The Ship as Home: Homemaking Practices Amongst Filipino Seafarers at Sea

Nelson Turgo
Seafarers International Research Centre
School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
Wales, United Kingdom
CF24 3EH
TurgoN@Cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

The complexities that attend global mobilities have shown us how migrants recreate home by drawing from their countries of emigration and immigration. In so many ways, any homemaking practices are embedded in home's mobile and sedentarist aspects. Amongst overseas Filipino workers (OFW), this means the performance of Filipino traditions like fiestas, and consumption of Filipino food whilst at the same time learning the language of their destination countries and partaking of their cultural and social practices. Filipino seafarers, however, present us with an interesting case: they perform homemaking practices within the constrained and limiting spaces of the ship where they both work and live. Filipino seafarers have a transportable home ready for unpacking and reconstruction on every ship that they board, drawing less on what the ship offers, but more on what reminds them of home back in the Philippines. Drawn from data gathered from more than a decade of engaging with seafarers on board ships and ashore, **this article focuses on the homemaking practices of Filipino seafarers viewed as a means to meaning-making, where ships conceived as non-places could be turned into home, and seafarer wellbeing is specifically defined as self-preservation on board and continuing authority back home.**

Introduction

For many seafarers who found themselves stranded at sea at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of merchant ships as "mobile prisons" (Markkula 2021b cited in Banta and Pratt 2023, 7) had never been more real and, at the same time, the longing to be home had never felt more urgent. Home represents comfort and safety whereas the ship given its structural and spatial contexts presents challenges to creating a sense of home. Nonetheless, the ship is the seafarers' homebase for the entire duration of their contract.[i] It is their temporary home away from home. Where the current norm on board merchant ships is containing mobilities (Markkula 2021a) making home at sea becomes even more imperative for seafarers. Homemaking practices are said to help people on the move to deal with the stresses and challenges of global mobilities (Bilecen 2017; Cancellieri 2017; Leung 2008). Seafarers missing home could indeed draw strength and comfort from the home that they recreate on board through their homemaking practices.

The experience of wellbeing as a result of homemaking practices does not take place in a vacuum. All experiences take shape in a particular time and space. Social actors are 'spatial actors' who negotiate the world around themselves trying to create meaningful and 'ready-to-hand' spaces (Cancellieri 2017, 50). Making home at sea requires the production of spaces where materialities and socialities underpinning homemaking practices are realised. The performance therefore of homemaking practices necessitates the malleability and adaptability of space. In the case of seafarers, the reworking of spaces and social relations at sea requires the transformation of the generic and impersonal environs of the ship – designed and made not for comfort, but for the safety of the crew and efficiency of cargo and navigational operations. A balance must be struck between the ship's purpose of reaching the port safely and at the same time maintaining seafarers' health and wellbeing.

In this article, I explore the relationship between homemaking practices and wellbeing, and how the ship becomes a host to constant reworking and negotiation of space – from non-place to home. The article highlights how wellbeing at sea must be conceptualised broadly to include homemaking practices that reference seafarers' desire for self-preservation on board (see also Turgo 2021) and continuing authority back home in the context of their periodic absence and global mobilities. **It is further argued that the homemaking practices of seafarers are also a means to meaning-making where finding meaning in one's work helps achieve "optimal human functioning" and "wellbeing" (van den Heuvel et al 2009, 509). Together with seamanship and professionalism (Knudsen 2009; Wu et al 2006) as other possible ways of meaning-making on board, homemaking practices allow for coping "with change, ambiguity and uncertainty on an ongoing basis" (van den Heuvel et al 2009, 509).**

The focus on Filipino seafarers fills the gap for a better understanding of the migrant experience of overseas Filipino workers (OFW) - Filipino seafarers being the least studied sector in Philippine migration studies (Galam 2012). Focusing on the complexities of how home is imagined and experienced in places, the article furthers what Swift (2019) has started in her attempt to elucidate expressions of homemaking amongst Filipino seafarers on board and their families in a small village of seafaring families in the Philippines. It also adds to what Pagh (1996) initiated in her ethnographic study of how women tourists and passengers on leisure boats transform and claim their own space on board by creating instances and expressions of home whilst at sea. Filipino seafarers' homemaking practices further our understanding of home issues faced by people on the move, and the empirical grounding of non-places like ships where migrant workers transit 'between and betwixt' (Garsten1999 cited in Costas 2013, 1471) the demands of life at sea and ashore.

