



Imperfect strangers: Picturing place, family, and migrant identity on Facebook



Alwin C. Aguirre^{a,*}, Sharyn Graham Davies^b

^a Institute of Culture, Discourse & Communication, Faculty of Culture & Society, Auckland University of Technology, PB 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

^b Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge and Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 January 2014

Received in revised form

31 October 2014

Accepted 6 December 2014

Available online 13 December 2014

Keywords:

Facebook

Multimodality

Place-making

Migrant identity

Migrant gaze

Filipino diaspora

ABSTRACT

Places have meanings and significances beyond mere location or functionality. This assertion becomes especially salient for migrants, whose status is defined by a physical move from one place to another. The aim of this paper is to discuss the practice of *place-making* by migrants, with specific focus on the role of Facebook in this endeavour. We present the particular case of Amy, a Filipina immigrant to New Zealand, and her Facebook activities. Central to the discussion is a four-minute audio-visual piece that she produced herself and posted online to commemorate her family's second year as New Zealanders. Guided by the framework of multimodality, the concept of place, and the practice of everyday photography, and with invaluable insights from a semi-structured interview of the participant, we illustrate how semiotic resources afforded by social media sites such as Facebook foster the construction of the discourse of the *good life* and a claim to national belonging. Our analysis shows that everyday family photography, in interaction with social media, potentially signifies migrants' *becoming* a natural part of the national landscape. By interrogating the boundaries of private and public spaces, and reproducing the "migrant gaze" in everyday family photography, Amy transforms images into unified strands of the ideal immigrant narrative.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

While taking a walk one chilly afternoon in an Auckland suburb in New Zealand, a thought occurred to Amy: "How did I ever get to this place?" Amy recounted this moment with a laugh and admitted that she had asked herself the question a couple of times before. There is no doubt that she considers New Zealand to be *home* after four years of knowing and being in the country. Nevertheless, she acknowledges having an inexplicable sensitivity to the fact that she now finds herself in a place that used to be so far removed from her reality. When asked how she sees such introspective moments, her response reflects a geographic imagination configured by her own personal journey vis-à-vis the larger Filipino diaspora pattern and a dominant myth that surrounds the construal of the new place:

You are kind of amazed—what happened that I ended up here? Like, there is the feeling ... you were in that small nation then suddenly you find yourself here at the end of, the end of the

world. I don't know ... or maybe because as Filipinos, we are more likely to find ourselves in countries that are more familiar—in the States, for instance. It's like if a Filipino moved to the States, it's normal; if a Filipino moved to Australia, it's still considered normal since we know where Australia is. But a Filipino who moved to ... New Zealand—the only thing that Filipinos know about New Zealand is *Lord of the Rings*, right? That's it! Or sheep! They don't know that there are these buildings here. There are even those who sometimes would ask me, "Where are you again? Aren't you in Europe?"

The feeling of loss and being lost is a common trope in stories of migration. Yet, the peculiar emotions attached to the place that induce existential ruminations in Amy have been brought on by a sense of being found, more precisely, of often finding herself contemplating being in a country that is radically different from where she hails. Her words set the tone of the discussion in this paper. As part of a larger study on migrant identity construction on the Internet that centres on experiences of Filipino migrants in New Zealand, we present the particular case of Amy and her use of Facebook as both a communicative and signifying platform.

Amy was in her mid-30s and pregnant with their second child when she, along with husband Ted and son Ben (all are pseudonyms),

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 9219999 ext. 6587; fax: +64 9219460.

E-mail addresses: aaguirre@aut.ac.nz (A.C. Aguirre), sd695@cam.ac.uk (S.G. Davies).

moved to New Zealand in 2009¹. She has a master's degree in communication, which could explain her proficiency in the technical aspects of design and production as shown by the object of analysis in this paper. The family (now with Sarah, born in Auckland) had been in New Zealand as permanent residents for two years when Amy decided to produce and put up on her Facebook profile an audio-visual presentation (AVP hereafter) to celebrate their second year in the country. This seemingly banal activity gains greater significance when seen as a particular instance of the confluence of everyday photography and social media practices as a means of making sense of one's place and oneself when building a life in diaspora. Our main aim in this article is to shed light on the dynamics of *place-making* in another land, its intersection with identity work, and the role of social media and in particular Facebook in imagining this area of migrant life.

In order to achieve this objective, we first discuss the concepts that inform our major arguments: place and place-making; social media and diaspora; everyday photography; and self-presentation and identity work. A background of the data set and the analytic framework we used follow this section. The AVP is the central text the potential meanings of which are examined through an analysis and interpretation of its multimodal composition. A deeper appreciation of the context and insights of Amy, as author of the text, was accomplished through a semi-structured interview, also the source of the quote in the opening. The succeeding parts are centred on the presentation and discussion of our analysis that focuses on the key components of the AVP.

