**Ambient surveillance:**

**how care-for-control emerges across diasporic social media**

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**Abstract:**

This article demonstrates how social control in the Filipino diaspora now works through social media surveillance, brokering exchanges of care between activists, on the one hand, and migrants, on the other. Taking care as the ‘pursuit of connections’ (Yates-Doerr, 2014), I outline the history of care-for-control exchanges between migrants and leftist activists. Setting out the cultural norms for reciprocity that shape Filipino expectations for care and political allegiance, I explore how they have travelled within the diaspora. I describe the emergence of ‘ambient surveillance’ – ubiquitous and middle-distance mutual observation that pervades everyday diasporic life – on social media. As care : control exchanges have shifted from face-to-face encounters to ambient surveillance via social networking platform, they continue to limit particular kinds of political participation among migrants and may be excluding reluctant, jaded or dissenting migrants from migration research.

**Introduction – Care-for-control and diaspora politics**

Migration has long been recognised to open up new spheres of transnational political action and participation in formal – and informal - political processes (e.g. Guarnizo et al, 2003; Ostergaard-Nielson, 2003). An important aspect of participation, however, is its limits. Which individuals and groups fail to participate in which processes and why matters to migration research. Migrants’ apparent political inaction and non-participation has implications for democratic processes, for activism, and for community representation and social cohesion. Ostergaard-Nielson (2003:761) sets out a typology that describes migrants’ low-level political engagement as part of an ‘expanded’ transnationalism. These are migrants who only occasionally participate in informal political discussions, meetings or events and rarely support formal political parties. Indeed, most migrants have wider, more sporadic engagements with political transnational practices, defined as forms of direct cross-border participation in politics (Ostergaard-Nielson, 2003:762). In diaspora politics, as elsewhere, those who become involved more actively tend to be a minority. However, this typology of involvement may itself be problematic for our understanding of the Filipino diaspora because it leaves apparent non-involvement - the constitutive outside of these political transnational practices – underexplored.

What draws migrants in to informal political action or formal political networks or party organisations can be understood under the wider rubric of expressions of care, with care conceived of as ‘the pursuit of connections’ (Yates-Doerr, 2014). Activists deploy care in the form of services, advice, support, social events and wider networks to recruit migrants to their political groups and causes. These forms of activist care for migrants attempt to shift migrants along the continuum that runs from political inaction to political engagement to form a political constituency under activist direction. Yet activist efforts to build these political constituencies by providing care to diaspora communities often falter or fail.

We see this unsteady conversion of care to political organisation among Filipino migrant encountering activists from the Philippine left. Filipinos abroad are able to vote in Philippine elections at the national level and frequently support the local-level political activities of family back home. For these migrants, there a continuum between political inaction and formal political action, one that passes through informal political participation. Activists from the organised left recruit migrants to their causes on the basis of the migrants’ care for themselves and their loved ones ‘back home’ and the potential for activists to offer care for migrants. The lobbying, advising and organising activities of activists are seen as expressing care for migrants. Migrants who then engage with activists’ activities are seen as expressing care for their country and fellow migrants. But these are unsteady and waving caring exchanges. For example, a migrant seeking activist advice may attend an event and engage in conversation on potential campaigns, voting preference or lobbying activities at the most informal end of the scale. After that event, she may refuse all further contact or pursue further affiliation with the activists, becoming (apparently) apolitical. In the middle, she may support activist activities by informally recruiting potential voters for a left-affiliated candidate in the Philippines or create banners for a protest overseas. Formally, she may join protest marches or pickets, sign petitions, sign up to political parties or volunteer as overseas campaign staff. The borders between these categories are blurry. Migrants are often unsure at what point the exchanges of care in a social or donor-beneficiary relationship with activists shifts into joining an informal political constituency. On the other hand, just as the co-opting of national and international NGOs is a valuable strategy for transnational political actors in party politics, so the co-opting of beneficiaries is a benefit for left activist organisations (Ostergaard-Nielson, 2003: 773). The unsteady nature of these care exchanges makes the co-opting of migrant beneficiaries a risky strategy for NGOs on the Philippine left. Reciprocally, it also makes relying on activist service organisations for advice or support a risky strategy for migrants abroad.

My focus in this paper is on those migrants who withdraw and refuse contact with activists and their rationale for doing so. What reasons do migrants have and what tactics do they deploy to avoid and redirect activists’ attempts to convert care into political control? This paper thus charts the history of care : control exchanges in the Filipino diaspora, following these dynamics from village relations on to social media platforms. I examine the strategies of Filipino migrants who negotiate engagement and affiliation with left activist organisations, seeking to understand those who reject, avoid, evade, or defer even the light-touch forms of formal political affiliation with the organised left. I describe their engagement in this light-touch politics as ‘everyday politics.’ By ‘everyday politics’ I mean the reciprocal relations through which migrants negotiate care for control with activist groups and, with it, their potential (non)participation in transnational political action. I argue that the explanation for Filipino migrants’ non-involvement in left activist politics lies in the history of care : control exchanges with the organised left. The history I outline, from the village to social media, shows why, for Filipino migrants, ‘everything becomes political.’ Finally, I demonstrate how this care : control dynamic underpins ‘ambient surveillance’ – the ubiquitous and middle-distance mutual observation that pervades everyday diasporic life – on social media.

