

## Relationalities of Identity: 'Sameness' and 'Difference' among Filipino Migrant Domestic Workers

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This paper examines identity negotiations among Filipino migrant domestic workers. For these migrants, the overseas stint becomes a significant moment in the construction of new identities because it affords migrants with opportunities for self-actualization and identification to a particular class and status, having been able to travel abroad. However, identity construction also revolves around the migrants' interactions, which are shaped by the 'maid' label and a time/space that is largely circumscribed by their employers. In order then, to negotiate identities with the intersections of place, 'race', and social class, migrants interface cultures - they make comparisons between themselves and those of other ethnicities, nationalities, and class positions. This is a relational strategy I call transcendent boundary work, because it involves the construction of 'sameness' and 'difference' based on an idea of the 'other' that is not dependent on the normative boundaries of the social categories of ethnicity, race, and social class. This paper argues that the process of constructing sameness or difference as such represents a kind of self-awareness acquired in the course of migration. It is a non financial gain, often overlooked among migrant workers, and is also key to understanding the formation of new self-perceptions and identities.

*Keywords: identity, negotiations, Filipino domestic workers and boundary*

This paper<sup>1</sup> takes off from literature on mobility and identity (see Silvey 2004; Yeoh et al. 2002; Law 2001; Gibson et al. 2001; Lan 2000; Pratt 1998; Constable 1997) that see female migrants as interpretive subjects whose

identities are fluid, socially constructed in an ongoing process, and built upon both social location and geographical context. It focuses in particular on the identity negotiations of Filipino migrant domestic workers who have worked in Singapore and Hong Kong. For migrant domestic workers, “going abroad” and the overseas stint become significant moments in the construction of new identities, not merely because they are in a different geographical and cultural space, but because by being in such a space, they are able to make comparisons between cultures and experience difference—being different and creating difference by comparing and contrasting—which facilitates a new way of seeing the world and their past and current subject positions. Going abroad provides the context for the interaction of places, bringing about an increased awareness of location among those who cross national borders, regardless of their cultural and financial capital.

The interfacing of geographies that occur with movement leads to new kinds of self-perceptions and learning. Migrant domestic workers acquire these new identities in the course of interfacing home and abroad. Respondents for the study construct abroad as a place for self-actualization as opposed to the home because despite being in an occupation that tends to racialize and marginalize, it is abroad where they encounter different ways of life and identify with a particular class and status as they engage in class-based leisure activities away from the “gaze” of family and community. However, they are still “maids,” and as such, they not only have a limited time/space and limited interactions but also experience the kind of hardship that involves not just class but ‘race’ as well. In the light of identity construction, this paper then attempts to pursue the following question: how do migrant domestic workers negotiate identity given their subject positions as ‘Filipina maids’ who, in being abroad, do have the ability for class consumption and self-actualization?

Identity is indeed a very broad research topic and for this paper, the focus is on social identity, specifically, on identity as self-perceptions (Jenkins 1996). Findings indicate that as domestic workers weave their way through the spaces of nation, race, class, and culture, they acquire a particular way of looking at the world that is not based on any clear-cut categories, and identify with people based on notions of sameness or difference that are in themselves products of this juxtaposition of spaces. This is what I call *transcendent boundary work*, which is a kind of boundary making not dependent on typical normative categories, and which is also learned in the course of migration (something the migrants had not been doing prior to working abroad).

Boundary making has been examined by Lan Pei Chia (2003) in her study on employers and domestic workers in Singapore. She mentioned boundary markers used by both employers and domestic workers in various assertions, for instance of status and distance. I take the idea of boundary work further in looking at identifications among migrant domestic workers—who do they identify with and why—as these identifications relate to the way they see themselves, and thus, negotiate identities. In this regard, the kind of boundary making that they do is experiential and situational, rather than categorical.

As it is in literature on social identity, the migrant domestic workers' responses to being abroad are framed by the context of their subject positions as female, Filipino, from provincial communities and a generally lower class upbringing, and working in varied domestic conditions in the spaces of abroad. Therefore, how they make sense of the structures of location—the policies of Hong Kong and Singapore, employers and employment conditions, and their space/time as household workers—and negotiate the same structures of marginality will be nuanced based on their particular subject positions. How new learning and self-perceptions are thus created, maintained and negotiated vary according to the interplay of structure and agency. At the same time, in migrant narratives about self-perceptions and new learning, identity is constituted as having an embodied and a collective aspect. Respondents talk about self-image, use labels to describe what it is to be in particular subject positions, and use the body as a canvass for their experiences. Furthermore, identity is always relational. It is formed and negotiated out of the collective interactions with others. The migrants' social relations—their actual interactions and the kinds of relationships formed abroad—influence their self-perceptions and self-image, attitudes, values, and learning, a great deal.

