

# Sent home: mapping the absent child into migration through polymedia

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**Abstract** *Migrants and their transnational families document their children and child-rearing practices on social networking sites (SNS) to enhance their social mobility. In this article, I identify a new group of migrant children, namely those sent home to their parents' countries of origin for an imagined 'good childhood'. I demonstrate that polymedia – SNS and other platforms – sustain these children and create new norms of publicness and visibility in transnational parenting. Exploring how families document child-raising across international boundaries, I show how the trajectories of parenting relationships remain open ended. I counter the predominant focus on transnational parenting as a kind of abandonment attached to left-behind children. Instead, I refocus the research on the opportunities polymedia give families to create and sustain intimacies, thus making the trajectories of migrant families and children increasingly dynamic. Polymedia create important shifts in global migration – a transformation that requires changes in the way scholars approach transnational families and long-distance parenting.*

**Keywords** CHILDREN, ICTS, SOCIAL NETWORKS, TRANSNATIONAL CITIZENSHIP, TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES, TRANSNATIONAL URBANISM

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In this article, by examining how families represent sent-home children on social networking sites, I reveal how child-rearing practices promote social mobility opportunities for transnational families. By analysing a case study of British-born children of Filipino migrant parents who have been sent home to the Philippines, I make an original contribution to the study of global migration and transnational parenting. I identify a new group of migrant children – those sent home to their parents' countries of origin for an imagined 'good childhood'. I then demonstrate how the expanding role of social networking sites (SNS) and polymedia help to sustain these children through technologies that create new norms of publicness and visibility in transnational parenting. By showing how the trajectories of these relationships remain open ended, I counter the predominant focus on transnational parenting as a kind of abandonment attached to

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left-behind children. Instead, I reveal how polymedia offer innovative ways of creating and sustaining family intimacies, making the trajectories of migrant families and children increasingly dynamic. The advent of polymedia marks an important shift in the dynamics of global migration and this transformation requires changes in the way scholars approach transnational families and long-distance parenting.

Around the world, labour migrants seek to convert their short-term contracts in host countries into eventual citizenship. Permanent status should then make it possible to secure opportunities for family formation. In the United Kingdom, however, a long-standing lack of investment in public services and public spaces has undermined the abilities of contract and even settled migrants to raise their children. Here, some Filipino professionals now opt to send their British-born children home. In the Philippines, these children are raised in less precarious surroundings and are parented long distance via polymedia. In what follows, I show how, by repatriating children with British citizenship, parents express their continuing affective investment in their Philippine connections. In the Philippines, their sent-home children sustain transnational families while expanding flexible citizenship into more global and popular forms.

Globally, it is well established that the movements of children and the mediation of their absence or presence give shape to transnational family practices. Children who are absent from their biological parents and separated from them by national borders are found in this situation for several reasons. Transnational migration separates left-behind children from their parents, often permanently, at great emotional cost and causing damage to that relationship. Children themselves may cross borders to work or for their own education, while some children are trafficked into forced labour or sexual exploitation. Other children are adopted transnationally. Another category of children is those who are fostered in a country other than that in which their parents reside or sojourn. Children who are born while their migrant parents are abroad and then sent home occupy another part of this continuum of absence. While transnational migration creates social mobility for migrants and their families, it also reinforces inequalities in their sending country. In this context, the movements and absences of children shape both their wider family's social mobility and that of migrant sending societies.

Transnational migrants who send children home seek to offer them the best possible childhood through the spatial separation. Such separations are often predicated on the availability of new information and communications technologies (ICTs).

ICTs afford new kinds of co-presence in daily life. Scholars exploring ICTs in transnational families have highlighted their benefits and limits, focusing on the quality of co-presence and the sense of intimacy experienced by ICT users and family members (Baldassar 2016; Baldassar et al. 2016: 134; Madianou 2016; Madianou and Miller 2012; Nedelcu 2012). In this article, I shift that focus from the intimate content of these long-distance relations to their more public performance on SNS, focusing on families with children and parents living apart. Rather than querying intimacy or the experiences of left-behind children (Parreñas 2005; Yeoh et al. 2012), I explore how making these long-distance, mediated family practices quasi-public creates new strategies for attaining social mobility. For migrant parents, the potential to mediate co-presence via ICTs and thus transcend physical absence makes long-distance child-rearing possible. Much

of the literature on transnational families has focused on parenting and family practices, particularly on the emotional toll migration takes on mothers and their ambivalence about long separations from their children. More recent studies on the impacts of ICTs on these relationships have extended this theme, but they have found that the technologies create redemptive effects, enabling both intensified intimacies and surveillance practices. This article complements work on the quality of intimacy within long-distance parenting relationships and relationships between migrant parents and the children's caregivers (Poeze et al. 2016) through exploring the more public aspects of SNS. Social media make parenting relationships with sent-home and left-behind children public, and SNS thus become part of the assemblage through which migration and childhoods are governed.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, scholars and policy makers became concerned with the impacts of parental migration on left-behind children in the Philippines (Asis 2006; Parreñas 2005). Since the mid-2000s, there has been growing interest in the prevalence and challenges of long-distance parenting for migrants and families using social media (Madianou and Miller 2012). The study of technology in sustaining such transnational family practices has moved on from initial work on text-and-phone-call parenting (McKay 2012; Parreñas 2005; Vertovec 2004) to webcam-chat parenting (Madianou and Miller 2012) and now to polymedia – a much fuller array of interlinked media platforms mostly accessed by smartphone, tablet and laptop computer (Baldassar et al. 2016; Madianou and Miller 2013). SNS are key platforms for migrants.

