

Performing Identities, Creating Cultures of Circulation: Filipina migrants between home and abroad¹

Deirdre McKay

Research Fellow

Department of Human Geography

Research School of Pacific and Asian studies

The Australian National University

Canberra ACT 0200 Australia

deirdre.mckay@anu.edu.au

Introduction

Research exploring the intertwined nature of culture and economy focuses on the ways that specific local traditions co-produce and rework global flows of people and information, creating what Lee and LiPuma (2002) call 'cultures of circulation'. Here, I apply their theorization of circulation and culture to the experiences of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines. This paper examines the cultural politics and identities produced through women's migration for contract domestic work, drawing on ethnographic data I have collected in the Philippines, Singapore and Canada as well as the work conducted by colleagues in Hong Kong, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Lee and LiPuma (2002) argue that circulation is more than simply the movement of people, ideas and commodities from one culture to another but a cultural process with its own forms. In what follows, I suggest how the culture of circulation attached to Filipinas as overseas workers produces practices of evaluation, constraint, consociality and resubjection in the interaction between the circulating female migrants, broader Philippine society, and

¹ This paper was presented to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June-2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

receiving nations overseas. I examine how new forms of identity emerge through performative practices of femininity deployed within these new translocal spaces of community. I then outline two performative identities – Filipina and *balikbayan* – and suggest how, in the circulation between these two poles, a new, translocal, version of femininity emerges. I conclude by indicating how a culture of circulation emerges around female migration in terms of both processes of imagining and of recognition at both the local and global scales.

Filipina transnationalism and place-based problematics

Migrant female domestic workers taking short-term contracts in foreign nations are transnationals. However, little of the literature on transnationalism addresses their specific experiences. Most researchers working on transnational communities have directed their attention to the cosmopolitan identities of globally mobile skilled workers who enjoy multiple citizenships and state protection (Mitchell, 1995; see Vertovec, 1999). The transnationalism of working-class and temporary migrants, often unskilled and unprotected, has received less attention (Werbner, 1999). Female-led and highly gendered transnationalisms and the role of gendered identities in constructing transnational cultural flows is likewise an area that has, as yet, received comparatively little attention (Pratt and Yeoh, 2003.) The Philippines is a key site for work on female-led transnationalisms, having the largest per capita number of female workers overseas (Boyle, 2002; Mills, 2003). In 2003, 69% of the newly hired overseas workers leaving the Philippines were female. In that same year, a total of \$ (US) 6, 345,815 was remitted to the Philippines from land-based overseas workers.² Money sent home by women working overseas is an important source of livelihood support for many households, particularly in the rural Philippines (Tyner and Donaldson, 1999). The transnational circulation of cohorts of female

² As of December 2001, the Philippines estimated that it had 7,402,894 workers overseas. Of these emigrants, 2,736,528 were permanent workers, 3,099,940 were on temporary contracts and 1,566,426 were classified as ‘irregular’. All statistics are from the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/html/statistics.html>, (accessed 06/10/04).

migrants to work sites overseas is transforming village landscapes, economies and cultures (McKay, 2003; Rigg, 2001).

The place-based specificities of transnational experiences are also relatively poorly characterized. Though much of the literature suggests transnationalism is produced by cosmopolitan modes of identification, it is clear that neighbourhood-based forms of identity, constituted through the practices of locality are also becoming transnational (Appadurai, 1995 and 1996; Hage, 2003). In the literature on migrant Filipina workers, Anderson (2001), Constable (1997 and 2003), Parreñas (2001), Pratt (1997, 1998 and 1999) and Tacoli (1996) examine Filipinas' experiences as workers in receiving nations. Studies of the relations between migrants and sending households focus on the experiences of respondents in sending places (Banzon-Bautista, 1989; Nagasaka, 1998; Pertierra, 1994, 2002) and of returned migrants (Barber, 2000; McKay, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). As yet, no place-based studies have yet examined both sending and receiving sites. Drawing on this literature and my own work with Filipina migrants in the Philippines and Canada, my intention is to move toward a framework for understanding how gendered identities might be approached in a multi-sited, place-based study of Filipina migrant experiences.

In the first part of the paper, I sketch of Filipina migrant's sending communities, focussing on the rural Philippines and examining how women working abroad on short-term contracts maintain their transnational ties to their sending households and villages. I then suggest how these practices of circulating translocality can open up new spaces of female freedom and create new female subject positions. The next section of the paper introduces identities formed within the global processes of migrant circulation. I select two of these identities for further analysis, exploring the construction of a *balikbayan* (returned to the nation) identity for migrants circulating to the Philippines from overseas and a Filipina identity for those migrants departing the Philippines for 'abroad.'³

³ Pilipino terms appear in italics and are defined in brackets within the text. Single quotes are used for terms frequently applied by respondents speaking Filipino English, e.g. 'abroad' for places outside the Philippines hosting Filipino migrant workers or accepting emigrants.

