

***The Filipino Migration Experience: Global Agents of Change.* By Mina Roces. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021. E-copy: 264pp.**

Given the magnitude and diversity of international migration from the Philippines, considerable research has been conducted to discern its impact on Philippine social and economic realities. Such scholarship includes studies on the effects of remittances, understanding the “brain drain” and “brain gain” phenomena, as well as sociological investigations uncovering the impact of migration on cultural values and social norms.

While *The Filipino Migration Experience* deals with the same migration issues, its author, Mina Roces, asserts that it differs from most other works through its focus on migrants as “agents of change” (p. 3). By placing migrant agency front and centre, the book veers away from the arguably dominant lens of victimization that both the academic and policy discourses on the Philippine migration experience tend to focus on. Rather than passive subjects reacting to external forces beyond their control, the book portrays Filipino migrants as active agents capable of altering the economic, cultural and social landscape in both their home and host countries.

Roces uses an historical approach, piecing together a history of Filipino migration from the 1970s to the present. What is noteworthy about the process of writing this history is her use of material from what she refers to as the “migrant archives”, which are data collected, published, and disseminated by the migrants themselves (p. 8). In doing so, Roces seeks to present a history of Filipino migration from the migrants’ perspective. She argues that this is important because migrants “want their voices heard” and “their stories of challenges and successes to be visible and publicly validated” (p. 8).

The book proceeds in three parts. The first part (Chapters One and Two) deals with the way migrants have challenged traditional views about the Filipino family and constructions of gender and sexuality. Roces highlights that in the eyes of many migrants, the Filipino family has often failed to live up to its reputation as a nurturing and caring institution. Based on several migrant stories, readers are made aware of cases in which families demand too much of their migrant relatives, are unappreciative of the sacrifices they endure for their sake and fail to provide the moral and emotional

support expected from them. In response to this, Roces argues that Filipino migrants redefine conceptions of the family to include anyone “who provided emotional and material support during times of crisis” (pp. 24–25). In many cases, this has meant that “NGOs became the substitute families for many migrants abroad” (p. 25).

On the construction of gender and sexuality, Roces focuses on how Filipino migrants have challenged deeply ingrained norms surrounding marriage and sexuality. Turning to the experiences of female migrants in Singapore and the Middle East, Roces details the prevalence of marital infidelity and the emergence of a “hookup culture”. She notes that this might be due to the separation of migrants from their loved ones as well as the distance from the constraints of Filipino social norms. Roces views such behaviour, coupled with the willingness to write and speak about it, as a manifestation of these migrants’ capacity to “defy social conventions and cultural norms in the most intimate of spaces” (p. 43). Although she considers this defiance “empowering” (p. 53), one might question how this would allow readers to construe migrants as agents of change. As this defiance is only shown when the migrants are away from home, one could argue that the norms and conventions are still acknowledged and not completely redefined.

The second part of the book (Chapters Three and Four) deals with migrants as consumers, in particular their consumption patterns and the meanings they attach to it, as well as the effects their enhanced purchasing power has had on businesses. Roces discusses, among other things, how regularly sending money and gifts back home has emerged as a norm and a principal means by which migrants seek to show affection for their loved ones. She also shows how higher wages enabled the practice of conspicuous consumption among Filipino migrants, symbolizing “the success of the migration project and the migrant’s new status as middle class” (p. 60).

On the effects of Filipino migrants’ consumption behaviour on Philippine businesses, Roces presented the success stories of ABS-CBN Corporation’s *The Filipino Channel* (TFC), a global television service with over three million subscribers, and various Philippine-based real-estate companies. It was the emergence of a large and growing market of overseas Filipino consumers hungry for news and entertainment from the Philippines that allowed TFC to achieve its success. It is also clear from the evidence presented that the real-estate sector in the Philippines owes much of its success to

overseas Filipinos and return migrants seeking to fulfil “the ‘Filipino dream’ of owning a home” (p. 84).

While the second part of the book presents the unintended changes brought about by the cumulative effects of the individual decisions made by Filipino migrants (e.g. consumption behaviour), Part Three discusses changes migrants have consciously and intentionally endeavoured to bring about. This activism for change took several forms and are presented in three separate chapters.

In Chapter Five, Roces recounts the campaign waged by Filipino Americans for “a space in social memory” (p. 90). They fought for their version of Filipino immigration history, which takes the form of a “heroic narrative” (p. 91), as well as their contributions to American society to be recognized. Chapter Six narrates two cases in which Filipino migrants partnered with the government in their host country to help fellow migrants in need. One was “Operation Manong” in Hawaii, where tutoring services were provided to Filipino youth struggling in school. The other involved Filipino-Australians assisting Filipino partners of Australian nationals suffering from domestic violence. These two cases showcased instances where Filipino migrants successfully spearheaded initiatives to alleviate social issues affecting the wider Filipino diasporic community. Finally, Chapter Seven focuses on diaspora philanthropy by Filipinos living abroad, making the case that many Filipino migrants care deeply for their homeland and are willing to invest the time and resources “to transform the homeland into the country they would like it to become” (p. 149). To support this argument, Roces presented two examples. The first involves Australia-based Filipino health professionals organizing yearly medical missions back home. The second highlights fund-raising efforts by Philippine International Aid in the United States for projects that benefitted disadvantaged youth in the Philippines.

Overall, Roces’s book provides intimate details and insights about the experiences, challenges and successes of Filipino migrants around the world since the early 1970s. However, except for the case studies presented in Chapters Five and Six, the book does not detail particularly novel findings on the lives, experiences and practices of Filipino migrants. While rich in detail, some chapters involving heavy narration may strike readers as too lengthy and too anecdotal. The anecdotal nature of the book also makes it difficult for readers to assess whether the experiences and practices being described are widespread among Filipino migrants. Lastly, while the

book deals with migrants as agents of social, cultural and economic change, it is curiously silent about their role as agents of *political* change in both their home and host countries.

Nonetheless, *The Filipino Migration Experience* is a noteworthy contribution to the literature on Filipino migration. Its historical approach, the author's construction and use of the migrant archives, as well as its focus on migrant agency and the impact Filipino migrants have on social and economic realities at home and abroad make it so.

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