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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Fleeting joy, divergent expectations and reconfigured intimacies: The visits home of Filipino migrant care workers in Singapore

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Abstract

For Filipino migrant care workers in Singapore, visits home are highly anticipated and longed for, but only as long as they remain brief. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, this paper examines such visits as emotionally complex events that bring intense joy as migrants reunite with dispersed family members, but also reveal divergent expectations and feelings of loss and betrayal. These experiences are especially felt among migrant women given the gendered constructions of their migration journeys that demand strenuous relational work on their visits and far beyond. Visits home, nevertheless, are important moments through which migrant care workers re-orient their priorities and aspirations as migrants and as women over time, often leading to prolongations of their 'temporary' absences. The paper further examines how migrant care workers, many of whom are on temporary work contracts in Singapore, fear and anticipate the moment when short visits ultimately become permanent returns.

KEYWORDS
gender, home, Singapore, temporality, the Philippines, transnational family

"Life abroad is like an addiction…
being home for just a few days is a dream
then I'll say goodbye
being home feels like a sin"

- MD Sharif Uddin

"How old are you
now my dear?
How many Christmases and birthdays
did you celebrate without me?"

- Jenelyn Alegonero Leyble

INTRODUCTION

An active group of migrant writers – men and women on temporary low-wage contracts in Singapore – come together on a regular basis to express their thoughts and feelings on the themes of home, kinship, intimacy. Visits home feature poignantly in the poems they write, as above, with all of the emotional ambivalence that such visits and connections entail. For temporary migrants who spend years, or oftentimes decades, away from their natal homes and families, it is not surprising that home and visits home are common topics of conversation. Migrants speak frequently about how much they miss home, how they long to be able to kiss their children goodnight and the pain of familial separation as they articulate their migration journeys as a 'sacrifice' for their families' futures. This sentiment is accentuated by difficult, undervalued and often isolating conditions of work in Singapore and by the limited mobilities they experience as low-waged migrants on highly restrictive visas. For both migrants, and for the Singapore state, this is seen to be a temporary state of affairs, after which migrants will return to their home countries. In their time abroad, they sustain their bonds with loved ones through phone calls and digital media, and through visits home. It is a neat narrative for states to justify their temporary migration schemes without giving migrants the right to family reunification, and it is also a narrative that idealizes home and its relationships.

This paper takes as its focus visits home by migrants as emotionally complex events that puncture this neat narrative. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with female migrant carers from the Philippines working in Singapore, I examine the role of visits home in shaping temporary migrants' lives, priorities and sense of place and how these visits contribute to migrants prolonging their stays abroad to live in a state of long-term temporariness. Visits home bring intense joy as migrants reunite with family members, who are dispersed around the world, and with children and ageing parents who stayed put. Homesickness is eased through activities such as eating together, karaoke parties and holidaying. However, such visits also involve performative acts such as gift-giving and hosting, all of which require significant expense by migrants. Families imagine migrants to be rich in spite of their precarious working conditions abroad, while entrenched gendered expectations demand that migrant women behave in particular ways. This leads to a simmering of tensions, and sometimes boredom, as migrant women miss their sense of freedom and cosmopolitanism abroad. Intimate dissonances (cf. Humbracht et al., this issue) also emerge as migrants struggle to bond with their children after years abroad; while marital betrayals, moral judgements and sibling conflicts come to the fore.

There is no doubt that these visits can be reaffirming on one level; they foster a sense of togetherness, enable quality time with children, often renewing migrants' energies. Yet after the initial moments of joy, conflicts of kinship and the sense of being 'out of place' work to estrange migrant women from their original homes. The paper explores the strenuous relational work that migrant women have to do on visits home as a lens onto understanding the particular gendered experiences of visits home of temporary migrants as they confront multiple expectations as both women and migrants. The shifting intimacies and feelings of estrangement that emerge on visits home make visible the different forms of care work that migrant women have to undertake both in their lives abroad and on visits home.

I argue, however, that we can speak about these tensions without falling into the moralizing narratives that often dominate public discourses which follow two contrasting premises: (i) that the migration of women gives rise to 'broken families', with such discourses often placing the blame on migrant women themselves rather than attending to the structural neoliberal logics underpinning their journeys (Rodriguez, 2008); (ii) or that migrant women make ultimate sacrifices that make normatively-imagined transnational families more resilient. This ethnographic case illuminates the ruptures and transformations in migrant women's lives that do not necessarily fit either of these two dominant narratives idealizing or bemoaning the fall of the transnational family. Instead, visits home by migrant women are pivotal points that enable a re-configuring of aspirations and ethics as they think about how they want to live their lives in ways that might undermine the dominance of particular gendered expectations and offer novel and dynamic understandings of transnational family life. In addition to ongoing forms of precarity that keep migrant women abroad (Parreñas, 2021), it is these subjective re-evaluations that encourage migrants to renew their temporary contracts. In spite of the restrictions that come with these contracts, being abroad can offer a space to migrant women to pursue aspirations that are not always in sync with kin expectations. Temporary stays abroad thus end up becoming longer-term migration projects, the temporal horizons of migrant women shifting as a result of this uneasy relation between visits home and pursuing life projects abroad (see Amrith 2021). These temporal dimensions are particularly notable in the experiences of older migrants whose visits increasingly foreshadow mandatory returns to countries of origin upon retirement as stipulated by Singapore's immigration policies. The anxieties that older migrants face in anticipating the moment when short-term visits home turn into permanent returns illuminate the importance of thinking about how gendered migration dynamics take shape over the life course and across generations (see Miah and King, this issue).

