

Examining Migrants' Notions of “Home,” “Nation,” “Identity,” and “Belonging”

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Abstract

This paper examines migrant workers' transnational experiences as they take on varying tendencies and trajectories that take place in both their host country and homeland settings. By introspectively looking at their non-economic personal issues, this paper explores how migrant workers construct/reconstruct themselves, seen through their notions of “home,” “nation,” “identity,” and “belonging.” Such notions are further filtered by locating them against the nexus of gender ideologies, concepts of family and parenthood, and religious affiliation.

Keywords: identity formation, migrant workers, transnationalism

There is no denying the fact that diasporic movements have tended to take on different tendencies in the past few years, compared to those that took place in the 20th century. While the earlier waves of labor-related migration saw the 20th century being propelled by economic issues within both the household and at national levels in the homeland and heavily concentrated on the contributions of male migrant workers, scholars found the said trend to be disturbing (Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Boehm, 2008; see also Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015). It encouraged later explorations of other often-underexplored trajectories. As such, investigations have started to look into issues that bring scholars into a more introspective approach in the hopes that their findings would provide them clearer answers to some non-economic personal issues that confront overseas workers. This paper is an attempt at examining some of the notions deeply intertwined with migrant workers' understanding of their "selves", and the relationships they either create or maintain while engaged in overseas work. This paper posits that a study on the notions of "home," "nation," "identity," and "belonging" vis-à-vis the nexus of gender ideologies, concepts of family and parenthood, and religious affiliation confronts not only scholars, but also migrants regarding the needed social lenses through which one can examine and understand the shifting diasporic tendencies. The paper makes a general discussion of the notions at hand and cites a specific Filipino migrant worker's experience, allowing a much closer examination of the relevant issues.

Transnationalism

To better understand and appreciate the diasporic experiences overseas workers go through in their host country, it is important to examine closely their transnational experience, so as not to confuse it with a simple *change* that only takes place in a single milieu or spectrum. Defined as a "social transformation spanning borders" (Vertovec, 2009, p. 4), *transnationalism* can be better understood under the prism of long-term changes. This is but fitting as Vertovec (2009) further calls transformations a popular motif within the context of globalization. "Stated more strongly, change that occurs only at the micro level of people or only at the macro level of collectivities, rather than at both levels, is likely to be a momentary fad rather than an enduring transformation" (Rosenau, as cited in Vertovec, 2009, p. 22). In looking at modern research on transformations that occur in societies, Ulf Hannerz demonstrates that those that take shape in the transnational context influence societies at national, local, and personal levels (as cited in Vertovec, 2009). Likewise, Vertovec commends David Held et al's (1999) *Global Transformations* for advocating the "transformationalist" approach to changes that heightened interconnectedness via globalization has brought about. Transnational activities, Portes (1999) maintains, refer to regularly occurring conditions spanning state boundaries, marked by the actors' genuine allegiance to fulfilling them. Performed by authoritative actors, such as those from the national government and multinational companies and "more modest individuals, such as immigrants and their home country kin and relations" (p. 464), transnational activities are distinguished as *transnationalism from above* and *transnationalism from below*, respectively (Portes et al, 1999, p. 221). Portes et al's mapping of transnational activities includes not only the normative approach to migration that is purely economic, but also those that have political, cultural, and religious dimensions. This explains, to a large extent, why a discussion on the notions of "home," "nation," "identity," and "belonging" and their intersectionality with the three other earlier-mentioned notions proves significant.

Transnational Spaces and “Imagined Communities”