At home – migrant sending communities in the Philippines

The Philippine experience of exporting female labour can be set within historic trends across regional labour markets. In Southeast Asia, rural women have historically moved to relatively nearby urban centres for work, but, since the late 1970s, have begun to move internationally on a ‘temporary’ basis, in order to take advantage of the relatively higher returns to labour offered by uneven development (Hugo, 2002). Migrants from the relatively poorer nations, the Philippines and Indonesia have taken contracts in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. Filipinas have also used those Southeast Asian cities as entry points to global labour markets and jobs in Europe and North America (McKay, 2004).

Governments and households alike have tended to see rural-urban and rural-international contract migrants as short-term sojourners. For many of these so-called ‘circular migrants’, permanently returning home is not necessarily possible; after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, rural sending areas could not reabsorb flows of retrenched migrants (Rigg, 2001). Yet migrants do not sever ties with their households – in many areas, rural households are now highly dependent on migrants’ international remittances (Rigg, 2001; Pertierra *et al*, 2002). Remittances suggest that relations between migrants and households are not attenuated by transnational mobility but can even be intensified.

This is the case in Al-Alinao Norte, a village in the northern Philippines, where female migrants support households through contract work overseas. The community is in La Union Province, part of the Ilocos region. The Ilocos has a long history of migration and one of the highest proportions of female overseas contract migrants, *per capita*, in the Philippines (Pertierra *et al*, 1992; Pertierra, 1994), the nation with the largest flows of overseas migrant workers in the global economy (Tyner and Donaldson, 1999:1). Some villages in the Ilocos are largely defined by female out-migration. One village surveyed in the early 1990s had thirteen percent of the adult working population overseas, with seventy percent of those migrants female, and sixty-two percent of households reporting migrant workers (Pertierra, 1994:67).

Transnational links between the Philippines and receiving nations are mediated at the village or locality level, pairing specific sending places with receiving neighbourhoods through highly personalised relations (see Pertierra *et al.*, 1992). A preliminary visit in September 2003 indicated Al-Alinao Norte is dependent on large numbers of female migrants circulating back and forth from Hong Kong. There are approximately 300 households (as counted by house in the provincial census), divided into four kin-based household clusters called *sitios*. Smallholder production of rice and tobacco has formed the basis of the traditional economy, supplemented with self-employed production of swine, vegetables and services for the local market. Women began to look for contract work overseas in the early 1970s. While this migration is temporary in nature, individual migrants have spent up to 25 years outside the Philippines on consecutive contracts abroad. An estimated 85% of households currently have at least one member overseas, the majority being female domestic workers in Hong Kong.

In the village site, impressive houses, constructed with remitted earnings, now sit amidst the rice fields and little tobacco is grown. Men and children inhabit these houses. Frequently, the absent wife's mother has joined the household as overseer. Men have taken up traditionally female tasks such as childcare and laundry, while returned migrant women are running for traditionally male positions in local government. Men still farm a small selection of commercial crops, investing remittances in agriculture, but no longer undertake much subsistence cultivation. They are, they say, 'waiting to go abroad'. The community is developing what might be called an offshore economy where cash changes hands in Hong Kong in payment for food and goods traded at home. Meanwhile, a small number of successful Hong Kong migrant workers have subsequently relocated their households to Australia and Britain. They employ kin as caretakers for their local interests and visit sporadically, yet remain active in community politics. These households have high local prestige, many residents expressing the hope that, with successive contracts, they, too, will be able to join their 'co-villagers' abroad.

Abroad – work overseas and transnational ties

Overseas, migrant women from communities like Al-Alinao Norte live and work in private households, conditions that restrict their mobility and social contacts with locals (Mills, 2003). Filipina migrants are known for socializing with other migrants from their sending locality (Law, 2001; Constable, 1997, 2003). Though they make take successive contracts, communication and remittance practices combined with continual interaction with other co-locals overseas can continue and even intensify, rather than attenuate, social immediacy between migrants and sending localities (McKay, 2003). Overseas workers send home cash remittances, either through special remittance agencies or banks. They interact with their home community through technologies such as text messages, letters, phone calls, tapes, e-mail and videos. Migrant women also ship large boxes – known as '*balikbayan* boxes' containing household goods and clothes for redistribution at home (Rafael, 1997; Szanton Blanc, 1996).

