

The linear imagination, stalled: changing temporal horizons in migrant journeys

MEGHA AMRITH

*'Ageing in a Time of Mobility' Research Group,
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity,
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073, Göttingen, Germany
amrith@mmg.mpg.de*

Abstract *In this article, I engage with a growing interest in questions of time in the study of migration to consider how changing temporal horizons in migrant journeys play an important role in shaping multilocal migration imaginaries. I draw on two ethnographic cases with migrant care workers from the Philippines, of different generations and at different points of their migration journeys, to examine how initially held linear imaginaries of migration become confounded and stuck over time. Snapshots of migrant lives at these different points of the journey – '(pre)-departures', 'stepping stones', 'settling' – reveal how migrants' temporal horizons shift as a consequence of changing state and political-economic conditions, as well as migrants' own dynamic subjective and affective engagements. New uncertainties, possibilities and dilemmas unfold and initial linear imaginaries give way instead to those that are open-ended and asynchronous. A temporal perspective reveals that mobilities are not marked by a beginning and an end but rather involve ongoing, multiple and provisional journeys across locales and over time and the life course.*

Keywords EMOTIONS, IMAGINARIES, LIFECOURSE, LINEARITY, MIGRATION, TIME

Scholarly writing on migration and mobilities, both historical and contemporary, has widely illuminated the heterogeneity and complexity of human movement around the world over different periods of time. In the context of Asian migrations, for example, historians have pointed to the diverse movements (at times fluid, at other times coercive) across maritime worlds, territories and port cities, cautioning us not to overstate the novelty of multilocal migrant trajectories (see, for example, Amrith 2011; McKeown 2004; Tagliacozzo et al. 2019). At the same time, ever-increasing attempts by colonial and postcolonial states to assert control over the movements of diverse groups have been accompanied by more static, linear and teleological conceptualizations of migration, thus reducing more complex multinational or multilocal journeys

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

Global Networks 21, 1 (2021) 127–145. ISSN 1470–2266.

© 2020 The Author. Global Networks published by Global Networks Partnership and John Wiley & Sons Ltd 127

and imaginaries to a specific migration ‘event’. The language of migration in state and global policy is replete with notions of ‘home’ and ‘host’ societies’ or ‘countries of origin’ and ‘countries of destination’ (and now also ‘countries of transit’). It is a language that fails to capture the more dynamic, subjective orientations of migrants as they journey across space *and time*. Adam McKeown (2001: 8) once wrote that studies of migration also fall under this ‘conceptual force’ of ‘nation-based categories’, whereby ‘immigrants are seen as either here or there, and no room is left for more complex orientations and circulation’.

From these larger scale debates on global migration, I focus this article on the ethnographic level to consider how ideas about linearity and multinational migrations also feature in migrants’ everyday lives. I draw on the experiences of Filipino care workers who are in different cities (Manila, Singapore and Barcelona), and situated at different points along their migration journeys – from aspiring migrants about to go abroad with planned journeys, to those living in what they perceive as a ‘transit’ city and migrants who have ‘settled’ somewhere over decades. I bring in the perspectives of time and the lifecourse to examine how migrants’ linear imaginings of their journeys stall and become more complicated over time.

When speaking of a ‘linear imaginary’, I mean it in both a spatial and temporal sense, referring to a steady, predictable, teleological and sequential movement, a journey with a beginning, middle and end that corresponds with moving from a specific point of origin to end up, finally, in a planned destination. Stops in-between might be included as stepping stones that offer a means to an end goal. Migration scholars have noted these modes of sequential movement in different empirical contexts. Claudia Liebelt (2008: 568) for instance, has written about how domestic workers from the Philippines make plans to move progressively ‘on and on’ along a hierarchy of ‘desirable destinations’, while Anju Mary Paul (2017) discusses the ‘stepwise’ multinational migrations of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in their plans for longer-term mobility projects.

The aspiring migrants I met in the Philippines who were about to start their journeys often framed their ‘going abroad’ in such terms, with a goal and with an expectation of reaching that goal with relative ease, if they were strategic about it. Such strategies involved planning linear journeys multinationally, via one or two stepping-stone countries. Yet, en route, migrants’ planned journeys take unexpected turns due to barriers imposed by particular institutional regimes of migration or as a consequence of their own changing subjectivities and emotions that intervene over time to confound these initially held linear imaginaries. The stepping stones in which migrants find themselves embody spatial and temporal uncertainty (Amrith 2017). They are also generative spaces where new communities and practices of home emerge unexpectedly while onward journeys are delayed, interrupted or indefinitely postponed. Studying migration journeys as they unfold can reveal the ways in which these planned multinational movements may or may not materialize. When speaking to migrants who seem well-settled over a long period of time, it becomes clear that their journeys have also encountered moments of uncertainty, and now, as they approach later life, feelings of being emotionally stuck surface when they reflect on where they want to spend their

days. In this second case, migration appears to follow a direct, linear pattern, but over time, multinational networks, possibilities, and potential future journeys become more salient to migrants' lives.

In this article I argue, through these ethnographic cases, that the 'shifting temporal horizons' (Cwerner 2001) that unfold over the course of migration journeys disrupt any simple sense of linearity and produce imaginaries that are instead non-linear and open-ended. Migrants start their journeys thinking and planning linearly, but over time, their plans become increasingly fluid even to themselves. Their past, present and future journeys are subjectively (re) interpreted and (re) imagined over time as a consequence of changing political-economic conditions (as they relate to visa regimes, citizenship possibilities, labour market shifts), as well as through new relational encounters and experiences. Their experiences of time – of aspiring, waiting, hoping, planning – are also emotional experiences of frustration, desire, fear, longing, guilt and hope. Migrants face unforeseen barriers that get them stuck, while imagining new possibilities that were previously not in view. These temporal intrusions unfold asynchronously and unevenly. Rather than migration constituting a singular pathway, we see how migrants embark on multiple, provisional and ongoing journeys (actual, imaginative and affective) that span a number of locales. Migration and time are thus mutually constitutive – specific experiences of time have an impact on migration trajectories, while embodied experiences of migration can lead to a shifting of temporal horizons.

