Researching Queenila and Living In-Between: Multi-Sited Ethnography, Migrant Epistemology and Transnational Families

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, San Francisco State University
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Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology and Sexuality Studies
San Francisco State University

Abstract:

I argue that migrants engaged in transnational practices can participate in multi-sited research through co-constructing a transnational field for ethnography. I explore multi-sited ethnography as a method and methodology in an increasingly globalized world wherein migration and separation are social facts in the histories of families in the Philippines. I review the debates in multi-sited ethnography and posit that it is a compelling methodology in investigating transnationalism as it reflects the social realities and epistemology of both migrants and their families in their homelands. Based on qualitative data gathered through multi-sited ethnography on Filipino transnational families, I provide evidence that the transnational social process of “multidirectional care” emerge when the Filipino transnational family is the unit of analysis through an ethnography of multiple sites, instead of migrants and families left behind as mutually exclusive. Finally, I reflect the implications and challenges of multi-sited ethnography on the research participants and ethnographer involved in the study.

Introduction

“It’s like I live in Queenila, my body is here in Queens but my heart is in Manila. I’m really in between.” Rose, a migrant living and working as a domestic worker in New York City and a mother of 4 children who all live in the Philippines commented on what its like to live away from her family yet go to work everyday with them in mind. Two jobs keep Rose busy, as she is cleaning toilets as a house cleaner and taking care of an elderly man, she often runs through the daily schedules of her children in her mind. Given that New York City and Manila are exactly twelve hours apart in time, she is able to think through what her children will be doing in their days as she sleeps the night away. Rose’s work is difficult and physically draining but it is the thought of her children that keeps her going. More practically, her husband, Mike, calls her on Skype or Viber mid-morning New York time and late night Manila time to go through the various household tasks and bills. Mike has now assumed all of the domestic duties
from taking care of the children to paying all of the household bills and family debts. The adjustment for Mike has been huge but as he chats with Rose, he recognizes his contribution to the family is minuscule compared to the sacrifice Rose has made for all of them. Rose’s life just as she described it required me to think about the places, both material and imagined, that she occupied daily. Truly transnational subjects, Rose and her family are living both in New York City and Manila as their communications, thoughts and actions are grounded in their locales and simultaneously suspended in a transnational space, Queenila.

In this article, I argue that research participants living in and engaged with multi-sited research co-construct the transnational field for ethnography. I reflect on multi-sited ethnography as a method to understand the dynamics and relationships between family members separated through migration an increasingly globalized and deterritorialized world (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992). Past studies have established that migration and separation are social facts in the histories of transnational families in the Philippines and yet there is little reflection about the methodology required to study such complex social arrangements (see Guevarra 2006). The transnational lives of migrants and non-migrants (i.e. families left behind) cannot be reduced to a single site or space, rather they require special attention to the ways globalization recasts people’s social worlds across borders and oceans. As with single site ethnography, the field of study, the bounds of place and the definition of space does not start or end with the work of the ethnographer (Boccagni 2016) and therefore the ethnographic site, defined as “social worlds of common concern,” can be constructed by participants and ethnographer as transnational (Nadai and Maeder 2005). This article proposes multi-sited ethnography allows for the social realities of migrants and their transnational families to be reflected in the creation of the transnational social field. The research questions I pose are: how can one conduct ethnographic research on a field
like “Queenila”, a site that is literally not here nor there, a space that is imagined yet real? Where is the site or field when the people in your research understand their lives as “in-between” two places?

The co-creation of a transnational ethnographic field in my research on Filipino domestic workers living and working in New York City and their families living in Metro-Manila, Philippines is exemplified in two ways: first, by centering migrant women’s social reality and including them in the design of this research project. The multi-sited character my work reflected how they conducted their daily family affairs, how they lived in Queenila, as Rose said. Since their lives were stretched transnationally, conducting research on their lives through a multi-sited logic only followed. Many of them insisted that if I wanted to study their transnational dynamic, I had to follow the transnational circuits of migration, capital and communication, spending time in both Manila and New York City and then back again. This epistemological urgency also gave way to the possibilities of migrant women shaping the findings of my research as they could engage with their families in the Philippines on illuminating the care work and the care providers in their transnational arrangement. Because migrant women and their families in the Philippines were involved in designing and setting new directions for my research, the “curious natives” were able to determine the forms of care work that was present in their families. They were able to point to whom they defined as family; given their ideas and formation was jettisoned into the Filipino diaspora.

Second, it was in the ethnographic character of “dwelling,” specifically with the movement between places, that I was able to tie this transnational dynamic to the globalizing processes of neoliberalism. The increasingly flimsy national economy of the Philippines due to free trade and rampant liberalization, privatization and deregulation, has been bleeding the
country dry of resources and avenues of livelihood. The transnational family is a byproduct of the Philippine neoliberal, labor brokerage state’s (Rodriguez 2010; Guevarra 2009) an attempt to keep the economy afloat without developing national industries while maintaining foreign direct investments. Labor brokerage—the systematic recruitment and management of labor migration, specifically gendered streams of labor export to particular countries—has become the modus operandi for national development. While the Philippine state accrues wealth to tune of $20 billion annually, exporting Philippine citizens and their remittances in has become integral to the rubric of national economy. This policy of export is constitutive of the Philippine’s effort to integrate in the global capitalist economy without the tried and tested strategies of stabilizing national economies through industrialization and internal development. Since the late 1970’s the labor export policy has attended to pushing Filipinos out to the labor markets globally and it has institutionalized this economic strategy as part of its development strategy in the 21st century. As the labor brokerage state steadily increases its dependency on migrant remittances expanding its nation-state’s borders transnationally, Filipino migrants become an essential part of the country’s globalization agenda. And thus, their families are implicated as well.

The Filipina migrant is not the sole recruit in the Philippine’s effort to enter the global stage of neoliberalism. Although understated and implied, the Filipino family is also drafted into the export of migrant labor as members of the family are significantly affected by the absence of one or more migrant family members. The reorganization in domestic labor in the transnational family is key to managing a migrant citizen population of over 10 million, 10% of the Philippine population. Abroad, migrants like Rose are negotiating domestic duties over the Skype while working paid domestic work like housecleaning or nannying. And yet, at home, family members left behind also juggle the tasks of child-rearing and household upkeep. The mobility of migrants
is produced in tandem with the immobility of family members left behind. I propose that these transnational adjustments in the family and domestic labor are moored to the macro institutions that rely on family separation to produce innovative strategies of care in the transnational family. Coupling the Filipino migrant population to the labor brokerage state demonstrates the different scales in which the world-system works towards pushing flows of capital and bodies for the benefit of some and not others.

