

Introduction¹

Diasporic Encounters, Sacred Journeys: Ritual, Normativity and the Religious Imagination among International Asian Migrant Women*

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This volume draws together recent ethnographic research that challenge conventional assumptions about Asian women's international migration. Whereas the dominant scholarly narrative construes these female migrants as hyper-exploited and compliant workers, we focus on the way migrants challenge their abjection in the alternative spaces they create and in which they live richly complex religious and social lives. Although shaped and constrained by the migration context, overseas female migrants, we argue, nevertheless create alternative worlds of fun, piety and rights activism. Their social lives are not solely structured by marginality, nor are their salient relations exclusively transnational. Rather, in their diasporic encounters, migrants creatively engage with the places and landscapes where they live and labour, sharing conviviality with others like themselves through ritual performance, pilgrimage journeys, mobilisation for rights, religious worship and new intimate relationships. The articles assembled here bear witness to this expansive sociality by disclosing how ritual performances, pious practices and transgressive acts in the diaspora engender novel forms of belonging, enable collective action and defy persistent stereotypes of docile bodies.

Christian Filipinos colonise space dancing through the streets of New Zealand's cities with their sacred icons, lovingly imported from home (Josefina Tondo). Their compatriots in Israel craft new selves through embodied encounters with the divine in pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land (Claudia Liebelt). Buddhist Sri Lankan women undertake ritual vows at Catholic shrines in sacred places in Jordan (Elizabeth Frantz). South Asian women in Kuwait embark on new spiritual journeys, converting from Hinduism and Christianity to Islam as the ambience of daily devotional practices is reflexively embraced (Attiya Ahmad). Indonesian and Filipino women in Hong Kong who choose religious conversion renegotiate connections to home while they collectively press for greater rights abroad and expand their cosmopolitan

¹ This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology Volume 11 (3-4): 205-218

horizons through labour activism (Nicole Constable). New Muslim Filipinas in Saudi Arabia grapple with the ethics and morality of second marriages and intimate relations while following the path of the Prophet and juggling commitments to their transnational families (Alicia Pingol). Sri Lankan women migrants in Lebanon pursue erotic adventures as gender outlaws beyond the normalising constraints of state, religious and other international institutions (Monica Smith). Siblings in the 'virtual village' that stretches from Mountain Province in the Philippines to Hong Kong and beyond contest the morality of traditional ritual sacrifice, with religious differences threatening to rupture transnational family relations (Deirdre McKay). In Paris, Filipino women reanimate the church as a sacred centre in a secular Parisian cityscape (Ascuncion Fresnoza-Flot), while in the central Coptic church in Cairo migrant women of different faith backgrounds migrating into Egypt from Africa and Asia form ecumenical congregations that provide mutual succour and support (Amira Ahmed). Professionals in Singapore and Saudi Arabia consolidate their middle class status as they confront the global image of Filipinos as a 'nation of servants', while affirming the moral superiority of their religious, class and national identifications as Christian and Muslim Filipinos respectively (Megha Amrith and Mark Johnson).

Our starting point for this volume, then, is an insistence on the enabling as well as constraining force of religion on migrants' imaginative creativity as they explore new social and aesthetic horizons opened up by the migration process (Johnson 1997, 1998, Werbner 1999, 2002a, 2010). The transformations they experience in their new places of work and settlement are, simultaneously, cognitive, intellectual, performative, embodied and material. To disclose these transformations we explore several related questions: how do migrants inscribe their presence symbolically on their new environment in order to build home and homeliness abroad? How do they forge new relationships with each other? How do they create Filipino, Sri Lankan, Indonesian or pan-Asian spaces in an alien environment? And how, in doing so, do they reshape their subjectivities spiritually and ethically? More broadly, how does the place of settlement enable Asian international migrant women to reposition themselves, not merely as subjugated servants but as agents of their own destiny, pilgrims and cosmopolitan adventurers on a spiritual journey?

