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**Love on the Run:
Transmigration, Emotions, and Governmentality
Among Filipino Domestic Workers
in Singapore and Thailand**

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ABSTRACT

Migration studies almost always tend to emphasize economic factors as the overriding motivation for leaving and are always couched in terms of searching for better sources of livelihood. Where studies have shifted to the emotional sphere, these usually focus on the destruction of the intimate relations particularly among those who have been left behind by the migrating worker. Among Filipino workers, particularly female Filipino domestic workers who service households in foreign countries, their departure often results in an “emotional deficit” back home. Parents, spouses and children are bereft of emotional care while the new employers benefit from the service of Filipino domestic workers and care givers.

The study focuses on the re-construction of intimacies in a context of migration, especially among women who have had to contend with regulatory migration regimes that prohibit them from entering into emotional liaisons with the locals. In other less regulated situations, the reconstruction of an intimate life is more possible, and there are various options that are open to women to experience a relatively more enriched emotional life that is mainly of their own choosing. These two contrasting situations are the subject of this paper, highlighting the contrasts between Filipino domestic workers in Singapore and Thailand. A highly regulated regime in Singapore prohibits Filipino (and other) temporary domestic workers from entering into emotional relationships with Singaporeans. In contrast, a highly unregulated labor market in Thailand offers far more emotional options for Filipino domestic workers. Through continuous two-week visa reissuance by immigration authorities, Filipino workers can stay indefinitely and build their intimate lives around situations of entry and exits across Thailand’s borders. In both countries, however, marriage as a migration strategy is a closed option.

INTRODUCTION

The Far East Shopping Centre and Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road are two famous landmarks in Singapore, widely reputed for their commercial success. Both were built in the early 1980s and have since then catered to a wide range of customer needs that include clothing, food, electronics, jewellery and personal care services. Of particular interest, however, is the proliferation of employment agencies that cater to a distinct market: Singaporean and expatriate households in search of domestic workers. These agencies serve as intermediaries between the servant-seeking household and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) in Singapore. They provide services that facilitate the hiring of female domestic servants recruited mostly from Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. In addition, they provide the crucial services of ensuring that employers and domestic servants comply with the requirements of the MOM that include background checks and passport renewals for prospective employees; documentation of tax assessments and eligibility requirements for employers; and the issuance of standard work contracts. Every Sunday, when applicants have their “day-off”, they congregate in any one of these offices, spilling over into the corridors as they wait for prospective employers who pore through their folders searching for the ideal housemaid. Hours are spent waiting and anxiously hoping that their dossier will attract a prospective employer and be called for an interview. It is not unusual for applicants to wait and waste an entire afternoon without any expression of interest. In between the waiting hours, the hopeful applicants exchange notes on their employment status, the behavior and character of their current employers, their families whom they left behind, the amount of money they need to remit every month through one of the many banking institutions in these same malls that cater primarily to overseas workers. And of course, they indulge in gossip – about spouses who cheat while their wives work abroad, or fellow domestic workers in “unconventional” emotional liaisons for the duration of their work permits. Alongside the usual conversations of navigating through the Singapore labor market and its highly regulated bureaucracy are the animated exchanges on personal lives and the relative freedom that overseas work permits them in their quest for financial, and also emotional, autonomy.

In contrast, Thailand’s labor market for domestic servants is relatively flexible, unregulated and informally organized. While there are a few employment agencies for domestic servants, most recruits are often sourced through informal networks of friends and co-workers. For Filipino domestic workers who arrive in Bangkok as tourists, they take advantage of a sizeable expatriate community whose needs for domestic help include English speaking skills as a necessity – a skill in rare supply among local domestic servants or from their Burmese, Lao and Cambodian competitors. Filipino female workers gather on Sunday mornings at several of Thailand’s Catholic Churches, notably, the Church of the Resurrection on Ruam Rudee Street or at the Assumption Cathedral within the Assumption College grounds in Bang Rak district. Prospective employers and employees gather after Mass to exchange labor market information, to conduct employment interviews, and to finalize hiring without the need for a formal contract. In these venues are the occasions to create and expand personal networks of friendship, peer group relationships, and overseas connections that keep them in touch with their family, friends, neighbors, and relatives. Just like their Filipino counterparts in Singapore, they gather for the obligatory Sunday worship that simultaneously provide the opportunity for needed self-indulgence: to cry and console, to connive and complain, to plot and plan, to confide and confess their personal circumstances that have been markedly changed since they left the traditional confines of their homes and their communities.