In George Marcus’ discussion of multi-sited ethnography, he argues that ethnography in the contemporary world should be situated “in and of the world system”, proposing that ethnography of the changes in culture under a globalizing world leads to an understanding of that system (Marcus 1995). Although there are many ways scholars have attended to conduct ethnography of the contemporary world, Marcus and others insist that multi-sited ethnography can tease out understandings of institutions and mechanisms of globalization within the lives and everyday actions of the subjects of study (Kurotani 2004). This type of ethnography can capture the view of globalization “from the bottom” while insisting on a critique of the current world-system. In this paper, I follow Marcus’ lead and add that through a multi-sited ethnography, transnational migrant women and their families are able to critique the labor brokerage state for producing the conditions of separation they live under and that they are able to define the transnational social field of care they have created under those conditions. Hence, multi-sited ethnography for transnational families not only uncovers an alternative view of labor export institutions but it values the epistemologies of those most impacted by these transnational institutions.

In this article, I aim to reflect on the possibilities of multi-sited as a methodology that can incorporate the voice and agency of migrants and their transnational families as tools of analysis
on macro systems of politics and economy in the lives and narratives of Filipino transnational families. Immediately after this, I discuss the trends in the literature for multi-sited ethnography and propose my contributions of this study to the burgeoning field. Then, I describe the ethnographic study that I conducted with Filipino migrants in New York City and their transnational families in Manila. Next, by providing ethnographic evidence from my study in the following sections, I present the ways in which multi-sited ethnography was able to capture the connections and links within transnational families that animated the maintenance of their transnational families. I also examine the ways in which a participatory methodology and multi-sited ethnography can also provide participants an opportunity to analyze their lives critically. Lastly, instead of assessing the validity of this method, I reflect on my position as a transnational researcher on the challenges and consequences of conducting multi-sited ethnography.

Logics of Multi-sited Ethnography

Multi-sited ethnography breaks with the conventional idea that ethnography requires researchers to choose one site to observe over a long period of time, positing that multiplicity in sites and space characterize the lives of people under globalization (Falzon 2009). In 1995, George Marcus argued that the emergence of multi-sited ethnography is linked with empirical and intellectual trends that emerge from the development of a capitalist political economy in the world-system. The processes within this system thus requires researchers to reflect the multiple geographies and cultural logics that span those sites under conditions of globalization. He proposed six approaches for conducted multi-sited ethnography: follow the people, things, metaphors, stories, lives and/or conflicts. These practical suggestions of following the currents of globalization challenge the traditional form of ethnography which fastens the ethnographer to a bounded site to observe life and culture. However, scholars question the viability of moving
away from the field-site towards the multi-sited as it replaces the bounded site with a study of the connection between sites instead (Candea 2007; Hage 2005). The cultural formations spanning multiple sites are difficult to pin down with “thick” description, the hallmark of ethnographic study (Marcus 2012). The multiplicity approach purports that there are many “undiscovered” sites of transnationalism to no end; thereby ethnographers eschew the challenge of “dwelling” in an ethnographic site. Additionally, multi-sited ethnography obscures the way in which the ethnographer is inherently involved in the process of defining sites for our own strategic purposes (Gallo 2012).

An ethnographic approach to studying transnational life might sound like a contradiction in terms; since a researcher cannot easily plant herself in one site to do participant observation, write field notes and interview members in a transnational “location”. Because after all, transnationality is a condition where people are literally “in-between” or “elsewhere” and not in one place. Scholars argue that a transnational social field is not necessarily a bounded site rather, “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationship through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt and Schiller 2004, 1009). To this end, the field develops as the fieldwork unfolds with the researcher defining the actors and the multiple locales that people identify as part of their social milieu (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Nadai and Maeder 2012). If the site is a fetished concept in ethnographic world, practitioners of multi-sited ethnography urge us to denaturalize place as a priori rather to study the way in which geography is constructed as a concept (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Instead of a geographic boundary, the field is a conceptual space and the “process of bounding” is an active exercise in understanding migrants and mobilities (Coleman and von Hellermann 2011). The advantage of a multi-sited program is to acknowledge that perhaps “mapping changes and
continuities” (Mand 2011) under globalization can arise outside of one bounded area, rather over
the multiple places and sites or even the unsited (Cook, Laidlaw, and Mair 2009). Instead of
planting one’s self in a location to learn about a transnational process, the field of research is
defined through identifying the multiple sites, actors and practices that make up the transnational
dynamics, like what occurs within a family.

Moreover, multi-sited ethnography presents a more radical notion of interrogating the
very systems that produce transnational life. As multi-sitedness challenges the theoretical bounds
of “site” it also allows for the context of larger systems, mechanisms and structures of neoliberal
globalization to be new objects of study in the ethnographic field (Falzon 2009; Marcus 1995;
Coleman and Von Hellermann 2012). Following scapes (Appadurai 1990), circuits of
dispossession (Fine and Ruglis 2009), contour lines (Katz 2001) and people provides a different
view of institutions that produce transnational processes. Multi-sited ethnography moves away
from methodological nationalism which assumes the ‘nation’ and the ‘state’ as the natural
starting point for the study of migrants’ lives. Insisting on transnationalism, multi-sited
ethnography, like global ethnography (Burawoy et al. 2000), present the lives of migrants and
their families as displaced from the nation and rather across nations. However, the promise of
multi-sited ethnography can easily be construed as a methodological solution towards holism—
the expectation that a coherent and unified picture of a global or transnational process can be
stitched together by ethnography in multiple sites, thereby challenging the validity of the single-
sited ethnography as it may only reflect a piece of a whole. Some scholars posit that challenging
the holistic aspirations of multi-sitedness can take the form of placing the process of bounding at
the center of the ethnographic practice and providing empirical substantiation of multi-sitedness
(Gallo 2012; Boccagni 2016). I heed scholars’ invitation to move away a holist perspective,
instead I focus on migrant epistemology and participation as a driving force in determining the multi-sited character of this study.