To answer these questions we interrogate three key processes that have remained relatively ignored or under-theorised in research and writing on female Asian international migration - of diaspora formation, embodied ritual performance and changing normativities. A focus on diaspora encourages us to move beyond a political and economic analysis of women's transnational (re)productive labours to consider their cultural practices and the

continuities and discontinuities in their relationships with the people and places they travel to and with those left behind. A focus on ritual emphasises the significance of religious performance in the making of place and convivial sociality. A focus on normativity foregrounds the moral and ethical considerations and dilemmas that shape people's affective relationships as these are performatively reworked and transgressed within and across discrepant diasporic spaces.

International Inequalities, Diasporic Journeys

The stress on inequality and exploitation in most studies of post-1970s female international migration has been a salient feature of this literature in general and of research and writing on Asian migrant women working in transnational care and domestic labour in particular. Within that literature international women migrant domestic or service workers and carers are situated within unequal flows of people and resources. These highlight the new structures of economic dependency that enable more powerful and affluent countries to exploit a feminised migrant workforce from less powerful ones dependant on cash remittances (Anderson 2000, Constable 2007; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Faier 2009; Gamburd 2000; 2002; Parreñas 2001, 2008; Pertierra 1992; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005; Tyner 2004; Weekley 2004). One key hurdle that migrants in many countries face is the denial of naturalisation and citizenship rights (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997, Ball and Piper 2006). Some observers describe the predicaments they encounter in some places as tantamount, in extreme cases, to a form of modern-day slavery, with women confined to their employers' homes, their passports confiscated, their weekly and annual leave denied and their work hours extended around the clock (Degorge 2006, Human Rights Watch 2008).

Paradoxically, however, despite the generally poor conditions of labour and their apparent social exclusion and marginality, many migrants live for long periods in host societies and repeatedly embark on journeys abroad, either returning to the same place or - just as often - to another place, always 'moving on and on' (Liebelt 2008). Poverty and deprivation are, at best, it would seem, partial explanations of this movement, since it is not primarily the most impoverished or uneducated women who seek work outside of their country of origin; hence the need to move beyond a conceptual framework that treats women international migrants simply as a victimised 'labour' diaspora. To speak as we do here of diasporic journeys moves the conversation forward in new directions.

First, it challenges the implicit assumption that migrant women's sociality is entirely transnational in focus and that migrants are singularly transmigrants, whose work and life is

focused on an absent home, family and community left behind. It is as though, in arriving singly and not settling in immigrant ghettos as did generations of (mostly male) international migrants in the past, research on female labour migrants takes for granted their lack of a clear sense of place, self and sociality in their daily lives. We build on recent scholarship (Constable 2008, 2009a; McKay 2005; McKay and Gibson 2005) that goes beyond the study of individual migrants to attend to Asian women's sociality and community building capacity in diaspora; their expanding rights and religious associations, evolving ritual practices, new friendships, changing normativities and the new convivial spaces carved out in the migration context.

Second, the notion of diasporic journeys takes seriously the *cultural practices* of international migrant women, practices that are too often seen as secondary or simply derivative of their subordinate economic status and marginal social position. It foregrounds the rich and varied relationships that migrants individually and collectively develop to their places of work and the creative imagination that links these new places to a sacred past or homeland metonymically, through ritual performance and material objects, and allegorically, by narrativising actors' place in the world. No doubt many migrants, including those described here, experience a sense of dispossession and placelessness at times (Parreñas 2008: 98 *passim*, Barber 2002). What the papers in this volume demonstrate, however, is that migrant women's movements and engagements with the people and places they live in, no less than those they have left behind, are far more extensive and varied than can be accounted for by sociological push pull factors alone. Transnational migrants transplant, re-evaluate and naturalise cultural categories because as a medium of social interaction culture confers agency within a field of sociality and power relations (Werbner 2010).

