

Stages in Life: Narrative Practices and Identities of Filipina Go-go Dancers

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Social interaction involves performances across varied 'stages' of space and time, where subject-authors use narrative conventions to communicate their beliefs, identities, and desires in order to influence the opinions and behaviour of others. As participants in these performances, people consider the particular context in which these utterances occur since narratives vary according to changes in audience composition and the discursive structures that frame social encounters. In this article I discuss how Filipina go-go dancers develop creative storylines that describe their biographical progression as young women in this modern, cosmopolitan setting. Despite the apparent position of 'powerlessness,' these actors exhibit considerable agency through the intentional representation of certain scripts (such as the 'dutiful daughter' or 'girlfriend'), choosing which stories to enact and using the transitional context of the bar to develop new biographical narratives.

Keywords: Identities; Filipina Go-Go Dancers; Performances; Agency; Biographical Narrative

Aliya¹ finished her dance routine and came over to greet me as she had dozens of times before over the years, yet she seemed tired this evening and did not engage in the usual playful banter as she approached. We discussed the recent scarcity of customers, and she recounted the emotional toll that working in the bar was having on her life: 'Whenever I am on the [dance] stage...I can forget about everything because I am just dancing. But then I have to go home and live a different life because my family does not know what I do here. I want to find a better life, marry a foreigner and have a nice family somewhere, but for now I am enjoying myself here.' Her voice trails off as she looks at herself in the mirror behind the bar, perhaps imagining what the future might hold or how she can reconcile the many contradictions she faces. Suddenly, she awakens to her immediate surroundings and utters a final observation

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before dashing off to talk to her friends: ‘Anyway, this is just *one* stage in my life’ (from fieldnotes; emphasis hers).

Introduction

Anthropology involves the study of culture as it is represented in the verbal and behavioural ‘texts’ of everyday life. This analytic endeavour necessitates an examination of the specific social contexts involved in communicative performances (Goffman 1959; Todorov 1984), recognising that these texts are expressed in a narrative form that communicates personal events and beliefs through a shared understanding of plots, socio-linguistic structures and storytelling conventions (Holstein & Gubrium 2000). In the above example, Aliya’s prescient wordplay is indicative of her experiences as a young Filipina negotiating her socio-economic position through employment in the go-go bar. Her statement also reveals the crucial symbolic connection between space and time when it comes to ‘staging’ personal identities and desires, and subsequently formulating an appropriate narrative to explain her activities to others.

Within this and other interactive settings, a ‘stage’ refers to ‘the platform in a theatre upon which spectacle, plays, and so on, are exhibited’ as well as ‘a period of a journey through a subject, life, course of action. . . a period of development, a degree of progress, a step in the process’ (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989). Both of these definitions inform the construction of personal narratives insofar as they signify the fluidity of a modern, transnational existence involving the continuous movement of individuals from one stage to another. The dual meaning and use of the ‘stage’ emphasise the complex practices of identity formation and presentation as a social process. This performative reading is particularly relevant for those individuals who are subjected to external categorisations that attempt to influence public opinion and policy through the construction of stereotypes—as happens to people working in go-go bars or other establishments associated with ‘prostitution’. While many moralising pronouncements carry a tone of fixity regarding sexual identities and activities, the transience of the stage helps counter such assertions. Stages, as manifestations of bounded space and time, thus emerge as textual devices that allow for transgressive and transformational practices because they situate the self within a dynamic narrative framework that is comprehensible to a broad array of spectators.

At issue in this article is the representation of agency (or lack thereof) among young Filipina go-go dancers as observed in their personal accounts and socio-erotic practices defined, in part, by the particular temporal and spatial stages they occupy in this ethnographic moment. After a theoretical summary of narrative ‘stages’, I describe the prevailing discourses associated with the different dimensions that are pertinent to this discussion: where the transitional interlude between ‘daughter’ and ‘wife’ is seen as a time of relative independence for many women, and the go-go bar is positioned as a location of leisure and the attendant ‘freedoms’ of consumption and cosmopolitan lifestyles. I then show how young Filipinas on the margins of society

weave established cultural scripts into intricate biographical texts that account for divergent attitudes and behaviours, always with an eye toward achieving specific goals and rationalising their predicament to a judgmental audience.