SNS such as Facebook enable people to recreate the transnational space of communication as a quasi-public field where 'networked privacy' obtains (Marwick and boyd 2014 cited in Madianou 2016: 195). Here, privacy is no longer an individual choice or shaped by a dyadic relation, but depends on relationships between individuals within networks. With Facebook's dynamic privacy rules, comments and 'likes' enable a post to be seen by 'friends of friends' rather than only the intended correspondent. Posting documentary evidence of transnational family practices (photographs of events, pictures of conversations, meals, celebrations and the like) on SNS thus represents a decision to make these events accessible to others. People choose to make specific aspects of transnational parenting and intimacy accessible to others through their own digital relationships with other people and their broader networks. The reasons behind making intimacy quasi-public and shaping such posts to strategic ends form a critical element of what Nedelcu (2012) calls the 'new geographies of everyday life' for transnational families. This quasi-public space of SNS is where transnational families and members of the wider diaspora express anxieties about absent children and negotiate new childhood and parenting norms.

The quasi-public space of social media draws together anxieties about children's movements and ICTs. Children's mobility has often been assumed to undermine family practices by creating anxiety and alienation, but this assumption does not hold in all instances, particularly when there are strong extended-family networks available to support both parents and children (Holdsworth 2013). Children, like other people living increasingly mobile lives (Elliot and Urry 2010), can retain their sense of connectedness to others through their everyday mobility patterns. Distance, likewise, is not necessarily

an insurmountable obstacle in building and sustaining familial intimacy (Baldassar 2016; McKay 2007, 2012). All family exchanges are both reciprocal and asymmetrical, but because distance increases opportunities for missed and misinterpreted communication, transnational ones can be more fraught or highly charged (Baldassar 2016). Because distance and absence are not the source of all problematic aspects within long-distance family and intimate relationships, attributing family problems to the study of the weaknesses and failures of media platforms would be reductive (Madianou and Miller 2012). Long-distance, mediated family care is, in many instances, capable of delivering an experience of adequate ‘distant co-presence’ or care (Baldassar 2016). However, mediation in these relationships is never an entirely neutral practice of translation. Media technologies can act as forces with trajectories of their own, shaping the fields that their affordances create (Baldassar 2016: 148). Using ICTs successfully to sustain transnational family practices requires not only accessible and affordable services, but also families with time, education, social networks, technical skills and money to spend (Baldassar et al. 2016: 138). The particularities of social media thus shape the messages sent, received and understood, and the social meaning attached to sending children home.

In this article, I apply three concepts – polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013), affective investments (Faier 2013) and prosthetic citizenship (McKay 2016) – both to explore migrant practices of long-distance rearing of sent-home children and to analyse the ethnographic data collected from transnational families. I use these concepts to map the posts on the SNS that connect Filipino migrants in the UK to their families and children in the Philippines. My analysis shows the new norms of long-distance belonging that social media afford reconfigure transnational family practices and social norms for investment and citizenship.

### **Approach**

I argue that social media are reconfiguring family practices and creating new social norms pertaining to long-distance belonging. I rely on ethnographic data derived from the transcripts of interviews with 61 Filipino migrants collected between 2009 and 2014, plus an additional and separate set of nine formal interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013, participant observation in family and community events in London, the Philippines and on social media platforms, and iterative follow-up interviews by Skype and Messenger chat (via Facebook). Combined, and then placed within my wider project (McKay 2016), these sources comprise a robust, diachronic set of qualitative data on sent-home children.

My migrant respondents in this study were all Filipinos from the Kankanaey ethnic group, one of the recognized groups of indigenous people from the Cordillera Central in the archipelago’s northern island of Luzon. Importantly, the ‘good childhood’ they imagined for their children was embedded in their Kankanaey culture. Kankanaey childhood and parenting ideals differ from the more homogenous set of class-inflected, more generically Western expectations of mainstream Filipinos (Jocano 1998; Scott 1993). My data come from my broader study of transnational cultural practices of sustaining

care (McKay 2016) in which I made it clear that I was not examining my respondents' long-distance parenting to assess how globally proper or improper it might be. Instead, my approach was to celebrate, with my respondents, the choices – though difficult – they had made to give their children the best possible future, and the successes and challenges along that route. Following social media profiles was key to my approach.

### *The general shape of polymedia*

Madianou and Miller (2013: 170) define polymedia as 'an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an "integrated structure" within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media'. Different polymedia platforms thus have different uses and represent a choice to balance distance and intimacy in communication (Baldassar 2016; Madianou and Miller 2012).

