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Skype Mothers: Technology, Multi-Directional Care in the Transnational Filipino Family
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Abstract:

This paper explores the redefinition of the roles and operation of the Filipino family for migrant and non-migrant members. Scholars have posited that “transnational motherhood” has reorganized the way that migrant mothers make meaning and participate family life in both of their host and home contexts. This paper posits that through strategies of “multi-directional care,” care work for transnational families go both ways: non-migrant family members actively partake in caring for their migrant family members. The main findings in the paper highlight the use of video computer technology to make meaning of familial roles that usually necessitate physical presence such as discipline and care work. The new development in technology for Filipino migrants to communicate with a visual register taps into a different texture of affect and communication from afar. The inventive experiences and approaches of Filipino families stretched over time and space allows us to see how the global has been sutured into the intimate parts of social life. In an increasing neoliberal world, understanding the changes in the family can also help us to understand the social processes that insist on conditions of separation and individuation.

Introduction

Manila

It’s more humid today and I’m a bit nervous about being in Barangay 50, a notorious neighborhood in Manila, Melann, Nanay Joan’s daughter, hurries me through the bus terminal and reminds me to hold on to my purse. When they lived in the Philippines, Nanay Joan and Nanay Vickie, the sisters in ISA, lived in a 20 foot radius of one another along with their parents, siblings and their children, their children’s children. I enter Vickie’s home, its small in perimeter but has a tall structure so they built a make shift floor out of plywood and stairs on the side to divide the space in two “floors”. I sit down a bit dizzy from the heat and travel and Dianne, Nanay Vickie’s

daughter, sits right next to me smiling, this is the first time we're meeting in person. We've chatted on Facebook and have been sending messages for almost 6 months now. I touch her shoulder and ask her how she's doing. She answers, "*Ok naman. I'm ok.*" Dianne is 16 years old, 5'4, heavy set and body conscious as she keeps tugging at all corners of her shirt while talking to me. Despite what her Mom tells me about her shyness, I find that Dianne is quite forward, she's the one that sat next to me and she seemed eager to start to talk with me about her mother. When we start, Dianne doesn't tell me about her life, love, dreams, struggles. She's still just a kid and the biggest real thing that has happened to her is her mother's departure. 3 minutes into *kuwentohan* as I'm asking her about her relationship with her mom, her reply being, "*Best friend ko siya gusto ko siyang alagaan, She's my best friend, I like taking care of her,*" her eyes start to well up and tears start to run down her cheeks. I'm surprised by this. I didn't think that she would open up to me so fast and so soon. At that moment, the Skype phone rings and Dianne says, "*Ok lang, o, dito na siya.* It's ok, because she's here now." Because Joan and Vickie are now present via Skype, Tito Mauricio, Nanay Vickie's husband, a strikingly tall man with an apron on, calls us to the table to have dinner. Everyone has a place around the table and they make sure to leave a space in between me and Dianne so that the computer is facing the food and that Joan and Vickie all the way from New York City can join us.

New York City

It's a chilly December Sunday, I'm happy to be inside of Nanay Vickie, Nanay Joan and Ate Teresa's shared room in Queens because its so warm. It takes me about 5 minutes to peel off my winter layers. The three of them live in the attic of a house, a floor that has two bedrooms separated by screens and that 2 of them only come home to on the weekends when they come home from their live-in domestic work employment. They keep their place neat and the first thing I notice is the 4 boxes stacked on top of each other almost touching the ceiling, waiting to be sent back home for the holidays. Nanay Vickie invites me to sit down and eat lunch with her and we start our *kuwentohan* over shrimp soup and rice. I ask her to tell me what the hardest thing is about being separated from her family is and she replies, "*Di ko maasikaso yung kanilang pagaaral or igabay sila*. That I can't help them with their studies or guide them in their everyday." As we continue our conversation, she starts to cry when talking about her daughter Dianne, who will be going into her first year in college in a month. She cries because her pain is double fold, Nanay Vickie's employer just moved away and she is unemployed. She is hard on herself as she says, "*Kung wala pala akong trabaho, de doon na lang ako*. If I don't have a job anyway, I should be there." After talking for an hour and a half, I hear some plates clinking together and being washed, and I have the urge to wash my plate as it has been sitting in front of me for so long. I ask Nanay Vickie to pause for a second and I proceed to an empty kitchen. At that point, I wondered where the noise was coming from and popped my head back into the room Nanay

Vickie and I were in and saw that she was looking at her laptop computer screen. Her setup in a corner of her and Nanay Joan's room is complete with a mic, speakers, camera, photo printer and charger. I discover that the whole time we have been talk-storying, the Skype has been on. I ask Nanay Vickie if I intruded on the time that she and her kids were supposed to talk, since it was Sunday and everything. And she says, "*Hindi, gusto ko lang marining sila kahit hindi nila ako kinakausap, gusto ko lang na alam nila na nandito ako.* No, I just like to listen to them even if they're not directly talking to me, I just want them to know that I'm here."

