

PERFORMING ELUSIVE HOMECOMINGS: MOBILITY, EMBODIMENT, AND DIASPORIC FILIPINO YOUTH

Martin F. Manalansan IV
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
manalans@illinois.edu

Abstract

The Filipino global diaspora has precipitated the circulation of embodied modes of identification and belonging. This paper focuses on the experiences of Filipino young people who were born and/or raised abroad, and who have returned to the Philippines to seek fame and economic mobility in the entertainment industry. These migrant hopefuls, unlike older counterparts, enact the material tensions and semantic contradictions that form part of popular discourse around life abroad. As such, institutional media practices and mass audience perceptions mirror such conditions and create shifting systems of valuation around such things as skin color, accent, and bodily comportment. To respond and conform to these demands, these migrant returnees refashion cultural citizenship by deploying performances of locality and authenticity with varying successes. Such corporeal revisions enable the displacement of attachments to and affinities for various expressions of home, citizenship, and selfhood. The main contention of this ethnographic and media study is that these experiences constitute what is being called an “aesthetics of mobility” where the shifts and travels of meanings and value inherent among this group return migrants are embodied in ways that unravel notions of class, gender, race and national belonging. The experiences of this youth group provide a distinctive narrative about the travails and travel of bodies and generations of modern Filipinos in the world.

Keywords

balikbayan, cultural citizenship, identity, performance studies, popular culture, return migration

About the author

Martin F. Manalansan IV is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Asian

American Studies and a Conrad Professorial Humanities Scholar at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He is an affiliate faculty in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies, the Global Studies Program and the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory. He is the author of *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke UP, 2003; Ateneo de Manila UP, 2006) which was awarded the Ruth Benedict Prize in 2003. He is editor/co-editor of several anthologies of essays. Presently, he is Social Science Review Editor for *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*. His current book projects include the ethical and embodied dimensions of the lives and struggles of undocumented queer immigrants, Asian American immigrant culinary cultures, sensory and affective dimensions of race and difference, and Filipino return migration.

MILLIONS OF FILIPINOS HAVE LEFT THE HOMELAND FOR WORK and presumably better futures abroad. Assuming such occupational role as domestics, entertainers, caretakers and construction workers of the world, Filipinos have become the paradigmatic global migrant. The Filipino diaspora, as an exemplar of the classical notion of Diaspora with a capital D,¹ is more often than not primarily understood in terms of leaving, emigration, dispersal, and departure of Filipinos from their homeland to various countries in the world. In this essay, I focus on an under-examined yet over-determined idea, process and meaning of Filipino diasporic return.

Diasporic homecoming or return to homeland is often portrayed as a romanticized endpoint, a moment characterized either as a sentimental discovery or nostalgic recovery of authenticity, a heroic and redemptive closure or an idealized final destination of all diasporic odysseys and linear migratory movements.² I argue that return is a complicated and situated process imbued with ambivalent and contradictory routes,³ meanings and practices that are embodied and enacted.⁴ Return migration therefore, is a performative arena where the tensions and contradictions about space, nationhood, gender, sex, class, and citizenship unfold and play out.⁵

This essay is part of an ongoing project on return migration to the Philippines. This project is a multi-year and multi-sited study of Filipino return migration which includes retirees, forcible repatriates, second/1.5 generation youth of Filipino parentage, economic repatriates, and returning OCWs or overseas contract workers. In this essay, I focus on 32 second and/or one point five generation children between the ages of 15 to 24 of Filipinos migrants overseas specifically the US, Canada, Europe and Australia – who were either born in these countries or migrated at an early age (on or before the age of 13). These young people are either employed or are attempting to be employed in the Philippine entertainment industry including print/television commercial, runway modeling, television, commercials, and film. Fifteen of these young people I interviewed are part of a talent school or training camp sponsored by ABS-CBN, one of the biggest entertainment conglomerates in the country. This school is not only a training venue but is also a feeder of talents to the conglomerate's extensive array of television, film and print ventures.⁶