The materialisation of translocal relations is an area for further research. Relations between migrants and their households are mediated by these communications technologies, but also through actors such as remittance agencies, employment agents, banks and shipping firms. The influence of these other actors in creating the networks of translocality has yet to be characterized. Meanwhile, in sending households, the ways people spend the money received, the content and impact of communication and the practices of redistribution attached to the *balikbayan* boxes have not been analysed. Likewise, little is known of the ways migrants receive and respond to requests from their families and the extent of their long-distance participation in household decisions in, for instance, agricultural production and land use. To undertake research on these questions, however, requires an understanding of the identities of migrant women both at home and overseas. Understanding the identities at play in the culture of migrant circulation will allow an understanding of what might be expected of migrant women and what they may expect from themselves and others in terms of translocal relations.

Migration – new spaces and new identities

My recent work suggests that migration opens up new spaces of female freedom in sending neighbourhoods (McKay, 2001, 2003). This paper is intended to support further exploration of this theme in terms of migrant women's translocal relations and the expectations – both their own and others' - that migrants negotiate.

Remitting cash to family members can absolve migrant women from obligations to consult husbands and parents when it comes to decisions about their lives and work (McKay, 2002, 2004; Tacoli, 1996). Migrants may also keep some of their earnings for their own independent investments in education, further migration and small enterprises (Gibson *et al*, 2001). Dependent households can resent these 'diversions,' claiming a right to the migrant's full salary on the basis of her gendered maternal or filial duty (McKay, 2004.) Thus households interpellate migrants, but migrants also use the experience of migration and their savings to become other kinds of subjects – investors, politicians, and citizens. While migration may create newly legitimate claims for women to inhabit previously masculine civic and economic roles, the issue of the power to request, direct, claim and distribute remittances simultaneously reveals tensions over gender roles in the mesh of household relations. Along with these economic changes come new modes of affect, forms of subjectivity and new cultural practices of evaluation, constraint, consociality and resubjection. These practices emerge in the interaction between the circulating female migrants, their sending locality, broader Philippine society, and receiving neighbourhoods and nations overseas.

By enabling new female subject positions and feminine subjectivities, migration produces changes in the materiality of local landscapes, in the sociality and reproducibility of household economies and in the forms of agency arising within gender roles. In previous research in Ifugao Province, I found that remittances are invested to change subsistence agricultural systems to less sustainable commercial cash crops, replacing rice with input-intensive vegetables (McKay, 2003). Here, the absence of women intensified the work of husbands and extended families, creating new masculine roles, relations and forms of knowledge for men who share the parenting of children with a long-distance partner/breadwinner, rather than a 'traditional wife'. These

observations suggest that migrants and their partners must renegotiate their norms for interaction and expectations of each other around remittances, investments, parenting and affection. Thus, migration can be seen to begin at home or – more literally – in the home. Research shows that ‘the household’ cannot be taken to represent shared income, resources and goals; that women’s individual migration is not always a reaction to household consumption that exceeds locally available resources; and that household-wide decisions are rarely made about migration (Westwood and Phizacklea, 2000). Instead, women’s decisions to migrate are usually motivated by issues of money and respect in intra-household transfers and relationships, not by their community situation. These findings suggest changes in gender roles and expectations as households are stretched across space.

As Rigg (2001:93) describes it, migration has caused the household to become more ‘spatially fragmented but socially embedded’. As I have suggested, above, this feature of social embeddedness needs to be unpacked by examining patterns of kinship, indebtedness, distribution of remittances and the communication strategies linking migrants, households and community within the Philippines, but also the broader sets of subject positions, techniques and technologies that make up a broader, globalised culture of circulation. Next, I map some of the new subject positions created for and by migrant Filipinas, drawing on the literature on Filipina migrant workers produced both in the Philippines and overseas.

Circulation and identities in women’s work abroad

The literature on Filipina migrants suggests a partial list of subject positions might read⁴:

⁴ Drawn from Anderson, Barber, Constable, Law, Parreñas, Pratt, Tacoli, Tyner, Rafael, Yeoh and Huang and my own observations. As in any ethnographic work that reflects a lived, real world, many of the identifications overlap between authors and studies, thus I’ve chosen not to attribute the exploration of specific identities to particular authors here. The References section provides an introduction to the work of these authors.

dutiful daughter; self-sacrificing mother; global servant; domestic helper; nanny; deskilled professional; national hero (*bagong bayani* – new people’s hero); unruly migrant; ‘mail-order’ bride; ‘single’ separated woman; community stalwart; consumer; stingy returnee; political activist; sex worker (*japayuki* – associated with entertainers working in Japan); entrepreneur; *probynsyana* (naïve provincial girl); successful Filipina; failed returnee

As Lee and Li Puma describe it, circulation is a cultural process with its own forms. In examining the culture of ‘going abroad’ from the Philippines, we can identify subject positions that cross between different scales of identification – processes of evaluation, constraint, consociality and resubjectivation that are iterated within the series of interactions between the circulating female migrants, sending localities, broader Philippine society and receiving nations and neighbourhoods overseas. Note that the identities listed in the preceding paragraph are applied to migrants from different perspectives. These identifications reflect the possible perspectives of a foreign host or employer, a Philippine nationalist consciousness, a class-conscious Filipino elite, a co-villager, and those of members of a migrant’s own family.

