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Title:

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Date:

2019-05-01

Citation:

Winarnita, M., Dirgantoro, W. & Wilding, R. (2019). 'Close, not close': Migrant artists negotiating transnational mother-daughter intimacies. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 31, pp.78-85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.02.005>.

Persistent Link:

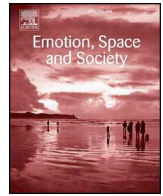
<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/355558>



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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

‘Close, not close’: Migrant artists negotiating transnational mother-daughter intimacies

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Emotional reflexivity
Creative art
Gendered subjectivities

ABSTRACT

The feminisation of migration is contributing to growing awareness of the transformation of familial subjectivities and emotional terrains as a result of transnational movements. The emotional lives and identities of women have often been at the forefront of these investigations. However, the female roles investigated are largely limited to those of mothers and domestic workers. In this paper, we explore how another gendered identity has also been transformed by international migration: that of the daughter. We avoid repeating analyses of the gendered experiences of domestic workers by drawing on an analysis of research conducted with young female artists who are first or second-generation migrants. Reflecting on research interviews and examples of their work exploring mother-daughter relationships, we consider how independently mobile young women navigate the emotional and geographic distances in their intimate relationships with their mothers, both within and beyond their artistic works. We argue that the navigation of ‘close, not close’ relationships with their mothers shapes their gendered subjectivities by informing the social and cultural identities they enact across the distances of generations on the one hand, and of nations, on the other.

1. Introduction

One of the features of the so-called ‘age of migration’ is a distinct feminisation of migration patterns (Castles et al., 2013). The growing numbers of transnational domestic labourers from the Philippines and Indonesia, in particular, is bringing new attention to the implications and emotional consequences of female migration. These include explorations of socially—and culturally—specific impacts such as the upheaval of marital relations (e.g. Hugo, 2002), detrimental effects of maternal migration on left-behind children (e.g. Cortes, 2015), and the burdens of sorrow and guilt carried by migrant women, particularly when they leave behind young children (Parrenas, 2001). Research attention to foreign domestic workers and their navigation of transna-

tional motherhood is an important body of work. However, two important gaps remain, which this paper aims to address. First, the emphasis on female migration as characterised by transnational domestic labour risks overlooking the wide variety of migratory pathways and journeys women make, including from Indonesia and the Philippines (Mee, 2014). Alongside the many thousands of women who travel to work overseas as domestic servants are many others who migrate as international students, skilled workers and marriage migrants, whose experiences are less well understood than those of migrant domestic worker mothers with left-behind children. Second, the emphasis on migrant mothers risks overlooking the many other important roles and identities that migrant women occupy. These include diverse social and occupational identities, including the roles that some women perform

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.02.005>

Received 1 June 2018; Received in revised form 19 February 2019; Accepted 26 February 2019

Available online 16 March 2019

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as artists, as well as a range of other important familial roles and identities, such as those of sisters, cousins, friends and, as we discuss below, the ‘dutiful daughter’.

In this paper, we explore how young migrant women artists use their artistic practice and their migration journeys to navigate their complex positioning as dutiful daughters who are ‘close, not close’ with their mothers. We begin by outlining recent shifts in artistic representations of mother-daughter relationships and of women in Indonesia and the Philippines, linking these to broader social transformations in perceptions and practices of gendered roles and identities. We then introduce ‘emotional reflexivity’ as a key conceptual tool for interpreting how women respond to the opportunities and challenges of migration in navigating their roles and identities as dutiful daughters. After a brief outline of our research, we then provide detailed case studies of two female artists, exploring their navigation of the ‘feeling rules’ of daughterhood as mediated by distance, cultural differences and national borders. We argue that the social context of change and uncertainty invoked by migration serves to transform both the practices and the feelings associated with the ‘dutiful daughter’ role, and also enables these migrant artists to contribute to the social and cultural remaking of the dutiful daughter in their artwork.

1.1. Representing women in Indonesia and the Philippines

Up until recently, artistic interpretations of the representation of mother-daughter relationships in Indonesia and the Philippines have been framed from the perspective of primarily male art critics and scholars. Their readings typically frame the subject matter within the traditional Madonna-child genre, often placed in relation to ideas of nationalism and state paternalism. For example, Datuin (2005: 44–45) stated that local critics put forward the essential Woman and essential Filipino to frame works by women artists in the Philippines. In Indonesia, the representation of motherhood is often framed as a reference towards *Ibu Pertiwi*, the ‘Mother Country,’ particularly when critics look at the artworks created during the formative years of Indonesian modern art (1940s–1950s). The predominantly male scene regularly represented mothers as symbols of virtue or as the archetype of femininity (Dirgantoro, 2017).