For the 61 respondents in my larger study, emails, like letters, were comparatively indirect and asynchronous. Email felt more formal than a more spontaneous short message service (SMS) text exchange via phone or a chat exchange with Facebook's Messenger function. Emails and Facebook chat messages were generally used to convey private information, which often included details of financial transactions or intimate conversations with sexual content or gossip. Other text-based platforms were an intermediate step towards publicness. Snapchat was most private, WhatsApp was group oriented, Twitter was public, and Facebook semi-public. Meanwhile, video calls, voice calls and real-time chat – using Skype, FaceTime, or Messenger – were more intimate because they facilitated simultaneous co-presence, so produced more free-flowing interactions. Real-time chat was occasionally semi-public, with multiple people present at both ends of the conversation. Polymedia thus offered a complex ecology, giving people multiple ways to communicate a message and then share or store it. People saved emails and text chats and would show them to others as evidence of a communication event, sometimes ignoring expectations that these would remain confidential. Facebook's record of photographs and comments, in contrast, served as a kind of quasi-public archive (McKay 2010, 2016). My respondents were relaxed about my 'friending' them on Facebook and discussing photos and posted comments or 'likes'. To explain the context of these posts, they would sometimes show me text messages, the text of saved chats, or saved emails. Most of the time, they talked about Facebook with me in the same way that they would talk about it with their peers, greeting me with 'Have you seen ... on my Facebook?'

For my subset of nine respondents here, the public aspect of Facebook made it unique among the SNS they used. It is thus worthwhile examining how, specifically, my respondents used this platform to shape social mobility through children's mobility. Facebook was the 'front channel' to contemporaneous private conversations, sustained by 'backchanneling' on WhatsApp, Snapchat, Messenger, Skype and SMS, and, occasionally, by voice calls (Baldassar 2016: 149). Everyone watched Facebook. However, they made their 'serious' comments on what they saw there to others through more private platforms, not on the comments threads beneath Facebook posts. Their Facebook comments – with some significant exceptions – were generally positive,

supportive, anodyne, or joking, posted in acknowledgement, not discussion. So, how absent children are represented and how these representations are engaged by publics and extended kin on Facebook becomes a key site of statements about family fortunes and family practices. We can think of accreted Facebook posts as a version of Appadurai's (2003, 2016) archive of aspiration, revealing how polymedia frames the ways members of the emergent middle class from the Philippines move their children to secure social mobility.

The revelatory aspects of social media transform norms for personal intimacy, status and ritual – and thus social practices themselves – within diasporic Filipino communities (Madianou 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012; Miller and Slater 2000). The transformation of social practices is particularly true of parenting practices that are at once highly particular to the child and parent (or parents) and very social – it takes a village. This village is a mediated one, because the combination of social media and family separations in a translocal field makes parenting very public. Social media meet a need to make visible things heretofore private, to recruit support for parenting approaches and share triumphs, and to maintain continual contact across distance. Facebook thus picks up and provides evidence of intimacy sustained on other platforms. For instance, among my respondents I saw 'all-day Skype' – parents with a continually open channel in a jacket pocket feeding into a computer screen 'back home'. This practice materialized Madianou's (2016) concept of 'ambient co-presence' and was polymediated, being linked with Facebook Messenger chat and Facebook posts. All of this would be facilitated by adults and documented on Facebook to show how, and how regularly, parents in London were in contact with Philippines-resident children.

My respondents used Facebook to share their stories about long-distance parenting. On Facebook, for example, their 'friends' could see Sonny giving Aila a birthday gift of an iPhone 6 in a London restaurant. Her new phone would help them stay in touch, via Skype, with their young son, Eric, back in the Philippines. Sonny and Aila's Facebook profiles each then featured photos of Eric, taken via Skype on the iPhone, engaged in parallel play to the camera. Their posted comments showed that Eric was receiving feedback and encouragement from his parents on the audio feed. While these polymedia connections do not give the same affective fullness as in-person contact, they are neither abandonment nor refusal of relationship. Instead, people are building new communicative ecologies of long-distance parenting/co-parenting and family and are developing very dispersed full-time intimate communities around parenting. These practices revealed a definite generational divide; Sonny and Aila are in their thirties. While people of all ages in migrant families have discovered that the constant flow of presence, potential interaction and emotional availability across an open channel is something they wanted but did not know how to articulate until they found polymedia, migrants in their thirties were most likely to explore all platforms for digital parenting, both when co-present with their children and especially in separation. Older family members were more sceptical and somewhat less adept with the technologies involved.

Here, how people think and feel about themselves as parents of very young children in and through a digitally mediated world became evident in their choices within the communicative ecology of polymedia – between webcam and chat and SNS. Facebook

was important because of its publicness – or, at least, its sense of ‘community’ – and its use by people of all ages in the transnational families I studied. This platform was the nexus where the trade-offs of money, space, family intimacy, career, and a child’s perceived needs were played out for observers. To post information about children on Facebook was to join a public debate on which of the children’s needs to prioritize, when and where. However, the way this debate is structured and engaged on social media tells us something more about parenting in an interconnected world.