Methods

The bulk of the data used for this article is based on fieldwork on board four merchant vessels between 2014 and 2018. In addition, data gathered from visits to seafarers' centres in the UK were also used in the article. These visits took place between 2010 and early 2020. The original purpose of the fieldwork and field visits was not intended to focus on the topic of the article, but rather on issues related to health and safety issues, living conditions and social practices at sea and ashore. However, data related to homemaking were also observed, paving the way for the author to pursue the angle.

All information used in the article were anonymised to protect the privacy of seafarers and the ships and seafarer centres where the author conducted fieldwork. Approval of the fieldwork which underpinned the data used in this article was granted by the School Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to every fieldwork and/or interview. They were also made aware that published works would be produced from the information they shared with the researcher.

Being a Filipino himself, accessing and fostering rapport with Filipino seafarers on board ships, and in seafarer centres, was relatively easy (Turgo and Sampson 2021). Homemaking practices, though could be said to be universal across cultures, have their own distinct nuances and peculiarities in relation to people's cultural and geographical enrolment. This could be said amongst Filipinos. The author thus had distinct advantages in the field as his own ethnic affiliation enabled him to identify social and cultural homemaking practices performed by Filipino seafarers on board which could be left unnoticed by foreign researchers. Such epistemological advantage is also the author's weakness as his

belongingness to the ethnic community of Filipino seafarers could have blinded him to other practices that Filipino seafarers have evolved over the years which the author, perhaps inadvertently, dismissed as red herrings. Closeness to data therefore has its own challenges.

The researcher is also male, and therefore, viewed and analysed what he saw and heard in the course of his fieldwork from the lens of a male subject. This researcher positionality – his being a male Filipino living and working in the UK – colours and texturises the presentation and analysis of data presented herein.

Non-place, and homemaking practices: Some explorations

The ship is often characterised in social science literature as either total institution (Goffman 2009) or an example of heterotopia (Foucault 1986), however, rarely associated with non-place (Auge 1995). […] A space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place (Augé 1995, 77–8). Examples most cited in literature are airports, malls, trains, wildscapes, and motorways. These non-places "do not provide meaning, a set of references or have an identity for those occupying them" (Costas 2013, 1474).

Since Auge (1995) came up with the idea of non-place, many studies have since highlighted its conceptual importance in explaining the nature of place and everyday experience (Arefi 1999; Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Varley et al 2020). Other studies, however, make a case for a more nuanced understanding of non-place. According to these studies, "there is nothing inherent to a space that makes it place or non-place. The concept of non-place is not absolute but relative, depending on the individual and their lived experience. Non-places are fleeting, temporary and homogeneous as they are approached in instrumental ways" (Costas 2013,

1474). Merriman further asserted that "places and landscapes are continually ordered, practised and placed through the folding together of different materials, atmospheres, spaces and times into a complex 'scrumpled geography' (Doel 1996, 421) characterized by 'a multitude of differences' (Hetherington 1997, 197)" (2004, 146).

It is within the gambit of Auge's (1995) conceptualisation of non-place and critique of the term that I consider the case of ships as non-place. In saying this, I need to clarify my use of the term. Following Merriman's call for social scientists to "'try to forge a dynamic sense of place' (Thrift 1999, 296) and focus upon the multiple, partial and relational 'placings' which arise through the diverse performances and movements associated with travel, consumption and exchange" (2004, 147), I offer the view that there are places which are structured to incite more non-place experiences than others. Airports and malls for instance are a case in point because the logic of their design and purpose is very different from other places. Due to the layout of space and traffic and concerns regarding security, these places are experienced differently. People in airports for example behave in a particular fashion because they are in a place that is structured to facilitate constant surveillance and "produces the feeling of only temporary welcome and the anxious need to pass through and not linger" (Varley et al 2020, 6). There are echoes and similarities to life experience on board ships.