**1 – Care and control in the Filipino diaspora**

In Filipino culture, care emerges through reciprocal exchanges between unequal partners: donors and beneficiaries. Receiving care obligates the recipient to reciprocate by performing political allegiance. Such care : control exchanges shape the everyday politics of local inter-household relations and institutions in Filipino communities both at home and in diaspora (Aguilar, 2013). They also underpin the party-political loyalties of formal electoral politics. The dynamics of care : control entangles the two spheres of political action so that the everyday politics of Filipino lives necessarily entails negotiating commitments to formal political parties and networks. Whether care is reciprocated by votes, contributions of labour, or participation in party political campaigns and other events, donors expect to control the political loyalties of beneficiaries. Lying along the lines described by Mauss (1990) and Sahlins (1988) (Sykes, 2005), the obligations of beneficiaries of political care are captured by the Filipino concept *utang na loob* (internal debt or debt of gratitude, see Enriquez, 1992, 66-69) as a normative form of social control. When recipients of care do not repay the debt they’ve incurred by reciprocating as expected, censure can follow. Their access to the benefits of care – money, status, protection, advice – may be attenuated and they can be excluded from further reciprocal exchange.

Among Filipino migrants, social networks are framed by care : control exchange. Activists who seek to advance migrants’ rights and improve their circumstances in host nations take on the role of donors. Their gifts of care take the form of advocacy, advice, services or space and sociality for migrants. Activist care works as a mode of political control because it creates obligations for political loyalty akin to those that honour the largesse of a Filipino patron (Rutten, 2008). At the same time, migrants seeking to further their own personal networks find the care and social connections activists offer compelling (see Aguilar, 2013; McKay, 2016).

In the diaspora, social media has made these entanglements between care and control more complex. Activists use its platforms to extend more compelling offers of care for control and, in turn, learn more about their target beneficiaries and potential constituency. Migrants, meanwhile, curate their digital profiles, preparing to perform political allegiance if they need to access care while, at the same time, try to evade the concomitant control. Here’s Fely, a migrant doing domestic work, describing these dynamics in Facebook interactions with a London-based Filipino NGO:

‘I just watch… As if, I’ve only joined them on Facebook. They’ve not ***got*** me… But I can see their programmes, who attends, what they offer… like that. But I don’t join in, really, or go to their functions; I’m a sleeping group member. Sure, I know that, if I do attend their activities when they call, they may help me. So, I keep that open for the future - if I will be the one to need their assistance. And I know they can be watching me, too, through my “friends” on Facebook, what I post… Even… no, specially, when I’m that sleeping member. They want to know… what are my intentions?’

Facebook offers users new forms of contact and ways of knowing each other, creating a new experience of intimacy: ‘ambient copresence’ (Madianou, 2016). Ambient copresence is ‘the peripheral yet intense awareness of distant others made possible through the affordances of ubiquitous media environments’ (Madianou, 2016: 1). Facebook and other social media platforms enable people to feel that they are always ‘with’ loved ones they have left behind in their sending country because they are, potentially, able to contact them by text message, voice call, Facebook post, chat platform, Instagram, WhatsApp etc. Facebook’s users receive and send snippets of information in images and text, continually and almost instantaneously. For migrants, it’s as if all their intimate relationships can be carried around on smartphones in their pockets. While migrants experience this ambient co-presence as ubiquitous, intimate and generally positive, Facebook also enables more intrusive and negative kinds of ambient interaction, like the surveillance Fely describes, above.

Surveillance is thus the shadow side - the control to the care - of social media’s co-present intimacy (Madianou, 2016). Surveillance is likewise a corollary of relations within migrant groups between people with regular or settled status who look and watch out for people whose status is irregular or precarious (Johnson 2015). More specifically, ambient surveillance is the similarly peripheral and intense awareness of a “they” who watch migrants’ everyday political commitments as they are made visible on social media. This form of watching may be regarded as a particular form of what Andrejevic (2006) refers to as ‘lateral’ or ‘peer to peer’ surveillance and may be usefully distinguished from the more explicitly vertical forms of surveillance employed by the state and employers which migrants are also routinely subjected to (see Johnson, et. al. this volume). This watching ‘they’ on social media emerges from a long history of face to face surveillance in village life (Pertierra, 1992) which has always produced social censure through gossip and the pervasive – and internalized – concern over what ‘friends of friends’ (Bossevain, 1974) might think of one’s conduct. Facebook gives the political form of this surveillance a new ambient characteristic, meaning ‘they’ are now always watching online, inferring political allegiance from everyday, domestic and personal activities.

**1.1 – Methods for mapping diaspora activism**

My data in support of this argument come from ethnographic studies of three independent groups of respondents in three countries. Migrants’ skills in navigating care-for-control exchanges are part of a Filipino cultural métis (in Scott’s 1998 sense). But, because both migrants and activists are not always self-aware in terms of their expectations and norms for reciprocity, care-for-control exchanges occupy a rather hazy ontological ground. Care: control is like charity: power, but not drawn in such a stark opposition. Instead, care : control is more of a matter of personal sensitivity, self-respect and Filipino concepts such as *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). Thus I examine data at the junctures where activist efforts to recruit constituents for the large-scale, formal political struggles of state and party politics intersect with the more everyday political activities of showing support, exhibiting interest, and curating an online persona.