To illustrate ways in which women may move between these listed subject positions and others that they create themselves, I draw on interviews conducted with female migrants overseas and with some who have returned to the Philippines, as well as Filipino family members and service agency workers who support migrants abroad. In the quotes, I have selected, below, I choose to highlight two forms of performative feminine identity – ‘Filipina’ and *balikbayan* (returned migrant) – in individual women’s experiences of migration. I selected these two identities because they emerged most frequently in interview transcripts as being the definitive explanation of migrant women’s feelings of alienation or conflict with the surrounding community. Abroad, migrants felt excluded in various ways on the basis of the ‘Filipina’ identity. Returning home, it was identification as *balikbayan* that marked migrants as obliged to meet a different set of obligations and expectations in their sending communities.

In the section which follows, I show how both Filipina and *balikbayan* identities are asymptotic ideals for which real women fall short. And both identities have long and complex genealogies, shaped by colonial and neo-colonial relations between the Philippines and first Spain and then the

United States as coloniser. The identities of Filipina and *balikbayan* are, as Judith Butler (1997) describes performatives, naming practices that both enable and constrain individual agency as they simultaneously make personhood possible. Brief sketches of these names will make their performative nature evident.

Performing Filipina femininity

The term Filipina is Spanish in origin. The name originally signified a female Spaniard born in the colony, thus its application reinscribes a much older European construct of upper class female domesticity on to a colonized woman. Traditional Filipina virtues are embodied in deals of self-sacrificing maternal care and *mestiza* (mixed race) beauty. Not until the rise of nineteenth century Philippine nationalism were colonised women, previously called '*indias*' actually named as Filipinas. In the global economic restructuring of the late 20th century, the Filipina, formerly constructed as *maybahay*, *lang* (plain housewife) was reidentified as Export Processing Zone factory labourer, *japayuki* (overseas entertainer), and *D.H.* (domestic helper or migrant domestic worker.) This refiguring of the Filipina happened through the perceptions of foreign capital and migrant receiving nations and, in the Philippines, there was a public perception that the Filipina was debased and the nation embarrassed by these new forms of labour (Rafael, 1997).

Today, the name signifies the national femininity of a post-colonial Asian nation and is identified with the export of female migrant domestic workers. In the Philippines, accommodating oneself to Filipina femininity today is attractive not least because its accoutrements – pale skin, formal education and conspicuous consumption – are themselves cultural capital and have been since the Spanish era. Yet, beyond the Philippines, this history is obscured and Filipinas report that their name is now synonymous with 'domestic worker', marking them by ethnicity, class and, frequently, temporary migrant status. Filipina femininity is now materialized, overseas, in the Filipina-as-maid, a generalized unskilled body (Pratt, 1997 and 1998).

The export of female labour from the lower middle class reflects, in part, tensions around class and gender relations within the Philippines and Filipino households. Women's work abroad is

understood through domestic themes: being household-centred is a desirable feminine trait and the motive that drives women abroad, sacrificing themselves through separation in order to provide for the economic needs of their families. A returned migrant explained her migration to me as follows, ‘When I see our rice pot is empty, I’m the one to find for our needs, so I went to Hong Kong’. Metaphorically comparing the household budget to the cooking pot locates her overseas work within a Filipina’s feminine domestic responsibility to make ends meet. This woman constructs her migration in terms consonant with the identities of ‘dutiful daughter’ or ‘self-sacrificing mother’. There are ironies of distance here for so-called ‘dutiful daughters’. By taking up domestic work overseas, a woman can increase the future entitlements she may have to family resources. Sending money home, rather than remaining to do domestic chores ‘for free’ is one way a woman can renegotiate her position in the household unit. As one Filipina migrant in Italy explained, remitting money to her family at home provides an ‘emotional advantage’, ensuring that the family members who benefit from the money remain obligated to her in the future (Tacoli, 1996: 18).

Research suggests that part of the lure of overseas work for rural women, the least ‘Filipina’ within the nation, is that it presents a personal and familial ticket out of the skin-browning sun and into contacts with global ‘culture’, particularly as consumed by and represented through middle-class Manila society (Pertierra, 1994). Thus, to become truly Filipina, in the eyes of her countrymen, a lower middle-class rural woman might well choose to leave the Philippines.