In this paper, I investigate the intimacies of the lives of Filipino domestic workers in Thailand and Singapore within an overarching framework of institutional control and regulation of overseas migration. The subject of Filipino domestic workers is particularly interesting given the traditional emphasis on the outsourcing of domestic work in globalizing economies and the institutional

responses to the globalization of labor. The emotional aspect of migrant workers' lives in global labor market studies is addressed in this essay, particularly the variations in responses among Filipino workers to respond to the emotional adjustments they make during periods of overseas work. I use the term "transmigration" to emphasize mobility across not only physical but also emotional geographies. Emotions are resources that are used for interconnection among transmigrants, but these emotions are pliable, flexible, and subject to readjustment to fit the transmigration context. Taking the institutionalization of migration as a context for understanding, regulating and controlling emotions in a migration context redirects the study of emotions away from "personality traits" literature; rather, I treat emotions as subject to rules and procedures by the state, what Foucault (2007) terms "governmentality." I compare "intimacy regimes" between Singapore and Thailand, and I argue that despite excessive regulation and policing in both countries, there remains a zone of intimacy that cannot be patrolled by the state. In fact, it is due to this control that alternative options emerge. I discuss these alternative emotional arrangements among migrants outside of marriage because the prevailing regulations in both countries that disallow marriage for domestic servants prohibits the use of marriage as a migration strategy. Finally, I connect governmentality of migration regimes to larger questions of development and economic growth in both countries. Migration as a strategy for economic development has been very central to Singapore and Thailand, though with significant differences among both countries. By taking into account migration as a feature of the development strategy of both countries, governmentality assumes greater significance in terms of limiting the possibilities for domestic workers to advance in the labor market, and instead, restricts them to the role of meeting the domestic demand for household care. In this sense, the state's "govern(ing) the body of its populace" (Foucault 2007) also becomes a significant feature of development strategies that are premised on control and regulation of emotions.

TRANSNATIONAL EMOTIONS and GOVERNMENTALITY

In today's global world, *transmigration* rather than immigration is the more appropriate term. According to authors Glick-Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc (1995), *transmigrants* are "immigrants whose daily lives depend on constant and multiple interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state." Conceptually, transmigration is located within the overall framework of *transnationalism*: this framework allows migration to move away from the usual conception of receiving and destination countries as separate units of analysis, rather migration experiences move beyond the "limitations of sedentary, spatially bounded contexts" (Skrbis 2008:233). Migration stretches across national spaces, thus mobility. To elaborate further: transnationalism implies "multiple and constant interconnectedness, accompanied by a process of *deterritorialisation*" (*Ibid*: 234). I take this to mean as a process and an event by which mobile subjects and human agents, are taken out of their immediate physical locations and are set in motion across national boundaries that render them "without territory", or at the very least, simultaneously occupies multiple territories without truly belonging to any specific one. Migrants are neither home-based, nor are they *in situ*. They occupy a "grey zone", a kind of liminal space between and among countries that are points of departure and arrival, but without fixity or permanence. In this situation of being in multiple locations, migrants seek interconnectedness, pledging some form of belongingness to several places simultaneously. Being "simultaneously embedded in more than one society, they assiduously maintain connections, build relations, and conduct transactions . . . between their societies of origin and settlement" (*Ibid*: 48).

But mobility also goes beyond moving across physical geography, that is, more than one bounded space into another. It likewise involves movement across emotional geographies. In a migration context, the interconnectedness in the emotional sphere happens in a variety of ways: through attachment with families left behind, reconstruction and re-creation of new familial-like situations (family by proxy), virtual belongingness through epistemic communities (online e-groups), and even a renegotiation of the dominant form of monogamous marriage, and likewise a rethinking of sexualities that may sometimes involves challenging heteronormativity. The migration experience is itself a highly emotional process, one that can be characterized as a “process of dissociation, nostalgia, adjustment, settlement, renewal, loss, discrimination, abrupt endings, new beginnings, new opportunities – all of which are potent sources of emotion.” It is emotions that are the “glue” to connect transnationalism to families, communities, and each other (Skrbis 2008: 236). More specifically, love and desire are part and parcel of the migration experience. They remain a central factor especially among women, in their decision-making process to migrate and to seek mobility within the framework of utilizing emotions as a critical resource in navigating the highly uncertain terrain of migration. I am not restricting the analysis to marriage migrations, but rather, I span the entire range of emotional liaisons that constitute a variety of options for migrants to enrich and reconstitute their emotional lives. In fact, these varieties outside the traditional orbit of marriage constitute the core of the transmigration experience which provide the opportunity for reconfiguring previous identities and social relations. I define emotions as “subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity . . . it is intensity owned and recognized” (Massumi 1995:88 as quoted in D’Aoust 2013: 261).

In the context of Philippine transmigration, Aguilar (1996:6), argues that the transmigration experience is one of reconfiguring social identities and relations that “may become ambivalent, partial, multiple, hybrid, and contradictory, but they may also be reinvented as primordial certainties.” These reconfigurations are certainly highly emotional processes as pre-existing identities are challenged and confronted, and new ones are reshaped, re-molded and readjusted to fit existing circumstances.