There are various routes and motivations for these young people's entry into their ethnic homeland's entertainment industry. Some of these young people were recruited by talent scouts during their visits to the Philippines. Another group of young people were enticed to join the talent school during their involuntary "exile" to the Philippines. Such involuntary exiles are a result of Filipino diasporic parents' attempts to discipline recalcitrant or wayward youth, give them a traditional "moral upbringing" through Filipino values and distance them from "wild Western ways." These young people are typically made to stay several months if not years to either go to school and/or live with strict relatives who

have the time to watch over them more closely than their parents. Then, there are other young men and women who, through word of mouth from peers, family members and the diasporic media, have learned about the lucrative opportunities in the local entertainment industry that await young Filipinos who have lived abroad and have devised ways to come back to their ethnic homeland and try their luck. This last group of individuals made a conscious effort to embark on this specific journey to the Philippines to try their luck. Some of these young people have tried to break into the entertainment industry in various Western countries with very little success and see the Philippines as a sojourn or stepping stone on their way to mainstream success in the West. Still many others are seeking financial rewards and fame that would enable them to live comfortable lives either in the Philippines or eventually in their countries of birth/settlement.

The young people in my study represent a special kind diasporic returnee whose lives, words, and deeds mark a radical departure from the typical and popular notion of return migrant or “balikbayan” as they are typically called in the Philippines. The Philippine government established the *Balikbayan* program during the Marcos era to take advantage of the burgeoning Filipino global diaspora by creating a special program to boost travel and tourism and later on to invite capital investment in the country. Balikbayan is a compound word based on Tagalog words, balik and bayan which literally means “return” and “nation” respectively. The balikbayan program is not only a state-controlled and propelled program established to promote and encourage temporary/provisional and permanent return migration; it has also created an expansive cultural field of discourses that is transnational in nature and global in its range. In other words, the balikbayan program has become not only an economic booster and but more importantly, it has create a complex pool of meanings and ideas for configuring and shaping the ways in which transnational lives are imagined and established particularly in cultural texts such as films, some of which I will be analyzing below. I shall be using balikbayan and returnee interchangeably in this essay.

Despite the attempts of the Philippine state to create a generic balikbayan or returnee, return migrants in the Philippines and I daresay return migrants anywhere — are not a monolithic group. In fact, they represent conflicting images and evoke divergent reactions and meanings in the Philippines. The return migrant in both Philippine popular culture and imagination occupies both hallowed and despised locations. As heroes and heroines, these returnees are greeted as triumphant victors from their struggles “abroad.” Conversely, they can be represented as embodying various modes of failure or they are seen to be contaminated with cultural, moral and/or biological maladies contracted from living abroad. Whether heroines or villains, I suggest that each specific group of returnees grapples with particular issues and problems as they confront the paradoxes of defining self and belonging.

One ways in which to situate these struggles can be framed is through the

idea of cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship is one important node to frame and understand return migrants and the process of return migration in the Philippines. By cultural citizenship, I follow anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Renato Rosaldo who define the concept in terms of scripts of belonging and performance of cultural filiation. These scripts in turn become part of the cultural capital, the nexus or medium through which returnees' ties to and investments in the nation are valued, assessed and understood. In the case of the young people in this study, citizenship involves the narrating and performance of scripts around sexuality, class and race that pivot on the idea of transnational movement. I argue that that these young returnees' struggles for cultural citizenship are enfolded and to some extent disciplined into an aesthetics of mobility that focuses on the ambivalent and paradoxical meanings around bodies and culture particularly race, class, gender and sexuality. By aesthetics of mobility, I attend to the ways in which people negotiate values and meanings around race, class and sexual "travel" across borders and boundaries marked by such assignations as Filipino or non-Filipino, local and foreign, male or female, etc. By default, the returnee is seen as mobile, eminently equipped for travel and/or traversing across embodied sets of cultural semantics.

Being from abroad, these young people are first seen as cosmopolitans – privileged subjects, imbued with modern bodily and cultural dispositions such as English language skills, light or lightened skin color, liberal attitudes towards sex etc. These dispositions are constituted through discourses and representations of returnees' bodies regarding racial and other bodily transformations that are seen to be endemic among people who have lived abroad.

Recent migration literature have suggested that migrants from many Third World countries who go to the West find out that upon returning, their skin are often chided as having "lightened" or "whitened" and their bodies radically transformed. Some are seen to having gotten fat or fatter as a mark of prosperity and the ease of modern life in the west. Or they could be seen as being svelte, slim and sexy due to the preoccupation of the west with gyms, plastic surgery, and health. In other words, returnees' bodies are often the arenas through which national anxieties, desires, and cultural puzzles about migration and transnational life are worked out and performed.

