourse – as well as the social norms and expectations that attend discreet life stages – is entwined with, and often disrupted by, migratory trajectories. We treat the geographic coordinates of these migratory trajectories, which in the case of the PALM scheme are exceptionally varied, as representative of biographical space. Our participants straddled a number of distinctive life stages and were accordingly navigating biographical space and time with very different sets of pressures, expectations and aspirations. Those who were younger and relatively less attached sometimes articulated hopes to settle in Australia, despite the categorical impossibility of doing so via the PALM scheme itself, and likewise conveyed fewer concerns about managing their existing romantic relationships. Interviews with this younger cohort often conveyed a sense of opportunity in migrating to Australia; even as the stasis of employer-tied work visas interrupted their intimate lives, and permanent residency remained out of reach, there was a palpable optimism that financial resources and skills learned might enable a biographical trajectory containing promise and possibility. This sense of hope was not only confined to those who were unmarried or without children, as the case of Hardy – a divorced single mother in her late 20s, with two dependent children – suggests:

> For me, I'm planning to build a house for my kids, but the real thing is to live in Australia, with my two kids, just for them to get good education, good living, because in Vanuatu, it's just too hard. Like, I'm seeing the long run because in Australia you adapt to their life, but then they get to teach themselves to be independent … my plan is to at least take them out of the country and give them something that I've been dying for way back in the years, and let them have it and they can just take it from there, that's the only way I can see my kids growing up.

The situation was often quite different for those in the middle of their lifecourse, particularly those with established romantic relationships and dependent children that were already of a school age. For these workers, the objectives of migration were pronouncedly more circuitous, with aspirations hinging upon notions of return and the channelling of skills and remittances into investments that might stabilise family life in their country of origin – whether through housing, education, or potential business ventures. Family was at the centre of these ambitions and the disruption of these manifold intimate relationships likewise took a toll on the emotional well-being of workers, many of whom described the challenge of connecting with their children, whose daily routines were particularly difficult to re-synchronise with their own. Physical reconnection was more difficult under such circumstances, too. Whereas a young, recently married Tongan meatworker noted that he could maintain a relationship with his wife via nightly video calls and the prospect of her visiting on a tourist visa, his colleagues with young families could neither afford to have their families join them in Australia nor forgo valuable savings by returning home themselves (flights from Western Australia to Tonga being prohibitively expensive). These challenges were often compounded by the spatial and temporal patterns of island life, as was described by Keina, an I-Kiribati woman working as an aged care assistant while separated from her partner and two young children remaining in South Tarawa:

> Most of the time I speak with my partner because my two boys were with him, but he was working on the ship back home and whenever he's out in the islands, then I couldn't even

> make contact with my two boys until he reaches the capital … It's difficult for me, especially for my two boys.

Participants' narratives also illustrated how complex forms of biographical time intersected with institutional space–time to shape differential and inequitable affordances for intimate life. Atonio, a Tongan meatworker in his mid-30s, conveyed that – like other workers – he was generally aware of the rigid visa conditions of the scheme and primarily articulated a desire for connection and shared living before returning to his country of origin. In the interview, he was plainly distressed about struggling to connect with both his teenage sons and a wife who had previously had an affair in his absence:

> I'm not intending to apply for residence or to become a citizen, I just [want to] apply for my wife and my two kids to come over so that we can stay here. All the expenses for that, I'll pay for everything. As long as we together, we can still save some money, try get my wife a job, something like that. But we're not thinking of staying here, because back home in Tonga we got our own land, we got some plans for that.

On the one hand, the quote conveys a sense of loss in being estranged from his children's biological and social process of 'growing up', which will continue without him while he is working in Australia. In this narrative, the PALM scheme is presented as temporally rupturing a relationship between parent and child. On the other, Atonio's experience of the scheme is articulated through the discourse of sacrifice and thus presented as an opportunity to meet biographical aspirations of accumulating savings for home-making and to fulfil socially-ascribed 'duties' as a parent and partner.

We also interviewed a smaller number of workers who identified as being in a later life stage, with grown up children who were living independently. While the PALM scheme once imposed rigid age-based restrictions whereby individuals over the age of 45 were not eligible for participation, these criteria were later relaxed. Indeed, among the cohort of ni-Vanuatu aged care and horticulture workers interviewed, three were in their late 40s and early 50s. One such participant, Maggie, was married to an older man, Paul, with whom she had four adult children and, together, their views on migration reflected a different set of concerns. On the one hand, they were conscious that increasing rates of emigration from Port Vila were affecting the care needs and personal relationships of the elderly, and Paul was anxious about his wellbeing in the extended absence of his wife. On the other hand, though, they saw migration as an opportunity to address a sense of unfulfilled parental obligations to improve the prospects of their children by supporting their tertiary education ambitions. Now retired, Paul remarked that:

> As a father—who is supposed to be the breadwinner, who is supposed to be the one financing my kids in school—now that I'm no longer working, if my two youngest daughters don't complete their studies, don't get the qualification, I will feel I have failed them … So, by sending my wife to Australia—we've discussed it, and it all depends on our trust for one another, allowing her, knowing that she will be away, for not just one year, but four years. But for me, I'd like my kids to [have the opportunity].