The generic features of ships help facilitate the production of an occupational culture that is unique to seafaring (Sampson 2013; 2021). These features prescribe what seafarers can do and cannot do on board. Time at sea is limited by employment contract and an extended stay, beyond the stipulation of one's contract and the willingness of the seafarer, is most unwelcome and could prove mentally challenging as shown during the pandemic (Banta and Pratt 2023; Markkula 2021a). Just like airports where passengers are constrained to exploring only what is available to them, for example shops prior to their flight, seafarers can only

spend their leisure time in select designated spaces on board for safety reasons. Unless they are in port and able to go on shore leave, they have very limited options for their leisure time. Ships are marked by the same kind of routine experience for every seafarer. This repetitive and structured way of life frames seafarers' life at sea.

Seafarers are compelled to be friendly and sociable with each other as they both work and live in the same place for an extended period of time. Personal rifts could have repercussions on their work relationships which could then negatively impact on everyone's safety on board. However, this does not mean that life-long friendships are forged. It is common for instance for seafarers to say that they are at sea not to make friends but to make money. As seafarers know that they will be together on board for a limited time, and that they might not be able to work together again on another ship, interactions are mostly transactional.

On board ships, seafarers are identified through their rank (captain, chief mate, OS, etc) and not through their individual names. The rank becomes the seafarer. Seafarer biography does not matter. It is erased on board. Someone's life stories are nobody's business. In so many ways, when one boards the ship, they leave behind their individual self and assume the generic identity of a seafarer. All this resonates with the observation of Bauman [who] describes non-places as places of the normalization of behavioural patterns:

> The temporary residents of non-places are likely to vary, each variety having its own habits and expectations: the trick is to make all that irrelevant for the duration of their stay. Whatever their other differences, they should follow the same patterns of behavior hints: and clues triggering the uniform pattern of conduct should be legible to them all, regardless of the languages they prefer or are used to deploy in their daily endeavours (2000, 102 cited in Putz 2012, 156)

Ships therefore are predisposed to be experienced as non-place. However, spaces of non-place can be supplanted where instances of meaningful and engaged lives can be performed and incorporated. Thus, whilst ships can be experienced as non-place, they also allow for the reformation and reworking of spaces as needed. This is where, faced with their desire to forge and experience wellbeing at sea, Filipino seafarers perform homemaking practices. These homemaking practices create spaces which then supplant what are otherwise ships' non-place spaces. How Filipino seafarers conduct their lives, most especially after work, and in the privacy of their cabins, or indeed during communal gatherings, tells us much about the connection between the reworking of space at sea and how homemaking practices take shape on board.

Studies of global mobilities spoke about the entanglements and complexities of migrants' connection to home (Ahmed et al 200; Brettell 2006; Nowicka 2007). In their pursuit of home, migrants reach out to both their new place of destination and home country for ways – both material and relational – to perform homemaking practices. The importance of home to migrants can't be overstated as "cross[ing] nation-state borders, […] expose[s] them to different systems of law, regulations, ways of living, and environmental surroundings with a variety of sounds, smells, emotions, people, and artifacts" (Bilecen 2017, 79**). In this array of dizzying changes underpinning global mobilities, migrants need to find meaning around them, and there lies the importance of homemaking practices like the** ownership and display of material artefacts like jewellery, photographs, and other mementos reminiscent of their places of origin, and constant communication with the people they left behind (Baldassar et al 2020; Francisco-Menchavez 2018; Meijering and Lager 2014). They could also draw from the place of their destination like learning a new language, joining local organisations, and adorning their new house with the accoutrements common to their new

place. In a way, migrants reach out to both places of connection - their new place of home, and the home of old - to be able to negotiate and effect a sense and actualisation of home.

