

## Transgressing the Nation\_State: The Partial Citizenship and 'Imagined (Global) Community' of Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas

Women's Studies and Asian American Studies

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Before I begin, I wish to thank the organizers of this conference, especially Professor Friedman, for inviting me to share my work with you today. In this talk, I am going to address the relationship of migrant Filipina domestic workers to the nation\_state. This is a work\_in\_progress and so suggestions are most welcome.

In this paper, I illustrate the denial of full citizenship rights to migrant Filipina domestic workers and the turn taken by these workers to negotiate their legal status and identity of partial citizenship in globalization. Basically, I make two interconnected points. The first is migrant Filipina domestic workers are for the most part partial citizens of the nation state. By this I mean, they are denied complete access to 'civil, political, and social rights.' And this is in both the sending and receiving nation. So, this is the dislocation to which they are constituted by the process of their migration from the Philippines into more than 130 countries in the world. The second central argument that I make is that migrant Filipina domestic workers, as a way to negotiate their dislocation of partial citizenship, turn to the construction of an 'imagined (global) community' that indeed supersedes the nation\_state.

Let me now begin with the first point, i.e., migrant Filipina domestic workers are partial citizens of the nation\_state. As partial citizens, they are neither fully integrated in receiving nations nor are they completely protected by the Philippines. For the most part, citizenship in a nation\_state, both as a legal status and identity, is at most partial for them on the grounds of the larger global processes that promote (1) the restricted incorporation of low\_wage workers in receiving nations and (2) the lack of political power of traditional sending nations such as the Philippines. How the first factor, i.e., the restricted incorporation of low\_wage workers, imparts partial citizenship is illustrated by the discriminatory measures imposed against migrant Filipina domestics in most receiving nations. To give you a few examples, in various destinations of the diaspora, they are not protected by labor laws and as such are vulnerable to the gross abuse of employers. As unwanted citizens, they are also relegated to the status of temporary settlers whose stay is limited to the duration of their labor contracts. In addition, nations such as Singapore prohibit their marriage or cohabitation with native citizens. Pregnancy is also prohibited in the Middle East and Asia. Finally, state policies in various destinations of the diaspora deny entry to their spouses and children.

Nation\_states with more liberal policies such as the U.S. and Canada also impose the position of partial citizenship on migrant Filipina domestics, but notably in a lesser degree and level of exclusion. For example in Canada, migrant Filipina domestics, as they enter under the Live\_in Caregivers Program, must complete an initial two\_years of live\_in service before they can become eligible for landed immigrant status. At this time, they are restricted to the status of temporary visitors, denied a family life, and are more prone to face abusive working conditions.

Notably, these discriminatory measures are not exclusive to the internal operation of nation\_states. Instead, they have to be seen as a product of larger global processes that demand the migration of low\_wage female workers to provide services in "global cities" as well as newly industrialized economies. Following Saskia Sassen's argument of the "opposite turns of nationalism," globalization demands the low\_wage service work of migrant Filipina domestic workers with the "denationalization of economies" but at the same time restricts their integration with the "renationalization of politics" so as (1) to secure a low\_wage labor force and (2) to appease the displaced middle class of postindustrial nations.

Notably, partial citizenship is not limited to the politics of incorporation into the host society. It also occurs at the other end of the migration spectrum. As much as they are denied full citizenship in receiving nations, migrant Filipina domestic workers are also denied citizenship in the Philippines. So, how does this happen? Designated an export\_oriented economy in the global labor market, the Philippines relies on the outmigration of their workers to sustain the economy with a smooth flow of foreign currency. For example, the remittances of overseas contract workers generate at least \$6 billion a year, which is a figure that amounts to their second biggest source of foreign currency, next to electronics manufacturing.

As a result of such gains, the government has created the iconic representation of its mostly female overseas workers as the "modern days heroes" of the nation; this facilitates the nation\_building project of the Philippines to enter the global market as an export\_orientated economy. The gains motivating this iconic representation, however, do not come without their costs. The Philippines \_ like other traditional sending nations of secondary tier workers \_ is without political power to protect its overseas workers. Though international human rights codes may declare the rights of transnational citizens, the fate of Filipina domestic workers is for the most part dependent on the host

society.

As outmigration is a state-sanctioned flow, the Philippine government does attempt to offer protection to its overseas workers. Notably, the assistance that the Philippines can offer its constituents is marred by its lack of power to override the laws and jurisdiction of receiving nations. For example, a Philippine government sponsored welfare center in Saudi Arabia was closed down "because the Saudi government thought that providing shelter to runaway maids constitute foreign intervention in their internal affairs."

The greatest cost of exportation is the vulnerability of bodies in migration. The vulnerability of overseas workers is without doubt a tremendous threat against the smooth flow of exported labor for the Philippines. Government officials, for example, downplay the brutalities faced by their "modern day heroes" as "rare incidents." In doing so, the state consciously downplays the human side of migration and renders the experiences of its overseas contract workers as having lesser importance than their roles as generators of foreign currency.