The central reflection stemming from these differing accounts is that life stage can have important bearing on the rendering of relational space and time in the PALM scheme, with dislocation and disconnection having varying acute implications for the maintenance of intimate relationships that inform different biographical junctures. Interestingly,

these observations were also shared by government staff administering the PALM scheme in PICs. Several informants expressed less concern about younger or elder participants, while noting that the bulk of social and economic problems stemming from family separation were experienced by couples with young children. One, a member of the Samoan labour sending unit, remarked that they actively considered these contexts when screening potential participants:

> The ones that we're encouraging to go on a three-year program are the single ones. They have no worries about these sort of relationship conflicts. But the ones we're trying to look into deploying in the nine-month scheme are these ones with their spouses and the younger kids, and the ones with old aged people at home that they're taking care of.

Everyday space and time

Finally, everyday space and time refers to the temporalities and spaces that structure, and are in turn structured by, day to day life. It was here that participants negotiated the structural constraints on family accompaniment with their commitments to maintaining family life and upholding the familial expectations of their life stage. Across interviews, technologies such as smartphones emerged as a key avenue through which participants would engage in kinkeeping practices and creatively navigate their family dynamics through the use of messaging, video calls and social media (see also Petrou and Connell 2019; Stead and Petrou 2022). Such forms of family connection were institutionally 'supported'; at the time the research was undertaken, newly arrived PALM workers were offered loans through the scheme (later deducted from wages) to purchase a smartphone and SIM card in Australia, if they did not already have one. The important role of these facilitating technologies is explained by Salesi, a young and recently married Tongan meatworker stationed in Western Australia:

> The truth is – it's very hard for me and her, for us to separate like this for three years, but when we're thinking about getting one month's leave, it's good for us. We're thinking for her to come visit me with a tourist visa. But with the technology, everything is easy, we get video chat every night, it's good.

In Salesi's case, being able to virtually connect provided daily continuity in a distance relationship where the possibility for proximate reconnection was contingent upon the expense, logistics and timing of a tourist visa. But the technology – and therefore the possibility of maintaining family connection – was not accessible at any time of day or in just any space. Rather, digitally mediated connections to family had a particular rhythm and spatiality, operating in the time left over from the rigidity of work schedules and labour temporalities more broadly. That is, everyday space and time – and its affordances for polymedia – were organised around the labour time of the abattoirs, aged care residences, farms, and hotels where PALM participants worked and the spaces they were required to move between in order to best satisfy that labour process. Australia's migration regime affords excessive power to employers to control PALM participants' lives at and outside of work: not only in rostering shifts or demanding overtime, but in providing accommodation, arranging transport, scheduling recreational activities, permitting leave requests, and ultimately in re-hiring or dismissing workers (which can mean a further four years of employment or effective deportation). It is the

particulars of these arrangements – varying by employer and industry – that most significantly shape the everyday space and time through which workers coordinate their intimate lives.

In the context of these everyday labour temporalities, the easiest time to talk to family was immediately before or after work, as Salesi elaborated:

> A good time for us to talk is right after work. So, we finish at 4, we get here 4.30, that's the right time, so that's nine o'clock in her country at night-time. So, it's two hours every day. So, in the morning, just wake up, on the phone, talk to her before going to work and after work. That's the first thing.

However, work schedules and time zones did not always neatly align with the daily routines of remaining partners and families – as demonstrated by Fetia's quote at the very start of this article, where she describes the difficulty of coordinating her work schedule around her partner's demands for communication. Indeed, consistent with other literature (Nishitani 2019; Wilding et al. 2020; Presto 2025), distance communication was not always an ideal medium for strengthening and maintaining relationships, but could also become a burden. Some workers described struggling to appease the emotional and material demands of family members that they encountered after exhausting shift work. PIC government staff also reported that social media platforms were a hotbed for suspicion, as photos of workers with their colleagues could provoke accusations of affairs. For others, like Hardy, digitally intermediated relationships could also be a source of frustration and helplessness, as she describes in the context of her child being unwell:

> Yeah, you can't say if they are going to be okay, or not. So, yeah, I check on them every minute, just to hear if she is okay, then that's it, I can rest. But it's kind of, like, a real struggle for me just not being there for my kid … We can't do much, but just stay focussed with your work and just call to check.