A third concept is Foucault’s notion of “governmentality”, defined here as the way the “state exercises control over or governs the body of its populace.” More specifically, Foucault talks about governmentality as “the conduct of conduct”, and government as “the right manner of disposing things so as . . . to lead to the end that is ‘convenient’ for each of the things that have to be governed.” These things, according to Foucault, include such things as creating and producing enough wealth, ensuring the need of subsistence for the population, enabling the population to multiply, etc. Against these “specific finalities,” Foucault argues that government must *dispose*, using the term very deliberately, rather than *impose* which is a matter of law and which, though still part of the nature of the state, is possibly less crucial to governing than to *dispose*, that is, to arrange things in such a way as to ensure that a certain number of means and ends may be achieved. Thus, governmentality signifies the “ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics.” This ensemble forms part of rationalized, objectifying and controlling technologies (technologies of power) that make it possible for governments to govern. Institutions for example like the prison, the hospital, and even the university employ technologies of control in order to dispose certain things that make governing possible – the uniform, evaluation and assessment tests, schedules, etc. – all these are within the repertoire of the state by which it can dominate and exercise power, but also to extract conformity and compliance among the population. In the context of migration, the immigration authorities and their corresponding ministries are the institutions that deploy these technologies not only to rationalize the movement of labor across national boundaries, but also to control the risks associated with these movements.

However devoid of emotional content these technologies may be, Anne-Marie D'Aoust (2013) argues that in a context of transmigration, specifically marriage migration, the state employs the same technologies – what she terms “technologies of love.” These are concerned with the enforcement of controls, imposition of regulation, policing of international migration flows especially in a context where marriage migration is viewed with suspicion by the state in terms of its “emotional authenticity.” In a Foucauldian manner, the state disposes those things that will ensure that its population enters into marriage with migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees that are not fraudulent, what the French call *escroquerie sentimentale* (sentimental fraud), nor are they disguised as ruses to acquire citizenship based on “grey marriages”. These technologies have been around for several decades, and many states have perfected the application of such technologies. These may include interviews that determine authentic co-habitation and the probing of intimacy details, (e.g., what does your spouse eat for breakfast? Which side of the bed does your spouse occupy? Do you keep a pet?)

But what about emotional liaisons based on love, desire, and emotional pleasure that lie outside the ambit of marriage migration? What about migrants who, while inhabiting the same transnational space at a given point in time, enter into emotional arrangements that fall outside the migration-marriage-citizenship route? Such arrangements are deemed highly temporary and are tacitly accepted by both partners. Are human agents capable of circumventing the state by *inventing* new ensembles, circumventing controlling processes, bypassing procedures and tactics, and in the final analysis, create, however temporarily, emotional lives that can be enriching and satisfying?

I argue that the degree of governmentality conditions the range of options for the reconfiguration of identities and the corresponding emotions that are “allowable” within the exercise of state control. More specifically, I argue that governmentality circumscribes transnational emotions, and transmigrants adapt and adjust their emotions accordingly. These adjustments are measures of their own design in the exercise of “bounded agency” particularly within the confines set by ensembles of the state.

Specifically, I look at the situation of Filipino domestic workers in Thailand and Singapore. I argue that while technologies of love operate in both these countries, the governments of which have successfully eliminated the option for marriage migration as a route to citizenship, migrant workers have designed their own “escape routes,” defying these technologies, and averting the gaze of the state in their emotional lives over which they exercise relatively greater control. McNay (2000: 10) refers to the “capacity for autonomous action (among transmigrants) in the face of overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities.”

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Data for this paper was obtained from interviews with approximately fifty Filipina domestic workers in both countries over an intermittent period of five years. Only a few agreed to be quoted, hence direct quotations from these interviews are from those who expressly gave their consent. While this essay may reflect a meager number of voices from among the interviewees, others agreed to relate their life stories provided they remained anonymous. To protect their identities, their names have been disguised. Only the portions of their life stories that have their consent are reported here.

The women interviewed are in the age range of 20 to mid-40s. Very few were in their 50s and no longer experience the complications of long-distance marriages. Nearly all of the women are married, most of whom have experienced the stress of physical separation due to migration. Many of them have been estranged from their husbands who continue to live in the Philippines and have found

other emotional partners. There are very few who remained single, and they view domestic work as an opportunity to navigate the global “marriage market.” They are the most mobile and easily the most adventurous. Almost all still intended to (re)marry, but exercising much more caution and discretion, ensuring that their choices for a life partner are consistent with their desires to retain control of both their finances and their emotions. A few remain in stable marriages despite the distance and find comfort in family life, albeit in long distance mode.

My introduction to the domestic workers was through a chain of friends and acquaintances in both countries who employed Filipinas in their households, either as part-time workers in Bangkok, or full time live-in workers in Singapore. A few related to me their life experiences during visits to employment agencies in Singapore while waiting for prospective employment. A significant number of employment agencies in Singapore are owned and managed by Filipinos. Hence, they provide ample opportunities for lengthy conversations that inevitably include the emotional aspects of overseas work.