I set out three ethnographic vignettes - stories from Canada, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom (UK). The first comes from the era before social media (1999 – 2000) in Vancouver, Canada. It draws on interviews and participant observations with clients and staff at two NGOs, supplemented by follow-on interviews and participant observations with leftist activists at the Filipino migrant NGO, Migrante, in Manila. The second vignette comes from the mobile phone era (2005-2007). It draws on follow-up interviews with nine previous respondents who were doing contract work in Hong Kong (McKay 2012) and with staff at the Asian Migrant Centre. The third comes from the social media era (2009 onwards). It draws on interviews and observations with Filipino migrants in London and staff of a London Filipino NGO consortium. This data includes participant observations and chat discussions over social media platforms where approximately 85% of my 61 respondents were active on Facebook, posting at least 3 status updates per week (McKay, 2016). On Facebook, I ‘friended’ a smaller group of 20 people and followed the ‘groups’ pages of several NGOs with which these people interacted. Finally, I interviewed three activists from the NGO consortium and ‘friended’ them and followed their groups on Facebook. Combining these data with participant observations made on visits to migrants’ families in the Philippines enabled me to grasp individual, household and community interactions with left groups.

My focus is on respondents who were non-joiners in diaspora NGO activities. These are people who do not engage, minimize their engagement, or engage and quickly withdraw, having extracted the caring services they sought and then evaded activists’ political control. To explain where they sit, I first outline the political field in their sending villages and show how Filipino norms for reciprocity predispose migrants to perceive activist care in diaspora as a gambit to establish social control.

**1.2 - Everyday politics and the split in the Philippine left**

Everyday politics in diaspora and migrant : activist relations are both shaped by politics within the Philippine left. The Philippine political left has a long history of acting as a parallel state (Rutten, 2008). In the 1970s, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) set up “movement” institutions that provided care for the masses – health, education, recognition of marriages etc. The armed wing of the CPP, the New People’s Army (NPA), has been an influential, if not controlling factor, in local politics in much of the rural and provincial Philippines over the last six decades (Rutten, 2008). Today, after a fractious split in the CPP, groups within a now more diverse Philippine left continue to oppose governments they consider to be dominated by the interest of national elites and international capital. Left groups care for migrants by campaigning against corruption in the migration industry, providing services to would-be and returning migrants, and supporting migrants’ families. They have convinced the Philippine government to tighten regulations for recruiting agencies, make remittance channels faster and more cost-efficient, provide additional social and support services, and better recognize migrants’ contributions to society. The same activist groups have also moved with, and organized among, the Filipino diaspora.

Overseas, left groups undertake advocacy, build networks, and create diaspora constituencies to campaign for migrants’ rights and reform host nations’ regulations governing migrants’ work, taking the lead in improving working conditions for migrants (e.g. Constable 2007, 2009; Hsia, 2009; Law and Nadeau, 1999; Pratt, 1997; Rother, 2009). Caring for migrants abroad gives leftist groups a claim on their beneficiaries’ loyalties. Activist groups use this claim to align their diaspora clients with their left political agendas in the Philippines. Thus migrants working overseas who seek care from these groups expect to reciprocate with political commitments that will extend back to the Philippines through their kin and community ties. However, claims made by activists to migrants’ time, earnings and campaigning efforts may ignore migrants’ own ambivalent personal histories with the organized left in the Philippines. Some communities experienced the care of leftist groups as involving “progressive taxes” (extortion) or “encounters” (armed clashes between the NPA and government forces, often with civilian casualties). Experience can make migrants hesitant to accept care from leftist groups.

Reluctance to accept activist care nonetheless remains under-examined in studies of Filipino migration. Scholars describing diaspora formation in anthropology, sociology and human geography have worked closely with activists. Many influential studies have accessed respondents through gatekeepers who have been activist group leaders and then snowballed through membership networks to recruit (e.g. Constable, 2009; Gibson, Law and McKay, 2001; Law, 2003; McKay 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2009, 2016; McKay, Cahill and Gibson 2007; Pratt, 1997). Affiliating or collaborating with activist groups has many positive points. Such research partnerships enable researchers to collect data efficiently, work within established ethical protocols, and deliver community-engaged research with policy impacts. Studies of activists and their networks reveal these groups to be powerful advocates for and opinion leaders among migrants. Law (2003), for instance, describes how activists’ networks and lobbying activities create ‘transnational cyberpublics’ that, as Constable (2009) shows, enable activist groups to demand accountability from the Philippine government. Hsia (2009) reminds researchers of the diversity of groups involved in activism: some are grassroots migrants’ organizations, while others are more ‘professional’ NGOs where the organizers do not themselves come from the group they represent. Rother and Kessler (2016) argue that migration – and migrants’ participation in activist’s projects – creates ‘political remittances’ that may lead to democratization in the Philippines. Constable (2009:157) shows how activist experiences abroad serve as a stepping stone to political engagement back home through newly formed parties and pressure groups. Rother and Kessler (2016) suggest migration likewise produces a ‘democratic dividend.’ Finally, scholarship at the intersection of these two approaches – studies exploring both NGOs or grassroots groups and the constituencies they represent –shows how activists organize and shape political campaigns targeted to the situations of their migrant supporters, clients, beneficiaries and/or members. But who is not represented here?