Migration, time and the lifecourse

This article is situated at the productive intersection between concepts of time, mobilities and the life course. Time and temporality have been receiving more sustained attention in social scientific studies of migration in a field in which the entanglements between migration and space still tend to be dominant (Baas and Yeoh 2019; Cwerner 2001; King et al. 2006; Robertson 2015). In a pioneering analysis of 'The times of migration', Saulo Cwerner (2001: 32) argues that 'the focus on the temporal experience of migrants can illuminate the nature of migration itself, its twists and turns, meanings and ambivalence, and the way that, in a diversity of ways, it displaces, and re-embeds people and communities around the world'. In addition to tracing migrants' subjective engagements with time, Cwerner (2001: 17, 10) demonstrates how the immigration categories adopted by states are 'suffused with a temporal language' with 'time ... a central variable and tool used by immigration law, policy and control'.

Since then, King et al. (2006: 259) have made a similar case for integrating perspectives of time into studies of migration, thus reminding us that 'migration must not be thought of as a single relocation decision by an individual at a moment', for this would overlook 'the outcomes and consequences of the migration in both the short and long terms'. Griffiths et al. (2013: 10) further highlight that 'a journey is composed of a variety of temporalities. ... Waiting, accelerating, queuing, being still, stopping, repeating, etc. are among the different experiences of the journey, although they are not, of course, experienced equally by all.' They observe that 'the temporal disruption

of the assumed linear path of migration is relatively unexplored' and call for a more detailed focus on these rhythms of migrant lives.

Responding to these calls for greater attention to migration and temporality, Shanthi Robertson, drawing on her empirical research with Asian migrants in Australia, offers us a number of conceptual tropes such as 'staggered' and 'contingent' mobilities to capture how 'migration intentions and migrant identities ... are heterogeneous and temporally fluid' (Robertson 2015: 46, 2019: 169). Migrant experiences, Robertson argues, are shaped by different scales and modes of time, from institutionally marked timeframes to those of biographical events and everyday life.

Taking these conceptual and empirical perspectives together, it is clear how time matters fundamentally to our analyses of migration, and to migrants' own subjective interpretations and reinterpretations of their journeys. I argue further that perspectives of time in migration can usefully enter a dialogue with more recent conceptualizations of the life course. Findlay et. al (2015) point out how mobilities and age are relational and processual, thereby complicating linear biographical (and I add here, migratory) sequences. Aspirations shift over time in ways that may not always correspond with particular 'stages' of the life course. For example, normative constructions of young people as highly mobile and older populations as immobile might overlook how youth mobility trajectories get 'stuck' or how peoples' lives may become more mobile at later moments in life. This is why a perspective on the life course as not something composed of distinct 'life stages' but as a perspective on time that is more fluid and less fixed in outcome, is constructive (Johnson-Hanks 2002). In this article, I consider migrants of different ages and generations, from aspiring young migrants to those who are ageing abroad in retirement, looking at how the linear ordering of their imaginaries becomes unsettled at different points in their journeys as they adapt to changing experiences and realities. Ethnographic attention to the embodied experience of migratory journeys can therefore contribute to broader conceptual understandings of migration that are not teleological, or unambiguously spatially or temporally linear.

Finally, in this article, I draw on debates that examine the tensions between mobility and immobility and, in particular, conceptual interventions that focus on the friction and unevenness of mobility processes (Cresswell 2010). I find Ghassan Hage's (2009) use of the term 'stuckedness' as a form of existential immobility particularly relevant to the ethnographic cases I discuss. Counter to feelings of 'going somewhere' that migrants might hold at different points of their journeys and lives, unexpected experiences of time can produce feelings of not going anywhere. Such moments of rupture challenge expectations of seamlessly moving between places (Werbner 2013).

It is these moments that illuminate how the 'temporal turn' in migration studies is intricately entangled with migrants' emotional and moral lives (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Werbner 2013). Scholars of migration, for instance, have noted that explorations of migrants' emotional lives are often neglected in dominant political-economic approaches. They further emphasize how emotions do not neatly map onto binary orientations towards either home or host societies, but are rather more contradictory, messily entangled with multiple places and productive of 'translocal subjectivities' (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015: 73–6; Conrandson and McKay 2007:

167). Such discussions mirror what I demonstrate ethnographically in this article, that migrants reorient themselves in unpredictable ways as past, present and future experiences intertwine to produce ambivalent emotional lives (Svašek 2010). The temporal dimensions that shape migrant trajectories engender affective responses that are both mobilizing and immobilizing at different points in migrants' lives.

Filipino migrant journeys across time and across cities

The data I use in this article are drawn from two distinct periods of ethnographic field research with different groups of migrants, and aspiring migrants, from the Philippines.¹ These migrants are broadly employed in the care sector – some in more professionalized and institutionalized nursing positions, and others in domestic service in private households.

The first period of fieldwork was a multi-sited study between Manila and Singapore with a younger generation of nurses. The nursing profession in the Philippines has become synonymous with a perceived lucrative career overseas. Nursing migration from the Philippines is certainly not a new phenomenon, for the establishment of nursing schools during American colonial rule predicated on racialized hierarchies between American nursing sisters and their Filipina students, had already oriented nursing in the Philippines towards the USA (Choy 2003). The opening up of US immigration rules in 1965 further cemented these orientations. Beyond the USA, the skills of nurses are highly 'in demand' in a number of countries facing shortages in the nursing sector, both in hospitals and particularly in caring for the elderly in the context of rapidly ageing populations. Nursing opportunities, however, are very much tied to shifts in global labour and migration regimes, such as changing policies in the hiring of overseas nurses, as well as changing migration and visa policies, which structure the journeys that nurses can take. In this study, I traced the aspirations of nurses who were making plans to leave Manila to go abroad, and then continued ethnographic fieldwork with migrant nurses in Singapore, a place they largely consider to be a 'stepping stone' or 'transit city' en route to more desirable destinations. Most nurses arrived in Singapore on a 'semi-skilled' visa, which at the time of my fieldwork, generally allowed for family reunification and offered pathways to permanent residence. Since then, however, policies have changed and become tighter. The fieldwork took place in public and private institutions (hospitals, nursing colleges), as well as in the spaces of everyday life such as shopping malls, parks, in nurses' homes and in religious spaces.

