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Overseas Filipino workers and the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring the emotional labor of persistence

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ABSTRACT

Without a doubt, the precarity of an overseas Filipino worker’s (OFW) life is augmented by the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily through the economic and political consequences that such public health crises engender. However, while primarily seen in terms of their economic and political dimensions, these consequences also affectively disrupt the life of OFWs. In this paper, I trace the various conflicting ways that OFWs perform what I am provisionally calling the emotional labor of persistence. This type of emotion work, though tied to, and enabled by the precarious conditions in which the respondents live, is a resistive and agential kind of emotional labor. It allows the OFWs to endure precarity, and in the process, find ways to elude, confront, or question the modes of thinking and feeling in which they are constantly circumscribed by the demands of their overseas work and overall precarious situation.

Rebecca Solnit (2020, para. 6) was right when she noted that “the first lesson a disaster teaches is that everything is connected.” Referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, Solnit illuminates how structures of power that maintain a world of inequality and inequity are in fact deeply connected, if not responsible, for the collapse of our interrelated lives: “At moments of immense change, we see with new clarity the systems – political, economic, social, ecological – in which we are immersed as they change around us. We see what’s strong, what’s weak, what’s corrupt, what matters and what doesn’t” (Solnit, 2020, para. 6). Likewise, writing about the situation in the United Kingdom (UK), Davoudi and Ormerod (2021) begin by locating the discourse of our despair and survival amidst these trying times in the World Health Organization (WHO) slogan, “we’re in this together.” They point out that this slogan is problematic because it

suggest[s] that the virus does not discriminate and can affect porters and cleaners as well as princes and prime ministers. However, this narrative overlooks the profoundly unequal health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. (Davoudi and Ormerod, 2021, p. 1, p. 1)

What these authors lay bare are the multiple interconnected vulnerabilities and oppressions most people endure in everyday life, only thrown into stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic. As Solnit (2020, para. 31) reiterates: “ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality.” For overseas Filipino workers, who are the focus of this paper, one of the manifestations of this reality during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the massive termination of jobs. Emerging literature on the displacement of OFWs because of these abrupt terminations continue to document and analyze the effects of the pandemic on the economy and the lives it has disrupted. For example, Galam (2020b, para. 3) writes that, “[t]he global economic and labour market devastation caused by the pandemic has led to the mass retrenchment and displacement of more than 400,000 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) whose remittances the Philippines has depended on to keep its economy afloat.” Although the Philippine government has made efforts to repatriate OFWs, it is proving to be an inadequate response to the overall structural shifts in employment during the pandemic. Fernandez et al. (2020, para. 11) report that, the prospects for returning OFs [overseas Filipinos] are not any better at home. During the first few weeks of community quarantine, 3 million left the labor force and an additional 5 million became unemployed based on the April 2020 Labor Force Survey. As the community quarantine dragged on, its economic impact became worse.

Regardless of the pandemic, the OFW’s life is indeed precarious. By tracing the emergence of this precarity, Paret and Gleeson (2016, p. 280)
explain that it has become the analytical concept by which recent scholarship on migration is framed because

the migrant existence is often precarious in multiple, and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination or isolation.

This precarity is rooted in the movements of many historical, political, and economic forces. The precarity of the OFW’s life is made more precarious by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though it is clear how the precarity of an OFW’s life prior to the pandemic hinges on social, political, and economic disruptions, the consequences of a public health crisis in general, the COVID-19 pandemic, and their affective and emotional disruptions to OFW’s lives is less apparent.

Aguilar (2020, p. 290) has used the term “covidscapes” to refer to the reality of the present pandemic, and he has described this reality as “profoundly perspectival. It is the physical, experiential, affective, and epistemological terrain constituted by the congealing yet shifting confluence of the Covid-19 disease” and is therefore “uneven across the world and also within the same country, with different social groups and entities experiencing it and responding to it in markedly different ways.” In this paper, I explore the intersections and particular forms of precarity, migration, and emotion, that are lived by overseas Filipinos during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other scholars have also begun examining these intersections in light of the recent deluge of global-scale catastrophes. For example, Katharina Wuropulos (2020, p. 3) writes that

the mere hearing of words such as disease, pandemic, emergency, or crisis can bring up imaginations of how affected people must feel. Consternation, panic, fear, and sadness are examples of usually negative emotions which are discursively connected to the named phenomena.

