

Performances Across Time and Space:

Drama in the Global Households of Filipina Transmigrant Workers¹

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ABSTRACT

The separation of transnational domestic workers from their kinship households and their integration in new ones present a conflict situation rife with social drama. It highlights contradictions in their positions in different global households: for example, in their contrasting roles as breadwinners in one household and as domestic workers in another; as transnational mothers and live-in caregivers; and as international migrants and domestically confined workers.

This article employs Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, particularly his notions of "contrived" and "real" performances, to examine the everyday performances of migrant workers across time and space—against their contradictory roles as breadwinners in the Philippine kinship households that they have left behind and as "maids" in their co-residential global households in Singapore.

The proponent refers to the time-performance continuum loop as a context explaining variations in the performances of domestic workers. This model describes the initial years of employment as overwhelming migrants with both hardship and poor performances. Long-term employment, on the other hand, equips them with mastery in their performances. The research draws from conventional ethnographic fieldwork among Filipina domestic workers in Singapore, supplemented by a virtual ethnography in an online forum among Singapore employers.

INTRODUCTION

The separation of transnational domestic workers from their households and their inclusion into new ones is a conflict situation that creates "units of aharmonic or disharmonic process," which Victor Turner (1975: 37) calls social drama. Contradictions in their positions in these two households highlight this drama, for example, in their contrasting roles as breadwinners in one household and as domestic workers in the other; as transnational mothers and live-in caregivers; and as international migrants and domestically confined workers. Social drama, according to Turner (1975), typically undergoes four phases involving a 1) breach of norm-

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governed social relations; 2) crisis; 3) redressive action to limit the spread of crisis; and 4) reintegration or recognition of irreconcilable damage between contesting parties. Breach, the “inaugurating event of social drama is always effected by a ritual or ritualised act or ‘move’” (Turner 1987). In the case of Filipina domestics, the breach of social drama is their moving out of their household and moving into their employers’. Separated from their families, they are marginally incorporated into new households where they carry out the same carework they performed for their families. Along with the paradox related to their positions as leaders (breadwinners) and servants is their transgression of national boundaries and confinement in the households where they work.

Transnationalism and performances have been widely studied. In paid domestic work, much research interest has been devoted to domestic workers’ performances towards their left-behind families as well as their employing households. Performances seem to fit in Turner’s (1975) third phase of social drama or the redressive action aimed at minimising the crisis. Towards the sending households of domestic workers, scholars have looked into performances on transnational mothering and homemaking (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Lan 2006), reconfiguration of gender roles (Asis, et al. 2004), and self-portrayal as upwardly mobile cosmopolitans (Margold 2004). With their employing families, domestic workers have performed the “rituals of deference” (Rollins 1985) and established what Goffman (1959) calls “backstage” and “frontstage” regions in their employers’ homes (Lan 2006) as well as in public spaces (Lan 2006; Yeoh, et al. 2004). These studies, however, have not incorporated time as central to their analyses, particularly its role in performance modification.

Thus, I hope to contribute to existing literature on foreign domestic work in Singapore by employing temporally and spatially grounded analysis of social drama in global households.¹ Where previous studies tended to focus on one household at a time (either the sending or receiving household), this project examines the migrants’ performances in the two global households over a period of time, based on life story narratives collected from these migrant workers.² In addition, I intend to expand our understanding on “performance” as a coping mechanism and a tool in negotiating power. I offer an argument that veers away from a dichotomous discourse of the “maids” in Singapore as either satisfied or abused workers, loyal or rebellious, smart or idiot, and so on.

I utilise Erving Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach to examine the everyday performances of migrant workers across time and space, that is, vis-à-vis their contradictory roles as breadwinners in their left-behind kinship households in the Philippines and as “maids” in their co-residential global households in Singapore, over a period of time. Performance is analytically important being an essential tool in their survival. On the other hand, dramaturgy serves not only as a coping mechanism whereby Filipinas adjust to different environments but also as a tool in their resistance project at the micro level. I provide a context explaining the variations of domestic workers’ performances: the *time-performance continuum loop*. This model captures the initial years of overseas employment as overwhelming hardships and poor performances, whereas long-term employment as mastered performances in the migrants’ everyday lives. Indeed, Heidi Armbruster (2002: 19) rightly explains that in migration and globalisation, “processes of identity are about ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’”