The progeny of Filipinos abroad face specific and highly dramatic representations of themselves that hover around racial hybridity and corporeal cosmopolitanism that differ in degrees and fashion with the older return migrant. I argue that these young men and women are embodiments of an aesthetics of mobility brought about by global mass media and colonial legacies of the Philippine mestizaje complex or light-skinned racial hybridity as paragons of beauty and cosmopolitanism brought about by living abroad.

There has been a long standing discourse around the relationship between racial hybridity and class privilege in the Philippines as embodied in

the local “mestiso” ideology or mestizaje complex. However, the popularity of this conception is complicated by the existence of the progeny of American GIs and foreign tourists with Filipina women and the ways in which Chinese intermarriages also produce a particular kind of mestizo. Comparing local notions of the mestizo with those in Latin America, it can easily be said that the Philippine mestizaje complex is more flexible and expansive further expanding its reach within the diaspora. Therefore, in the late 20th century, racial hybridity has included perceived epidermal “whitening” or lightening and an amorphous and ambivalent cosmopolitanism of coming from abroad. Ironically, this corporeal, cultural and racial hybridity is almost always bestowed on returnees, despite their actual skin shading. Ideas about racial and corporeal transformations shape and inflect these young men and women’s struggle to define self and belonging in the context of their struggle for stardom in their parent’s homeland. In other words, these young people carry the burden of moving across such racial, class, gender, and sexual divides and transforming themselves into marketable and desirable figures of modern cosmopolitanism.

The perceived corporeal and cultural cosmopolitanism of young returnees is often seen as the ticket or capital for these young people’s entry into the entertainment industry. However, Filipino audience’s initial fascination with these young returnees’ western ways, bodies, and demeanor does not last very long. Racial hybridity and western cosmopolitanism give way to a kind of “browning” or localization. These young people learn that in order to survive in the long haul, one has to move or shift from this perceived embodied cosmopolitanism into a more “authentic” native persona. Thus, for longevity and prolonged marketability, these young people must learn Tagalog or more specifically Taglish as spoken in the broadcasting and entertainment world, and slowly unlearn if not temporarily tuck away the “western” bodily comportments and habits to become a local or “true” “native” Filipino.” This aesthetics of mobility is by no means monolithic but rather is a set of contested meanings, images and ideas that are espoused, resisted and/or re-worked not only by the young people themselves but also by talent scouts, entertainment personnel including directors and script writers, by other Philippine born and raised hopefuls, the mass media and by the Philippine based audience.

This essay focuses on the contested nature of this aesthetics of mobility. I will examine how diasporic return is negotiated through performance by looking at three primary sites: film roles about returnees and return migration and those where returnees are lead characters, training sessions in the talent school, and life histories. Following Ann Cvetkovich (2004) capacious notion of archive, my aim in assembling this panoply of sites such as rehearsals, trainings/classes, and auditions sessions is to expand and develop the idea of an archive. Archives of performances go beyond the onstage-offstage dichotomy. I note that these events and sites are “stages” for the negotiation and contestation of meaning where

contradictory scripts about race, class and sex are played out and enacted in the pursuit of citizenship, nationhood and stardom.

Cinema and the Paradox of Return

Filipino films are important repositories of images, practices and ideas about diasporic return.⁷ There are two main types of films related to diasporic return. There are those that promote stories that include a young balikbayan typically played by actual returnees. There is a longstanding tradition in Philippine movie and television soap opera scripts that had its heyday in the eighties and early nineties of including the figure of the “visiting young relative from abroad” or featuring a comedic ploy to have a foreign looking character start talking in fluent Tagalog. Another type of film involves returnees who play the starring role and whose story need not be directly about diasporic homecoming although it operates as a subtext or context for the viewing audience.

In *Lagot Ka sa Kuya Ko* (“You Are In Big Trouble With My Older Brother”) the female protagonist is a young woman who is made to go to school in the Philippines in order for her to learn traditional values. Here, the protagonist is seen as cultural figure who is unable to speak Tagalog fluently but despite such shortcoming is able to navigate the social terrain. In this and other Filipino movies, being balikbayan is itself a type of recalcitrant figure that is eventually domesticated in multiple ways. In this film, the protagonist becomes a true Filipina and loses her “foreignness.”