In contrast to these emotions, Galam (2020a) has shown how solidarity and care figure in the experiences of Filipinos in the UK. Pointing out the focus on migration and emotion of these recent works is important in light of a review of studies on migration and emotion by Boccagni and Baldassar (2015, p. 74) where they claimed that “the emotional side of the migrant condition seems still relatively understudied. This is partly to be explained by the dominance of economic and political analyses of migration.”

Using emotions as a lens to understand the life of the migrant worker is valuable because “migration invariably affects emotions as both (corporeally) embodied and (societally) embedded” (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015, p. 75). Boccagni and Baldassar (2015, p. 79) further emphasize that “investigating migrants’ emotional experience sheds light on the shifting material, relational and spatial bases of emotions more broadly.” In examining how the COVID-19 pandemic affects overseas Filipinos workers, I proceed from the assumption that overseas work and public health crises are states of precarity also characterized by their affective dimension.

I interviewed three OFWs, Chona, Kakay, and Ben, (not their real names), who were terminated from their jobs in Abu Dhabi (Chona), Dubai (Kakay), and Doha (Ben) during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted the in-depth, semi-structured interviews separately via Zoom. Aware that three life stories might present a limitation in finding a basis to explore the interrelatedness of emotion, labor, and migration, I locate the respondents’ lives in the many discourses of overseas labor that also inform the realities of many OFWs. To this end, my conversations with Chona, Kakay, and Ben included stories about their time as OFWs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which spanned 14–15 years each. We began by talking about the reasons and circumstances that pushed them to find work abroad, shuttling back and forth between their lives in the host and home countries, as they tell me about the ways they came to terms with the termination of their employment.

1. Early return

Chona, Kakay, and Ben’s time abroad spans from 1997 until 2020. Kakay and Chona both migrated abroad for the first time to work in 2006, while Ben first migrated in 1997. Prior to the termination of their employment, they all worked in the Middle East. It was a long journey before they reached their last job abroad. In this section I trace the kind of lives and emotion work that Chona, Kakay, and Ben have performed — and that have been disrupted and altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. These life course stories inform the way they persist during their attempt to return to the Philippines.

As a graduate of civil engineering in the Philippines, Chona found her first job in Qatar, where she was a quantity surveyor for eight years. Chona came to Qatar with a tourist visa and no employer. She recalled that, “when I arrived in Qatar, my focus was to find a job. I faxed my resume nonstop. You know the yellow pages, like the one by PLDT [Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company] that we have here in the Philippines? I faxed my resume to all the listings there that had to do with construction”. In 2015, she went to Abu Dhabi and was also employed as a quantity surveyor for another company. When I asked her if she can recall the moment when she finally decided to work overseas, she told me that making the decision was difficult for her as a mother. Chona recounted the guilt and worry that absent mothers feel (Asis et al., 2004; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009) as she contemplated leaving her five-year-old son to work abroad. Then, she told me about a particular episode vividly:

I am a single mom. My aim was to raise my child by myself. When my son was around two or three years old, I rushed him to the hospital because of a severe asthma attack. I was carrying him in my arms. He couldn’t breathe. I had no money and I had to rely on my mother. I will never forget being turned away at the hospital because we had no money. I thought my heart would crumble. So I said to myself, ‘Alright, I need to go abroad and I need to find a job for my son’. When I was finally in the plane, I couldn’t think of work. All I could think about was my son. I was crying the entire flight. When I landed in Qatar, my eyes were so swollen.

Chona only took a one-month vacation in the Philippines every year, until 2020, when she was dismissed from her job and forced to go home. Chona’s resolve and determination to work abroad also resonates with Kakay’s and Ben’s stories.