THE SINGAPORE MIGRATION REGIME

Singapore’s migration policy is directly related to its pattern of economic development over the last fifty years since independence. At the heart of this development strategy is the importation of migrant workers at all levels, to augment labor shortages and to propel economic growth through an aggressive build-up of the labor stock. Established in 1819 as a British trading colony, the growth of Singapore since independence has largely been due to immigration. In particular, the period since the 1980s witnessed rapid in-migration as Singapore became more industrialized.

In the 21st century, immigration continued unabated, as Singapore transformed its economy from an *entrepot* into a fully industrialized country, achieving very high per capita incomes relative to its Asian neighbors. In fact, it has succeeded in acquiring First World status within a very short period of time. This success has largely been due to a comprehensive human resource development strategy, premised on the continuous influx of migrant labor both at the lower, unskilled sector and in the professional, high-skilled sector. Singapore’s foreign labor force continuously grew very rapidly, doubling nearly every decade since the 1970s. In 2010, the number of foreign workers comprised about one third of the total labor force. See Table 1 below.

This phenomenal growth rate in the foreign labor sector was accompanied by and enforced through strong governmentality. Alongside a highly regulated regime of institutional controls are specific measures that include levies on domestic workers, issuance of time-bound work passes, the Foreign Identification Number (FIN), and strict classification of foreign workers in terms of skill levels.¹

¹ Work passes are issued according to unskilled, semi-skilled, and highly skilled categories. Within each of these categories are specific work conditions that include eligibility for permanent residence (PR) and citizenship. Workers in the unskilled category are not eligible for PR status, let alone citizenship.

Table 1: Foreign Workers in Singapore, 1970-2010

Year	Total Labor Force	No. of Foreign Workers	Percent of total labor force
1970	650,892	20,828	3.2
1980	1,077,090	119,483	7.4
1990	1,537,000	248,200	16.1
2000	2,129,300	615,700	28.1
2010	3,135,900	1,088,600	34.7

Source: Compiled from Rahman (1999:7) for 1970 and 1980; Singapore Department of Statistics (2001:43) for 1990; and Singapore Department of Statistics (2011:38) for 2000 and 2010. As quoted in Yeoh and Lin (2012:3) <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/rapid-growth-singapores-immigrant-population-brings-policy-challenges> (accessed 30 November 2014)

Central to the Singaporean state's ensemble of institutions and processes to control migration is the prohibition of marriage between locals and low-skilled migrants. Rarely does intermarriage occur; where they do, there is a very lengthy bureaucratic process of registration that would recognize the marriage, which often takes years and even of living separately before the state finally sanctions the marriage. The procedure that efficiently achieves this objective of separating the locals with the domestic workers is the temporary contract, which already indicates an implicit "shelf life" even with several contract extensions. Moreover, men who work and live alone are often refused an application to hire a domestic worker. A man living alone with a domestic servant who looks after all his needs offers untold temptations. To circumvent this, many men simply register their mothers, cousins, sisters, and a host of other relatives, real and imagined, as co-habitors in his dwelling.

Singaporean men living alone are rare occurrences. The nuclear family where child care predominates the work of the hired helper is the norm. Until the children are ready to enter university, the helper stays in the household. This may involve employment up to eighteen years. The household helper acts as a surrogate parent who not only helps the children with their material needs for schooling, but also may involve helping with homework and English speaking skills. The obvious advantage of English-speaking Filipino workers puts them in high demand among the locals.

Among migrant workers, however, emotional liaisons are "allowed." The state has not so far come up with technologies of control for low-skilled migrant workers, nor is it conceivable that the state would expend its resources on designing them. The temporary work permit is enough of a built-in guarantee. Thus, it has become commonplace for many of these domestic workers to enter into emotional liaisons with other low-skilled workers. Marriage is a non-option. For some Filipino workers, they maintain relationships with fellow Filipinos, South Asians and Chinese temporary workers. They form a community of other Filipinas who enter into similar liaisons, and thereby maintain this community for the duration of their stay in Singapore. None of them ever entertained the thought of marriage nor do they imagine themselves living in Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, India, or Sri Lanka. No one would ever dream of taking home their boyfriends back to the Philippines. The net effect of this is twofold: i) permanent singlehood among unmarried women; and ii) a high rate of infidelity among married Filipino workers – a situation that pervades not only in Singapore, but in other countries where marriage and labor migration is severely restricted and subject to the gaze of the state. Among single workers, "serial monogamy" is commonplace. Boyfriends and lovers are maintained for the duration of the work permit. The institutionalization of transience through contractual work has posed formidable challenges to a marriage migration strategy.