The representational mode is part of a broader social and cultural context that locates women's bodies and identities closely within the nation and within the family. In the majority Catholic Philippines, the Virgin Madonna's symbol of maternal chastity continues to frame the idealising of a particular version of womanhood. It is often argued that the Philippines still has ‘a long way to go’ in relation to protecting women's rights, even as women are bombarded on the internet by Western images that seem to portray a post-feminist era (de la Cruz and Percullo, 2011:51). In Indonesia, the norms of the dutiful daughter role are structured by the predominant gender discourse of *kodrat wanita*, which refers to what is perceived as the biologically determined role of females to eventually become mothers. During the New Order (1966–1998), the State promoted *kodrat wanita* through the annual celebration of the national heroine Kartini, which showcased women's domestic abilities in cooking and flower arranging competitions, as well as deportment in traditional outfit fashion shows (Suryakusuma, 1996). This celebration plays down Kartini's struggle for equal access to education, including building the first school for girls, by instead emphasising her role as a ‘dutiful daughter’. Notably, she died from childbirth after being forced into an arranged marriage by her father (Coté, 2005).

During the past twenty years, perceptions of women in Indonesia and the Philippines have undergone significant change, both in the context of visual arts and in broader social and cultural terms. While there has not been a distinct theory on the representation of the mother-

daughter relationship in visual arts in either Indonesia or the Philippines, a number of scholars inspired by transnational feminisms have begun to open up a discursive space of alternative female subjectivity (Datuin, 2005, 2012; Dirgantoro, 2017). The representation and theorization of the mother-daughter relationship in visual arts has become a particularly rich area of interdisciplinary inquiries that draw from art history, psychoanalysis, philosophy, cultural and literary studies. The works of American artist Mary Kelly (b. 1941), titled *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979), are considered pivotal in bringing to the surface the discussion of motherhood from the perspective of maternal subjectivity (Chernick and Klein, 2011; Buller, 2012). Kelly's narrative installation documented and analysed the development of the artist's newborn son for six years, adding psychoanalytic depth to art-making and to a subject matter that was previously considered to be trivial and sentimental at best (Kelly, 1999).

After 1998, in post-New Order Indonesia, critical perspectives on the idealisation of the feminine began to emerge. Cultural production that favoured the idealised mother slowly gave way to ‘modern womanhood’. In this new mode, women artists such as Titarubi (b. 1968) and Laksmi Sitaesmi (b. 1974) presented motherhood and mothers not as the ultimate representation of the feminine, but rather as active, speaking subjects that are also compatible with the identity of artists as the makers of images and mothers as the makers of flesh (Dirgantoro, 2017). The intimate realms of maternal identities were rendered increasingly public and active. In line with the criticality that emerged in the post-New Order period, studies of tensions between mothers and daughters have explored the growing unwillingness of daughters to conform to ideals of femininity, and their emerging acts of subversion, such as by engaging in pre-marital sexual relationships (Porter and Poerwandari, 2012).

As in Indonesia, the Philippines' visual arts and literature have included a critical perspective regarding the idealisation of the feminine. For example, Alma Quinto (b. 1961), a female artist based in the Philippines and Marikit Santiago (b. 1985) in the diaspora, and their critique of the Catholic Church-based gender structuring discourse through alternative representations. Santiago often inserted a self-portrait or the everyday woman and child to replace the sacred Madonna or Madonna and child as her way to critique the idealised representation of the feminine (Datuin, 2012; Gonzalez-Macarambon, 2017).

Daughterhood and gender expectations have also been the focus of work by Philippine American transnational poet Barbara Jane Reyes (2017). Her *Invocation to Daughters* rewrites the Catholic narrative of the Father and Son into the Father and Daughter, as a gendered critical interpretation of the sacred figures: “The daughter is the collateral of the father, they are bound by patriarchy,” a constraining, trapping form of intimacy that also subjugates the “daughters as colonial subjects” and as “the servant of the father” in roles such as the migrant domestic worker who provides remittances back to the family (Majeed, 2018). Reyes writes from the position of the “we” that pulls all the quiet daughters out from where they were hidden away, in a new language for the daughters, the mothers, the workers, the immigrants, the silenced: the women (Majeed, 2018), which alludes to the hidden intimate spaces of unseen and unheard daughters within the transnational family of domestic migrant women.

It is this dynamic background of shifting representations of dutiful daughters in Indonesia and the Philippines that forms the backdrop against which the migrant artists in our research navigate their own roles and identities as daughters and reflect on their complex relationships with their mothers. The process through which they acknowledge and intervene in this backdrop, we argue, is best understood as one of emotional reflexivity.

1.2. Emotional reflexivity and migrant daughters

Mary Holmes (2014: 20) defines emotional reflexivity as ‘a capacity to use emotions to consider and form ourselves and our relationships in light of our social context’. There are three significant elements to this definition. First, building on the insights from symbolic interactionism, the self is understood as essentially relational, produced through encounters, involvements and engagements with others, not just in the moment, but also throughout the life course. Second, the relational self is understood as subject to social processes that are perceived as external to both the self and the relationship, but are internalised within the self. The social construction of the relationship and the feelings it evokes become part of the self. Third, emotions are not simply felt by the self or observed as expressions in other people. They are subject to active if ambivalent interpretations that require reflection on the relationships and social contexts within which they occur and are embedded, as well as on the feelings that they provoke.

