Geographics of identity: the migrant experiences of Filipinas in Northeast Ohio

James A. Tyner

Abstract: Major urban areas in the United States have undergone rapid shifts in their ethnic compositions. However, ethnic change is not limited to urban areas; rural areas, likewise, have witnessed substantial changes in recent decades. Scholarship, though, has paid minimal attention to the day-to-day lives of migrants in non-urban, and ethnically-homogenous, locations. And yet the ‘migrant experience’ is fundamentally different. Using Friedman’s concept of a ‘geographics of identity’, this paper provides insight into the day-to-day activities of two Filipinas as they adjust to living in rural northeast Ohio. Findings suggest that difficulties may accrue at a multitude of social scales, including tensions and contestations not only between Filipinas and non-Filipinas, but also among the Filipinas themselves. Moreover, the constant ‘becoming’ of identity is highlighted through their experiences.

Keywords: Filipinas, identity, migration, rural, Ohio

Population movements have subtly contributed to the reshaping of the geographies of the Asia Pacific region (Forbes, 1997: 21). Indeed, since the mid-1960s, patterns and forms of immigration from Asia have exhibited significant changes. These shifts have resulted largely from transformations of the global economy and have been augmented by changes in international migration policies. New sending countries, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, have emerged; likewise, larger proportions of female migrants, and highly-skilled migrants, have participated in systems of Asian migration. Apart from these emergent systems, however, older, more established systems of migration have also been transformed. The United States, especially, has witnessed a substantial transformation in its patterns of Asian immigration. Major urban areas in the United States, for example, have undergone rapid and dramatic shifts in their ethnic compositions owing to changes in Asian immigration. However, as Roseman (1999) identifies, ethnic change is not confined to large metropolitan
areas (e.g., Los Angeles, New York, Chicago). Indeed, remarkable changes are occurring in small cities, towns, and rural areas scattered across the globe, including the United States.

The ‘migrant experience’ is fundamentally different in ethnically-homogenous places than it is in ethnically-heterogeneous places. Issues of discrimination may be magnified; problems of isolation and vulnerability may increase precipitously. These conditions are encountered through the migrants’ daily activities, such as shopping, banking, and schooling. Although considerable attention has focused on the experiences of migrants in major urban areas (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996), less research has examined the experiences of migrant groups in smaller, and more ethnically-homogenous places. Consider the state of affairs in Philippine immigrant communities: Numerous studies concentrate on a few key locations, including San Diego, Los Angeles, and Honolulu (Okamura, 1983, 1984a,b, 1998; Ong and Azores, 1994; Espiritu, 1995; Bonus, 2000). Decidedly less attention has been directed toward more rural locations. As such, questions about migrant adjustment among Filipinos remain largely unanswered when we turn our attention away from major metropolitan areas.

This paper serves as a response to these concerns. Specifically, through narrative analysis, I provide insight into the identity construction and migrant experiences of two Filipinas, Maria and Jolene, both of whom live in rural Northeast Ohio. In so doing, I draw on Friedman’s (1998) notion of geographics. For Friedman (1998: 19), geographics ‘figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiple situated knowledges.’ As such, in this paper identity is a form of constant becoming rather than a fixed point of origin or an end product (Friedman, 1998: 153). Accordingly, while it is insightful to consider re-negotiations of national identity, and the meanings associated with ‘being’ a migrant, caution must be exercised so that we do not lose sight that ‘migrant’ is not an essential – nor defining – feature of one’s existence. Through their spatial mobility, certainly, as well as governmental and academic discourses, people become migrants. But their lives are filled with the everyday trials and tribulations of simply being people; the day-to-day activities of shopping, cooking, and going to work, along with more episodic events such as marriage, divorce, and childbirth. I seek to provide, therefore, an understanding of the migrant experience through daily, often mundane, activities. Indeed, as Hanson (1992: 572) writes, ‘An interest in the mundane means using experience as a starting place for theory and not forgetting that the purpose of theory is to shed light on that experience.’ In this way, further insight is afforded to our understanding of the unfolding drama of the USA’s changing ethnic landscape.