Third, diasporic journeys call into question the notion that transnational social fields are continuous and uninterrupted, without boundaries or ruptures (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Portes et al 1999). Despite the immediacy and simultaneity of hi-tech modes of communication such as email, skype and text messaging, ruptures are inevitably produced by long separations and the forging of local socialities. These need to be managed ethically and subjectively. It is true that cultural institutions produced in different countries across the diaspora often follow predictable patterns - the creation of weekend points of assembly (as in Hong Kong or Tel Aviv), processions or fiestas in city spaces (as in New Zealand or Malaysia), the efflorescence of places of worship or rights associations often linked to the home country – are all examples of charodic transnationalism (Werbner 2002) that inscribe migrants' presence symbolically and materially without any apparent central command

structure. Despite being un-orchestrated and situated in discontinuous social locales, such institutions are nonetheless ordered in ways that mobilise migrants around shared and contested diasporic predicaments and imagineries. The other side of this is that migration opens up new horizons and possibilities for migrants wherever they journey, and these come to be embodied materially, performatively and spiritually in the place of settlement. Hence, if religion, family and politics are actively extended by migrants across the transnational social field, this does not imply that the field extends homogeneously and unproblematically. Instead, new relationships forged in the place of settlement mediate prior relations within and across space with those left behind.

Ritual Performance and Practice

Religion figures prominently in the lives of many international migrant women. It is often central to their home cultures as the many anthropological studies of peoples and cultures across Asia routinely and repeatedly demonstrate. Religion is also a key feature of diasporans, who organise themselves in congregations, sacralise their new homes and appropriate the streets of their new cities through ritual and religious performance (for a review, see Werbner 2010). Given the pervasive centrality of religion in the formation of diasporas, it is surprising that previous literature has made only passing remarks or oblique references to religious affiliation and observance and even less to the ritual practices of Asian international migrant women (but see Liebelt, forthcoming). Our contributors go some way to correcting this bias by focusing respectively on ritual practice, pilgrimage and conversion, on the one hand, and on specific institutional places and congregational spaces on the other.

It is important to move away from the simplistic view of ritual as an identity flag or symbol. Ritual translocation into the diaspora is not simply about ethnic boundary making processes. Rather, ritual as embodied practice ritual effects cultural renewal and innovation, produces inversions of gender and generational authority, reconciles past with present and reconstitutes a sense of home and personal integrity in the face of rupture and disintegration. Thus Tondo argues that the Santo Nino fiesta imported from lowlands Philippines transforms new space into diasporic 'home'. In dancing through the streets of Auckland and other cities in front of the imported icons of the *Santo Niño* and the Blessed Virgin Mary, migrants inscribe a tangible connection across space to home and family, at the same time transcending religion as private practice to assert a collective identity and public presence in New Zealand's multicultural nation. Writing on Israel, Liebelt shows the creative fusion of pilgrimage, tourism and migration achieved by migrants in their transnational journeys.

Filipina pilgrimages to holy and devotional sites in the Holy Land, she argues, sacralise the humdrum and sometimes degrading realities of their work and residences and enable them to transcend through performance the 'migrant' label assigned to them by contemporary migration regimes. In Jordan Buddhist Sri Lankan women migrants go on pilgrimage to Christian sites and attend Christian churches, but this, Frantz argues, is not a case of 'Buddhism transformed'. Rather, it is a further instance of Buddhism's personalised and pluralist approach to the divine that enables ways of connecting with a local social geography while privately renewing migrant women's existential sense of connection to people and places at home.