For migrant daughters from the Philippines and Indonesia, emotional reflexivity is both a necessary and a necessarily complex process. The migrant dutiful daughter is a self that is produced through encounters and engagements that occur across national, social and cultural contexts, as well as across time. Brought up in the intimacy of the family household, she internalises longstanding gendered structures as foundational to intimacy with her mother. However, migration disrupts this apparently seamless transference of femininity from one generation to the next. Whether a migrant herself, or the daughter of a migrant, the migrant daughter is shaped by multiple competing norms and expectations from the maternal and new homeland, which sometimes reinforce and sometimes contradict each other. This is evident in the contradictory outcomes for migrant daughters that are repeatedly identified in social research. While some are subject to the reproduction of culturally specific gendered social fields that span national borders and distance (e.g. Nishitani, 2014), others enter new education and employment roles that were previously prohibited (e.g. Feliciano and Rambaut, 2007).

Women recognise the potential of migration to disrupt gendered norms. Migration is often perceived as a viable strategy for avoiding the constraints of patriarchal cultures and facilitating a wider range of options for autonomy and economic independence, by providing a means of disrupting gendered roles and scripts (Mee, 2014). However, for many women enmeshed in global industrial capitalism, ‘pre-industrial norms of filial piety and female subordination are perpetuated – and even intensified’ (Wolf, 1988: 89). For many, the migration experience remains framed as a ‘duty’ rather than a right (Paul, 2015; Saavala, 2010). For Philippine migrant adult children in Australia this filial piety or *utang na loob* is expressed as emotional and practical transnational caregiving to their left behind parents (Cabalquinto, 2018: 4012). Others negotiate the expectations of motherhood or responsibilities as an aunt who is expected to invest in the wellbeing of the extended family’s children (e.g. Madianou, 2012; Winarnita, 2018).

The women sending remittances and care back to kin in Indonesia and the Philippines act in accordance with sets of ‘feeling rules’ that guide their behaviours, duties and obligations (Hochschild, 1983). It is through doing what ‘feels right’ that women reproduce widely agreed social scripts of gender, sexuality, age and life course identities that have been instilled in them from an early age (Holmes, 2015). Emotional reflexivity is most likely to occur when ‘feeling rules’ are no longer clear or stable. This is particularly the case within social contexts of uncertainty or change, such as in the rapidly changing social and cultural contexts of the Philippines and Indonesia, and within the context of migration.

For the many young migrant women from the Philippines and Indonesia who are not yet mothers (Williams, 2007), it is the feeling rules associated with the ‘dutiful daughter’ that are most likely to be disrupted. Migration overseas does not sever the bonds that tie women to their roles as dutiful daughters. As Lindquist (2004: 488) argues in the Indonesian context, there is an ‘emotional link between the *kampung*, the village or home, and the *rantau*, the space of migration, as the demands of what it means to be a moral person haunt the migrant’ even when they are living many miles away in a different social and cultural context. Women remain emotionally close to their families and familial responsibilities, even when geographically distant. Yet, even as the women remain linked to the home country, the contradictions in norms and expectations that women encounter in a new country create opportunities and requirements to produce and negotiate a space of reflexivity within emotional landscapes that were previously taken for granted. The result is a more explicitly reflexive set of gendered subjectivities, in which female migrants might begin to reconsider everything from their religious identities to their relationships with their mothers (Constable, 2010; Pratt, 2012).

Under conditions of migration, gendered norms become subject to contestation and ‘creative potential’ when migrants are required to navigate conflicting cultural frames or contradictory demands – what has been called the ‘double bind’ or ‘double consciousness’ of migration (Werbner, 2013). Women encountering a double consciousness must make decisions about which expectations to prioritise, which opportunities to pursue, and which obligations to fulfil in any given context. It is in these decision-making processes that they exercise their emotional reflexivity. Importantly, recent discussions of emotional reflexivity emphasise that this decision-making is not entirely rational. Rather, feelings play a role in the choices that people make about how to live and how to navigate their roles and duties to others (Burkitt, 2012). For dutiful daughters, these feelings include internalised social and cultural expectations to bring honour to the family, including by providing remittances when working overseas (Lindquist, 2004; Constable, 2010; Madianou, 2012; Mee, 2014), avoiding pre-marital sexual relations and any relationships or activities that might bring shame upon her family (Lindquist, 2004; Constable, 2014).

Exposure to new social and cultural norms and expectations when overseas creates an opportunity and requirement for migrant women to reflect on their roles within the family and their sense of self. Through the case studies we provide below, our aim is to explore how two women migrant artists engage in emotional reflexivity in their investigations and discussions of their roles as daughters. We consider how the women artists from Indonesia and the Philippines use Australia and its distance from the maternal home as a new place from which they might reflexively navigate and rethink the ‘feeling rules’ that are presumed to apply to daughters in their relationships with their mothers. In doing so, we heed the argument that ‘the establishment of mother-daughter relationships is essential to women’s autonomy and identity, as women and not just as mothers’ (Whitford, 1992: 263, original emphasis).