### **The movements of the ‘London babies’**

The key social media image that led me to my nine respondents in the Philippines was a photograph of five ‘London babies’ lined up in a row on a sofa. These children had professional Filipino migrant parents, were 11 to 22 months old, and were attending a first birthday celebration for Eric. Grace, the mum of one of the other children, posted the photo on Facebook in late 2012. Another respondent, Blanca, whose own daughter was ‘left behind’ in the Philippines, ‘shared’ it with me so that I could see that it had been taken at Blanca’s own London house. Two years later, four of the five babies, no longer infants or even toddlers, were being raised ‘back home’ in the Philippines.

The journey of the London babies back home occurred in the context of the Filipino diaspora. The Philippines has a long-standing history as a migrant-sending country (Asis 2008; Madianou 2016). In the Philippines, approximately 50 per cent of all households now receive some share of their income from overseas (McKay 2012). Sustaining households with remittances from migrants abroad has become a social norm – an expectation among working- and middle-class Filipino families. Katigbak (2013) reports that families without overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are the ones that now appear dysfunctional, rather than families with absent parents. The parents of the London babies remained in the UK, practising their professions as nurses or senior care assistants, and most now hold either Indefinite Leave to Remain status (the UK equivalent of permanent residency) or British citizenship. Though these respondents appeared to be earning secure salaries and have permanent status in the UK, they were sending their children back home. These children were all British born and, as far as I knew, would have received British citizenship through their parents if those parents had been permanent residents at the time of their birth. Their parents had all qualified to live in the UK after five years on a working visa or through a previous partnership with a UK national, paid taxes, and had paid national insurance in order to use the National Health Service (NHS). All their households earned more than the £30,000 (after taxes and benefits) required for them to be classified as middle class, rather than poor, by the British government (Belfield et al. 2016). Yet these parents had found they were struggling to offer their children an appropriate ‘good childhood’ in London and decided to send them to the Philippines to be raised by extended kin.

### *Sent home temporarily*

Siblings Rosa and Hansel stayed with their grandparents for a year while their parents, Alvin and Benilda, moved to a new house and took up new jobs. Both the house move

and the change of employment were intended to support the children better in London. Benilda and Alvin moved farther out into the outer London suburbs, where they could find an affordable childminder so that Benilda could return to part-time nursing. Alvin would commute to his new nursing job – a promotion in grade – at an inner-city hospital. The family would live near other congregants from Alvin’s church who could step in for emergency babysitting. Their old flat, which was nearer to central London than the new one, was an easy commute to work, but it was unsuitable for children. It had neither parks, childminders, playmates nor helpful neighbours. The situation in Zone 6 – double the transport fare – is better but not ideal because of the strain of commuting and the cost of childcare; nonetheless, Alvin and Benilda persevere. Rosa and Hansel go to daycare. When they are at home and their parents are working, ‘aunties’ from Alvin’s church give them the extended family care they would have received from their Filipino kin by providing babysitting for minimal pay.

*Sent home indefinitely*

When Aila and Sonny (above) sent Eric home to live with his grandparents and aunt, they set out an argument for their decision on Facebook. Over several months, before they flew home on vacation and to drop Eric off, they posted a series of photos. The photos showed exhaustion etched on Sonny’s face after overnight duty on the NHS for extra money, Aila on her way to do cleaning work with infant Eric held in an *oban* (shawl) on her back, Eric standing on the concrete in East London’s very dirty and limited public park space, the grey, crowded streets of their neighbourhood, and Eric watching TV from a bouncy chair in their equally crowded accommodation. In striking contrast to the ways other respondents used Facebook, Aila and Sonny were very publicly setting out their case for sending Eric home to live with his grandparents in the Philippines. Almost all their pictures of Eric in London show him red nosed, watery eyed and listless, and, importantly, alone. He rarely got a chance to play with other children his age or to run around outside. Instead, he spent much time confined to a pushchair, on the sidewalks or on the subway. He had continual upper respiratory infections. Aila, despite her nursing qualifications, was unable to prevent their recurrence, and Eric seemed to be constantly going to the doctor and taking antibiotics. His health was a primary concern in deciding to send him home. Aila and Sonny saved for a year and spent a month’s vacation in the Philippines, settling Eric with his grandmother who had, herself, returned from working in the UK to care for him. Their entire visit home was documented on Facebook for their Facebook ‘friends’.

His parents’ post-return pictures of Eric in the Philippines tell a different story. Even though they are only visiting him twice a year, Sonny and Aila regularly post or share photos they take with Skype and photos sent on by email by Eric’s caregivers – his grandmother, grandfather, aunts, uncles, and visitors to the family. His post-return photos show Eric, when he is on his own, not only beaming into the camera but also enjoying his surroundings. He is running in the grass, petting a cat or dog, climbing a rock wall, walking on rice terraces, or climbing a tree. The themes here are of sensory stimulation, fresh air, exploration, and safety. Besides photographs at the mall, or



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consuming Western-style burgers and French fries in a restaurant, Eric is also shown learning to eat with his hands in Kankanaey style. These portrait-type photos contrast sharply with the earlier ones on the parents' timeline of a chronically ill, lonely, under-stimulated, house-bound child living in London.