GEOGRAPHICS OF IDENTITIES

Questions of identity are becoming increasingly prominent in the migration literature. In part, this is associated with broader concerns over structural
changes in a globalizing world. As Papastergiadis (2000: 13) writes, ‘In the current phases of global migration there is a need for a more complex framework of differentiation, one that is capable of addressing the shifting patterns of inclusion and exclusion.’ In this paper I draw on insights derived from post-structural feminism and especially Friedman’s (1998) geographics of identity. In so doing, I attempt to provide a more contextual understanding of the experience of migration and settlement.

First and foremost, identity is not something given; it is, rather, a precarious and temporary effect of difference (Weedon, 1999: 104). Papastergiadis (2000: 14) argues that a need exists to ‘shift the conceptual framework [of identity] in terms of an ongoing process of negotiating differences that cross and ground our life’s narrative, rather than the rigid performance of a predetermined script.’ Friedman (1998: 19), likewise, contends that the geographics of identities is polyvocal and often contradictory. To capture these multiplicities and contradictions, Friedman (1998) forwards six related but distinct discourses of identity: multiple oppression; multiple subject positions; contradictory subject positions; relationality; situationality; and hybridity. The first discourse, multiple oppression, suggests that no one social integument (e.g., gender, race, class, or sexual orientation) should a priori be privileged over another. She (1998: 21) insists, for example, that to define identity in terms of gender (as some feminists do) reinscribes other forms of oppression by rendering them invisible. As Tyner (1996: 81) argues:

We need to acknowledge that for Filipina migrants . . . economic considerations and other systems of oppression (e.g., race, gender) are interlocked and not additive. We cannot examine Filipina migrants first as poor (class/economic), second as women (gender), and third as Filipinas (nationality). Identification and oppression is simultaneous and interactive: one informs the other.

Hence, the second discourse, that of multiple subject positions, reaffirms that identity is not singular but rather multiple: identity sits at the crossroads of many different formations of power and powerlessness (Friedman, 1998: 21). Papastergiadis (2000: 15) effectively captures this sentiment: self-image is formed in, not prior to, the process of interaction with others. By extension, the third discourse – contradictory subject position – highlights the notion that a woman, for example, may be simultaneously oppressed by gender yet privileged by race or class (Friedman, 1998: 21). As such, this discourse focuses attention on the contradictions of a person’s identity within conflicting systems of gender, race, class and so on.

Fourth, the discourse of relationality suggests that one axis of identity, say gender, must be understood in relation to other axes, such as race (Friedman, 1998: 22). Men, for example, are typically defined in relation to women; whiteness is defined in relation to blackness (Weedon, 1999: 104). The discourse of relationality thus stresses the constantly shifting nature of identity as it is constituted through different points of reference and material conditions of history (Friedman, 1998: 23). A spatial corollary to the discourse of
relationality is the discourse of situationality. This discourse emphasises that identity resists fixity and, importantly, shifts fluidly from setting to setting (Friedman, 1998: 23). Hence, depending on the geographical (and historical) context, a person’s gender (or race, class, religion and so on) may assume prominence in her or his interactions with others. Friedman contends that these ‘axes of identity are not equally foregrounded in every situation’ and, indeed, argues for the ‘significance of space as a situational marker of identity’ (1998: 23). Thus, the experiences of being a Filipina in the United States would be significantly different than being a Filipina in Singapore, just as being a Filipina in Los Angeles would be different than a Filipina living in rural northeast Ohio. Accordingly, I am in agreement with Bonus (2000: 2–3) who suggests that there can be no reference to the singular Filipino American identity, for example, but rather articulations of Filipino American identities in specific times and places.

Finally, Friedman advances a discourse of hybridity. This is especially pertinent to the study of migration in that ‘hybridity often depends materially, as well as figuratively, on movement through space’ (Friedman, 1998: 24). Thus, through the physical movement associated with migration, a person’s identity will reflect a blending and clashing of different social settings. However, Papastergiadis (2000: 15) cautions that

Hybridity, as a metaphor for identity formation, can only function critically when the dual forces of movement and bridging, displacement and connection, are seen as operating together. It is only when there is a consciousness of this oscillation between different positions and perspectives, that hybridity can offer a new understanding of identity.

In sum, a geographics of identity contends that identity formation is relational and situational, multiple and hybrid, fluid and contradictory. Identities, especially as people move across space, are thus syncretic, constantly ‘becoming’, and infused with questions of power.