As with ritual, migration and religious conversion is a theme that has rarely been explored in relation to international migrant women except in terms of the broader migrant move in the diaspora from established to Pentecostal or charismatic churches within Christianity (Haar 1999; Yang and Ebaugh 2001; Wang and Yang 2006) or from traditional to more globalised forms of Islam (Roy 2004). The other, more recent focus has been on conversion among migrant women in the Middle East. In this volume Ahmad suggests that this mass movement of conversion has been generally construed as another example of migrants' subordination in situations of extreme inequality and domination. By contrast, the Nepalese and South Indian domestic workers in Kuwait that she encountered experience becoming Muslim not as a radical break from their previous practices and relationships, but as a reworking of these over time, in an analysis that foregrounds the importance of households as sites generative of transnational religious subjectivities and movements. Through the narratives of four different migrant women labour activists in Hong Kong with different national religious backgrounds, Constable shows how religious conversion can be a vehicle through which migrants critically examine their lives and life choices, reconsider familial and gender expectations, reformulate pasts, re-envision futures, and in the process expand their cosmopolitan horizons as labour activists.¹ Also in Hong Kong, McKay shows how the changing or strengthening of religious affiliation to a new church potentially disrupts long-distance kinship obligations. McKay suggests, however, that one sibling's refusal to provide a sacrificial pig to placate ancestral spirits at home was less a repudiation of pagan traditions and customary belief than a translation of the logics of exchange that bind people and things together through the prism of new modes of reaching the divine (see also McKay forthcoming).

Churches are evidently central to international migrants' experience in many countries. In the Middle East their role is particularly salient in providing a haven for

incoming migrants of different religious backgrounds, not only Christians but Buddhists and Muslims as well, as Frantz, Smith and Amira Ahmed show for Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Migrants have also demonstrably been central to the renewed social and cultural presence of the church. In Paris as in Cairo, Fresnoza-Flot demonstrates in her study among Filipinos in the Île-de-France, the church functions simultaneously as a house of worship, physical refuge, employment agency and commercial centre for exchange of goods and services. It is migrant women who are central to expanding church membership and revitalizing the work of the laity. But the church's supportive role often comes along with a normative discourse on appropriate sexual behaviour, both directly, in its formal teachings, as Smith highlights, and indirectly, as Fresnoza-Flot and Ahmed show, as a channel for gossip in which stories told among congregants in one location are relayed and conveyed to others across the world (see also Chang and Groves 2000).

Normalising Discourses, Normativity, and Intimate Diasporic Practices

Normativity has both explicitly and implicitly figured in much of the previous writing about international migrant women. It features in three interrelated ways. The first is in relation to 'technologies of servitude' (Rudnyckyj 2004); that is, the disciplinary procedures of sending and receiving states, NGOs and recruitment agencies that produce compliant workers through the inculcation of the gender normative ideals of the good 'foreign'/'national' worker (Constable 2007, Parreñas 2001, Tyner 2004, Silvey 2004, S. McKay 2007, Faier 2009). The second, specifically in relation to care work, is in relation to the gender normative ideals that underpin the new international division of labour whereby migrant women expend not only physical but also emotional labour, in the sense originally spelled out by Hochschild (1983, Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). The third is in relation to intimacy in diasporic encounters, including the stigma and perceived vulnerabilities of migrant women to sexual exploitation (Manalansan 2006, Constable 2009b).

On the one hand, migrants are subject to a racialising discourse that naturalises women, and Asian women in particular, as uniquely suited to domestic and affective labour, a discourse that elides the mechanisms through which those workers are produced, and the skills and accomplishments that such work demands and that must be acquired. On the other hand, they are stigmatised because their chosen and enforced separations from their families do not conform to dominant ideals of femininity: lone migrant women in particular are held to be both vulnerable to abuse and predation, especially by alien men, and perceived to be a potential threat and danger both to the families that they serve and to those that they leave

behind. Demands for greater intervention on the part of states and others to address migrant women's perceived vulnerabilities and sexual conduct have often been the occasion for reinforcing essential connections between femininity and the family and soliciting further affective commitment to the norms and ethics of marital obligations and responsibilities, as Smith and Ahmed argue here (see also Bakan 1995; Constable 1997; Guevarra 2006; Piper 1997; Parreñas 2005; Silvey 2006).