In the film *Balahibong Pusa* (“Cat Hair”), Joyce Jimenez, a US born and raised actress performs in a scene in what has become her trademark genre, the soft porn film where the scenarios often feature a modern sexually liberated young woman and there are a lot of nudity and love/sex scenes. Her film characters/roles are not always returnee but rather that of a woman at ease with her body and desires. She is by no means the first or the only of female returnees to have this kind of reputation. In fact, this genre of Filipino film has become major venue for many foreign born and/or raised Filipinas. My interviews with Filipino movie-goers boosted their perception of Joyce Jimenez and many of the young female returnees as being comfortable –if not *too* comfortable with their bodies particularly in nude and love scenes. These women are seen to be brash and straightforward with their desires and bodies because they are perceived to be the embodiment of the modern West.

Male returnees, like the women, are also portrayed in terms of acquired cosmopolitan bodily and cultural habits. However, there is a gendered discrepancy in the cinematic representations of male and female returnees. While male returnees are often seen to be taller, bulkier, and more sexually open than their local male counterparts, unlike female returnees, they do not have to contend with strong demands for changes or shifts in scripted bodily and sexual

habits and dispositions.

The mimetic tension between returnees' biographies and the narratives of the films produce and disseminate powerful stories and ideas about diasporic return. And yet, these circumscribed narratives are not simple bundles of information that the young people in the talent school easily deploy. The films, together with television shows, are not the only sources for disseminating ideas about diasporic return, they are also the sites for the articulations of moral imperative as well as functioning as an endpoint for many of these young men and women's aspirations for fame, prosperity and stardom. The training sessions or classes in the talent school are important conduits for such aspirations as well as a discordant arena for the performing competing scripts of the body for the entertainment industry.

Rehearsing Cosmopolitanism and Performing Authenticity

The scripted cultural shifts and bodily transformations required of young returnees are not just handed to them. Rather, these are learned, contested, managed, choreographed and resisted in specific venues most obviously in training sessions and rehearsals at the talent school. I observed many of these activities at the talent school for several months. In many cases, these situations were combined rehearsals for television variety shows where a throng of the talent school participants were typically used as backdrop to the main stars where they dance, model, participate in games or simply wave to the studio and television audience. These training sessions were also auditions and casting calls where the "talent" of each individual was scrutinized, assessed, rejected and/or nurtured.

In some cases, the returnees' cosmopolitan bodily comportment were stereotypically emphasized and reinforced. At the same time, these ideas were also questioned and contested. However, in most cases, performances of resistance and enforcement, obeisance and disavowal are not independent of each other. Rather they blur or merge into each other in actual situations. For example, in one training session, a young Filipina Canadian girl was admonished by a choreographer that she was dancing too stiffly and was not swaying her hips. The choreographer said, "Are you from abroad or what? I thought you balikbayan girls knew how to shake your bootie." To which the girl replied, "We are not all like that. Some of us do not shake it at all." The choreographer was miffed at this young girl's reply and said, "You are so sassy – you are really a balikbayan." And the choreographer huffily walked away.

In this situation, the disavowal of a particular cosmopolitan bodily aesthetic slides and bolsters another bodily aesthetic and comportment. The young girl later on told me that she did not mind all of these sexual and corporeal stereotypes about female balikbayans. She knew that these are "expected" of her if she is to make it big. I asked if that meant having to a career like Joyce Jimenez's

and become a star of soft porn-like movies. She said it all depends on how her career goes. While she was personally averse to nudity, she did not see any problem with it since no one in her immediate family lives in the Philippines and so long as the nude scene would lead to other roles. She thought that balibayan “sexiness” or the idea that Filipinas born and raised abroad live and breathe sex was quite funny but she said that if it enabled her to get the roles she wanted then, she keep quiet and then just show her more “conservative” side if her career picked up. Not everyone was instrumentalist or strategic about these situations as we shall see in one of the life stories that will be presented in the next section.

In another set of situations, a Filipino Australian young man was trying to read a teleprompter or a screen where a blurb for a toothpaste product was projected. He was having a hard time suppressing his Australian accent. The older man leading the session and who was a casting agent was getting impatient. The casting agent said, “You know your accent is quite cute – it can get you some speaking parts in commercial but can you tone it down? You know, speak English like a Filipino and pronounce every letter of each word – bite down on them!” The young man was a little confused at first and then tried to approximate what he thought Filipino English sounded. He talked to me after the session and said that many people did think that his Australian accent was endearing but it also limited his appeal.