As artists, the women in our study are already asserting their independence from the status quo and from the expectations of the dutiful daughter. Creative professions are not valued particularly highly in their home countries, yet these women have prioritised the passion they feel for their art forms above the demands of their other identities. As O’Neill argues (2008: 4.2), Art makes visible experiences, hopes, ideas; it is a reflective space and socially it brings something new into the world – it contributes to knowledge and understanding.

Art thus provides an ideal space for exploring the emotional reflexivity that constitutes the subjectivities and informs the practices of

women as they negotiate shifts in their identities. The dynamic emotional landscapes discussed by the women in this project were diverse, ranging from collaborative relationships with mothers who are perceived as close and supportive, to more ambivalent and strained relationships that are nevertheless perceived as intimate. That is, they were close, [but also] not close.

1.3. The study

The analysis that follows is based on two sets of data. First, a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with a group of six young women aged in their early 20s to late 30s, who live in Melbourne, Australia, and were born to mothers from Indonesia or the Philippines. In these interviews, we asked questions about their migration history, their relationship with their mothers and other family members, and their work as artists. Second, we consider a selection of the artistic productions, from performative pieces and video to writing, available online through their artist website portfolios and by attending public events in which their work was presented. These were explored for expressions of migrant, national, ethnic, class and gendered identities as well as articulations of their roles as daughters.

The demographic profiles of the women are as follows: three of Indonesian heritage and three of Philippine heritage; two Permanent Residents, one applying for Permanent Residency and three Australian citizens; three entered Australia as international students and three were born in Australia of mixed heritage with fathers of Anglo Australian descent; all six are from middle to upper class educated families, two studied at PhD level, one has a Masters and the others have Bachelor degrees. Three live either in the same city or country as their mothers, who migrated as skilled migrants with white-collar occupations. The other three have mothers living in Indonesia or the Philippines and are considered by the participants to be supportive – emotionally in the case of the two who received PhD scholarships to Australia, and also financially for Rani, who came as a thirteen year-old for boarding school as an international student.

It is not possible to do justice to the rich narratives and artistic expressions of all six women in a short paper. In this paper we instead limit our exploration to two of the women. Rani Pramesti is of Indonesian descent living in Australia and describes herself as a performance maker and producer. Eleanor Jackson self-identifies as Filipino Australian; she writes and produces plays, poetry and poetry readings. These two women were selected as examples because in research interviews as well as in their artistic productions, both Rani and Eleanor engaged closely with the themes of daughterhood that were present across the sample. Both had spent time interviewing and collaborating with their mothers in their creative process, aiming to tell their mother's stories as well as their own. This, too, was a common theme across the sample. Furthermore, the two women's performative expressions explicitly focus on emotions, including eliciting emotional responses from the audience. These two case studies provide a unique opportunity to investigate artistic reflections by migrants on daughterhood as a form of emotion work, which can be conducted both transnationally and trans-temporally, and requires a negotiation of the distances of place, culture and generation.

1.4. Rani: Indonesian-Australian performance maker

Rani describes herself as a performance maker and an arts producer in Melbourne Australia, who advocates for the arts in a range of different roles.¹ Rani (b. 1986) studied social work at Sydney University when she successfully auditioned for a youth theatre company. She finished her social work degree and worked full time as a support worker for refugee organisations, before deciding to pursue another

Bachelor degree, this time in Dramatic Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts, the University of Melbourne, graduating in 2013.

Her focus on performing arts is connected to her two interests: theatre and pursuing social justice. Rani suggests that performances have the best capacity for pursuing conversations around social and political issues (Blakkarly, 2014). Her works have been performed in arts festivals within Australia and her current piece, "Chinese Whispers" (2018),² was launched in Jakarta, Indonesia in May 2018 accompanied by a series of workshops and discussions. The launch in Indonesia was a significant move for Rani and her team because they wanted to re-introduce the difficult subject matter of anti-Chinese Indonesian violence to the largely young, middle-class Indonesian audience who were unaware of the racial and sexual violence of May 1998.

In her other works, Rani prefers to create small, intimate performances inspired by her own migration, her mother's experience of sexual violence in Indonesia and her grandmother's personal history and migration to the United States. The performances navigate the emotional and geographical distance from her mother, who is in Indonesia, as well as the maternal intergenerational relationship. When Rani began research for her first work in 2013, her initial idea to explore Chinese Indonesian women's stories of migration to Australia began to shift towards the events of May 1998, a series of riots targeting Chinese Indonesians that included mass rape atrocities, which changed Rani's life. She described her migration experience as follows:

"I was only twelve years old. I think it really shifted my sense of identity. And for me, May '98 definitely had that effect on our family as well, you know beginning with my brother being sent over to Perth, and then I followed and what that did in terms of our family dynamic."

She noted the parallels between her personal story and that of the Chinese Indonesian women in Melbourne in terms of family members being scattered everywhere. Yet, in her case, unlike her other 'upper class' Chinese Indonesian friends, her mother was active in the community of female activists in Jakarta during the gendered violence against Chinese Indonesians. For Rani, geographic distance creates a reflexive space in which she reconstructs what it means to be a feminist artist with a minority Chinese Indonesian background and an activist mother.

