Engaged, but not immersed: tracking the mediated public connection of Filipino elite migrants in London

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Original citation:

Abstract

While most of the literature highlights the social, economic and cultural aspects of Filipino migration, this study explores its political dimension by focusing on the public connection of Filipino elite migrants in London. Unlike other types of Filipino migrants, such as Americanized balikbayans and 'low-skilled' labour migrants, elite migrants are expected to return physically to the homeland as part of their nationalistic duty to 'lead the nation'. From their interviews and participant observation, the authors discover that overseas scholars indeed maintain a strong interest in homeland political issues through heavy news consumption on the Internet. However, this has also fostered an ambiguous kind of public connection. On the one hand, elite migrants remain engaged with issues that they hope to address on their eventual return, but on the other hand they are not immersed with 'other' Filipino people in the diaspora. Their political engagement involves talk and mediated conversations with limited face-to-face collaborations with other migrants. This kind of public connection lends itself to long- distance particularistic communication and a great volume of discussion, but limited and short-term forms of public activity. The authors argue that elite migrants' practices of political engagement are inscribed in continuing socio-historical – and fundamentally classed – divides in Philippine society. Further, rather than enabling cross-class communications and connections, the media are frequently used by elite migrants to maintain political, economic, social and cultural divides.

Keywords

This paper investigates the mediated public connections of Filipino scholars in London. As elite migrants whose economic and cultural capital affords them a world of options, their media use might be expected to reflect their cosmopolitan character as 'footloose' people, 'on the move in the world', who 'tend to want to immerse themselves in other cultures' (Hannerz, 1990, pp 240–241). As a privileged group of Filipinos who anticipate – and are expected to make – a victorious return to the homeland, they are routinely involved in practices of long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992), maximizing the media resources available to them to engage with public issues in the Philippines. But while they engage in mediated forms of long-distance nationalism, their actual physical encounters with fellow Filipinos in public political events is limited.

Exploring the connections and contradictions between elite migrant experiences and forms of mediated public connection, we draw on and contribute critically to two existing fields of study. First, this paper enriches debates about Philippine migration by foregrounding the importance of mediated politics in the migrant experience. Most studies on Philippine migration have tended to focus on its other aspects, such as its social costs (Aguilar, 2010; Dungo, 2008; Parreñas, 2005), economic implications (Aldaba, 2001; Asis, 2006; Porio, 2007) and cultural consequences (Amrith, 2010; Johnson, 2010). Those works that do consider the role of the media in Philippine migration typically engage with issues of performing cultural identity (Cabañes, 2009; Ignacio, 2005; Ong, 2009) and maintaining long-distance relation- ships (Madianou and Miller, this issue; Uy-Tioco, 2007). Although these are important issues to consider, we argue that the issue of political engagement should not be set aside.

Here we consider the role of media in facilitating migrants' political engagements. This is especially salient in the case of migrant Filipino scholars who have had a particularly storied history with mediated politics. One of the earliest groups of migrants from the Spanish-colonized Philippine Islands constituted scholars who travelled to be educated in the cosmopolitan cities of Europe, such as Madrid, Berlin and Paris in the late nineteenth century. Known as ilustrados [enlightened ones] – this group of young men from the landed elite class included Jose Rizal, Juan Luna and Gregorio del Pilar.[1] Many of them would later on be commemorated as heroes of the country because they were instrumental in constructing the idea of a Filipino nation (Aguilar, 2005; Cullinane, 2003; Reyes, 2008). While printed periodicals of the time kept them connected to their homeland, they also became producers of various propaganda materials to campaign for – initially – recognition as Spanish citizens and, subsequently, independence as Filipino people (Anderson, 1991; Rafael, 1990). Today the notion that migrant Filipino scholars have an especially political role is still played out through the media. There are incessant news items calling upon them to return and lead in rebuilding a fallen nation that was once the most esteemed country in South East Asia (Lapeña, 2010; Villafania, 2009).

The second aim of this paper is to extend the notion of mediated public connection by situating it in a transnational context. Thus far, most of the public connection debate draws on empirical work focused on individuals living within their countries of birth and assumes that there is only one public sphere to orient towards (Couldry and Langer, 2005; Couldry et al, 2007; Dahlgren and Olsson, 2008). This is, of course, inapplicable to most migrants, who routinely negotiate ties with both the homeland and the host country (Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Vertovec, 1999). To be sure, there are media and migration studies that take due consideration of this ambivalence, such as those ethnographic studies of migrant news consumption (for example, Alghasi, 2009; Gillespie, 1995; Madianou, 2005) and empirical works on the mediated politics of the diaspora (for example, Aouragh, 2008; Fogt and Sandvik, 2008; Matar, 2006). However, the primary focus of these studies is on identity performances and identity politics and does not address the central questions of a public connection framework. By insisting that the concept of mediated public connection accounts for the migrant experience of multiple belongings and multiple public spheres, we move it away from its tendency for methodological nationalism and towards the more transnational stance of media and migration studies.

In sum, this paper emphasizes the necessity of investigating mediated politics in Philippine migration studies, and the importance of bringing a transnational perspective to bear in studies of political engagement. In the case of the Filipino overseas scholars in London considered here, we reveal that their mediated public connection is informed by socio-historical understandings and practices of nationalism and political engagement in the

Philippines. Specifically, we argue that in this context, their practices of engaging with homeland political issues while disengaging with 'other' Filipino people are embedded in, and potentially amplify, long-existing class divides in Philippine society.