From this literature, we know little about migrants who do not join in activist events, use activist NGO’s services, or participate in public demonstrations. Migrant non-participants pose a problem for claims about ‘community views’ or ‘unity.’ Data from non-participants could challenge established characterizations of predominant migration experiences among Filipinos, particularly where non-participants share characteristics such as age, class, race, ethnic group, marital status, gender or sexual orientation. If migrant participants have been, de facto, selected by their support for left factions, much of what we know about broader community politics may need to be reconsidered.

Not all migrants are engaged in activist politics, while activist groups themselves are split into factions. As Constable (20009) observes on for Hong Kong, some Filipino migrants avoid activist groups and their activities. Even among those who were involved in, for example, the 2005 anti-World Trade Organization protests there, their involvement was factional. There were two, competing, Filipino alliances of activists – the Asian Migrant Centre (AMC) and Asian Migrants’ Coordinating Body (AMCB) (Constable, 2009; Rother, 2009) at the Hong Kong WTO, a function of the formal split in the Philippine left in 1993 (Quimpo, 2008). These two factions are a diverse set of ‘rejectionist’ groups (RJs), who no longer wish to follow the policies set by the leadership-in-exile of Jose-Maria Sison, founder of the CPP. Sison loyalists are the other faction: reaffirmists (RAs). The RAs remain committed to the leadership of the CPP, the National Democratic Front, and its armed wing, the NPA. However, not all diasporic Filipino activist groups now map themselves onto this split. Contemporary groups are diverse; many have much wider-ranging affiliations and interests. Migrants, however, may not know of or be able to perceive activist diversity.

**2 - Care: control exchanges**

Many migrants expect diaspora NGOs to be either RJ or RA-aligned. My research engaged groups organized by and/or allied with RA groups through Migrante International in both Vancouver and London, and an RJ-allied group in Hong Kong. Both the RAs and RJs had presence in Hong Kong and competed for the same constituency among migrants, sometimes holding simultaneous public events and protests (Constable, 2009). On top of this, activist activities were also shaped by differences in migration management and regulation between each of the three host countries. In all three countries, their Filipino migrant clients were most often non-citizens. They were thus either unfamiliar with the services available to them or did not have access. Migrants relied on activist groups to advocate for them and to circulate accurate information on current services and sources of reliable advice.

Each NGO thus had clients with different experiences and needs. In Canada and the United Kingdom, NGOs focussed on migrants who did not (yet) have what is called Permanent Residency (PR) in Canada or Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK.) What migrants called becoming ‘a permanent’ was not available to migrants in Hong Kong. In Canada, most NGO clients were migrants who had arrived via Canada’s Live-in Caregiver Program. They had to do two years of caregiving work in a private home within three years of arrival before they could convert their visa to Permanent Residency (Law and Nadeau, 1999; McKay, 2005; Pratt, 1997).  In Hong Kong, Filipino migrants were working on specific domestic worker visas (Constable, 2007 and 2009). In the UK, most of the NGO consortium’s members and beneficiaries held work visas and were completing short-term contracts in either the health or social care sectors. Some were irregular migrants who had overstayed tourist, student or work visas to take on cash-in-hand, casual employment with private employers (McKay, 2016). In all three sites, activists helped migrants claim their rights, provided advice, and drew attention to their social marginalization, economic exclusion and exploitation.

**2.1 –Reluctant migrants in Canada**

In Canada, the West Coast Domestic Workers Association (WCDWA) and the Philippine Women Centre (PWC) both provided advice and support for migrants in Vancouver who had entered Canada on the Live-in Caregiver Program. Workers on this special visa struggled with the frequently exploitive demands of their employers, the conditions of their housing, and their eventual application for Permanent Residency and thus access to the rest of the job market. Most migrants entering Canada on this program were from the Philippines, though some arrived from Eastern Europe. Both NGOs – WCDWA and PWC– offered support for these migrants, but the remit of the WCDWA did not limit their provision by ethnicity.

My research anticipated most Filipino migrants would seek out the PWC and WCDWA would have relatively few Filipino clients. WCDWA staff told me that this was not the case. A significant proportion of their clientele was Filipino, estimated at between 30% and 50% at any one time. Why did Filipinos choose a mixed-ethnicity NGO when Filipino-targeted services were available? One WCDWA interviewee explained:

‘Look, they are just so grateful that someone will help them. Where they come from, they don’t have services like this. They don’t have a caseworker who will sit down with them and go over their papers for one hour. They don’t get follow-up phone calls from the offices they deal with… Most of them tell us about standing in line for entire days, holding a number, then going back, a week later or even longer, to do the same thing again. That’s good for us, because they volunteer. I mean, you have your Eastern European clients and they come in and they are used to government services. They expect it. They spread out their paperwork and tell you what they want. Then they go. They don’t say “thank you”, they don’t get involved in any volunteering. Problem solved. We don’t see them again, because that’s what they expect – that someone else pays for it – the service, I mean - and we deliver it to them. They know they are entitled, because they come from that kind of state. Our Filipino clients, they come back as volunteers, they make food, they come to fundraisers, they contribute to our newsletter or letter-writing campaigns – anything… Because they are so grateful that we care. They come here, we help them, and they give back. It’s like they make this place theirs, too. So, Filipinos have a real presence here. They are our “joiners”….’