NARRATIVES IN MIGRATION RESEARCH

Migration is more than a simple decision to move; an understanding of this process, and of the period following migration, must be contextualised. As Boyle et al. (1998: 81) relate, ‘The reason’s for moving are seen as being part of the migrant’s whole life – their biography – and thus are unlikely to be appreciated fully just by asking blunt questions such as: “Why did you move?”

Population geographers have re-embraced biographical, or narrative, approaches in the study of migration (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Miles and Crush, 1993; Vandsemb, 1995; Boyle et al., 1998; Watkins, 1999). This constitutes an ontological shift, away from an explanation of migration flows to an understanding of migration experiences. As Watkins (1999: 299) contends, ‘For too long . . . researchers have examined migration from the outside, gathering numeric data through surveys or census tabulations and drawing inferences
about individual action.’ Boyle et al. (1998: 80) concur, noting that ‘instead of stressing the purposeful and calculating character of migration, the biographical approach emphasises its location within the individual migrant’s entire biography.’ My intention in this study, therefore, is provide insight into the lived experiences of Filipina migrants in a non-ethnically diverse rural area. The goal is one of verisimilitude with other migration research.

A number of benefits have been forwarded for narrative approaches (Miles and Crush, 1993; Vandsemb, 1995; Boyle et al., 1998; Watkins, 1999). First, narratives provide for the recovery of hidden stories. This is especially valuable in the study of marginalised peoples. Miles and Crush (1993: 85), for example, write that in South Africa, ‘life-histories have proved an indispensable aid to the re-writing of the country’s history “from below” ‘.

Second, narratives may provide a richer understanding of migration. As Vandsemb (1995: 412) explains, ‘if we let people tell their stories of migration it may be possible to capture more of the factors involved and thus to reveal a more complete picture.’ In short, narratives express life experiences in meaningful ways (Vandsemb, 1995: 414). As a result, insights gained through narratives, as Vandsemb (1995: 415) acknowledges, may pose new avenues for inquiry.

Third, narratives allow for a greater opportunity to contest academic androcentrism and eurocentrism. Indeed, as Vandsemb (1995: 413) identifies, feminist research has emphasised narrative as an alternative form of producing knowledge in academica. Vandsemb (1995: 413) continues, explaining that ‘In creating stories, people are able to impose order and coherence on the stream of experience and to work out the meaning of incidents and events in the real world.’ As will become evident throughout this paper, Filipinas are confronted with, and must contest, dominant stereotypes on a near-daily basis. Often, these stereotypes are perpetuated through ‘objective’ media, such as school lessons and newspapers.

A narrative approach is not without limitations. As Watkins (1999: 299) notes, the accuracy of narrative information has been questioned. Narratives, for example, offer the illusion of presenting a complete story; concern, remains, however, over the representation of reality (Vandsemb, 1995). Watkins (1999: 299) explains that ‘Events and situations serve as important motivations in migration decisions, but people do not necessarily respond to strict realities. Instead they filter reality, imposing their own impressions and beliefs through their experience.’ A related criticism of qualitative methods in general, and narrative approaches in particular, hinges on issues of generalisability. Narrative data alone cannot provide definitive answers or firm conclusions (Watkins, 1999: 309). Caution must be taken, therefore, that in the presentation of narratives we remember that a goal is to provide insight into experiences and interpretations and not to provide causal explanations for observed behaviour. I do not claim, therefore, that the experiences of the women involved in this study are ‘generalisable’ to all Filipinas, or even to other Filipinas living in Northeast Ohio. I do suggest, however, that greater insight into the intersections of migration and identity may be illuminated through
this study. Josselson (1995: 33) contends that narratives are not ‘records of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life.’ Accordingly, we serve our theoretical interest in general social processes when we take seriously the idea that people make sense of life experiences by narrating them (Chase, 1995: 22).

As a final methodological comment, this paper developed out of my own personal participation – as a Euro-American husband of a Filipina – in various Philippine-American communities for over 13 years, in both California and Ohio. During the course of research I interviewed Maria and Jolene in both formal and informal settings. Interviews were conducted by myself, in English, over a period of several months. In addition, through our families, I interacted in social activities, such as birthday parties, baby showers, and picnics. Both participants, including their families, were fully informed of my research and, to that end, fully supported my project. They were similarly concerned with questions of belonging and not-belonging, of being part of a community, and yet always perceived as a foreigner. I was also concerned about unduly imposing my own perspectives, my own interpretations, on the research. Accordingly, this research was iterative: at any particular session we would cover certain issues and, at later meetings, we would revisit these to clarify our ideas. I relate these issues not to position myself as an insider, but rather to reflect the conflation of the personal and professional in this research. Following Friedman (1998: 42) I do not wish to succumb to the ‘scripts of denial or confession’ that is at times present in the research of academics. Instead, I seek to situate this research, through an acknowledgement of my own shifting, relational identities.