Public connection in the context of Filipino migration

For this study, we draw on the seminal work of Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham (2007) to define public connection. According to them, this concept refers less to a sustained attention and more to a basic orientation – actually a spectrum of engagement and disengagement – towards a public world where public issues should be confronted. Equally important, they posit that the media may play a crucial role both in enabling and disabling this connection. In that way, they avoid the extreme pessimism that characterizes Putnam's (2000) indictment of television as the primary culprit for civic disengagement in the USA and Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) claim that negative press coverage is a significant factor in growing cynicism and apathy among Americans. At the same time, it also avoids the opposite extreme of being overly celebratory, as in Dayan and Katz's (1992) insistence that the broadcasting of special rituals that interrupt daily programming has the power to cohere audiences as a single public, and more recently Shah et al's (2005) assertion that the Internet enables collective action that is transcendent of the temporal and spatial considerations that constrain face-to-face communication. In place of such media deterministic approaches, Couldry et al (2007), drawing on Dahlgren's (2005) civic culture framework, situate the relationship between media and public connection in the context of people's everyday lives.

It is unfortunate that there are no previous studies that closely examine how the media matter in the public connection of Filipino migrants. However, there are works that we can draw on to help us tease out the kind of orientation they have towards their homeland and their host country. But with 10% of the approximately 90 million Philippine population scattered all over the world (Nayan, 2009), their experiences will necessarily be very diverse. That diversity is evident in the reactions to a YouTube viral video of Economics Professor Solita Monsod's 'last lecture'. In it, Monsod admonishes her students at the University of the Philippines not to turn their backs on their country by leaving it, and worse, never returning. In one of her most rousing lines, she says,

> 'If you are going to help this country, you've got to be in the country. If any of you have little ambitions of going abroad so that you can earn more, please disabuse yourself, because by doing that you are essentially betraying the people in the Philippines who trusted you and who invested their money in you.' (Lapeña, 2010)

One very angry retort to this was written by a Filipino–American physician, Joy de Mercaida (2010). She asks,

> 'How am I a traitor when the dollars I earn here translate into businesses and consumer confidence and local spending by the family and people I still support back home? How is it that I am a fool when I have wrought only respect and admiration and love in [the USA] for a Filipino?'

And then there were the many Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who made their disagreement with Monsod clear by emphasizing how much they give back to and sacrifice for the country. In an article at Spot.ph that reports on the Monsod video, there are posts such as:

> Rachel: 'pero [but] the Philppine economy is propped by OFW money'.

> Bida: 'as an OFW, I cannot allow this one opinion of hers to render useless my choices in life . . . I have to be away from my kid while I do my bit in helping keep the Philippine economy out of the red.'

What is interesting about these comments is that their writers assumed that Monsod had referred to them, when really, her speech was specifically directed towards scholars – those whom she especially addresses as the country's 'crème de la crème' – those who were still torn between staying and migrating. She, in fact, did not articulate anything about Filipinos who had already chosen to reside permanently or work temporarily abroad. These cases appear to be illustrative of 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu, 1977), as migrants misread their class positions due to social forces that mask significant differences and inequalities. This is perhaps because, in both popular and academic discourse, there has been a tendency to homogenize Filipino migrants. It is crucial then that we have a more nuanced view of their different experiences. We thus provide a heuristic division of the Filipino migrant condition in relation to the notion of public connection.

The balikbayans

There are those, like Dr de Marcaida above, whom we will refer to as the balikbayans. Here we define this category in historical terms. For this, we turn to the Philippine scholar Vicente Rafael (1997, p 206) and his depiction of this group:

> 'It was the Marcos regime in the mid-1970s that coined the term balikbayan to describe immigrant Filipinos primarily from North America who periodically visit the motherland. The term joins the Tagalog words balik [to return] and bayan [town, and at least from the late nineteenth century on, nation]. As a balikbayan, one's relationship to the Philippines is construed in terms of one's sentimental attachments to one's hometown and extended family rather than one's loyalty to the nation-state. At the same time, being a balikbayan depends on one's permanent residence abroad. It means that one lives somewhere else and that one's appearance in the Philippines is temporary and intermittent, as if one were a tourist.'

He goes on to explain how Filipino nationalists tend to deride this group for their overt preference for the USA. Often, they are caricatured as coming home only to complain about how backward everything is in the Philippines and, at the same time, to proselytize about how superior everything is in the land of the 'American dream'.

Despite keeping very strong personal and emotional ties to the home- land then, they generally consider themselves expatriated. Their primary concern is no longer how to intervene in Philippine politics, but how to create Filipino–American spaces within the American political system; they are less about fixing the homeland and more about fixing their new home away from home (Bonus, 2000; Ignacio, 2005). Knowing this, what the Philippine nation-state usually expects to get out of them are their dole-outs to the people still stuck back home and the tourist money they spend during their occasional visits (Rafael, 1997). In light of these, it can be argued that the public connection of balikbayans is firmly directed towards their host country, namely the USA.

The OFWs

Although many migrant Filipinos desire to be balikbayans themselves, the majority are, like Rachel and Bida above, in everyday and official discourse commonly considered to be

overseas Filipino workers – OFWs (Nayan, 2009). Most OFWs are employed either in care and domestic work or in factory and construction work. These occupations, along with seafaring, are routinely and respectively associated with migrant Filipino women and men. As a testament to how much money and goods they put into the Philippine economy, the Philippine government has officially recognized them as mga bagong bayani [modern-day heroes]. As the then-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo proclaimed in the 2001 Bagong Bayani Awards ceremonies,

'Overseas Workers [are] contributors to the national economy . . . In several instances when the economy had a foreign exchange crisis, the consistent dollar inflows from our [OFWs] saved the economy from collapsing. But beyond the billions of dollars in remittances which have built homes, sent children to school, and started small businesses, the Bagong Bayani Award acknowledges the [OFWs'] efforts to keep alive the Filipino values and promote our sense of nationhood wherever they may be.' (cited in Cabañes, 2009, pp 179– 180)

Although the government might want to conflate OFWs' remittances with strong loyalty to the nation-state, this is not necessarily the reality. Like their balikbayan counterparts, migrant Filipino workers' connec- tions with and talk about return frequently focus on attachments to locality and the embrace of their kinship network (McKay, 2005). Some view the state as 'a corrupt exploiter, not representative of the masses, a comprador agent of transnational corporations and Western (specifically US) powers' (San Juan, 2000, p 236). Though many are resident for long periods abroad and may develop complex relation- ships with the people and places among whom and in which they live and work (Johnson and Werbner, 2010), they frequently do not think about staying permanently in their host countries because they are often accorded at best partial citizenship (Parreñas, 2001).