When Ben left the Philippines in 1997, he went to Taiwan to work for a year, then he was in Saudi Arabia for two and a half years, and then in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for six months. His three kids were left at home, with his wife, who was also working full-time. In 2001, Ben returned to the Philippines because, as he told me, he was a young father who had kids at home, and life abroad was simply too difficult. He stayed in the Philippines for nine years, jumping from one job to another, sometimes working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Although Ben had no intention of working overseas again, a former colleague who was also Filipino emailed him in 2010 and informed him about a job opportunity in Qatar. In this job and location, he eventually became a technical manager and quality control engineer (he told me that he performed the job of three people because of the company’s poor policy and management). At first, the manager in the company did not want to hire Ben because he was already 43 years old. But the friendships and social networks Ben had built in Taiwan helped him secure the position. Among the friends he had made there were fellow OFWs who were also linked to the company in Qatar. They told the manager that they had worked with Ben before, and that Ben was fit for the job. Having had an idea of what life abroad was like, Ben said that the decision to leave once more was difficult. He did not want to be separated from his family again. Ben added, in a resigned tone, that work abroad has no “direction” (“walang plano dito”). This phrasing means that, to Ben, working overseas often feels like an endless labor that leads to nowhere, where money is not enough to improve one’s situation, and in which it feels
rather like a band-aid solution to a large and deep problem. This time around, Ben said he was offered an adequate salary that might have a different outcome. Ben told me, “I did it for my children, so they can have a better life”.

Kakay’s migration story also took many paths like Ben’s, and similarly began out of necessity too. What finally pushed Kakay to find work elsewhere was losing her job in the Philippines around the same time that her husband also lost his. This event happened as their two children were about to go to high school. Kakay told me,

My children then were young. We didn’t have a lot of savings. Everything was breakage. We put all of our money towards our children’s education and a future home we can call our own. Then the company I was working for closed. When my husband also lost his job, we bought a van that he could drive as a means of public transportation.1 But that didn’t last long. We would always get caught by the police because we couldn’t register the van properly for public transport. We just end up using the money we earn to pay for the fines.

Like Ben and Chona, who had an idea of what happens abroad, informed by stories of difficulty and danger that OFWs experience, Kakay also initially refused to go, but stated that she had no choice. She wanted her husband to go first, but was told by a distant relative who was already working overseas that it would be better for Kakay to leave first because “it is easier for women to get jobs abroad”, signaling the feminization of labor migration (Yoshimura, 2007; Parreñas, 2000; Piper, 2003). Kakay arrived in Dubai with a tourist visa. She worked as a cleaner and a part-time waitress. She said “it was so difficult to be the first one to go. I knew no one. In my job, we cleaned small hotel hallways and the cafeteria of the hotel staff. We also cleaned the surroundings of the building”. After working 1 year as a cleaner, Kakay borrowed money to cover the cost of visas and flight tickets to fly her husband to Dubai as well. Kakay remembers her first year abroad with a mix of relief and pain:

About six days before I spent one year as a cleaner, one of the friends I had made in the place I stayed at sent me a job vacancy, among the many she found that day because between the two of us, she was the one who sent her CV every day to every place she could find.

It was an arduous process for Kakay, whose previous company held her passport to prevent her from switching jobs: “When I resigned from my job as a cleaner, they withheld my passport. That’s illegal, but they do it”. Eventually, Kakay would be hired as an office assistant at the company she would end up working for until 2020, when she was let go because of the pandemic.

Out of necessity, Chona, Kakay and Ben, as OFWs, navigated the tensions between their emotions and material reality. The three dealt with a complex set of emotions as early as their departure from the home country, a process wherein they reconcile their love for their families and the need to be away from them in order to sustain this love (McKay, 2007). This process was also responsible for how Chona, Kakay, and Ben were able to push themselves to leave the country despite the inadequacy of the Philippine state in handling labor migration (Rodriguez, 2002; Solomon, 2009; Tigno, 2014). That the respondents started out with tourist visas and informal social networks pointed to the reality of the state’s history of absence in ensuring the welfare of OFWs and securing their employment abroad, despite its reliance on OFW remittances that help the Filipino economy. 