THE JOURNEYS OF MARIA AND JOLENE

Maria and Jolene were introduced to me through their association with my wife. Currently, both Maria and Jolene reside in Northeast Ohio and form part of an incipient ‘Philippine community’ composed of a half-dozen Filipinas and their families. Compared to larger metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles and New York, this region of Ohio is relatively ethnically homogenous. In all of northeastern Ohio – defined as Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Mahoning, Portage, Stark, Summit, and Trumbull counties – the 1990 US Census recorded a total of just 4,051 Filipinos. This constitutes just 0.12 per cent of the 3 million people living in Northeast Ohio. For comparison, in Los Angeles County alone, nearly 225,000 Filipinos were recorded. Proportionally, Filipinos in Northeast Ohio are also spatially concentrated: 73 per cent of all Filipinos reside in a single county, Cuyahoga, which is home to Cleveland. Portage and Summit – the two countries considered in this study – recorded only 460 Filipinos in 1990. This represented 0.06 per cent of the total 1990 population of 657,575. Moreover, these two countries are significantly ethnically-homogenous. In 1990, nearly 90 per cent of all inhabitants (585,196 out of 657,736) were classified as white.
How did Maria and Jolene arrive in Northeast Ohio? What routes were undertaken, and decisions made, during their journeys? Research on Philippine immigration is in general agreement that kinship ties are the principal factor in influencing the timing and destination of movement. In the Philippines, the powerful influence of the family shapes many social, political, and economic interactions (Timberman, 1991: 17). Studies often find that migration decisions of Filipinos are made by entire families (Arnold and Abad, 1985; Medina and Natividad, 1985; Lauby and Stark, 1988). Trager (1988: 186), moreover, contends that family strategies are not necessarily focused on migration per se; instead, families are concerned with ways of maintaining household capital. This does not imply, however, a unified ‘family strategy’. Indeed, the decision for some family members to leave may be – and often is – highly contested.

The stories of Maria and Jolene differ from other case studies in that neither woman migrated with, nor to join, family or friends. Rather, their movements to northeastern Ohio conform with more ‘traditional’ notions of attached migration. This does not, however, imply passivity. Indeed, both Maria and Jolene made their own decisions regarding migration. Additionally, as both Maria and Jolene explain, neither set out to move to the United States. Rather, opportunities arose and both women made their decisions accordingly.

Maria grew up in a small village in the southern Philippines. She recalls that her family was relatively impoverished but she was able to obtain a solid education as well as vocational training. Maria, in fact, studied to be both an elementary school teacher and a beautician. As a teenager Maria harboured no dreams of migrating to the United States. However, her sister did consider the possibility and, in pursuit of this, she wrote a letter to a ‘pen-pal’ organisation. The sister, though, used Maria’s name. Consequently, and partly out of curiosity, Maria began answering the letters that came to her. Gradually she began to concentrate on the letters of one man in particular. His name was Tom, and he was a university professor who lived in Illinois. During their correspondence Maria began to weigh the options of remaining in the Philippines, or of migrating to the United States. Maria was well-educated – she had earned a teaching credential – though at the time she worked as a hair-dresser. And although Tom was considerably older than Maria, and she knew him only through mail correspondence, the thought of moving to the US, and of earning more money, solidified her decision. Having made-up her mind – and being supported by her parents – Maria asked Tom to journey to the Philippines to get married. Thus began Maria’s journey to the United States.