Further, the mandatory six-month pregnancy test for all female domestic workers rules out marriage migration even further. Where a domestic worker is found pregnant, she is immediately deported. Sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) are included in the bi-annual check-ups for women who are still in their reproductive age. Though not strictly enforced and very much dependent on the discretion of the employer, there is a 9 pm curfew on Sundays that requires workers to be back in their employers' homes from their regular day-off. To ensure compliance, any transgression on work contracts makes both the employer and domestic servant equally liable, and punishment ranges from fines, outright termination of contracts, and deportation in the case of expatriate employers.

Then there are the rare consensual partnerships between Filipinas and non-locals (mainly with Caucasian men) that normally should be construed as a success story, except that the male partner is unwilling to formalize the liaison through marriage. Within the term of the work permit, both partners consider themselves as spouses to one another, referring to each other as such especially among other fellow Filipinas. This is often viewed as a step-up the social ladder, an improvement in one's social standing to have been hitched, however temporarily, to someone perceived to possess better economic status and perhaps the possibility of a permanent escape should the Caucasian partner decide to make a formal offer of marriage. In this rather unconventional emotional bargain, both partners are quite unscrupulous and willing to bear the risks, not to mention the emotional costs. Joy (not her real name) related to me her close friend's predicament. She has a "so-called husband" in Singapore, Joy relates, yet they have doubts as to whether he is for real. "He doesn't take her to his country, doesn't introduce her to his family or friends. But they live together as though they are married, and she is his dependent." The litmus test is at the expiration date of the work permit and whether the Caucasian partner is willing to follow the subsequent legal procedures that would bring their relationship out of the shadows.

An additional common feature among Filipinas is infidelity from the spouse left behind. Most Filipinas leave for overseas work in their early twenties and remain employed for as much as two decades. Among the younger women, infidelity from their husbands is commonplace. Since infidelity is an expectation within the wider community, the peer group and their own relatives retain any residual hope for a reconciliation once the errant husband discovers the value, both financially and emotionally, of his overseas wife. Among transmigrants, the emotions of compassion (*awa*) and sacrifice (*pagmamalasakit*) are very central to the migration experience. Bautista (2014: 2) refers to this as the "economy of sacrifice", and migrant workers as "export-quality sufferers – transnational agents have been trained to externalize moral values and comportments of docility and subservience in the pursuit of overseas work." Other emotions such as betrayal, anger, disbelief, sorrow and vengeance tend to be discounted. One particular Filipino whom I interviewed wanted to surprise her family by an unannounced visit to the Philippines before taking up her new employment contract. Upon arrival, she found herself at the receiving end of the surprise. She discovered that her husband had already left their home and moved in with another woman. Returning to Singapore, her response was to seek immediate employment, "so that I can forget fast," she said, and recover the money that she felt was wasted on her husband who lavished her hard-earned salary on another woman. She would not allow herself too much time for other emotions, she said, because what was of paramount importance was her ability to find work and support her two young children who were just starting out with their schooling. Consistent with Bautista's ethic of sacrifice, Filipina domestic helpers are "lauded as virtuous sufferers . . . (that) resonates with a religious idiom of Christ-like martyrdom . . . (and) this, in turn, is premised upon the promulgation of a discourse in which the casualties of overseas deployment are valorized as the paragon of the highest civic and pious virtues (*Ibid.* 4).

All told, the transmigrant experience in Singapore is an emotionally charged one, and this begins at the moment of recruitment. In the applicants' folders is a repertoire of skills that constitute the applicants' employability, what Hochschild (1983) refers to as "emotional labor." In an employment situation, especially in the services sector, Hochschild refers to "feeling rules" to signify the social norms which require the appropriate type and amount of emotion that should be displayed in an employment situation. Cumulative expertise in knowing and displaying these feeling rules is referred to as "emotional management."² A sample of an applicant's profile that displays predominant labor reads thus:

(NAME of APPLICANT) has worked as a helper in Singapore for 10 years. She is a widow with a teenager child 17 years old. She is a motherly type, simple, hardworking, very independence and can follow instruction also willing to learn (*sic*). From 2004 till 2013: She was employed by a Chinese family that stayed in a condo for 9 years. Her main duties was taking care of the employer's children and doing all around household chores (*sic*). She manages everything from ironing, washing, cooking, marketing and car washing. She can cook Chinese food, Western food, and Filipino food.

2013–2014: She worked for a France family (*sic*) of 5 pax staying in residential house. (Name of Applicant) has to take care of 3 children aged 10, 7 and 2 yrs old respectively. During the day both her employer (*sic*) are working and she took care of the 2 kids. (Name of Applicant's) strength is caring for the children, natural talent to bond with the children. She is genuinely interested, very loving, patient and devoted with her work. She make sure that they are safe, healthy at all times. She showed a strong work ethic and always eager to fulfill her responsibilities to her employer satisfaction. (Name of Applicant) is available for transfer anytime and can be interviewed personally.³

In similar vein, applicants likewise register the conditions of their preferred work environment. Not surprisingly, these conditions are very much related to the emotional set-up of their idealized employment. One applicant indicated in her dossier that her current work environment is confusing due to the high number of people in the household (five persons) and thus causes emotional confusion. An example of an employment record and skills sets is shown as Figure 1 below.