Roger Rouse’s concept of “alternative cartography of social space [refers to] transnational spaces... [that] are envisioned as multi-sited ‘imagined communities’ whose boundaries stretch across the borders of two or more nation-states” (Gutierrez & Hondagnue-Sotelo, 2008, p. 504). In the article “Asian brands and the shaping of a transnational imagined community,” Cayla and Eckhardt (2008) explain how *transnationalism from above* exploits these “imagined communities.” The same authors maintain that regional Asian brand managers have started capitalizing on people’s common understanding of global and multicultural experiences, playing a part in the production of “an imagined Asia as urban, modern, and multicultural” (p. 216). A look at Filipino migration, on the other hand, requires the need to look at *transnationalism from below*, exploring “the interstitial social spaces traversed and occupied by migrants in their sojourns between places of origin and places of destination” (Gutierrez & Hondagnue-Sotelo, 2008, p. 504). In this context, Gutierrez and Hondagnue-Sotelo further assert that global companies continually adapt to a changing international market and, as such, technological innovations in the transportation and communication sectors facilitate exchanges within transnational networks. These transnational engagements are a combination of “both population settlement and population circulation,” calling for a reconstruction of the meaning of *local community* and the emergence of “translocal as another way to conceive of human migration and demographic change” (p. 505). Gutierrez and Hondagnue-Sotelo (2008) also claim that transnational scholarship undergirds social (re)formations that have an impact on one’s identity, a discussion to which I will go back in the later part of this paper. For Aihwa Ong (1999), this has a bearing on *flexible citizenship* defined as the “cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (p. 6). Clearly, this prompts thinking about *identity* and *belonging*.

The Notions of “Identity” and “Belonging” vis-à-vis Religion/ Faith

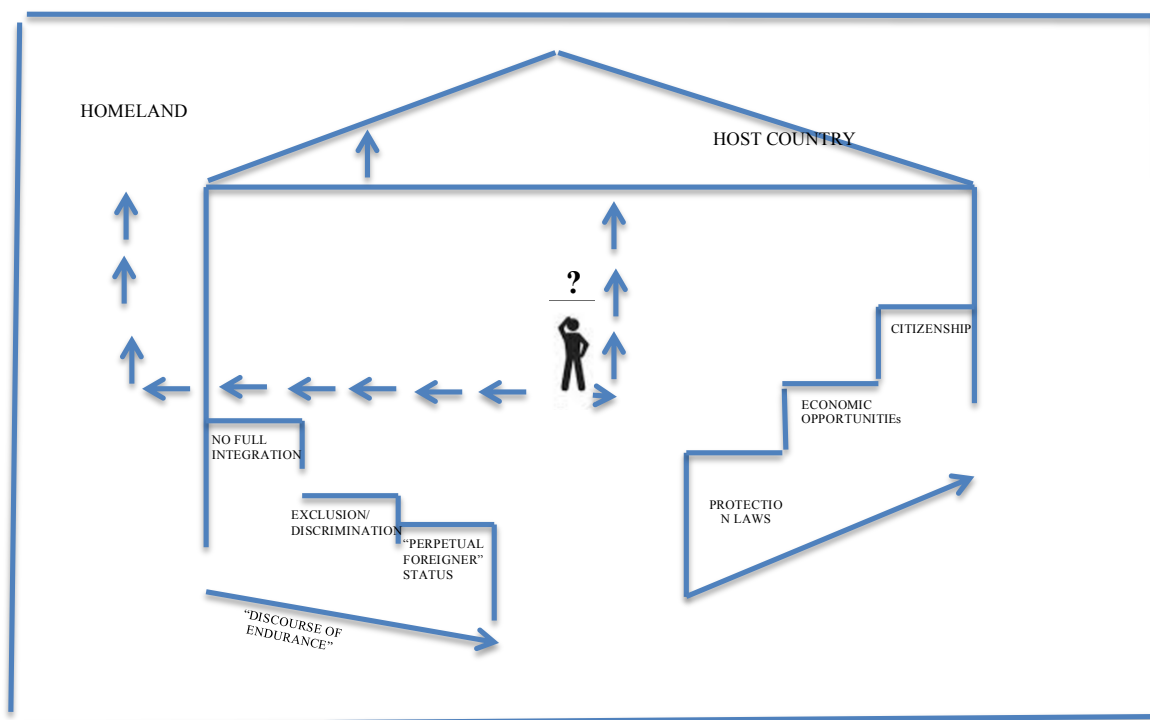
In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes. These logics and practices are produced within particular structures of meaning, family, gender, nationality, class mobility, and social power (Ong, 1999, p. 6).

One of the key features of Aihwa Ong’s (1999) flexible citizenship most relevant to this essay is her problematization of the identity, underscoring who “belongs.” This concept is a two-pronged process: social and political (Ong, 1999; Gutierrez & Hondagnue-Sotelo, 2008; see also Castles & Davidson, 2000). Social processes include, but are not limited to, the need to assimilate; political processes, on the other hand, originate within the host-country-homeland axis. More specifically, host-country political processes include, but are not limited to, exclusionary practices (De Genova, 2002; Bosniak, 2006), whereas homeland political processes include, but are not limited to, the sending country’s act of “disciplining” its migrant workers by way of capturing monetary remittances sent home (Miralao, 2007; Pécoud, 2009; Lorente, 2011).