The approach in these mobilities studies highlights the "shifting and mobile meanings that migrants give to home" […] (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 517-518). Bilecen (2017) for instance observed that it is questionable whether the notion of home as a dichotomized entity between countries of immigration and emigration truly grasps migrants' experiences and practices. Rather, studies with a transnational lens illustrate continuity and simultaneity of migrants' lives stretched across several state borders (Bilecen 2017, 79-80). Thus, "the challenge […] is to conceptualise the simultaneity of home as sedentarist and as mobile" (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 517-518). There is a need therefore to constantly consider the mixed nature of longing and remembrance and embeddedness in places both old and new that migrants perform in their experience and vision of home.

Whilst this observation is astute and timely as there are underlying complexities to how migrants define and experience home, and indeed issues around place, identity and belongingness, there are other things to consider. In relation to the experience of Filipino seafarers, we need to focus on how their notion of home is borne out of their desire to fix home on board at the point of and around their place of origin – the Philippines. The sedentarist notion of home therefore requires further unpacking here because in our rush to highlight the bi-focal reference points of home for migrants, there is also the tendency to "underplay[s] the resilience of [home's] stable, bounded and fixed interpretations" (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 518).

Whilst there is a need to investigate the ties, and how notions of transnationalism suture the fabric of contemporary global mobilities, the persistence of places as containers of affect and practices in determining how home is experienced should also be addressed. Given the nature

of place inhabited by seafarers, their connection to ship is primarily underpinned by economic rationality. There are cases where contracts are extended by one month (usually from nine to ten months for Filipino seafarers) not because seafarers long for ship life, but because they need more money which in the case of Filipino seafarers concerns finishing some "projects" back home[ii]. There is nothing to incite a sense of home on board, and any sense of home needs to be connected to the material and relational aspect of home back in the Philippines. The sedentarist notion of home therefore is what Filipino seafarers perform in the context of the nature of life at sea. The home country predominates the memory of home of Filipino seafarers. The source of their wellbeing is drawn from their idea and experience of home in the Philippines. **Meaning-making through homemaking practices is attached to their place of origin.**

The home as mobile and the home as stable do not reflect the experience of seafarers at sea. Home as experienced and performed by seafarers on board therefore is the stable land-based home that they bring with them every time they board a ship. Unlike land-based migrants who can reference both their new home and the one they left behind, in some ways, performing the grammar of both mobile and stable home in their daily lives, seafarers only reference the home they left and will return to. This is so because unlike the majority of land-based migrants, seafarers do not have the privileges to acquire residency and/or citizenship in the flag state of their ship (the nationality of the ship). Returning home after every contract is always a reality.

Issues of place, identities and belonging which underpin our notion and experience of home therefore, are always tied up with the sedentarist aspects of home for many seafarers. Their workplace can't be a place of belonging, and with the concomitant accoutrements of non-place, ships continuously present constraints that limit seafarers' homemaking practices and

therefore also their idea of home and quest for wellbeing. By looking at the homemaking practices of Filipino seafarers, we understand how home very much depends on the agency of actors in moulding places to "imagining, inventing and diversifying space […]" (Johnson 2013, 800). […] Relph's contention that intention can liberate our experience from the deterministic elements of non-places (1976, 141 cited in Varley et al 2020, 2) makes sense in the case of seafarers.

Making and performing home at sea

Preserving the self in an ocean of changes and uncertainties

The need for wellbeing on board amongst seafarers comes from the nature of seafaring itself. Seafarers work in an environment that constantly poses danger to life and limb. Seafaring remains one of the most dangerous occupations in the world (Oldenburg et al 2010; Rinne et al 2020). On the other hand, home represents safety and stability. It is a refuge, a domain of warmth and security, far from the madding crowd of impersonal transactions. The idea of home accords us with "stable psychic and physical space; providing stimulation, security and identity" (Pagh 1996: 197). Remembering home in this instance reminds Filipino seafarers of the need to keep safe all the time as they have a family to return to back home.

The need to preserve themselves also comes from the precarious nature of seafaring as a form of employment. Most seafarers from developing economies like the Philippines are on temporary contracts. After the end of every contract, renewal hinges on favourable report and recommendation of senior officers and passing a series of medical examinations prior to deployment on board. **Acts of self-preservation and therefore the possibility of contract**

renewal could also come in the form of acting out varying forms of masculinity on board (Turgo 2021). Homemaking practices at sea, by bringing on board material artefacts and social practices that remind them of home, allow Filipino seafarers to have a semblance of normal life at sea.