Being Filipina is thus constructed around meeting obligations to others at home, internalising external views of a colonised, ethnicised self and navigating the stereotypes produced by both a national discourse of femininity and those created by previous cohorts of co-ethnics abroad. The following quotes describing experiences of being Filipina overseas exemplify this positioning.

On being Filipina overseas:

[Quotes are from interviews with migrants conducted in Canada, October 1999]

Comments from Luz, a Filipina migrant in her 40s, working in Canada as a ‘nanny-caregiver’–

'Because I don't want to be just a nanny anymore, I went for evaluation and my degree wasn't even recognized. And I became realistic about it. Even though we have a good education, it doesn't matter to them. Because we're Filipino we are only a domestic helper...'

Sasha, an NGO worker in Canada –

'Actually between the Filipino community which is already landed immigrant – or people who came directly as landed immigrants – they look down on the domestic workers. There's a very strong separation. 'So you're only a nanny; we don't really communicate with you or we don't really deal with you'. And so the Filipinas have a tendency to stick within their domestic workers group'.

Ally, a migrant domestic worker in Canada –

'And I became realistic about it. I'm not shy to become a domestic worker. That I'm a Filipino woman, I'm not ashamed to anybody. Everybody is the same. (B)eing a Filipino... they look at us like we're small. Even though we have a good education, it doesn't matter to them. Because we're Filipino we are only a domestic helper. They only can control us because they have the money and power, of course, here in Canada'.

These quotes illustrate the contradiction and negotiations of women who are trying to accommodate themselves to 'being Filipina' overseas. They feel discriminated against by broader Canadian society for being Filipino and they experience exclusion from immigrant co-ethnics because of the presumptive class background attached to their migrant worker class positions. These women find themselves in a bind. They are perhaps 'too Filipina' to move beyond domestic work and into the Canadian labour market. To transcend the identity, they must somehow prove themselves to be 'less so' or exceptional (see Pratt, 1997). Simultaneously, they experience not being 'Filipina enough' to enjoy the support of the longstanding community of Filipino migrants in Canada. Canadian society and the Filipino-Canadian community both evaluate the Filipina domestic worker migrants I interviewed, above, in terms of their ethnic background and skills as well as their class background and 'cultural capital'. These practices of evaluation constrain migrants' abilities to both find work and experience consociality in their overseas receiving localities. Migrant women in this situation experience resubjectivation as

'Filipina', identified as domestic workers by their Canadian hosts. Their co-ethnics see them as less than 'Filipina' -- rather than embodying successful entrepreneurial migrants, these women are seen as shamefully poor and deskilled representatives of their national femininity.

Performing *balikbayan* identity

Balikbayan comes from the Tagalog term for return, *balik*, and the term for town, *bayan* – a term later extended to mean nation (Szanton Blanc, 1996: 178). Like Filipina, *balikbayan* identity has a genealogy that is steeped in colonial relations. The term *balikbayan* initially was applied to emigrants returning from the United States for a short visit (Rafael, 1997; Szanton Blanc, 1996). *Balikbayans* from America were often seen as snobbish and superior -- neo-colonizers who disparaged the nation they had left behind. They brought with them boxes of gifts – a taste of life in America – that were intended to prove the inadequacy of the Philippines. Rafael (1997) notes that *balikbayans* were, until the 1980s, distinguished from overseas contract workers who brought gifts home to kin in order to gain their respect and recognition. The 1980s, however, marked the beginning of a period of transition in the meaning of the term *balikbayan* (Szanton Blanc, 1996). The Philippine government began to include overseas contract workers within the official definition of *balikbayan* for customs and excise and tourism purposes. In 1989, the Philippine government introduced special duty-free status for such boxes of gifts (as long as the items were 'used goods') as a way of encouraging both 'return tourism' from Filipino-American emigrants and allowing contract workers to bring additional value home to their households (Szanton Blanc, 1996). The popular understanding of the term also began to shift. In Asipulo, in 1996, one community elder explained to me, 'We have no migrants in America. These OCWs (overseas contract workers), they are our *balikbayans* here.'

As with the tensions around Filipina identity discussed above, there is a similar tension between being ascriptively *balikbayan* (returned) and the ways in which returned migrants are expected to live up to that identity by their families and communities. In fieldwork I conducted in 1996-1997, I found that becoming recognized as 'properly' *balikbayan* was achieved by returning to the Philippines and, once there, conducting oneself in a particular way as a self-made woman.