The need to assimilate has led to the notion of acquiring a particular citizenship (Ong, 1999; Gutierrez & Hondagnue-Sotelo, 2008). As illustrated in Figure 1 below, migrants recognize

that acquiring citizenship is a necessity. In the figure below, an overseas Filipino worker's (OFWs hereafter) migratory experience is further explored.

Figure 1: An illustration of the Filipino migrant workers' dilemma involving the presence/absence of citizenship in a host country.



First, it affords them protection from deportation, “the ultimate means of emphasizing ‘the borders demarcating the included’” (Kumar & Grundy-Warr, as cited in Derks, 2013, p. 223). Second, it provides them economic opportunities that non-citizens may be denied. Mobility creates many paths for migrants. In the case of OFWs, for instance, cognizant of the fate that other OFWs have suffered from in the past in various work destinations, they understand that their settlement condition controls their sense of identity and belonging, and even security, within the host country (see San Juan, E. Jr., 2000; Constable, 2007). However, while acquiring citizenship guarantees protection from deportation and provides economic opportunities that may be elusive to non-citizens, it is important to note that this form of assimilation is often a highly contested process in many host-societies. Prejudicial treatments propel Filipino migrants to take on the identity of *transmigrants* who, despite being stable in their new country, insist on “maintaining multiple linkages to their homeland” (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995, p. 48) and

generating and sustaining multistranded relations between the Philippines and the United States...In so doing, they have created and maintained fluid and multiple identities that link them simultaneously to both countries (as cited in Tyner & Kuhlke, 2000, p. 239).

As mentioned earlier, a host country's exclusionary practices impinge on migrants' notions of identity and belonging. Aihwa Ong (1999) views this as another form of “flexible citizenship.” Political by nature, exclusionary practices are a form of contestation and prejudicial treatment which Tyner and Kuhlke (2000) argue Filipino migrants will encounter in other destinations. While households of top destination countries, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, allow Filipina migrants entry into their most intimate domestic spheres, these OFWs, most of whom work as domestic helpers (DHs hereafter) and nannies, are denied

full integration and belonging in host-countries' societies, thus making them "perpetual foreigners" (Parreñas, 2001). Filipina DHs in Hong Kong (HK hereafter) are restricted from obtaining citizenship and/or permanent residence regardless of the number of years of stay in said host country. In addition, household rules and regulations that DHs are made to abide by are another form of concretization of one's "perpetual foreigner" status. Meant to "discipline" Philippine OR FILIPINA and Indonesian maids, the household rules and regulations that their HK employers impose on them impact on

Her body, her personality, her voice, and her emotions [which] may be subject to her employer's controls, marking her status and identity as that of someone who is physically present, but who does *not* belong (Constable, 2007, p. 90).

An International Labour Organization report asserts, "laws and policies play a significant role in how employers treat workers" (Pearson et al, 2006, p. xxiv). Many times, however, an HK employer's "'rule' inaccurately represents government policy" (Constable, 2007, p. 96). Despite the legal status of Filipina DHs in HK as contracted migrant workers, and the supposed presence of laws and legal contracts to protect them, they remain shadowed, excluded, and discriminated in their very own migrant work social space. This is demonstrated as well by Constable in the accounts below:

What I did then was to keep praying to our Almighty God that He will change the attitude of my employer because I really believe that only God can change their attitude towards me (Marie, as cited in Constable, 2007, p. 192).

Indeed, we are degraded, humiliated and discriminated against.... Let's prove that we are not here to disgrace our country but to work and earn money...let's lift our hands to God, for God is mightier than anything (Padua, as cited in Constable, 2007, p. 193).

The *discourse of endurance* commonly uttered back home when one reaches a point of emotional dispiritedness is articulated in the local language as *ipasa-Diyos nalang* literally means "to pass (*pasa*)[matters] to God (*Dios*)" or simply put, "one should just leave things in God's hands."