Abroad, migrants interact not only with employers but also with other groups including fellow Filipino domestic workers, other foreign workers, and Filipino professionals. Some of these interactions might be limited to some extent as migrants are free only on their off-days, if they have any, which range from once a month to once a week, but these interactions are enough to allow migrants to develop ideas about cultures, practices, similarities, and differences. Given the diversity of their cultural encounters as well as the intersecting spaces of class and race, one of the ways by which migrants identify with various social groups and form relationships is by interfacing of cultural contexts, which entails making comparisons between themselves and those of other cultures—those of other ethnicities, nationalities, and class positions—as they rationalize the consequences of their subject positions, engage in social networks, and create continuities of home.

Social relationships among different groups of people are generally marked by the normative boundaries of social categories, for instance, groups identify with one another on the basis of gender, 'race,' ethnicity, social class, among others. However, for the migrant domestic workers, comparisons and differentiations in identity negotiations make use of *transcendent boundary work*, in which markers are fluid, and the 'other' is not based on bounded social categories. While migrants do utilize these same social categories, identifications transcend their normative boundaries in that, notions of who is similar to, or different from, them go beyond just race, ethnicity, or social class, but are instead products of the intersections of these categories with the experiences of the migrants. Transcendent boundary work is primarily manifested in particular notions of sameness and difference: differentiations based on nationality to gain a sense of advantage; sameness as shared suffering to cope with marginality; differentiating employers based on socio-cultural standing to rationalize ill-treatment; sameness as 'foreign-ness' rather than nationality to equalize positions with fellow nationals; and sameness as a function of cultural understanding in the formation of social networks.

This strategy of transcendent boundary work enables social positioning – migrants are able to construct and maintain an identity that allows them to position themselves within these spaces of race, class, and culture, and especially in situations where they feel less empowered. While boundaries are still constructed and maintained, migration has given the migrant domestic workers new ways of looking at 'sameness' and 'difference' that would not have otherwise been present had they remained in the home.

#### A NOTE IDENTITY CHANGE

While this paper will not discuss new self-perceptions and new learning, a brief account will be given to provide a better picture of the outcome of the interfacing of cultural contexts. On the level of attitudes, the social relations experienced abroad have led to a greater empathy towards other people and better skills in interpersonal relations. Respondents who used to be shy have become more outgoing in return, some of them even participating in, and leading, community affairs. This kind of change has been more apparent among those who returned from Hong Kong than from Singapore, primarily because of Hong Kong's longer history of hiring Filipino domestic workers, as well as policies that require a mandatory day off and a minimum wage for migrant domestic workers, and allow migrants to organize, mobilize, and even speak out in public space. Many respondents however, regardless of

the destination abroad, expressed greater patience and tolerance of other people. This is perhaps a significant non-financial gain that goes unrecognized among migrant domestic workers. The multiplicities of their cultural encounters and exchanges, regardless of being in work considered “unskilled” has led to a kind of self-awareness, of knowing one’s location vis-a-vis those of other people in the globe, and thus, to greater empathy. According to Leny, a 40-year old housewife who worked in Singapore for eight years, working abroad changed her attitude when it comes to dealing with people:

“We already know, so to speak, how to have smooth interpersonal relations/ to adjust to people who are different from us, like that so to speak/ then in our self-image/ we already dress differently/ compared to before when we have not been away, gone out to other countries/ then in our attitudes.../...it’s easy for us to understand/ easy for us to have compassion to our fellow humans.”

The idea of being more tolerant and compassionate could also be a function of gender. Filipino values socialize women to be more caring compared to men, and in reproductive occupations such as domestic work and for instance, nursing, women draw on the value of care-giving even more. Domestic work in Singapore and Hong Kong are especially wont to push women into a position where they have to tolerate the characteristics and habits of their employers who are of a different culture, not only because their job requires them to take care of children and elderly, but also because of proximity. Domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong are usually ‘stay-in,’ which means they live with their employers. Under these circumstances, the need to engage becomes even more urgent and smooth interpersonal relations become crucial to the performance of one’s job. At the same time, as foreign domestic workers from developing countries, they are also subjected to the kind of racialization that could have perhaps enabled them to see beyond “race” and into the commonalities of all human beings. Out of these experiences of being female in a reproductive occupation that transpires within a domestic space, and of being an “other,” a greater sense of compassion and understanding towards those of other cultures could have developed among migrant domestic workers.