Shortly after their arrival in Illinois, Maria gave birth to their first and only child, Scott. Life for Maria thus revolved around the raising of their son, and the difficulties of adjusting to a new environment. And although Maria experienced bouts of loneliness after her arrival in the United States, her adjustment was facilitated by the fact that her husband served as faculty advisor for a Philippine Student Organisation. Maria describes this as a positive factor. Through her association with students of either Philippine birth or ancestry, Maria was able to overcome her initial feelings of displacement and isolation. However, after about seven years her husband obtained another position at a...
university in Northeast Ohio. Following this move, Maria found herself considerably more isolated than she was previously. In Ohio there was no established Philippine Student Organisation, nor did either Maria or her husband know any Filipinos in the area. Indeed, neither Maria or Tom had any friends, relatives or acquaintances in their new home. Adjustment was thus a joint endeavour for Maria and Tom. Living in an upscale neighbourhood populated by university professors, Maria and Tom began to associate with other individuals based on perceived class and academic commonalities. Still, Maria desired to meet other Filipinos. Through her participation at faculty wives clubs, parent-teacher associations, and other civic events, she sought out Filipino friends. Maria explains that with other Filipinas, they could share common experiences, and reminisce about their homeland. That said, Maria was also cautious when meeting other Filipinas she might encounter in public, such as at the grocery or bank. As I discuss below, there are components of Maria’s identity apart from her nationality that would influence her interactions with other Filipinas.

Compared to Maria, Jolene’s route to the United States was more circuitous. She grew up near Olongapo, a city outside the former US naval base at Subic Bay. Following graduation from high school Jolene worked at various part-time jobs, including a candy factory. One day, though, she was approached by two Filipinos who identified themselves as talent scouts. They worked for a Manila-based private recruitment agency that specialised in the deployment of performing artists. After consulting with her parents and friends, Jolene decided to seek employment as an entertainer in Japan. She was offered, and accepted, a booking in an Okinawa-based night club.

Jolene worked for over three years in Okinawa. During this time she was fortunate to save a modest amount of money, and was able to provide needed materials for her family. Indeed, Jolene was able to support her siblings’ education back in the Philippines. Jolene’s experiences in Okinawa thus served to bolster her self-confidence as she constructed her identity as the ‘breadwinner’ of the family. In this way, her identity shifted from that of a dependent daughter to an independent, self-supporting worker.

While working in Okinawa Jolene met Robert, a young marine from Ohio. They began dating and, after several months, Jolene became pregnant and was unable to continue working in Okinawa. Jolene, back in the Philippines, was fearful that she would never see Robert again but, within a few months, he reunited with her. After a quick marriage, and Robert’s retirement from the marines, the couple moved to his home-town in Northeast Ohio.

Although Robert’s immediate family lived in the area, Jolene felt isolated. All of her family was in the Philippines. Only through an occasional phone call, and painfully-slow mail correspondence has Jolene kept in touch. Her relationship with her in-laws is cordial but lacking in warmth. During this time Jolene had to adjust to her new life as both a mother and a wife in yet another foreign country. And compounding her difficulties, she was no longer working. Her previous identity as a self-supportive, independent person gave way to new and ‘troubling’ feelings of dependency.
Jolene has since given birth to two more children and now spends her time at home raising her children. Robert has found factory work but bills remain a problem for the couple. Living on just his salary, and supporting three children, Robert and Jolene are only able to afford a small rental house in a ‘lower-class’ neighbourhood.

The journeys of both Maria and Jolene reflect altogether different processes. Combined, though, their experiences shed insight into processes of identity construction. We can gain a more specific picture of these by focusing on three fields of social interaction. Maria and Jolene are problematically positioned within both (1) the incipient Philippine community as well as (2) the dominant host society. Their multiple identities are thus both situational and relational; their identities, however, are also formed within oppressive and contradictory contexts. Within the Philippine community, for example, certain identities such as nationality recede into the background whereas other identities, such as class, appear more prominent. Conversely, while participating in the host society, their ‘ethnic’ identity may dominate their daily interactions. However, there is a third setting, one in which some identities, such as Jolene’s former occupation as a sex worker, may transcend and dominate both settings. This conforms with Friedman’s (1998: 23) contention that ‘one situation might make a person’s gender most significant; another, the person’s race; another, sexuality or religion or class.’ In short, the context of interaction is a vital element in the process of identity construction.

The incipient community

In his discussion of urban-based Philippine communities in Hawaii, Okamura (1998) highlights the prevalence and significance of many social activities. This include the formation of and participation in immigrant voluntary associations, as well as the retention of language and cultural values, and also kinship ties through remittances. Voluntary associations, for example, may provide information about community meetings, church services, but also more pressing concerns, such as listings of doctors, lawyers, and tax consultants. Okamura contends, though, that beyond merely an ‘adaptive’ mechanism, these activities represent collective expressions of a Filipino identity. This holds especially for cultural activities such as beauty contests and social gatherings which are not especially adaptive in nature (Okamura, 1998: 71).