In a second project, I focused on the lives of older Filipina migrant women employed in Barcelona as domestic workers. The women whom I interviewed for this project had left the Philippines in the late 1970s and early 1980s and were among the first Filipina women to arrive in Barcelona; they are known within the community as the 'pioneers'. Community estimates suggest a population of around 25,000 migrants of Filipino origin in the city. This also includes the male partners, children and family members who accompanied the women later on. The women initially arrived through a variety of channels – some via bilateral agreements, others via Philippine

employment agencies, or some with tourist visas who then worked in households without documents for a number of years, until they were able to regularize their stays. Residency status then put Filipinos on a pathway to obtaining Spanish citizenship.² The fieldwork I conducted here was located in the inner-city neighbourhood of Barcelona, El Raval, where most Filipino community life takes place.

The initial drive to conduct this research in Barcelona was to understand better the lives of care workers living under different immigration regimes and in contexts where the care sector is differently structured, organized and valued (in the light of what I had found in Singapore). This included questions of visa and residence pathways, the relationship between professionalized care work (such as nursing) and less-professionalized work in private households (domestic work). While doing the fieldwork for both projects, however, I realized how questions of time appeared crucial in ways that I had not initially anticipated. While the experiences of the two groups are not intended to be comparable, considering them alongside each other, and adopting a multi-sited and multi-temporal approach, sheds light on the experiences of migrants who are situated at different points in their journeys, belong to different generations and are embedded in different labour market and visa/citizenship regimes. The nurses are of a younger generation who were just starting out and planning their migratory journeys, while the perspectives (and retrospectives) of the migrants in Barcelona covered a longer period. The ethnographic cases thus reveal, from different vantage points, how multinational migration journeys are imagined and how they unfold over time.

Drawing on these two distinct cases, I follow a linear structure of different spatial-temporal moments: departures, stepping stones, settling. I do so deliberately to show how this linear sequence is in fact challenged in and through the journey as migrants subjectively negotiate and rethink – through feelings of stuckedness, restlessness and uncertainty – what they initially consider to be a ‘normative’ or ‘successful’ trajectory. In the section on ‘departures’, I highlight the aspirations of a younger generation of migrants who imagine their journeys abroad. I then move on to consider a ‘stepping stone’, where migrants make plans to move on to a final destination, while experiencing the unexpected turns that life in a transit city can take. In the final section, I shed light on the lives of an older generation of seemingly ‘settled’ migrants, well-established in their destinations who are now contemplating their place in life through new potential journeys of return, movements back-and-forth, or in some cases, onward migration.

Departures

In this first ethnographic case, I start with a focus on the pre-departure imaginaries of aspiring migrant nurses in Manila, how they speak about their departures from the Philippines, and their expected trajectories when going abroad. Given that nursing in the Philippines is now fundamentally linked to overseas migration, it came as no surprise that this was the main topic of conversation in the interviews and focus-group discussions that I held in nursing colleges and hospitals (public and private) in Manila

with a young generation of nursing students and junior nurses. The nurses spoke candidly about how nursing is not something they took up because of its romanticized associations of nobly serving others, but because it offers a pathway to life overseas. They shared their imaginaries about life abroad, but also their intimate knowledge of how to plan their overseas journeys given the shifts of the nursing labour market and the strategies required to navigate it. In almost all cases, the nurses would have working and living in the United States as their ultimate goal. As one nursing student put it, the 'US is still the #1 choice', while another stated plainly, 'the US is my priority, of course'. In a few cases, Canada and the UK were mentioned as possible end destinations.

However, migrant nurses must first pass the very competitive nursing examinations – 'NCLEX'³ – to be eligible to work in the United States; they also face long recruitment and visa processing times and demands for significant work experience. As such, a number of nursing graduates decide, strategically, to start their overseas journeys in 'stepping-stone' locations – those mentioned in interviews included Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and New Zealand. One staff nurse working in a private hospital in Manila, for instance, said, 'we can go to NZ, that is also open. But only like caregiver, bedside care. I don't mind to go there first, or Saudi ... most of my friends are in the Middle East and Dubai – not many are in the US yet.' Her colleague added, 'I might as well earn some money and gain some experience while I'm waiting' [to move on to the USA]. Their comments reveal that nurses are willing to take lower-ranked positions that involve tasks they do not typically associate with their profession (such as bedside care) as a means of gaining experience and some money while waiting to move further along.

In the way that aspiring migrants strategize their various routes, we see here a foreshadowing of more complex trajectories. Still, their ideas at the outset are to move sequentially and progressively along a 'hierarchy' of destinations, from Manila via a 'stepping stone', with the aim finally to reach their goal and settle down. This idea often stems from their own family histories and most nurses told stories about their multinational family lives. One nurse mentioned that she has three aunts in the USA and recounted that, 'you could see growing up what kind of lifestyle you could have if you worked in the US as a nurse, so I wanted to be a nurse from a young age.' Another nurse explained, 'my father worked in Saudi for 20 years ... it was a hard life for him there but he supported our education.' However, because of the hardships he faced, Saudi is not a place that she herself wishes to go.