The photos in which Eric looks happiest are the candid shots of him playing outdoors with his step-brother, cousins, and other neighbourhood playmates. Like every well-socialized Kankanaey child, he has a neighbourhood *barkada* – group of friends, many related – who play games with improvised toys. Older boys teach the younger ones how to behave, settle disputes, take turns, and share – they 'correct' them, as their elders explain it. This is a vital part of Kankanaey socialization – parental discipline is reserved for more serious matters; the day-to-day rules are acquired through interacting in an age hierarchy of children. To become a functioning adult, a child needs, not adult contact, but contact with the next age group up. Eric, now aged five, needs to hang out with seven to nine-year olds to ensure that he learns his life lessons. Yet, behind the photos, someone is responsible for ensuring that Eric is clean, tidy, and available to interact with his parents on Skype.

Someone must take a weekly photo and share it promptly on Facebook. This 'platform being the message' of polymedia has implications for transnational families. There is an emergent media ecology where different generations use different platforms and require different content to raise children in the same extended family. Younger siblings or aunts on Snapchat, WhatsApp or Instagram want funny videos; grandparent caregivers want portrait photographs on Facebook. The ability to make some of these transnational communications public (such as posting an album of 'Skypeshots' on Facebook) establishes broader norms for parenting, childhood, and family relations.

The comments that Aila and Sonny's Facebook 'friends' make on Eric's photos offer evidence of the transformation he has undergone; they mention his happiness and comment on his health, toys, and space available back home. But the most engaged photos are those of young children like Eric with their step-siblings, cousins, and other playmates. Comments here suggest that living in London fails to provide what people see as optimal socialization for children because of the lack of safe access to a peer group and thus opportunities to engage in unstructured play with others. Eric may either live out his school years in the Philippines or return to the UK. Sonny and Aila are still unsure about how their jobs and housing options will turn out. They would love to have him with them, but only if they can earn enough to give Eric the best opportunities they can find for education, lifestyle, comfort, and consistent care.

*Sent home to be joined later*

Grace, who is the mother of one of the 'London babies', announced her decision to rejoin her young child back home on Facebook. James, her then three-year-old son, was the oldest of the London babies, sent home because his parents could neither find affordable childcare in East London nor afford to reduce their working hours. Grace participated in a comments exchange, below, on Marilyn's Facebook profile page that reveals how other migrants responded to her news.

*Grace:* ... goin' home at last ... missin' my little James so much!!! Oh my!! I just realized I can't manage to stay abroad ha! Ha!

*Marilyn:* You can if there will be no choice. You can go a bit crazy but what is important is you can save your sanity. It's hard though.

*Blanca:* That's very true older sister Marilyn, hah! Hah!

*Vicki:* That's true it's hard, but we also need to, hah! Hah!

*Blanca:* You check on Marilyn if she gained her sanity again.

*Vicki:* Marilyn, did you gain your sanity? Hah! Hah!

*Blanca:* Hee! Hee! It's your fault Marilyn that you're discussing sanity so we're checking on you. Vicki, my friend, being nostalgic sometimes – that proves I'm normal and I'm still sane.<sup>1</sup>

Blanca reacted to Grace's news by describing herself as 'nostalgic' for her own daughter's younger days, this being 'normal' and 'sane'. Later, Marilyn explained that this exchange expressed support for Grace, but acknowledged, with Vicki and Blanca, that other mothers' time for being physically co-present with their children had passed. Grace could afford to go home to James, having invested her savings in business in the Philippines and relying on her husband and other migrant family members to support her. Though the other women envied Grace, staying in the UK paid for the college fees that would give their now-teenaged children the best chances in life.

Making this exchange available to all their Facebook 'friends' suggests that my respondents anticipated that others would discuss their ongoing choice to remain in the UK. Respondents with older children often expressed nostalgia for their early days of childhood. Like Marilyn, they often posted or shared photographs of the babies they had sat for or visited in London, even after they had returned home, as well as photos of their own grown-up children. Whereas Grace returned home to James, the parents of the babies in the photograph made different choices. As Coe et al. (2011) argue, children in migrant families exert agency; responses to their perceived – and expressed – needs shape the migration outcomes of their households. Polymedia offer transnational families new ways in which to shape, express and understand the needs of their absent children, and allow them to show that migrants can be 'good' parents.

### **New norms for family, affect, and citizenship**

Polymedia and social mobility go together; a social media presence is now a key marker of aspiration and accomplishment. As Nedelcu (2013) observes, social media enable migrants to update their understandings of political belonging and social norms within the transnational family's public space on an ongoing basis. The families of my respondents now measure the success of their migrant members in London in terms of housing, education and technology norms. Successful migrants move the family home from more remote settlements to Baguio City, send their children to fee-paying or 'private' schools (where parents pay for tuition),<sup>2</sup> and have reliable broadband for

Skype and Facebook (McKay 2016). Looking at the more public side – social norms rather than personal intimacies – shows, not what these relationships contain in terms of content, but the front-channel performances people wish to make public. This publicness reveals additional norms for transnational family relations, belonging and citizenship.