## DIFFERENCE AND MARGINALITY

As Filipino maids and therefore part of the marginalized “others” in Singapore and Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers utilize notions of difference when comparing themselves with those who are in similar positions

of marginality, such as other foreign domestic workers. Despite a shared status as foreign workers with limited rights, respondents differentiated themselves from other foreign workers using national identity to gain a sense of advantage. By setting themselves apart from others in the same social position, migrants are somehow able to transcend feelings of marginality and be less of an "other." Respondents agreed that Filipino domestic workers exhibit a greater deal of modernity, higher educational levels, and better English skills, than other foreign domestic workers. These qualities are not attributed by migrants to individual achievement and merit but rather, they are seen as cultural traits intrinsic to Filipinos in general.

"Filipinos are really talented / The Indonesians... as long as they have money they are okay / it's like they no longer... it's like when they see money / that's big for them.../ And Filipinas are mostly business-minded.../ but Indonesians, they are already contented /... We [Filipinos] are also more attentive to our work compared to them." - Jennifer, 35, Singapore

The Filipino is like... more ahead [than Indonesians] in terms of behavior / then in education, the Filipino has a higher level.../ then in attitudes, the Filipino is ... a fighter." - Judy, 32, Singapore

These kinds of intercultural differentiations are based on the respondents' interactions with other foreign workers and minority groups, whether in superficial encounters or deeper friendships. Respondents utilize these distinct cultural traits to separate themselves from other foreign workers in similar situations because these are also the kinds of traits that make them more privileged as domestic workers. Filipino domestic workers get higher wages<sup>2</sup> compared to domestic workers of other nationalities and are also more 'sought after' because, according to most of the respondents, Filipinos work harder, are cleaner, and have initiative. Thus, domestic workers' perceptions of themselves as Filipinos often draw on the racialization and categorization imposed by those of a higher class position or status, such as employers or the majority ethnic group. Zydith, a 31-year old who worked in Singapore for five years sets Filipinos apart from other minority groups by referring to how the majority ethnic population in Singapore describes Filipino domestic workers:

"Ah the Filipino/ not that I'm bragging/ but the Chinese they're the ones who are saying/ that the Filipino is higher when it comes to education/ the Philippines has a higher [educational] level than Myanmar, Pakistani, and also the Indonesian, Malay/ most of them have a low level of education/ so a lot of... they say there in the news that [in] Singapore/ a

lot commit suicide/ because they can't handle the stress there/ they can't conceive/ they don't know how to widen themselves/ how to do it step by step..."

Zydlith's narrative indicates the relationship between education and one's ability to locate oneself in context (widen self), which she attributes to nationality in her claim that Filipinos are able to do this more so than those of other nationalities. While this further reinforces "othering" in a sense, as well as the status position of employers, it also provides Filipino domestic workers with alternative ways of looking at themselves abroad and disregards intra-national divisions of social class and ethnolinguistic background. According to Zydlith, Filipinos are more capable of handling stress because they know how to broaden their perspectives. While these kinds of comparisons may not lead to any structural change and may even reinforce the authoritative voice of those who are structurally in a higher social position, they nevertheless provide migrant domestic workers with a greater sense of power and agency because these notions are often used to resist ill-treatment. As Zydlith mentions further about her Korean female employer:

"But her, I cannot stand her attitude/ sometimes when I was ironing/ she, like, I don't know what she told me/ I almost pulled her hair/ she almost pulled my hair too/ I told her try to slap me/ I will do everything.../ I really fought with her because/ then she told me I'm the only maid who fought against her/ I told her, I'm not like Indonesian/ that everything you say, nothing/ just keep their mouths shut/ I said, when you're dealing with a Filipina/ when there's an enemy, they will fight you/ so I told her don't try your best/ don't try your luck..."

## SAMENESS AND MARGINALITY

The preference for nationality-based groupings (discussed later) reinforces this 'difference' as many domestic workers choose to engage primarily with fellow Filipino domestic workers out of greater cultural understanding. However, the shared social positions of all foreign domestic workers have also led to a shared sense of suffering that is "race-blind." While Jennifer, 35, who has worked in Singapore for two years, distinguishes Filipinos as more talented, she also pointed to shared experiences between Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers when she said that Indonesians are "like us [Filipinos] in that they also aspire to improve their situation in life." Comparing themselves to other marginal groups who are in the same plight and experiencing the same difficulties becomes a means by which migrant domestic workers cope with hardship. Given that abroad means hardship

("everyone suffers"), respondents feel less so when they think of other domestic workers who have it worse. Helping others then becomes a source of accomplishment and pride, and assistance in various forms is provided to other domestic workers regardless of nationality or ethnicity.