The paper will first situate this ethnographic case in the context of broader debates and observations in the literature on visiting migrants. It then moves on to describe the research context and methodological approach before considering different ethnographic episodes in the visits of migrant care workers which demonstrate the emotional complexity of visits and their impacts on migrant women's gendered subjectivities and their temporary migration trajectories.

VISITING MIGRANTS: APPROACHES IN SCHOLARSHIP AND CULTURAL TEXTS

The subject of visiting migrants has featured in a number of scholarly analyses of migration, even if they are not always the main focus. Loretta Baldassar's (2001) pioneering study on the visits home of Italian migrants in Australia and their role in sustaining kinship ties is one of the few in-depth ethnographies on the topic. Since then, studies have examined the multiple meanings and forms that such visits home take among diverse groups of migrants and diasporas around the world (Janta et al., 2015). Visits home are not a given; there are different degrees of privilege and mobility that shape or limit the possibilities to visit. Nevertheless, there are common themes that have emerged in the research on migrant and diasporic visits. One notable theme is on the new inequalities that emerge through the development of migrant and diasporic tourism economies. Eric Pido's (2017) ethnography 'Migrant Returns', for instance, examines not only the physical return visits of Filipino-Americans, but also the financial returns that are expected through investments and spending on these visits. Visits home have been shown to reveal differences in status between migrants and those who remained through fashion, a cosmopolitan habitus, and conspicuous consumption practices (Ferguson, 1999; Osella & Osella, 2000). As highly anticipated events that are bound up with practices of gift-giving and hospitality, visits home also embody a ritualistic character (Striffler, 2007). Ambivalence is a key theme that emerges in the literature as migrants grapple with the contradictory feelings of being at home and not at home (Constable, 1999; 2014), and where home is thought to be both 'beautiful and unbearable at the same time' to borrow Steve Striffler's (2007, 680) words. In tandem with this focus on ambivalence, the emotional dimensions of home visits are salient as migrants undergo 'encounter-displacements' (Lulle, 2014b) while (re)connecting with others, which is both invigorating yet also exhausting and disorienting (Hunter, 2018). As a number of scholars have observed, the boundaries between visits and returns are blurred as migrants return only to migrate once again (Constable, 2014; Killias, 2018);

or they use visits to delay or substitute for permanent returns (Carling & Erdal, 2014; Parrenas, 2021; Pido, 2017). While much of the research has focused on migrants' own visits, a newer angle of research is now examining the role of 'reverse' visits, that is, family and friends visiting migrants (Miah & King, 2021).

This body of scholarship sets an important foundation for the observations made in this paper on the visits of Filipino migrant care workers. In this paper, I use the term 'home' in a loose sense to capture its shifting and dynamic meanings. When care workers speak of 'visiting home', they are primarily referring to their localities of origin in the Philippines where their kin live and I mirror their usage in this paper. The narratives presented ahead, nevertheless, reveal far more complex meanings of home which include practices of home-making in Singapore, and in the world, too. This complexity echoes scholarly approaches to home which seek to de-naturalize the notion and to demonstrate home-making as an open-ended process (Boccagni, 2017; Lenhard & Samanani, 2020).

The article contributes to the literature by first, foregrounding the gendered dimensions[1] of visits home from the perspective of migrant women in low-wage and precarious positions in the domestic and care work sectors and the relational work that they are expected to perform on visits home as women, mothers, daughters, sisters *and* migrants. Second, this paper contributes a temporal perspective on visits home by examining the role that visits home play under temporary migration regimes when migrants do not have the right to bring immediate family members with them. In a more psychological approach to visits home among Filipino labour migrants, Garabiles et al. (2017) argue that 'resilient families rebuild ties through temporary family reunification, which occur during family visits when the mother returns home after long periods of separation' and that the 'sacrifice of being separate is transient and finite'. This paper, however, demonstrates that the idealized nuclear family and its unity is sometimes called into question through challenging experiences associated with visits home which subvert initial expectations of transient separation to a condition of indefinite temporariness. Rather than reading this as the failure of transnational families' resilience, however, this paper explores how visits contribute to re-orienting the character of temporary migration trajectories and experiences. They become journeys that are not only about hardship and suffering but also about agency, aspiration and creative engagements as migrants seek to find a sense of self in the world (Johnson & Werbner, 2010). In so doing, it echoes the work of feminist geographers and anthropologists of migration who argue both for attention to the gendered structures (evident in state migration policies, institutions, social imaginaries and kinship norms) that shape transnational migration, and to the relational 'gender work' that people do to reproduce or contest hierarchies, and the fluid gendered subjectivities and relations that emerge in the process (Donato et al., 2006; Pessar & Mahler, 2003). These gendered dynamics also relate to the 'temporal turn' in migration studies, which has called for greater research attention to how transnational relationships are negotiated not only across space but also over time (see e.g., Griffiths et al., 2013). In this article, I highlight the key role that visits play in this extended process of re-evaluating one's relationship to home and kin over time and how this simultaneously shifts migrants' temporal horizons (Amrith, 2021).