Emerging norms for transnational families reveal that nostalgia, rather than ambivalence, shapes migrant subjectivities. Parents who have felt compelled to live apart from their children for extended periods are often described as ambivalent (Madianou 2012; see also Pratt 1997, 2012). As mothers, they feel torn between their desires to advance their careers and attain professional recognition or economic security and being a ‘good enough’ parent. They choose to sacrifice their parenting role by leaving their children behind in the sending country, yet question their choice. Because children’s absences occur along a spectrum of vulnerability, precarity and estrangement from their parents, these ambivalent feelings vary with the family context. Blanca, Marilyn and Vicki feel nostalgic because they live through time in long-distance social fields where all is mobile and nothing is long term. They might eventually return, much later or perhaps in the next year. Time has moderated their feelings, rapidly reshaping ambivalence into nostalgia. These vignettes also reveal how quickly migrant strategies can shift. It is often unclear, as in Eric’s case, whether sending a child home is a permanent or temporary measure.

New norms for assessing emotional states and child-rearing decisions in these families also emerge from polymedia practices. Respondents found evidence of the child’s happiness in the form of interrelated and cross-cited Skypeshots, embedded videos, Facebook comments, status updates, and quotes from the child’s conversations, shared among the wider family and group of friends. Parents were more concerned about whether their networks assessed their decision to send their children home as justified and legitimate, and their parenting as ‘engaged’ or ‘appropriate’, than they were about intruding into their children’s privacy. The dominant norm became to parent more publicly – making evident daily contact, not just milestones and birthdays. In this way, polymedia made migrants’ decisions to send their preschool children to kin in the Philippines understandable, even laudable. Although people in the wider community of migrants expressed nostalgia for their small, cuddly, dependent babies and toddlers, they understood that older children needed toys, green spaces in which to play and the company of other children more than they needed an ever-present parent. Hence, the nostalgia felt by Blanca, Marilyn and Vicki led them to comment on the photographs of the London babies back in the Philippines and to support their parents in the decision they had made to send them home.

Children’s access to space for play and socialization has become a concern for transnational families and communities. Here, beyond the nuclear family, my data indicate a realm of personal life that takes family practices further in that it acknowledges extended-kin and non-family relationships (for example, friends), as well as those that exist in the imaginings and memories on which they draw. Sent-home children are being raised within these broader networks, and the parents’ decisions are being assessed on normative grounds other than intimacy. For Aila and Sonny, socio-spatial

concerns drove their decision to send their son Eric home. Indeed, ideas about desirable play space and peer relations, not just family intimacies, informed all my respondents' notions of a good childhood. They connected these ideas to a healthy lifestyle and their obligation to develop their child's potential. These new norms may arise from migrants' engagement with public debates on child health in the UK. British government policies have increasingly sought to intervene in early childhood to produce a productive and adaptable workforce (Holdsworth 2013). While the importance of socio-spatial contexts tends to receive less emphasis than parental care in shaping the emerging embodied subjectivities of young children in public debates, the need for healthy spaces is acknowledged. My respondents, confronted by the vast difference between London spaces and those available for children in the Philippines, gauged that the benefits of living in the social spaces of 'back home' and having polymedia contact would outweigh the strains of physical separation.

The use of polymedia among transnational families is changing migrant experiences of social reality by blurring the distinction between private and public spheres. My respondents did not experience social media as re-creating a divide between private and public, but as a space that folded public into private and vice versa. Their family life was lived out in a public realm where polymedia undermined the fixed identities that are assumed in conventional family discourses. Parents were identified as their children's Facebook 'friends', while junior family members took the initiative in establishing WhatsApp groups for backchannel parenting discussions. These norms for transnational family life shape broader community practices of child-rearing and forms of citizenship.

Sent-home children represent an 'affective investment' (Faier 2013). Not only do they embody their parents' permanent ties to family and place in the Philippines, but they also hold the possibility of migration for their caregivers. Around each child absent from the UK there stretches a web of claims to citizenship through care, shaped by kin ties, citizenship law, migration regimes, long-term financial investment and, most vitally, feeling. Entrusting a child to kin in the Philippines is even more powerful than the building of houses that Faier (2013) describes. For Grace, sending James home first eased her return and then justified her taking up work and housing in her sending community. With James back home, she was in constant contact and virtually present, remitting money regularly for his care and supporting his caregivers, long before she herself arrived.

Polymedia facilitate this kind of affective investment. For my respondents, posting and tagging photographs of rituals – baptisms, birthdays, weddings, wakes and funerals – as well comments on the exchange of gifts expressed reciprocity, cooperation and obligatory kin exchange. Each photograph, video, Facebook post, text message, like share, Skype call, or gift of goods was an investment of time and effort to maintain Kankanaey culture. My respondents described the situation in which people put in more time and effort than they receive as *pa-utang*. This term describes repaying a debt by giving more than required as an indication that the debtor wishes to continue the exchange relationship. A sent-home child indebted migrant parents to caregivers and the broader community, ensuring lots of *pa-utang* would follow to smooth that child's

formative years. Strengthening these relationships meant children would be raised ‘properly’ and migrants could eventually return or retire to a better future in the Philippines (McKay 2012, 2016). Polymedia thus allowed the Philippines to be the ‘better place’ in which to raise children, becoming the channel through which positive global affect flowed. These flows incorporated nuclear families, extended kin, aunts, uncles and fictive kin. All these people were making their own global personhood visible, not just by ‘friending’ on Facebook, but by being actively involved – and documenting that activity – in parenting or fostering or being an aunt or uncle for repatriated children, even if only through ‘liking’ posted photos or sending the occasional gift.