While many Filipinos understand American English due to the history of American colonialism and mass media, an Australian accent was deemed too exotic and incomprehensible. The young man thought of trying to imitate a more American accent since he thought that Filipino English was too hard. Another casting agent who was listening in to the conversation had a suggestion which was to code-switch continuously from English to Tagalog as a way to defuse the “heavy accent.” The young man thought it might work. A few weeks later, he reported that his attempt was successful when he was given the opportunity to emcee a section of a game show together with three other young members of the talent school.

In both cases, it is clear that deployments of scripts of transformation of what I am calling the aesthetics of mobility involve the enactment of the appropriate bodily disposition or cultural skill, be it a particular swaying of the hips or speaking in an acceptable manner. Such enactments consist of a kind of arbitration or refereeing by cultural authorities such as casting agents, directors, etc. and it also involves the returnee’s skill in negotiating and assessing the situation, and deploying and presenting the proper or suitable bodily performance. At the same time, western authenticity is never static particularly in its valuation – as in the case of the unskilled dancer’s brashness and the Filipino Australian’s unintelligible accent. Both cases show how the western cosmopolitan returnee is always “on the move,” always calibrating and mediating between points of cultural propriety or authenticity on the one hand, and nodes of cultural

dislocation on another.

Three Life Stories: Circuits of Returns, Departures and Uncertainty

These constant negotiations, compromises, and refusals constitute the tropes and ideas that permeate these returnees' life narratives. While I interviewed several who were already in the limelight, I interviewed mostly those returnees who are still trying to break into the business. I will give three brief examples of the latter. I do not intend for these narratives to stand in for all of the young migrants but rather to nuance the observations and analysis that I am putting forward.

The first is Tisha,⁸ a Filipino Canadian young girl of nineteen, who at the time of the interview was being groomed for a movie role – as a second lead in a big-budget film. The second is Maria, a twenty year old Filipino-British who just arrived from London five months before I interviewed her. The last one is Bryce from Australia who was trying to get into the local hip-hop scene while at the same time mulling over offers for modeling and playing professional basketball.

Tisha

Tisha considered herself as a “perky” young woman. She said, “I am so full of energy so people are not surprised when I tell them that I was not born here.” When I asked what she meant, she said that most people considered Filipina-born and raised girls to be “malikot” or “energetic,” “bouncing off the wall” – or as she is called a “kiti-kiti” or a mosquito larvae that is always moving around. She happily reported that she can now speak Tagalog after ten months of tutoring in a private Catholic school for girls and as she said, “a lifetime of listening to her parents and her grandmother.” She also watched a lot of local television to get the TV “speak” or the kind of non-quotidian Tagalog that is spoken by movie stars and by newscasters.

When I asked her why she came to the Philippines, she said that it was only after several unsuccessful years of trying to get roles in Canadian film and television that she and her parents decided that if she was to fulfill her dreams of becoming a star she would have to go back to the Philippines where her “tropical beauty” was not as a barrier to the major roles but would in fact be an asset. Then, I asked her how she has been received by the local industry. She hesitated at first and then she said she did not realize until after a month of trying to get into auditions for TV shows and films that it was not all that easy. First, there were other Filipino teenagers born and/or raised overseas pursuing the same goal. The idea that she possessed a novel therefore marketable persona was quickly stifled. She also saw the limitation of being a “balikbayan” starlet. The clamor, according to Tisha and several of my informants for the foreign born returnee is dying down. She has been advised to go “native” or to root one's self and one's body within a

localizing idiom. In other words, it became imperative to start speaking Tagalog without a trace of a foreign accent or to start behaving less as the young Western visitor and more of the person at home with things “Filipino.” As Tisha aptly puts it, if one wanted to become the “bida” or the lead in any television or movie story, one needed to divest oneself of cosmopolitan trappings and dive into the teeming pool of the mainstream culture and attempt to appeal to the tastes of the “masa” or the teeming masses of mostly dark hordes of local audience members.

However, this was not the complete story as Tisha herself admitted. She believed there might still be some demand for someone like her. In the end, her milky skin and gym toned body that she loved to set off in skimpy outfits were still important assets that opened some doors. Her life story of coming from the suburbs of Toronto, a place she believed very few Filipinos know about or even have had the opportunity to see in movies, created a necessary mystique.