Narrative Subjects

Narrative is an essential part of everyday interaction where the subject employs descriptions of experiences, attitudes and desires to reposition his or her self within an ever-changing social milieu. This discursive fluidity reveals the workings of identity formation in the (post)modern world insofar as people select and discard lifestyles through contact with various sources of information and other subjects who bring different ideas and stories into the mix (Giddens 1991). We construct increasingly complex biographies that reflect this fascination with mobility (geographic and socio-economic), charting our travels and conversions as indicators of progress and asserting our 'rights' derived from discourses of individuality and consumer sovereignty (Frank & Meyer 2002; Slater 1997). It is within this conceptualisation of a multivalent, narrative self that shifting 'stages' of time and place achieve prominence as ideological and performative constructs.

These textual practices require a motivated, knowing agent actively engaged in (re)presenting the self, 'trying to see the point of someone's words or actions, struggling for recognition, trying to influence others in emotional or artful ways, and harmonizing our beliefs and values with others' (Richardson *et al.* 1998, p. 505). Thus, while the actions of the subject represent an individual perspective, s/he is invariably dependent on other actors to acknowledge and validate his or her presentations. Furthermore, these dialogical encounters are fruitful only if there is sufficient cognitive coherence to enable subjects to transcend differences in age, economic background and cultural heritage that might otherwise inform their viewpoints. Knowledge of local conditions is achieved through socialisation in those discourses that inform perceptions regarding acceptable activities for each stage, since the prevailing behavioural scripts often vary according to location (workplace, home) and time (adolescence, night-time), as well as encompassing differences in gender and ethnicity. Mikhail Bakhtin summarises this comprehensive approach to communicative intercourse when he depicts the 'utterance' as a continuous practice involving:

the complex correlation of the *text* (object of study and reflexion) and the *context* that frames it and which is being created (as questions, objection, etc. are raised)... It is the encounter of two texts: the already given text and the reacting text being created, and therefore, it is the encounter of two subjects, two authors. (Bakhtin, quoted in Todorov 1984, p. 23, italics in original)

'Context' is always on the minds of those who are seeking sites of co-operative engagement that are crucial to the production and interpretation of these convoluted narratives, since the meaning of utterances is negotiated through collective immersion in a specific dialogical setting, where audience and actors facilitate intersubjective understanding based on shared symbolic structures, values and

linguistic practices (Bruner 1991; Simon & Gagnon 1986; Todorov 1984). Many people are looking for such spaces with a sympathetic audience where they can 'audition' those personae that reflect their desires, and Philippine go-go bars are particularly amenable to the staging of unconventional performances since they are identified as sites for acting out sexual and material fantasies.

From Audience to Author: The Ethnographic Context

As one of the actor/authors in the production of these narratives, it is necessary to locate myself within the go-go bar. This anthropological account covers establishments located along P. Burgos Street in Makati City, Metro Manila, where I conducted research in 1995–6 and then again from 1998 to the present (Ratliff 2003). Rather than following a particular line of inquiry, I simply observe people in this space, allowing their interactions to unfold without too much interference from my own intellectual proclivities. Yet my presence invariably affects the actions of others because I am part of the audience, and, thus, a participant in the formation of the dialogical context. I have attempted to mitigate my intrusion by refraining from structured interviews, engaging instead in informal conversations and periodically asking for clarification or elaboration on a topic. As an American man, my identity upon initial entry into these venues is the same as that of any other 'customer', and although my performance over the years has altered my bar persona to that of de-sexualised *kuya* ('older brother'), I remain a 'customer' in terms of my ability to manipulate gendered narratives and identities according to my outward appearance and comportment. Thus, the statements re-presented herein largely reflect how women have constructed my identity and performative presence according to their familiarity with my motives. I am often positioned as an informed and co-operative actor who supports dancers' narratives and performances, so women who know me in this manner are comfortable in disclosing their opinions and desires. However, some women still approach me hoping to satisfy some other interest through those erotic dramatisations that are expected in this setting.²