That response didn’t entirely answer my question so, subsequently – and not through referrals from the NGO - I conducted follow-up interviews with two women who had been assisted by WCDWA. I asked them if they had been nervous about going to a mixed-ethnic or non-Filipino service for help. Consuela, in her mid-50s and a housekeeper, told me:

‘To me, it was great. You go there, they let you sit down. You have coffee and talk about your problems. My caseworker [name], she already knew of cases like mine. So, her advice is very good…. They care! But they aren’t looking for any ***counterpart*** [reciprocal input as payment in kind for a benefit –DM]. I recommended my friend, Alma, to go to them when she also got some problem to her employer….’

Alma, late 30s and working in a convenience store:

‘…they really like to help us. And they don’t expect us to join any. We can, if we like… We already know the other people [in the Filipino-specific NGO - DM] and we don’t like to join them. From back home, we already know their programs. They have good policies. But, for us… We are not going with those groups already. No use starting now…’

These interviewees distinguished between the two NGOs on the basis that the Filipino activists expected ‘counterpart’. Counterpart is a Filipino English term for an in-kind contribution, usually a donation of labour time or food. In the Philippines, beneficiaries contribute counterpart labour to NGO or government projects as a condition of the funding agreement. Written in to project contracts, counterpart formalises the informal exchange relations on which Filipino sociality and society depend (Aguilar, 1998) exchanging services, goods, infrastructure or funds in return for people’s time, effort and sometimes money.

Consuela elaborated,

‘If we went… to Filipinos… they’d ***get*** us… Isn’t it? They help you. But then they invite you. You just can’t be the one to say no. You go. Then again and you’re the one going on the streets, marching. But you… maybe you don’t know that program you follow, it’s all from your *utang na loob* [debt of gratitude - DM] for them. That’s how…’

These comments show that migrants understood the counterpart expected from them to be political loyalty and commitment: marching in the streets. Both Consuela and Fely (above) describe being obligated through accepting care as being ‘got’, suggesting control based on censure. Migrants considered the danger of ‘getting’ reason enough to avoid Filipino activist groups. In Vancouver, Alma and Consuela volunteered their time and labour to reciprocate the care they’d received from WCDWA’s because that exchange did not oblige them to participate in formal politics. (Fely, in the UK, found other ways to negotiate - see below.) Importantly, these migrants were making an active choice to avoid PWC. While my interview data does not let me conclude their non-participation in PWC and Philippine left politics was based entirely on fear of control, they were not, as PWC activists described them, ‘just passive’ in their choice to avoid the NGO. They were reluctant to engage.

In migration research brokered by NGOs, as my data (above) suggest, researchers need to note and seek explanations for non-participation. Constable (2009), considered the non-participant migrants during the anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations in Hong Kong in 2005. She observed (2009:158) that ‘domestic workers often learn after the fact that affiliating with one activist organization or network can also alienate them from others.’ As she suggests, migrants need to consider the services and networks on offer and the best fit to their own existing friendship networks, histories and politics. Extending this, we see how reciprocity between migrants and activist groups is not individuated, but shared. Migrants who join bring their friends; their friends become obligated to join and recruit further friends etc. Control through care is thus collective and, to some extent, corporate. If a migrant had a sibling or cousin involved in left politics in the Philippines, joining or supporting an activist group on the other side of the reaffirmist/rejectionist divide in Hong Kong could create family tension. As I will show, some migrants likely recognize this and try to determine, in advance, to which left faction these groups belong.

While left activist groups may attribute non-engagement to a lack of political consciousness and workers themselves talk about their worries over job security, fear of violence or plain lack of interest (Constable, 2009: 158-159), both groups may be concealing other concerns. The corporate aspect of care : control suggests that, while some migrant non-participants are possibly politically naïve and disengaged, others are potentially concealing suspicion behind their distance. Constable (2009: 158) describes how two Filipino-dominated NGOs - one RA and one RJ - had their stage and speaker systems set up at opposite ends of Victoria Park during Hong Kong’s WTO protests in 2005. Some of those apparently uninterested migrants who walked past nonetheless recognised this as competition between left factions, like my friend Luis.

**2.2 – A jaded migrant in Hong Kong**

In December 2005, I visited Hong Kong’s Asian Migrant Centre (AMC), accompanied by two long-term respondents who were living in the city as contract domestic workers. Luis and his wife Angelina were working in the elite Hong Kong Island neighbourhood, ‘The Peak’, for a very wealthy Cantonese household. My contact with AMC came through my collaborative work with the Philippine NGO, *Unlad Kabayan* (Gibson, Cahill and McKay, 2010; Gibson, Cahill and McKay, 2007). Unlad’s director in the Philippines had previously been director of AMC. When we dropped by AMC’s office, AMC staff asked if Luis and Angelina were ‘delegates’ for the anti-WTO protests. While I chatted, Luis and Angelina looked at the posters and pamphlets outlining AMC’s activities – their various campaigns, services and protest events. When we explained that Luis and Angelina were just ordinary migrant workers, not delegates, the encounter became awkward. AMC was fully engaged with preparations for the protests and the staff members made it clear they had no time to counsel potential beneficiaries. But Luis did not consider himself a beneficiary; he clearly felt uneasy and unwelcome. After we left AMC, Luis explained:

‘You don’t need them. You can just ask us any questions for your work. We’ll introduce you to our friends, or even just any Filipinos you like to meet there, in Central. Because that’s now the other side. Just like that guy who came there in Haliap to see you, it’s the same. Just the other group. So, me, I’m thinking, “not again.” Yeah, you know, you just get… *sobrang problema* [too many problems] with them…’