She was hoping to make it big in 2004 when I interviewed her. And from what I heard recently, her movie where she played second lead was moderately successful. What was important was that she saw her stay in the Philippine as a temporary one – of getting her feet wet and biding her time – getting the right exposure that might give her good connections to other gigs and roles outside hopefully back in Canada or even better, Hollywood. She was also being “realistic” that her sojourn in the Philippines may be just be one way for her to earn money, buy some real estate both in Manila and maybe Toronto. She giving herself until the age of 25 to make it big and then go back to Canada.

Maria

A good number of Maria’s experiences are similar to Tisha’s. However, the Filipino-British young woman who was a relative new comer in the local scene has a set of outlook that is different and completely diverges from those of Tisha’s in many ways. Maria, whose original screen name was Diana Rose after Princess Diana of England. She changed to Maria Teresa after she found that her initial attempt at marking her foreignness through an exotic screen name was unnecessary. In fact, as a child of mixed parentage, her father is a white British businessman and her mother is a Filipina who used to work for a British bank, she clearly looked Caucasian. She was tall (five feet nine inches) and had light brown hair and green eyes. Unlike Tisha who has Filipino parents, Maria mixed heritage obviously marked her as different and of not being a “pure” Filipino. Her body, as she herself astutely noted, “says it all.”

She found that her stay in the Philippines was in many ways a continuation of her numerous summer trips to the Philippine and in one instance, her whole family stayed for six months while she and her brothers went to the British school in the Manila. When I interviewed her, she was staying with her grandparents who she said were the most important source of support and love apart from her parents. Despite having recently arrived to find her fate in the movie industry, Maria unlike Tisha – who has only been to Manila once as a child, possessed a

very strong affection for Manila and Philippine national culture. She also said that while she still needs to get rid of her British accent when speaking English, she had no traces of it when she spoke Tagalog.

Maria also knew that her mixed parentage was both an asset and a barrier at different times. For instance, she cannot easily even after dying her light brown hair black and having “tons of tanning sessions,” she will never be the young lass from the small rural village or barrio. She makes up for this shortcoming by her prim and proper behavior, like a “kolehiyala” or the stereotypical upper class coed from a Catholic private all-girls college.

She was called an expat, “tisay,” “puti” or “kana” or American woman by many admirers and detractors alike. But as she started to appear in commercials and small parts in movies, she endeared herself to local audiences as she presented a cultural paradox – a perennial favorite among Filipino audience that of the Western-looking woman who starts speaking in unaccented street inflected Tagalog.

Maria intimated that while the prim and proper demeanor that she presents to the public is really who she is, she also is cognizant of the fact that as a foreign born Filipino, she is nevertheless suspected of being “lose” and being too open about her body and sexuality. She finds that idea to be amusing and troubling at the same time. Maria considers local audience’s attitudes and expectations not as barriers but particular ideas that she needs to negotiate. For example, she said that her kolehiyala or college coed performance can be twisted into something naughty. She feels the need to play around with these expectations and stereotypes in order to “make it” in the film and televisions industry.

Unlike Tisha, Maria saw her return to the Philippines as a more “permanent” one. She had a Filipino boyfriend and her mother’s extended family is more present in her life than her father’s. She wanted to stay or at least make the Philippines a “base” even if her attempt at stardom failed or fizzled.

Bryce

Bryce was sent back “home” to the Philippines as a way to teach him, according to his parents, “some manners” and to be more of a courteous Filipino young man than becoming a hooligan like the bunch of “delinquent” Australian friends he ran around with in Sydney. Bryce did admit to doing poorly at school but he did not think that being “banished” from Sydney was something he deserved. He also, like Tisha, has only visited the Philippine briefly in his early childhood. He feels that he did not belong in Manila and did not think too affectionately about his uncle, his mother’s brother and his family. When I interviewed him, he was living alone in an apartment for three months much to the chagrin of his whole family.

Before striking it on his own and being recruited into modeling and commercials, he has gotten by through monthly remittances from Australia and from his occasional modeling and commercial gigs. He dropped out of college a year before and started hanging around men and women in his age group who

were either from affluent and or expatriate families. Here, he has found a circle of friends who advised him to use his height – 6 feet 2 inches and somewhat light complexion to good use and he was able for the first time to earn a significant amount of money.

While he admitted he will never become the “proper” Filipino man that his parents had in mind, he nevertheless thought that he was quite well behaved. He knew that his “shelf life” in the industry was going to be short lived if he did not go “native.” Despite advice from mentors in the talent school, he refused to learn Tagalog except for the smattering of phrases that enabled him to get the everyday essentials.