The Filipina subjects of this ethnography engage in narrative performances that reflect personal longings as well as their position within various social, political and economic discourses represented in the media and popular culture. From an analytic standpoint, their primary interaction is with the male clientele, but they also utilise narratives to address the interests of the other stakeholders—friends and family members, bar managers, state and religious officials—who vigorously maintain discourses of feminine propriety (see also Law 1997). The stage they occupy is that of the go-go bar, a cosmopolitan (yet marginal) environment that serves as a locale of work and leisure. Lisa Law (1997) identifies these establishments as a 'third space' where Western men and Filipina women negotiate identities across a broad array of differences (such as gender, class and ethnicity) that are generally enacted within a dualistic power structure. Thus, the identities of 'sex worker' and 'sex tourist' that frame public discussions of bar practices and identities are not necessarily replicated

inside the bar because women and men seek alternative presentations of self. The construction of the go-go bar as a stage for sexual fantasies and leisure pursuits means that 'entertainment' is the primary consideration when it comes to presentations of self,³ so, rather than adhering to the notion that there is some fixed and universal 'truth' involving personhood, the context and rules of discourse influence the acceptance of these narratives. Moreover, upon this stage, the veracity and sincerity of performances do not matter as long as the actors are competent in staging emotions and identities that at least appear 'real.'

These young women also occupy a particular 'stage' in their biographical progression: a transitional phase between adolescence and marriage that is often represented as a brief interlude in a woman's journey from one supervisory household (natal) to another (marital). It is described as a period of 'freedom' as well as 'responsibility', a time of 'adventure' that is also fraught with 'danger'. For the Filipina go-go dancer, these are the stages in which she must frame her own personal biography. Drawing from the stories of co-workers, customers and mass media in this transnational, urban setting, there is a wealth of narrative resources from which women are able to craft their own situated and fluid biographies that challenge the existing discourses concerning Filipina go-go dancers.

Modernity, Mobility and Femininity

Many of the difficulties go-go dancers experience arise from their attempts to reconcile the contradictory discourses of 'traditional' femininity and modern lifestyles within their own narratives. Identities in the Philippines are often framed in terms of complementarity so that women are characterised as daughter, wife and/or mother, and domestic imagery is pervasive in the discussions of their ascribed roles. Filipino women are enjoined to participate in the socio-economic development of the nation in a manner that expands their reproductive activities beyond the home (Jimenez-David 2003), and filial piety is invoked to encourage migration overseas or to distant export-processing zones with the idea that remittances will further the economic interests of household and nation. These portrayals of femininity serve as didactic scripts that outline proper behaviour at particular stages in one's life, providing models that people are supposed to emulate to be accepted or garner special recognition (for example, overseas migrant workers are feted as *bagong bayani* or 'new heroes'). Almost all of the Filipina students I interviewed at a rural university constructed the same narrative timeline as a guide for postgraduate life: they would find employment in their chosen field, working for five or six years so they could finance the studies of younger siblings. They then planned to marry and become housewives, perhaps engaging in some small-scale entrepreneurial activities to help support ageing parents as well as their own children. This stage of progression, from daughter to wife, is important because it maintains the continuous structure of the 'home' as a foundation for social and economic relations, so considerable effort is expended to promote this particular storyline.

However, these narratives do not always unfold as originally envisioned since the modern demands for higher education and a mobile workforce entice young women away from the protective, domestic sphere. As a result, there is considerable uncertainty when it comes to women and economic progress, because conservative voices within the household and other socio-political institutions rail against the destructive influences of materialism while also enjoying the profits derived from the labour of 'daughters'. Women wield considerable power when it comes to financial matters and other decisions concerning the family (Medina 1991), but critical discourses underscore women's 'weakness' when they venture beyond the home, playing upon perceived physical and psychological limitations to generate a broader narrative of gullibility and emotional frailty in everything from shopping to sexuality (Slater 1997; Wilson 2001). Filipina vulnerability is thus linked to specific stages in time (transitional period, 'modernity') and place (any site away from 'home') that incorporate beliefs about the 'nature' of women as well as the interests of those who want to maintain social and economic control over others.

This construction of femininity presents a paradox in assessing 'blame' for various social transgressions because the female subject is positioned both as seductress and the one who is seduced. Part of the problem is that the Philippines is also in a transitional stage where the global drive to modernity comes up against local desires to keep some 'traditional' elements of culture that are indicative of a distinct national identity (de Quiros 2003). Asian values emphasising communal responsibility do not always correspond to discourses of universal human rights that are based on individual subjectivity, and the messages emanating from the global advertising and entertainment industries effectively communicate the ideals of personal improvement to an audience that is already versed in the ideology of 'development' as a desirable condition of progression. Given the ubiquity of this alluring imagery, many young migrant women partake in the consumption of luxury items and 'modern' lifestyles that also integrate sexuality as an expression of self, causing many conservative critics openly to voice contempt for those who embrace independence and material trappings in such an audacious manner. Those who act out their desires through these conspicuous, transgressive practices challenge notions of female restraint, reinforcing the belief that women cannot control themselves and thus require some form of paternal management.