Women's sexuality, religious normativity and proper moral conduct have long been a concern of colonial and post-colonial states and the political elites who worked within or against those states (Stoler 1995, McClintock 1995). In the Philippines, the young, elitist group of male anti-colonial revolutionaries, attacked both priestly sexual exploitation of local women and critiqued the promiscuity and sexuality of the Filipino and Spanish women themselves in the name of bourgeois morality that was at least partly shaped during their extended period of living in the diaspora in Europe. (Reyes 2008). Whereas that early nationalist movement's concern with female sexuality at home focused on images of their home country abroad, in the contemporary era of mass migration women's sexuality has figured centrally in the fear of both labour exporters and recipients, perceived as a threat to familial and national integrity, and among various international religious, voluntary and political institutions and activists, for whom the protection of migrant women has become a measure of universal morality and human rights.

All of the above provides a useful starting point for exploring the dilemmas that migrant women face. It is also attentive to the way that women resist their oppression through 'hidden transcripts', in different ways subverting the stereotypes and conventions that stigmatise their subordinate position. The overriding emphasis of many of these Foucault-inspired feminist critiques, however, has been on disciplinary procedures that produce compliance. Linked to the pessimistic evaluation of those normalising forces is a literature that examines its disruptive consequences for individual workers and their families, the men and children left behind and overseas wives and mothers who face the challenge of managing long-distance conjugal and maternal relations. Few scholars go beyond the allegedly pathological impact of women's international migration to probe the creative response of women and men as they confront and adapt prior normative assumptions about gender, conjugal roles, family and parenthood to their new circumstances (see especially Aguilar 2009; Pingol 2001; McKay 2007; Pratt 2009, Faier 2009).

While recognising what Parrenas (2008, see also Lan 2003) terms the 'Force of Domesticity' in producing and policing migrant women's lives, an exclusive focus on social

constraint neither adequately accounts for nor sufficiently explores women's creative agency within those processes, and the transformations that migrant women's practices entail and enable. That includes not only transformations in gendered and familial relations but also transgressive forms of erotic practice. As recent gender theorists and scholars of queer diaspora contend, we need a critical and nuanced way of theorising and talking about normativity. Butler (1992, 1995) has suggested that hegemonic discursive norms of gender and sexual comportment are established not by recourse to any outside law or power but through repeated reiteration in performative practice. Her work provides a way of thinking about the corporeal effects or *affects* of normativity as a set of embodied social practices (Rudnykyj and Richard 2009). Although the body might be construed as the site for the sedimentation of normative dispositions, Bourdieu's habitus, Butler suggests that there is always an inevitable normative instability precisely because norms are only ever provisionally acquired in repeated bodily performances. People's affective relations inevitably exceed, transgress and fail to achieve, and hence call into question, their idealised forms.

Thus, for example, Faier labels synergies between Filipina Catholic and Japanese ideals of normative femininity 'resonant patriarchies'. She suggests, however, that there is always an unbridged 'gap', an ambivalence in such diasporic encounters, in which 'boundary practices' are interpreted from differing perspectives (2009: 175, 184-85). Moreover, as scholars of queer diaspora remind us (e.g. Manalansan 2006, forthcoming; Gopinath 2005; for a recent review see Luibhéid 2008), migrant and diasporic peoples further challenge the terms by which people and acts are recognised and qualify as 'queer' and insubordinate.

Situated within and between different 'iterative field of performances' (Rouse 2002, p. 4) Asian overseas women migrants' practices compel us to interrogate the boundaries between putatively heteronormative and transgressive spaces and practice. As Monica Smith demonstrates, migrant women's sexual agency troubles the mono- and heteronormative assumptions and scripts of Christian international organisations which effectively exclude women they are meant to help because they are not, in Butler's terms, bodies that matter. On the other hand, as Alicia Pingol suggests, those women who do seek shelter and legitimacy through affective accommodation to Islamic dominant performative scripts ought not for that reason to be construed simply as manipulative or compliant subordinates: theirs is both a search for self coherence and intelligibility across distant and disparate worlds and a creative appropriation and reformulation of new ethical idioms in order to solicit the recognition and reciprocity they are often denied.