Transnational Motherhood

I bring your attention to these two examples in my ongoing research because they illuminate what Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila call "transnational motherhood," in which they argue that migration rearranges "mother-child interactions and requires a concomitant radical reshaping of the meanings and definitions of appropriate mother" (1997: 557). In both sites of my research, not only has motherhood been reconfigured, so has being a daughter, husband and participating in a family. To extend Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila's work and through the examples of how technology is used to manage separation, I argue that the families in my project that are separated are participating in multi-directional care work. Yes, migrant motherhood is a key nodal point to study the work that goes into maintaining transnational families but including the perspective of families left behind shows how families are absorbing, negotiating and

working with the absence of a migrant mother. These multi-directionality of care is significant because...

In this paper, I would like to frame the preliminary findings of my current dissertation research about the multi-directionality of care work in transnational families in the terms of what Michelle Fine has called the “presence of absence.” Fine, concerned about American neoliberal retreats in social services and supports by the state from working class, poor communities and communities of color, argues that women and the people that live in those communities shoulder the blame and stigma for their social conditions. In my work, I quickly offer this frame as context to the everyday life examples I provide during this talk. Of course, I will not have enough time to deeply treat this theoretical frame fairly but I think its important to note that I’m thinking of the presence of the absence in the lives of transnational families in three ways:

First, in a very tangible and physical way, the presence of the a mother or child’s absence is being rearticulated through the use of rapidly developing technologies like Skype and Facebook. For migrant mothers in New York City, their absence from their homes in Manila is substituted by their presence online, a sometimes creepy and comforting surveillance of their families through these venues. In Joanna Dreby’s research about Mexican migrants and their families in the late 90s and early 2000s, she found that managing separation relied mainly on unreliable phone calls, gifts and remittances. Dreby’s ethnography uncovered the painful reality of

migrant parents sending gifts of clothes and toys that were age-inappropriate or could no longer fit their children, signaling a parents' inability to provide anything than just financial support for their kids. But today, like Vickie's example, Skype breaks this dynamic down. Although, Vickie cannot touch her quickly growing children, she can at least see them face-to-face on a daily basis and watch how tall or skinny they get.

The presence of Vickie's absence in the Philippines adds another dimension to the maintenance of the family at home in Manila. At Vickie's request, "*Buksan ang online pagdating sa bahay*. Turn on the internet once you get home." Since NYC is exactly 12 hours in advance of Manila time, when Vickie's kids get home from school at 4-5pm in Manila, she's up and getting ready for work early in the morning in NYC. Many of the domestic workers maintain this schedule, whether it is early morning in Manila and late in NYC or vice versa, they insist on being "in the room" when mundane things are happening like dinner time, washing up or getting ready for school. Rose, another ISA member and migrant mother, says, "I just like hearing them move around." The presence of migrant mothers through technology in this way allows their absence to be a bit bearable.

Another presence migrant mothers occupy transnationally is their use of Facebook to monitor their children's daily actions and behaviors. Unbeknownst to them, children who are friends with their mothers on Facebook allow their mothers to come into a social part of their life that mothers may not have been privy to if they were physically in the same

vicinity.

Second, the affective absence of mothers' migration often stays present with children and husbands as they make the decisions their mothers would have made but cannot because they're in NYC. Across the different families I visited in the Philippines, children of ISA members would always tell me that in moments when both big and little decisions needed to be made, that their mothers' absence would become ever so present. Maya, a 14-year old daughter of Rose, an ISA member, said when I asked her what has changed since her mom left, "Nothing really. When I have to decide to take JJ to the clinic or if I should do my homework instead of watch TV, she's always with me. I think of what she would've done, and I do it." She continued telling me that she filters her decisions by embodying her mother because she misses her mom and that this process makes her feel closer to her mother. The absence of her mother, Rose, is ever present in Maya's life. But it can go the other way too. In my *kuwentohan* with Ricky, the 16-year old son of Anne another ISA member working in NYC to put him and his brothers through an elite college and pay for his dormitory in the city proper, he relayed to me that because of his mother's absence he experienced more freedom. When I asked him what he did with his time, he said, "I just hang out. Sometimes I don't go to school. If my mom was here, I could never do that." Here the presence of absence is celebrated by Ricky because he is aware that his mother cannot closely monitor his actions. The presence of absence influences decisions of children here in very different ways. A child

making good decisions has a lot to do with him or her taking care of the responsibilities that mothers have left behind. Whether or not children of migrant mothers make good on those responsibilities is another issue—what I want to bring to light is that their decision-making process including WWMD (What Would Mother Do)—is a part of multi-directional care work that maintains transnational families. On an aside, I think gender is a crucial dimension of who takes up this care work; across the board, daughters seem to internalize the weight of their mothers' absence and absorb much of their mothers' responsibilities in domestic labor and sons seem to take the absence of their mothers to increase their mobility and independence.

Third, and I'm still working on this, I'm thinking about the theoretical generalizability of Fine's argument. I think that the presence of global migration as an industry and a development strategy in the Third World, especially in the Philippines, allows for the absence of mothers from their dinner tables and from their children's first days of school. The absence of a discourse of development in the Third World and a discourse that recognizes domestic work as labor in the US, allows for the presence of domestic workers in NYC to be invisible. In the last permutation of my presence of absence musings, I'm trying to consider the types of structural weights that are over-present or over-represented and that allows for the absence of people and opportunities in the everyday lives of migrant mothers who are domestic workers and their families at home.