Finally, the material presented here also acknowledges how these themes have been dealt with in a range of cultural texts such as films, photography and poetry, as we saw with the poetry writing groups mentioned at the start of this paper. Cruz Bacani's (2018) photographic collection 'We Are Like Air', to mention but one example, documents the life of her mother, who has worked as a domestic worker in Hong Kong over the past 20 years. The visual narrative develops from Cruz Bacani's perspective as a child who stayed in the Philippines and then later migrated to Hong Kong as a young adult to join her mother as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Some of these photographs document visits home: of her mother travelling home from Hong Kong, the anticipation at the airport as her family awaits her and the moments of intimacy when reuniting with her husband and grandchildren. When it is time for her mother to return to her long-term employer in Hong Kong, with whom she has promised to stay until her employer's last breath, Cruz Bacani writes that 'sometimes, the pain we think we have buried and forgotten about finds its way back most unexpectedly' and that 'the distance has become the silent backdrop to our everyday life' (Cruz Bacani, 2018: 196–204). The texts and images speak of the shifting relationship between migrants' kinship ties at home and those abroad, and recognition of the complex reasons why migrants end up staying abroad on temporary contracts for so long.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

In the context of regional inequalities and the growing demand for care, migrant care workers have played a crucial role in the social reproduction of households and societies across Asia. This paper focusses specifically on migrant care workers from the Philippines who are employed in domestic work and institutional care in Singapore. The Philippines is one of the world's largest 'exporters' of care workers, the state structuring the outmigration of women into the global labour market for care (Guevarra, 2009). Singapore is one such country which employs a significant number of Filipino migrant care workers, both as domestic workers in private households and as professional nurses in care institutions.[2] The majority are women and most are on highly-restrictive visas. Those in domestic work live in their employers' homes, are not protected under national labour legislation, and experience gendered restrictions on their mobilities and forms of everyday surveillance which are bound up with moral panics about migrant women's own social lives and intimate relationships. Care workers employed in institutions have slightly more freedoms in that they can choose their living arrangements (often sharing small apartments with colleagues) and may also be able to obtain permanent residence in Singapore, though this has become increasingly difficult in recent years. Most are still on temporary visas and those working in eldercare homes are unlikely to meet the minimum salary threshold to bring their families.

This paper presents narratives of migrant women on temporary visas in Singapore who do not have their families living with them and who make periodic visits to their countries of origin. The temporalities and frequency of their visits home varies. Visits home do not generally occur in the first years of employment due to debts incurred in the initial migration journey (Killias, 2018; Platt et al., 2017). For domestic workers, employers determine a worker's entitlements to leave and are not obligated to grant annual home leave or to pay domestic workers' salaries during their home leave. The ability to visit often depends on having a 'good employer', one who recognizes their multiple social and familial entanglements across borders. There are also other socio-cultural life rhythms which affect when domestic workers may or may not able to visit home; for instance, they may not be given leave at festive times of the year, such as at Christmas or Chinese New Year, or during the school holidays of employers' children, which may coincide with times when domestic workers want to visit home (e.g., their own children's holidays or graduations). Visits home are thus not a given and are tied up with the precarious and employer-dependent situations of migrant women (Lam & Wong, 2020). Writing now in the context of a global pandemic, it is important to highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic stalled many planned visits home, creating much uncertainty for migrants.

Migrant women themselves also decide how often or not to visit. Given the huge growth of budget airlines in the Asian region, flight tickets are cheaper and airlines connect Singapore to an increasing number of smaller cities. This makes visits home easier than they used to be, but as the paper will demonstrate, there are other social factors that shape migrants' decisions to visit. Generally speaking, migrants visit their original homes once a year or once every 2 years (coinciding with workers' biannual contract renewals). In some cases, the gap between visits is longer and the widespread prevalence of digital technologies makes it easier for migrant women to remain in daily contact with loved ones in these times, which are like virtual check-ins between the physical, embodied visits. The duration of visits is typically 2–4 weeks, but could be longer when they coincide with the termination of employment or if migrants choose to return for longer periods of time before re-migrating again. In my research context, visits from friends and relatives to migrants in Singapore were very rare and depends largely on domestic workers having a close relationship with their employers who then 'allow' family members to come and stay.

METHODS

The data presented in this paper draw on long-term ethnographic research with Asian migrant care workers (predominantly female) since 2008 in Singapore. In particular, the paper draws on findings from two research projects. The

first project was on the aspirations of Filipino care workers in primarily institutional settings (2008–2012), which also involved me accompanying a migrant care worker on one of her visits home from Singapore to a family reunion in the Philippines. The second, a more recent project (2018–present), is on older migrant domestic workers approaching retirement. Although this project involved migrant women of different nationalities, I focus this paper on women from the Philippines (who were the largest group), though there are parallels with the experiences of women of other nationalities. Taken together, the projects comprise of over 100 in-depth interviews (approximately seventy percent with women from the Philippines), long-term ethnographic observations in a range of spaces from shopping malls, churches, migrant community spaces, training courses, workplaces and parks and continued informal contact and conversations with key interlocutors[3]. The migrants in these studies worked in different spaces of the care sector (domestic work, eldercare work, nursing) and were at different points of the life course (approximately between the ages of 35 and 65 years). The majority had children living in the Philippines and while some were married, it was more common to meet women who had separated from their spouses. A smaller proportion were single without children. Visits home were mentioned repeatedly in almost all of my encounters with migrant care workers, regardless of their age or familial status. In what follows, I present a smaller selection of these narratives and observations that representatively capture the diversity of what visits mean and that illuminate the emotional tensions that emerge when balancing visits home with their migration aspirations.[4]