Not all Asian migrant women always and everywhere live on the margins, falling through the cracks while simultaneously servicing, subverting and holding onto the fantasy of middle class normalcy (see Berlant 2007). There are those who achieve that status in and through migration: Filipinos, for example, have been successful in carving out an international niche as skilled health care professionals in the USA, Saudi Arabia and Singapore (see Choy 2003, Ball 2004). Recognising this requires that we attend to the particular dilemmas, compliances, insubordinations and normative assertions that middle class achievements entail and enable. Nurses in Singapore, Megha Amrith discloses, affirm their professionalism and middle class status by setting themselves apart from unqualified carers who they identify as morally inferior. At the same time, care is construed by them as characteristic of an authentically Christian Filipino ethic that guides their affective relations with family, friends and patients. It is also naturalised as a distinguishing feature that marks Filipinos out as morally superior to the majority population of the host society. Similarly, middle class professional Filipino Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Johnson shows, take in and shelter irregular compatriots as guests and servants in their homes. This act of compassion and ethnic and national solidarity distinguishes them from their Saudi hosts while ironically, it cements their status through the acquisition of service labour.

Conclusion

The contributors to this volume position themselves, then, between two opposed trends in migration studies: a hopeful theorisation of transnational migration as opening the gateway to prosperity (see, for example, Portes et al 1999), and the reverse view that sees international migration as entirely exploitative and subjectifying, particularly so in the case of women (see, for example, Pettman 1996). Nor do we accept an analysis of caring work as solely an expression of submissive agency. In their different ways, all these previous approaches start from the individual migrant or aggregates of individuals, whereas our aim is to show how workers collectively shape historical, locational and communal processes. Like E.P. Thompson's analysis of the making of the English working class (1963), the women transnational workers depicted here make their own collective histories, albeit under circumstances not of their own choosing. In performing rituals and establishing places of worship or celebration in the diaspora, or in venturing out on pilgrimages, converting to an alternative religion or forming intimate relations and even marrying men of other ethnic groups, Asian women international migrant workers prove their emotional capacity to find

pleasure and joyfulness in strange lands, to inscribe their presence and open up cosmopolitan horizons of travel and experimentation.

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***Acknowledgements**

This volume is the culmination of a major two-and-a-half year research project led by the editors (Werbner, Principle Investigator, Johnson, Co-Investigator), entitled 'In the Footsteps of Jesus and the Prophet: Sociality, Caring and the Religious Imagination in the Filipino Diaspora' (see Johnson, Liebelt, McKay, Pingol and Werbner, 2010). The project was funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) UK, within the framework of the Diaspora, Migration and Identities Research Programme (grant ref. AH/E508790/1/APPID: 123592). The research team included Claudia Liebelt and Alicia Pingol as Research Assistants for two years, researching in Israel and Saudi Arabia respectively, and Deirdre McKay as Research Fellow for nine months. Claudia Liebelt co-convened and organised with Mark Johnson and Pnina Werbner the conference at Keele, UK, in June 2009, on 'Diasporic Encounters, Sacred Journeys: International Migration, Gender and the Religious Imagination', in which the papers collected here were first presented, funded in part by the British Academy. Mark Johnson and Alicia Pingol co-convened and organised the conference with the same title at the University of the Philippines in January 2010. Both conferences

expanded beyond the Filipino diaspora to include other Asian international migrant women, migrating to various destinations. We wish to thank the participants in the two conferences for their comments and the AHRC and the British Academy for their generous support. We would especially like to thank Professors Annelies Moors, Martin Manalansan IV and Raul Pertierra for their key note presentations at the Keele Conference and to Prof. Julkipli Wadi and Prof. Cynthia Zayas of the Institute of Islamic Studies and the Centre for International Studies who sponsored the workshop in Manila.

Endnotes

¹ On this process of expanding cosmopolitan horizons in the face of adversity among labour activists in Botswana see Werbner (2009).