In both accounts, migrant workers are seen using and depending on prayers and religion to help alleviate their work conditions. Guevarra (2010) argues that this religious ideology is well entrenched in the Philippine national psyche and is seen to have been imbued with the values brought about by Roman Catholicism, introduced to and imposed on the Filipinos by the Spaniards for more than 300 years. Accordingly, the migrants' invocation of the Bible and prayers demonstrates their ability to engage in *creative management* as they treat religion and its attendant practices (use of the Bible and prayers) in a utilitarian manner, helping them deal with or attempt to overcome problems and difficulties encountered on the job.

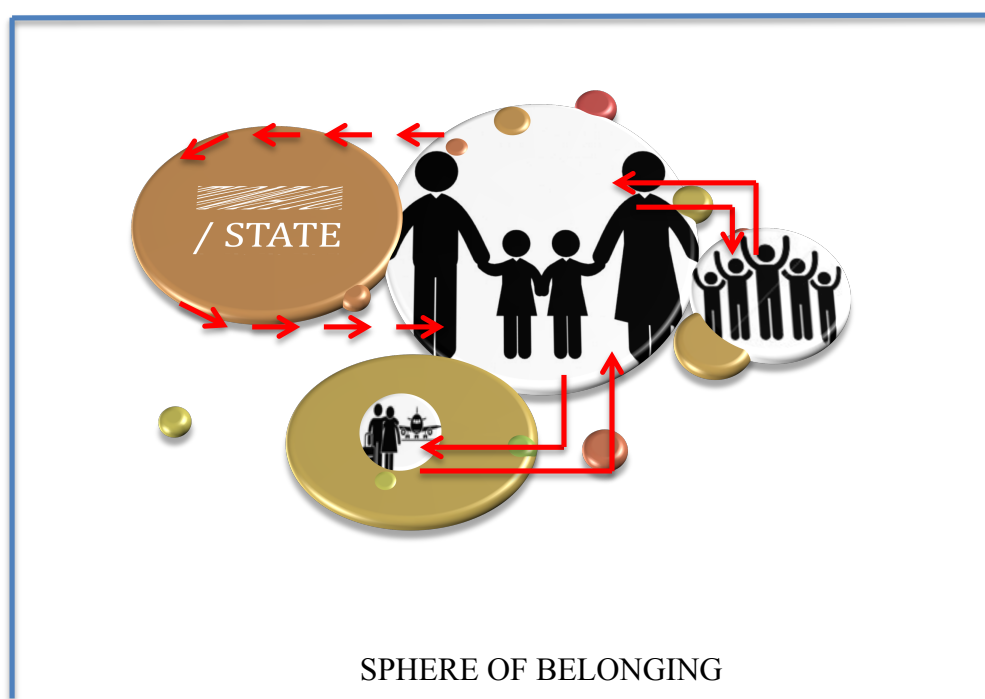
The Notions of "Home" and "Nation" vis-à-vis Family and Parenthood

The concept of "home" proves to be essentially significant to allow one to understand how its members, in this case the Filipino migrants, and their familial experiences impact them individually, and the society, collectively. Kenyon's study underscores the centrality of the concept of the "right to return" in defining "home" (as cited in Petridou, 2001). Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuñiga further discuss Kenyon's "right to return", stating that it

results from a recurring pattern of being on a journey and then coming back (as cited in Petridou, 2001). “There cannot be a home without a journey as much as there cannot be a self without an ‘other’” (p. 87).

Epifanio San Juan Jr. (2000) claims that because the Filipinos’ international dispersal is from “family or kinship webs in villages, towns, or provincial regions first” and that the Filipinos’ mobility is due mainly to perceived economic growth, “the origin to which one returns is not a nation or nation-state but a village, town, or kinship networks” (p. 236). San Juan Jr. further argues that the Filipino migrants’ notion of “home”, that is heavily attributed to family and kinship, eclipses their affinity to the Philippines as a “nation” because “the state is viewed in fact as a corrupt exploiter, not representative of the masses, a comprador¹ agent of transnational corporations and Western (specifically US) powers” (p. 236). Having said this and in keeping with San Juan Jr.’s argument, the figure below maintains that a migrant’s memories of the homeland do not exactly result from the peremptory power one’s birthplace can have over him/ her.

Figure 2: An illustration of the Filipino migrant workers’ notions of “home” and “family,” eclipsing one’s affinity to the State.