Other participants, including Tarariki, the I-Kiribati worker in Queensland whose trip home for the birth of his son was recounted in the opening of the article, had to manage digital and real intimacy in more restrictive terms. With flights to Kiribati prohibitively expensive, given its remote location in the Pacific, travel plans had to be coordinated around major life events. Digital intermediation had allowed the couple to remain in close communication and adhere to shared life goals over the two years of their separation, but quickly became inadequate when his wife's pregnancy necessitated actual co-presence. Following a brief trip home, his intimate relationships with wife and child were again navigated from a distance, but with a greater sense of loss. It was with forlornness that that he explained having witnessed his child starting to crawl for the first time through a low-resolution video his wife had taken earlier in the day; a sense of missing the opportunity to be present during key milestones in his daughter's childhood development. In his case, the fullness of these overlapping registers of space and time becomes apparent: his life stage exemplified through the birth of his child, the institutional restrictions on space and time apparent through the fleeting opportunity of reconnection, and the asynchronous everyday rhythms of family life recounted through the limitations of virtual co-presence mediated around restrictive work schedules and limited ICT infrastructures.

Conclusion

The PALM scheme has entailed a paradigmatic shift in Australia's migration regime, signalling the logical conclusion of a decades-long drift towards a guestworker model strikingly at odds with national mythologies of freedom and opportunity. In this article, we have drawn on and extended Robertson's (2020) concept of intimate chronomobilities to examine how the spatial and temporal coordinates of manifold personal relationships are violently reordered by a scheme that situates Pacific and Timorese migrants as labour and not people. Our reconceptualisation of Robertson's framework as one of intimate chrono*immobilities* emphasises the profound limits on the movements of PALM workers who are only made 'mobile' according to the imperatives of labour temporalities but are otherwise substantially unfree: mired in place by employer-tied visas and subject to the rhythms of extractive labour processes. It makes a necessary intervention in the Australian migration literature by attending to the intimate lives of guestworkers who, in the academic literature as much as in policy discourse, are principally analysed as agents of development. Through interviews with workers, their family members, and government staff, we consider the implications for intimate family life by separating out coinciding expressions of space and time implicit in emergent narratives: the biographical, the institutional, and the everyday. While each is necessarily enmeshed with the others, this analytical disentangling of space and time facilitates a deeper understanding of how inequities within an already inequitable scheme play out through a combination of differing life-stages, rigid visa constraints and the various labour processes that determine the schedule of daily life. What emerges is a clear sense of the factors inhibiting intimate family life in the PALM scheme by varying dislocating and disconnecting workers from their loved ones. In some cases, these limitations may be fairly banal; in others they have stark implications for welfare of workers and their families.

Of course, this is not to downplay the agency that is exercised by PALM workers – whether by digitally or physically mediating their relationships, or by choosing to leave those relationships, and perhaps start new ones in Australia. Nor is it to reify or unduly celebrate the family, a deeply contested institution that can perpetrate harm just as easily as it might remedy it, or contribute to moral panic about its erosion amid increasing international migration (Acedera and Yeoh 2020). The contribution is rather to identify the exceptional lack of affordance for intimacy that accompanies the discriminatory rendering of Pacific and Timorese migrants as guestworkers made 'permanently temporary' by specific policy settings. All migration pathways can be seen as constituted by a configuration of restrictions on rights expressed spatially and temporally (Yi and Paul 2026); in Australia, the PALM scheme stands alone in the degree of severity imposed along both dimensions. As we have shown in our analysis of interlocuters' experiences, this culminates in constraints on intimate family life that would be deemed categorically unacceptable for Australian residents or migrant workers on different visa sub-classes, including the middling migrants whose intimate chronomobilities have so far defined this literature. One clear implication is that, in discriminating against Pacific and Timorese migrants in particular, Australia is not only discovering long-established incompatibilities between guestworker schemes and basic rights (Castles 1986) but risks reanimating colonial histories of the South Pacific in the process.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used to de-identify all interview participants.
2. Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.
3. A family accompaniment pilot scheme has recently commenced for up to 200 workers, but eligibility is contingent on employer approval, further reinforcing and existing power imbalances and falling short of constituting a substantive right to family life.
4. We note that 'family' is an expansive concept in many Pacific Island cultures and that the immediate family relationships we describe in our analysis are not completely representative of the relational networks that are forged and maintained by Pacific and Timorese migrants in Australia (Faleolo 2020). While not a prominent theme of the interviews we conducted, we acknowledge that Pacific and Timorese guestworkers often maintain connections with diaspora groups and those with less restrictive migration statuses (Nishitani, Boese, and Lee 2023), including the formation of new intimate relationships.
5. The term 'absconding' is frequently used by the Australian Government to describe disengagement from the PALM scheme and reaffirms the carceral connotations regarding the regulation of labour.
6. Since these interviews were conducted, the Australian Government has launched a family accompaniment pilot scheme for a maximum of 200 workers and their immediate spouses. However, eligibility is contingent upon employer approval and all costs must be borne by the worker, reinforcing existing power imbalances associated with employer-tied visas and establishing acute financial disincentives from pursuing the option.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research was supported by the Australian National University.

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