2. The presentation of one's place in everyday life: The framework and data

2.1. The place of new media in migrants' lives

Augmenting their communicative capabilities to sustain connection with family and friends in the Philippines is Amy's primary reason for choosing to stay on Facebook. She admitted that she would have used it less had they not moved to New Zealand. Her case exemplifies how, as Miller (2011) claims, Facebook has spelled the "death of time and distance" since it enables people to come "closer to the sense of the family as a whole group in constant interaction with each other" (p. 194). For the diasporic person, it is safe to say that finding ways of communicating with significant people from a distance is a fundamental aspect of life away from the former homeland.

Madianou and Miller (2012) in their seminal ethnographic work, *Migration and New Media*, examine the diverse means that Filipino migrants employ to maintain connection with their families in the Philippines. From the "old" ways of writing letters, long-distance telephone calls, and recording voice messages on cassette tapes up to the more "modern" means of keeping contact such as sending short messages (SMS) through mobile phones, and computer and Internet-based methods (e.g. email, social networking sites, and blogs), they map the practice, function, and value of different media forms available for communicating and keeping ties. Madianou and Miller propose the use of the term *polymedia* to refer to the various means of facilitating communication and connection in the continuance of relationships amidst separation. The concept captures the "entire range of media as a communicative environment" the potential value

of which to users depend on the affordability of certain media forms, the skills and confidence users possess to harness the capability of the available digital media, and the infrastructural costs to realise media use (Madianou and Miller, 2012, p. 137).

Today there is an evolving phenomenon of "virtual families" in which parents and children who are thousands of miles and several time zones apart are just a mouse click or a few keypad strokes away (Komito, 2011; Torres, 2005). New forms of communication media are relatively cheaper, more accessible, and more efficient. These technologies, being digital, are easily manipulated, capable of being networked, and is more interactive than traditional media (see Flew, 2008). For these reasons, it is no surprise how the uptake and use of these modes of communication have been quick for those who have to endure great degrees of physical disconnection.

2.2. Blurred lines: Social media as personal and mass media

Pertierra (2007) has made similar observations of the place of computer-mediated information and communication technology (CMICT) in the lives of Filipino labour migrants and their families in the Philippines. He put forward the idea of "co-presence" as one of the main contributions of new media technologies. Earlier discussed by Goffman (1963), co-presence "renders persons accessible, available, and subject to one another" (p. 22). In situations where separation is difficult to overcome, achieving co-presence, earlier felt in the communication modes of the telegraph and telephone, "expanded structures of communication beyond *direct* aural and visual contact" (our emphasis) (Pertierra, 2007, p. 40). Further, Pertierra's articulation of "representation" as an effect of "non-physical" co-presence becomes cogent in probing identity discourses in new media texts. Recent and emerging forms of communication made available on various Internet platforms, such as social media sites, require that we engage in the business of *signifying* ourselves since "co-presence is virtual as much as corporeal" (Pertierra, 2007, p. 40). Chat rooms, blogs, media sharing sites, and social networking sites (SNS) – of which Facebook is an example – perform a communicative function between people without bodily co-presence as a precondition. Obviously, such an interactive situation possesses affordances and limitations that are distinct from face-to-face interaction: paralinguistic cues from the voice, face, and gestures are absent. These features of physically co-present discourse are appropriated through other symbolic means such as texts, icons, and images (e.g. emotion icons). The "textuality" of interaction of Internet-based media makes the act of "sign-making" paramount. Additionally, the capacity of these platforms to archive one's activities as generated content is further reason for new media users to consider their recorded discourses as potential presentations and representations of who they are as a "person" to both an intended and unintended audience.

Since the particular case study is a Facebook account, we present our understanding of this platform as a type of "social media". There is no form of media that is not social, clarifies Lomborg (2011) but adds that social media become distinctly social because they are based on interpersonal communication, interactive content creation, and personal purpose. Being "personal" refers both to content and authorship—social media generally contain personal topics and are authored by an individual (or individuals) whose subjective *voice* is what is represented in the content. Since the personal ethos of social media builds on the desire and ability of a user to project a *self* on a chosen format, identity remains "core" to many social media platforms (Kietzmann et al., 2011) be they blog sites, media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), micro-blogging sites (e.g. Twitter), or SNSs (e.g. Facebook).

Despite social media catering to personal purposes, however, the possibility of having an audience beyond oneself and one's

¹ As part of the larger project the first author conducted a face-to-face semi-structured interview with Amy to elicit deeper thinking on such notions as place, family, and migrant identity. Quotes from the interview were translated into English from the original Filipino by the first author. Amy was recruited into the study because of her existing connections with the researchers and her willingness to share her Facebook page.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1100560>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1100560>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)