Both Maria and Jolene participate in various communal activities, such as birthday parties and other celebrations. Typically these are large, pot-luck affairs where Filipinas bring Philippine dishes like pancit and lumpia. Jolene, especially, notes that these parties are considerably more fun when their husbands are not around. This affords the Filipinas, according to Jolene, an opportunity to ‘be Filipina.’ As such, these cook-outs allow both Maria and Jolene to symbolically recreate a ‘taste’ of home. Developing a sense of community for Maria and Jolene thus involves similar functions as other, urban-based Philippine immigrant communities.
Maria, however, also identifies a more personal importance of these communal events. She says that even if the Filipinas don’t necessarily get along, ‘we’re very desperate.’ By this Maria explains that just being with other Filipinas ‘brightens her day.’ More pointedly, though, Maria says that simply ‘knowing other Filipinas makes you feel safe.’ Accordingly, both Jolene and Maria indicate that these social gatherings are important facets of their lives. They choose not to ‘assimilate’ in the traditional sense of the word; rather, they conform to what Espiritu (1995: 27) has described as a refusal to sever their ties to the Philippines and have, correspondingly, assumed instead the role of transmigrants.

This is not to suggest that the incipient Philippine community in which Maria and Jolene participate is not without its tensions or conflicts. Indeed, the fluidity of Maria’s and Jolene’s multiple identities becomes apparent in their interactions with other Filipinas. Maria and Jolene, for example, associate with their Filipina friends at birthday parties and picnics. As such, they relate to other Filipinas at a ‘national’ level. What they have in common, in this context, is a shared understanding of where they grew up. Thus, in these settings, Maria and Jolene speak of a perceived commonality based on their ‘Philippine-ness’. This national identification, however, is divided by class and other social differences. Indeed, both Maria and Jolene indicate that they share no other bond with each other beyond their Philippine nationality. Maria and her family own and reside in a large, two-storey home in a middle- to upper-class neighbourhood near a major university. Jolene and her family, in contrast, rent a small home in an economically depressed neighbourhood. Indeed, when considering some other Filipinas, Maria explains the paradox in that if ‘these people were American, she probably wouldn’t hang out with them, but since they’re Filipino . . .’

The interactions between Maria and Jolene shed insight also into the variations of being ‘Filipina’. Maria, for example, hails from the southern Philippines whereas Jolene originates from the northern Philippines. Through a shared Philippine-based education, both Maria and Jolene speak Tagalog and thus can communicate. But Maria and Jolene also believe that the ‘ethnic’ variation in the Philippines – being from different provinces and islands – is more salient than regional variation in the United States. In this context, it is important for both Maria and Jolene to participate in the process Bonus (2000: 170) describes as a resistance to homogenisation. Bonus (2000: 170–1) explains that, carried over to the United States, such resistance gains currency and potency as Filipinos verbalise resistance to homogenisation not only in the Philippine context (being lumped into one rubric known as Filipino) but in the United States (being lumped into one category known as Filipino American).

Another tension within the Philippine community is predicated on mode of entry. Pratt (1998), in her study of Filipina domestic workers in Vancouver, identifies a process of stigmatisation within the Philippine community. She writes that Filipinos coming to Canada as immigrants with full citizenship rights may stigmatisise Filipino nannies (1998: 290). Pratt elaborates:
Landed Filipinos thus enact their own gestures of closure around citizenship and the nation-state, with subtle and not-too-subtle gestures instructing domestic workers that they lie outside the boundaries of respectability (1998: 290).

Similarly, the migratory routes of Maria’s and Jolene’s entry into the United States assume importance in the construction of their identities as well as their daily experiences. This holds especially true given that Maria is often viewed as a ‘mail-order bride’ while Jolene is viewed as a ‘prostitute’. Thus, my earlier statements regarding Maria’s caution in approaching Filipinas in public becomes more clear. Her caution stems from a perceived hierarchy among the few Filipinas with whom she interacts. It is common within Philippine immigrant communities, for example, to ask about geographic origins and mode of entry. For Bonus (2000: 7), this exchange operates not so much to determine where the rest of the conversation proceeds but to set the terrain upon which negotiations regarding Filipino Americanness can be articulated. Through her marriage to an older (white) American, Maria is sometimes viewed as just a ‘mail-order bride’ and suffers prejudice stemming from being not only in an ‘interracial’ marriage, but also of a ‘May–December’ marriage. Typically, Maria’s response is to make light of the situation. A common joke of Maria’s is that she simply married ‘an antique’. She refuses, furthermore, to be identified solely as the wife of an American; rather, she points out repeatedly that before she was a migrant, before she was married, and before she was a mother, she was also a school teacher and an entrepreneur.