Beyond identifying and constructing sites and fields, multi-sited ethnography can also an examination of “shifting locations” (Clifford 1997), the connections, links and relationships between site more than actual space is considered the units of analysis (Lapegna 2015). The “in-between” becomes the object of study, in Boccagni’s formulation, “the actual unit of research from this perspective is less the migrants than their interpersonal social ties with the significant others left behind” (Boccagni 2016, 2). The ethnographer is key in defining these connections between sites as they travel and move instead of dwell in one site. And in the case of this study, I made the decisions to study the relationships of care between Queens and Manila. Partly it was defined primarily because of the group of Filipina workers I was in contact with—most coming from Metro-Manila instead of other provinces in the Philippines—and also because I grew up in Metro-Manila and had some familiarity with the city. These two factors worked together to begin a sketch of the transnational field and locations of my multi-sited ethnography, however, the relationships between family members in those two cities became equally important in answering the question, how has care been reorganized for transnational families.

My objective in this paper is to reflect on the potential of multi-sited ethnography as a method of studying the transnational lives of migrants and their families alongside an examination of the political economic systems that export migrants as labor. This query exemplifies the need for research design to allow for their interactions, networks and relationships across time and space, a methodological transnationalism (Amelina and Faist 2012). This multi-sited study of transnational families does not claim to give a fuller picture than an ethnography of a migrant in her place of destination or a linear account of what happens to a
family left behind when a migrant leaves. My position in this paper is to consider the experience of migrants’ and their families as experts in transnational life in the construction of the transnational and multi-sited field for study.

**Ethnography of the Transnational Family**

Scholars agree that practices in transnationalism are the conditions under which migrants sustain linkages with their homeland through relationships and practices despite geographic distance, borders, political regulations (Vertovec 2009; R. C. Smith 2006; Foner 2005). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila introduce the concept of “transnational motherhood” in their pioneering article named, “I’m Here but I’m There,” wherein migrant mothers’ definitions of what it means to function as the mother in their family is radically reconfigured because of the circumstances of separation in their family (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Although families are spread over space and time, the basic functions and operations of the family are revised but they still “do family” (Dreby 2010). Multi-sited ethnography allows for researchers to move away from “dwelling” in a single site to observe a multi-sited phenomenon such as transnational family relations (Falzon 2009; Marcus 1995). In *Divided By Borders*, Joanna Dreby studies the transnational lives of Mexican migrants and their children, and she emphasizes the importance of caregivers and extended kin networks in Mexico for maintaining transnational parent-child relationships (2010). She argues that “doing family” transnationally is not a natural cultural value in Mexican families. Rather it is the significant roles of “care networks across borders” that allow physically absent parents to still be a part of their children’s lives through mundane activities such as homework and play. Ethnographic methods in both Central New Jersey and Oaxaca, Mexico was invaluable in understanding the cross-border networks of care in her study.
Transnational families demonstrate that while lives of migrants are vastly changed by their migration, the lives of their families left behind are changing simultaneously. For example, children left behind are not powerless in the transnational family; instead, they leverage care from their parents by withholding emotion, for example by refusing to communicate with migrant parents when both parties are in conflict (Dreby 2010; Pratt 2012). Children left behind act out to challenge what Robert C. Smith calls the “immigrant bargain,” usually a migrant parent’s tale of the sacrifice of migration converted into a debt for families left behind to return through good behavior (R. C. Smith 2006). When parents activate their narrative of the immigrant bargain, children respond through their own motivations, whether it is withholding emotions to punish migrant parents or reward them with achievements (Parrenas 2005a). Care providers in these emotional tugs of war exemplify how care is produced in both host and home lands while it is concurrently produced across borders.

Simultaneity—how social relations, processes and practice change concurrently—between host and home and in material and imagined communities allows us to think of care in the transnational family as happening both from a migrant’s location abroad and from the home left behind (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Still, these theoretical frameworks of transnational family arrangements need empirical substantiation to identify the consequences, practices and meanings of simultaneous care work across borders (Mazzucato 2009). Whether its following the tracks of transnationality in the material evidence in home land and host land (Boccagni 2016) or finding the erasures in cultural identity between sites (Isaksen 2011), the first challenge in studying the simultaneous adaptations and adjustments in transnational lives is defining the bounds of the multi-sited, transnational field.
I argue that the transnational process of care work divided up among transnational family members defined the ethnographic field that I was able to study. Resisting the urge to define the ethnographic field as either Metro-Manila or New York City, the process which I call “multidirectional care” in transnational Filipino families emerged as migrants and their family members defined their new family conditions across borders. Even defining the unit of analysis in my project as the transnational family took several trip, as I tried to get a better grip at how care work was exchanged instead of unidirectional or linear. This finding surfaced because I privileged the epistemologies of migrant women in designing the project to value the multiple sites and necessarily the multiple people that worked together to maintain transnational family functions. Migrant women in New York City in this study insisted that a full picture of their transnational families had to capture the dynamic simultaneity of care happening in their transnational families. If I wanted to observe the transnational dynamics of care in the lives of migrants and their families, it was clear that I had to pay attention to the changes that migration and separation produced not only from the places migrants lived but also the places they left behind. Through qualitative ethnographic methods in New York City, migrants were often involved in negotiating the balance of household duties even if they were abroad. Complementarily, their narratives about their lives in New York were always mediated by their family lives in the Philippines. Therefore finding a research design to accommodate the transnational shuffling in between places required a multi-sited approach.

**Studying Queenila: Migrant Epistemology and Exploring the Transnational Field**

“Tanongin mo sila? Why don’t you ask them?,” said Rita, a Filipino migrant woman living and working in New York City as a domestic for over ten years. One of my key questions in my research with migrant women in New York explored how their migration changed the
domestic life of their families in the Philippines, and often they replied with practical answers about their absences, but more apparent was their insistence in bringing their families’ voices and experiences to answer the question. I began my work thinking that it would be enough to do ethnographic research in New York City with migrant women to understand their transnational practices and how they made meaning about being apart from their families. Wrongly, I defined the field of transnationalism with a group of women in one site when even their daily experiences did not live and exist in that one site. From the moment that migrant women urged be to ask their families in the Philippines, they were already helping me to define and construct the transnational ethnographic field of their lives. Little did I know that they were not only helping me construct the boundaries of my ethnography, they were also shaping how I would learn and define the key interventions in my research.