Social media also generate images of 'making it' overseas, portraying life abroad as glamorous, and following a straightforward, linear story of adventure and success. One nurse working in a private hospital in Manila had documented her journey from Manila to Georgia, via Jeddah, on social media. Her posts would include images of her life overseas with captions such as 'living my dream', while excited comments from peers in the Philippines would read, 'you are an inspiration, our role model'. In these posts, little is uttered or shared about feelings of alienation, disappointment or stuckness, or of things not moving seamlessly through the imagined sequence. These silences, in part, also help shape the linear imaginaries with which aspirant migrants

start. Even when there are rumours about difficulties, these do not deter nurses from making their plans. As one nurse mentioned, ‘you hear that now the US, they are not giving visas, there is retrenchment. Even though we hear about this, the enrolment is going up and up in our nursing colleges.’ Nurses recognize that labour markets ‘open’ and ‘close’ along the way, but they still perceive their journeys to be relatively seamless and expect that, in time, they will reach their end goals. Cultural narratives are also used to explain these perceptions of seamless movement, such as the idea I repeatedly heard among nurses that ‘Filipinos do well for being more caring’, or ‘foreigners love Filipinos’. With these ideas in mind, they express confidence that their journeys will lead them to their most desirable destination. The aspirational landscape – of vibrant social media interactions, intense pressures for linear success, stories of happy lives abroad – generates and perpetuates desire as a central affective dimension of migration projects.

Stepping stones

My fieldwork then led me to focus on a key ‘stepping-stone’ location for migrant Filipino nurses, Singapore, to examine their everyday lives in a place they expected would just be a temporary stop en route to their final destination. Most expected that this temporary phase would last just one or two years. However, life in such transit cities, I found, began to complicate the migrants’ original linear imaginary for reasons they had not initially anticipated. It is here where a focus on the journeys ‘in-between’ and how migrants actually ‘touch the ground en route’ can reveal much more than looking simply at the two poles intended to frame the journey (Drotbohm and Winters 2018: 4, 16).

For most of my informants, Singapore was their first experience of working overseas. Some were relatively fresh nursing graduates with a few years of experience, while others had already acquired several years of work experience in the Philippines. Some worked in public and private hospitals as registered nurses, others as junior nurses, and some as aides in nursing homes for the elderly and chronically ill run by charitable and faith-oriented foundations.

From my early encounters with migrant nurses in Singapore, it was clear that they intended to move on and their conversations frequently reflected their thoughts or actual plans for their onward journeys to final destinations, which they almost always envisaged would be in the ‘West’. They would give me regular updates on the progress of these plans, which involved spending time after work studying for the NCLEX exams, reading through online forums, speaking with recruitment agencies and conversing online with kin and peers spread all over the world. One of my interlocutors, Ana, had been studying for the NCLEX for a long time and had attempted the examination once before. She did not pass it that time and said, ‘I have to keep trying ... there is no test centre in Singapore, so I have to do it in the test centre in Hong Kong. It gets expensive.’ The rising costs, however, did not yet appear to be a deterrent, for Ana was determined to eventually pass these exams. Another nurse, Alyssa, was struggling to adapt to working conditions in the hospital in Singapore and

had been talking about going to Canada since her early days in Singapore. I remember after a few of our meetings, her telling me:

you know, my husband and I, we applied to go to Canada. We did an online application with an agency, we paid them already 800 dollars. Then we have to pay them more money. Maybe it will take one year to get immigrant visa, then we can go there. That is our plan. So maybe I will finish my contract here first and then we can go there. My brother is already there with his family.

The onward plans that migrants make also start to materialize as exams are written, papers submitted and fees paid.

Recruitment agencies recognize and play on these linear imaginaries. Sometimes they encourage nurses to consider another stepping stone, selling it as a place that will help them reach their final destinations quicker and more comfortably. Judith, a nurse working in a public hospital, explained how the agencies operate:

they will come and ask, how much are you earning in Singapore? Then they will say higher than they are earning ... and then lodging and board is provided there. Here, you have to pay [for] everything ... it is so expensive ... people in my place they will talk or ask, how come she earns less [in Singapore] than other places?

The expectations and pressures of kin and agencies, as Judith suggests, keep nurses looking onwards, for Singapore fails to meet the expectations of or expected returns from an overseas nursing career. Furthermore, their early experiences of working in Singapore's care institutions (in which they say their tasks were less 'professional', the working atmosphere too stressful and bureaucratic, and their work insufficiently valued), were demoralizing. For nurses in this situation, 'the elsewhere' is a way of coping, and offers them hopes of realizing their initial expectations of a career abroad. Rather than giving into present disappointments, hopes are reoriented, at least initially, towards the future once again.

Yet, it became clear over the course of my fieldwork that realizing plans to move on were less straightforward. There were a few other stories, hidden beneath the dominant 'moving forward' narrative, of journeys that were more complex. For example, one of the male nurses I interviewed, Roy, had been in Saudi Arabia prior to coming to Singapore. He said, 'for me I was ten years working as a staff nurse in the Philippines, then I was for one year in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia in 2001.' He went on to say that life there was 'no good, not good at all ... in the private hospital, they bully you so much just because they are rich. I cannot take it after one year so I went back to the Philippines.' He then spent more years in the Philippines working as a staff nurse in the surgical ward of a hospital before deciding to go abroad once more to Singapore: 'why not, it's an opportunity to access other countries ... even if you are a nursing aide, you can get the Singapore stamp in your passport, who knows.' Roy's story demonstrates how things do not always work out as planned and his negative

experience in Saudi Arabia made him want to return to the Philippines. Still, he tried a new ‘stepping-stone’ route some years later, perhaps a little less certain of the outcome but with the comfort of time taking the edge off the disillusionment of his first experience abroad.

In a similar vein, MeAnn, a staff nurse in a public hospital, hints that things are not so simple. She explains that her housemates

only want a one-year lease, not two years, because they think they will not be here anymore in Singapore after one year. But you wait and see, I bet you anything, they will still be here. It takes a long time if they want to go [to] other countries, then also the US is not hiring now and you cannot just go back to the Philippines like that.