**Negotiating the host society**

Away from the Philippine community, Maria and Jolene are viewed ethnically and nationally as being identical. They relate that members of the host society – non-Filipinos – simply view them as an undifferentiated ethnic/national group: they are all either ‘Filipinas’ or, most bothersome, ‘Orientals’. This external assigning of identities assumes more importance at other, non-ethnically based activities. In these settings, both Maria’s and Jolene’s perceived ethnic identity often assumes greater prominence in that they are often the only ‘non-white’ persons in attendance. This is common, for example, when Maria participates in her son’s school activities. In this context, Maria confronts a ethnic homogenisation in that she is perceived simply as ‘non-white’. Alternatively, she is perceived as simply being ‘Oriental’. As testimony to this homogenising process, Maria tells of an incident that took place when she attended an open-house at her son’s school. In the class room, Maria recalls, the teacher had displayed flags representing the children’s nationalities. Disappointedly, Maria looked around but could not find a flag of the Philippines. Wanting this part of her son’s heritage to be recognised, she asked the teacher about the omission. With a puzzled look, the teacher indicated that a Korean flag was on display. Maria laments that she had to point out the difference between Korea and the Philippines. Though seemingly a minor incident, to
Maria this was reflective of a larger confusion and ambiguity of living in an isolated predominantly ‘white’ neighbourhood. Moreover, this reaffirms her attempt to retain her identity as a Filipina living in a foreign country. The other irony, of course, is that her son, born in the United States and fathered by a ‘white man’ is legally American.

In contrast to their interactions among other Filipinas, however, Maria and Jolene indicate additional discourses that they must negotiate in their interactions with the host society. Filipinas, on a day-to-day basis, confront dominant stereotypes of the Philippines, other Asian groups, and even some non-Asian groups. It is not uncommon, for example, for people living in rural, non-ethnically diverse locations to have never encountered a person from the Philippines; their only source of information is obtained via television, print media, or academia. This, however, imparts an added dimension to the construction and negotiation of identities. In January of 1997, for example, 60 Minutes aired a report on mail-order brides. During the broadcast the anchor, Lesley Stahl, reported that:

The reason [for mail order marriage] is not only the irresistible charm of American men, it’s that marriage is an escape route from poverty. Mired in the Third World, the Philippines relies heavily on exports to the First World, and one of its most valuable exports is its women. Each year close to half a million Filipinas go to foreign countries, many as nurses and maids, some as prostitutes and others as brides. And they send millions of dollars back home. There’s an unwritten law that daughters sacrifice for the rest of the family.

Television shows reaffirm these representations of Filipinas. In a 1994 episode of the situation comedy Frasier, the father of the title character remarked, ‘For an extra five grand, you could have bought a whole new wife from the Philippines’ (quoted in Okamura, 1998: 52).

The prevalence of stories of poverty and prostitution, mail-order marriages and victimisation, permeate the encounters between Filipinas and non-Filipinas. As it happens, of course, Maria is a ‘mail-order’ bride and Jolene did participate in the sex sector of Okinawa. However, both women lament the stereotypical representation of their lives, and how these discourses inform their interactions with other people. Maria, for example, relates the experience of playing in the park with her son. Another mother who was not Filipina approached her. In this setting both Maria and the other woman might have related as mothers, simply enjoying a day in the park with their children. However, as they sat watching their children, the woman asked Maria where she was from, to which Maria replied the Philippines. Without hesitation, the lady followed with: ‘Oh, are you poor?’ As this episode reveals, Maria cannot escape her multiple identities as being ‘different’, a perceived outsider, and the signifying association between the Philippines and poverty. Maria explains,

When Americans see me, they ask, ‘where are you from?’ I tell them the Philippines. And then they ask me if I’m poor! I’m from the Philippines so I must be poor. That really hurts. I’m a certified teacher in the Philippines, yet here
I’m not allowed to teach. I operated a beauty parlor in the Philippines, but here I have no certificate and so can’t get a job. They won’t consider my training because it comes from the ‘Third World’.