RESEARCH FIELDWORK

In writing this paper, I drew from my ethnographic fieldwork on Filipina domestic workers in Singapore from October 2006 to May 2007. My activities involved face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and secondary data analysis consisting of text from an online discussion forum. Forty-three life-history interviews with Filipina domestic workers were conducted. The interviews, half of which were voice recorded with the informants' permission, ranged from 45 minutes to four hours per session; 13 informants underwent one or more follow-up conversations through telephone, SMS, and face-to-face meetings, in which I accompanied them in their various activities, such as shopping, disco, religious service, picnicking, and watching their wards in the playgrounds. To supplement interview data, I conducted participant observation in public places inhabited by foreign domestic workers. Ethnographic sites included places frequented by Filipinas on Sundays, such as the Lucky Plaza mall, Botanic Garden, and churches. I also included public spaces explored by Filipina domestic workers on their workdays, such as schools, playgrounds, and markets. In addition to conventional ethnography, I conducted "virtual ethnography" (Constable 2003) among Singapore employers in an online discussion forum, where they discuss issues related to their employment of foreign domestic workers. The text data consisted of 110 threads from over a hundred members and guests.

THE FORMATION OF GLOBAL HOUSEHOLDS AND THE RISE OF SOCIAL DRAMA

International migration has engendered the restructuring of households. Conventionally, households comprise of related individuals living in the same dwelling and sharing a nationality. Changes in the world-economy and continuing accumulation of capital, however, have resulted in the rising commodification of chores and carework (Wallerstein 1984).

Immanuel Wallerstein argues that a consequence of everyday life's commodification is the "*decline in co-residentiality and kinship as determinative of the boundaries of household*" (1984: 21, emphasis mine). For instance, one in six households in Singapore incorporates in their household membership a live-in foreign domestic worker (Ministry of Manpower 2006). On the other hand, 27 per cent of children in the Philippines have absent parents who work overseas (GMA News 16 March 2007). These two contrasting patterns of household restructuring from co-residential to transnational and from familial to internationally non-kin, co-resident membership result in the formation of global households that challenge the conventional notion of household (Arnado Forthcoming 2009).

I extend Petra Weyland's (1997: 85) usage of global household, which she referred to in the context of moving households of global corporate executive men, who were assigned from one global city to another, in a two-to-five-year period, accompanied by wives and their domestic workers. I use a paradoxical conception of global households linked by the migrant worker. On the one hand, a co-residential global household is situated in a geographical dwelling space where First World-Third World relations are enacted right within the First

World household, through the incorporation of foreign domestic workers from poor countries. On the other hand, a kinship global household comprises transnationally dispersed families within the geographic differentiation of the core and the periphery. These two notions of paradoxical global household are simultaneously experienced by the foreign domestic worker who is integrated at the margin of the First World household while sustaining her own household in the geographic Third World (Arnado Forthcoming 2009).

Global households are spaces where social drama is enacted. As a dwelling space, the employer's household is a familiar but foreign space for the domestic worker. Although she is equipped with housework and childcare skills, the new setting prescribes new procedures. Her employer frequently perceives her mastery of the craft as inefficient and inadequate, if not stupid.³ With working experience in the Middle East and Hong Kong, Yolanda Fajardo reveals that even as she found her work perfect after exerting much effort, her employer remains dissatisfied. Giving up on her madam and looking for another employer, Yolanda expresses, "[m]y employer is only content when she can see her face reflected on the well-shined door." Another Filipina, Flora Gallardo, was exasperated about her employer's high expectations. Flora exclaims, "[w]hen she sees an ant or a hair on the floor, she would pick it up purposely where I could see her, as if to tell me that I did not clean the floor properly." Different definitions of cleanliness create trouble in the working relationship between employers and domestic workers. In addition, differences in food preparation and household technologies further confuse the foreign domestic workers who endure scolding from their employers.

Similarly, the reproduction of the domestic workers' kinship household is laden with drama, from the internalisation of transnational relationships to actual performances. Blatant renderings of this drama came from informants breaking into tears as they told stories of painful separation from their infants, of single-handedly raising seven children, of family members dying in the midst of their overseas work, and their husbands' extra-marital affairs. Fifty-two-year-old Pamela Jamero is a widow who single-handedly sent her seven children to college. Her husband, who was in the police force, died in a shootout 20 years ago. Confronted with the sole responsibility of raising their children, Pamela left for Singapore in 1989 to afford the cost of raising them. When she left her family, her eldest child was only 10 years old while the youngest was two. Another informant, full-time homemaker Narda Bracero, was breastfeeding her six-month-old baby when her husband died. Her distressed body refused to eat, making breastfeeding a difficult process. The same problem of single parenting brought Narda to Singapore. These two women were deprived of time and space to mourn their husbands' deaths. Thus, in their employers' homes, they grieved quietly for their husbands, and they cried for the children they left behind. In the midst of all these emotional and financial burdens, they were expected to perform well in their employers' households.