True to these words, it became evident how linear imaginaries are interrupted or stalled in ways that shifted nurses’ temporal horizons.

In some cases, changes in institutional and state policies interrupted migrants’ linear imaginaries. Among those actively applying to move on from Singapore, the realities of tightening visa policies and labour markets, for example, dented hopes, or kept them alive in vain. One of my key interlocutors, Nelia, waited months and months for her British visa, certain that it would eventually come since she had all her paperwork in place to enrol in a nursing college, which would allow her to work 20 hours a week in a care home. It was only after months of no news that she was told that the nursing college that had accepted her was a scam, and that the UK was cracking down on such routes into the country. Such schemes were often façades for underpaid and full-time work in care homes. This externally imposed state of waiting, however, made Nelia feel humiliated. She was living in this ‘liminal time’ (Cwerner 2001) of the in-between, where hopes remained alongside a creeping sense of not going anywhere, a looming sense of ‘existential immobility’ (Hage 2009). This orientation to the future made her unable to live in the present, and when her visa was finally denied, she felt helpless and resentful. Her story further reveals the number of privatized actors (agencies that create these scams) that play on migrants’ linear imaginaries and hopes. A few years after this period of fieldwork when I was in contact with Nelia once again, she informed me that she eventually went back to the Philippines, and is no longer working as a nurse. She runs an online business and cares for her children, whom she had earlier left behind. She seemed contented to be with them but still remembers that she was unable to join other relatives in the UK, pursue her profession or give her children a different future.

Beyond these institutionalized barriers, which reoriented migrants’ spatial and temporal plans, were the subjective transformations that unfolded in and through the often-mundane rhythms and routines of everyday life in the city. Slowly, a sense of home and place in the ‘stepping stone’ grounded some migrants in ways they may not have expected. This transit space of waiting, which embodies spatial and temporal uncertainty, can also become a space of new connections, care and friendship. Among nurses whose children joined them in Singapore, the everyday concerns of raising them

and taking them to school became priorities. In a couple of cases, it was worth staying for professional development, and a few others found new spiritual communities that took them by surprise as they began to reorient themselves in the service of God. As one nurse, Maricel, who joined an evangelical movement, put it:

before, when I was in the Philippines, I wanted to go to Canada. But in Singapore, I received so many blessings. ... sometimes I feel there is no need to go elsewhere, I am enjoying life now, I am satisfied. I mean if the opportunity comes to go to Canada, then why not? But maybe God wants me to stay, and I want to commit to him.

Slow (sometimes unintentional) social embedding over time cements modes of staying, creates subjective feelings of home and belonging, and opens migrants up to new possibilities. This ‘transforming of transnational migration into a moral project’ can also turn ruptures, or disappointments, into a subjectively meaningful experience (Werbner 2013: 116). Now, the ‘elsewhere’ takes on a more unknown, of which the nurses are warier.

In these situations, the linear imaginary becomes muddled, and plans to move on are put on hold indefinitely. I remember ending this period of fieldwork with a distinct sense of open-endedness, the futures of my interlocutors uncertain and their initial plans to end up in the ‘West’ stalled, repositioned or sometimes overturned.

Settling

I now turn to the second ethnographic case of Filipina women in Barcelona employed in domestic work. This case allows us to consider a later point in a person’s life course, when past experiences are reflected upon, imaginaries shift over time and questions of return appear with more regularity. This initially sounds like a linear, bi-national story – migration from A to B, where B (in this case Barcelona) is the point of long-term settlement. However, over time, because of specific critical events, increasingly scattered family networks and changing emotional connections, migrants’ ideas shift to take on a more multinational character. In my initial interviews with migrant women ‘pioneers’, I noted a narrative of what Erdal (2017: 112) calls ‘retrospective linearity’, a narrative ordering of temporal linearity, with their experiences told as a sequence of events that ultimately end with a ‘successful’ migration and community story. The women would talk about their early days in the city of not speaking Spanish or knowing anyone, and about how they slowly emplaced themselves in the city, forged a community, obtained residence papers, brought their families over and are now a ‘model’ community in the intercultural city of Barcelona.

Yet, as Erdal (2017: 112–13) noted with her interlocutors, this retrospective linearity ‘underplays those events over which the story’s author had little control’, perhaps as a process of sense-making that hindsight can enable. A slightly deeper discussion about these different points and transitions demonstrated a less cohesive story. The women lived through periods of significant uncertainty and precarity; their family lives

did not always quite work out how they had hoped; and now, in their older age, there are evident ambiguities over where they really want to spend the later years of their lives.

I start by looking at their initial arrivals in the city. A few of the women had initially thought about migrating directly to Canada or the United States, but Spain at that time was more 'open' and so they went in the hope of settling there and eventually bringing their families over to join them. Some had contracts arranged via agencies in the context of a bilateral agreement between Spain and the Philippines, while a number of them arrived in Spain on a tourist visa. However, from the early days of their arrival, it was not always clear that they would be allowed to stay on or for how long in Barcelona. I recall Tita Mary, one of the community leaders, explaining her situation regarding immigration papers: 'I had three months on the tourist visa, then I was able to extend three more months, then just leave the country, get another stamp. I extended little by little each time. After six months, I got my first 'permanencia' [longer-stay visa], then extended another year.' It was easier without papers to find an employer and earn an income in private households as domestic workers. After a few years of working with the same employer and without leaving the country, one would be eligible to apply for residence papers with sponsorship, which would then open up a pathway to long-term residence and finally citizenship. This was a difficult period of uncertainty for the women who felt essentially immobilized and in limbo – they could neither visit their families for a number of years nor acquire assurance about their and their families' futures. In the meantime, however, the Filipino community in Barcelona was getting larger and more centred on the Church. Here, community leaders and pioneers helped to raise greater awareness of migrants' rights and collectively organized immigration papers for members of the community.