**Transcending identities**

Within the Philippine community, questions of ethnicity and nationality assume minimal importance to Maria and Jolene; conversely, these identities appear paramount in their interactions with non-Filipinas. Some identities, however, assume prominence regardless of the setting of interaction. Specifically, discourses of mail-order marriages and of prostitution seem to overshadow the daily experiences of both Maria and Jolene whether they are interacting with other Filipinas or non-Filipinas. Indeed, both Maria and Jolene speak of a constant stress confronting these representations that are forwarded both from inside and outside the Philippine community. As to her ‘identity’ as a mail-order bride, Maria explains how many initial encounters with other Filipinos play out: ‘They ask “how did you get here?” “Did you marry an American?” “Are you a pen-pal?”’ In interpreting these questions, Maria explains that these other Filipinas ‘put the idea in your head, if you’re married to an American, you either are a mail-order bride or were a prostitute. They act like they’re better than you.’ Jolene concurs, explaining that ‘other Filipinas will say “Oh, I was petitioned.” Sometimes, though, they lie, maybe they worked in a club.’

Jolene’s previous occupation significantly informs her interactions with other Filipinas. She speaks of difficulties in relating with, of feeling shunned by, Filipinas who entered the US through other avenues. Jolene explains that other Filipinas place considerable stock in the paths of migration. She feels that as a former dancer in Okinawa, she is diminished in the eyes of other Filipinas. In this setting, Jolene’s identity as a former exotic dancer transcends her other identities. She is, in this respect, marginalised within the immediate Philippine community as well as the dominant host society. Both Filipinas and non-Filipinas, Jolene believes, do not want to associate with her and assume that she is less worthy of their respect because of her former occupation. Jolene is thus burdened with the long-standing denigration of sex workers in general. That said, Jolene does not assume the role of a victim. She does not deny her previous occupation; nor does she dwell excessively on that part of her life. Rather, she views her experiences in Okinawa as a temporary moment, a time where she earned money and helped support her parents and siblings. Now, as she negotiates her daily life in rural Northeast Ohio, she draws strength from these experiences. Having been socially and financially independent while in Okinawa, Jolene is able to transcend the negative and racially-derived stereotypes she encounters from both within and outside of the Philippine community.

**SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

Roseman (1999) identifies that, in the United States, dramatic changes have occurred in some suburban counties, some smaller metropolitan areas, and a
widely-dispersed set of smaller places. What are the implications of these ethnic changes? What are the different conditions and constraints encountered by migrants living in isolated, non-ethnically diverse places? This paper provides a first step in examining the migrant experiences of a particular ethnic group in one small town. My broad focus has been on the mundane, the ordinary, the day-to-day lives of two Filipinas living in a non-ethnically diverse place. My goal has been to not ignore the significant and particular constraints that are encountered among isolated immigrant groups living in small towns and rural areas. Findings suggest difficulties at a multitude of scales, tensions, contestations not only between Filipinas and the larger host community, but also problems within the incipient Filipino community and their households.

What can we learn from the narratives of Maria and Jolene? How may their stories contribute to our understanding of migration and community formation? First, I would underscore the importance of location as played out in the migrant experience. As this preliminary studies reveals, Filipinas living in rural locations as opposed to more urban locations will share similar experiences; however, they are also confronted with decidedly different contexts that impart distinct constraints and opportunities. The stories of Maria and Jolene, although unique, are played out many times over across the changing ethnic map of the United States and other destinations. Their experiences are shaped by a multitude of factors and are contingent upon local contexts, personal circumstances, particular histories and geographies. Thus, while they are frequently assigned identities through racist stereotyping, they retain space to redefine and reassert their own positive identities.

Second, a greater awareness of the multiplicity of identities is necessary in our studies of ethnic communities. I suggest that Maria and Jolene are caught within the interstices of their identities. They may sacrifice perceived class differences to facilitate nationalist bonds – as they do during picnics and birthday parties – but, conversely, they may forgo these ethnic ties to promote other affiliations. Both Maria and Jolene reflect Friedman’s (1998: 23) assertion that ‘while the person’s identity is the product of multiple subject positions, these axes of identity are not equally fore-grounded in every situation.’

REFERENCES