Employers, domestic workers, and their families perform their redefined roles based on limited, ambiguous, and vague scripts, subject to different interpretations owing to their different cultural, geographical, gender, ethnic, and class standpoints. For neophytes, this often results in what Goffman (1959) calls a "slip" in performance, which is often a cause of punishment or termination in the receiving household, and family instability or marital separation in the sending household. At worst, drama in global households results in tragic endings, with foreign domestics jumping or falling from high-rise buildings, murder, and

family disintegration. These endings follow Turner's (1975: 42) final phase of social drama, the "legitimation of irreparable schism between contesting parties." The kaleidoscopic life stories that I have collected from Filipinas who have been in Singapore from less than a year to 22 years deviate from the models of happy workers as shown in a Straits Times survey (Ministry of Manpower 2005) and abused maids as shown by the Human Rights Watch (2005).

THE PHILIPPINES AND SINGAPORE AS SENDING AND RECEIVING COUNTRIES

In the mid 1960s, the Philippines and Singapore were both Third World nations. After this period, however, Singapore grew rapidly, continuously rising to become part of the First World, leaving behind the Philippines whose economy deteriorated over the years. From a Third World country, Singapore had risen to be one of the wealthiest countries in the developing Asia Pacific, according to a 2005 study by the Asian Development Bank (2007). Singapore is ranked second after Brunei, and is ahead of China's Macao, Hong Kong, and Taipei. In sharp contrast, the Philippines lags way behind, even tailing Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The Philippines' GDP per capita of HK\$16,675 is a mere six per cent of Singapore's and is lower than the regional average.

With a small population, the export economy of Singapore is anchored on limited workers. The government's commitments to economic development and family cohesion put women in a bind. To meet these goals, the government has challenged Singapore women to be simultaneously productive in the paid labour force and reproductive in the domestic sphere, to thwart the declining fertility rate of the city state (Lee, et al. 1999). With the diminishing support of a few extended households, the 4.3 million population is dependent on 160,000 foreign domestic workers from its neighbouring countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, to help Singapore women meet the challenge of an industrialised country (Transient Workers Count Too 2006).

Contrasting Singapore's economic stature and physical modernity is its rather pre-modern labour practices towards foreign domestic workers. Although a First World city-state, Singapore offers lower wages to its foreign domestic workers compared to other popular Asian host countries that have lower per capita income, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁴ Considering the mean monthly household income of S\$5400 in Singapore in 2005 (General Household Survey 2006), Filipina domestics' starting wage of S\$350 is merely 6 per cent of the average household income, for a round-the-clock and all-around service. In addition, the Singapore government has rejected a mandatory day off every week for its foreign domestic workers, as such privilege would "inconvenience" the employing families (Reuters 2006). In part because of its inferior benefit package, Singapore lags behind Hong Kong and Taiwan as a destination country of "quality" Filipina domestic workers (POEA 2006). Consequently, Filipina applicants with less social capital and are prone to abuse end up in Singapore. My informants' social characteristics, for example, differ from the findings of other scholars on Filipina domestics in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the USA, and Italy. Scholars, such as Nicole Constable (1997), Rhacel Parrenas (2000), and Lan Chia Lan (2000), suggested that many of their informants held relatively prestigious positions in the Philippines, as teachers and supervisors. Contrary to these findings, not one of my informants in Singapore held a stable or "prestigious" job that was dumped in favour of the lower-status-but-higher-compensating

job overseas. In the Philippines, they previously worked as farmers, domestic helpers, factory workers, and volunteer midwives. At best, they were substitute teachers, unable to find permanent positions because they failed in the teachers' board examination. While a number of them have college degrees, they did not have permanent jobs in the Philippines; one college degree holder even became a domestic worker in the Philippines. Given the lack of opportunities in the Philippines, these women considered Singapore a much better option than remaining in their home country.

Besides Singapore's low-grade employment package relative to countries of comparable economic standing, perception about the authoritarian nature of Singapore may be a turn off to many Filipinos. The Flor Contemplacion saga in the mid-90s not only caught national attention but strained the relations between Singapore and the Philippines (Yeoh, et al. 1999). It also instilled in Filipina domestic workers a negative impression of Singapore as a destination country (Asiaweek 1995; Human Rights Solidarity 1995). Keeping this collective memory alive in the Filipino consciousness, the Flor Contemplacion discourse was resurrected recently, this time in the name of Guen Aguilar who was convicted for the gruesome killing and subsequent dismembering of another Filipina (OFW-Balita 2005). Flor's and Guen's stories are not isolated events; mass media continuously depict foreign domestic workers' deviation from the highly disciplined populace. Several stories report about domestic workers' involvement in the deaths of their employers and wards (for example, see *The China Post* 28 November 2007; *The Straits Times* 10 January 2008). Additionally, the Human Rights Watch (2005) has documented 147 foreign domestic workers who died due to workplace accidents and suicide, between 1999 and 2005. In 2004 alone, 26 Indonesian domestic workers died as a result of falling from apartment buildings, suicide, train crashes, and drug abuse. According to the Human Rights Watch (2005), "[t]here is no single reason why domestic workers resort to suicide, but [their] research... suggests that many women are made despondent by poor working conditions, anxiety about debts owed to employment agencies, social isolation, and prolonged confinement indoors, sometimes for weeks at a time."