Preparations for the homing of cabins, and the ship in the general, start when the Filipino seafarer organises what to bring on board. As well as clothes, their luggage would generally have food items (Lucky Me noodles, and snacks like Ding Dong), and their favourite sneakers, sandals, and ointments (like Vicks and Tiger balm). Religious items would also be included like a copy of the bible, and pictures or statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary, and an assortment of saints they deem to be providing them with special protection as the majority of Filipino seafarers are Christians. Once on board, Filipino seafarers would start transforming their cabins into something familiar and personal.

The 'homing' of cabins takes different forms as some Filipino seafarers could be more expressive and involved than others. The display of personal items in cabins is in accordance with rules and regulations pertaining to health and safety on board. As cabins are subjected to regular inspections and visits from peers (for social drinking or watching of movies, for instance), what is on display is generally accepted as normal in relation to adorning one's personal space. Offensive materials are usually not put on display, or even highly personal items that could subject the seafarer to rumours and gossip.[iii] For instance, I have never seen cabins adorned with sexy images of movie stars/models.[iv] When seafarers put up posters of women in risqué pose and clothing, I was told that they are routinely taken down when nearing ports known for their conservative views.[v]

Filipino seafarers would usually adorn their side tables with framed photos of family members or partners. Some would have more personal biographical markers like a framed photo that shows the seafarer after their graduation from the academy. Pinned on the walls are religious items like rosaries, or images of Jesus or any other saints that they venerate. There is also usually a copy of the bible either on the side table or in one of the drawers. Whilst some bibles were a gift by visiting chaplains, others had copies with personal stories. One seafarer showed me his copy which looked aged and worn-out, the spine battered, a testimony to its constant use, which he said he found on a previous ship, discarded, tucked in one corner. Displaying religious icons in the cabin or even bringing them to work made them feel safe and protected.

> INT: Why do you have all those religious artefacts, chief, in your cabin, let's explore it further? It seems that you have a lot.
>
> Senior Officer: You are free from harm. That's what I feel.
>
> INT: You are being protected?
>
> Senior Officer: It feels like you are being looked after. God is looking after you. (Ship Interview 2017)

The symbolic constitution of the homeland is enacted through material artifacts usually brought back from the country of origin (Bilecen 2017, 84). However, there are layers of place connections that must be stressed here. For instance, in adorning their cabins, Filipino seafarers do not just evoke their belongingness to the wider polity of the Philippines, but also more specifically, to their more personal and intimate belongingness to much smaller spatial or ethnic groups like their families, their towns or ethnicity. For example, aside from family photos, I also saw photos of local places where Filipino seafarers come from. One seafarer

had a photo of himself in a loincloth taken during a festival when he was back home for holiday, highlighting his ethnic affiliation in the Philippines.

The display and adornment of personal mementos help people on the move to get a footing and placement in an otherwise fluid and unsteady world that they inhabit. **They foster meaning out of the random changes and impersonal things that populate everyday life.** As explained by Hoolachan, "[…] displaying objects like photographs, candles and posters, and being able to rearrange furniture, (create) feelings of home" (2020, 222). Memories of home fortify them. A messman that I met in a seafarer centre explained how being at sea means having one foot in the grave. He was keeping framed photos of his wife and children on his table "so when I enter my cabin, with all these photos, I feel at home. […] I feel renewed."

On all the ships that I sailed on, there was always a karaoke/videoke machine available for use by seafarers. Some Filipino seafarers would also bring their own memory stick and chips (containing songs) or "magic mike" (a microphone which can be loaded with songs) for their own use. Every night and especially during social events on board (like the weekly Saturday night socials), the lounge reverberates with songs as Filipino seafarers take turns in belting out their favourites like "My Way" and Filipino classics like "Isang Linggong Pag-ibig"(One week love affair). The use of karaoke/videoke evokes memories of home where social and cultural events like birthdays and fiestas in the Philippines are not complete without karaoke/videoke binge singing until the crack of dawn. Whilst in some studies, migrant communal activities highlight the importance of socialising as a way to experience home, for Filipino seafarers it is the mere act of doing karaoke/videoke, more than it being a collective activity (a singer and an audience) that allows them to experience home at sea.