Balikbayan identity was also associated with ideas of selfishness, self-sufficiency and a set of class differences emerging between returned migrants and their sending communities and families. There are a whole series of performative practices that might be described as a ‘*balikbayan* style’ that now apply to returned contract workers and visiting American emigrants alike. The following comments are drawn from research conducted in Asipulo, Ifugao Province, in 1996-1997. Similar sorts of observations, I argue, would be applicable in other rural communities with growing cohorts of migrant contract workers circulating back and forth from sites overseas.

In Asipulo, in interviews and casual interactions, the people I spoke with expressed pride in the women who have been ‘abroad’. The cultural capital they had accumulated by going abroad – fairer skin, a particular style of presentation, distinctively imported clothes, make-up etc. – was considered very important, both for the women themselves and for what it indicated about the abilities, resources and sophistication of the community. People would point out returned migrant women to me, saying, for example, things such as, “There, see?! She’s our *balikbayan*, the pale one with the sunglasses.” When I interviewed returned migrants in this rural, agricultural community, I found that they did not return to farming. They conceptualised themselves as having a different identity than their pre-departure farming selves. Several of these respondents expressed that their reluctance to farm came, not from within themselves, but from the sense that the rest of the community would think of them as ‘failed’ in their plans if they returned to agriculture.

I also found resistance, too, to the idea that women should work overseas at all. One woman who was deeply involved in community health care explained to me that, ‘instead of looking everywhere for money, we stay here and care for our children.’ Her words suggested that women who took on migrant work were materialistic, failing their children by following their own apparently ‘selfish’ desires for money.

Balikbayan women experienced new forms of cultural exclusion. One returned migrant worker I talked with, Tala, had invested some of her savings to become a local distributor of Tupperware. Her investment failed because many people took the containers on credit but never paid their

debts. When I asked her neighbours about this, they argued that, since Tala was ‘already rich from abroad’, she did not need their money. Tupperware, for her, they claimed, was ‘just a sideline’. Tala, however, told me that she had staked her savings on the venture and was now considering taking another contract in Singapore, much as she disliked the idea of leaving her children again. Her other option, to run a small *sari-sari* (corner type) store from her house, would also be doomed: ‘If you don’t give credit, they won’t buy anything, but if I give credit, they say “never mind, she’s OCW already”, and then it’s only credits and never money. People are jealous here; they don’t want to know how hard it is, abroad’. Being unable to live up to the expectations and become a ‘real’ *balikbayan*, rather than a failed ‘one day millionaire’ (see Constable, 1999), is a reason that women choose to migrate on subsequent contracts, again taking on the Filipina identity overseas. Many *balikbayan* women, like Tala, choose to leave for subsequent contracts, creating a local culture of circulation.

Behind these local experiences of return, we can see the evaluation of neighbours and family as to the ‘success’ of the *balikbayan*, the constraints of community expectations on returned women’s actions, exclusion from local forms of consociality on the basis of women’s new *balikbayan* status and, lastly, the resubjectivation of returned women as no longer ‘really’ part of their sending community.

Circulation, value and discursive strategies

The previous discussion of identities suggests how the ongoing circulation of migrant women from the Philippines to jobs overseas emerges from movement between these two performative poles – the yin of the Filipina and the yang of the *balikbayan*. As Lee and LiPuma (2002) indicate, such a culture of circulation works to mediate between notions of tradition and modernity with forms of value. Mapping these two identities on to notions of tradition and modernity here, we can see the seemingly ‘traditional’ domestic values that underpin Filipina identity swinging to the self-sufficiency and self-development discourses that support *balikbayan* women. The latter could be named as a kind of ‘modern’ femininity. Mediating between these

subject positions for individual women are indeed notions of value and, more specifically, indebtedness and enterprise.

In my work in Asipulo, I found the performance of both ‘Filipina’ and *balikbayan* identities to be supported by the deployment of discourses on debt – the value produced to meet obligations to kin and community – and enterprising exploration – the value produced and circulated by appropriating the surplus of women’s labour elsewhere.⁵

Migrants deployed discourses of debt that spoke of meeting family obligations and expectations, but also opened up the space of freedom to leave the household in a frame made intelligible through Filipina domesticity. Debts of gratitude (*utang na loob*) also come into play between family and household members. Aida (interviewed in the Philippines in 1997), explained: ‘I am the one who was sent to school. They sacrificed, my brothers and my parents, to pay my education. Now I am the one to earn, and to make improvements for them’. Aida is attempting to reposition herself from debtor to her family to patron by ‘earning’ overseas.