It seems then that both the homeland and the host countries of OFWs have a primarily instrumental relationship with them. For the latter, their primary value abroad is as cheap labour, while for the former it is as export material and a source of external revenue. Their bodies are to stay overseas, where they can best contribute by sending back money and goods to the home country. And their bodies will only come home in moments of defeat, as exemplified by the harrowing statistic that five coffins carrying dead bodies of OFWs arrive every day – their deaths a result of sometimes inhumane treatment abroad (San Juan, 2000). It is that situation that conditions and constrains the forms of public engagement among OFWs in the homeland and host country respectively.

The elite migrants

Few as they are, there are some Filipino migrants who are deemed more fortunate than their OFW counterparts. Defined as elites, they are often characterized as people,

> 'who [are] traveled and who [wear] the knowledge gained from [their] travels lightly . . . they are always aware that there are other worlds which they could also, and will in all probability at some time later, be a part of.' (Latham, 2006, p 94)

These comprise not only scholars, but also highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, accountants and IT workers (for example, Cabañes, 2009; Ong, 2009). In the specific case of migrant scholars, the call of the homeland and the host country are both very strong: capable of taking advantage of global opportunities, there is also a strong nationalistic call for them to return and help their country. This experience holds true for many scholars

from the developing world, such as Ghana (Goethe and Hillman, 2008) and the Caribbean countries (Potter and Conway, 2008). In the specific case of Filipino migrant scholars considered here, they contend with two distinct discourses.

On the one hand, there is a strong moralistic undercurrent to the calls for migrant scholars to prove their nationalism by coming home. Just as the ilustrados of the past are remembered for sparking the revolution of the colonial Philippines against Spain (Aguilar, 2005), so are the foreign-educated Filipinos of today expected to bring about a socioeconomic revolution in the country. For instance, Senator Edgardo Angara, head of the Congressional Committee on Science, Technology and Engineering (COMSTE), sent out an impassioned plea to Filipino scholars to return and raise the quality of local academia and the productivity of local industry (Villafania, 2009). To be sure, there are quite a number of academics and technocrats who have heeded such requests, having gone back home to help push the national economy out of its decades-long stagnation (Pinches, 1996).

On the other hand, there is the long-standing belief that a foreign degree offers one an escape from the hard life back home. The opinion columnist Conrado de Quiros (2009) accurately describes this discourse: 'The notion of someone who took an MA or Ph.D. in an American university coming home to teach in [the University of the Philippines] or some other school is regarded as an act of insanity. Despite the desolate landscape of the US today . . . we still think our compatriots are lucky to be there.' There are many who no longer return: hence the panic about the 'brain drain' phenomenon (Palatino, 2007).

Unlike the balikbayans who have settled permanently in host countries, migrant Filipino scholars still seem eager to consider the clamour for them to return and be heroes for the homeland. Unlike many migrant workers, they have a chance to attain a life of comfort and security in their host country, to become balikbayans. Because of these contradictory obligations and opportunities, it is not as easy to discern the kind of public connection that these elite migrants have. To see how those contradictions are resolved and to see how the media play a role in that, we turn now to data gathered from a series of ethnographic interviews and observation of 10 London-based Filipino scholars[2] from December 2006 to March 2007, as well as some follow-up interviews with them in September 2009 and October 2010.

Media-savvy information-seekers

Any inquiry into public connection needs to start with issues of access and availability of media. While it might be easy to assume that the 'elite' status of these migrants affords them limitless options when it comes to their choice of media, their stories reveal constraints in the sense of having overall fewer media that they could access, or afford, in their sojourn to London. And, due to time and (for some) budget constraints, many adjusted their media habits and became more selective and purposive in which media technologies and content they consumed. Twenty-eight-year-old Trina says,

> 'In the past, the TV is just there, switched on, I don't really care. The newspaper . . . just lies there. Then when I drive to work, I turn the radio on. . . But here, I have to make an effort to be informed.' (Trina, MA, Geography)

Trina here is comparing her experiences with media usage before and after her sojourn in London. As a project manager in a non-governmental organization that focuses on energy conservation, she relates the necessity to keep up with the news to part of her job training

as well as an old habit picked up from her days as a student leader. In London, however, she says that she has become 'utterly deprived' of media. While such a statement comes across as slightly hyperbolic – Trina came to the interview toting a Blackberry, a Motorola RAZR, a 13-inch laptop, an iPod, a geography textbook, and what looked like the sports section of a UK newspaper – her 'deprivation' appears genuinely troubling and unfamiliar to her. Of course, this personal feeling of media deprivation is in stark contrast to the social reality of London as the hub of media and creative industries in Europe: Trina herself admits to being impressed with the way in which free dailies are generously handed out at bus stops and tube stations, how thick and wordy UK newspapers are, compared with newspapers back home, and how smart and informative BBC news and documentaries are. But for her, and for most of our respondents, this feeling of deprivation was undeniably rooted in the limited choices that they had had with homeland-oriented news platforms since their arrival. From an experience of Filipino news simply being 'environmental' to a context in which they had to seek Filipino-oriented media content actively and creatively in a foreign land, these elite migrants talk about the significance of adjusting to this new media environment as no less important than adjusting to the weather, or to the food, or to the many different English accents.