Once things were settled and the women became eligible for family reunification, their husbands and children followed from the Philippines. However, this process also proved to be difficult emotionally. The children who had grown up and been to school in the Philippines before arriving in Barcelona as teenagers, were the most challenging cases. As Marie said of her daughters who finally arrived after years of her planning and waiting for this family reunification, 'they were like strangers; they missed the Philippines; they did not speak the language here. They were raised by Filipinos, aunts and grandparents.' In the end, the readjustment proved too challenging and they returned to the Philippines for college and to find work. This was not an uncommon story and, as the head of one community organization told me, 'they lose their objectives, they forget why they came here in the first place; [while] dealing with family problems [and] fixing their lives ... they get disoriented.' Her words capture how this sense of finality associated with their families joining them generates unexpected tensions, as well as feelings of being unmoored and lost, thus denting their plans to settle down together and stalling any neat closure or resolution of their migration projects. In another case, Violet's three daughters finished their studies in the Philippines in accounting and nursing respectively before joining her in Barcelona. The trained nurse, however, could not get her qualifications recognized and took up work as a domestic worker. Violet recalls how her daughter cried when

she had to wear a ‘nanny’ uniform to work every day. The daughter eventually managed to relocate to the UK, finding a job in a residential care home and now lives there with her own family. Some families were therefore spread over different countries. Violet wonders about spending more time with her daughter and grandchildren in the UK. She plans to go for visits, but whether these temporary visits will turn into something longer-term is less clear, especially as Violet speaks with concern about how cold it is in the UK and that Barcelona’s warmer climate suits her better.

Another key turning point was *la crisis* (referring to Spain’s economic crisis beginning in 2008), something that was always mentioned in our discussions as a marker of time – before *la crisis* and now, with the enduring impacts of *la crisis* reverberating in the lives of migrants over a number of years. The weight of this sudden yet protracted period of crisis generated significant fears about job security and being able to provide for their families. Migrants in Spain found their lives becoming increasingly precarious. While some household workers lost their jobs, it was mostly the male partners or sons of domestic workers (among the families I knew) who lost their jobs in Barcelona’s restaurant and service sector as cooks, dishwashers and waiters. They said it was difficult enough to find work, but now even more were thinking of leaving and moving to other countries like the UK or Germany. This was not always an easy decision since it meant facing new uncertainties (starting over, perhaps learning a new language, going to a new country) and it also introduced the possibility of families becoming separated again across countries, particularly if the women did not want to give up their jobs and lives in Barcelona. The ‘elsewhere’ here represents a way out of an impasse, but it also represents an unknown and introduces new fears. The pastor of the main Catholic Church frequented by the Filipino community explained that

the crisis ... it really changed a lot. ... I would say before the crisis, people found what they were looking for, they seemed happy with their earnings, satisfied with their life. Many are able to build their dream houses in the Philippines, bring their families here. But now they are still paying the mortgage for their house, jobs are harder to find, contracts are shorter.

Changing political-economic conditions can therefore bring on crises of a more existential nature and destabilize previously held certainties.

The women of the Filipino community remarked that things are even more difficult for recent arrivals and the second generation. It is nowadays more difficult to be without papers; qualifications for work are more stringent, family reunification is less guaranteed, and the next generation has to think more broadly about their opportunities. One young family told me of how they had been in Taiwan, Israel, back to the Philippines and were now in Spain without papers. While they are glad to be able to access the city services without papers, the precarity of work means they are still unsure about where best to plan for their child’s future. In recognizing this generational shift and how it affects their children, friends and neighbours (including fellow

migrants from Latin America), the older generations' connections and imaginaries also become increasingly unmoored as they span multiple locales across Europe and the world.

In the next section, I explore how notions of being 'settled' are further questioned by migrants who are now ageing and thinking about retirement and return with ambivalence.

Returns

The women who arrived in Barcelona in the late 1970s and early 1980s are now in their sixties and seventies. While questions of return to the Philippines have come up before – such as when their children returned for university or during the crisis – it is now spoken about more frequently in the context of retirement and old age. The main Filipino community centre, with the help of some Church leaders, has taken up return as one of its priorities. During a competition for funds among migrant associations in Barcelona, this group came up with the idea of setting up a co-operative and centre for returning migrants, since conversations about return had frequently come up among *jubilados* (retirees or impending retirees) and was causing anxiety, for many of them found the prospect of return daunting.

The project then came into fruition as a 'multi-purpose' and multinational co-operative whose members are OFWs (overseas Filipino workers), returnees and their family members in different countries. Its stated objectives are to 'facilitate the process of reintegration and re-adaptation with family member's environment and the society upon return to their home country' and to 'help develop the country of origin through sharing of cultural and economic gains acquired during long years of service abroad'. The idea underlying it is that one's 'gains' abroad, acquired over time, ought to return, as a cycle.

However, when this possibility of return approaches, there is discomfort and hesitation among the women. For one, they realize that their sense of home and purpose has become more complex over the years. Even as they regularly speak about the Philippines with nostalgia, they have, over the decades, invested a lot of their energies in building a 'Filipino community' in Barcelona and a vibrant (even if sometimes conflictual) associational life. The leaders of community organizations regularly contribute to the Raval neighbourhood meetings and invest their energies in making this neighbourhood more liveable – through for example basketball courts in public spaces for the youth, ensuring the continuity of mass in the Filipino language in the Church and cooperating with other NGOs on everyday matters such as trash collection. They are thus not just being 'hosted' by the city, but participate actively in making the city and its spaces more habitable.

Over time, their connections change. Anita, the leader of a women's association in Barcelona, reflected, 'I thought I would go back one day but my family and friends are in the UK, so it's better for me to go there. I am single and there is no one left for me in the Philippines.' Her initial narrative of returning 'one day' stalls, as she reflects on where her connections actually are. In this case, moving to the UK makes more sense

for her than going back to the Philippines. Similarly, Jess, one of the women involved in the returning migrants' project, explains:

We all change. ... I have spent my earnings to raise and educate my three daughters. Now they all have their own families, and I don't want to depend on them anymore. But I need to take care of myself, make sure the money doesn't disappear. So we are setting up a cooperative for returning migrants, so that they can pool their money.