Developing a multi-sited ethnography meant that I had to privilege the social realities of migrant women and their families in the Philippines. I had to design a method that reflected their epistemological reality. It was through participatory research methodological principles where, I as the researcher, could invite the women peopling my research to help me craft how I would study their lives. Participatory action research methodology holds that the people often made static as objects of study should have the opportunity and avenue to define the research methods that aims to represents and inevitably intrudes into their lives (Billies et al. 2010). The colonial history of social science research and current tyranny of participatory research have treated marginalized communities as passive objects of study (Cooke and Kothari 2001). However, decolonial, feminist and participatory methodologies have prioritized the participation of researched populations as the driving motors of research agendas (L. T. Smith 1999; Tuck 2008).
By traveling between New York City and Manila from 2009-2014, I spent a total of eight months in Manila and five years in New York City. Numerous visits to families left behind allowed me to see growth spurts in children and the development of wrinkles in the faces of husbands, mothers and fathers of migrants. In New York, I became intimately bound up of week to week changes in housing or health as the precarious nature of domestic work left migrants vulnerable. The relationships I built with families left behind in my visits were also sustained by our digital relationships. I began and continue to be Facebook, Instagram and Skype friends with almost all of the family members I visited and interviewed. This relationship and my regular visits to their homes and towns allowed for me to observe and ask about the effects of separation and the strategies in transnational families. The field was thus further defined through the technological connections between Queens and Manila. This aspect of transnational families is beyond the neat borders of nation-states, almost creating an added field of ethnographic observation, giving way to many interactions and connections that animated the lives of people on both ends of the spectrum.

Migrants in Queens encouraged me to explore what their own families thought about migration and separation. Therefore, I was able to observe transnational life in doing research by staying within constellations of families, from migrants in New York City to families in Manila, to study the changing operations, definitions and forms of care in a transnational family. In other studies of Filipino transnational studies (Asis, Huang, and Yeoh 2004; Parrenas 2005b; Wolf 1997), samples of migrants and families left behind are often disconnected. Researchers of Filipino transnational families often interview or survey migrants abroad solely (Pratt 2012; Constable 2014) and/or non-related members of families left behind (Parrenas 2005a). The erstwhile form of sampling may have constrained participants’ answers to emphasize the
negative consequences of migration and separation. In my research, I wanted to see if the existing research findings would hold if I chose a different methodological approach through multi-sited ethnography within the same members of transnational families.

To this end, I prioritized eleven constellations of families to follow in five years of fieldwork, yielding fifty interviews with migrant women in New York and thirty interviews with family members in the Philippines. The migrant women in New York were gatekeepers in the snowball sampling and recruitment of their families. Between their families, migrants and family members left behind also talked about my research and if they were comfortable participating in it. This methodological choice allowed for families to articulate the dynamics of grievances about long-term, long-distance separation but it also gave them the chance to talk about and think together on and express the ways in which they were exchanging the labor of care. When participants understood their family’s care work in a continuum of interactions including the choice of migration or the use of technology as a form of care, I could tease out forms of care that were otherwise considered as neglect or a compromised way of participating in a family. Resisting the urge to launch a linear, holistic argument about care in the transnational family through this methodological choice of staying within a constellation, I provide evidence that understanding transnational life, it is not quite as simple as collecting narratives on both ends of the migratory spectrum. Rather it is stitching together dynamic and circular relationships between transnational families over time, that can provide the nuance in understanding how care is deployed, retracted and redirected. In what follows, I present the narratives of three of the eleven constellations that were part of the larger research project to highlight how multi-sited ethnography captured multidirectional care in Filipino transnational families.

**Multiple Sites, Multiple Directions for Care Work**
The Girardo family was a tight knit bunch before mother and wife, Melanie, left for New York City. Her husband, Peter, and their two children, Nina and Bruce, slept in a family bed even when the children were past the age of sharing the same bed. “Parati kaming sama-sama, parang magkaibigan lang,” said Peter, “Siyempre di parating masaya, pero parating sama-sama. We were always together, just like friends, it wasn’t always easy but we were always together.” When asked about their lives at home and the division of labor, Peter, Nina and Bruce all admitted that Melanie was the glue that kept their household together and they were her “assistants.” When she left, they also admitted that their lives came unglued. Peter remarked at his new responsibilities, “Napakabigat, ibig sabihin, yung work ng mother hindi kaya ng lalaki. Hindi mapapalitan ng tatay ang trabaho ng nanay. Very heavy, what I mean is that a man cannot attend to the mother’s work. A father cannot replace the work of a mother.” On the other side of the world, Melanie remembered that time of transition for her and her family, “Pumayat siya for the first few months. Talagang parang matanda na dahil naiwan sa kanya yung responsibilities. Naging ‘Natay,’ nanay at tatay siya. Pero tanggap naman niya. Sabi naman niya mas-na-appreciate niya ako, pero sa to too lang, mas-na-appreciate ko din siya. He lost weight in the first few months. He looked older because he was left with the responsibilities. He became a ‘Mapa’, a mama and a papa. But he accepted the role. He said he could appreciate me more now that I’m gone, but in truth, I appreciated him now too.”

Melanie and Peter on different sides of the world remark on the difficulty and sadness that comes with migration and separation, and in particular the strain of the shifting gendered labor responsibilities in the households. This story maybe quite standard in the lives of transnational families but I rehearse this particular story of husband and wife through a multidirectional care model highlighting that the adjustment of Peter in the Philippines in taking up “mother’s work”
is a type of labor within the transnational family. The evidence lies in the end of Melanie’s comment where she states that she appreciated him too. Melanie, the head of her household, was often awash with worry about the state of her home, the bills that may fall between the cracks, worry about her children’s homework, etc. But what allowed her to become more and more confident throughout the years of being separated from her family was Peter’s ability to master the tasks that he first struggled with. As Peter adjusted to the work, and more importantly, accepted his new role as ‘Natay’, Melanie started to ease her worries about her family back home to become more assured that her family was doing alright and she could turn her energies into adjusting to her new surroundings.