"Some employers can be too much / There are many like that / That's why we are helping out a lot of [domestic workers] there / If they no longer want [to work] / if they cannot take it anymore / we find other [employers] or sometimes we encourage them to run away /... Filipinos and Indonesians, it's the same." - Judy, 32, Singapore

Respondents from Singapore are in a better position to speak of assisting domestic workers of other nationalities as it is in Singapore where greater ethnic diversity in terms of domestic workers can be found. Most of the domestic workers in Singapore are from three countries – Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. In terms of opportunity structures, Filipino domestic workers receive a higher salary compared to their Indonesian and Sri Lankan counterparts primarily because of their educational backgrounds and English skills. In this sense, even the structures promote distinctions between foreign domestic workers while still keeping their subordinate status intact. Out of this kind of situation, many of my respondents from Singapore mentioned that they knew of, for instance, Indonesian domestic workers (most of them neighbors) who are unable to directly confront oppressive employers. It is therefore not uncommon for Filipino domestic workers to intervene, at least indirectly, mainly in terms of giving food and advice.

While there is also some ethnic diversity with regard to foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, this category is still dominated by Filipinos and therefore, encounters with domestic workers of other nationalities are less common, especially for those who have begun working in Hong Kong in the early 1980s. Many of the respondents from Hong Kong however, mentioned helping out fellow Filipino domestic workers in need. This is usually in the form of looking for alternative employers in case the domestic worker is terminated, or running boarding houses where domestic workers can either hang out or seek temporary shelter when they have run away or are in-between employment. These boarding houses, while usually Filipino-run, are not limited to taking in only Filipino domestic workers.

Despite the crossing of ethnic lines in the provision of assistance, particularly in the case of Singapore, cultural stereotypes still exist and distinctions are still being made. But as De Sousa Santos (2007) maintains, the idea of empathy is a significant indicator of, and a factor for, subaltern

cosmopolitanism. Empathy towards people who are not from one's own country and who might be from countries that are relatively poorer than one's own becomes more present in lives of Filipino domestic workers as they interact with those "others" who are in similar positions of marginality. It is relatively easier to empathize with fellow Filipinos, but the recognition of the plight of others is a start at getting to know about how people from other parts of the world are being treated and how they are faring. Perhaps an element of pity might be present here since Filipino domestic workers do have a higher salary and speak better English and are therefore comparably less marginal. But nevertheless, for Filipino domestic workers who, given their socio-historical backgrounds, have probably never encountered a foreigner who shares their situation, this experience enables them to situate themselves within the cultural complexities of marginality as a function of work.

## DIFFERENCE AND EMPLOYMENT

When it comes to employers, notions of difference are also utilized. Just as domestic workers make inter-cultural distinctions among similarly marginalized groups in Hong Kong and Singapore, so do they recognize social and cultural differences among their employers, from nationals of Hong Kong and Singapore to expatriates. Migrants rationalize the kinds of social relations that are developed with employers by exploiting distinctions among employers of different nationalities, ethnicities, social class. American and European employers are placed on higher level than Asian, particularly Chinese, employers. Aside from ethnicity or nationality, distinctions are also made between highly educated and less-educated employers, and between upper and middle class employers. By using these distinctions to categorize employers, migrants are somehow able to either resist ill-treatment, although not structurally, or feel at par with their employers.

Carmen, 53, who worked in Hong Kong for 11 years, differentiates the three employers she had worked for based on how they had treated her, which tends to be attributed to ethnicity. All of her employers were British nationals, but in terms of ethnicity, one was Chinese, another was Scottish, and the other she referred to as "really" British. She said that among them, she preferred the Scots because they treated her as part of the family. She said that her British employers were also a great deal better than the Chinese because the Chinese "really belittle you." As such, cultural exposure may not just encourage compassion but may also bring forth enmity.

