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Migrant Returns (2017) by Eric Pido is essential reading for scholars focused on migration and diasporic communities. The book examines the complex and multilayered dimensions of migration in an East Asian context. It disrupts contemporary discourse on migration by articulating the intricacies of return migration through the geographical lens of the homeland. This refreshing perspective gives new meaning to the life cycle of migrants. As an Asian American studies scholar with familial roots in the Philippines, Pido is well positioned to provide expertise in this context. Over four years, he conducted in-depth interviews with Filipino migrants living in the U.S. and had follow up conversations after their return to the Philippines. This narrative of the journeying migrant is placed in the context of neoliberalism as Pido evaluates its implications on the home country. The book offers a seamless interweaving of theory and personal narratives that enhances research but also brings the story of return to life. Finally, the book is timely and needed. Filipinos are one of the largest immigrant groups to the United States, yet little scholarship focuses on them.

In the book, Pido demonstrates that (1) Migration does not end with settlement in the U.S. or Europe; (2) Returnees negotiate a deep-rooted ambivalence of returning to a space that is simultaneously familiar and foreign; (3) There is a powerful role of the state in setting the stage for the return migrants; (4) Relationships between the state and private entities are established to profit from the emotional experiences of returning migrants; and (5) Return migration is an intriguing and unique phenomena, but it is not a social panacea to the “brain drain” that global South countries continue to seek to reverse, as it often reinforces societal inequities.

One way in which Pido’s argument resists traditional conceptions of migrants lies within his insistence on migrants’ agency. This is evident even in the decision for the title of the book, *Migrant Returns*, rather than a title such as “Return Migrants.” By placing the migrant as the focal point of the narrative, we are encouraged to embrace a more nuanced perspective that includes emotional desires, imaginations, relationships, and economic and social decisions that migrants navigate. As the author notes, “It is critical to this analysis that both the individuals and communities continue to be placed at the center of this imaginative laboring” (p. 7). Additionally, one of the underlying premises of the book is that in order to truly understand the experiences of migrants who return, we must also abandon our traditional understanding of “home” as a stationary place. Instead, Pido encourages the reader to develop a more complex understanding of “home” as shifting and in need of constant reinterpretation. Through the voices of the migrants who return, we are reminded that the decision to return to the home country is not made in passing after an isolated incident or as a result of aging or ill health. Instead, the decision to return to the place of origin begins from the moment the migrant leaves the home country. At the end, this focus on the experiences of the migrants moves beyond migration studies’ traditional concentration solely on remittances.

Filipinos have a special word for migrants who return: *balikbayan*. Pido’s interviews reveal that balikbayans have expectations for the type of societal opportunities they should be “rewarded” with once they return (p. 110). The unwritten belief is that they endured hardships and harsh work conditions abroad and expect that their sacrifice will be rewarded upon their return. However, Pido outlines the difficulties with meeting these expectations. The balikbayans struggle emotionally with their new role and especially with the contradictory perceptions of them as either traitors, persons who left to seek fortune elsewhere or heroes, persons who are back to help their country succeed (Chapter 4). In addition, they must grapple with expectations placed upon them upon return, such as to invest economically in the Philippines while simultaneously providing financially for their own families. They must also wrestle

with their personal needs, which seemingly become less relevant to those around them. Certainly, previous scholarship has uncovered these tensions, but Pido presents these complexities in a format that helps the reader learn how they affect the balikbayans' daily lives, leading them to build what Pido describes as "balikbayan homes" (Chapter 5). These physical spaces and their contents are a reflection of balikbayan dreams, desires, and images from their journeys, along with nostalgia for the home country. As Pido states, "The living room therefore tends to be cluttered with displays, showcasing images from migrants' lives in the United States, their other travels, and their most precious accomplishments—their children" (p. 139).

Pido thoroughly explores the role of the Philippine state in the experience of its return migrants, which it views as "the country's most important and unique resource" (p. 4). For the past forty years, the Philippine government and tourism industry have been implementing strategies to attract Filipino migrants in the U.S. to return home in the form of numerous economic transformations (Chapter 1). The author's synopsis illuminates an age old ethical question: Is the government of the home country justified in its insistence and reliance on migrants (both those away and those returning) for future economic sustainability? While Pido does not resolve this absolutely, his argument suggests that what may have started as a benevolent governmental expectation for support eventually morphed into exploitation.

The non-altruistic motivations of the Philippine state are exacerbated by its collaboration with private entities such as real estate companies that benefit from balikbayans' concerns for safety and security and desire to maintain some of the new customs and tastes acquired in the U.S. (Chapter 3). The author reveals how the state manipulates the balikbayans' paranoia and need for security, which generously profits "a litany of businesses in the Philippines" (p. 120). To achieve this indispensable investment, the state and private entities engage in considerable "transnational advertising" that aims to appeal to the migrants' desires for the home they left, mixed with their expectations from living in a developed country.

Overall, this is a very valuable and timely book than can benefit students, scholars, and policy-makers. But as is common with case studies, Pido's book inevitably leaves some areas unexplored. For example, a more comparative lens would have helped to further contextualize and underscore the need to study the phenomenon of return. There seems to be much similarity with other countries and their migrants who return, but the reader is left wondering at the universality of Filipino migrant experiences. Furthermore, it appears that the narratives and experiences of the Filipino migrants included by the author come from balikbayans with middle to high socio-economic standing. There is little or no mention of the experiences of migrants who return with limited financial or social resources. What happens to them when they return? What kind of reception do they receive? Which social groups do they connect with? We know that not every migrant succeeds and some return because they are forced to do so, oftentimes in worse circumstances than they left. There is a discussion of class that showcases the distinctions between return migrants and the Filipino urban poor, who are often further displaced and disadvantaged by balikbayans (Chapter 6). But the condition of those who return without financial resources remains to be explored.

Finally, while reflecting on the experiences of balikbayans, there emerged some glaring differences in experiences based on gender. Gendered dynamics run throughout the various narratives, whether in the discussion of return, reasons for return, or rebuilding a life upon return. Scholarship has already uncovered the feminization of migration,¹ and I suspect that there is equally a feminization of return. The book could have merited from a discussion on this issue even though one could fully understand the constraints that Pido faced in constructing a study of such scope and complexity.

Still, this is a worthwhile and valuable scholarship that sheds light on the cyclical nature of

migration. Initially, the concept of the “brain drain” was the focus of significant scholarly concern. Then, the focus shifted to the study of migrant communities in the host countries and the ways in which they engage with the home country. Pido’s work shifts attention to the return journey and its meaning for states, private entities, and migrants. In the end, Pido’s narratives leave the reader pondering the potential next question in this research: Is the return of migrants making things better or worse for the migrants themselves and the country of origin? And if it is the latter, will they leave again?

Notes

¹ Studies on migration patterns show that a significantly higher number of women migrate as compared to men. The trends show that in the family women were often the first to migrate, with the male partner and family joining later on. After migration, female migrants also tend to be the main transmitters cultural norms, traditions and customs and as such play a crucial role in shaping the relationships with the home country.

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