Their mobile computers then become their primary media platform. Through their laptops, they access the world wide web, spending upwards of five hours a day on the web for both 'personal' and 'work' reasons. And when it comes to political engagement, as we discuss in the next sections, they use the Internet to seek political news and information and discuss public issues on various social networking sites, online forums and mailing lists.

When we met Jonsy, a 24-year-old Master's student in political sociology, he was enthusiastic to tell us about his 'searching powers' on the web. Chatting over coffee at a Starbucks in North London, he pulled out his laptop to show us which words to type into Google and YouTube and which websites to visit in order to access at no cost clips and entire episodes of Filipino TV shows. 'I don't have money to buy a TV, I have no place for a TV in my dorm, I don't have money to pay 100 pounds for a stupid TV licence, and I certainly don't have money for [a subscription to] The Filipino Channel. So this is what I do!' Jonsy had apparently found a way to watch his favourite Filipino talk shows and newscasts by accessing a YouTube user's (illegal) uploads of ABS- CBN programmes, and he was eager to share his discovery with any other Filipino who might be interested. In fact, during our interviews, we observed how our respondents seemed especially proud to show off their ability to access illegal and hidden Filipino content online. Such displays of interest and knowledge about the homeland sound thoroughly different from the Americanized balikbayans described by Rafael (1997) and de Quiros (2009) as desperately distancing themselves from their native country.

The media consumption of our respondents indicates a public connection oriented towards the homeland rather than the host country, challenging assumptions that elite migrants become cosmopolitanized during their travels and detach themselves from their roots (Latham, 2006). But is this interest in Philippine issues really a display of nationalism, or is it something else? And is this a function of the media that they consume, or does it have more to do with their experiences as overseas students?

In probing their evaluations of Philippine media, particularly Philippine news, we actually came to hear very pointed critiques of their content and style, with consistent references to 'superior' British and international news coverage of politics. 'Simplistic', 'biased' and 'incomplete' were some of the adjectives used to describe Philippine news and public affairs programmes. One respondent even recounted being stunned by, and subsequently

feeling jealous of, the BBC programme Question Time. Jenny reflected, 'Why couldn't we have programmes like that back home? If only we could grill our candidates in a straightforward, sensible way like the British can!' Talking about the coverage of the Philippine elections, Jenny seemed deeply concerned about how media coverage of politics in the Philippines may forever remain personality- rather than issue-oriented.

However, while they expressed admiration and respect for the UK media's coverage of political issues, we discovered that this did not translate into higher interest in British politics. 'Honestly, I don't give a damn' was the succinct response of Miko to our question as to whether he was interested in British and international political issues. And although we had respondents who were in fact interested in British and international political issues, our interviews with them revealed that they had already been interested in international issues even before their departure for London. Their media consumption in London only served to reinforce their previous interests, but did not in fact spark (or cosmopolitanize) them.

It seems then, for our respondents, their interests in political issues have not significantly changed since their sojourn. The majority of our respondents are still interested in Philippine politics, particularly in news about the elections, corruption scandals and issues of governance. In fact, they have become even more conscious of the need to keep in touch with homeland news as they have actively had to seek out content on the Internet. Whereas before they could incidentally over- hear or absorb political news in a media environment that directed them to the Philippine public sphere, now they had to search for alternative platforms to sustain this public connection. It appears that the quantity and quality of the media content only reinforce the pre-existing orientation of their public connection rather than radically transform it. So what might explain elite migrants' continued focus on homeland politics?

Explaining their homeland orientation

Nationalism as a moral duty

As mentioned earlier, there is a special set of concerns and expectations around educated Filipino youth. While Filipinos recognize the great need for their countrymen and women to move abroad and earn a living for themselves and their families, among educated youth there is a particular hope that they will choose to stay in – or at least return to – the Philippines so that they can institute much-needed changes in their respective universities, companies, industries or in the government. We were curious to see how our respondents related to this.

> 'Well, I know a lot of things are wrong in our country . . . I was involved in some activist organizations [at the University of the Philippines] so I did my share back home. Here I'm not yet sure what's going to happen. But yes, I want to give back to my country eventually. It's kind of like our debt too.' (Grace, MBA)

> 'I don't know about you, but [returning] has always been the plan. I'll be going home to Palawan to run for [public office] . . . I feel that I could apply what I learn here and help the people in my province start small businesses. Then they could sustain themselves and become more independent [from corrupt politicians].' (Horacio, MA, Development Studies)

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Respondents explicitly drew on the notion of 'return' and 'giving back'. Most echoed the mainstream rhetoric and expressed 'return' and 'giving back' in moral terms. To shun opportunities to earn in pounds and dollars abroad and work in prestigious international organizations in favour of working at home is described by our informants as a 'duty', a 'sacrifice', even a fulfilment of a debt or obligation to the country. They express awareness (and shame) that the country once boasted the most promising economy in Asia, but that since the 1970s has become the 'sick man of Asia', lagging behind almost all of its neighbouring countries (Jose, 2005; Kind, 2000). They convey both acceptance and idealism in the claim that they themselves carry the burden of responsibility to help solve social problems and, more significantly, that they could actually fulfil this responsibility in the near future. Although they did not attribute blame to Filipinos who leave the country to work as domestic workers or nurses, they are harsher towards migrants who leave as doctors, engineers and other professionals: 'That's just sad. Understandable but sad. If all the good people leave, then who is left? I feel like these people are quitters. They're just giving up.' They sometimes referred to fellow Filipino 'elite' colleagues who had gone to the USA but never returned to the Philippines as people they did not wish to emulate.

Like Horacio above, many of the elite migrants we met stressed the significance of education in helping to address the country's social, political and economic problems. There is a shared belief in the transformative value of ideas. Specifically, they relate how their academic studies and learning experiences outside the classroom in the UK 'opened their eyes', even 'changed their lives forever'. In our inter- views, elite migrants shared the hope that these life-changing ideas would be equally life-changing to others once they shared them with their compatriots back home. And as with Horacio, there is a shared desire to experiment and introduce new ideas and best practices from the West to their local communities or companies back home.

