

INTRODUCTION

Discourse, Gender, Migration

On the OFW: the Material and the Discursive

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OVERSEAS LABOR MIGRATION HAS BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF MANY FILIPINO LIVES since the 1990s. Newspapers have headlined the different kinds of fate many of them ended up with. As successes and some level of social mobility come to some, for some others, the experience of living overseas for work, of having transnational households, has not yielded the expected good, even if the good and the bad do not always come in clear solid colors. At the heart of measuring the good and bad, the social costs and the costs to the members of the families continue to be an important societal issue.

This volume of the *RWS*, with an issue title of “Discourse, Gender and Migration,” puts together an interesting exhaustive academic discussion on this particular matter, developing analysis from the narrative mode in doing so. On the one hand, the essays focus on the individual narratives of labor migrants, allowing their voices and perspectives to be part of the discussion; on the other hand, the featured articles also examine the narratives *of* and *about* OFW migration thus far: how have the various stakeholders, e.g., the migrants, government, media and the academe, understood and explained the phenomenon thus far? Such a line of inquiry is important because discourse has concrete effects on our lives. The effects of discourse, or the relations between discourse and reality, are often taken for granted because it is easy enough to say that discourse “*is just words*” or, in Filipino, “*salita lamang, usapan, o*

usap-usapan” because words are not tangible. But words, within any language system, serve to bring about a critical human experience: the apprehension and comprehension of social reality. We see and understand the things and events around us through language. The way we understand ourselves, and the way we relate to one another, is also mediated by language or discourse. Language and its discursive system, which is constructed socially, in turn, shapes reality. In this context then, how we conceive of, understand, and explain the experience of contemporary overseas labor migration have a critical bearing on our very experience and on the reality of what overseas labor migration is for us, as Filipinos. For one, being an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) is being a hero, for family and nation. This is the discourse; it has also become our social reality.

That this volume opens with a short story about a migrant’s life does not suggest that this issue and its narrative is fictional or imagined; instead, it is a testament to the pervasiveness of the experience in our daily lives that the experience of overseas labor migration continues to be an artistic concern as well. It also illustrates that the migration experience is part of the story of our lives.

The opening narrative, the short story, “A Living Will”, by Rosario Cruz-Lucero traces a migrant’s life experience to the earlier wave of Philippine overseas labor migration to the plantations of Hawai’i and to human frailties and regrets. Focused on the love story of an elderly couple, who were reunited by the efforts of a nurse, “A Living Will” commemorates the centennials of migrant labor in the Hawai’i plantations and the forced exile of lepers to Cullon Island under the American public health system in the 1920s. The story covers the topics of the overseas contract work (OCW) phenomenon, the mushrooming of nursing homes, and the emotional penance that elderly people carry in their psyche after having lived a life of choices.

The second article featured is a personal narrative *cum* artistic rendering through a painting of a concept of ‘being an OFW’. This painting, titled “Margie, OFW” by Esther S. Garcia, also serves as this issue’s cover artwork.

The third article is a comprehensive close examination of the news reporting on two Filipino women victims of homicide

in Australia and the implications and (mis)representations these narratives have constructed about the victims, in particular, and Filipino women in Australia, in general. “The Absent and Silenced Voice in Newspaper Representations of Filipina Victims of Homicide in Australia” by Nicki Saroca explores the absent and silenced voice in Australian newspapers through case studies of two Filipino women victims of homicide in Australia. It uses feminist discourse analysis of newspaper articles to explore how violence against the women was represented in media discourse. The author illustrates how the newspaper discourses of the women as ‘mail order bride’ and exotic sex objects and predatory gold-diggers constitute a racial and sexual “othering” of the women. Saroca employs interviews of the women’s families and friends to counter the newspaper accounts, as she recognizes the importance of the interviews as media that could also represent, and thereby, counter the newspaper accounts. Accordingly, “analyzing the newspaper images in light of the interviews provides an entirely different, more accurate and just reconstruction of the women’s lives.” Saroca underscores how the women’s—Nenita and Marylou—families and friends address the absence and silencing of the two women in the newspaper accounts.

The next set of articles is a sociological-legal examination of the effects of migration on the family and family relations. Designed as a research cluster, these essays are important interventions in the continuing discussions on migration, overseas labor migration, and the family. “The Angara Lectures of the Family and Welfare Cluster: Focus on Migration” is comprised of three essays that cover three approaches to the issue of the effects of migration on the Filipino family and welfare. The first essay by Grace Gorospe Jamon takes an empirical look at the effects of migration on family relations using focused group discussions and individual interviews. It examines the circumstances and complexities of the life of the family members left behind to analyze the social impact of the increase in female OFWs on the family. It describes, and explores potential issues, about family separation and its effect on parental authority and marital relations, economic status and social mobility of family members, and the reproductive health and rights of the spouses. The life narratives in this study include those of children left behind and of fathers who

ended up being sole parents for long periods of time in the absence of mothers.

The second essay in the cluster, that of Carolina S. Ruiz Austria's, is a preliminary inquiry into the policies for the welfare of Filipino migrant workers' families. Focusing on the policies on temporary migration, Ruiz Austria asserts that doing policy analysis on the welfare of migrants' families necessarily needs to consider how these studies "actively contribute to shaping discourse and framing which claims are legitimate or important."

And lastly, "(Dys)functional Studies: The Need for a Power Analysis of the Family in Migration Research" by Sylvia Estrada-Claudio argues for the introduction of the analysis of sexuality into migration research, "especially as blindness to the underlying assumptions on sexuality tends to structure research findings and policy prescriptions regarding welfare and the family." Estrada-Claudio focuses on the effects of unproblematized assumptions of patriarchal and heteronormative family structures and their dynamics in overseas labor migration research, which results "in lost opportunities for crafting better policies and programs that would lead to adequate social protection." Because of the 'feminization' of migration, especially in the country, Estrada-Claudio further asserts, "these two effects of the unproblematic assumptions of heteronormative and patriarchal family structures and dynamics" have the added consequence of failing to provide an adequate understanding of the realities of migrant workers, on top of these assumptions, "reinforcing women's oppression across the board."