Constable’s (1999) study involving HK-based Filipina DHs aptly echoes San Juan Jr.’s statements. Her narratives below illustrate a Filipino migrant’s notion of “home” (Emphasis mine).

Every one of us dreams of **going home** to the Philippines **to be with our loved ones**—far from the daily toil of cleaning toilets, washing other

¹ Acts as a negotiator for foreign organizations that are engaged in transnational investments, trade, economic or political exploitations.

people's clothes, living with strangers who look down on us ("Are you preparing for your future?" as cited in Constable, 1999, p. 205).

In consonance with what San Juan Jr. claims, the text above indicates that going home to the Philippines is synonymous with returning to one's family or kin with whom one finds a sense of "belongingness." Notably, the discourse of going home *to* a nation is absent in the text. In addition to San Juan Jr.'s explanation, such an absence of the "nation" in the migrants' imagining of "home" can be understood in view of the fact that the State has failed its citizens in a number of significant ways. Poor care resources for the Filipino family, unstable political economy, lack of quality health care, and poor labor market state are the primary reasons that place Filipino families at a disadvantage, driving them to seek higher wages abroad (Tyner, 2004; Parreñas, 2005; The Ibon Report, 2010; Guevarra, 2010). All these certainly contribute to the eventual absence of the concept of "nation" in the migrants' notion of "home."

It is antithetical, however, that given the migrants' notion of "home" to be closely attributed to family and kin more than to anything else, family and parenthood have turned out to be the first ones to be heavily implicated by the ill effects of migration. The Philippine society does *not* approve of transnational families as the ideal fundamental social unit – "the more the transnational family diverges from the construction of the right kind of family...the more dysfunctional the family is considered to be. [T]he dominant perception of transnational families in the Philippines holds that children are much better off in traditional nuclear families with a mother and father both living at home" (Parreñas, 2005, p. 35).

Parreñas (2005) posits that in the Philippines, family refers not only to its composition as the smallest social group, but also to the *experience* its members live and share with each other. However, separated by migration, its members lack the "temporal and spatial proximity [that] are necessary ingredients to a family" (p. 33). Article 211 in the Philippine Family Constitution states, "The father and the mother shall jointly exercise parental authority over the persons of their common children" (1987). In reality, however, either the father or the mother is absent and engaged in transnational parenting instead. Even among families that have either the father or the mother around to personally supervise their children, parenthood still suffers (Parreñas, 2005):

I would tell him that that is his job. 'I wish you were here. You, you just bring home the bacon, while me, I am the one dealing with all the problems with your children' (Gosalves, as cited in Parreñas, 2005).

Interfacing the Notions of "Home" and "Identity" with the "Narrative of Ambivalence" and "Gender Ideologies"

In the text below, a Filipina's description of her return, particularly the first two to three lines, speaks of a similar notion of "home" (Emphasis mine).

This is how it always is. When I **go back home** for a week or ten days, **we [she and her husband] get along very well. He is attracted to me, and we are very happy.** But any longer than that and I am thinking...I just want to come back here again (Acosta, as cited in Constable, 1999, p. 210).

For Acosta, going home means being back into the arms of her loved ones. Returning home means compensating for one's prolonged absence, hence the happiness it gives both the left-behind family and the migrant is understandable. However, Acosta's narrative, starting from

the third line onwards, reveals another dimension to her notion of “home.” Just like Torrefranca, “home” is not what it used to be.

After being away from home for eight years now, Diane **felt like a stranger** in her parents’ home. The whole **house was no longer the same haven** which she **used to derive so much comfort** (Torrefranca, as cited in Constable, 1999, p. 205).

In both accounts, the Filipina migrants’ notions of “home” carry an ambiguous nature. In as much as San Juan Jr. argues that the notion of “home” is bonded with family and kin and not with “nation,” such familial relation, however, is challenged by the migrants’ desire to return to HK, their “home away from home.” As Constable (1999) argues in the accounts below, their migration experience has reconfigured their notion of “home” eventually leading to their articulation of a certain level of ambivalence toward return.

Ahhh...Hong Kong, we have managed to mingle with your flow of life like a home away from home (Mendoza, 1996, as cited in Constable, 1999, p. 205).

This is a piece of home...I come here each week and it doesn’t feel so bad to be away from home (*Manila Chronicle*, 1997, as cited in Constable, 1999, p. 206).