JOY AND REUNIONS

Visits home, for many temporary migrant care workers, are associated with joyful reunions – reuniting with children they have not seen for years, with elders in the family, as well as with family members scattered around the world. They are highly anticipated events which support migrants in enduring the mundane, often challenging, routines of life abroad. To best capture the joyful character of these reunions, I draw on an ethnographic vignette from the time I accompanied Grace, a nurse working in a care home in Singapore, on a 2-week visit to her family home in the Philippines.

Grace's visit home was timed at the peak of Philippine summer to coincide with the *Fiesta* period in her village, Layan,[5] on Panay Island. *Fiesta* is a time when the village celebrates the patron saint, comes together through social events, prayer and hospitality. It was a particularly special year to visit, Grace told me, because three of her sisters (along with their husbands and children) were coming home, one from the UK and the other two from Canada, after a 4-year absence from the Philippines. Grace's aunt, who works as a nurse in Texas, had not returned home for 15 years and her American-born son who had never visited the Philippines, would be there too. Grace's son would come from Manila, where he lives with Grace's sister, and her husband would come back from many months working at sea. It was to be a large family reunion of a truly global Filipino family.

Grace could not sleep the night before the trip as she was so excited, she told me when we met at Changi Airport's budget terminal to take a Cebu Pacific flight to Manila. When we arrived in the Philippines, the days were filled with sheer enjoyment as one reunion followed another with plenty of hugs and shrieks of excitement as different generations came together after years apart. Upon arriving in Grace's family home in Layan, we immediately sat down with the big family to a breakfast of garlic fried rice, *longganissa* sausages and *lapu-lapu* fish, while an uncle put on the karaoke machine to sing along to 'Besame Mucho'. The following days involved eating, laughing, gossiping, banter, drinking, dancing, playing sports and games. Another uncle's 70th birthday was celebrated with the delicacy *lechon*, while on the day of the actual village *Fiesta*, more visitors came to eat and greet the migrant returnees and the family dressed up to attend the local Church service and village parade. Grace's son stuck to Grace (and her husband, who is also absent for large parts of the year due to his work as a seafarer) the whole time and she revelled in these moments of bonding with him. As I have elaborated in more detail elsewhere (Amrith, 2017), visits home like Grace's reveal a strong sense of togetherness, as they are felt affectively and intensely. The visits are also a time to forget the hardships and routines of life abroad.

The joys that come along with these visits were echoed in other migrants' narratives. Following an interview with Rhea, a 53-year-old domestic worker who has been working in Singapore for 10 years, we sat down for a coffee in a shopping mall and she spontaneously propped up her smartphone on the table to show me some photographs of her family in the Philippines. She then played a video on full volume from her last visit of all of her brothers and sisters dancing and singing for the camera to Whitney Houston's 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody'. As we watched the video, Rhea was in the moment: 'But look at us', she said gleefully, 'we are not older, we are not younger, we are just the same as we always were. My mother and father are looking down on us smiling, seeing how happy we are'. When meeting another migrant, Margie, we also spent time talking about her recent 20-day visit home and how she treated her family to outings at the swimming pool and restaurants. Margie reflected that 'I always cherish those moments when we all go out together, as one big family. My mother is very clever, she is still floating in the swimming pool at 80 years old!' For others, visits home are associated with pride because it means they can attend special events, such as their children's graduations, which are especially meaningful since some migrants are likely to have missed 'milestone' moments in their children's lives.

OBLIGATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The joys and reunions on visits home are no doubt powerfully felt and experienced. But they are also fleeting, snapshot-like moments. On my visit to Grace's home, I noticed that little was spoken about the struggles of life abroad. Silence, as Sampaio (2020) observes, is one way of expressing care from a distance in transnational families. In a similar manner, silences were also present on these visits home, as if talking too much about the hardships of life abroad would take away from their status as successful migrants, create worry for their family members, or rupture those moments of immense joy. Only a few times did I hear side conversations between Grace and her siblings and aunt (all visiting migrants themselves), who talked of their struggles to get visas or residence permits and the humiliations that come with the work that they do abroad. These conversations among visiting migrants were not shared openly with relatives living in the Philippines or during large family gatherings (Amrith, 2017).