So far, I have established the "partial citizenship" of migrant Filipina domestic workers vis-à-vis the receiving and sending nation. Now, I turn to a discussion of the means by which they negotiate this subordinate position. If citizenship in a nation-state defines one's sense of belonging in globalization, how do those who are denied full citizenship imagine a community to which they belong? How do migrants whose experiences speak of exclusion from both receiving and sending nations develop a sense of place in globalization? To answer these questions, I rely on the writings of migrant Filipina domestics that are featured in the multinational monthly magazine *Tinig Filipino*, which is published in Hong Kong and Italy. Distributed in at least a dozen countries, this magazine gives its readers a forum for dialogue as overseas workers themselves write most of the articles and commentaries published in it. I found that migrant Filipina domestics try to define a sense of belonging in two ways. The first is through the construction of the Philippines as home and the second is through the construction of an "imagined (global) community." Briefly addressing the first turn, in *Tinig Filipino*, the word "home" has become synonymous to the 'Philippines.' This fits literature on transnationalism and observations of transmigration scholars that migrants create ties to the "homeland" as a way of negotiating their racially segmented integration into the host society. In fact, writings in *Tinig Filipino* frequently promote the eventual return migration of its readers.

With the view of the Philippines as their rightful "home," discussions in *Tinig Filipino* about the political economy of their labor solely concern the Philippines. Critiques of the Philippine government and its economy abound in *Tinig Filipino* and the recurring discourse regarding "home" concerns the contradictory relationship that they have with the Philippine economy as 'unprotected economic heroes.' For example, one domestic worker writes:

We are called the living heroes or the new heroes. Yet why are we called "heroes" when we are slaves in other countries. Oh, OCWs (overseas contract workers) \_ the heroes without monuments. Yes, we earn a little bit more yet the pain of our bodies, minds and most of all feelings are equal to none. Why does the government, instead of supporting our college graduates and youth and pushing them to strive in our country, actually allow them to leave the country yet without any sufficient protection as citizens? Country... When can you finally provide us with a peaceful and simple life? (Plandano 1995, 60, translated from Tagalog to English)

Though poignant, this critique limits the accountability of the political economic displacement of migrant Filipina domestic workers to the Philippines. Consequently, receiving countries are never blamed. Instead, they are usually seen as benevolent nations that have provided "opportunities" which are not available in the Philippines.

Hence, the domestic workers writing in this magazine never critique exclusionary policies of receiving nations nor do they demand for the extension of their legal status from temporary to permanent settlers in light of the economic benefits that are provided by their low-wage labor. By limiting its construction of "home" to the Philippines, *Tinig Filipino* sways its readers away from claiming their rights for full citizenship in the various receiving nations of the diaspora. Yet, as globalization continues to demand their labor, migrant Filipina domestics are unlikely to return home. As a result, they are unlikely to achieve the legal status of full citizenship in the Philippines and receive the rights and protections that they have earned from the fulfillment of their responsibility as the "heroes" of the nation.

As migrant Filipina domestics cannot go 'home' to end their dislocation of partial citizenship, they have opted to use another strategy for achieving a sense of belonging in globalization. They have particularly turned to the transnationalization of their gendered and racialized identities as migrant Filipina domestic workers by forging the construction of an "imagined (global) community." In this sense, citizenship is achieved as an identity in the Filipina diaspora. Moreover, in turning to the construction of a 'community' that transcends the nation-state, they foreground the formation of a contemporary female labor diaspora of migrant Filipinas in globalization.

As print language created the "imagined community" of the nation in the 1800s, it now provides a tangible link connecting migrant Filipina domestic workers in the formation of an imagined global community. A vehicle for creating the notion of a global community, the magazine *Tinig Filipino* aptly describes itself as the "Linking Force

around the World." As one letter to the editor describes,

We are all aware that many of us Filipinos work around the world. With our great efforts, we created and published *Tinig Filipino*... Through correspondence, we could publish the life experiences of our fellow Filipinos in other countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, France, Italy, London (sic), and many more. Through this way (sic), we are able to unite and educate all Filipinos abroad (Julie Lopez, Hong Kong, July 1995).

From the camaraderie that develops in its transnational circulation, *Tinig Filipino* instills a diasporic consciousness among migrant Filipina domestic workers, who thereby situate themselves in an imagined community inclusive of domestic workers in other parts of the world.

Providing them a source of support against the "contradictory regulatory practices" of partial citizenship, the existence of an "imagined (global) community" reinforces the presence of similarities in their lives. Their imagined global community emerges, in part, from the simultaneity of their similar experiences as domestic workers across geographic territories. Notably, they are only able to conceive of a global community because of the similar impacts of global processes in their lives. These similar impacts include homesickness, family separation from children and husbands left behind in the Philippines, the underemployment of educated domestic workers, and work grievances such as isolation and overwork. It is thus important to emphasize that *Tinig Filipino* is able to circulate not because of the existence of migrant Filipina domestics throughout the world. Instead, the magazine circulates because these domestic workers have unifying social realities that are engendered by their migration processes in various nations of the diaspora. This suggests that this global community does form around the same principles of a nation as conceived by Benedict Anderson. The imagination of this global community is based on a 'deep horizontal comradeship' that is based on the creation of a 'set of shared symbols, common events, and a secular 'cross time' temporality promoted by a print vernacular.'