On the brighter side of labour migration in Singapore, mass media have captured stories regarding awards given to domestic workers for their loyalty towards their employing households. For example, 56-year old Lucy was one of the recipients of a long-service award for having worked in Singapore for 37 years (Transient Workers Count Too 2005). Although the media discourse weighs heavily on the burdens of migrant workers in Singapore, development news is also covered to highlight the realities of success and failure. In what follows, I will provide a dramaturgical context of the varying experiences of Filipinas in their paradoxical global households.

PERFORMANCES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

Performance, as Goffman (1959: 22) puts it, is "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers." It may be real or contrived, in which real performances are sincere and unrehearsed, whereas contrived performances are false (Goffman 1959). Without situating time in the centre of his analysis, Goffman (1959: 20) alluded to its influence on individuals' performances in the following case:

For the last four or five years the island's tourist hotel has been owned and operated by a married couple of crofter origins. From the beginning, the owners were forced to set aside their own conceptions as to how life ought to be led, displaying in the hotel a full round of middle-class services and amenities. Lately, however, it appears that the managers have become less cynical about the performance that they stage; they themselves are becoming middle class and more and more enamored of the selves their clients impute to them.

The above situation is one of his examples on how time conditions individuals in the performances that they play. The beginning of performance, as Goffman (1959) showed, is often characterised by cynicism, whereas the latter, by sincerity. A neophyte performer tends to engage in contrived performances, thus frequently slipping into what he calls "performance disruptions," such as unmeant gestures, slips of the tongue, and inopportune intrusions. In time, as shown in the case of the married couple running the island's tourist hotel, individuals become sincere and engage in real performances; they become their performance. In looking at time, Henri Bergson (1910; in Urry 2000: 420) distinguished between "temps" and "durée," in which temps is "the sense of time as quantitative and divisible into spatial units" and durée is lived duration, time proper, or the time of becoming. In the above example, durée explains the couple's transformation from merely performing to becoming.

No successful performances are achieved overnight; rather, mastery is acquired through repetitive presentations. Applying Goffman's (1959) concepts and the various empirical findings on domestic workers' performances, I offer a time-performance continuum loop (see Figure 1) to provide a context from which we can explain variations in the performances of Filipina domestics towards their sending and receiving households. The model delineates the different performances of domestic workers through time, which contextualises varying dramatic conditions and dispositions for Filipinas.

Insert Figure 1 somewhere here

I refer to "dramatic conditions" as external circumstances affecting the lives of transmigrants in relation to labour migration. Initially, these involve the first, second, and fourth phases of Turner's (1975) social drama, i.e., the breach, the crisis, and the reintegration, respectively. Dramatic conditions include displacements from ones' homes and settlements into new ones, and disruption from daily patterns of life to reestablishment of order. In their first two years in Singapore, equivalent to one contract cycle, Filipinas face the impacts of major disruption of their everyday lives. Such disruption includes separation from their social networks; alteration of daily activities, food intake, sleeping pattern, language, and social interaction; curtailment of freedom related to speech, time, space, and to a certain extent, ownership of personal properties such as mobile phones and walkman.⁵ In addition, their sexuality is regulated, bodies are subjected to bi-annual medical surveillance for pregnancy and STDs (see also Devasahayam 2006). They are financially insecure as they pay agent fees equivalent to six or seven months of their salaries, thereby receiving only S\$20 as monthly allowance to cover

their personal needs. Full salaries for the remaining months pay off previous migration-related debts incurred. In other words, conditions in the first two years in Singapore put the migrant workers in highly vulnerable conditions in many facets of their lives: psycho-emotional, financial, and moral aspects. In the long term, however, dramatic condition is highlighted by social integration, as these transmigrant workers have adapted to their routines, achieved linguistic proficiency in Singlish, and negotiated for better working conditions and wages.⁶ They may also have created emotional bonds with their employing families.