There are also a number of expectations and obligations that come with being a visiting migrant – and particularly, a visiting female migrant – that generate strains. Grace's home was known as the 'migrant' household and was at the centre of Layan (symbolically and geographically). The household was therefore expected to provide hospitality during the *Fiesta* – offering limitless food to anyone who would visit the house. The women – Grace, her mother, sisters, cousins (together with household help) – were cooking around the clock to prepare breakfast, lunch, *merienda* and dinner, folding empanadas, marinating fish and chicken, preparing the shrimp and crab, peeling the mangoes and serving the food. They went around regularly offering cool drinks and fresh mango to the kids playing basketball in the grounds next door, while the men sat drinking beer under the trees on the hot summer afternoons. The women were also the ones getting the children washed and dressed in the morning. While they did so with a sense of purpose, the performance of these unspoken gender roles and 'duties' on visits home as good mothers, wives and daughters, revealed the continuities between gendered paid and unpaid care labour that cut across their migrant and visiting lives. At the same time, as migrants, Grace and her relatives were expected to pay for all meals in restaurants and the family beach vacation to Boracay Island after the *Fiesta*.

The weight of financial and emotional expectations during visits home emerged in the narratives of many of the women I spoke to. Maria, who has been abroad for 20 years, said that she could not see her children for the first 4–5 years she was away due to debt and her fragile employment situation but she now goes back every two years. She further commented:

> I don't know if other people have told you the difficulties for parents when they see their children again … because after so many years apart, maybe they are spoilt by the grandparents, when you come for

> holidays, they only want the latest cellphone or something like that, to compensate for your absence. You have to buy them what they want. There are many difficulties.

Some migrants mentioned that they avoid going home because of the expense. As Amanda, in Singapore as a domestic worker for 26 years, commented, 'all the money, all the savings you have is gone after just one week. Your salary just goes, disappears'. Some say it is 'better not to go back', even if their employers give them time off. This was the case for Bella, who said that 'my employer asked me to go home in January but I said I don't have enough money because if we go home, we must have big money – they are thinking you are abroad so you have a lot of money, you need to bring *pasalubong* [gifts]'. Migrant women are often the primary breadwinners in their families and they are seen as rich by family members. Visits are both about displays of migrant abundance and success, yet at the same time, reminders to migrants of their precarity working in the care sector abroad. Bella is now in a financial education programme for domestic workers which encourages her to save money for herself. Such programmes teach domestic workers like Bella how to say 'no' to family members' requests for money and to put some aside for their own future business plans and livelihoods. While there is often a neoliberal narrative underlying many of these schemes which again put the responsibility on migrant women to be 'financially-smart', Bella also expressed how much she enjoyed going to these classes on Sundays and finally being 'allowed' to think about herself and her needs and desires. Here she finds a balance between her obligations and finding a sense of purpose abroad. Sometimes, taking longer breaks from visits offers migrant women this space.

There are also different perceptions that migrants have of themselves, and how others regard them, which has to do with their habitus and the kinds of consumer goods they have. Lea, a nurse working in a care home in Singapore, said that in Singapore she hardly spends money on herself but at the same time claimed that

> when I go back to Philippines, even though I have such simple things, my cousins they envy me so much. They are so envious of us and how we are. They want to be like us, they say '*até* [sister], I like your bag, I like your phone, I like this one. Can you buy for me?

At the same time, Lea gets annoyed that her relatives feel a sense of entitlement to obtaining things from their migrant relatives without putting in their own efforts to 'better' themselves, as she complains about them not studying and getting pregnant young. She sighed, 'they want to be me but I say do you know how much work it takes to be who I am?'

For others, there are administrative obligations to deal with on visits home. Amanda mentioned that when she goes home, she wastes her time going between different government offices to sort out social security payments. She lamented that her brother, who had worked in Saudi Arabia for decades and now lives with a disability has no social support, so she uses her time seeking information on government benefits for people living with disabilities, and on where to obtain free or subsidized medication. Her caring labour, which involves looking after the bureaucratic aspects of social protection on behalf of her brother, continues both at home and abroad. Doing this reduces the burden on her to send remittances back for these care and medical expenses, but Amanda is fed up that her relatives expect her to do all of this in her short trips home and expresses that is one of the reasons why she feels more at peace in Singapore.

I also heard about the tensions that arise when dealing with siblings who have been entrusted with important responsibilities, such as taking care of the house building projects of migrants. Tess, a domestic worker who has been abroad for over 25 years, invested in running a hostel in the Philippines with her husband (who works in Spain), but complained how her brothers-in-law completely mismanaged the property in their absence and that everything became so 'ugly'. She was especially upset that they 'treat the workers there so bad. We are shocked, we are working here, being treated well by our employers, but there in the Philippines, they cannot even treat their own people with respect … now we are not even talking to them anymore'. Visits home are thus constituted by this strenuous relational work that does not always reaffirm existing bonds, but can strain them by revealing different ethical dispositions

among family members. These tensions, however, need not only be negatively construed, as they offer migrant women an opportunity to re-evaluate the relationships and communities that matter to them.

Migrant women further deal with peer expectations and judgements. Tess recalled the misunderstandings that emerged with her peers who stayed in the Philippines to work in 'professional' positions, while she, as with a number of others in her position, often end up in jobs abroad that do not match their qualifications:

> When I go back to the Philippines, we have our college reunions, and I tell them I am a DH [domestic helper], they are shocked. They say, I cannot imagine you are doing this there. They are all engineers, teachers. But I said, I am doing well, helping my family, there is nothing to be ashamed of. No one else has been able to do what I could do for my family

For Tess, her status and sense of value comes from her ability to support her family, which compensates for the fact that she works in a feminized sector of labour that is poorly valued.[6] This sense of value is something she shares with other migrant women, her friends and peers, as people who relate to the decisions she has made. All of these narratives demonstrate that while going home is filled with joyful moments, it comes with multiple gendered expectations and obligations that create distance within kin and peer groups. The narratives further reveal the asymmetries that develop between migrants and non-migrants as they '[interact] with each other from a distance and [imagine] each other's' lives' (Carling, 2008, 1473) often imperfectly and with friction. These frictions in turn can produce new forms of self-understanding among migrants on their priorities and their ways of living with others.