Chona, Kakay, and Ben’s stories show that a messiness and difficulty of emotional experience goes hand in hand with migration. One way in which these emotions are managed is simply by adapting: as Chona put it, “you get used to your life abroad” (“sanay ka na”). It is a management and regulation of emotion that helps them do their job because, put frankly, money must be sent home every month. As OFWs, they are valued by the state chiefly for their remittance, and, in this regard, their emotions exist only as an excess that is displaced and spills onto conversations with fellow OFWs. The work that being sanay requires includes drawing artificial boundaries between life (family, love) and labor (survival, remittance). In this sense, such circumstances produce a way to dissociate the emotional complexity that overseas work entails from the emotional stagnation that overseas work demands. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, when they lost their jobs, Chona, Kakay, and Ben performed a different kind of emotion management, one that is tied to their life abroad, but that now meant dealing with the slew of pandemic-related problems, including difficulties of returning home jobless and needing to recuperate the self lost during years spent “conditioning” themselves (to be sanay).

In the following sections, I trace the varied and conflicting ways the respondents dealt with these emotions while still in their respective host countries, and as they tried to find ways to return home. I begin by examining how they manage fear; I then proceed to look at other emotions that co-existed with this fear. Finally, I make sense of the ways the respondents managed their emotions and the implications for their precariousness. Drawing from Arlie Hochschild (1983) concept of emotional labor, I argue that all respondents performed what I am calling the emotional labor of persistence. This emotion work is tied to and enabled by the precarious conditions of the respondents’ labor and life abroad, but it is also a resistive and agential kind of emotional labor that allowed them to endure this state of precarity. In enduring they found ways to elude, confront, or question the modes of thinking and feeling circumscribed by the demands of their overseas work and precarity.

2. Living with/beyond fear

For Chona, Kakay, and Ben, the fear of contracting the disease was inextricably tied to the threat of “destabilizing” the precarious state that they had long endured by “getting used to” life abroad by taking away their jobs. Kakay admitted that even before she was informed of the company’s decision to let her go, she already had worried and feared that she would be fired because she was not “essential”: “I was worried about being fired from my job because I couldn’t do anything from home, but I was getting paid. They had no use for me. And we didn’t know until when the pandemic would last”. The state of precarity that the pandemic has created intensified the disposability of certain lives and certain forms of labor (Pratt et al., 2017). In a time of heightened panic and emotions, Kakay’s account manifests a crucial aspect of fear during the pandemic: metrics of performance, wage, and necessity. Such economic rubrics of labor value anything but an OFW’s life.

But this fear must be managed, felt but not expressed, faced but not dispelled. In Chona’s case, her fear of losing her job coincided with her fear of losing her mother. During the pandemic, Chona’s mother was hospitalized, which made it doubly hard to decide whether to go home or stay abroad and earn the money needed to finance the hospitalization:

When my mother was admitted to the hospital in April, I started performing poorly in my job. Then the pandemic happened. People were laid off and I was one of them because I did not perform well. I was always absent. My priority was my mother who was in a critical state. Your employer doesn’t understand that.

Chona added that “you constantly have to set your feelings aside when you are abroad”. Despite Chona’s emotional work, she was fired anyway. Here, the fear of losing one’s life and the fear of losing one’s job are not separate from each other but intertwined so that ending one means effectively terminating the other.

Fear during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies and crises are well-documented (Carney and Bennett, 2014; Degerman et al., 2020; Schimmelfennig et al., 2020; Wurupulos, 2020). In this case, while Chona, Kakay, and Ben were all afraid of contracting the disease, they

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1 SUVs and vans are a mode of public transportation in the Philippines.
feared the situation specifically because they are in their respective host countries and not in their homeland. For instance, Ben asked: “If I test positive for the virus, how will I go to the hospital? Where will I get my food? I worry about all those kinds of things because I am by myself”. Chona even went as far as to say that if being infected is inevitable, she hopes that it will at least happen once she lands in Manila: “It is difficult to die in the host country. No one will be able to see you, you will just get cremated right away.” Kakay also questioned, “what if something happens to you, who will bring you to the hospital? If you die, who will arrange your funeral?”

With the articulation of the respondents’ fears surfaced the loneliness and alienation from their home and diasporic communities. All respondents agreed that one of the most unbearable effects of fear during the pandemic is the realization (and fact) that they are practically by themselves and would have difficulty relying on somebody else should things take a turn for the worse. Here, diaspora communities that foster a sense of belongingness do not seem to offer much solace. In fact, though Chona and Ben noted that they were part of different communities, such ties did not figure in our conversations about dealing with the pandemic-related fear. However, even though such connections were not made during or due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these communities did play a role, based on the respondents’ accounts, in maintaining a sense of safety and security for OFWs like Ben and Chona. Under “normal” circumstances, affective friendships provided presence and support in the host country (Tsujimoto, 2016). That such bonds weakened rather than strengthened during the pandemic was interesting.