"It's only really in going into university education [in Australia] and learning a bit more about the history of violence, and then now as an artist [in Melbourne] kind of really delving a bit more deeply, what does that mean to identify as Chinese. A lot of my friends who were also other upper-class Chinese who were born and grew up in Jakarta, they didn't have activist mothers. So through my mum, I was introduced to a lot of people and social movements and readings and stories that I don't think many of my other friends were exposed to ... that in turn informs my feminist lens."

The gendered violence that informs her on-going trilogy of work is her way of counteracting what she describes as a 'rape culture' that often accuses women of lying, where rape in particular is a source of taboo and shame. Her mother's story is presented in an interactive performance installation titled 'Sedih//Sunno' (2016), the second part of a trilogy, and is her way of creating social change. Rani states that she wants to start by making a work where her mother's story is treated as truth and is treated with respect.

"So this one, I consulted very closely with my mum every step of the way, because it's her story. So when I came back from Solo (Indonesia) with this audio recording, one of the first things I did was to kind of think about okay, out of the many, many hours of recording, which one do I feel really *kayak merasa terpanggil yah* [I feel like it was a calling] to make a work from that? And it was my mum's, that 1 h with my mum."

Rani and three other performers guided a small audience of twelve

² This is a further development of her 2014 work by the same name; see Rani Pramesti, "Chinese Whispers" from <http://www.insideindonesia.org/chinese-whispers-the-art-of-reflection>, accessed 17 September 2018.

¹ See her website <http://ranip.com.au/>.

through a series of three of what she calls ‘intimate’ spaces. She used family heirlooms, batik hanging fabrics symbolising her family history as batik traders and artisans, audio recordings and personal anecdotes to represent her mother’s statement that ‘in sadness, you are always alone’, to reflect on her mother’s experience of sexual abuse.

Rani sharing her mother’s story in Sedih//Sunno.

Photo copyright: Rani Pramesti.



The consequences of this artwork for Rani’s sense of her relationship with her mother is that she became ‘closer’ by just having that ‘one hour’ of recording of her mother’s traumatic story that awakens her up to her true calling or *merasa terpanggil*. Her mother’s personal experience of sexual abuse resonated to Rani as a universal issue that many women faced and became an impetus for her identity as a feminist activist-artist. She recalled her mother saying, “Rani, this is now your story, I give it to you”. Thus, her mother’s story becomes her story as well. Yet,

The combination of aural and visual elements in the performance space was inspired by the artist’s mother’s memory, while simultaneously also speaks about Rani’s memory of her mother. While Rani sensitively included her mother’s voice in the performance, it was also her own voice that guided the audience within the intimate spaces; ‘to listen to sadness’ (*Sedih* is the Indonesian word for sad, while *Sunno* is Fijian Hindi for listen), namely to listen to the sadness of her mother’s story of sexual abuse. The performance thus highlighted the intricate layer of emotions between the artist’s subjectivity, the idea of home and the memory of the maternal.

Rani was not just engaging in her own emotional reflexivity, but was also seeking to provoke emotional reflexivity in the members of the audience. She produced an embodied experience of emotional intimacy with her audience through the expression of her mother’s story:

“It is very intimate, and not just in terms of performance but you have to focus in on the source of this audio, and you also focus being with me. You know that I am with you. And then it reaches a very emotionally heavy point, where my mum talks about her experience and understanding of what it’s like to be raped, why that is really heavy, is heavy and very sad to listen to. This is the point where the energy in the room is quite thick. It really affects people. If people cry it would be during this bit.”

For Rani, her mother becoming a source of inspiration for her performances against gender violence is a way to bridge the geographical distance between them. Rani has lived apart from her mother, who remains in Indonesia, since being sent to an Australian boarding school at the age of thirteen to escape the violence. Rani goes to great lengths to remain emotionally close to her mother using a regular weekly video call on Skype, constant social media connection and extended annual return visits to Indonesia. This effort also shapes her combination of artistic and activist work.

it also highlights the physical distance that has become a barrier to their relationship, only being able to record that ‘one hour’ on a return visit to her mother’s natal home in Indonesia.

The act of sharing this story with the audience becomes another form of understanding the close not close mother daughter relationship, or in Rani’s words, a way of ‘building proximity’. The artwork avoids the direct representation of the sexual violence, and replaces it with a poetic and immersive approach. In doing so, the immersive aesthetic experience creates an intimate atmosphere that allow the transmission of different subjectivities and affect between strangers. It also highlights Rani’s ambivalent feelings on presenting her mother’s experience of sexual violence in Indonesia. On the one hand, the story no longer remains a personal story shared between Rani and her mother when physically close, but one also shared with distant others. On the other hand, the engagement with her mother’s deeply personal story was an attempt by the daughter to become (psychically) closer to understand the mother’s trauma. Simultaneously, it is also a form of distancing through imaginative investment and shared universalism by the artist-daughter. Meanwhile, intimacy is rebuilt in Rani’s fulfillment of a sense of obligation to continue her mother’s politics as a feminist who works against gender violence.