LOSS AND BETRAYAL

Visits home can also be marked by a sense of loss and some of my research participants choose not to go home to avoid the emotional pain of having to leave again. This is especially the case when it comes to confronting their relationships with their children (see also Hoang & Yeoh, 2012). Mary, who has two children back in the Philippines, explained 'you don't like to see when the children are crying when you go back [to Singapore]. It's very hard'. In these moments, women like Mary have to face the heavy emotional judgement that they are not 'good mothers', as they justify their absences to their children and to themselves. Mary explains, even when they are apart, 'we think, did they eat on time, did they sleep well, are they sick, or need a hug, or got a problem, whatever, it's always on our mind', but feels that the children do not understand that. These dissonances were reflected in a number of other narratives and in observations. When I went home with Grace, there was an awkward moment when we got out of the van from the airport. Grace held out her arms to her 6-year-old son whom she had not seen for 2 years, while he went over to embrace Grace's other sister, instead of his mother. Meanwhile, Flor reflected on how her daughter was 7-months-old when she left the country, and when she went home for the first time after 3 years, Flor said, 'she doesn't know me … she doesn't like to go with me, it's so painful'. The difficulties in bonding with their children is strenuous work for migrant women, as they try to confront the overriding expectations that as women they will care always and for everyone, in presence and absence. At the same time as they lament these lost intimacies, a number of migrant domestic workers become used to the everyday intimacies they share with their employers' families (and also pets), who become like kin to them while migrant carers in old-age homes form close bonds with those for whom they care (Amrith, 2022). As Killias (2018) observed, the Indonesian migrants in her study would often call their employers' children during their visits home, sometimes more than they called their biological children while abroad. These shifting relationships also contribute to migrant women extending their stays abroad time and again since they might find other meaningful forms of intimacy abroad; in this sense, the 'lost' intimacies can simultaneously generate new kinds of connections in other spaces of their lives.

Other kinds of loss are also associated with visits home. Memories of losing a parent were ingrained in the minds of a number of the women I spoke with, as they recalled their last visits or the times when they were not able to visit

to say goodbye to a dying parent. Amanda recalled how her father passed away one month after she had been with him in the Philippines, but that her family did not tell her until a few months later. She said it was 'because they are worried, my bonding with my father was really very close, I'm the youngest and since I was just there, they did not tell me'. She lives with the regret that she could not visit for his funeral. Amanda explained that her mother subsequently suffered with cancer. After her parents passed on, Amanda does not feel the need to go home as often as she points out that she herself is single and does not have children of her own in the Philippines (though she does still have siblings and relatives to visit). Instead, she dedicates her energy fully to her Church family in Singapore, spending all of her Sundays volunteering, ushering and dedicating herself to her faith. These changing relationships to home and kin, including memories of loss, re-shape migrant women's journeys and their desires to visit frequently over time.

Visits home can also be tied to spousal betrayals. Over the course of my recent fieldwork, particularly with older domestic workers, it was more the norm than exception that my research participants were separated from their spouses. The relative absence of the men in this account reflects this pattern. In one of my last fieldwork meetings at the very start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore in February 2020, I sat in a food court with a group of my interlocutors, all of us thinking back to the time when SARS affected Singapore in 2003. Jocelyn, however, responded: 'yes I remember SARS, but that's when my husband ran away with another woman so I don't remember much, I was visiting the Philippines then. I had other things to worry like me chasing after him', after which the whole group laughed uproariously. Enough time had passed that the women reflected on such events in their lives with a sense of humour, particularly since they themselves have changed and found a different sense of purpose in life that was not dependent on having a husband. Jocelyn stayed abroad for much longer than she initially anticipated, spending her Sundays volunteering at a shelter for domestic workers with a group of close female friends, and earning an additional income through several side activities such as candle-making, cooking and baking. The events, sometimes dramatic, that occur on visits home can reorient women towards staying abroad longer, which in turn might offer a greater sense of freedom and joy.