By ‘the other side’, Luis meant the ‘sides’ in the split in the Philippine left. Luis’s comment recalled a visit that a member of the (RA) *Kilusyang Mayo Uno* (KMU) labour union had paid me when I lived in Luis’s home village in 1997. Luis’s village had hosted NPA rebels in 1990, and the Army had shelled his house from the nearby highway. A subsequent series of armed ‘encounters’ between soldiers and NPA guerrillas had not led to any civilian deaths, but gunfire at close range had been frightening. His village had also coped with NPA attempts to extort to pay ‘progressive taxes’. Luis had been go-between connecting the elected village Council to the NPA cadres, while his friend, an ex-solider voted Barangay Captain, had handled the Army. He and Luis had kept the armed groups apart during the 1992 elections, and had tried to keep both away from me, as well. Luis felt betrayed by promises the left had made to him, and to his village, but never delivered on. He now mistrusted organised left groups and advised me against obligating myself to them, not least because, by extension, he would also be entangled. Perusing their pamphlets, Luis had accurately identified the AMC as ‘the other side’ – i.e. as rejectionist (RJ), as opposed to the (RA) KMU.

Luis was not naïve or disengaged but more-than-familiar with left policies and tactics. He had lived through the height of the Marcos-era NPA insurgency, with a disrupted education, strained family ties, and several periods of unemployment and near-starvation he attributed to the effects of guerrilla activity (see Kwiatkowski, 2008). When the NPA departed his village, Luis felt he saw precious little improvement to show for his loyalty. Instead, he found he was now excluded from local formal politics because of his leftist past. Luis no longer wanted a part in this conflict. He especially did not want to carry it with him overseas. He arrived in Hong Kong jaded with the organised left.

Luis’s story demonstrates why migrants’ non-participation should not be attributed to simple disinterest or ennui. Constable (2009:158) argues that migrants participating in activist groups’ protests learn ‘about the ways in which their personal experiences as migrant workers are embedded in a wider global context. They learn the language of human rights and global rights, as well as the critique of neoliberalism, by observing and listening to protest organizers and activists and other worker participants.’ Luis’s story suggests a good number of migrants arrive overseas already familiar with these critiques. Nonetheless, what they understand about the left comes from local political struggles back home. Thus, along the spectrum of non-participation - from lack of interest to fear of violence being resumed – lie the concerns of jaded migrants like Luis. They anticipate that (re)engaging with activism will require resuming reciprocal exchanges with left organisations. Just as at home, they see accessing services and advice will come with surveillance to inform and enforce activist political control, but for no apparent outcome.

**2.3 – A dissenting migrant in the United Kingdom**

Social media now offers activists – and migrants - broader and more pervasive forms of surveillance than that found previously in diaspora or village communities. In the UK, left activist groups and their migrant constituencies used Facebook. The platform enabled them to structure and document their social lives, and to track each other’s networks and activities. Facebook built community and expanded individual social networks, but it also brought migrants’ allegiances, acquaintances, and activities much further into the sphere of public visibility. Migrants’ shared and archived online interactions with activists revealed direct negotiations and/or refusals of care-for-control reciprocity. Far more political meaning could be inferred from some of these online exchanges than simply ‘walking past’ a street demonstration in Vancouver or Hong Kong. By 2012, online surveillance had become the background texture of migrants’ daily lives in London. The story of Fely (above), reveals how a migrant curates her Facebook activities to conceal past political affiliations while keeping open the option to seek activists’ support.

In Fely’s sending village in the Philippines, people felt increasingly alienated by the machinations between political factions playing out in conflicts over land and development. Where Fely’s family found themselves shut out from access to jobs and resources, her remittances offered them hope of attaining social mobility. Much like the families of other migrants from their village, they did not support the local left groups. However, many of their neighbours without migrant family members did, with frustrations with the local government increasing their support for NPA insurgents. Fely’s family had to negotiate payments for land titles and pay bribes to secure permissions to build with local officials who were former NPA cadres (see Rutten, 2008). These officials and local left leaders potentially still maintained connections to the NPA and RA groups, both in the country and overseas (McKay, 2016). Though Fely sympathised with her family and social mobile neighbours, she needed to keep her opposition to the left concealed.

In London, Fely and her husband had both overstayed their tourist visas to work. When they were discovered by the UK authorities, they claimed protected status (equivalent to asylum). They justified their claim on the basis of fear of persecution by the NPA. They had fled their home village to avoid repercussions after an armed encounter between NPA guerrillas and the Philippine military (McKay, 2016). Fely used social media to track NPA/military conflicts in the Philippines from London and kept tabs on left activist responses and campaigns in the UK. On Facebook, she sometimes expressed opinions critical of the left leadership in the Philippines and of London-based diaspora activists’ interpretations of events there (McKay, 2016).

To Fely’s comments, one of the UK-based activists - a member of Migrante International and affiliated with the London NGO consortium - replied:

‘One of the most difficult situations is when we are told stories of people or families about their bad experiences as a result of the processes of change (revolution) which were inevitable and however we explain why how etc., the more we feel apart. What is challenging is how to create unity…. so that we all understand that 'change' is the only option....’