Fear, it seemed, obscured this sense of belonging and reoriented the respondents’ perspective towards home rather that diasporic support networks. For Brian Massumi (2010, p. 54), “fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter”. The “futurity” of fear, as SiAnne Ngai (2005) has called it, helps explain the way fear during a pandemic isolates the OFW from their social networks and diverts their attention to forms of security that would ensure their future selves a stable ‘disposition’.

The respondents’ accounts suggest that emotions were a site where the consequences of political and economic forces of migration were worked out as much as the same emotions were a force for migrating. Of these emotions, it is fear that arose from the specific contexts of being an OFW during a pandemic and that governed the respondents’ emotional state and their emotion work. The respondents highlighted the tension between living in fear and persisting to gather oneself and return home.

Much has been said about the way fear works in politics to justify racist logics of the state (Ahmed, 2004) to organize everyday life and regulate (and dominate) human behavior (Massumi, 1993), and, most recently to effectively implement pandemic response under the right governance (Degerman et al., 2020). In Chona, Kakay, and Ben’s stories, managing and keeping fear at bay was an unavoidable consequence of their situation. This management of fear goes back to the beginning of their journeys as OFWs. In the beginning, they were simultaneously fearful of what lay beyond their countries’ borders and the possibility of not surviving the precarious conditions within its borders, which is what pushed them abroad in the first place. What these accounts show is that as OFWs, Chona, Kakay, and Ben’s lives have been spent (so far) living and laboring in, and through, fear in their attempt to persist beyond it. In the next section, I discuss how fear has also been met with competing and reinforcing feelings, primarily because of the different forms of pandemic response in the host and home countries.

3. Feelings for/of home

Despite the prevalence of the respondents’ fear and their work to manage this, other emotions came into play both in the host countries and in their attempts to return home. For instance, Chona details that her fear of the pandemic and of losing her job during her time in Abu Dhabi was compounded by confusion. Censorship of news was still rampant in Abu Dhabi. Thus, guidelines and protocols in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which she did not quite understand at the time, made her panic at first. According to Lynn Maalouf (2020, para. 4) of Amnesty International (2020), “the GCC states have failed to justify how these measures are necessary and proportionate for the protection of public health”. Chona says that it was only through her Facebook community, predominantly comprised of fellow Filipinos, that she finally understood the pandemic.

All respondents agreed, however, that the pandemic response in their respective host countries was better than the management of the pandemic in the Philippines. But even an efficient pandemic response in the host countries cannot compete with persistent feelings for their families. According to Ben, “it’s different when you are with your family during this pandemic”. Kakay echoed this concern when she talked about the need to be physically present in the Philippines to make sure her family is safe and healthy; she also noted that:

You worry that your family in the Philippines gets infected by the virus. You always tell them to be careful. But you constantly worry about it, and it’s very stressful. In Dubai, yes, you worry about getting infected, but hospitalization is free. You become afraid, though, of being in a critical state. But in the Philippines, you worry about how expensive it will be if you contract the disease. You don’t want your family in the Philippines to get infected.

Similarly, family is of utmost importance to Chona: “Now, my priority is my family, my parents, especially, because they are both senior citizens and no one watches over them.” It is at this juncture in our conversations that the respondents were able to draw comparisons between the host countries and the Philippines, bringing to the surface their feelings about their homeland, including its inadequate pandemic response. For Ben, “it’s a mix of emotions. There’s frustration, anger, annoyance, sadness, because you can’t do anything. You hope that it could have been the same for the Philippines”. These feeling also led him to reflect, admitting that the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply altered his emotional state: “I became more worrisome, sadder, especially during the lockdown when you were just in your house. In the times that we did go to work, they made us work shorter hours. So more hours were spent at home where you felt more homesick”. Kakay shared the same frustration and anger towards the Philippines, pointing out that it is the government that must be blamed:

Of course, you become angry at our government here in the Philippines. Everything leads back to them. Our problem is our government … If I could have done something not to go home, I wouldn’t have gone home. But that’s what you expect when you return to the Philippines—you’re on your own (bahala ka sa buhay mo).