During the time of the interview, Bryce did not have any definite plans about either staying in the Philippines or going back to Australia. He was having fun at the moment and as he said, he was enjoying the pampering he was getting from people. He found it humorous that people thought of him as “white” and sometime calls him “kano” or American man when he spoke and walked around. He remembered being called racist names back in Sydney where he said he was the darkest skinned member in his gang of friends.

Once in a while he said he missed Sydney and his friends over there. His family has visited every year. His parents were telling him to get a good paying job and not be “slumming it” in the entertainment industry. Despite his seeming nonchalance, Bryce was very much aware of the power of being perceived as a light complexioned male and he thought that playing the role of a balikbayan was less appealing to him than the comfortable life of maids, chauffeurs and adoring fans. As he said, at least there were no ties that will keep him in case he decides later on to move on and take on other challenges elsewhere.

These selected and abbreviated life narratives portray the uneven and ironic contradictions between competing scripts about race, sex, and bodies and the challenges of ethnic/homeland return among young returnees. In their ancestral homeland, these young men and women are unable to escape racializing discourses that they have confronted at home in the West, although they find such discourses working mostly in their favor. Tisha may have found a modicum of success in the Philippines but she has done so not through her “tropical beauty” or “Western whiteness” but by assuming and being subsumed into localizing idioms and tastes which may not help her when she leaves and tries her luck again in Toronto’s entertainment industry. Maria did not find mainstream success. She said it was because of the rather worn “gimmick” of a Western-looking woman speaking fluent Tagalog that highlighted the discrepancies between her bodily dispositions and linguistic skills were not enough to lift her career. However, she did stay in the Philippines. Family and other emotional ties to the Philippines were more than enough to keep her settled in some way. Bryce on the other hand, was never committed to working in the industry and was unwilling to negotiate or compromise. He wrote to me from Sydney where he was working as a clerk

which was several notches down from his glamorous and easy life in Manila. He bitterly reported that he was again confronting blatant racism in Australia as he has become in his words, “the darkie” once again. Bryce, Tisha and Maria are but a few of the many young returnees who, as diasporic subjects, are always in motion, whose bodily dispositions and habits are always read against the competing and ambivalent scripts from the “right here” and those from the “over there,” and the shifting locations of “home” and “away.”

Conclusion: Beyond Mobility and Bodies

The films, the stories of the training sessions and the life narratives of these returnees in the talent school offer a brief yet partial glimpse of the paradoxes of return. Not only are these young people “learning” how to make it in the Philippine entertainment industry, they are also learning what it means to return. In other words, diasporic return for these youth is not a singular event – that of the actual moment of physically stepping into Philippine soil but rather, return is a series of multiple events where the idea of fitting in and belonging become paramount. Not only are they learning how to perform on stage, they are being educated in the various ways “Filipino” and “Filipinoness” can be articulated and enacted in other stages and contexts. Anthropologist Andrea Louie’s (2004) study of young second and third generation Chinese Americans on a summer study trip to their parents’ ancestral province suggests that returnees discover not a primeval and eternal China but rather a diffused and destabilized one. In the same manner, these young Filipinos born and/or raised abroad, are participating in destabilizing Filipinoness where the contours of nationhood are oftentimes negotiable and permeable by working through the corporeal paradoxes of sexuality, class, and race. Equally important is that their experiences of “return” are at the same time re-formulating their own locations and feelings towards their land of birth or settlement. In other words, not only is Filipinoness at stake in these transformative aesthetics but also ways of being British, American, Australian and so on.

On a material level, these young men and women realize that one’s provenance and pedigree from the global north or the so-called west is not a guarantee of instant celebrity and economic success. As performers of an aesthetics of mobility, these young men and women have to shuttle or move – so to speak – between various competing codes of conduct and cultural idioms that are both marketable to the Filipino mass audience and are deemed culturally legible, desirable, proper and correct. Stardom or at least the pursuit of it involves the management, rehearsal and reformulation of various social scripts around diasporic return. The struggles of these young returnees and whatever fame they might attain are all fleeting if not mostly unreachable thereby creating a kind of elusive, perpetual and almost impossible homecoming.⁹

Finally, these young men and women are a vital part of the Filipino global diaspora for they embody for the local population the possibilities and promise of life abroad. Yet, the very act of these young people's return enables the local Filipino audience – people who have stayed put, to territorialize the returnees while maintaining their cosmopolitan *elsewhereishness*. By troubling the very idea of linear migratory movement, the situations in the talent school and the lives of the young returnees provide dynamic lessons in the ambivalent yet powerful forces of Filipino transnational migration and diasporic life.