Apprehension over these manifestations of modernity is evident throughout Southeast Asia, where there is often an overt narrative coherence among corporations, families and governments in creating disciplinary regimes. The construction of young Filipinas as inherently naïve and controlled by romantic (irrational) passions absolves them of some blame, but those who control the discourse of morality would prefer not to give them too much 'independence' in making crucial decisions regarding sexuality. Cities offer a variety of fashionable consumer goods as well as opportunities for engaging in sexual relations in relative anonymity, so the two are linked in what many see as simply another example of 'corruption' involving the commodification of domestic intimacy (Morris 2002); mobility in this context

implies sexual accessibility, leading to charges of ‘immorality’ or prostitution. There is widespread co-operation when it comes to limiting exposure to these corrupting influences: factories are managed as a large ‘family’, with workers observing restrictive ‘house’ rules while living in company dormitories and answering to a foreman who assumes the role of the ‘father’ (Mills 1999; Ong 1987).

People in positions of power continue to influence public discussion of female mobility where ‘modernity-as-desired comes to be approximated by a subject position that is stigmatised, perceived as a disruption of social reproduction, and is potentially fraught with violence’ (Wardlow 2002, p. 16). Within the circuitous ideological framework of feminine seduction, young women who exist outside the family—that is, unsupervised by a father- or husband-figure—are portrayed as both victims of and threats to social order. Once beyond the watchful eyes of those who have a stake in these normalising discourses, people tend to form their own biographical realities as they engage in dialogues with other ‘authors’ who articulate different dreams and perspectives. Recent ethnographies involving Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong show how they follow their personal desires for socio-economic mobility and ‘independence’ through migration, but continue to deploy appropriate ‘public transcripts’ of femininity to satisfy discriminating audiences (Chang & Groves 2000; Constable 1999). Women working in Philippine go-go bars take a similar approach, constructing multiple narratives and identities that they can apply to changing social circumstances.

The Many Masks of ‘Entertainment’

The young, female subjects portrayed in this article tend to create more imaginative narratives because they occupy specific temporal and spatial ‘stages’ that are situated at the margins of society. As women existing in the intermediate stage between ‘daughter’ and ‘wife’, Filipina go-go dancers living in the city experience greater ‘freedom’ since they do not always have to answer to some higher authority at home. Also, the go-go bar emerges as an appropriate stage for alternative performances because it is identified as a venue for ‘entertainment’, where the liminality of leisure encourages radical, transgressive behaviours that are not acceptable in the ‘real’ world of work and home environments (Brewis and Linstead 2000). What follows is a brief discussion of three different character archetypes used by Filipinas working in the bars of Makati. These different scripts overlap in their content and presentation, as they are all part of the broader discussion of femininity and modernity that structures subject positions and social situations.

Perhaps the best-known narrative emanating from the go-go bar is that of the ‘dutiful daughter’ who toils in this stigmatised vocation only because she needs to support her downtrodden family in some remote village. Janelle is one of many Filipina dancers who provides a biography that is illustrative of this subject position:

My mother died and my father is too old to work now. . . we are twelve [siblings] in the family. . . I have two older brothers, but they are married and have their own

families to support, so they cannot help my family much. . . . I did not finish high school because we have no money. . . . I am sending money to my [younger] brother and sister so they can finish their studies.

This is not necessarily the narrative that is voiced most often within the bar, but it is the most widely accepted characterisation of bar employees because it embodies traditional feminine virtues of family obligation and sacrifice; it also symbolises the economic underdevelopment and persistent hardships that are part of the Philippine national imaginary. The presentation of this persona emphasises the socio-economic distinctions between the dancer and her audience (foreign customers as well as middle-class critics), and thus it serves as a powerful tool for engendering sympathy because it is a familiar motif. This script frames all performances within the bar because the audience expects narratives of ‘poverty’ from women who are deemed to have no other reason to work in such an establishment.