Whereas dramatic conditions are external forces, dispositions are internal dynamics in response to the dramatic conditions. In the beginning of their overseas domestic work, Filipinas' dispositions are affected by the sudden disruption of life patterns, causing them to experience separation anxiety towards their left-behind families and culture shock associated with homesickness. Along with culture shock, the migrant workers confront other contradictory realities related to uprooting from their homes and transferring into strange households where they care not for their own homes and children but others'. Surpassing this stage requires agency at the cognitive and behavioral aspects, what Turner (1975) calls redressive action, to mitigate the crisis. As much of agency work rests in the mind, emotional toughness is a necessary trait of a migrant, as most of my informants suggested. While money is a requirement to find work abroad, more important, they say, is the migrants' character. Emotional toughness and determination are two traits deemed crucial in migration, especially for mothers who must leave their infants behind. My own sister-in-law who left her eight-month-old to work in the Middle East returned after three weeks, unable to cope with family separation and her new role as a domestic worker. Her family, who was already in debt for sending her to the Middle East, had to borrow some more money to get her back.

My informants see the importance of toughness as a necessary trait to survive the uncertainties in their sojourn. They call it "*panimpalad*" in Cebuano and "*pakikipagsapalaran*" in Tagalog; both terms refer to finding luck or destiny in other countries. *Pakikipagsapalaran* is what constituted most of my informants' mindsets when they moved to Singapore, despite knowing the hard-line stance of its government in maintaining discipline in its populace. Somehow, *pakikipagsapalaran* became an easier choice, being the only alternative for many of them, as they indicate that they have "nothing" in the Philippines in the first place. "*Kapit sa Patalim*," which literally means to grasp the knife, is a domestic worker's description of her journey to Singapore a few months after the hanging of Flor Contemplacion in 1995. This Tagalog expression connotes a "final recourse in the face of extreme desperation" (Macabenta 2006). Indeed, desperation drives many of these women to Singapore; most of them are desperate to find employment to support their families, while a few are desperate to escape from unhappy families. Pauline Barber (2000: 403) noted a similar disposition, the "*bahala na*" or "come what may" attitude among Filipino migrants in Canada, suggesting on the one hand, that this cultural idiom displays fatalism, and on the other, agency.

However, dispositions do change over time. On the other side of the continuum of dispositions are those of the long-time domestics in Singapore. This group has gone past the stage of disequilibrium. For years, they have mastered their redefined identities vis-à-vis their co-residential and sending kinship global households, and have integrated into the new identities they have created for themselves. As far as disposition is concerned, I see them as

calm and settled although during the interviews, several broke down in tears as they relived past ordeals through their storytelling.

After discussing the dramatic conditions and dispositions as being constituted in time, I now focus on the influence of time in Filipina domestics' performances. I argue that because of the kinds of dramatic conditions and dispositions they are in, Filipina domestics' performances in both global households tend to be contrived and slip-laden in the earlier part of their labour migration, whereas the latter years tend to be real and characterised with mastery, if not sincerity. Depending on the intensity of dramatic conditions in the latter years, Filipina domestics may revert into contrived performances and slips, although they are expected to achieve mastery faster this time as they have already gone through the loop.

NEOPHYTE DOMESTICS AND CONTRIVED PERFORMANCES

Contrived performances are often called for in one's job to protect tenure or avoid scolding. Lies, a contrived performance, are part of domestic workers' everyday performances even before they commence their employment, to foster the impression that they possess the ideal qualifications that employers seek. To accomplish this, they conceal undesirable information from their bio-data, such as age, marital status, and housework and childcare experiences. Also hidden are objectionable habits and relationships such as smoking, and existence of boyfriend or children when they have never been married.

Priscilla Bondoc is an old-time domestic worker in Singapore, but presents herself (by way of lying) as a neophyte to obtain accommodations from her employers who tend to be more emphatic to newcomers. Based on her extensive experience with employers, Priscilla believes that Singaporeans prefer "fresh maids" to experienced ones, because the former are more open to learning and are untainted by the bad influences of long-time domestics, known to have a bag full of tricks against their employers and to be aware of their rights. Unlike the Filipina domestics who play stupid to elevate their Hong Kong employers' status (Constable 1997), Priscilla plays "stupid" to outsmart her employer. In performing the neophyte image that she projects, she allowed her madam to teach her things she already knew and acquiesced to her madam's instruction about dressing "like a maid," by wearing the cheap white T-shirts and knee-length shorts bought for her. In addition, she accepted without question the S\$320 monthly wage offered to her, and agreed to her employer's no-day-off policy which is unacceptable to experienced Filipina domestic workers. Priscilla told me confidently, however, that in six months, she would obtain a day off and more concessions from her employer; she did not tell me how but she was working on a plan. While Priscilla may have a convincing performance with her madam, experienced Singapore employers are cautious about domestic workers who "play stupid," as they suspect a contrived performance. Having seemed to have employed the likes of Priscilla, many employers in the online forum warn that maids play stupid to accomplish as little work as possible and obtain material and social concessions, such as free toiletries, sympathy, and low expectations from employers.