Notes

1. The classical notion of diaspora stems from the provenance of the word in terms of a dispersal from a homeland or point of origin – and is premised on a kind of teleological completion through a return to that originary node.
2. See Roxas (2011) for personal testimonies and essays of Filipinos who have lived abroad most of which pivot around return as a re-location to authenticity fueled by nostalgic longing.
3. See Constable (2002) for an excellent ethnographic limning of the ambivalence of return among Filipina domestics in Hong Kong.
4. See Biao et al. (2013), Constable (2002), Levy and Weigrod (2005), Hirsch and Miller (2011), Long and Oxfeld (2004), and Tsuda (2009) for critical essays from the humanities and social sciences about the exigencies of return.
5. See Manalansan (2012) for a queer reading of diasporic return as mediated through film.
6. I interviewed 32 young men and women – with a median age of 19.7 years of age. Of the 32, 17 were female and 15 were men. Most of them hailed from the United States and Canada (12 Americans and 8 Canadians), five from Australia, and seven from Europe – mostly from Italy and Great Britain.
7. See Lejano (2006) for a study of balikbayans in contemporary Philippines cinema.
8. All the names of interviewees are pseudonyms. I have also altered a few details to protect the interviewees' anonymity.
9. See Vergara (2009) concept of “repeated turning” among Filipinos who have settled in Daly City, California. This wonderful ethnography showcases the paradoxical, ambivalent, and non-teleological predicament of Filipino Americans that speak to fraught connections to both the Philippine homeland and to America.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people who have encouraged me and helped me shape my ideas on this topic. First to Cori Perez for her patience and interest in the project. I would like to thank my friend, Maryol Alberto who was instrumental and very helpful in helping me recruit interviewees at ABS-CBN. Many thanks to people who have commented and helped shaped the ideas in this paper: Rick Bonus, Oscar Campomanes, Billy Johnson Gonzalez, Andrea Louie, Bonnie McElhinny, Lulu Reyes, Ricky R. Rodriguez. As well as audiences at the universities of Texas at Austin, British Columbia, Michigan State, Northern Illinois, Syracuse, DePaul and Toronto. Special thanks to my my family especially my mom and siblings as well as my friends Manolo Tanquilut, Bobby Abastillas and Alonzo Gatuslao – they all make my own homeland returns not only inevitable but exuberantly joyful. And of course I extend my love and gratitude through thousands of miles to my family in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Works Cited

- Biao, Xiang, Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Mika Toyota. *Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. Print.
- Constable, Nicole. "At Home But Not At Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns." *At Home in the World: Filipinos in Global Migration*. Ed. F. Aguilar. Manila: Philippine Migration Research Network/Philippine Social Science Council, 2002. 380-412. Print.
- Cvetkovich, Anne. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Nancy K. Miller, eds. *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. Print.
- Lejano, Eduardo Jr. "The Presence of the Returnee in Contemporary Philippines Cinema." *Asian Culture Forum* (2006): 455-469. Print.
- Levy, Andre and Alex Weingrod, eds. *Homelands and Diaspora: Holy Lands and Other Places*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.
- Long and Lynellyn D. and Ellen Oxfeld, eds. *Coming Home: Refugees, Migrants and Those Stayed Behind*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.
- Louie, Andrea. *Chineseness across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Manalansan, Martin IV F. "Wayward Erotics: Mediating Queer Diasporic Return." *Media, Erotics and Transnational Asia*. Ed. Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein. Durham: Duke UP, 2012. 33-52. Print.
- Ong, Aihwa. "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-making: New Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Ethnic Boundaries." *Current Anthropology* 37.5 (1996):737-62. Print.
- Rosaldo, Renato. *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003. Print.
- Roxas, Reni, ed. *Sa Muli: Homecoming Stories for the Filipino Soul*. Makati City: Tahanan, 2011. Print.
- Tsuda, Takeyuki, ed. *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. Print.
- Vergara, Benito Manalo. *Pinoy Capital: The Filipino Nation in Daly City*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009. Print.