Performances of the ‘dutiful daughter’ role facilitate encounters with male customers because the dancer/author frames the dialogue according to the economic conditions and filial responsibilities of Filipino women. This narrative reveals her motivational plot, encouraging a response from the customer as to whether he will sustain the conjoined discourses of material interests and intimate exchange by purchasing a lady’s drink (from which women receive a commission). Understanding the dynamics of sociality and the male ego, the woman may play up the ‘dutiful daughter’ to evoke a complementary enactment of the ‘generous benefactor’—a narrative that customers readily adopt to distance themselves from the negative associations of ‘prostitution’. However, because this narrative involves an unpleasant subject and highlights politico-economic disparities that dispel the notion of sexual consent, women working in bars must be careful not to bring it up at an inappropriate time or the customer will find some other dancer who will fulfil his desires through a different presentation of self.

Other biographical texts employed by dancers may create confusion for the audience because they offer a different line of reasoning as to the ‘true’ nature of women’s desires, challenging the veracity of the ‘dutiful daughter’ identity. The ‘Manila girl’ persona embodies urbanity when it comes to the consumption of fashionable items and services, incorporating these commodities into a performance that distinguishes her from the poverty and ‘backwardness’ of her *probinsyana* (‘provincial’) past.⁴ Like many of the young female migrants in this setting, Carmen expresses a modicum of disdain for the austerity of rural life:

Before, I just want to stay in my province, but then I found out there was something else in life. . . . I did not even know there was such a thing as a lamp; we would just light a match and that was our only light. Then I had experience with a light you could simply plug in. . . . now that I have lived in the city, I do not think I could live in the province any more.

Dancers often jokingly deride those who exhibit *probinsyana* attributes, especially when they display a propensity for rural mannerisms or a lack of knowledge regarding urban lifestyles and popular culture.

Almost all women in this setting embody the 'Manila girl' persona to some extent since they are obliged to dress and present themselves in accordance with the ideology of 'entertainment'. Go-go dancers also enact these bold performances to convey their own desires through the assimilation of 'modern' goods and ideas into their deportment, and many extend the boundaries of their position as 'employees' to engage in leisure practices that mimic those of the male customers:

No, I came back to work [after a six-month absence] because I was bored at home. I like to work here because I can see my friends...we sit around and eat and gossip and flirt with the customers. For me, this is not really work, like in a factory or [retail] store. I like living here in Makati and working in the bar. . .sometimes the customer will take me to a nice restaurant or disco; I also go on vacation with customers sometimes to Puerto Galera or Boracay [resort destinations], and we stay in nice hotels.

The image of self-indulgence embodied in the 'Manila girl' identity betrays the 'dutiful daughter' narrative because the dancer then appears to be more concerned with her own desires than those of her family (Cañares 1996). The audience for this presentation is limited to the bar because no one else wants to see young Filipinas behaving in such a manner, so most dancers abandon these performances when leaving this stage to avoid the scrutiny that accompanies inappropriate expressions of female sexuality and material desire within public realm.

Despite this apparent departure from the typical Filipina life cycle, go-go dancers also proffer narratives that integrate women's traditional identities and roles, although unplanned pregnancies, disruptions in education and other unforeseen events have significantly altered their stories. Undaunted, they still seek textual continuity in their evolution from 'daughter' to 'wife/mother', but their presence in this particular stage—as young, single women in a sexualised, urban setting—makes this transition all the more difficult because they are effectively situated outside the local marriage market while engaged in this stigmatising (and therefore, secretive) socio-erotic vocation.

Many of the dancers have said that they came to work in these establishments with the intent of finding a husband because they believe Western men to be more accepting of a woman with a sexual history than local men in this predominantly Catholic country. Hence, female employees in these venues may also assume the guise of a 'girlfriend' in their attempts to secure a commitment from an admirer (or at least extend his financial obligations as the 'provider' in their relationship). In some cases, these affairs may lead to marriage, and the stories of successful outcomes fuel additional romantic narratives and performances.