Chona, Kakay, and Ben distinguished their feelings of attachment and love for their families from their feelings of anger and disappointment towards the state. Their feelings about their families allowed them to push through and let them suspend the emotional work of managing fear (for the thought of being with one’s family gives comfort and reassurance). However, feelings about the state only required the same kind of laborious effort of managing one’s emotions. Returning jobless, the respondents knew that the state offered limited prospects for employment. A poor pandemic response was expected of a country that, for several decades, has failed to develop adequate institutional support for OFWs like them. All respondents were only able to obtain plane tickets to Manila by negotiating with their companies, using social networks, and finding their own way, without any help from the inadequate repatriation process of the Philippine state (Liao, 2020). In this case, the struggle to return home was driven by feelings for the family. Despite the challenges posed upon the obduracy of familial ties among transnational families (Asis, 1994), these feelings override the anger towards, fear of, and disappointment with the state. What makes the persistence of this love so laborious is not just the precarious condition
of the OFWs, but the complicity of the Philippine state in reproducing structures of precarity as well through an exploitative scheme of labor migration (Lindio-McGovern, 2004; Tigno, 2014, 1990).

Kakay’s statement, “bahala ka sa buhay mo”, which loosely translates to “you’re on your own”, captures how the Philippine state abandoned and neglected its citizens, especially during the pandemic, when the state response is an extreme form of militarization, rather than scientifically backed policies and regulations (Hapal, 2021). While bahala ka sa buhay mo is a common phrase in Filipino, the meaning of which ranges from “whatever” to “you’re on your own”, here Kakay articulated the weight that the phrase has accumulated in the past months because of the pandemic, her situation as an OFW, and the Philippine state’s role in this situation. “Bahala ka sa buhay mo,” in this time and context, confronts the criminal negligence of the state in preserving life (buhay) through means that precede and co-exist with the pandemic. Kakay highlighted the urgency and reality of fending for one’s life within the host country (as an OFW) and within the home country that threatens the lives of its citizens. In crossing borders, an act that requires state help but for which they were not able to receive any help, Kakay, Chona, and Ben navigated these dangers, and their journeys to return and reunite with their families become a preservation and assertion of life. There is a kind of emotional work here that persists and insists on continuing, pushing through conditions of precarity and danger. It is a complex confluence of emotions that submits to techniques of management and suppression and, more importantly, heeds the call of family, life, and love. The work that the OFWs perform here, which I am calling the emotional labor of persistence, is the subject of the next section.

4. Feeling of persistence/persistence of feeling

The intersecting discourses of labor, migration, and emotions have a long history. Migration is a disruption of established personal ties and form of social attachment in the homeland that are reconfigured but not eroded when family members are separated by national borders. Separation affects intimacy, which Yeoh et al. (2005) have argued in structures of precarity as well through an exploitative scheme of labor migration. In a distance from an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar that ranges from of a distance from an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar that ranges from of a distance from an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar that ranges from of a distance from an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar that ranges from of a distance from an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar that ranges from of a distance from an emotional grammar of an emotional grammar that ranges from.

Eyes on the past and present, the ways by which their emotional labor enabled her to recuperate a sense of self that had lived in fear, as fear, anger, loneliness, sadness, and even frustration, confusion, disappointment, comfort, solace, and homesickness shape the way the respondents navigated their situations, it is their awareness of how these emotions materialized, and how they were managed, that suggested that the OFWs were not entirely subject to the conditions that gave rise to these emotions. Though it may seem like their endurance of such realities is an acquiescence to structures of power and inequality that put them in such a position, the respondents’ awareness of the ways they manage their emotions, evidenced by their stories, and of the conditions that push them to endure suggests that this endurance is a way of persisting beyond this catastrophe, signified by their return to their families and achieved through the monumental efforts it takes to manage one’s emotions under such trying times.