This obligation to her mother’s story and politics is an embodied, emotive obligation that is unable to be left behind. It overcomes geographic distance between her mother and herself through an intimate reimagining of her mother’s trauma, even as that intimacy is rendered public and distanced.

1.5. Eleanor: poet, play writer, editor

Eleanor is a poet, performer and past editor (now Board member) of an Asian Australian literature magazine, academic and a community

worker. Her creative and professional work since 2008 draws on various relationships to geographical, racial and cultural spaces in international development, Asian arts and culture and on identity as a mixed-race person living in an Anglo Australian context.³ Eleanor has always enjoyed writing poetry. When she began to attend a few readings and saw that these events were full of white men, she decided as a form of identity politics to contribute a different voice. She explains:

“I am curious about questions of how intersectional identity plays out in the individual ... I do talk about it a lot in my work and I think identity politics are present in the work that I do.”

Eleanor started entering what she describes as ‘white male dominated’ poetry reading competitions, particularly in Australia. She says that her poetry resonates more with audiences who are made up of ‘groups of women and women of colour and queer women of colour’, but that she enters Australian national poetry competition because she wants to talk to various people outside of her community, to find shared common experience in difference.

“If I only made poems for Filipino people, they’re experiences that they’ve already had. Why would I tell them what it’s like to get the snuffly kisses that your grandma gives you ... that Filipinos do ... so I don’t necessarily write just for people who have those same experiences.” Now in her late 30s, Eleanor identifies herself as a Filipino Australian, born in Australia (b.1979) to a mother from the Philippines and a father who is Anglo-Australian. They all live in the same city of Melbourne. In spite of her father’s non-migrant background, she nevertheless considers herself a ‘second generation migrant’ who has followed a fairly typical trajectory of the over-achieving migrant. She attended university to study Arts and Law with Honours and a Masters degree in Social Science (International Development), as well as trying to earn a stable income and contribute to her family.

Similar to Rani’s maternal trilogy, Eleanor’s writing illuminates the trope of intergenerational Filipino women as grandmothers, mothers and daughters. A particular focus is her mother’s expectations of her as a Filipino migrant’s daughter, as in her play *After the Exposition* (2015):

“The mum’s a nurse and the grandma’s very devoutly religious and the daughter is very rebellious and funky ... who cares about being polite and respectful and being nice and not having boyfriends and achieving well and making the house look nice ... an inflection of Filipino-ness while also being quite universal ... for people to be like, “That’s just a family, that’s what it’s like to feel ashamed of your parents and that’s what it’s like to feel annoyed by your children.”

Eleanor’s creative practice is a means by which she seeks to interrogate and navigate the distances she perceives between herself and her mother. These include the cultural differences produced by her positioning as a Filipino Australian daughter of a Filipino mother – differences in language, upbringing and role expectations. But it is also a distance produced partly by her mother’s disapproval of Eleanor’s profession as not generating a reliable income. Eleanor explains that earning capacity is important for her mother, who brought her up in a middle-class family living in a typical Australian outer urban suburb with a Philippine migrant social network that aspires for their children to become professionals such as lawyers and doctors.

One of Eleanor’s attempts to negotiate these distances is in her series of poems called ‘*Languages I don’t Speak*’ (2012), which includes ‘I don’t speak Tagalog’ and ‘I don’t speak Suburban’. The series of poems is a collaboration with her mother that incorporates Tagalog into the text, in an effort to bridge the gaps between language, culture and generation. As she explains, “So asking ... my mum to collaborate to write a poem with me about why I don’t speak Tagalog ... She’s collaborated with me a few times. It was a really hard time for me about trying to get to know her and trying to understand her worldview. We’ve had a really difficult relationship ... I did get to spend a year talking with my mum and learning more about her, about where she grew up, what her life

was like, and understanding her ... better.”

This tension is reflected in the first poem of the series titled ‘*I don’t speak Tagalog*’ (2012):

indeed, we begged for vegemite sandwiches.

My mother was working on her *Ingglés* then too –

why confuse the issue? Though we knew

to give our names, and then the blessing, to older Filipinos who asked:

Anó ang pangalan mo?

Having disinherited myself from all that might be

(had only I been a better Filipino daughter)

I sometimes sit bored at family parties and only occasionally

let on that: *Hindī ko maintindihan*.

I’ve no idea what you just said.

While the incorporation of Tagalog in the poem is an acknowledgement of her Filipino heritage, it is also significant that her mother’s tongue appears as fragments in Jackson’s own work, reflecting the fragmentation of her own linguistic heritage. Her selfhood is produced through the interweaving of fragments of her mother’s cultural identity and linguistic practices in her own creative practice, further underlining her agency as a maker and producer of meanings that are inherited from afar.

‘I don’t speak Tagalog’ articulates the moments of emotional connection and disconnection with her mother that are made possible through reflecting on shared and different languages. She further elaborates on this theme in ‘*Meeting*’ (2017), where she provides additional context to understand her current relationship with her mother:

“My mother attends my wedding, to a man I love, who loves me too. I try to release myself from the feeling of sadness at her joy at getting what she has wanted for so long, at last, I want it too. I am almost a good Filipino daughter ... Still we don’t invite my Filipino relatives to the wedding ... She tells them, “It’s an Anglo wedding.” At which they nod, understanding.”