Many of the respondents who have experienced having both Western and Asian employers said that 'white' employers tend to be more open when it comes to giving off-days while the Chinese are very strict, even with the performance of household work. Some of them also said that female Asian employers are relatively more difficult to get along with. Surprisingly, this has not really been attributed to gender, as has been shown in studies that look into the issues that come with having female foreign workers in the household. Migrants rationalize tension with female employers by saying it is a cultural quirk, while others point to social class and education. They do not expect females who have married into wealth, or employers who are members of the working class, to be kind and generous. When migrants attribute the severity of employers to culture or social class, they are better able to accept ill-treatment. And as foreigners, they feel that it is their job to adjust. As long as their rights are not being trampled on, Zydith mentions that when it comes to employers who are very harsh:

"Just say that this is not my country/ I need to be patient.../... isn't it that where we come from we also have a culture that they might not like? / so just tell yourself that this is not my culture.../...so whatever their culture is, just understand / because we also have our own / it's necessary that when it is them who are in another place / they should understand the culture of one another right?"

## SAMENESS OR DIFFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

Many of the respondents also use their own educational and linguistic capital to put themselves on equal footing with employers whom they do not regard as highly. To equalize social positions or to resist being looked down on, domestic workers compare the social and cultural traits of their employers to those of their own, as Filipinos, so that they become their employers' equal on certain things. For instance, they do not shy away from saying that an employer has a low educational level, or an employer used to be poor and just married someone rich. Even the manner of dressing is given attention as Leticia, 57, a domestic worker from Hong Kong noted:

"I was also stylish even before/ that really I also knew how [to dress]/ my employer is even the one who asks me what she should wear/ the Chinese/ sometimes they're a bit tacky."

Caroline, 29, echoes this sentiment when she said that having worked in Hong Kong, she finds the Philippines to be very modern in comparison,

primarily in terms of clothes and culture. She finds the manner of dressing in Hong Kong to be tacky. And Laila, 30, who has also worked in Hong Kong, said that in terms of language, the Philippines seems to be more modern because the Chinese speak “carabao<sup>3</sup> English.” Laila did point out that if one were to turn things over, Filipinos do not really know how to speak Chinese.

In this sense, English becomes an indicator of modernity, especially in Hong Kong where employers who are Chinese and of a lower social class and educational background do not speak the language fluently. When migrant domestic workers view themselves and their own culture (as Filipinos) as more modern, they are capitalizing on their knowledge of English and on a certain level of cultural capital. Cultural capital also plays a role in the migrant’s ability to resist, and even to negotiate rights and work demands. As mentioned previously, respondents have identified Filipinos as having a higher level of cultural capital and therefore a greater ability to negotiate than domestic workers of other nationalities. However, when it comes to dealing with employers, regardless of whether it is in Hong Kong or Singapore, there will always be times when choosing to go against, or argue with, employers are difficult. While migrant domestic workers do go abroad for a number of reasons, earning money is a major concern and when they do not have that financial capital to hold on to, the room to negotiate is smaller. Having more money, which is also a function of having been abroad longer, means having greater capacity to negotiate or handle problematic employers.

“My problem was the old one was so strict/ she keeps talking/ even though it’s just a small mistake that’s like/ they say that she had a lot of maids before me.../ when it was [me] because I didn’t have any money/ it was my first time to go abroad/ I endured it.”

What perhaps makes for further subjugation is the inability to resist, the lack of power. Respondents mentioned that recruitment agencies tell them that in order for them to have smooth interpersonal relations with employers, they just have to say yes to all the orders. However, there is a fine line between saying yes all the time and defending one’s rights. If a domestic worker cannot argue even though she is in the right, then it leads to her further subjugation. While domestic workers do not have a choice all the time, even the decision to leave an employer whom they feel is too harsh becomes an act of agency in itself.

“The others you don’t know/ inside the house/ they are maltreated.../ so what we have experienced/ we tell ourselves that we are still lucky/ because the others/ when their employers do those things/ they no longer have the courage to speak up/ they just say yes.”

"I do have other domestic worker friends... Sri Lanka... India....then... Thai, Thailand.../ They also share with me / when we get together / they're okay / but they tell me what their employers do to them / They are maltreated /... [because] they don't know how to speak English ... / ...they are hit with those... spoons... or anything, those pointed objects." - Aida, 53, 16 years in Hong Kong

When domestic workers compare themselves to other marginal groups of a different nationality, the kind of cultural capital that they have gains value. Such cultural capital is attributed to being Filipino; because compared to other nationalities such as Indonesians, for instance, Filipino domestic workers in general, regardless of their province of origin, are more educated, can speak better English, and are therefore more modern, because they are Filipino. This knowledge gives them a leverage when it comes to negotiating with people of a higher social status and can become a tool for resistance because it gives them at least the idea that they can exercise power over situations, which exerts a big influence on their self-perceptions. This cultural capital also becomes an equalizing force with regard to employers whose nationality (for instance as citizens of Hong Kong or Singapore) might give them the capacity to look down on domestic workers, but whose socio-cultural background is not considered superior enough by domestic workers to merit that kind of authority. Thus, even the thought that they might be better than their employers in terms of particular forms of cultural capital already brings about the notion that they are on equal footing with their employers.