² A good review of the theory and research on emotional labor can be found in Amy S. Wharton, *The Sociology of Emotional Labor 2009: Annual Review of Sociology* 35, 147-65

³ <http://www.bestmaid.com.sg> (accessed 20 November 2014). Real name of applicant was purposely omitted to protect her identity. The website address is herewith provided for attribution purposes, however, the specific website address for this particular candidate was likewise omitted for privacy purposes.

Figure 1: Sample of Employment Record⁴

From	To	Country	Employer	Main Duties	Remarks
2001	2003	United Arab Emirates	Muslim Employer	Taking care of newborn and young children, general housework, cooking and marketing	Completed contract
2007	2011	United Kingdom	Muslim Employer	Taking care of kids, general housework, cooking and marketing	Completed contract for 4 years
2012	2013	Qatar	Muslim family	Take care of young kids, general housework and cooking	Requested to go home to rest
2014	2014	Singapore	Chinese family	Taking care of newborn, general housework, cooking and grocery shopping	Work for 5 months, too many people in the house, confuse which one to follow

In face-to-face interviews, applicants openly express their impressions of their prospective employers to other fellow applicants. Mostly, applicants are anxious about their employers being too strict (*striкта*) and aloof (*mahirap lapitan*). Their desire for the ideal employer is one who is approachable (*madalinglapitan*) and easy to talk to (*madalingkausapin*). First impressions generated during the interview process are always couched in emotionally-laden adjectives: unfriendly (*suplada*); happy and easy-going (*masayahin*); and thoughtful and considerate (*maalahanin*). House helpers who consider it their good fortune to work for an employer whom they consider kind (*mabait*) and generous (*mapagbigay*) are those to whom they can confide their personal relationships. Several Filipino workers confessed that seeking the confidence of their employers is a form of protection for themselves and their reputation within the Filipino community, especially if they are involved in unconventional liaisons.

INTIMACY AMONG TRANSMIGRANTS IN THAILAND

There are an estimated 3.5 million migrants in Thailand coming from three major source countries: Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. They are mostly low-wage workers in the manufacturing sector financed by foreign investment. There are also a number of high-wage professionals working in the country, but these are far outnumbered by the low-wage workers that are also employed in the domestic and informal sectors. There are an unknown number of unregistered migrants. Also, the number of non-nationals who stay is a miniscule number compared to the number of foreigners who stay and work in Thailand. Also, the number of professionals (including diplomats and officials) with official work permits is a very small number compared to migrants from the three aforementioned countries. Nearly 95% of migrants come from Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar most of whom are unregistered. Since these are estimated numbers, it is likely that the total figure is higher than what is reported in the Thailand Migration Report.⁵

⁴ <http://www.bestmaid.com.sg> (accessed 20 November 2014).

⁵ Thailand Migration Report 2011, 9. http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/TMR_2011.pdf (accessed on 25 July 2014)

Thailand's migration regime is moderately regulated despite attempts by the state to impose controls. The Thai government has initiated the registration process in the past decade to control migrant flows from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar. However, the progress has been slow and more than half of the migrants are still unregistered. More recently, the military government has embarked on a program to crack down on foreigners whom the authorities perceive as taking undue advantage of relatively relaxed controls in Thailand's many borders.

Migration to Thailand via marriage is as restrictive as that of Singapore, although property relations is the basis of this restriction. A Thai national who is married to a non-Thai loses her (mostly) right to own property. Thus, many propertied Thai women married to non-Thais forego registration of their marriage in Thailand and marry instead in their (usually male) spouse's country. Intermarriage with Thais is also an expensive proposition. According to Thai immigration laws, a Thai long-term visa is granted only on a yearly basis with extensions. There is the legal requirement of a bank statement showing regular income of 40,000 THB (approx. US\$1500) per month or a local bank balance of 400,000 THB (approx. USD15,000) per year. Further, pay slips, money transfers, letters from employers/investment company may also be required. More recently, immigration authorities have required "four photographs of you and your spouse in your Thai property, one photo of you standing outside the property clearly showing the mailbox and your street number and three photos inside the dwelling showing both of you. Also required, in some instances, is a map from your property to the Immigration office. Presumably this is so Immigration can easily find you if they wish to do one of the spot checks that they perform from time to time."⁶

Despite the legal restriction of not being allowed to work on a tourist visa, many Filipina workers defy this rule, gambling on the proposition that a diplomat would request them to work in the expansive UN system of in an embassy. This guarantees legal stay, higher wages, and better benefits (days-off, shorter working hours, etc.). Other employers would sponsor the domestic worker and pay for a one-year student visa, though she may only be required to take Thai lessons once a week, or cooking classes. Still others apply for a dependent visa and take on the domestic worker as part of an extended household. For those who remain on tourist visas, they take advantage of the ASEAN status that permits them to remain in Thailand for 15 days if entering by land, or 30 days if entering through the international airport.