Bruce, the youngest, remembered the months after his mother’s departure, “Parang ang weird si daddy yung anjan, eh gusto ko yung luto ni mommy eh yung lutu ni daddy puro experimentation. So ako na lang ang tumulong sa pagluluto. Wag magalala Mommy! It was weird that Daddy was here all the time now, well because it was Mommy’s cooking that I liked and Daddy’s cooking was pure experimentation. So I became the person that helped out with the cooking. Worry not, Mommy!” After some years of separation, Nina recalled how they have reinterpreted “caring” for their mother, “Kung ano man yung problema sa bahay, eh if we can solve it without her knowing, gagawin namin. Kesa paparatingin mo pa, magwoworry pa yun. If there’s a problem with the house, well if we can resolve it without her knowing, we’ll do it. Instead of letting it reach her because she’ll start worrying so much over there.” These gestures can be interpreted as putting out the small fires at home. However, in my analysis Bruce and Nina’s examples are not merely serving their own interests. They are cooking or solving household issues to ensure that their lives in the Philippines stay smooth but their actions are always undergirded by thoughts about appeasing their mother’s worry. This duality in their acts
of service for their family and their mother abroad is a part of web of care that is deployed from the place left behind. If their mother is consistent in sending back remittances monthly to pay for the household bills and tuition, Bruce and Nina are also unrelenting in keeping their home and family life glued together as much as they can to lessen their mother’s concern about their situation in the Philippines, a prime example of how care is multidirectional. From an outsider’s perspective, Bruce and Nina are just helping to keep the house intact but with the context of multidirectional care and multi-sited ethnography, I can situate their work was care work these children left behind are actively creating through new acts of service and redefining new forms of care for their mother abroad. Through sustained observations in both sites, adjustments such as these affix commitments by all family members from Manila to New York towards keeping the family together. Even if these acts of service are done in the Philippines, sometimes without the knowledge of a migrant mother in New York, they are always constructed transnationally.

In New York City, Melanie has struggled with exploitation at her workplace and finding stable housing, the one thing that keeps her motivated in her work is the fact that she is sure that her children and husband are securing their obligations for their house and different parts of their lives in the Philippines. She said, “Masuwerte naman ako sa kanila dahil kapag talagang hindi kailangan, hindi sila nanghihingi dahil alam niyang mahirap din ang trabaho dito. I’m really lucky because if they really don’t need it, they don’t ask for money because they know that my work here is hard.” Melanie shows that her family’s efforts at minimizing the issues that arise at home become key in creating a steady confidence while she is abroad. It would be easy enough to take Peter and Nina’s word and believe that their efforts in the Philippines is reflected in their mother’s life but in reality, it does matter. Melanie interprets their communication and their
ability to hold the fort down, so to speak, as a form of care that allows her to go about her life in New York with resolve.

Lastly, multidirectional care can also come through another medium: technology. Melanie said, “Malaking tulong din yung Facebook, plus yung Skype. Nung una ko kasing dating wala akong sariling computer so phone lang talaga. Pero ngayon, naguusap kami parati at nakikita ko yung mga kalokohan nila. Facebook and Skype are a huge help. At first I had no computer, just my phone, so it was hard. But now, we talk all the time and I see their silliness.” In Manila, Nina talked about the intentions behind keeping in contact with her mother, “Nagkukuwento ako kung ano yung mga pwedeng ikuwento, pero kung wala okay lang. Usap pa rin. Sa akin lang kasi, ah si mommy kailangan sulatan every holiday or birthday. You have to give her something dramatic. Something that will show, you love her very very much. Sa akin naman parang okay lang. I just talk to her about anything I can tell her, but if I have nothing to say, its okay. I still just talk. For me, um, Mommy needs a something every holiday or birthday. You have to give her something dramatic. Something that will show, you love her very very much. For me, I’m okay with that.” Melanie sees her digital relationship with her children as a huge help in continuing to build relationships while they are away (see Francisco 2013). Nina’s comments illustrate that keeping up a digital relationship with her mother is not as easy as it seems as she contends with Melanie’s expectations. In the way that Nina talks about it, she actually shows that it takes a certain amount of work to get her message right while balancing what she thinks her mother wants. This type of balancing and attention to digital interaction evidence of multidirectional care in the family. As Melanie stated, her relationship with her children online is a huge help in her everyday life. And therefore they are often all working to keep in contact and build intimacies with one another despite the distance.
The Girardo family’s narratives demonstrate the fact that everyone is engaged in doing some type of care work in their transnational family. This finding could not have been established without multi-sited ethnography. My time in the Manila and in Queens allowed me to understand the weight and implications of these types of care work. Whether it is ensuring that the water pipes in the Girardo home didn’t puncture their newly built ceiling or the joy Melanie got from the countless Facebook photo montage videos made for her during birthdays and mother’s days. My ability to go back and forth between Queens and Manila helped me to substantiate that these localized gestures had transnational consequences for the members of their family. Lastly, the Girardo family constant thinking of one another in their respective homes ultimately defined the transnational field, the Queenila, they lived in.

**Defining the Transnational Family**

Who belongs to a family when it is split? Migrant mothers in New York City would recount the different people that assisted them in going about their care work from afar. Bryceson and Vuorela have called this process, “relativizing” the membership of the transnational family according to the conditions of migration and separation (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). The transnationality of a family would reconfigure who was considered in the bounds of the family relative to the labor and work that was needed to keep a family operative. The size of one’s family would grow or shrink given the material needs and mutual obligations of the members maintaining a sense of familyhood, requiring the active selection and consistent communication between biological and non-biological people who became family relative to the current conditions of absence. Relativizing the family is constructed at the moment migration is considered and then enacted. However, this process is ongoing as cooperative members of
transnational families often bow in and out of their responsibilities, biological and non-biological members included.

Multi-sited ethnography and the participation of migrants and their transnational families allow them to identify who becomes part of their transnational families but it also allows for them to attest to the ways this relativizing process is working or not. Migrant women in New York had their ideas of who would and could step into the vacuum they left behind but discussing this process of relativizing with their families in Manila illuminated the family formations that contributed to the maintenance of their family operations. They were able to redefine who “belonged” or “contributed” to the family, which included but was not limited to biological children, spouses, biological parents, grandparents and siblings, biological kin networks, fictive kin and friends. In 2009, Rose, a migrant mother who left four young children in the Philippines, said, “Pagbalik mo, makikita mo na hindi ko lang silang bastang iniwan. Kamaganak, mga kaibigan, lahat inengaño ko na tumulong. When you go back, you’ll see that I didn’t just abandon them. Relatives, friends, I encouraged everyone to help.” On the opposite side of the spectrum, JJ and Grace, the two youngest of four, commented on who came to fill their mother, Rose’s, absence:

JJ: Si Tita Zora ay naging second Mommy namin. Lumipat siya sama ni Jeffrey.
Grace: (looks to me to explain) Tita Zora at si Mama best friends sa high school. Si Jeffrey naman ay kanyang anak. Lumipat sila sa bahay nung umalis si Mama kasi magka-age kami and gusto nila magkalaro kami.