> 'The problem with the people who run our government back home is that they have no experience what it's like in other countries. They become so complacent, they're treated like gods, they're not used to being challenged!' (Lulu, MSc, Information Systems)

> 'Look! Here in the West, they welcome debate and argumentation [in public issues]. I hate how the Church [back home] controls the government [in the issue of reproductive health and contraception]. Here that is simply unacceptable. Argument from authority is a fallacy. It's medieval!' (Kara, MA, Social Work)

The responses that we have seen in this section are not simply articulations of personal moral codes, duties or ambitions; they are also expressions of shared social understandings, meanings and expectations. In their expressions of desires and ambitions for themselves, there are also underlying judgments about their own peers and also other Filipinos back home. In fashioning themselves as future leaders of the country, there is an unspoken statement that people back home would be better off as followers. In underscoring the value of education and ideas – intellectual capital that they have accumulated in their studies – they assume that thinkers (the intellectual elite) are the better leaders in society, just as others with less intellectual capital are better 'doers' or 'workers'. In being hopeful about the future and their contributions to such a future, they reveal negativity about the present and a value judgment of backwardness and ineptitude in the current establishment. And for a few, their valuation of knowledge derived from the West is indicative of their own Orientalist dichotomies of West/ East, modern/pre-modern and progressive/regressive. Nevertheless, it is significant to stress that these elite

migrants' expression of moral duties is infused with a sense of youthful idealism and a genuine desire to 'help', even 'save' an eternally 'developing' Third World country.

Investments and opportunities

When probed further as to why their public connection remains unwavering towards the homeland, other reasons aside from the moral come up. In particular, it seems that for these elite migrants, highly attractive political and economic opportunities remain available for them at home. We have two stories to share.

First, there is David, an urban planning student. His family owns a real-estate business in Manila, and he is expected to run the company with his sister in the future. Back home, David was responsible for the new business division of their company. He pays attention to Philippine news 'every night'. He is anxious about political turmoil or natural disaster, as this would affect their business. Self-funded as a Master's student, he claims he is 'almost 100% sure' of returning home.

Second, we have Miko, a development studies student from Bohol on an academic scholarship. Since graduating from university with honours, he has worked for an NGO in Cebu. While he is keeping his eye out for opportunities in prestigious London-based NGOs, he expects that he will eventually return to Bohol. 'I don't want to abandon my friends who are counting on me,' he says. 'Though I'm sure the pay here would probably be four times the peanuts I make back home.'

While their backgrounds could not be more different, at least if we follow Pinches's (1996) ethnographic descriptions of 'old rich' and 'new rich' communities in the Philippines, both David and Miko share some key similarities. First, unlike the majority of Filipino migrants who venture abroad in pursuit of economic opportunities absent at home, David and Miko already enjoy comfortable lives back home. While between the two there are still great disparities – with David earning substantially more from the real-estate business than Miko the social worker-cum-academic – nevertheless, both possess 'elite' status in their own fields. David, as part of Manila's 'old rich', has high economic capital, just as Miko's prestigious academic scholarship lends him more intellectual and symbolic capital. Their sojourn abroad then was not about gaining new status for themselves (as labour migrants attempt to accomplish) – rather, theirs was about consolidating already existing status back home, at least in their particular fields. The sojourn abroad was not about a pagbabakasakali or 'taking a leap of faith', as OFWs have been known to narrate (Rafael, 2000) – theirs, in contrast, was a more proactive pagsunggab sa pagkakataon or 'seizing the opportunity'. While the OFW discourse of departure is inflected with the theme of risk, the elite migrant discourse is about opportunity, available and attractive at home or abroad.

David and Miko have much invested back home – in their careers, their peers, their family. So, unsurprisingly, there is much invested in their return. On their return, they are expected to take leadership positions, share skills and knowledge, and institute changes that people perceive no one else could make but them. And (quite significantly), on their return, they themselves believe that they will have acquired the resources necessary to face their responsibilities. In this way, we argue that these London-based students have a high degree of self-efficacy that overpowers whatever low trust that they may have in current institutions. This high self-efficacy, coupled with a sense of youthful idealism, translates into a conviction that, having invested time, effort and (for some) money in their studies abroad, they will be able to make right what is wrong in the homeland.

Alienation and exclusion in the UK

Another reason behind this homeland-directed public connection may pertain to feelings of alienation, rejection and exclusion that some of these elite migrants sometimes experience in the UK. Only two out of 10 respondents mention having family or other relatives in the UK. This is radically different from the US context, where Filipinos have long established a wide network of family ties (Dia, 2003) to whom they could turn for companionship and care. Some of our respondents also mention various experiences of 'discrimination': they disdain the way in which classmates register surprise about how well they speak English ('They thought I was from mainland China! They had no idea where the Philippines is!'), how new acquaintances immediately assume they work in a care home or hospital ('Excuse me!') and even how they are ignored by people when they go clubbing ('I think the Brits just dislike Malay-looking people. They've gotten used to Indians, but not to us, I guess.') What this clearly illustrates is that elite migrants, while subscribing to popular moral discourses about their duty to 'return', sometimes elide other reasons for their continued public connection to the homeland.

The media are clearly implicated in maintaining this public connection to the homeland. First, homeland news is used as a political resource for them to maintain a belief in themselves as active agents in Philippine society. Homeland news platforms become instruments – and news content the resources – that enable them to make decisions for themselves and others. At the same time, through social networking sites, messages boards and mailing lists, we see these elite migrants testing the waters by expressing the ideas they have learned in school, making new connections and publicizing their work and achievements. In displaying their social, cultural and intellectual capital in these online spaces, we see attempts to build and establish a name for themselves in their respective industries and communities, and perhaps to acquire supporters and followers to help with their causes.