The enterprise and exploration discourses deployed to describe migrant women convey a sense of a migrant feminine self that cannot be contained by the narrow confines of the sending locality, a place that lacks modernity. For example, a young migrant worker I met, Sally, had just returned from her first contract. She was trying to recruit ‘girls’ for her ‘auntie’s’ maid agency in Singapore. Sally explained the lure of overseas work for young women in these terms:

What’s left for them here, anyway? They get married in high school, have their babies... There’s no money, there’s nothing here. What can they do? They are already wives, mothers but it is still kurang [lacking]. Always looking somewhere for food, for money. No nice things, no respect. So they like to go abroad. It is something new for them. There is money... but there is also new friends, new places to learn.

⁵ See Gibson, Law and McKay (2001) for a deeper exploration of surplus accumulation and redistribution in Filipina migration.

In Sally's description, the local is lacking modernity and cannot generate either value or support the performance of the kinds of identities to which women aspire. This local is deficient in providing the 'nice things' and 'respect' that underpin performances of Filipina femininity at home. Another description of enterprise and the lacking local came from an older man describing his niece, returned from Singapore and planning to go to Taiwan: 'How can we keep her here, now that she has seen those far places? There is no more for her to do, except more adventures there'. His niece was a 27-year-old mother of three. Though married, she carried a passport stating her marital status as 'single'. Her remittances from Singapore had provided the capital for her husband's market gardening and supported her extended family while they looked after her children (McKay, 2003). She soon left the village for a second contract, this time in Taiwan.

Conclusion

In moving towards a framework to describe the ways gendered identities might be approached in a multi-sited, place-based study of Filipina migrant experiences, I have shown here how the performative practices of Filipina and *balikbayan* femininity are mutually constitutive with a culture of circulation. This culture produces migrant women and encourages their continued movement between home and contract work in sites overseas. The movement of migrant women produces value – both economic and cultural capital – in the relations between sending and receiving localities. I want to suggest here that the subject positions produced within the particular forms of transnational economic organization – here, Filipina migrant domestic work – are also doing the work of making this new culture of circulation in the Philippines. The interactions of Filipina migrants with their employers and co-ethnics abroad can inflect their experiences, behaviours and expectations on returning home. Likewise, expectations for *balikbayan* women on return are structured, in the local imaginations of sending communities, by what they expect to have been migrants' experiences overseas. Tala, above, perhaps exemplifies a performance of a new translocal femininity emergent from this culture of circulation. Her story suggests how women who fail to become recognized as successful *balikbayans* can go abroad to negotiation and perform 'Filipina' identity again.

As Lee and LiPuma (2002) argue, cultures of circulation are produced processes both of recognition and of imagination. It is evident that both recognition and imagination lie beneath the identities I have teased out here. At the local scale, in sending communities, there is an imaginary of the life of Filipina workers abroad as glamorous and economically secure. Simultaneously, sending communities refuse to recognize that work overseas may not provide financial security for *balikbayan* women. *Balikbayans* attempting to rejoin their home communities as local business people and investors find that their co-villagers refuse to readmit them into full participation in the community. Meanwhile, migrant domestic workers have to negotiate a globalized imaginary that maps Filipina identity on to domestic work (Parreñas, 2001), disparaging their skills and abilities and conferring on them low status vis a vis other groups of Filipino emigrants. There is a refusal at this global, receiving nation scale to recognize that many of these women, as temporary workers, are required to return home and reinsert themselves into their sending communities (McKay, 2004; Parreñas, 2001). Thus, while abroad, migrant domestic workers in some ways are an embodied extension of the economic space of their sending village into sites overseas.

On the basis of this analysis, I suggest that the circulation of women from home to abroad and from Filipina to *balikbayan* hinges on these processes of imagination and recognition. As I have argued above, understanding the identities at play in this culture of migrant circulation allows us to understand the expectations of migrants and others in terms of translocal relations. Thus, in approaching migrant sending communities and migrants overseas, future research will need to explore the specific local and translocal identities of Filipina and *balikbayan*. This paper has argued that these identities are performative across local and global scales of experience. I suggest that this performativity can be mapped in very specific ways within the experiences of migrant women from a specific community. Thus, in future work between Al-Alinao Norte and Hong Kong, I plan to trace the terms through which Filipina and *balikbayan* are imagined and recognized in both sites and within the circulating community of female migrants themselves.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (2001) Different roots in common ground: transnationalism and migrant domestic work in London, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 27, 4: 673-683.
- Appadurai, A. (1995) The production of locality, in R. Fardon ed. Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge, pp. 204–225 (New York, Routledge).
- Appadurai, A. (1996) Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Banzon-Bautista, C. (1989) The Saudi connection: agrarian change in a Pampangan village, 1977-1984, in Hart, G., Turton, A., and White, B., eds. Agrarian Transformations: Local Processes and the State in Southeast Asia, pp. 144-158 (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Barber, P. (2000) Agency in Philippine women's labour migration and provisional diaspora, Women's Studies International Forum, 23, 4: 399-411.
- Boyle, P. (2002) Population geography: transnational women on the move, Progress in Human Geography, 26, 4: 531-543.
- Butler, J. (1997) Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative (New York: Routledge).
- Constable, N. (1997) Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Constable, N. (2003) A transnational perspective on divorce and marriage: Filipina wives and workers. Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 10: 163-180.