Eleanor’s poetry evokes the emotional distance, ‘the feelings of sadness at her joy’ between mother and daughter who live in the same city, yet are separated by cultural distance. Eleanor’s aspirations to be a ‘good daughter’ remain unfulfilled because it appears that the distances between her own Anglo cultural influences and her mother’s Filipino family culture are too vast. While her marriage is a fulfilment of Filipino gendered expectations, it is considered to be a disappointment, an ‘Anglo wedding’. The simultaneous presence and absence of a common cultural framework within which Eleanor and her mother coexist is a theme that she returns to throughout her work, struggling to navigate the chasms that prevent the mother-daughter intimacy she feels motivated to create.

In her poem ‘*The Very Best Story that I Know*’ (2013), Eleanor returns to the theme of disappointment in the barriers to closeness she consistently encounters. However, in contrast with other works, in this piece she does not claim sole responsibility. This becomes clear in a line in the poem: “Your mother is disappointed/and you are disappointed in your mother too”. Here, the dynamics in their intimate relationship have shifted. Now, it is not just that the daughter feels she is never good enough. Instead, the mother too is found wanting, perhaps not quite able to be the transcultural maternal guide that the daughter is seeking in her own navigation of cultural differences.

1.6. Discussion: creative practices and mother-daughter relationship

The intricate dynamics of navigating intimacy and distance are common to both Rani and Eleanor’s personal experiences and artistic

³ See her website: <https://eleanorjjackson.com/bio/>, accessed 21 Aug. 18.

practices, yet play out in very different ways. This is in part because they start from different positions. Rani was forced to be geographically distant from her mother at a young age as a result of violence in her home country, but has actively maintained a close emotional bond over time and space. She uses social media, visits and regular online communication to maintain a sense of closeness with her mother. In contrast, Eleanor has been geographically close to her migrant mother throughout her life. Her problem lies in fulfilling the desire to attract her mother's approval in spite of the culturally-based disapproval of her life choices. For both Eleanor and Rani, their creative expression and products are not only forms of personal expression (mediated in the form of live performance/poetry) but also a space for emotional reflexivity, through which they navigate the intimacy and distance of their mother-daughter relationships.

In deAnda and Geist-Martin's (2017) study on autobiographical memory in generational mother-daughter relationships, it is argued that the sharing of autobiographical memories could serve as a form of intimacy to build stronger mother-daughter bonds. This is evident in Rani and Eleanor's practices. This includes the use of mother tongue and the representation of intimate spaces in their art/writing, to engage the body, language, visual and affect in representing the layered emotions of a mother-daughter relationship that is navigated from a distance. In 'Sedih//Sunno', for example, the intimate performance space becomes a site where the audience witnesses and participates in the daughter's recovery of her mother's past. The use of family heirlooms and a recording of the mother's voice in the artwork not only evoke maternal memory but also underline the artist-daughter's desire to reaffirm intimacy following separation. In Eleanor's body of work, the intimate space is evoked through a recollection of daily activities, such as the making of a sandwich in 'I don't Speak Tagalog' (2012). Yet, it is also a contentious site for intergenerational expectations, as represented in 'The Very Best Story that I Know' (2013).

Rani uses intimate created space in her artwork to reaffirm her emotional closeness to her mother, but the act of sharing her mother's personal story with the audience depersonalises and transforms the closeness of mother-daughter intimacy while highlighting their geographical distance. Eleanor's notion of space explores the unmaking and remaking of mother-daughter intimacy as well as a negotiation of feeling rules between different cultural, race and gender contexts. The use of creative practices such as installation art, participatory art or poetry writing allows such complex navigation of emotions and transformation in mother-daughter intimate relationships through its imaginative investment.

Yet, art works are not merely a confessional board of the artists. For all of the women in this research project, making and creating in the forms of poetry, dance, performance, and/or theatre are strongly aligned with their commitment to contributing knowledge and understanding, particularly of the gendered migrant and Asian-Australian experience.⁴ Indeed the emotional complexities of the mother-daughter relationship coupled with their migrant narrative/s are played out within their connection with sites of 'home' and intimate spaces through the use of family heirlooms passed down by her mother to Rani. This is prominent in the 'Sedih//Sunno' intimate performance installation and in Eleanor's reference to domesticity, of 'being bored at family parties and begging for vegemite sandwiches from her mother who is still working on her English or *Ingles*' in 'I don't speak Tagalog'.

Language is explored by Rani and Eleanor not only to evoke the memories of the mother, but also as an example of the daughter's agency to contest the dutiful daughter tropes that continue to frame their feeling rules. Their positioning as migrant daughters has the capacity to rebuild intimacy through the act of translating and

incorporating their mother's tongue. Yet the acts necessarily remain incomplete, in order to allow the daughter to represent her own independent and autonomous subjectivity (Morra, 2007: 98). Thus, Rani and Eleanor's idea of a migrant's home country is mapped out from memories of their mother and as daughters in the fragmented use of the 'mother tongue' in their respective works.