She explains that the Barcelona community leads the project, but it is also open to Filipino migrants in other European countries: 'there is a Filipino instinct, I believe ... even if we had different experiences, worked in different countries, we can connect.' Jess alludes here to the shared experience of long decades abroad, of multiple attachments and the uncertainties of approaching a critical juncture and time in their lives when they will slow down and work less. The fears of not wanting to be dependent on others motivates this translocal project connecting Filipino migrants across the world with localities in the Philippines – in a way, it situates their experiences in a broader, multilocal imaginary. I asked Jess if she thought that re-adapting to the Philippines would be challenging. She responded saying, 'it is the way we see things, our mentality has changed. It's not so simple after so many years ... now I'm used to the *correria* (rush) here. Then we go back there, and see people idle, sitting around, I get really upset.' She reflects a little further, 'maybe it is better to go back, but not yet. Eventually, if we get our pension here and pension there, we will gain more than if we just stay here, for retirement it could be better.' Jess's conflicting emotions from longing to practical considerations to scorn make particular reference to time – the busy rhythms of their lives in Barcelona contrasted sharply with the slow, empty time they look down upon in the Philippines, reinforcing again the different scales at which time comes to matter.

Ruby, the head of one of the main community organizations (which is, in fact, very involved with this project) was frank:

I would rather die here than in the Philippines, you know why? The relatives kill us, they ask so much so much, they think we are rich ... if I go back, everyone will take from me until I have no more ... then what? When I have nothing left, they will forget about me. That is why, I would rather die here than face that, just live my last days peacefully here.

The idea of return, for Ruby, evokes some resentment, a sense of injustice and fear that she will be harassed for money after her long years of work abroad, and then forgotten. These unknowns about return occupy their minds and conversations in disorienting and muddling ways.

The Filipina women in Barcelona also return for holidays to the Philippines more frequently, now that they have more time and the resources they need to make the long journey. However, these are transient and intermittent visits lasting a few

months at a time. As Griffiths et al. (2013: 14) note, ‘return, often envisaged as an ending by policy makers is rarely experienced as such by the individual, who may see it more as another beginning’ and that “‘return” is often not a single, final movement, but a temporary, often repeated journey, more akin to visits or holidays’. Later life mobilities are thus more circular, repetitive, and the duration of such journeys tends to be indeterminate. These rhythms mirror the emotional ambivalences. Violet, for example, had intended to go home for a longer time. During this stay, however, her husband died, and she felt uncertain about whether to stay, go back to Barcelona or join her daughter and grandchildren in the UK. Then, she received a call from the older man for whom she had worked for more than 15 years and whose wife had moved to a nursing home with Alzheimer’s. Violet recounts that he pleaded:

come back to Spain, don’t leave me. So I came back and now I go three times a week for a few hours, help him in the house, then we visit the *señora* in the residence.⁴ He always tells me, when I go home to the Philippines for longer stays, *volver aqui*, come back.

Her movements back and forth are therefore multiple, provisional and contingent on transformations in the intimate relationships that have been important to her familial and working life at home and abroad.

There were a few women who took a more deliberate decision to return. Two years after my fieldwork in Barcelona, I had an opportunity to meet Sister Lea in Manila. She is now in the Philippines, on her own, making this centre a reality. At present, they have just one hut, which does not really allow people to stay there for long. Nonetheless, the centre holds regular meetings for returnees and their families travel in from their home provinces. People come and go and she reflected, ‘it is lonely sometimes. Just yesterday, I felt like giving up.’ The oscillating presence or absence of others, and the slowness of time passing, is unsettling compared with her vibrant community life in Barcelona. It seemed as if her loneliness was a reflection of her feeling of being estranged in the Philippines. Her parents have died, her sisters live abroad and the country is different – a reminder of Stuart Hall’s (1987: 44) comment that, for migrants, ‘there is no “home” to go back to.’ Their nostalgia never disappears, but new longings arise, which creates a constant sense of being unsettled. That said, Sister Lea speaks of how she has been able to support some returnees who have been entirely lost: ‘they come back and their children don’t treat them as kin, they are ignored and seen as strangers. But they feel better when they see there are others living through the same situation, we can support each other and it makes us feel less alone.’

In all cases, we see how older migrants’ encounter powerful feelings of being stuck – not knowing where they want to go or be (or where they ought to be) – which brings out conflicting yet simultaneous feelings of fear, anticipation, intimacy and loneliness, and that confounds their imaginaries. These (potential) returns are often filled with ambivalence, moments of disconnection and changing expectations. The passing of time does not always make things clearer.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed two different case studies of migrants at different points of their journeys, using the lens of time to look at how their imaginaries adapt along the way. The cases have revealed how migrants planned multinational linear journeys, are stalled along the way, as well as how more direct linear trajectories become more complex over time. There is value in looking at multinational journeys not only in terms of the actual journeys but also in terms of how they feature and change in migrants' imaginaries over time. As Cwerner (2001: 17) importantly notes, migrants' expectations about their stays and journeys 'vary immensely with time'. The different narratives demonstrate how migrants' original linearly framed intentions and expectations are stalled, put on hold, or ambivalently reconsidered. People are not always able to move fluidly across multiple locales given the realities of state border and labour market policies. Specific events, such as political and economic crises (sometimes protracted) can disrupt feelings of being settled. Migrant journeys are also affective journeys, and the intimate, familial and community relationships that develop relationally and change along the way affect their sense of self, place and belonging. Their lives, connections and imaginations often crisscross different locales over the course of time, even if they are not physically moving. Sometimes the 'elsewhere' serves as a place of desire, hope and future; while in other cases, it represents a place where migrants do not wish to be.