For others, such betrayals were fresher. In my interview with Rose, once she raised the topic of her unfaithful husband, she could not stop talking about it. All the while that Rose had been working in Singapore as a domestic worker, her husband had been working in Saudi Arabia. They used to meet each other every couple of years in the Philippines. She became suspicious when her husband started making excuses about not being able to get time off work at the time when Rose herself would be visiting the Philippines, and then made visits at different times of the year. Eventually, through gossip spreading in her networks on who the mistress was, Rose said, 'I asked my sister and my niece to go to that lady's home and pick up my husband … So, bullseye!' A few years later, when Rose went home, she said 'he didn't face me. He didn't come to see me because he knows what he did to me is very wrong'. Rose's family pressures her to forgive him, 'men are just like that', they say. But Rose was clear: 'if the husband is fooling around, no matter what happens some people will accept the husband. But I told my family, I am not one of them. I don't like that kind of husband. I would rather stay alone and happy'. Rose, who was at one point thinking about returning to the Philippines with her husband, has re-configured her plans and wants to stay on in Singapore as long as possible (until retirement, according to the law), finding comfort in her long-term relationship with her employer's family and in her everyday, familiar routines of managing a household. Forms of loss can thus turn into somewhat of a new start. As one domestic worker told me laughing, 'marriage is a death sentence' for women in the Philippines. While the betrayals are still in their minds, migrant women use these moments to become free from the expectations of being 'good wives', doing more for themselves rather than simply waiting around. Some also engage in new intimacies abroad, for instance with migrant or local men whom they meet out and about on Sundays, or online with strangers or acquaintances (what some of my interlocutors call 'FB [Facebook] romances') and they look forward to these encounters, preparing what to wear, taking selfies and anticipating their online conversations. Visits home are thus moments which allow for reorienting gendered subjectivities away from the potential constraints of nuclear familial intimacies to those that allow for pursuing personal desires.

ANTICIPATING RETURNS

As noted earlier, a number of scholars who have examined visits home highlight that they are often precursors to permanent returns home. Return was less of a theme among the nurses in my study who were younger and had plans to move on to other countries. For domestic workers who are on the most restrictive work permit, returns home are mandatory once they reach retirement age, which in Singapore is the age of 60. There are no pathways to permanent residence or citizenship, even for women who have laboured in Singapore for decades. A number of the women in my current study are approaching this age and anticipate what returning home 'for good' would look like, producing temporal tensions between their past, present and future lives. When visiting their families at this later stage of life and of their migration journeys, migrant women try to imagine themselves settling into these environments that they left long ago, with all the tensions mentioned above, while also making practical preparations.

As other scholars have argued, re-migration or repeated migration is common feature of migrant domestic workers' trajectories (Constable, 2014; Parreñas, 2021). Domestic workers might return home in between their temporary contracts, sometimes with the intention of returning permanently. However, they might later find that their livelihoods are not sustainable and plans for small business ventures do not always 'succeed' (Parrenas, 2021; Spitzer, 2016). This was echoed in Jenny's story, as she explained:

> I tried to go home but I only stayed for one year and then had to go out again. Because people are spending all my money. I wanted to have a small shop but my customers keep borrowing and never pay back. All the money goes out. Finally, I said, I need to go out again and build my savings for a house, some land.

She then returned to Singapore on a new contract to work as a domestic worker again. For those over the age of 50 years, however, returning to the Philippines essentially means returning 'for good' since it is very difficult to re-migrate at that age.

In addition to the financial precarity that is associated with returning, some migrant women worry about the lack of privacy and comfort. As Jo explained:

> I tell people when I go back to leave me alone. If I want to sleep, let me, if I want to go out, let me, don't always ask me what I'm doing, where I'm going. Then after a few days, I want to go home [to Singapore], to my bed, we don't sleep well there.

Jo's comment makes clear that 'home' holds many meanings and emphasizes once again the various demands on her time on visits. Others, however, speak of boredom. Lena, who was planning to return to the Philippines after finishing her contract with her current employer reflected on this:

> we don't really miss life in the Philippines, we are used to it here. When we go back, if we are doing nothing and just staying home, our bodies are ageing faster, we get older quickly. After a few days, when I go for my 4-week rest, I get sick because I am doing nothing there and I want to come back to Singapore already.

Lena's sentiments were widely shared by a number of migrant women that I spoke to, who refer to the feeling of 'doing nothing' on their visits home – even if, they are in fact doing a lot of unpaid care work. The boredom they feel is combined with the desire to go back to their more independent lives abroad, given that many have established close friendships and regular activities there. There is still, however, a sense of ambivalence. When I asked Lena how she feels about returning she explained:

> actually, I am not tired, I can still work. But then I'm thinking, I have been away for almost my whole adult life, maybe it's enough now. I will just go and rest. But my daughters are here in Singapore and her kids are back there, so I told them, I cannot look after the grandchildren, you have to pay someone to look after them.

Lena looks forward to a time of rest, at the same time as she is pushing back against the idea that she will simply take over the unpaid care work of looking after her grandchildren when she returns. For migrant women in Lena's position, visits home when approaching retirement are also bound up with planning for this time ahead, sometimes in concrete and hopeful ways. Carol, a domestic worker in her 50s in Singapore, with a sibling working in Japan and another in Australia, explained that on her next visit home, she and her siblings would start discussing their idea to open a business as their retirement plan – a multi-cuisine restaurant, where each of them would cook food from the countries in which they have worked. Yet there is uncertainty given that not all of them have sufficient savings to sustain their livelihoods once they return, a reminder of their long-term precarity as migrant care workers over the life course.