A teacher by training and profession in the Philippines, Linda Layosa, the editor of *Tinig Filipino*, was once a domestic worker in Hong Kong. She sees her job to mostly entail guiding the transnational dialogue among migrant Filipina domestic workers. In a personal interview, she describes the philosophy of the magazine as:

It's a reader's magazine. I want everyone to participate@ Why not give light reading to the overseas contract workers? At the same time, inform them, entertain them, educate them@ I wanted the workers to write the stories themselves@ It's important that they are involved, personally involved. I want their lives to be told by them. Without imagining it as such, perhaps, domestic workers write articles in the spirit of Paulo Freire's concept of "problem\_posing education." Filipina domestic workers, as the oppressed, are conscious\_beings who cannot be told what problems are important to them as they themselves "inform, entertain and educate" each other of the issues that are relevant in their lives.

One of these issues concerns the struggles that they encounter in the workplace. For example, every issue of the magazine features numerous stories describing experiences of overwork, maltreatment, and inhumane living conditions. One such story is that of Rosalie Vista, who describes:

My employer's family consists of 11 persons and I served them all. They dictated to me everything that I should do. I had to wash the clothes with my hands twice a day, do all the household chores and I had to look after the baby as well. With all sorts of work for me to do everyday, I had to wake up very early at about 4:30 in the morning. At nighttime, I had to sleep very late@ (March 1995, 30).

I should point out that clearly not every reader faces abusive working conditions. Thus an ironic underside to these stories is that other domestic workers can garner emotional support from such stories by being reminded that they should count their blessings for being spared such an abusive situation in the workplace. Another ironic underside to these stories is that other domestics in similar working conditions can gain emotional support from the knowledge that they are not the only ones who confront abuse in their everyday work routine.

However, despite the many stories of abuse in *Tinig Filipino*, domestic workers usually advise one another to cope with this abuse. Rosalie Vista continues her story:

With all the things that happened, I just cried out of self\_pity but I never uttered any word against them. I gave my respect to them as they were my masters. With all the hardships I encountered working with that family, I still managed to stay with them for three long years. When I left, they told me that they would always remember my kindness and that I was always welcome to work with them. So you see, kindness softens a hardened heart (Ibid). Despite an awareness of their maltreatment, domestic workers usually end stories of abusive conditions with advice to tolerate them. *Tinig Filipino* however does not condone abuse. Yet such advice does suggest that awareness of abuse does not automatically translate to a consciousness of 'human rights.'

The passive attitude of "we know we are abused, but we cannot do much about it" that resonates in *Tinig Filipino* stems from the consciousness of their limited power as isolated domestic workers who as such have to eventually

turn to the imaginary community of the diaspora to find support in the workplace. This attitude also foregrounds the construction of 'foreign' servants as having no rights to complain. Two reasons they promote such a compliant attitude is first, they consider themselves 'guests' of the state, fortunate enough to be given jobs more financially rewarding than those available in the Philippines. In other words, the legal status of partial citizenship imparts the view that they have no rights to complain. Second, as sojourners who hope to return 'home' to the Philippines after a few years, domestic workers convince themselves that it would be easier to comply rather than to contest.

Consequently, the political potential generated by the creation of the global platform of *Tinig Filipino* remains a potential at most among these women. Despite acknowledging the structural conditions shaping the experiences of migrant laborers, *Tinig Filipino* has yet to transform into a platform advocating for political acts of resistance against inequalities in the workplace. However, the support garnered by the readers of *Tinig Filipino* may still give them strength to interject acts of resistance in their daily routines. Hence, *Tinig Filipino* should be given credit for the sense of allegiance that it fosters among domestic workers. Explaining the importance of addressing work-related issues in the magazine, Liza Cepillo Bueno, for instance, explains that the difficulties of domestic work must be acknowledged so as to deter prospective migrants from romanticizing the opportunities of working outside of the Philippines:

Let's just say that life in another country is good because we earn dollars and in all honesty we do well especially if we compare our salaries to office workers or teachers in the Philippines. And it is so great to hear that we are being placed on a pedestal as "new heroes" of the country@ Life abroad is rewarding but painful@ It is hard to be away from our loved ones. Our employers order us around, but we cannot do anything about it because in exchange we have dollars, blood, tears, and sweat@ Isn't it time that we let everyone know the truth, that working abroad is very painful and hard? (November 1994, 21, partly translated from Tagalog to English)

In the regularly featured columns of "Life in Italy," "Life in Saudi," and "Life in Singapore," a litany of articles provide responses to the question posed by Liza Bueno. Through the articulation of their experiences as domestic workers in a particular location of the diaspora, readers do not just imagine the conditions of fellow domestic workers in other countries but recognize them as very much like their own. As a result, the globalization of their experiences \_ in other words "the globalization of their work" \_ despite their different contexts \_ highlights the shared dislocations of migrant Filipina domestics and in turn strengthens the formation of transcontinental bonds among them. The sharing of these experiences in *Tinig Filipino* projects a united community of Filipina domestic workers who are invested in the successful adjustment of other members of their global community.