These shifting temporal horizons expose the stalled, asynchronous, sticky and non-linear forms of migrant lives, as well as the complex emotions that such temporalities (of aspiring, waiting, rupture, longing) engender. As Filipino migrants negotiate aspirations relating to family, career, care, future and belonging over time, and across different spaces, we see that migration is not a story with a beginning and end, but one of shifting subjectivities across multiple locales, nations, time frames and generations. As noted in the introduction of this special issue, it is therefore crucial to continue studying multinational migration as an 'open-ended process', rather than a specific event, decision or sequence fixed in time, in recognition of migrants' changing 'aspirations, imaginations, and capacities' (Paul and Yeoh forthcoming) throughout the course of their lives.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Anju Mary Paul and Brenda Yeoh, the guest editors of this special issue, for their helpful insights into an earlier version of this paper prepared for the 'Multinational Migrations' conference at the Asia Research Institute, Singapore, in September 2018. I am also grateful to the Gates Cambridge Trust and the Max Planck Society for funding parts of the research on which this article is based. Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. [Correction added on 19 January 2021, after first online publication: Projekt Deal funding statement has been added.]

Notes

1. In this article, I bring together conceptual and empirical insights and findings from different research projects conducted at the University of Cambridge, the United Nations University and within the 'Ageing in a Time of Mobility' research group at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

2. This is why official statistics on the number of migrants with Filipino nationality is significantly lower than the community estimates of people originally from the Philippines. For Filipinos, there is a 'fast-track' to citizenship because of the history of Spanish colonization.
3. NCLEX is an acronym for 'National Council Licensure Examination'.
4. Even though some of the women are past official retirement age, they continue to work part-time for employers for whom they may have worked for many years (see Parreñas 2015 on ageing carers in Rome and Los Angeles).

References

- Amrith, M. (2017) *Caring for strangers: Filipino medical workers in Asia*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Amrith, S. (2011) *Migration and diaspora in modern Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baas, M. and B. S. A. Yeoh (2019) 'Introduction: migration studies and critical temporalities', *Current Sociology*, 67 (2), 161–8, doi: 10.1177/0011392118792924.
- Boccagni, P. and L. Baldassar (2015) 'Emotions on the move: mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16, 73–80, doi: 10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.009.
- Choy, C. (2003) *Empire of care*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Conradson, D. and D. McKay (2007) 'Translocal subjectivities: mobility, connection, emotion', *Mobilities*, 2 (2), 167–74, doi: 10.1080/17450100701381524.
- Cresswell, T. (2010) 'Towards a politics of mobility', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28 (1), 17–31, doi: 10.1068/d11407.
- Cwerner, S. B. (2001) 'The times of migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27 (1), 7–36, doi: 10.1080/13691830125283.
- Drotbohm, H. and N. Winters (2018) 'Transnational lives en route: Africa trajectories of displacement and emplacement across Central America', working papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 175.
- Erdal, M. B. (2017) 'Timespaces of return migration: the interplay of everyday practices and imaginaries of return in transnational social fields', in E. Mavroudi, B. Page and A. Christou (eds) *Timespace and international migration*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 104–18.
- Findlay, A., D. McCollum, R. Coulter and V. Gayle (2015) 'New mobilities across the life course: a framework for analysing demographically linked drivers of migration', *Population, Space and Place*, 21 (4), 390–402, doi: 10.1002/psp.1956.
- Griffiths, M., A. Rogers and B. Anderson (2013) 'Migration, time and temporalities: review and prospect', COMPAS Research Resources Paper, available at: www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2013/migration-time-and-temporalities-review-and-prospect/.
- Hage, G. (2009) 'Waiting out the crisis: on stuckedness and governmentality', in G. Hage (ed.) *Waiting*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 97–106.
- Hall, S. (1987) 'Minimal selves', in L. Appignanesi (ed.) *The real me: post-modernism and the question of identity (ICA documents 6)*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 44–6.
- Johnson-Hanks, J. (2002) 'On the limits of the life cycle in ethnography: toward a theory of vital conjunctures', *American Anthropologist*, 104 (3), 865–80, doi: 10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.865.
- King, R., M. Thomson, T. Fielding and T. Warnes (2006) 'Time, generations and gender in migration and settlement', in R. Penninx, M. Berger and K. Kraal (eds) *The dynamics of international migration and settlement in Europe*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 233–68.
- Liebelt, C. (2008) 'On sentimental orientalis, Christian Zionists, and "working class cosmopolitans": Filipina domestic workers' journeys to Israel and beyond', *Critical Asian Studies*, 40 (4), 567–85, doi: 10.1080/14672710802505315.

- McKeown, A. (2001) *Chinese migrant networks and cultural change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii 1900–1936*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McKeown, A. (2004) ‘Global migration, 1846–1940’, *Journal of World History*, 15 (2), 155–89, doi: 10.1353/jwh.2004.0026.
- Parreñas, R. S. (2015) *Servants of globalization: migration and domestic work*, second edition, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Paul, A. M. (2017) *Multinational maids: stepwise migration in a global labor market*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paul, A. M. and B. S. A. Yeoh (forthcoming) ‘Studying multinational migrations, speaking back to migration theory’.
- Robertson, S. (2015) ‘The temporalities of international migration: implications for ethnographic research’, in S. Castles, D. Ozkul and M. A. Cubas (eds) *Social transformation and migration*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 45–60.
- Robertson, S. (2019) ‘Migrant, interrupted: the temporalities of “staggered” migration from Asia to Australia’, *Current Sociology*, 67 (2), 169–85, doi: 10.1177/0011392118792920.
- Svašek, M. (2010) ‘On the move: emotions and human mobility’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36 (6), 865–80, doi: 10.1080/13691831003643322.
- Tagliacozzo, E., H. F. Siu and P. C. Perdue (eds) (2019) *Asia inside out: itinerant people*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Werbner, P. (2013) ‘Migration and transnational studies: between simultaneity and rupture’, in A. Quayson and G. Daswani (eds) *A companion to diaspora and transnationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 106–24.