As mentioned earlier, it was rare for my interlocutors to be visited by family members due to the fact that they live in their employers' homes. Margie, who has worked in Singapore for almost 30 years and is approaching retirement, says that one of her dreams before she goes home is to have her family visit. Margie wants to invite her daughter and her sister over, as a way of repaying her sister for taking care of her family budget all these years. Margie counted on her hands, 'so 7 people, 5 grandkids, my daughter and sister, husbands no need', she laughed. 'I hope my employer will allow them to stay here, the house is big. Otherwise I have to find a hostel somewhere', she explained. Margie was thinking about how to arrange the air tickets and all the attractions in Singapore that she wants to show them, like Universal Studios, the zoo and Sentosa Island. When we spoke in August 2019, she had been planning this for the following May school holidays. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this planned visit would not have materialized, leaving it uncertain whether Margie will be able to have her family visit before the end of her working life abroad.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the context of the long-term precarity of temporary migrant care workers from the Philippines working in Singapore, visits home offer a respite to the challenging and sometimes isolating conditions of life and work abroad. Reunions with kin and friends are joyful occasions – a time for being together, for spending time with children, eating and dancing. However, these joyful moments are often fleeting, and the overwhelming expectations that migrant women face, together with experiences of loss and betrayal, leads to a deepening sense of estrangement and prolongations of migrants' absences. The strenuous relational work that migrant women have to do illuminates how gender importantly shapes the dynamics of such visits. Migrant care workers are expected to embody multiple roles as breadwinners, sacrificing mothers and daughters, and loyal wives all at once, their care labour continuing across the spectrum of paid care work in Singapore and unpaid care labour for kin in the Philippines. Visits home become emotionally complex events that contribute to a re-orienting of migrants' gendered subjectivities, reminding us of the need to think about the relational and shifting nature of gender identities and relationships throughout the migration process (Donato et al., 2006). Visits home, in tandem with migrants' shifting subjectivities over time, also play a role in reversing the logic underpinning temporary migration regimes, as temporary stays abroad turn into states of long-term temporariness, amplifying disjunctures in how migration is imagined by different actors, including kin, migrants themselves, employers and states. This reiterates the need to attend closely to questions of time in studies of transnational family life and visits home, including tracing how the meanings of home remain open-ended over time (Boccagni, 2017). As a researcher, I admit to sharing a similar naivety that Nicole Constable describes (2014, 217), imagining that migrant women's returns to be with loved ones would be desirable and fulfilling. Yet, I found, just as Constable did with migrant mothers in Hong Kong, that these returns (and their anticipation) can be emotionally

draining and fraught with misunderstandings. In some ways, their experiences challenge the simplistic narrative that visits home are joyful and lives abroad characterized by suffering. Rather than framing these experiences in binary terms, more relevant here are the shifting emotional tensions and balances that migrant women navigate over the course of visits that take place repeatedly over the decades. Their lives are shaped and lived between freedom and constraint, aspirations and obligations and moments of both loss and renewal.

The ruptures on home visits, however, are not absolute or abrupt. These can also be slow processes that represent a shifting and dynamic balance between care workers' lives at 'home' and 'abroad', which they navigate with ambivalent emotions such as guilt, uncertainty, frustration, relief and hope (see also Constable, 1999; Striffler, 2007). As Victoria Sakti (2020, p. 305) observes among older East Timorese exiles in Indonesia and their planned or imagined visits/returns to East Timor, difficult relationships do not 'diminish the sense of kinship among its members, and close the opportunity for giving or receiving care'. Similarly, among my interlocutors, these forms of kinship and connection continue as they stay in touch with their children through digital technologies, which play a crucial part in bridging visits (Madianou & Miller, 2012), continue to send money, and imagine harmonious reunions (cf. Humbracht et al., this issue). However, such relationships shift in character and importance over time and across space as kinship itself can encompass different degrees of asymmetry and discomfort (Carling, 2008). Ultimately, the narratives in this paper tell a story neither about the resilience of transnational families nor about their breakdown as public narratives would frame it. Rather than reifying a normative and static version of the transnational family, we see how its meanings and boundaries shift over time. For women who occupy different positionalities – as married, single, mothers, those separated or widowed and those who are not in heteronormative relationships – visits are regular points in their lives that enable a re-evaluation of past and current relationships and novel ways of thinking about how to live a good life, which involves finding a comfortable balance between love, obligation and a sense of freedom that may or may not fit normative ideals. Despite the hardships that they may face, migration to Singapore offers women an opportunity to pursue diverse aspirations abroad that are carefully negotiated alongside obligations to kin 'back home'. The COVID-19 pandemic reveals that visits are still deeply important and grounding components of transnational life as the current impossibilities to visit home disrupt, in existential ways, this delicate balance that migrant care workers seek to establish.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The sharing of this ethnographic data in a public repository compromises ethical standards.

ENDNOTES

[1] While this paper's focus is on migrant women, Osella and Osella (2000) offer a unique insight into the masculinities of returning Gulf migrants in Kerala.

[2] There are nearly 250,000 domestic workers of different nationalities (the largest group is Filipino) working in the country (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore), as well as a notable presence of migrant nurses working in institutional settings. The exact number of migrant nurses is not provided in state statistics.

[3] Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of my research participants.

[4] I have not included the narratives of professional nurses with permanent residence who had the option to bring their families to Singapore. These women formed a minority of cases and the focus here is on migrant women on temporary contracts. I did not include narratives of women of other nationalities due to limitations in space for analysing differences in experiences based on national origin.

[5] The real name of the village has been changed to remove identifying information.

[6] It is not uncommon for migrant domestic workers to hold Bachelor degrees and deskilling is a common experience.

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