The proper distance for political engagement

Having explained the direction of their public connection and the various reasons that influence this, we now discuss the quality of this public connection and their actual activities of political engagement. Following the public connection model, we asked our respondents about their political practices past and present – from writing 'letters to the editor' to attending rallies to joining organized groups – and the frequency of their participation. For a majority of our respondents, the activities that they enumerated were highly interpersonal, rather than formal or organizational, in nature: discussing political news with friends, commenting on news articles online, forwarding petitions via e-mail, posting a topic in the Pinoy-UK mailing list, etc. While four out of ten respondents mentioned physically going to EDSA to protest about the ouster of Philippine President Joseph Estrada in January 2001, activities such as joining organizations or visiting community centres were rarely mentioned, and when they were, they were negatively evaluated, especially in the UK context.

> 'Those types of activities are hit-and-miss. And they're usually a miss. You never know who you'll meet, and they'll probably just waste your time.' (Jonsy, MA, Political Sociology)

> 'I'm always scared to go. [laughs] If the [Filipino students] you meet in the [Philippine Embassy] Christmas party are any indication, then you'll only go home from these seminars with a very bad headache.' (Jenny, MSc, Public Health)

> 'There was a seminar I attended at SOAS about Campaign for Human Rights in the Philippines with Congressman Satur Ocampo. I'm passionate about the issue for a while now. But you know, ah, it's hard to attend if you're going by yourself. . . When I go to events, I always have a buddy with me. That way, you always have an escape! [play-acts] "Jonathan! Look at the time! Let's go!"' (Arlen, MA, Media Studies)

For the students we interviewed, political events are perhaps first and foremost perceived as social events. And as social events, they carry a curious kind of risk in that you never know who you'll meet at such functions. Our respondents express wariness of the possibility of inter- acting with participants with whom they have very little in common, even if they ostensibly share the experience of being among the few hundred Filipino students, on top of the more than 200,000 Filipinos living and working in the UK (Johnson and McKay, this issue).

This concern with the social highlights the peculiarity of the diasporic experience. In diaspora, social boundaries are transgressed and new ones are erected: people meet people they would otherwise never meet, and people meet people in contexts wholly unfamiliar. 'Old rich' meet 'new rich', scholars meet sons of scions, leftists meet rightists, businessmen meet nurses, young meet old, on a supposedly 'level' playing field, as everyone is back to being a student. This levelling-off or erasing of previous status differentiators is an illusion, as new configurations of power and new rules of engagement emerge – giving rise to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in socializing with other Filipinos.

Several of our respondents, for instance, recount their annoyance at how Chevening scholars[3] display a 'superiority complex'. As Joyce remarks, 'Just because they're Chevening, they feel that they can talk down to me. When they ask my course and I say 'public health' they think I'm, you know, OFW-nurse. I'm a scholar too!'[4] It appears that an unusual new hierarchy is enforced in some student gatherings, where the self-funded economic elite move down the food chain while the intellectual elite are accorded more symbolic capital.

Social class conflicts re-emerge too in 'new rich'–'old rich' interactions in the diaspora. Here we have Jericho, a politics student with ambitions to run for congressman. Self-confident and opinionated, Jericho surprised us when he started confiding in us about his negative experiences of 'networking' with other Filipino students in the UK. All this time, we had pegged Jericho as part of Manila's elite society, judging from his diploma at a UK boarding school, his apartment in Knightsbridge, and his family resort outside Metro Manila. This is his story:

> 'I attended this Filipino human rights event. During the tea break, I approached this daughter of a Filipino senator, hoping to discuss politics with her. Who knows what that might lead to, right? So we got us talking for a while, and then she asked me for my last name. Can you believe that her reply was, "Hmm, I haven't heard of that"? All I could muster back was, "Me neither".'

Such experiences of boundary-raising in face-to-face contexts, both recreational (such as a students' Christmas party) and political (such as seminars with opposition-party politicians), seem to impact upon the kinds of political activities in which elite migrants participate. Elite migrants become wary of activities that involve prolonged, deep inter- actions with other Filipino elite migrants. A few respondents even mention that, at times,

they prefer to befriend Filipino domestic workers; it appears there is less need to assert status with OFWs as compared with other Filipino students and professionals.

Wary of fellow elites' unpredictable backgrounds and behaviours as well as the reconfigured contexts of interaction in the diaspora, students then seek to establish an engagement with homeland politics from a 'proper distance': close to issues but far from other people. This explains their great knowledge of issues, high volume of talk and discussion, but limited action in the form (and formalities) of organizing and rallying.

Through the course of our fieldwork, we were indeed surprised how much of Filipino interaction in the diaspora is inflected with rituals of 'sizing up' the other, as Fenella Cannell (1999) witnessed among a community of poor people in Bicol – a context seemingly very far removed from that of elite migrants in London. Cannell observed how poor people's everyday interactions with others were occasions when they attempted to transform their conditions by finding potential patrons they could depend on in times of need. In this case, sizing-up rituals are not motivated by a desire to forge cross-class connections that might benefit one's condition; they are driven more by a desire to forge connections within the same class groupings. Given that they all possess a high level of self-efficacy, not to mention self-esteem, being dismissed by 'peers', as in Jericho's case, is a difficult pill to swallow, as they have been used to being treated with respect and authority back home. Back home at least, spaces for social and political interaction are more rigidly monitored, and the chances that 'outsiders' will penetrate these boundaries are much more minimal. As a result, political engage- ment – and political socializing – are preferably practised from a safe and proper distance, where there is limited long-term commitment, with an escape plan always already in place.

The media then become significant to their story. As mentioned, there is much blogging, e-mailing, forwarding – and more recently, Tweeting and Facebooking. E-mail groups and social networking websites provide these students with relatively safe venues for interaction where the boundaries of page and screen provide a defence against the unpredictable socialities of the face-to-face.