Affective investment was not only virtual or nuclear family oriented. Godmothers, godfathers, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents and friends also participated materially in transnational family projects. Their support ranged from expressing their approval of the parents’ decisions, to sending birthday gifts to the children or supplying the carers with parcels of clothing and food. Such investments sustained small businesses or were redistributed to a much wider village-based network. Gifts from these networks would turn up at special celebratory meals or as hand-me-downs, both clothing and toys, making them investments in family social status. Thus polymedia, by making the parents’ wider networks present and meaningful to the child and the people in their immediate day-to-day household from a very early age, became a key part of social mobility. Blanca’s daughter, Sasha – a left-behind child – is a case in point.

When Blanca (in London) posted a photograph of her daughter’s birthday party (in Baguio City) on Facebook, likes came from both her village of origin and from kin and friends in the UK, Germany, Spain, Canada and the United States. Blanca had tagged some of these ‘friends’ in her comments on the photo. Others commented on the responses and chimed in to wish Sasha a happy birthday. Blanca followed up by thanking people for their greetings, phone calls and gifts. She posted photographs of the gifts, particularly foodstuffs and clothing. Sasha and her aunt Nancy took these photographs in the Philippines and emailed them to Blanca. Blanca’s expansive tagging practice drew others’ attention to the scope of her family’s ‘friends’ network. Sasha may always have lived in Baguio City, but she had gifts and friends around the world, just like Eric, the London baby whose birthday party photograph was discussed above.

Facebook photographs represented Sasha in specific ways. One image showed her doing chores at her grandparents’ house in a pink knitted hat with a ‘London’ logo on the front. Eric wore the same logo hat, in blue, to play outside on cold mornings. In group shots, Sasha’s imported clothes marked her as different from her peers, while other photos and comments showed Sasha attending a fee-paying school. Sasha has overseas Filipino relatives and family friends and even non-Filipino friends on her ‘friends’ list who engage with her daily life.

Even looking closely, it would be difficult to distinguish Sasha’s Facebook presentation from Eric’s, other than that he is too young to have his own profile. Few people apart from Sasha’s grandparents realize that her mother, Blanca, has overstayed her initial visa and is working cash-in-hand as an irregular migrant in the UK. Barring a future regularization programme, Sasha will never have the same chance to gain the British citizenship that Eric’s birth conferred on him. Eric is a sent-home child, while

Sasha is left behind, but Sasha's Facebook presentation is curated in a way that conceals any differences in status and thus family futures. Blurring the distinction between Sasha and Eric in terms of the potential returns to affective investment moves the argument towards another set of norms shaped by polymedia – those of citizenship.

Caregivers of British-born sent-home children can claim closeness to kin in the UK and thus a sense of belonging by proxy. They can leverage their care into acquiring visas for family visits, recommending courses for which to apply, finding places in which to stay, seeking out potential employers, and pursuing personal migration projects. For example, after six months as Eric's caregiver, his aunt Caroline came to visit her brother Sonny in London. Caroline arrived on a family visit visa looking for a possible university course. She then returned to the Philippines to save up for her future studies. Having British children at home encourages would-be migrants to consider their own pathway towards belonging in Britain. Returning children foster a feeling of entitlement among caregivers and facilitate chain migration. Kin involved in raising returned children exchange their care for an anticipated flow of personal opportunities. Similar opportunities appear to arise around left-behind children like Sasha. Sasha's aunt Teresita also came to London on a tourist visa to visit Blanca, her sister-in-law, intending (officially) to visit some other relatives. Teresita stayed on for two years, working as a housekeeper, then returned to the Philippines to invest her savings in a small business of her own. However, there are very real differences in status and future family possibilities here. Caroline's visit complied with UK immigration rules and she may yet return to study. Teresita overstayed and, as an irregular migrant, will be unable to re-enter the UK for at least five years.

Transnational families use social media to smooth over these distinctions. Blurring the key differences between status and opportunity is a way of performing and producing social mobility. This strategy of acting 'as if' the family were transnationally successful is a preliminary step towards negotiating with other institutions governing migration – kinship groups, community, church congregants, activists and government officials – to attain higher status. For example, when birthday gifts and gatherings began to be presented globally and publicly on Facebook, as was Eric's first birthday, it became more important to send and acknowledge gifts and more vital to attend the events, even if only virtually. Families organized similar birthday celebrations for both sent-home and left-behind children. They typically rented a hall or restaurant for extended kin and friends, offered a special meal, then, in a separate Facebook album, recorded the food and attendees with photographs. This practice replicated the birthday celebrations first held for British-born children in London. On Facebook, family and 'friends' overseas were also tagged in or shared the images, so their comments and emoticon or meme responses become part of the event. All children absent from their parents thus appeared as if they were mobile, middle class and being reared in anticipation of a reunion with their parent or parents abroad.