Some studies have shown how Filipino migrants navigate their presence in their country of destination through the performance of cultural and religious practices that speak of their ethnic origins (Balgoa 2017; Gantner and Weninger 2013; Tondo 2009). Such practices underpin their assertion of identity amidst the oftentimes alienating and threatening influence of different cultures in their midst. Others have a more instrumental view of religion. In this instance, Filipino migrants see religion as provider of spiritual and social capital and as a way to navigate their new environment (Angeles 2022).

The biggest cultural and religious event in the calendar of Filipino seafarers is the Christmas party, usually held on the evening of 24th December (if the ship is underway, though the Christmas party could be held on any date when the ship is not busy or in operation alongside). It is the most anticipated social event in the ship calendar amongst Filipino seafarers who are spending Christmas at sea. I was lucky to be able to spend one Christmas on board a bulk carrier in 2017. Here is how I described the morning of December 24.

> […] I woke up with much anticipation; I felt a certain ecstatic vibe in the air. When I went to the officer mess for breakfast, the messman was there and asked me if I was ready for the party. I answered in the affirmative and I asked him if there is a need for me to dress up. He said that some do while others come in their comfortable clothes, though many he said would usually be wearing pants and shoes. Then I asked him what he was going to wear and he said that he would be putting on his new shirt bought in Australia and a new pair of shoes (he said it's Converse) newly purchased in a mall in [place]. I told him that he sounded NOT that prepared for the party! He laughed. I was reminded of our tradition in the Philippines where we wear our best clothes on Christmas day and Christmas parties are always very much anticipated for

> the promise of gifts (mostly money) and lots of food! The chief cook was also there and sorting out the ingredients of the food that he was preparing for the party. (Ship Fieldnotes 2017)

In my fieldnotes, I noted how being in the midst of all the buzz and excitement, I felt a sense of being part of the ship, and not just a researcher on board. I felt like I was at home, the seafarers were my family.

However, cultural and religious expressions go beyond the staging of special events on board. On a daily basis, Filipino seafarers recreate home through the local food that is served, and they cook for themselves if allowed by the chief cook and or the captain. In this instance, the consumption of local food produces "a sense of spatial and temporal stability" (Rankin and Collins 2016, 235) and "feelings of being 'home', while 'away' […] " (Collins 2008 cited in Rankin and Collins 2016, 235). Abstaining from eating certain types of food, like pork on Good Friday, could also be a way for Filipino seafarers to feel connected to home even when at sea.

Filipino dishes were also served daily. Breakfasts were served with steamed and/or garlic fried rice (left-over from the previous night), corned beef, fried eggs (sunny side up), fried dried fish/tuyo (if available) and any leftover food from the following day/night. Bread was also available, mostly loaf bread bought in bulk and stored in the freezer. Spread of varying kinds was also available, most specially cheese spread (called Cheese Whiz by Filipinos, regardless of the make). Filipino dishes were also served on a daily basis like sinigang (either pork or fish), adobo (considered to be the Philippines' national dish), menudo, ginisang munggo, caldereta, fried fish, grilled liempo, and chop suey.

It has also become a practice of ships with Filipino crew to have Filipino branded snacks and condiments on board. For example, on many of my visits to ships with Filipino crew in different ports in the UK, I would usually spot tin cans of Skyflakes, a Filipino brand of crackers, in the mess hall. On some other ships, I saw Mang Tomas (sauce/gravy for fried pork especially for lechon (roast whole pig) or lechon kawali (deep-fried pork), Datu Puti soy sauce and vinegar, Jufran or UFC ketchup (Filipino alternative for tomato sauce, which is made from banana), pinakurat (a kind of flavoured vinegar with chillies), patis (fish sauce) and alamang (fermented shrimp paste).