By playing on the impression they foster, domestic workers pay the consequences. Fatima Chaves had previously worked in Singapore for four years, where she became pregnant and returned to the Philippines to deliver her baby. Four years later, she went back to Singapore and introduced herself as a single woman without any children, as she feared the label of a

“loose woman” Singapore employers attribute to unwed mothers. Consequently, she hid motherly issues from her employers. When her son needed hospitalisation, Fatima formulated another lie to justify her need for a cash advance. Even as she avoided lengthy discussions with her employer to keep her lie intact, she fell into performance disruptions as her employers commented that she was not behaving like a typical “single” woman who buys clothes and cosmetics on their off days. Fatima kept herself simple and saved her earnings for her son’s education. To keep her lie, she would tell her employers that she was providing financial support to her parents. Like Fatima, Priscilla inadvertently slipped into a performance disruption through inadvertent displays of her familiarity with Chinese cooking. Her employer, however, did not sound suspicious, and only showed appreciation that she cooked well.

Experienced employers are aware of their domestic workers’ general tendency to lie; therefore, information coming from their domestics is dealt with suspiciously. This is the reason why employers in the online discussion forum admit to checking their servants’ belongings behind their backs and installing surveillance cameras in the house/flat, to catch the domestics’ “backstage” (Goffman 1959) activities. In Goffman’s (1959: 44) terms, these checks enable employers to distinguish “discrepancy between appearances and actual activity.”

Lies and deceptions are also extended to sending families. Nora Acosta, whom I met in an afternoon disco, wanted to meet a casual partner. When she asked for my help in introducing her to an attractive male standing a few metres from us, I began to ask for more details about her, including her marital status. While she admitted loving her husband, she clarified that she felt lonely and wanted an intimate partner. A few minutes later, she left the disco with another male; her female companion commented that Nora would have a “quickie” as she did the previous week. With the exception of Nora, all other informants indicated being faithful to their husbands, despite the latter’s extra-marital affairs. Husbands pretend to be faithful too, but family members notice their slips when they wear perfume, spend too long in front of a mirror, and leave undeleted text messages of their girlfriends in their mobile phones, open to the prying eyes of the overseas workers’ children and siblings.

Deference, “a ceremonial activity that symbolically functions to convey one’s appreciation or devotion to another person” (Goffman 1956) is frequently displayed by maids towards their employers. It involves “rituals of obeisance, submission, and propitiation that someone under authority gives to someone in authority” (Goffman 1956). “Rituals of deference,” as Judith Rollins calls it (1985), is a common contrived performance also employed by African American domestic workers towards their white employers. Less than two years into her current contract, my informant Nina Colmenares has already mastered the linguistic rituals of deference, but she remains cynical about her performance. She had previously worked in Singapore for seven years, and returned to the Philippines to mend a broken heart that lasted four years. Back in her servant role, she wants to go “home” for good, because she is tired of addressing her employers as “sir” and “ma’am,” and responding in the affirmative “yes, ma’am” and “yes, sir” as her way of acquiescing to her employers’ wishes, even as she neither understands nor agrees with her employers. A glamorous woman during her monthly off days, she dislikes dressing down and walking behind her employers when they all go out

on other days. She is saving enough money, to reopen her eatery that financially sustained her family when she temporarily quit as a domestic worker.

VETERAN DOMESTICS AND REAL PERFORMANCES

Unlike amateur domestics whose performances were laden with disruption and cynicism, veteran domestics, like the hotel owners in Goffman's (1959) example, engaged in real performances, displaying mastery and/or sincerity; they have become their performance. Through their extended absence from their sending families and presence in employing households, they became fixated on the "maid" role; the married became "transient wives," and the single, "old maids." To explain this further, I present the life stories of Monica, Maricel, and Lydia.

Monica Dungo worked as a midwife in the Philippines, but her husband's on-and-off employment and the growing educational expenses of her two children urged her to take the lead role in breadwinning as a domestic worker overseas. Her remittances have afforded the middle-class lifestyle of her family: a house, a passenger tricycle, and a private university for her children. By maintaining regular communication through overseas calls and "text" messages and by keeping them financially comfortable, she succeeded in maintaining good relations with her children. Her employer for eight years gave her a light workday, a comfortable room, a handsome wage of S\$950, and a weekly day off. The situations in her sending and receiving households would have been ideal, except with her husband's extra-marital affair, which resulted in a pregnancy and his mistress moving into their house. Upon learning the news from her own children, Monica confronted her husband by phone, where she engaged in a contrived performance of coolness. Deep inside, rage drove her to consider hiring an assassin, but common sense had overcome her and she dropped the idea. Instead, she punished her husband by selling the passenger tricycle and depriving him of her remittances, which she sent directly to her children. A year later, however, Monica had accepted their marital situation and realised that she still cared for her husband. Blaming her prolonged absence as the cause of her husband's affair, she made up with him, on the condition that his mistress would stay away from their house during her annual vacation leaves. In effect, Monica became a "transient wife," performing her conjugal role for two weeks every year. For the rest of the year, her husband's mistress replaced her, as she shifted into the role of a domestic worker. Up to the time of our interview, the extra-marital relationship continued, and the child and his mother lived in Monica's own household. Having forgiven her husband, she was settled with the husband-sharing arrangement. She said, "I guess, the saying is true that forgiveness brings peace. When I last went home, it felt like nothing tragic happened." The once contrived performance has turned into a real and sincere act, indicating acceptance of the situation.