For Filipina migrant workers, marriage migration strategy is a closed option unless they luck out and find a Caucasian husband in Thailand's highly lucrative "retirement market." Typically, Filipina domestic workers enter as tourists and engage in "part-time" household work. Many of them rent out rooms in the Pattanakarn district of Bangkok, often sharing the costs of the room in a building designed for itinerant workers. Their hourly wages are more than sufficient to cover their rental costs. They have control of their time, very much unlike a live-in domestic situation where they could be working late hours without additional compensation. These living arrangements provide opportunities to do housework on a time schedule of their choosing. Typically, they divide their day into two sets of four hours in the morning and the afternoon with a 1-2 hour break for lunch. After 5 o'clock, they are free from housework and the rest of the evening is their free time. These are the hours during which they pursue their private pleasures. For the younger domestic workers, their after-5pm hours are devoted to patronizing one of Bangkok's many night spots, spending time with friends, lovers, other co-workers. The legendary nightlife in Bangkok has not failed to live up to expectations.

⁶ A Guide to Thailand's Visa. 2008. *Stickman's Guide to Bangkok*.
<http://www.stickmanweekly.com/ThailandVisa/ThailandLongTermVisa.htm> (accessed on 2 July 2014)

Among the Filipinas whom I interviewed, most were in their late twenties and early thirties who come to Thailand on tourist visas to earn money through housework. It was the surest and fastest way to land employment in Bangkok. Others venture to Pattaya, Phuket and Koh Samui in the southern provinces where numerous resorts attract overseas tourists. The high demand for English-speaking workers in these foreign enclaves are easily met by Filipinos in contrast to their Burmese, Lao and Cambodian competitors. These transmigrants have come from Singapore, Hong Kong, the Middle East and also Europe after their work contracts expired and were no longer renewed by their employers. They prefer to live and work in Thailand because of the less restrictive employment conditions and the options available in the other sectors. As always, their network of friends, relatives and neighbors provides the best source of job market information. Typically, part-time workers would experience a high rate of turn-over in their employment; some held jobs that last from a few days to several months.

Maria (not her real name) came to Bangkok on a quick stop-over on her way to Russia. For the final four hours in the afternoon, she found part-time work before boarding her plane at midnight, armed with a few hundred dollars with the additional income as a welcome bonus. "Why Russia?" I asked during our interview. "My next adventure, and my friend is there waiting for me. We will work together in the same house so I will not be alone," she replied. And of course the possibility of meeting a "guy" who might "become serious with her" and potentially give her a new life. Barely in her thirties, Maria viewed the world as a wide open space in which to pursue her multiple goals: to gain financial autonomy, discover new horizons, travel, meet different people, and down the road, perhaps even meet her life partner.

Among Filipinas, this entrepreneurialism was commonplace. They are nimble and versatile, able to adjust to the high variability of domestic work. Unlike Singapore, there are no work permits issued, and therefore they can disappear at anytime without prior notice especially if their employers turn out not to their liking, or if a better option came along. While others may view this as a tremendous source of uncertainty, these intrepid Filipinas consider part-time work as part of a survival strategy characterized as a combination of adventure, competitiveness, and even fun.

Teresa (not her real name) worked for at least twenty different employers since she came to Bangkok in the late 1990s. She worked exclusively for expatriates, and she allocated regular working hours and days for each one of her employers. After nearly two decades, she finally met her good fortune when a diplomat from an overseas embassy in the Western hemisphere employed her with an unbeatable salary and a working visa that no longer required her to do the exit runs to Cambodia every fifteen days. She was guaranteed a tenured job despite the regular turn-over of diplomats and she would retain her job as an official staff at the embassy. Hers is a rare story of utmost good fortune, a model employment situation to emulate. Her name continues to crop up in conversations with Filipina workers who regard her life with a mixture of admiration and envy.

It is quite common that domestic servants in Thailand enter into emotional liaisons with the locals, or with other non-Thais. Visa restrictions are relatively more relaxed than Singapore, and work in the non-formal sector is plentiful. Many Filipinas leave the country to escape domestic abuse, spousal infidelity, or an all-around unsatisfying domestic life. Thailand offers plentiful opportunities for reconstructing both work and personal relationships – a situation that is made possible by the varieties of short- and long-term visas offered by the state. Not surprisingly, the majority of the Filipinas in Bangkok are young, unmarried or separated from their husbands. With flexible working conditions, many Filipinas can meet their financial obligations with a considerable measure of autonomy in contrast to their Singaporean counterparts. They also enjoy the independence afforded by living separately from their employers.