## SAMENESS AND RACIALIZED LABOR

Filipinos abroad are not a cohesive and happy group however. Among Filipino domestic workers, there are indeed factions, and some domestic workers express grievances against others by bringing their province of origin and distinct cultural traits into the picture. They say, for instance, that a certain domestic worker acts the way she does because she is from a particular province (and people there are known to be such). But generally, ethnolinguistic origins are not the cause for factions and in-fighting<sup>4</sup> in Singapore or Hong Kong. Furthermore, when respondents talk about being Filipino, it does not only pertain to their regional origins or being residents of their villages in the Philippines but being a citizen of the Philippines as a whole. They speak of the Philippines as a nation and hardly of their regional origins except when specifically asked.

What is more striking however, particularly in Singapore, which receives not only a significant number of Filipino domestic workers but also a significant number of Filipino professionals and expatriates including nurses, IT workers, and those who are posted by multilateral corporations, is that class divisions in the Philippines get transported abroad. The Philippines is a highly class-based society, which is apparent even among Filipinos in Singapore. For many Filipino professionals, the presence of a similarly large, or even bigger, group of Filipino domestic workers has been the object of 'transnational shame' (Aguilar 1996), which has often led to professionals constructing barriers between themselves and domestic workers. Given their status and socio-economic background, they can better assimilate and integrate into Singapore society and can afford to distance themselves from domestic workers despite having the same nationality. It is especially vital for Filipino female professionals to separate themselves lest others think that they too are domestic workers, which leads to grievances among domestic workers because such marginalization is being done by their own countrymen and women.

In these instances, notions of sameness are employed by migrant domestic workers in comparing themselves to fellow Filipinos who might have the same national identity but whose professional occupations lead to the 'othering' of Filipino domestic workers, who are in a different class position. While Filipino professionals may have the upper hand because they have the right to be residents, to bring their families to Singapore, and to send their children to Singapore schools, this does not give them the right to snub fellow Filipinos just because of their class position. After all, according to respondents, they too are foreigners working in a foreign land. In this sense, "foreign-ness" becomes the basis for similarity, and not simply national identity. While it is true that given their shared culture as Filipinos, cultural adjustment would also be shared in many ways even though social class and status are different. But in terms of equalizing social positions, racialized labor becomes the point of comparison. For instance, Filipino nurses are a group with whom domestic workers feel the most affinity, as both occupations involve care-giving. Some respondents however, claim that Filipino nurses are among the most condescending towards them.

Zydlith mentions how they used to tease one of their friends who is a nurse whenever they would get together and the friend would just laugh about it:

"I tell her 'why are your fellow nurses so boastful'? / then she would just laugh / we would get together with Inday Fen... because that's what I say / why are they like that? / Why do they belittle the maids just like that / because sometimes when we're eating / I tell her why, you're picky because you're a nurse? / ... because sometimes that's the truth / when professionals face the maids, they seem so boastful / I tell her, why, what's your job there? / if your body doesn't ache because of all the bedridden people / and because of wiping the bottom of the people there.../ that's your job / you know nurses are no different from maids / at least maids have it better because when employers are not around they can rest / but you, your time is set / you are just higher because you have diplomas..."

Based on Zydith's account, resistance is done by comparing the nature of the care given by domestic workers and that administered by nurses. They claim that nurses are no different from maids because even though nurses have degrees and certifications, they all clean up after people. In this sense, while respondents are talking about a neutral (if gendered) occupation, the racial dimension is present because they are talking about nursing as performed by fellow Filipinos, who are also subjugated (albeit less so than domestic workers) by foreign employers.

In Hong Kong, grievances are usually against Filipino women, often former domestic workers, who were able to marry Chinese or British nationals. Salva, 40, a college graduate who worked in Hong Kong for five years and is acquainted with Filipina residents said:

"You know how it is / because they were able to marry Chinese / I actually prefer having Chinese employers rather than Filipino ones / Because I have a friend but she's no longer there now / from Urdaneta / her employer was a Filipina who got married to a Chinese/ but the way she treats her maid / it's really [bad] / Yes, I prefer a Chinese employer than a Filipina / Isn't it that most of us / they're your fellowmen but they are still the ones who will put you down."

## CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

While national identity is a basis for sameness when migrant domestic workers try to compare themselves with fellow Filipinos in Singapore to resist "othering" by these groups, the idea of 'us' vs. 'them' still exists. This is most apparent in their choice of social networks. Social networks become jump-off points for transnational belonging because it is through these networks that migrants are able to feel integrated abroad. They can assert their cultural identity, create continuities of home, and cope with being "others" through networks.

"It's like after one year/ you don't really go out as much/ because you still don't know.../...but after two years/ when you have a lot of friends/ you go everywhere..."

The formation of social networks, especially when it involves individuals of other nationalities, is what makes abroad different from home, or even the urban spaces of home. The significance of being abroad is that it allows Filipino domestic workers to interact and foster ties with individuals of other nationalities, even if these ties are location-specific, which means that some of these ties were no longer maintained in return. Relationships with non-Filipinos have also been developed out of church attendance, through classes they have enrolled in, in apartment building lifts, or while waiting to pick children up from school. For the younger respondents from Hong Kong, they meet other foreign domestic workers through sports events that are organized by associations and usually compete against each other in matches. These spaces suggest that interactions are limited to specific groups of non-Filipinos, mainly other foreign workers. Respondents are quick to mention however, that while they do have Indonesian or Chinese friends, networking with fellow Filipinos is preferred.

"It's difficult because the Indonesian/ it's like sometimes when you're talking to them/ but you can't converse for a long time, no/ because it's hard to "spell" them out.../ ...it's like the two of you can only talk about one two three."

Siony, 58, says that in her 22 years in Hong Kong, her experience is that when foreign workers get together, they usually stick to their own kind: "If Filipino, it's just mainly Filipino / if [for example] Indian, it's just Indian / it's like that / they don't mix... because they don't... they cannot speak English / so they just do it that way."

In a way, the formation of social networks also utilizes notions of sameness or difference. For Filipino domestic workers, linguistic capacity is important in developing deeper relationships with others because it is a key to better understanding. According to respondents, conversations with non-Filipino friends usually revolve around language-teaching, how things are said in each other's language, or what the conditions are like in each other's home countries. While this makes for a good past-time and does increase awareness of other cultures, it does not provide the kind of support that migrants need abroad. Based on their narratives, cultural understanding remains a key in forming relationships, and this hinges on a shared national identity that is coupled with a shared social position. This is why respondents expressed

preference for interacting with fellow Filipino domestic workers rather than with Filipino professionals, although this does not mean that they do not have friends who belong to the latter. Within the context of nationality therefore, the notion of “us vs. them” reappears in social groupings. Domestic workers turn to their social network in times of need and they prefer to seek help from those who understand their situation in its entirety, which means those who are not just from the same country but also in the same social position.

“They [Filipino professionals] are already PR there [in Singapore]/ they work in the office/ of course they are able to move up/ we are just maids so to speak/ they are already [on top] there/ so they kind of belittle/ but it also depends on the person how to/ of course there are different nationalities so to speak/ I make friend with -/ comparing the maids to those who are working/ the engineers or what/ it's better that you are with the maid/ fellow maid/ rather than with them.”

Same nationality groupings are also preferred because social networks are vehicles by which migrants create continuities of the home and thus assert cultural identity. One of the means by which continuities are created is when migrant domestic workers get together and cook Filipino food. Food has been mentioned almost all the time as a control agent among employers. It becomes a gauge for the domestic workers' living conditions when good or bad employers are judged based on how much freedom they give when it comes to food. A good employer is one who “feeds” their domestic workers well, provides enough food, or allows the domestic workers to cook Filipino food. To resist this kind of control from their employers, domestic workers use food to acknowledge their agency. They give the extra food from their employers' households to fellow domestic workers, regardless of ethnicity, if they know these domestic workers are being “starved.”

When it comes to cooking Filipino food, regional divisions collapse because while every region in the Philippines would have its delicacy and local food, and migrants who cook would usually specialize in food from their region, these dishes would still be referred to as Filipino. This further asserts the significance of Filipino food as a platform for national and cultural identity and that abroad, it is national identity that counts, not regional proclivities. While creating continuities of home through food might seem like an excuse among labor migrants to remain within their cultural bubble, given the domestic workers' experience of marginality and the importance of food to Philippine culture, food becomes a way of breaking out of a limited

space/time. Respondents likened being able to cook Filipino food to being free, and not being “fed” rice by employers to being starved. Food/eating is symbolically important to Filipinos as a sign of fellowship and celebration. Rice in itself is not just a meal but a way of life that the lack of it becomes a major source of hardship.