Women's financial dominance in the family and prolonged absence from their homes has taken a toll on their marital relationships, as these patterns disrupt traditional gender ideology depicting men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Monica's case is not isolated, as many married informants talked about their husbands' extra-marital affairs. Forty-seven-year-old Maricel Jagualing had been in Singapore for 17 years, serving only one employer, a multi-millionaire real-estate magnate. Through years of proven loyal service, her wage rose from less than S\$300 to S\$1000 plus allowances. Four years into her overseas work, Maricel

returned to the Philippines for one month to marry her boyfriend. Since then, they would only see each other during her one-month annual vacations. Childless and physically separated from her spouse, Maricel rarely felt being married. To add on to this, her husband admitted to having an affair, which Maricel tolerated, as she had not been acting like a wife to him. She resigned herself by saying, “[i]t’s alright with me, as long as they do not let me catch them.” In contrast, she treated her employers’ three children who grew up under her care like her own. Proud like a mother, Maricel claimed that “her children” cared for her, while showing a white gold necklace with a diamond stone, which her “son” gave her. Due to her fondness for her employing family, Maricel had no plans of quitting her job yet, even as she no longer needed money, as she already has a house, several retirement plans, and savings, in addition to her husband’s earnings.

Lydia Ladia, 42 years old and single, had a lot in common with Maricel. She had one employer for 20 years. In the first two years of her work in Singapore, she thought she would not survive, but years passed swiftly and before she knew it, she turned 40, and realized that she had lost half her life, being servant and financier of her family needs. She had long stopped helping her parents as they had already passed away, but she still provided for her siblings’ emergency needs, which occurred too often, such as wedding, hospitalisation, and funeral.

Even as she had spent 20 years with them, Lydia remained antagonistic with her employers. “Chinese are different,” Lydia exclaimed, explaining that they were not generous to their workers; they only wanted to overwork them. Her pessimistic view was reflected in her monthly wage that remained at \$550 and her failure to secure a once-a-week day off, despite 20 years of service.⁷ She could not imagine how she survived living with them this long; she probably just got accustomed to living with them; they had adjusted with each other, and she did not want to risk knowing a new employer.

Although she wanted to return to the Philippines for good, the thought about reintegration difficulties stopped her from doing so. She was scared of running out of money and depending on a future husband, if she could still marry with her advanced age. Even as she had bought several retirement plans, she worried about failing to meet her family’s expectations. Her previous visits in the Philippines depleted her savings fast because of financial requests from friends and relatives. Keeping the status quo of remaining for a little longer in Singapore became a temporarily comforting decision as she was better equipped to handle the present situation rather than the unknown.

Maricel’s and Lydia’s cases show contrasting work conditions in their employing households, yet both lasted for 17 and 20 years, respectively. Lydia’s story unravels another reality that a worker does remain in the employing family despite a poor benefits package. By repeatedly performing the servant role for years “without realising it,” Lydia has successfully absorbed the domestic servant role, even as she was cynical about it during the interview. Indeed, confinement and performance of repetitive tasks shuts time off. Many long-time and never-been-married domestics have indicated that before they realised it, they have gone past their marriageable age.

CONCLUSION

Through the various stories of Filipina domestics, I have tried to demonstrate the drama in domestic workers' global households with the time-performance continuum loop. In this model, novice workers struggle with the disruptions of their everyday lives, whereas veteran domestics have reestablished order. Dispositions become more settled as redefined identities and roles are absorbed. Consequently, performances are mastered that they become real. With their sending global households, they have mastered the art of transnational mothering and homemaking through "time-space compression" (Harvey 1990) made available by cheaper information and communication technologies, shipping, and transportation. Similarly, their left-behind children have grown accustomed to their absence and in the process, have learned to stand on their own with the help of relatives and left-behind fathers. "Transnational wifing," however, has taken a less prominent importance in their performance, as many end up being part-time wives while they are full-time servants. Although hurt by their partners' extra-marital activities, Filipina domestics appear tolerant towards their partners. In the end, many accept being transient wives, performing their conjugal roles when they are with their spouses, and allowing the latter freedom to have other relationships in their absences. Those who are not yet aware of such activities of their partners have prepared themselves for the worst.