Beyond the migrants’ economic motivations, however, are pretexts propelling me to raise other questions: How does an imagining of “home” involving family and kin in the homeland get reconstructed, gradually being supplanted with an imagining of the other “home”? How does a Filipina migrant’s narrative of ambivalence relate to her own identity as a worker and as a woman, impacting the gender ideologies of the society she lives in?

The text below is Acosta’s narrative, a confession of why she cannot stay any longer than a week or 10 days in their home in the Philippines with her husband.

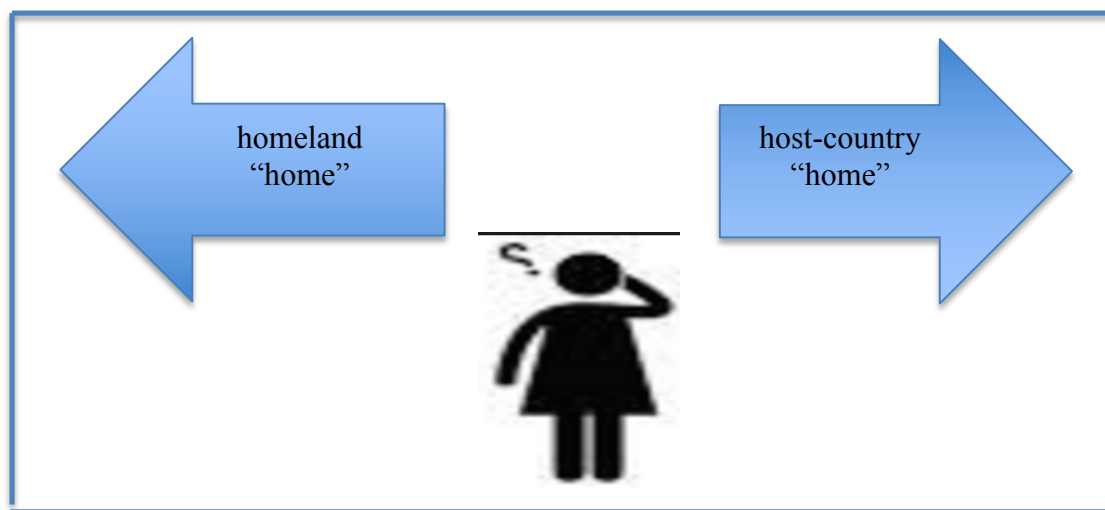
On trips home, she becomes ‘**just a nagging wife**, and we **fight** a lot. He **always wants to know where I am going**, and I get angry.’ **Unlike in Hong Kong**, ‘I have to tell him where I am going all the time.’ Life was ‘**not exciting back home**’ (Acosta, 1997, as cited in Constable, 1999, p. 210).

Acosta’s experience demonstrates a complex web of identities: Acosta’s and her husband’s. As Boehm (2008) argues,

migration results in a complex interplay between males and females—a series of negotiations through which women are exercising increased power in some circumstances but also facing the reassertion of male dominance (p. 18).

Acosta’s story establishes the power relations between her and her husband and their struggles within, as Boehm (2008) explains. Acosta has found increased power in her stay overseas, but her husband continues to assert his authority over her whenever she is back in the Philippines, which Acosta resents.

Figure 3: An illustration of a migrant worker's narratives of ambivalence.



In reference to Kenyon's definition of "home," it can be said that the significance of "home" lies in "places." Places are those that provide the necessary human conditions that are created through people's "movement, memory, encounter and association" (Tilley, as cited in Petridou, 2001, p. 88). Petridou (2001) paraphrases Mary Douglas, defining "home" as "a kind of place" whose significance is acquired from exercises that form part of one's daily routine, defining (and even re-constructing) one's self. In Acosta's case, she has found for herself a new meaning of "home" in HK. She has found significance in that "place" resulting from her day-to-day activities, eventually both defining and re-defining her. Additionally, Acosta's migrant experience has also allowed her to re-conceptualize her notion of "home" away from the physical structure of her house in her home country, but not necessarily away from its material culture. As the material culture of her house in the Philippines has been economically/ materially sustained by her earnings as a migrant worker in HK, the material culture of her house has helped her

examine realizations of the self by focusing on the self-creation of the subject [Acosta] through interaction with the object [called the] process of objectification. This is particularly important in contemporary societies that are characterized by high levels of mobility and blurring of geographical boundaries (Petridou, 2001, p. 88).