Rani and Eleanor's perceptions of their mothers are not only gendered and generational, but also classed and racialised, embedded in culturally specific expectations of femininity. For Rani, there is a feeling of obligation to carry on her mother's feminist cause despite coming from an urban upper class Chinese Indonesian family, with no friends from the same background with activist mothers. She states, 'we are abnormal, we do not agree with the Indonesian *kodrat wanita*'. For Eleanor there is an ongoing felt obligation to be as close as she can come to being 'almost' a good Philippine daughter. While acutely aware that she can pass as 'White', she feels her mother's desire for her to be part of the successful second-generation migrant cohort: educated, with a good job and able to take care of her family financially. In other words, to be the dutiful daughter symbolically reflecting her mother's worth. In terms of ethnic identity, Rani highlights her multiple identities as a minority Chinese Indonesian, coming from a majority Javanese ethnic group through her maternal grandfather. For Eleanor it is the mixed race identity of being Anglo Australian and of Asian 'ethnicity' from her mother's Philippine heritage that requires negotiation.

It is clear that migration transforms gendered, classed, ethnic and generational subjectivities as expressed and understood by the participants in their interviews and in their creative practices, particularly ones directly inspired by their mother, such as Rani's 'Sedih//Sunno' story of her mother and Eleanor's 'Languages I don't Speak' collaborative poetry series. Through these artistic productions they are able to transform their relationship with, as well as their perceptions and representations of, their mothers. Rani was able to 'feel' why her mother became a feminist activist, acknowledging the sexual violence she experienced as a child. She felt a calling to continue her mother's activism, but as an artist. Eleanor is able to understand her mother's worldview and expectations as coming from a developing country, the Philippines. The year that she spent on the collaborative project enables Eleanor, in her words, "to try to become closer to my mother", to bridge the gaps between migrant and second-generation, developing and developed, mother and daughter.

2. Conclusion

Geographic and temporal distance can create a reflexive space in which individuals reconstruct what it means to be a woman and a dutiful daughter. In this study, we explore the extent to which independently mobile young women, occupying non-conservative identities as artists and writers, actively create spaces of reflexivity and social change. In the cases of Rani and Eleanor, who counter the image of female migrants as domestic workers, their 'mother' provides an inspiration in various ways. For Rani, her family's maternal intergenerational story is the inspiration for her performances and in particular, 'Sedih//Sunno' is about the gendered violence experienced by her mother. Similarly to Rani, Eleanor also created a body of work based on a maternal genealogy. Even though it is a work of fiction, it still speaks to her family relationship, particularly her ambivalent mother-daughter relationship and the expectations of being a second-generation Philippine migrant.

The artwork and performances are ways for the participants to reflect upon the forms of intimacy that are possible as daughters within their relationships with their mothers. Despite geographical distance Rani's sense of being close to and inspired by her mother is clear in her creative work, yet tinged with a sense of obligation to continue her mother's 'passion', to pursue a feminist agenda against gender violence. Eleanor's sense of being distanced from her mother by cultural and

⁴ See for example a visual art exhibition "Disobedient Daughters" in Metro Arts Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, 4–21 April 2018, <https://www.metroarts.com.au/posts/disobedient-daughters/>, accessed 17 September 2018.

linguistic differences is the provocation for her creation of artwork aimed at bringing her closer to her mother. She does this not just through creating intergenerational plays and collaborative poetry, but also by interviewing her mother and aiming to understand the Philippine part of her heritage.

The politics in the creative practices by the two young women are occupying non-conservative identities by actively resisting roles from the past and creating spaces of reflexivity and social change. For Rani this is about emphasising feminist politics and giving voice to gender and sexual violence. For Eleanor it is more strongly focused on the identity politics of race, racism and gender. In doing so, they are transforming their selves as dutiful daughters by reconfiguring their relationships with, perceptions of and representations of their mothers through emotional reflexivity framed by their creative practice and their role as artists. In highlighting these complex practices of navigating the gendered, migrant self, our aim has been to use the lens of emotional reflexivity to provide a nuanced perspective that positions women from Indonesia and the Philippines beyond their assumed identities as domestic workers who mother. Our focus instead is on the multiple expressions of daughterhood as close, not close.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all of the women who participated in this research and generously shared their stories, art, reflections and insights. We particularly thank Rani Pramesti and Eleanor Jackson for agreeing to have their stories shared in this article and for providing comments and corrections on our drafts. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the authors alone. This research was made possible by a La Trobe University, Melbourne Australia internal grant from the Research Focus Area Transforming Human Societies RFA THS (grant number 3.2508.07.15) for the project titled 'Multimedia, Migrant Identities and Family Relationships: A Qualitative Investigation', with Chief Investigators A.Prof Raelene Wilding and Dr Monika Winarnita. We thank Dino Concepcion for excellent research assistance, and Mary Holmes, Kye Askins, Andrew Gorman-Murray and the anonymous peer reviewers for their thoughtful critical engagement with this work.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.02.005>.

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