Fely did not dignify this comment with a response or a ‘like’. She told me the ‘change’ activists were seeking was going to be defined on their terms, rather than reflecting the interests of overseas migrants like her. Migrants were busy investing training, effort, money and emotions back home and needed political stability to succeed, Fely observed. In these comments, the NGO discourse of ‘unity’ (see also Rother, 2009, for Hong Kong) worked as a claim define and lead of change by the RA faction of the Philippine left. But Fely thought migrants wanted a change they could define on their own terms, not one that would be directed by activists. Fely did not want to be part of a constituency opposed to her family’s local interests, no matter what grand claims of unity were being made.

Fely’s silence covered her dissent. She watched online interactions between her ‘friends’ and RA activists. The aftermath of this particular comment about ‘unity’ saw a lot of Facebook ‘unfriending’. Fely also observed what people ‘liked’ and posted in response. She saw it as ‘*pinultika* - it’s everything becoming politics.’ Her comment indicates how everyday politics between ‘friends’ online became subsumed into the informal struggle to build left unity and the more formal ballot-box strategies deployed by the left to shape Philippine election outcome.

Fely did not subsequently cut herself off from left activist networks in London. She couldn’t afford to do so because she anticipated she might need activist care - support, advice, and advocacy – in the future. She knew much of the work activists did helped to hold open the social space for irregular migrants like her to contribute to UK society. Instead, she ‘followed’ and ‘liked’ in support of NGO campaigns to provide higher pay and meet migrants’ aspirations to settle in the UK. Thus, instead of hiding from activists online, Fely accepted ambient surveillance. Fely sought out and joined both activists’ ‘friends’ lists and on-line campaigns. She joined a Facebook group set up to advocate for the rights of Filipino migrant domestic workers in the UK, ‘friending’ one of the activists and ‘following’ the group’s updates as well as going along to one of their many face-to-face social events. Reciprocally, the groups’ activists could then track Fely’s ‘shares’, ‘likes’, comments and event attendance. Even if Fely was one of their less-active members, her social media ‘likes’ enabled the activists to determine if the interest she expressed at their face-to-face meeting was sustained through her online activities.

Much of the activists’ Facebook activity was campaign-focussed. In 2015, one of the NGO consortium’s member organisations launched a ‘Defend our nurses’ campaign developed by UNISON (the UK labour union’s) Filipino Activist Network, and the UK Campaign for Human Rights, Philippines. This coalition first built support through this social media campaign, then held a public education event in November 2015. Speakers at this event offered advice on the new UK Immigration Bill, spoke on natural disasters and indigenous people, and then had a planning session on campaigning to defend Filipino nurses in the UK. Their social media posts explained: ‘Defend our Nurses is a campaign to give non-EU migrants nurses the right to get permanent residency in the UK.’ For workers in the health care sector with nursing qualifications who find themselves earning beneath the UK government’s £35,000 required salary threshold, this campaign promised the possibility of eventual IDL settlement (McKay, 2016). Since the UK does not offering this possibility to people in the visa categories through which many Filipinos enter the UK, migrants considered joining such a campaign would help to open up opportunities. As Rissa, Fely’s flatmate, explained, ‘I’d be the one to attend, if I could, because I like to stay here as a permanent. You know? You gotta have advice for that. And someone to convince them you’re just good here.’ But Rissa was reluctant to even ‘like’ the coalition’s Facebook posts or attend the event because she had overstayed her student visa to work cash-in-hand.

Though Fely ‘liked’ and ‘shared’ nurses’ campaign posts, she was again watching from a distance. Fely’s own claim for protected status in the UK depended on her demonstrating persecution by the Philippine-based affiliates of the RA groups behind the nurses’ campaign. Fely could thus not afford to negate the grounds of her application by publicly and formally allying herself with the activists. Nor could she disclose the basis of her claim for protection to her activist contacts. Fely let activists watch her everyday politics so that she was likewise able to watch them. This produced ambient surveillance. Middle-distance and ubiquitous, this kind of surveillance arose from everyday politics playing out on Facebook, allowing Fely to stay informed, but giving her life in London a distinct texture.

Living with ambient surveillance, Fely’s continual social media observations taught her which events she should avoid so that she would not be photographed and tagged by activists. She identified political topics in the UK and back home on which she would never post or “like” – or only to a very restricted audience. She developed social media strategies that enabled her to welcome the surveillance and appear vaguely supportive of left campaigning efforts, but to simultaneously keep her distance. Fely estimated she would update herself on the activists’ activities several times a week. She did this updating when she felt the need - “because it is always available, isn’t it?” Fely also adjusted privacy settings on her important posts so that her activist-and-affiliated online ‘friends’ could not see, like or repost things that could reveal her dissent. With ambient surveillance, left activism had left its previous moorings in NGO offices, meetings, and public demonstrations – what I saw in Canada and Hong Kong - to become the digital background of Filipino migrants’ London lives.