At the end of our conversation, Chona told me:

I thanked Dulce because somebody was doing interviews about those who have lost their jobs during the pandemic. This was an opportunity to voice what I feel. I didn’t have anyone to talk to in the host country. At home, I also can’t talk to anyone because I am taking care of my mother. I wasn’t able to talk about my feelings until this interview.

I take Chona’s words as evidence that a working through of the emotions enabled her to recuperate a sense of self that had lived in fear, and been alienated by conditions abroad. This self was contained in the emotional labor of being “used” (sanay) one’s life overseas. What I have explored as the “emotional labor of persistence” is what the OFWs routinely perform. It recognizes and encompasses precarious conditions and salvages the self from the consequences of a life lived in precarity. Ben highlighted the kind of consciousness that was present in this emotional labor when he said that “whether there’s COVID or not, you can’t understand the life of an OFW until you become one. No story, TV show, film, or news coverage [can capture it]. You won’t be able to understand it until you become one”. The “emotional labor of persistence” that all respondents performed functioned as a means of disentangling – by themselves and for themselves – the ways by which their emotions have been repressed, suppressed, and even silenced by their precarious positions.

In my conversation with Chona, I was struck by how the necessity to persist was inextricably intertwined with her faith. When she received news that her mother’s condition was improving within the same week that she lost her job, Chona recounted the experience to me by saying: “When I lost my job, I thought, ‘Thank you, Lord. If this is the trade-off—that I lose my job in exchange for my mother’s health, I would gladly accept it, because I know, Lord, that you will take care of me till the end’. This kind of faith was also evident in the stories and circumstances surrounding all the respondents’ decision to work abroad in the first place. Tadiar (2004, p.244) captures the risks associated with finding a means to persist elsewhere in pagbaba-bakasakali, which she characterized as “an acting in faith”. Here, she talked of faith as sampalataya or the force that “incarnates the unarticulated relations among people—feelings, respect, hope and belief” (p. 244).

Informed by the various discourses of faith, survival, and familial love, Chona, Kakay, and Ben performed a kind of emotional labor that did not serve to stifle feelings of fear, anger, helplessness, or aloneness, but that recognised, reconfigured, and resisted the intimacy by which structures
that reproduce precarity forced them to persist.

I have framed Chona’s, Kakay’s, and Ben’s stories as narratives of persistence to challenge dominant discourses of resiliency and heroism that obscure the dangerous and precarious realities that OFWs like them endure. Attention to their emotional labor manifests in their very experiences. In the national political discourse that constructs the image of the OFW, the state of precarity is rendered acceptable if not invisible by the rhetoric of “bagong bayani” or modern-day hero. What began as a way of saving the collapse of the country’s economy during President Ferdinand Marcos’ term, labor export in the Philippines, according to Encinas-Franco (2013, p. 97), came to be narrativized as stories of modern-day heroism under the term bagong bayani during the administration of President Corazon Aquino: “[H]enceforth, the nation’s overseas workers were anointed as self-sacrificing ‘modern-day heroes’, evoking images of hard work amid loneliness abroad”. This discursive move by the state was necessary because it “legitimize[d] and normalize[d] the risks of migrating for work abroad and downplay[ed] the huge role of the state in labor export promotion” (Encinas-Franco, 2015, p. 57).

Chona, Kakay, and Ben were subjected to the logic of the bagong bayani narrative, which transformed their endurance and struggle as a story of sheer bravery and strength. While Chona, Kakay, and Ben indeed possessed the strength and courage to journey back home in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was crucial that their labor through this hardship was rendered visible. In this regard, a narrative of persistence and emotional labor highlights the continuation of life for the OFWs without concealing the precarious state of life and labor from which they recuperate themselves.

5. Conclusion

The mass displacement of OFWs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic showed unique problems and highlighted enduring issues of labor migration in the Philippine context. OFWs had to suddenly deal with the termination of their employment and a return home, in the face of limited job prospects, a failed pandemic response, and entrenched conditions of precarity that forced them to work overseas in the first place. Through the stories of Chona, Kakay, and Ben, in this paper, I have endeavored to trace the emotional labor required in journeying back to the home country under dangerous and precarious conditions. Although three life stories are admittedly a limited sample with which to explore the emotional labor of persistence, I have weaved their lives to generate and solidify broader patterns of precarity that such forces cannot reach.

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