Acosta's overseas work was instrumental in making her (re)create herself via the variegated daily experiences she has had in the host country, and it is this same process of self-(re)creation that has made her not only want to leave the Philippines, but also want to remain and keep on coming back to HK. As a number of studies indicate, migration affects gender relations as mediated by a number of strands (Itzgsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005).

First, Acosta's remark – "Unlike in HK, I have to tell him where I am going all the time. Life was not exciting back home" – demonstrates her preference for the degree of freedom that she enjoys in HK. Acosta knows that for as long as she stays in HK, she will never have to comply with her husband's constant asking about her whereabouts. What does this imply?

Women adapt faster than men to the norms and values of the receiving country. Furthermore, immigrant women fear that returning to their countries will result in a loss of their independence and a return to traditional gender roles. Hence, women favor settlements in the host country as a way to protect their advances (Itzgsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005, p. 897; see also Cole & McNulty, 2011).

Thus, having grown accustomed to her new lifestyle in her “home away from home”, Acosta’s life in HK has helped transform her gender subjectivities. She knows the situation will change as soon as she returns home for good, hence her resistance.

Second, Acosta knows that back in her home in the Philippines, she will be jobless. Should she find a job in her home country, her earnings will be neither enough nor comparable to what she was earning in HK. With her earnings from doing overseas work, she has not only secured financial independence, but she has also enjoyed reaping positive experiences bolstered by her ability to send monetary remittances back home. Acosta’s financial remittances and felt financial independence confirm that migration “can destabilize rigid gender roles – it is generally positive for women” (Boehm, 2008, p. 18). Acosta knows that the traditional gender roles she and her husband observed in the past in the Philippines have already changed – *destabilized* – and that their current situation works to her advantage. From being a housewife in the Philippines, whose role was limited to that of being a care-giving and nurturing mother, she has been given the chance to negotiate and transform her role, thus shifting her identity to that of an income-earner, a role often attributed to the sphere of men. Matthew Gutmann contends that as Acosta’s femininity and her husband’s masculinity “...are not...embalmed states of being,” it is natural to witness the couple’s gender subjectivities to be constantly shifting and this eventually makes “themselves into whole new entities” (as cited in Boehm, 2008, p. 17). To be sure, other couples do not necessarily go through exactly the same experience as Acosta and her husband did. Boehm (2012) posits, however, that gender role shifts are a natural general tendency, especially within the context of migration and transnational living.

Conclusion

In keeping with the context of Filipino migration in Asia, I end this paper by positing a few suggestions. For one, I maintain that to deeply understand the concept of “home” and “nation” of other Filipino overseas workers from other destinations, specific migrant work contexts should be factored in, as host countries’ employment conditions vary from one country to another. Doing so should be helpful in determining the specific reference points they might have. This is mainly due to the fact that a host country’s labor conditions are considered as one of the main determinants affecting the actions and decisions a worker engages in. Secondly, as a migrant’s concepts of “identity” and “belonging” vary in terms of levels/degrees and intensity, I hold that such notions be identified early on, if only to effectively make sense of their specific experiences within the migrant social space whose sense of affiliation impinges on their engagements, actions, identity construction/reconstruction, and other personal decisions enacted. Thirdly, I suggest that for a more effective understanding of a migrant’s overseas labor experience, developing a heightened sense of awareness of a migrant worker’s gender dynamics, ideologies, subjectivities, and other gender-based concepts should be undertaken. Within the same vein, I hold as well that a migrant worker’s concepts of family, parenthood, and family relations be made central in ensuing discussions and analyses. As discussed in this paper, a Filipino

migrant worker's concept of family cannot be sidelined mainly because it is, in fact, the one that a person returns to and considers "home," and not the nation/state. Doing so is also considered appropriate because although the family is deemed as a private institution, the actions families engage in/ transact with cannot be fully severed from the public space. Lastly, I maintain as well the pervasiveness of religion in understanding a migrant's experience. While migration, for the most part, has been directly correlated to fulfilling a person's economic agenda, a migrant worker's religious affiliation, such as the case of the Filipino migrant workers cited in this study, nevertheless, plays a crucial role. Religion may concern a people's expression of faith, but it also relates to how they utilize it for practical reasons.

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