For example, there was Jenny who talked about being a regular reader of posts in the Pinoy-UK mailing list, a mailing list for UK-based Filipino students. Jenny articulated two primary ways in which online discussion platforms were productive. First, she found that the website links and commentaries posted by other students on these sites were useful when reflecting on her own stand on thorny political issues. And second, she found that mailing lists and Facebook groups were helpful in tracking which issues people generally held to be important.

But while such spaces are good resources for learning about political issues, Jenny and others still had a low regard for the quality of political interactions on these platforms. Some of our respondents cite how fellow elite migrants often argue in moralistic rather than rational ways, and others share the fact that instead of correctly 'referencing' their arguments, people choose to 'name-drop' the family names of powerful people they know in order to be accorded respect in online forums. Quite a few also deride not only their fellow elite migrants' online discussions, but also the mediated talk of Filipinos more generally. An illustrative example is the shared fear and disdain for jejemon users that they felt to be 'invading' Facebook and Twitter. Jejemon is a recently invented popular term that refers to Filipinos who 'misuse' (and abuse) the English language in mediated communications. Instead of spelling 'hehe' to denote laughter, these users instead type 'jejeje' playfully derived from Spanish, and are described by fellow users as

'monsters' (hence jeje-mon). But as Rolando Tolentino (2010) astutely points out, this naming and shaming of jejemons is not only a battle for the 'proper' use of the English language, but is fundamentally reflective of class conflict, given that jejemon language is the popular, 'cool' practice of young lower-income Filipinos.[5] Elite migrants explain how jejemons misbehave online: they supposedly post 'below-the-belt' comments remarking on the author's (homo)sexuality, play FarmVille rather than debate about issues, and – during the elections – support the 'absolutely wrong' (that is, non-elite) candidates such as the dark-skinned, populist vice-presidential candidate Jejomar Binay.

Online sites then are not completely productive spaces for political discussions; nor are they perfectly desirable spaces for social interaction.But they are nonetheless considered to be better alternatives than face-to-face diasporic gatherings. Here at least, people can talk and disagree in ways that are perceived to be more manageable than face-to-face gatherings. As elite migrants are typically very passionate about their political views and loyalties to particular politicians, they find it easier to disclose and discuss these in their online networks rather than face-to-face, where it is more difficult to predict people's backgrounds and beliefs. And finally, one respondent who was able to have his political blog picked up by a mainstream news website expressed the hope that his political writings could actually have a significant impact on local debate, even though he was physically distant from the centre of action.

While mediated political participation seems to be beneficial for elite migrants' opinion formation and dissemination, when it comes to more action-oriented forms of participation, online platforms reveal their constraints and limitations. Jericho, for one, observes how online group- initiated fundraisers for Philippine calamities rarely receive replies and solicitations from others, as Filipinos still prefer the face-to-face when it comes to monetary transactions (but see Longboan, this issue, for a counter-example). He also remembers how a group of LSE and UCL Filipinos tried to organize a protest on behalf of OFWs when the UK Home Secretary was to deliver a keynote lecture. 'We did email blasts online inviting Filipino students from all over the UK to come down to London. But when we started assigning people to do banners and posters or bring food and drinks, people stopped replying.' The protest was in the end cancelled, with Jericho bringing three close friends to attend the talk with him. Although there are clearly instances in which online platforms do facilitate forms of political action – as evident in the recent student protests in the UK – the case presented here is a useful reminder that online interactions may also offer opportunities to disengage and can complicate decision making and control (Bennett, 2003).

At the same time, we observe that, for the most part, elite migrants' discussions of political issues remain targeted at like-minded peers and authority figures. Except for one respondent who managed to obtain mainstream media publicity for his blog, most of our elite migrants target their communications at their local communities, work colleagues and university friends. Even though online forums are 'safer' spaces in which to interact with people beyond their social circles – be they economic elite or the intellectual elite, 'old rich' or 'new rich' – instances of cross-class mediated interaction are recalled with similar cringe-worthy effects to shameful face-to-face faux pas in diasporic gatherings. The media in this sense do not radically transform the political practices of elite migrants in the sense that they alter or change them; the media instead simply sustain their penchant for political talk and maintain the rigid class boundaries as to who belongs to these spheres of political discussion.

Hierarchy of migrants and divided mediated nationalisms

This study on the mediated public connection of Filipino elite migrants in London has illustrated the diversity of the Filipino migrant experience, the significant role the media play in the context of migration, and the contentious meanings of nationalism that underpin migrant practices of political engagement. Extending the framework of public connection to a transnational context emphasizes migrants' negotiation of the multiple public spheres with which they engage and disengage. At the same time, it allows us to reflect on migration as not simply a social, cultural or economic concern, but also as an important political concern. Based on our interviews and participant observation with Filipino elite migrants, we argue that their mediated public connection is inscribed in a socio-historical – and fundamentally classed – framework of nationalism and political engagement. These meanings and practices of nationalism inform their specific kind of public connection: one that is engaged with political issues, but not immersed with 'other' Filipino people.

The first aspect of their mediated public connection is their expressed duty eventually to return to the homeland. Contrary to assumptions of elite migrants becoming cosmopolitanized in their travels and subsequently orienting themselves to the host rather than the home public, these elite migrants instead sustain their interest in homeland issues through skilful use of the media. Through the Internet, they keep abreast of major developments in the homeland and seek out news that enables them to plan ahead and make decisions for their eventual return. While they express this endgame of physical return to the homeland as a moral duty to their country, we argue that this return is also influenced by the fact that they have a wealth of opportunities for advancement and leadership waiting for them at home. Just like the ilustrados of the 1800s who returned from their studies in Europe to desirable positions of status and leadership, these elite migrants also expect to take on new responsibilities when they return. In fact, they view their return as the very fulfilment of their debt and obligation to the homeland: by physically being at home, they are able directly to transmute through their bodies the ideas, talents and skills absent in a deprived and depleted Philippine society. Crucially, this inquiry to elite migrants' reflection of their nationalist duties demystifies for us a widely unspoken and unquestioned hierarchy of migrant bodies. Popular and academic discourse tends to elide the heterogeneity of the Filipino migrant experience, as we tend to 'misrecognize' one migrant for the other. Here however, we vividly see how migrant bodies are differently valued in the expected nationalist duties they are expected to carry out: to be good Filipinos, elite migrants should come home, balikbayans should intermittently come home, and OFWs are of greater value when they are away from home.

