

Southeast Asia

Eric J. Pido, *Migrant Returns: Manila, Development, and Transnational Connectivity*

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Eric Pido is right to distinguish *balikbayans* from overseas Filipino workers or OFWs. *Balikbayans* are Filipinos who go abroad to work but settle in and become citizens of the host country. They tend to live in countries in the Global North: Canada, Australia, the U.K., and especially the United States. The word *balikbayan*—literally “to return to one’s country”—refers to their return to the Philippines as tourists or retirees. This is a population worth distinguishing from OFWs. OFWs, or perhaps more precisely, overseas *contract* workers, are associated with a different set of destinations: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, Kuwait, and Singapore. Within these countries, they are primarily regarded as workers not citizens.

OFWs are well studied, *balikbayan* much less so. In *Migrant Returns*, Pido makes the case that *balikbayans* deserve greater scholarly attention. He points out that Filipino-Americans alone comprise 17 percent of foreign tourists and that thousands of *balikbayans* retire in the Philippines every year. The Philippine government has taken steps to capitalize on the *balikbayan* population. The term was invented in the 1970s as a way of enticing Filipinos living abroad to return to the country and invest. Over time, the status became invested with various privileges such as tax exemptions and a dispensation allowing for the purchase of land as foreigners. The Philippine Retirement Authority has made attracting *balikbayans* its chief focus. The real estate industry has kept the population uppermost in mind in its furious building of condominiums, gated subdivisions, “*balikbayan*” hotels, and sprawling retirement villages.

Pido focuses on the connections among three actors: the Philippine government, the real estate industry, and the *balikbayans* themselves. In the process, he uncovers the truly transnational nature of the *balikbayan* situation. He makes an insightful link, for example, between the foreclosure crisis in the US and the property boom in Manila. He points out that many of the cities with the highest foreclosure rates during the Great Recession—Daly City, Stockton, Vallejo (all in California), and Las Vegas—have large Filipino-American populations. He then draws upon qualitative data featuring informants forced to sell their homes in the US and looking to retire in the Philippines. Some of these informants relied on the same realtors to handle both the short sale of their American property and the purchase of the Philippine property.

He documents the activities of a “transnational realty network.” He shows the Philippine real estate industry specifically targeting *balikbayans*. It advertises properties in Filipino-American media, agents go on road shows to the US, and “bird dogs” are employed to rope in buyers. These bird dogs are trusted members of Filipino-American communities. Their job is to talk up properties to their friends and family.

Pido highlights the ambivalence surrounding *balikbayans*. They are Filipino but foreign. They possess greater privileges than ordinary Filipinos and thus are local but exceptional. In the Philippines, they are regarded as both heroes and traitors, as beautiful and ugly. They regard their homeland, meanwhile, with appreciation and trepidation. They see corruption everywhere, as well as crime, trickery, and lack of discipline. The conceit of home is both attractive and fraught. This ambivalence, contrary to Pido’s claim, points to the limitations of a “transnational subjectivity.”

Pido also makes the argument that *balikbayan* capital is worsening the fragmentation of Manila’s urban landscape. It is contributing, specifically, to a process of enclavization: the rampant building of heavily guarded high-rises, gated subdivisions, and exclusive commercial complexes. It may be a contributing factor, certainly, but I doubt that the role of *balikbayans* is as big as Pido suggests. Enclavization is primarily being driven by middle class growth and remittances from OFWs generally. It is unlikely that several hundred thousand Filipino-American tourists and some twelve thousand retirees are transformative in and of themselves. Indeed, given the limited scope of the *balikbayan* phenomenon, I am not sure whether terms such as “*balikbayan* economy” and “*balikbayan* landscape” are really warranted.

I would also question Pido’s attempts to frame the *balikbayan* situation using terms like “repeated turning,” “precarious modernity,” and “the economy of appearances,” and phrases like “the affective production of imaginative laboring” and “home is situated, epistemically, as the counterpoint of modernity.” These gestures strike me as being not only empty but distracting from an otherwise interesting empirical story. The strongest chapters have a clear empirical focus, such as transnational real estate and the Philippines Retirement Authority. The weakest indulge in theoretical speculation at the expense of a more careful analysis of the qualitative evidence.

In general, I wanted more and better use of the interview data. These data should have been the book’s strongest asset. Ideally, they would give us insight into the *balikbayan* experience. The status of these data, however, is uncertain. We’re not told how many interviews the author conducted and how they were selected. We’re not told very much about the social situation of his informants.

The bigger problem is that there is just not enough data being featured and analyzed in-depth. We don’t hear enough from the *balikbayans* themselves. In the chapters on *balikbayan* subjectivity, for example, Pido spends more time analyzing a hotel catering to *balikbayans*, a supposedly typical “*balikbayan* house,” and real estate ads targeting *balikbayan* than he does on the sense his informants are making of ideas like “return” and “home.” The dearth of *balikbayan* voices, I suspect, leads to some of Pido’s broader characterizations, such as *balikbayans* being “paranoid” when in the Philippines, hyperconscious about security, fraud, and sanitation. I wanted a more data-based and sophisticated account of *balikbayan* subjectivity. Perhaps I am being unfair and asking for a different book.

Shortcomings aside, *Migrant Returns* highlights an interesting phenomenon, one that should be of interest not just to scholars of the Philippines and Filipino America but of migration and transnationalism.

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