The lack of distinction between sent-home and left-behind children demonstrates norms and expectations established for citizenship through performance. Many of the new gradations of citizenship emerging with migration rely on this 'fake it 'til you make

it' strategy. In this approach, migrants append citizenship to themselves through performances of virtue, establishing a substantive claim to belonging in their host country. They then hope this claim will be recognized through regularization or successful appeals to government to change their status from temporary sojourners or irregular workers to permanent residents (McKay 2016). Transnational families similarly use polymedia to position children back home as prosthetic persons who express family citizenship status through the ways that they are represented. The ways children are shown to be reared indicates apparently successful attempts to secure financial stability and economic security in transnational families. We can thus read Blanca's own prosthetic citizenship, expressed in her curation of Sasha's social media presence, as a kind of situated transnationalism intended to shape local institutions (Kilkey and Merla 2014) in ways that garner more social support intended to help Blanca extend her stay in the UK and secure her daughter's future.

Here, we see how polymedia expand the flexible border mobility available to already affluent or highly skilled people (Ley 2010; Ong 1999) to incorporate a much larger group of migrants by presenting themselves on SNS as if they will become such flexible citizens themselves. These people know that borders are there for the poor and unskilled, while the wealthy pass unimpeded, so the obverse must be true: those who pass unimpeded must be wealthy or on their way. In this context, performing 'as if' on social media becomes evidence of a family's social mobility in advance.

## **Conclusion**

Migrants with transnational families seek out the best of the UK and the Philippines for their children. On Facebook, my respondents shared evidence that low-wage jobs in central London currently offer very poor circumstances in which to parent. As migrants, they faced the challenge of trying to settle and to remit while also sustaining an acceptable work-family balance. This challenge was exacerbated when their jobs were with the NHS or social care providers, sectors of the UK economy that have suffered several decades of underinvestment. The ongoing crisis in funding care has created pockets of low-wage jobs for migrants, largely in expensive inner cities. Living as close to their work as they can afford, migrants encounter the outcomes of underinvestment in the urban environment, especially in the creation and maintenance of green spaces and spaces for play. Thus, even migrant parents who were on the correct pathway to British citizenship – with working visas, adequate wages and good employment records – frequently found themselves unable to give their children a recognizably 'good childhood' in the UK. Their children therefore needed to go to the Philippines and take up their Philippine citizenship to secure the best possible childhood. These mobile children become a way of hedging the bets in migrants' trajectories, maintaining their citizenship by contributing back home in the Philippines while keeping their options open in the UK. In turn, these choices presented new ways of thinking about the situation and the futures of children in the left-behind category for transnational families.

Of course, these strategies will likely shift over time. While parenting via polymedia with visits twice a year may be preferable to raising a child in low-wage London, further

questions will emerge. These dilemmas will be about where migrants' money goes farthest and where the networks of support for older children are strongest. Sent-home children are back home because conditions in receiving countries are disadvantageous to child-raising or parenting. They come back to what is agreed to be a better place. But will the children themselves come to accept that choice, or see it as an imposition? Will this experience of parenting and extended-family living have eventual emotional costs for the parents and children? Will parents' circumstances change? Will parents be allowed to reconsider? Indeed, the adolescents who were originally distance-parented may be brought back to the UK to rebuild quotidian parenting in new ways. So, this may be a mobile generation of children, able to have the best of both the countries their parents inhabit. It will also drive entry into the UK informal labour market in a specific direction. That direction is towards irregular working, where strategic and capable workers can earn £37,000 untaxed (McKay 2016), a figure approximately 1.4 times the 2015 UK median income of £27,600. The conditions of disinvestment in public spaces and wage restraint in the UK have seen migrants shift towards shorter-term work rather than migration and eventual settlement and towards irregular migration strategies.

While this future plays out, children will continue to remain central to, not absent or occluded from, the wider family migration project. Children's returns will thus have important implications for citizenship and the social construction of a 'good childhood' transnationally. Transnational families will find the idea of raising children in the most desirable physical and economic setting, irrespective of where the biological parents live, increasingly compelling. Moving children for a 'good childhood' will then generate further gradations of citizenship, accompanied by new, polymediated strategies for creating and performing family and national belonging. For transnational families, long-term strategies and geographical separations become something more – and something different – from what they were in the offline-only world. Polymedia offer new ways in which representations of children and childhood can shift Ong's (1999) flexible citizenship towards popular and prosthetic variations.

The same is no doubt true for other groups of transnational migrants and their long-distance parenting strategies and family forms. Further research will undoubtedly help unpack how polymedia are shifting the dynamic norms for a 'good childhood' and changes in the roles of mothers, fathers and extended family in providing it. This creates a new research agenda, where scholars acknowledge and track how the 'left behind' and 'sent home' are increasingly able to shift migration streams and change places. For parents of an absent child, providing the latter with a good childhood and a greater chance of social mobility increasingly relies on representing the child as if he or she will undoubtedly become this new global kind of citizen.

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## Notes

1. Original Facebook comments thread in Kankanaey, translated by Marilyn. Nostalgia appeared in English in the original.
2. Parents who send children to state schools pay for books, supplies and school activities, but do not pay directly for tuition.

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