The enactment of the 'girlfriend' script is accepted in the go-go bar because it combines elements of the two characters discussed above. Men who are interested in fostering a lasting relationship with Filipino women are attracted by those values of

domestic responsibility and faithfulness exhibited in the 'dutiful daughter' narrative; the 'Manila girl' persona addresses men's erotic desires as dancers understand that Western ('modern') attitudes advance a more permissive approach towards pre-marital sexual intercourse. In addition to the brazen exhibitions projected upon the go-go bar stage, women also interact with male customers in a manner that reveals their *malambing* (tender, loving) qualities. Much of this has to do with the Philippine ethic of hospitality along with the general expectations of service in this commercial enterprise, but some women are also hoping that these demonstrations of affection will lead to some form of long-term emotional and/or financial commitment. Many observers question the sincerity of women's expressions of 'love' in this setting, believing that all performances are designed only to satisfy some basic pecuniary interest (see Chant & McIlwaine 1995). However, the imagined boundaries between emotional, political and material desires are often blurred in situations where subjects grapple with competing discourses (Farrer 2002; Kelsky 2001; Mills 1999; Wardlow 2002).

The fluid nature of these narrative identities sometimes leads to misinterpretation, especially when there are different expectations regarding sexual performance in this setting. One evening I went to a bar to see Gemma, a dancer I had known for several months. Yolly, a co-worker, told me that she was absent, and then gave her unsolicited evaluation of Gemma's interaction with customers: 'Gemma is so good with customers . . . she holds their hands and looks deeply into their eyes, and you really believe that she is in love with them. That is why she is so popular. She really knows how to make a man feel like he is loved.' Gemma's performances as an employee are exemplary because she garners revenue for the bar, thus receiving praise from managers and a modicum of envy from co-workers. Yolly's assessment is probably a reflection of her own attitudes towards work, as she tends to move from customer to customer, quickly appraising if he is willing to purchase a lady's drink. However, Gemma imparts a different set of desires in explaining the intimacy she engenders:

Of course I want to earn money because I have two children. . . but I also want to find someone to love. I feel lonely at home, and would like to have a husband before I am too old. . . some of the girls here [in the go-go bar] just want money, so they get one or many boyfriends to send them money, but I am just looking for one nice guy to be my one love.

Gemma's validation of her actions shows how many go-go bar employees rationalise conflicting narratives of personal longings and familial responsibility. As the authors/actors of these biographies, most dancers see no contradictions in wanting to uphold the idea of conjugal fidelity while fostering relationships with multiple 'boyfriends', or maintaining family ties and traditional forms of social reproduction while also pursuing their own desires for consumption and mobility. The fact that other women in the go-go bar consider Gemma to be a 'good employee' improves her standing in their eyes, but such an interpretation could cause problems if potential suitors come to view her in a similar manner since a pragmatic, material approach to intimacy calls

into question the 'truthfulness' of romantic narratives (Farrer 2002; Law 1997; Wardlow 2002).⁵

Agency and Transformation

Agency among go-go dancers is difficult to discern because they start out from a position of apparent powerlessness derived from the established politico-economic discourses of prostitution and Filipina identity. However, agency is integrated in the process of narrative authorship because the subject in question develops his or her own perspective in a thoughtful and creative manner with the intent of influencing others. Identities enacted upon the 'stage' of the go-go bar have been carefully cultivated from the consumption of media imagery and observation of others as well as the inculcation of 'mainstream' ideologies. In the case of dancers, they must negotiate between their desires for communal acceptance and desires for independence when it comes to establishing their rights as workers or consumers. While toiling in the bar, they have to contend with the immediate demands of friends, customers and managers, and once they leave the premises they must endure the suspicious gaze of family, neighbours and government personnel. This dialogue goes back and forth between the different subjects who are trying to assert their own standards and ideals as a means of controlling the discussion and producing changes in the perceptions and/or behaviour of others. It is through this process that narratives are validated as a shared understanding of social 'reality', producing common values, myths and memories that we can then apply to our own lives as we choose.

The structuring of narrative time and space often entails a progression from the here-and-now to an imagined stage that will be 'new and improved', providing a vision of self that extends the individual's perspective beyond his or her present condition to consider a range of possible futures. As a means of looking forward, the transformational potential of biographies is of great concern to Filipina go-go dancers because many of the discourses related to 'prostitution' imply continuity through biological or psychological models that rationalise their behaviour as a form of innate sexual 'deviance'. Scripts such as the 'dutiful daughter' or 'girlfriend' counter such assertions by positioning the go-go bar as a temporary condition that leads to something better, and even the 'Manila girl' persona provides a suitable spatio-temporal shift insofar as it represents a desired advancement to a 'modern', cosmopolitan lifestyle. Much is made of the opposing positions of accommodation and resistance when it comes to situating subjects within discursive circuits of power, but it is clear that these complex narratives and dialogical relations emerge from a variety of perspectives involving new forms of expression as people move in and out of different stages (Abu-Lughod 1990).