The second aspect of this mediated 'long-distance nationalism' is a belief in the transformative power of ideas. As overseas students, they place special significance on the value of education. Ideas and best practices that they learn from esteemed academic institutions in the UK are seen as means by which they could help, develop, even save, a home- land that they recognize, as others do, as a damaged democracy, the sick man of Asia and a 'culture of disaster' (Bankoff, 2003). They have a self-belief that in the future they could be agents of positive change in Philippine society by applying what they have learned in the West to their communities and companies back home. There are traces of this valuation of education among the ilustrados as well. The 'First Filipino' Jose Rizal (1882 [1933], pp 253–254) himself wrote, 'What a revolution takes place in the ideas of the man who for the first time leaves his native land and travels around through different countries!. . . By this means a wise traveler carries to his own country the good usages he has seen and tries to apply them there with the necessary modifications.' Like the ilustrados who were users of homeland- oriented news media and producers of homeland-

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oriented books and periodicals, the media play an equally important role in elite migrants' political education: they use various news websites and social network-ing sites actively to seek out homeland news and communicate their ideas to their peers. Similar to the ilustrados, who strategically fashioned themselves as more intelligent, progressive and advanced than native Filipinos such as Igorots (Aguilar, 2005, p 614), these elite migrants also reproduce distinctions between themselves as better thinkers and leaders as against most other Filipinos back home – Filipinos who very probably have no opportunity to access intellectual capital that they could convert into valuable political and economic capital.

The third and final aspect of elite migrants' public connection refers to their actual practices of political engagement, one that we describe as engaged, but not immersed. Elite migrants engage in multiple forms of political talk and discussion, while at the same time keeping a 'proper distance' from the people they meet in formal organizations and social activities in the context of diaspora. These diasporic encounters are qualitatively different from what they have been used to back home, where boundaries between people of different social groups in society are more rigidly observed. In the diaspora, where people from different classes share common spaces as fellow students and fellow Filipinos, 'sizing-up' rituals based on assertions of various intellectual, economic, social and cultural capital more often create divisions rather than forge connections. Mediated spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, online forums and mailing lists become the preferred venues for political discussion and socializing, as they tend to reduce the anxieties of face-to-face encounters. However, that online political activity very rarely translates into offline mobilization. In that respect, contemporary Filipino scholars in London are significantly different from the ilustrados of old, or the intellectual elite of other developing countries (for example, see Matar, 2006). Rather than the media being used to forge alliances and mobilize collective political action in diasporic public spaces, for this group of migrants the media are used to reinforce socio-cultural divides among the many different divisions that elite migrants faith- fully observe: 'old rich'/'new rich', 'scholarship'/'paying', 'elite'/ 'balikbayan'/'OFW', 'class'/'jejemon', 'elite migrant'/'local scholar', 'Manila'/'province', etc. In sum, although the media may fan the flames of nationalist identification, they douse the flames of civic nationalism by allowing them both to disconnect easily from and disregard threatening and undesirable others, and at times to retreat completely from the public realm. For elite migrants to have a truly transformative political impact, what is required is not just that they should develop better uses of new media for political engagement, but rather that they should find new ways to mediate, rather than exacerbate, long-existing political, economic, social and cultural divisions in Philippine society.

1 Considered to be the first among these equals is Jose Rizal, who has the distinction of being the national hero of the Philippines. Guerrero (1963) calls him the 'First Filipino', arguing that the concept of the Filipino and the Filipino nation only became clearly articulated through Rizal's writings, which subsequently inspired the efforts of his fellow ilustrados in the Propaganda Movement and revolutionary leaders in the homeland.

2 In selecting our respondents, we came up with several drafting criteria. First, all of the 20 participants were supposed to be students between the ages of 18 and 30, with 10 participants in London and 10 in Manila. Other than these basics, the London- based informants also had to satisfy the criteria of: (1) at least three months of residence in London at the time of the interview, and (2) possession of a student visa on a Philippine passport. This would eliminate informants who might have actually grown up in the UK, though of Filipino descent. Interviews with our respondents lasted for at least an hour. In the UK, the researchers conducted additional participant observation in various student- and OFW-led social and political gatherings.

3 Chevening scholarships are perhaps the most prestigious scholarships for study in the UK. Around three to eight scholars are awarded (by the British Embassy in Manila) full-cost scholarships for Master's studies in any field in the UK. Chevening schol- ars are supposedly given 'special treatment' by the Filipino Embassy in London, to the annoyance of other students – whether 'scholarship' or 'paying'.

4 As Amrith and Benedicto argue, nurses occupy a liminal category in between the low-status OFW category and the high-skilled (elite) migrant category.

5 Interestingly, jejemon as a term coalesced in online spaces and was taken up by mainstream media in the months leading up to the May 2010 election – an election also fought along significantly classed lines, with 'old rich' eventual president Noynoy Aquino competing against candidates Joseph Estrada and Manny Villar, both of whom claimed that their (alleged) experiences of growing up poor enabled them to sympathize better with the masses. We suspect that the circulation of class-conflict discourses in the political sphere provided an impetus for strategies of class differentiation to be produced and reproduced in other arenas of public culture, including online spaces.

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