The presentation of transmigrants' relationships with sending and receiving global households captures the complexities and paradoxes of their relationships, and their struggle to keep or alter the status quo. Beyond the generally known phenomenon about individuals becoming their performance, is the implication of long-term overseas employment of women on their families of procreation or on their potential of building one. Due to confinement in their houses of employment and the state policy that lies contrary to their reproductive rights (i.e., prohibition from becoming pregnant), their chances of building intimacies are minimal. Marriage to a Singapore citizen is prohibited, and pregnancy is a ground for cancellation of their work permits and deportation to their home country. Likewise, married workers' prolonged absences from their sending households create marital trouble, even as children survive with reconfigured motherhood.

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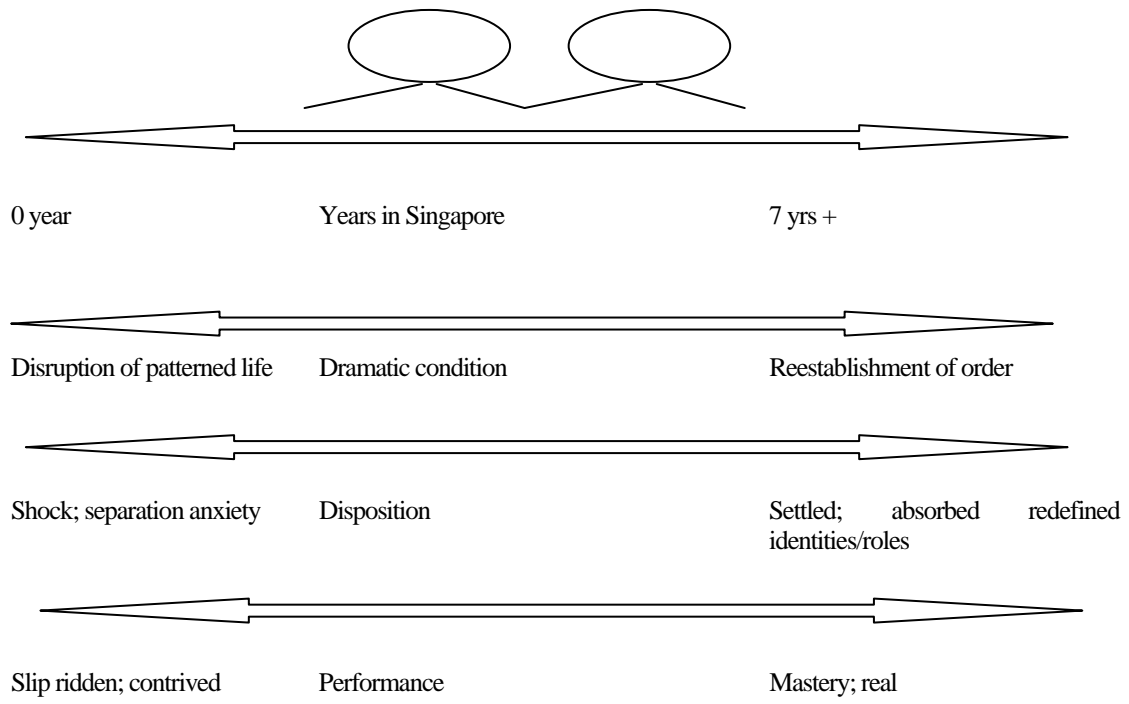
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FIGURE 1: THE TIME-PERFORMANCE CONTINUUM LOOP



NOTES

¹ Michael Douglass (2006) employs “global householding” to refer to one’s nurturing practices towards family members back home while being in another country. The term “householding” has been coined by Fernand Braudel Center’s household project, to refer to “the practices that compose this sharing [of obligations] and ensure continuity” (Friedman 1984: 46).

² Asis and others (2004) have looked into the dynamics that take place in the household of the sending family in the Philippines, while many (Rodriguez 1989, ; Yeoh and Huang 2000) have explored the social conditions of labor migrant workers in the receiving households.

³ This is based on the online discussion among Singapore employers.

⁴ Hong Kong and Taiwan offer a minimum monthly wage of USD435 and USD487 to their foreign domestic workers, respectively, while Singapore pays a meager USD231.

⁵ Employers reveal in the online forum that they prohibit their domestic workers from having a cellular phone and walkman inside their house or flats because of the destructive effects of these apparatus on their employees’ work.

⁶ Wikipedia describes Singlish as “an English-based creole language native to Singapore,” with influences from Indian English, Baba Malay, and Chinese.

⁷ She is given an off day twice a month.