JJ: Tita Zora became our second mommy. She moved her with Jeffrey.
Grace: (looks to me to explain) Tita Zora and Mama were best friends in high school. And Jeffrey is her son. They moved in with us when Mama left because Jeffrey and I are the same age and they wanted us to play together.

JJ and Grace, who were eight and ten years old when this interview took place, saw their Tita Zora and Jeffrey’s move for the purposes of having children grow up and spend time together. In
their storytelling, they consider Tita Zora and Jeffrey as added family members even if they were not biological relatives. Although for the children, their integration to their family structure as a matter of fact. But as Rose reflected in New York, there was a more concerted logic as to why Zora and her son became part of her household after she left. JJ seconded that logic as he commented that his Tita Zora became a second mother to him. Through multi-sited ethnography, I was able to validate the opinions of migrants through the experience of the families they left in the Philippines. Because Rose could not accurately depict who exactly stepped up to help her family upon her absence, JJ and Grace completed that circle through their interviews.

In past studies that assumed the Western idea of the nuclear family as the operative form of family in the Philippines, emotions of outrage and betrayal were rife because the scope of family “members” were necessarily limited to a few biological members. However, placing emphasis on the Filipino family in an extended kin network frame, allows families left behind to see a broader range of resources that contribute to the success of the transnational family. In this expansive definition of who gets to be in the family, participants were able articulate the different providers of care contributing to the family, therefore allowing me to analyze the multiple directions of care within extended networks. JJ and Grace’s conversation about adding Jeffrey as a playmate in their family expanded the idea of who belonged to their family while their mother was gone. At times in their family history, they spoke about the sadness they felt when they missed their mother but they also redefined their family narrative through the growth of their family with the incorporation of Zora and Jeffrey.

After a few years of Zora and Jeffrey living with the Rose’s family of four children and a husband, the house became too crowded with the growing brood of kids and a shift in who was doing the labor of care work in the transnational family also shifted. In 2011, Rose signaled that
her children were growing up and there needed to be a change in who was taking part in maintaining the day to day tasks of her transnational family, “Ngayon kasi sa edad na mga anak ko, hindi mo na sila kailangan alagaan kasi. At nakadjust na ang tatay nila. Kaya na nila magsarili. Now, my children are at an age that you don’t need to take care of them. And their father has adjusted. They can do it on their own now.” As Rose’s family has become accustomed to life without their mother, the labor of the family has become routine. Time has become an ally to maintaining the transnational family as Rose’s husband, Mike, adapted to the many responsibilities for child-rearing and the children could start taking responsibilities for chores around the house. It is important to note that Rose and Mike were not on the best of terms upon her migration and through their physical separation, their marriage transformed into a utilitarian relationship instead of a companionate one. Rose’s acceptance of Mike’s integral role in the family is a result of their transnational condition. If they were still living under the same roof in the same country, it would be highly likely that Mike would not have such a central role in raising their four children. However, because of Rose’s migration, Mike’s presence and role has become relativized as important due to the declining contact time between the couple.

Later that year, in a second visit to Rose’s home in Metro-Manila, her husband Mike stated, “Ang pag-aalaga ko sa mga bata is talagang obligasyon ng magulang. Kaya nga kami nangkapalit na ako talaga yung nababagay na maiwan kasi siguro kailangan ko matutunan ang pagiging tatay...at nanay na. Na mahirap talaga. Tapos dapat kong ganahin ang tiwala ni Rose, posible lang yon sa pagaalaga lang ng mga bata. Taking care of the children is the obligation of parents. I think that’s why our roles were switched and I was left to be here at home with the kids maybe because I needed to learn how to be a father…and a mother. Its really hard. I’m also trying to gain Rose’s trust which is only possible through taking care of the kids.”
realization about the difficulty of the work of being a parent, a single parent in the physical sense in the Philippines, points to the fact that taking care of his children and home is as much an offering to caring for Rose from the place left behind. In this multidirectional web of care, Rose and Mike are constructing a transnational field by defining the membership of their family given the new adaptations they’ve made after years of separation. For Mike and Rose, the troubles in their marriage did not revive the love they had once before but their relationship transformed into a partnership focused on the care of their children. They were able establish their new roles relative to the new and changing conditions of their family.

Migrant epistemology and the participation of their families was crucial in identifying the formulation and reformulation of family members during times of separation. More importantly, it was key in elucidating the transnational field for the families; multi-sited ethnography and staying within constellations of families led to an understanding that the adjustments that would happen from time to time had simultaneous effects on the transnational family.

At Home in a Transnational World

Multi-sited ethnography offers an ethnographer an opportunity to witness how research participants gain a better understanding of institutions that shape their families’ migration and separation throughout the years of shuttling back and forth between their family members. My ability to travel back and forth from Manila to Queens over a long period of time informed my analysis on how migrants and their families were growing in their political critique of the conditions of migration in the Philippines. In what Dorothy Smith calls, “institutional ethnography”, she emphasized that the study of institutions and policies may be best articulated by those who are directly impacted by them. To this end, the multi-sitedness of this study created
a chance for family members both in New York and Manila, to reflect on why there was a continuing need for one member of the family to live and work abroad.