Gibson, K., Law, L., and McKay, D. (2001) Beyond heroes and victims: Filipina contract migrants, economic activism and class transformation, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 3, 3: 365-386.

Hage, G. (2003) 'Identification, Transnationalism and Kinship', *Cultures in Collision: Transnationalism and Identities*, Paper presented at the University of Technology, Sydney, 9 May 2003.

Hugo, G. (2002) "Women's international labour migration" in Robinson, K., and Bessell, S., eds. Women in Indonesia: gender, equity and development, pp.158 – 178 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies).

Law, L. (2001) Home cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong, Ecumene, 8, 3: 264-283.

Lee, B. and LiPuma E. (2002) Cultures of circulation: the imaginations of modernity Public Culture, 14, 1: 191-213.

McKay, D. (2001) Migration and masquerade: gender and habitus in the Philippines, Geography Research Forum, 21: 44-56.

McKay, D. (2002) Negotiating positionings: exchanging life stories in research interviews, in Moss, P, ed. Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods, pp. 187-199, (London: Blackwell Publishers).

McKay, D. (2003) Cultivating new local futures: remittance economies and land-use patterns in Ifugao, Philippines, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 34, 2: 285-306.

McKay, D. (2004) Dutiful daughters abroad: globalisation and the Philippine transnational household, Gender, Place and Culture, (in press).

- Mitchell, K. (1995) Flexible circulation in the Pacific Rim: capitalisms in cultural context, Economic Geography, 71,4: 364-382.
- Mills, M.B. (2003) Gender and inequality in the global labor force, Annual Review of Anthropology, 32: 41-62.
- Nagasaka, I. (1998) Kinship networks and child fostering in labor migration from Ilocos, Philippines, to Italy, Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, 7, 1: 67 – 92.
- Parreñas, R. (2001) Servants of Globalization: women, Migration and Domestic Work (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Pertierra, R. ed. with M. Cabilao, M. Escobar and A. Pingol, (1992) Remittances and Returnees: The Cultural Economy of Migration in Ilocos, (Quezon City: New Day Publishers).
- Pertierra, R. (1994) Lured abroad: the case of Ilocano overseas workers, Sojourn, 9, 1: 54-80.
- Pertierra, R. (2002) The Work of Culture (Manila, De La Salle University Press Inc).
- Pratt, G. (1997) Stereotypes and ambivalence: the construction of domestic workers in Vancouver, B.C., Gender, Place and Culture, 4(2): 159-177.
- Pratt, G. (1998) (in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, Vancouver) Inscribing domestic work on Filipina bodies, in Nast, H. and Pile, S., eds. Places through the Body (London and New York, Routledge).
- Pratt, G. (1999) From registered nurse to registered nanny: discursive geographies of Filipina domestic workers in Vancouver, B.C., Economic Geography, 75(3): 215-236.
- Pratt G. and Yeoh, B. (2003) Transnational (counter) topographies, Gender, Place and Culture, 10, 2: 159-166.

Rafael, V. (1997) Your grief is our gossip: Overseas Filipinos and other spectral presences. Public Culture 9,2: 267-291.

Rigg, J. (2001) More than the Soil: Rural Change in Southeast Asia, (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited).

Szanton Blanc, C (1996) *Balikbayan*: a Filipino extension of the national imaginary and of state boundaries. Philippine Sociological Review 44,1-4: 178-193.

Tacoli, C. (1996) Migrating 'for the sake of the family'? Gender, life-course and intra-household relations among Filipino migrants in Rome, Philippine Sociological Review, 44, 1-4, pp. 12-32.

Tyner, J. and Donaldson, D. (1999) The geography of Philippine international labor migration fields, Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 40, 3: 217-234.

Vertovec, S. (1999) Conceiving and researching transnationalism, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 22, 2: 447-462.

Werbner, P. (1999) Global pathways: working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds, Social Anthropology, 7, 1: 17-35.

Westwood, S. and Phizacklea, A. (2000) Transnationalism and the Politics of Belonging (London: Routledge).

Yeoh, B. and Huang, S. (1999) Singapore women and foreign domestic workers: negotiating domestic work and motherhood, in Momsen, J. ed. Gender, Migration and Domestic Service, (London and New York, Routledge) pp. 277-301.