Homemaking practices amongst Filipino seafarers go beyond the performance of nostalgia. Though instantiating "sensual romanticised identity with home" (Magliveras 2019), they also firmly connect them to a more practical and pragmatic purpose. **In the context of life at sea, embroiled in the possibilities of risk to life, homemaking practices allow for meaning-making to take place where home, and family members and friends left behind are re/membered.** Such remembrances in turn remind Filipino seafarers of the need to look after themselves, that there are people waiting for their return. Their return to the Philippines, however, should also mean that they are returning with the possibility of a renewal of employment contract.

More than a phantom presence, reasserting authority ashore

Many seafarers would cite their many years of being away from home as lost years of their lives. Unable to attend important events in their families and communities, seafaring has made the life of many seafarers an unending battle with the constant need to catch up and stay relevant to the lives of the people that they have left behind. One other pressing concern

of many seafarers is the possibility of their influence and dominance in the household getting diluted, or passed over, due to their regular absence (see also Turgo 2021). They lament the fact that family members sometimes see them as strangers whenever they return home (Viljoen and Muller 2012). Seafarers could also suffer from role displacement when at home (Thomas and Bailey 2006).

The digital revolution of recent years has had an impact on the contours of social life and interaction on board (Gheorghe 2019) and helps facilitate seafarers' presence at home on a daily basis regardless of their physical absence. As more and more ships are fitted with internet facilities, seafarers are able to engage with people ashore through their social media accounts and other platforms.[vi] The availability of internet facilities on board enables seafarers to dissolve spatial and temporal barriers between themselves and people ashore. I duly noted in my ship fieldnotes for example how some seafarers would rather spend time chatting on Facebook and other social media applications than spending time at the gym. Furthermore, whenever there is a strong internet connection on board, family chats, through mobile apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Zoom/Skype, have become a routine for many Filipino seafarers during work breaks and after meal times.

Real time calls allow for the continued integration of Filipino seafarers to their families and communities. This creates a sense of home on board for many Filipino seafarers as in most cases families back home are at the beck of their call (different time zones notwithstanding). The visual spectacle of being present, and therefore existing in real time and space, is performed on a regular basis by Filipino seafarers when there is time, and allowed by their internet bandwidth. One seafarer for example told me that he would routinely go on Facebook live whenever they were in a port to show his family where he was. In return, his

family would also share live events with him like birthday parties, or when some house renovations were going on, whenever possible.

The importance of social media platforms for the unhampered and real-time connection between seafarers and people ashore, however, goes beyond the facilitation of intimacy and family relationships (Francisco-Menchavez 2018). For many Filipino seafarers, through their use of social media, they are able to monitor and to a certain extent reassert control of the conduct of lives of family members. They are able to exhibit their authority in the household by participating in family decision-making through video chats. Their digital kinning (Baldassar et al 2020) translates to assertion of control and authority over the affairs of the household. For example, one junior officer explained:

> Through [regular video chats], I […] have a say on some family matters, my wife would ask, what do you think about this? I can even tell my daughter, no, don't go with that guy, I know his family, that young man is a hooligan. (Port Fieldnotes 2019)

The use of social media furthers the bridging of distance, enabling Filipino seafarers to feel less remote, and in touch with people back home. Such experience parallels the findings of related studies. For instance, Bonini (2011) who examined Filipino migrants' experiences in Milan shows how a Filipino migrant regularly reconnects with his family and relations back home, recreating the warmth of home through exchange of local news and domestic developments. Social intimacies on social media however also exposes the challenges of being away from home. For example, the multi-directional care (Francisco-Menchavez 2018) that sutures the transnational relationship between Filipino seafarers and their left-behind families brings to light the precarious hold and influence of Filipino seafarers over their families. In their absence, the care of the family is performed by grandparents, aunts and

uncles, and relatives, and even by neighbours. Decentred as the primary source of care, Filipino seafarers became more assertive and vocal over their power in the household. Through the use of social media, Filipino seafarers make their presence felt, ensuring that their authority is never side-lined in the lives of their left-behind families.