Joan, who just turned 53 when we first met and started our research relationship, left three children in the Philippines. Although her children were older, her youngest son was entering high school when she left, the pain in her sacrifice of migration defined her stay in the United States. The separation she endured would be her constant reminder during the endless hours of cleaning houses in the Upper East Side of New York City and the accomplishments of her children in their education and careers were here pride and joy. She overstayed her one-year tourist visa to work for a family whose breadwinners are financial executives because they paid a living wage. After all, she wanted to see both of her college-attending children through graduation. During our first interview, Joan said, “Ayaw na ayaw ko silang magabroad. I don't ever want them to work abroad,” reflecting on the hardships of being a domestic worker in the US. “I worked too hard to send them to school and I really hope that the country can fix itself so they can stay in the Philippines.” At the very outset, Joan’s analysis of migration already points at the structural weaknesses of the Philippine government and economy. In her idea of “fixing itself”, Joan’s inchoate critique of the Philippines state is about the lack of job opportunities that is sustainable and long-term, not temporary and contractual. In her remarks about her wish for her children to stay in the Philippines, Joan expresses an adamant hope that her children will not have to migrate as she did. Later in this same interview, Joan was one of the first people to suggest that I go back to the Philippines to get the full story of what it was like to live in a transnational family. In her suggestion and initial analysis of Philippine economy, she was already critiquing the political economy of migration in the Philippines; an acknowledgement
that the lack of sustainable livelihood was crucial in shaping the lives of people in her home country.

During my interview with her daughter, Melann, a few months later in Manila, I found that Joan was open with her family regarding the difficulties she faced as a migrant domestic worker in New York City. Four years apart, the 24 year old Melann was forming her own opinions about the conditions under which women like her mother migrated. As a part of their family conversations, they would share their ideas about why Joan needed to work abroad and the root of the phenomena of so many mothers leaving the Philippines. Melann stated:


It’s not true that the Philippines is rich like what the government says. They’re lying actually because there are so many poor people and the rich, the really rich, are the only ones getting richer. Who can afford to live here in the Philippines? Even if you’re middle class, you can’t live in the Philippines if you don’t have a family member working abroad. Actually migrants are the ones supporting the Philippines and that’s why the government encourages it.

Melann’s discussion of the politics and economy of the Philippines points to an ever-widening gap in wealth and opportunity in the Philippines. Her analysis of affordability and social class in the Philippines is intertwined with the reality of migration. In her assessment the migrant family member is no longer a choice but a necessity for even those in the “middle class” in the Philippines. Those aspiring to a middle class lifestyle in the Philippines can not sustain themselves with the opportunities in the Philippines, and therefore she asserts that the government has a role in systematizing and regulating labor migration. Not too far from what scholars have found, the labor brokerage state (Rodriguez 2010; Guevarra 2009)in the
Philippines has an aggressive design to research markets in need of migrant workers and then recruit and deploy their citizens to those markets. Melann comes to this conclusion through the four years her mother has been gone and seeing her aunts (Joan’s sisters in particular) leaving their families and migrating to other countries only to send back money for their families’ subsistence.

Joan and Melann were co-constructing the transnational social field with me through identifying and critiquing the very institutions that engender their transnational lives. Amelina and Faist argue that a multi-sited approach must give way to an examination of both “mobile and immobile phenomena” to dissect the processes and agents that require the traffic in bodies while staying put, and I would add profiting from the jettisoning of migrants globally. Longitudinal, multi-sited ethnography allowed me to track the unfolding dynamics and analysis reverberating between family members of broken government policies that was failing to provide livelihood and jobs in the Philippines and immigration reform in the U.S. Melann’s sensitivity to the government’s complicity to labor export is a realization that mobility is an cornerstone to the Philippine economy and the Filipino family. While Joan’s inability to come home because of her undocumented status renders her immobile because she can not afford to leave her dependable wage to visit her family, risking the penalty that she could not be able to return to the U.S. For both Joan and Melann, they understand that the Filipino people are consistently made mobile by the Philippine state, either implicitly because of the lack of livelihood in the country or explicitly through the sophisticated system of migration regulation. Meanwhile, migrant citizens are made immobile by immigration policies abroad. These findings are key in deepening the understanding that transnational lives are not merely created by mobile-rational choice actors, rather they are
constitutive of immobile institutions relying on a mask of ideology of individualism in an era of neoliberalism.

A multi-sited approach framed my analysis of the continual mass migration of Filipinos as overseas workers by a hyperactive labor brokerage state, on one hand; and on the other hand, an immigration system in the U.S. which refuses to legalize the millions of undocumented people in the country that do the essential, low-wage work. These nation-states which are over reliant on migrants, are rendered immobile when for example migrant citizens who live and work outside of the bounds of the Philippine nation-state, require advocacy for things like detentions and deportations. It was a stark contrast against my ethnography in Manila and New York wherein I followed the perpetual movement of people, remittances, and communications. These institutions that relied on these flows were over apparently stagnant in the ways the attended to the needs of migrants (or lack thereof). From the lived experiences of transnational families, I understood that migration was an inevitable factor in Filipino family lives given the neoliberal retreat of the Philippine government to provide sustainable occupations for Filipinos. It was the painful immobility of migrants in New York City, unable to return to their families for the sake of providing, that pointed me towards acute examination of the world-system that relies on cheap migrant labor.

I would like to end this section with a little bit of political imagination. Activating a critique of the world system is not the only result from sustained, multi-sited ethnography. In my third interview with Joan after years of building a relationship with her and her family, she offers an alternative possibility of livelihood in the Philippines:

*Panananaw ko, kung concerned ang gobyerno sa tao, bigyan mo ng hanapbuhay! Na matagalan, hindi yung panandalian buhay. Bigyan mo yan ng bigas? Isang araw lang yon, what about the other day? Yung ginagawa nilang 500 a month na suporta? Bakit di*
In my view, if the government is concerned with their citizens, they should give them livelihood! Sustainable, not just temporary jobs. Give them rice? That’ll last for one day, what about the next? Their 500 pesos a month support they provide? Why don’t they provide them a business opportunity? Take the people in my province, they had something like this in the past, a cooperative! A business that engaged the housewives of the San Miguel cooperation. They built a cooperative in the community where families of San Miguel employers lived, like they produced cleaning cloths. Yes! And the San Miguel corporation bought all of those cloths. They can do that. There are so many businessmen there, and large corporations that manufacture there, right? So, each large company can do that so that there the Filipino people could have some type of livelihood. The companies aren’t the only ones to reap the profits in the Philippines, the Filipino people will and the government too, they could do well with small businesses like that.

Joan’s passionate imagining of the potential of the Filipino economy is informed by what she came to understand as forced migration. She positions cooperatives under the numerous multinational corporations as a possibility to reorganize opportunities for sustainable livelihood in the face of continuous outmigration of Filipinos.