Church-going is also a way by which migrant domestic workers create continuities of home. Almost all of the respondents mentioned going to church as one of the highlights of their off-days. Some of them even said that going to church regularly was something they did abroad but not in the Philippines. While most of the respondents are Catholic, there are also some who tried attending other church services, for instance Protestant ones, because they were encouraged by other Filipino friends. Church-going then, is primarily a social activity, and one which respondents engage in to feel a sense of community with fellow Filipinos. Even though they do meet non-Filipinos in church, church is not as much a venue for making new friends as it is for re-living Filipino traditions with Filipino friends (fellow domestic workers) abroad, and as such, also a space where they feel free to perform a cultural identity. In relation to this, respondents mentioned that one of the reasons why they prefer same-nationality groupings is because of religious differences between Filipinos and non-Filipinos. Indonesians, for instance, are Muslim and would go to mosques on a regular day-off while Filipinos would be going to church<sup>5</sup>. Because of differences in religious practices, church-going as a major social activity that reinforces social ties is done separately.

Notions of sameness in this case are based on the idea of religion as a key to cultural understanding, which is also why religion has been linked to nationality. Migrants express greater understanding and affinity among those who practice the same religion, which would be fellow Filipinos, even though some of these Filipinos might be practicing other religions.

Creating continuities through food and church provides domestic workers with a sense of home abroad while at the same time furthering their sense of straddling between cultures because food and religion is also juxtaposed within the dynamics of class and culture. As a means by which national identity is asserted, food could also be a space for resistance to racialization – that even though they may be marginalized not just because of their occupation but also because they are considered “racially” inferior, they are still proud of their cultural identity and will manifest this through the consumption of Filipino food on their off days, often in public spaces such as Central in Hong Kong or Orchard Road/Lucky Plaza in Singapore.

## SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE: AGENCY WITHIN SPACES

While their subject positions as domestic workers largely determines who they deal with and how they do so, there is still choice in the formation of social networks and in the dynamics of interaction. The process of constructing sameness or difference based on the idea of who is the 'other' forms the basis of many of the migrant domestic workers' interactions and relationships, which then influence the formation and maintenance of new self-perceptions and new identities. In using different bases for sameness and difference to negotiate and assert identities abroad, migrants not only draw upon culture but combine cultural elements with other imagined boundaries based on their experience of interfacing their location vis-à-vis the location of other groups of people. Migrants encounter difference in many ways, and this has led to the kind of boundary work that recognizes the dynamics of class, culture, race, and nationality. Migrants utilize social and cultural elements to assert their ground, which means asserting modernity through national identity and asserting national identity through the performance of cultural elements. Even the idea of national identity is utilized differently depending on who they are dealing with. In comparing themselves to Filipinos of a higher social position, national identity is combined with the idea of 'foreign-ness'— that all Filipinos are doing some sort of racialized labor abroad and are therefore equals. National identity, on the other hand, takes on the form of cultural understanding in imaginations of the Filipino domestic worker community abroad. As Filipinos, domestic workers would likely be sharing the same religion, cuisine, and cultural capital.

At the same time, however, there is also the notion of a shared experience that comes from shared social positions, regardless of country of origin. And in these instances, showing compassion to those who are also othered crosses ethnic lines. As such, even though the idea of boundary work seems to reinforce cultural stereotypes and othering, the experience of Filipino domestic workers abroad has enabled them to go beyond just ethnicity or nationality in the way they think about other people and other cultures. In transcendent boundary work, these categories are still used, but not in the normative sense. The lines have already been blurred. This shows in a way the transformative possibilities present in migration – had these domestic workers remained in the home, their relational boundaries would still be those normative categories. Without their varied experiences of difference and of being different, the world would still be much smaller, and boundary work still categorical, for these migrant domestic workers.

## NOTES

- 1 This paper is extracted from one of the chapters of my Ph.D. thesis on cosmopolitanism among return Filipino migrant domestic workers. Findings are derived from narrative interviews conducted among return migrant Filipino domestic workers from Hong Kong and Singapore in two municipalities in the Philippines.
- 2 In Singapore, the salary for Filipino maids is at S\$300 - S\$350 a month. Indonesian maids on the other hand, get around S\$220 - S\$250 a month while Sri Lankan maids get around S\$200 - S\$240 a month. The range depends on the educational background of, and domestic duties assigned to, the domestic workers (see <http://www.expatsingapore.com/content/view/1174>).
- 3 broken
- 4 The paper will not be dealing with this.
- 5 None of my respondents are Muslim; Muslim Filipinos could have had a different take on this.

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