**3 Discussion: how care : control yields ambient surveillance**

I have shown how ambient surveillance extends and intensifies village-level surveillance practices that enforce obligations attached to care : control exchanges. With social media, migrants can map and evade practices of social control left groups attempt to establish in the diaspora, while those same groups can attempt to create, curate and mobilize digital, political constituencies by digital means. Ambient surveillance, however, is only made possible by their particular attitudes to – and choices around – online privacy. Because Facebook’s major attraction is the opportunity to create and consolidate new connections for users – expanding care – migrants’ privacy settings are almost always set to ‘friends of friends.’ Care depends on keeping those connections potent and available. Thus migrants understood ambient surveillance as an inevitable outcome of necessarily being ‘friends’ – both online and real-world friends – with people who were active in NGOs’ constituencies. Given migrants’ Facebook ‘friends’ lists were already crowded with people and entities who might do them harm as well as offer care, it was not much of an extension to include leftist groups in that mix. Thus, migrants curated their activities on Facebook to perform themselves as if they were not potential clients of these activist groups, but distantly interested community supporters. They lurked, rarely ‘liked’ and attended events only infrequently, if at all. These behaviours suggested they were merely a disinterested profile owner, not an actual or potential beneficiary or client receiving services. Migrants’ choices were made based on how they would look to those who might be conducting occasional surveillance on them. Events where this distance was ruptured revealed now-familiar care-for-control reciprocities playing out, as in Fely’s case. Such ruptures were most often translocal, linking London to relationships and political tensions in villages back home. But ruptures were only occasional and the norm was concealed affiliations and strategic posting.

Social media here is not opening up new spheres of translocal participation in formal political processes as documented by Guarnizo et al (2003). Instead, social media is concealing political convictions and discourages committed affiliations. Even where migrants are not opposed to left organising and activism, they do not become fully-subscribed supporters. Instead, they are watching and waiting, following their own, individual strategies. Ambient surveillance is thus a mode of practice for everyday diaspora politics that has effectively damped down or concealed formal, traditional participation in translocal political action. Indeed, where everyday politics plays out in ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ on Facebook, it is not evidence of much political commitment, even that of ‘broad’ or ‘expanded’ transnational political action (Ostergaard-Nielson, 2003). When expressing support for an activist campaign may be as simple as clicking a like, posting an emoticon, or reposting a comment, visibility matters. However, joining with a click is very different from turning up to a protest outside the Philippine Embassy in London in person and having one’s picture taken by activists (and, possibly, the UK Home Office). These two actions entail incommensurable levels of commitment. The extent to which online networks and traceability mean these low commitment forms of joining really enable activists to gain – or ‘get’ – some control over migrants’ networks and future actions is questionable. However, both migrants and activists themselves interpret both virtual and in-person joining as assenting to specific forms of leadership and agenda-setting. While taking direction from activists offering services seems to be worthwhile for people whose plans have not yet come together and who seek to remain in the UK, joining can represent a risk to long-term plans for family social mobility in the Philippines. Being seen to join from a distance, to know what is going on, but remaining non-committal gives activists lukewarm support. It would be, perhaps, enough to secure help if needed, but not so much as to undermine migrants’ own interests in securing their futures.

**Conclusion**: **implications for migration research**

What migrants consent to, when they accept care, has long been a source of anxiety for migrants and continues to be an open and negotiated question. Because migrants themselves can never be sure that they can bound or stipulate their obligations to care providers, reluctant migrants initially developed spatial strategies to avoid activists. In Vancouver and Hong Kong, these migrants could choose not to engage with their organizations and events by avoiding the spaces they frequented. However, excluding themselves meant that migrants could know little about the care on offer. Where they were already jaded by their previous affiliations with left groups in the Philippines, migrants may have missed out on helpful training and advice from activists. Based on previous experience, migrants may have decided that apparently apolitical or altruistic activities sponsored by activists were modes of recruiting political constituencies. Social media has become the most recent venue for these activities and thus the latest instantiation of care : control exchanges. Following the historical arc of diaspora and moving online, we can the same groups of migrants who dissent from the political lines taken by the organised left have nonetheless been able to deploy new social media strategies to remain in touch with activists’ activities and services. Social media platforms enable migrants and left groups to watch each other from a distance, hence ambient surveillance becomes the key mode of practice for everyday diaspora politics. Surprisingly, ambient surveillance makes the diasporic social field appear less, rather than more, formally political.

I have shown how care : control exchanges are both intimate and strongly translocal. When Filipinos in diaspora speak about care and control in activism, it may seem overstated, simply because migrants have had to depend so strongly on these activist groups while working overseas. Where migrants’ choices to source advice or support been limited to left-allied groups, they have had to situate themselves and their decisions to affiliate in much longer histories and broader communities. These histories shape migrants’ approaches to diaspora activism. Where migrants feel the need to limit and manage their necessary exchanges with activists without closing them down, this feeling makes social networking sites a locus where political and personal loyalties and obligations are performed, played out and consolidated. Demonstrating the links between apparently apolitical migrants and diaspora politics has implications for the way we research diasporas.

The dynamics I describe here between activists and migrants mean broader scholarship on Filipino migrants’ strategies, experiences and political allegiances needs careful methodological reconsideration. Where activists have positioned themselves as brokers for research and offered researchers respondents who were already entangled in in care-for-control exchanges, research may have missed important critical voices and outlying experiences. Future research thus needs to be carefully multi-sited and in-depth to move beneath the curated performances designed to cope with ambient surveillance and the care : control reciprocities of NGO brokerage. Only by acknowledging ambient surveillance can migration research really grasp the deeper political entanglements, dynamics, and migration experiences of our participants. Everyday politics as shaped by care : control may mean our accounts of much more than migrants’ political transnational practices remain problematically incomplete.

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