During the length of my research project, Joan was involved with political organizing with Filipino domestic workers in New York City in a program called Kabalikat (translated as shoulder to shoulder in Filipino) Domestic Workers Support Network. Through political education and participation in the organization, she began to develop an analysis of the conditions under which she came to the decision to migrate. Her years away from her family and undocumented status became the cornerstones to her political subjectivity. The emergence of Joan’s ideas around cooperatives stemmed from her participation in her community organization but also from her own experience in the Philippines before she became politically involved.
attribute this intersection of her past experience of alternative economic options and current political participation to her embodied knowledge of globalization via migration and separation.

My back and forth travels also drew the boundaries of the world system for Joan, understanding that some things like corporations and documented people like me are privileged and mobile in this society. And others, like her and the masses of Filipinos in the Philippines are not. She understood this neoliberal design keenly. Interestingly enough, she offered this political imaginary as a solution in the Philippines—the place she left behind. Although abroad, Joan saw herself as integral to a potentially new type of nation-building. Her transnational nationalism sought to create opportunities for the Filipino people so they would not have to think to migrate in the first place. Multi-sited ethnography is not the reason for Joan’s exciting political imagination. In reality, it is her experience as a migrant and a transnational mother under neoliberal globalization that produced her alternative vision; the mobile-immobile phenomena pervasive in her and her family’s life pushed her to re-imagine a new type of Philippines.

Conclusion

Migrant women’s epistemology and participation in the research process is key in designing and conducting research on their transnational practices. Their stories and lives were not just subject for analysis by me, the outside researcher, looking in, rather their stories pushed my research to work as their lives were working, transnationally. The methodology for this paper was not a simple exercise in adding sites or hopping from site to site towards some holistic goal, the methodology relied on the opinions and more importantly the experience of migrants and their families. The methods and findings of this study could have stayed on one site of the migration spectrum, however, the voices of migrants drove the the direction of the research process findings in a different direction because of the already occurring co-constructing the
transnational field by transnational family members themselves. Migrant women’s perspectives and insistence on studying their lives transnationally challenges the conventional notion of ethnography. Instead of establishing one site as “natural” or “discovered”, they pushed me to substantiate the field by involving me in how they maintained their transnational families daily.

Multi-sited ethnography was a “shift in the social relations and modes of producing ethnography” (Coleman and von Hellermann 2011, 3) as incorporating the voices and perspectives of the “researched” into the research process. Placing migrant women’s epistemology at the center of this ethnography allowed me to democratize the research process and create techniques and procedures that remove the limits of ethnography as solely academic into an engaged practice. The members of Filipino transnational families co-constructed the transnational field but they also demonstrated that there research and knowledge production is also multidirectional. The participation of migrant women in this study shifted how their stories can be easily deployed as victims in the throes of globalization, instead they employed me as their partner to envision their lives through the lens of motherhood redefined. A multi-sited approach not only encourages women to shape the research to describe their way of life, it also gives them and their families a platform to reflect on the ways their lives have adjusted to migration and separation.

Multi-sited ethnography and transnational methodology opens up the possibilities of conceptualizing care in transnational families as multidirectional. In studying multiple sites, I was able to observe the care network activated by the people left behind in the place left behind. Those who are often characterized as passive recipients of financial support and remittances from abroad became dynamic contributors to the transnational family, albeit through different forms of care. Multidirectional care proves that they are not just waiting in a developing country
with hands outstretched, rather they are actively shaping their families by reconfiguring the care work and care providers from the Philippine. These alternative forms and definitions of care, according to those in the place left behind and migrants abroad, were defined only through multi-sited research over a long period of time. When I focused one site in the study of transnational families, then the financial remittances become the most salient and measurable form of care. However, when I was able to sit and observe the interactions of family members across borders, I understood that a sum of money often meant as much as a long and meaty Skype call about goings on in the Philippines. Multi-sited ethnography also offered a chance for me to interact with families who were going through the peaks and valley of family histories where I could observe how care work was deployed and received.

The broken immigration system in the U.S. makes family reunification impossible while the labor export program in the Philippines continues to push labor migrants globally. Multi-sited ethnography highlighted that these are the conditions that migrant women and their families live under to revise the care strategies that maintain their families. In this paper, I’ve demonstrated that migrants and their family members were able to reflect on the larger social, political and economic forces that induce migration. These reflections surfaced because of the years of separation families endured which in turn led many of them to question the context under which their families were apart for so long. Moreover, as an ethnographer, I was able to pick up on this critical sensibility within family discussions but I also witnessed to over reliance of the Philippine nation-state on migrant remittances and that proscribed family reunification in a time where neoliberal privatization and liberalization are unrestrained in the country. In the U.S., strands of neoliberal ideology keep immigration reform at bay while nativism masks the American dependence of low-wage, precarious work done oftentimes by migrants. Multi-sited
ethnography provided evidence for me to analyze and study the world-system that is “populated by mobile actors and immobile institutions” (Amelina and Faist 2012). Although this world-system is the backdrop of migration under neoliberal globalization, both participants in this study and me as an ethnographer could point at these mechanisms as an important player producing the lives of transnational families.

Finally, my multi-sited fieldwork was only possible due to my privilege to travel as a documented person and my ability to fund my multiple transnational travel from New York City to Manila. As Michael Burawoy aptly states, “global ethnographers cannot be outside the global processes they study” (Burawoy et al. 2000, 4), and I would add, we are of the global process that engenders the migration and separation my participants live through. My ability to travel the distance in between families and my own experience as an immigrant daughter in a transnational family led me to ask questions and come to conclusions about simultaneity in care work within transnational families. As a formerly undocumented person, the ability to cross borders heightened the brokenness of the US immigration system and it also reminded me of the privilege of legal status in the U.S. It was one of my life’s greatest heartbreaks to feel the arms of a nine-year old child of a migrant mother who left him at the age of one. It occurred to me that the legality of forced migration and coerced separation should also be debated in the halls of U.S. politics. As migrants in this study were criminalized for leaving their families and overstaying their visas, nation-states like the Philippines and the U.S. should stand trial for pushing people out of their countries for the name of profit or for criminalizing people who are doing the essential work of this country like taking care of the children of CEOs. Still, my ability to scrutinize the cause and effect of revised care work in transnational families came from my ability to boomerang across the continental United States and the Philippines. And although not
all ethnographers can do this work, I turn to migrant epistemology and participation as one way
we can construct a transnational field while centering the lives and experiences of migrants and
their families.

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