An unrestricted labor market in Thailand, especially in the informal sector, offers more options for readjustment of emotional lives among domestic workers. Marita (not her real name) met her boyfriend Alex (not his real name) via Facebook. He is employed in Pattaya while she lives and works in Bangkok after having spent about five years in Singapore. They speak to each other everyday on the phone to plan their monthly meetings. They would alternate: she goes to Pattaya one month, he comes to Bangkok the next. Marita has chosen to forget the unfaithful husband in the Philippines who ditched her for another woman. The phone liaison with Alex and monthly visits are enough of an emotional fulfillment. Meanwhile, her earnings mostly go to her son who is finishing a computer course in Manila. When he graduates, she hopes to bring him over to Bangkok where he can find a job and live with her. Alex is a welcome addition to her life, and the physical distance between them allows her much needed emotional control. "I have my son to focus on, so he can finish his studies. Alex is a bonus, and I don't have to live with him (*pakisamahan*) or serve him (*pagsilbihan*)" she declared with much confidence. Like many others who brave the tenuousness of a fickle labor market, Marita found the workable balance between financial autonomy and emotional sustenance. The trade-offs with job insecurity and exhausting trips to and from the Cambodian border every two weeks are well worth it.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, the illustrative cases of Singapore and Thailand provide the opportunity to investigate the workings of governmentality and the impact of this on the emotional lives of Filipino domestic workers.

In both cases, migration through marriage is a difficult, if not a closed strategy for domestic workers. This limits the exercise of agency and precludes all attempts among transmigrants to pursue a more permanent solution to their tenuous migration status. The ultimate escape for Filipinos in both Thailand and Singapore is to find an expatriate spouse, usually Western. Thus far, however, these options occur within very narrow margins given the highly segregated worlds between the unskilled and skilled sectors. Governmentality practices through regulatory measures in these two labor spheres have worked kept these sectors separate.

However, despite governmentality and the restrictions these impose on emotional choices among Filipina domestic workers, the exercise of agency continues to trump the state's ensemble. The ability of Filipina women to engage in "strategic conduct in constructing their own (multiple) identities and navigating their (and often their families') life paths" (Yeoh et.al 2002: 2) serves as testimonies to the endurance of human intentionality despite structural constraints and limitations. The alternative life paths and identities that they consciously cultivate is initially afforded by domestic work. For many, this type of work would be shunned because of its intrinsic degrading character. But for numerous others, despite the risks and the uncertainties, they regard this as avenues for "transcending political boundaries" (Lee and Piper 2003: 126) and thus for reframing their personal relationships that imbue them with a larger measure of personal autonomy. Perhaps this is one of the most encouraging features in the lives of itinerant domestic workers.

The changes in migration regime have implications for the immediate future of domestic workers in Thailand, where adjustments to immigration policy are on-going. The military government that has been ruling the country since May 2014 almost immediately introduced border control measures to discourage tourists from abusing their visas and undertaking illegal work in Thailand. However, thus far, these measures show little success in controlling illegal migration. Changes in policy happen

frequently.⁷ Visa runs to Cambodia were no longer allowed in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of martial law. The border was closed to foreign tourists who cross and return the same day. Some go to Laos instead, spending approximately USD120 to hire a van and spend two nights in a hotel. In the past, tourists could obtain 90-day visas from the Thai Embassy in Laos. The latest practice reduced the tourist visa to 15 days. Filipinas were distressed by this new ruling as this would significantly increase their costs, notwithstanding the eighteen-hour travel by land each way from Bangkok to Vientiane. In light of Thailand's labor shortage due to a projected decline in working-age population for the period 2010-2050 (Ducanes 2008: 13), constant readjustment is an unavoidable necessity.

The forthcoming ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will definitely require even further adjustment in migration policies by all member countries. Singapore and Thailand are expected to be affected the most as they are labor-receiving countries of long-standing. Thus far, there is no formulated policy for harmonizing labor movements across these countries except in specific occupational categories.⁸ Filipina domestic servants are in the dark as to their options once the AEC is formed – a situation they look upon with trepidation even while they recognize the inherent possibilities for exploiting loopholes in the absence of clearly articulated policy. As always, the intrepid Filipinas are a step ahead, already formulating their strategies in anticipation of new procedures that would directly affect their lives, particularly the financial and emotional autonomy that they protect with utmost vigilance.

⁷ Thailand Introduces New Visa Regulations. *Channel News Asia*. 1 September 2014. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/thailand-introduces-new/1339732.html> (accessed 29 November 2014)

⁸ Sarah Huesler and Adam Heal, "Moving Freely? Labor Mobility in ASEAN." *Asia Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade*. Policy Brief No. 40. June 2014. <http://artnet.unescap.org/pub/polbrief40.pdf> (accessed 29 November 2014)

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