Because many outside observers invalidate those demonstrations of desire that challenge the conventional ideology of feminine sexual passivity, the transformational potential of dancer narratives is limited. For example, Aliya and Gemma have since

married foreigners and moved to different countries, leaving the bar far behind as they enter this new stage in life. I went to visit Aliya and her husband at Christmas several years ago and attended a party in their new home. As I walked in the door, she quickly shuttled me into a separate room away from the other guests, explaining that some women from the local Filipino community were in attendance, and she wanted to make certain that I would not bring up the fact that she had previously worked in a go-go bar; we then concocted a new story to explain how we met.⁶ Like other dancers, Aliya does not want to be part of the public discussion of prostitution or any other aspect of sexuality that would detract from the desired storyline of proper feminine decorum. Not only does the common perception of dancers as ‘prostitutes’ provoke shameful imagery, it also brings up questions about the legitimacy of her marriage and jeopardises her immigration status. The go-go bar stage is—as Aliya intimated in the opening account—‘just *one* stage’ in life, providing a means of achieving an acceptable Filipina identity of wife/mother through transgressive activities that are not tolerated in polite society (see also Peracca *et al.* 1998).

Gemma and Aliya are on their way to realising the romantic dream of having a family and living ‘happily ever after’ in a foreign country, achieving a sense of narrative finality that incorporates traditional constructions of Filipino womanhood along with modern elements of consumption and mobility. Through their employment in the go-go bars of Makati, they adopted diverse performances of labour, sexuality and domesticity to manipulate an array of people according to their stated goals and desires for a particular imagined future. In the process, each persevered in a difficult occupation for many months (or, in the case of Aliya, years), dealing with social stigma and avoiding violence while keeping employers, customers and family members happy with markedly different presentations of self. Both women artfully conveyed narratives that transformed a ‘customer’ into a ‘husband’, and then provided a convincing history of romantic courtship to sceptical immigration officials. Yet in spite of its prominent role in the positive biographical transformation of many young Filipinas, the go-go bar is a stage in life that remains on the margins of the social imagination.

Notes

My sincere gratitude goes to the women and men in the go-go bars who have allowed me into the most intimate aspects of their lives over the years. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers from *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* for their helpful suggestions.

[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

[2] Even women who know me well will occasionally engage me in a more sexual manner, testing the veracity of my identity as *kuya*/‘anthropologist’ or even trying out different aggressive tactics because they realise that I will not react in kind—as one woman explained, ‘we just like to play with you because we know you will not take it seriously’. As a Western man in this setting, it is difficult to discard the sexualised aspects of my corporeal identity.

[3] ‘Entertainment’ describes the activities within the go-go bar involving dancing and intimate conversation between male customers and female employees (who are officially labelled ‘entertainers’ in Philippine labour codes).

- [4] For people living in Manila, 'the province' (*probinsya*) includes any place beyond its metropolitan borders (those living in other Philippine cities might disagree). The focus on Manila as the pre-eminent urban centre informs Filipino perceptions of cosmopolitan sophistication and functions as a place for consuming those transnational goods and images that are considered indicators of 'modernity' (de la Cruz 2003; Pinches 1999; see also Mills 1999). Conversely, 'the province' serves as a pre-modern space—a place that people come from, rather than a desired destination in narratives of 'progress'.
- [5] In light of this narrative dilemma, it is possible that Yolly was subtly trying to sabotage what she perceived to be a budding romance by portraying Gemma as promiscuous and thus questioning her motives (this was the first—and only time—I ever talked to Yolly, so it is unlikely that she was aware of my research, or the exact nature of the relationship between Gemma and myself).
- [6] While most ex-dancers try to hide the fact that they used to work in a go-go bar, there are examples of women who are willing to describe their lives in detail, as some who have sought the assistance of non-government organisations (NGOs) in leaving this vocation are then employed to recount their tales of abuse.

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