What floats their ship: The home that Filipino seafarers make at sea

There is not very much that we know about homemaking practices of seafarers and their impact on wellbeing. Issues that surround seafarers' wellbeing are also hardly a matter of public concern especially when they work in places (ships and ports) hidden from public view. Recent studies and industry initiatives have mainly focused on how the maintenance of health and mental wellbeing of seafarers can be addressed by providing them with internet facilities on board, time and resources for social activities, nutritious food, well equipped recreational facilities and regular shore leave (ISWAN 2020, Pike 2022, Sampson et al 2022).

The notions of wellbeing of Filipino seafarers are, as this article asserts, intertwined with their sense of home, and homemaking practices on board. Home, in turn, is more than identity and belongingness. **It is also about meaning-making where as a result of "globalisation, technological developments, reengineering and numerous other changes, the complexity of work and organisational life has increased rapidly" (van de Heuvel et al 2009, 508-509). As seafarers experience constant change in varying forms, from time zones to workmates (as every port of call could also instantiate crew change), they need to find meaning in what they do, and in homemaking practices, they are able to create meaning in their everyday life at sea.**

In meaning-making where home plays an important part, homemaking practices at sea, much like performing varying forms of masculinity on board (Turgo 2021), are imbricated with the more practical issues of self-preservation on board and continuing authority ashore. Homemaking practices are a way for seafarers to assert control of their being and time on board. Through their homemaking practices, Filipino seafarers experience a degree of freedom to control what they want to have, to do, and consume, within the select spaces on board. In turn, this allows them to fortify their stay on board, with the hope of employment contract renewal, and continued authority and influence back home. They need to keep themselves free from harm whilst at sea, and maintain presence ashore through digital kinning (Baldassar 2020) as they know that their periodic absence could lead to mere phantom presence back home.

The ship is a restricted place and containing mobilities (Markkula 2021a). Compared to land-based migrants Filipino seafarers have limited resources, both spatially and temporarily, to fashion their own space and time in the image of home. For example, land-based Filipino migrants would hold big social events like barrio fiesta, Santacruzan (May Flower festival) or Simbang Gabi (dawn mass) (Balgoa 2017; Tondo 2009). Filipino seafarers, on the other hand, have to contend with organising their own little 'fiestas' around their monthly barbeque parties (if there are any), or Christmas parties**.** Where shore leave is not allowed, Filipinos cannot enjoy the possibility of visiting Filipino restaurants in places where there is a big Filipino diaspora. There have been stories of Filipino seafarers' luggage being searched in airports and ports in some countries prior to their embarkation on board and their religious icons getting confiscated. Such restrictive practice adds further curtailment to the homemaking practices of seafarers.

Company policies pertaining to ship safety protocol also limit how Filipino seafarers make home at sea. For instance some companies have dry ship policies which prevent them from consuming alcohol on board at all times. There are also country-specific practices and situations that affect their experience of home on board. In cases where ships are provisioned in countries where food ingredients for making Filipino dishes are unavailable, or when food stocks are raided by port state authorities[vii] and the crew could not complain for fear of retaliation, this would have an impact on the performance of one important aspect of homemaking practices at sea which is the consumption of local food.

In recent years, observations have been made that contemporary merchant ships have been largely designed for cargo maximisation, with the comfort of seafarers leaving much to be desired (Sampson 2021; Sampson and Ellis 2019). This is primarily gleaned from the dwindling size of living spaces on board to give way to bigger spaces for cargo. Others are also quick to highlight the absence of recreational spaces like swimming pools, basketball courts and saunas which were common features of merchant ships built in the 1980s. On one of my ships, there were no gym facilities, and the swimming pool was long disallowed for use, covered with floorboards. Where the swimming pool used to be, the room became a storage of sort. It has also been reported that on some ships, a number of social activities like basketball and monthly barbecue parties have also been disallowed for both health and safety reasons. In some ways, with more standardisation of ship amenities in accordance with health and safety measures, and with more rules and legislation that limit seafarers' agency both on board and ashore, the ship becomes even more experienced as a non-place by many seafarers.

As ships' non-place spaces intensify, the pandemic further exposed the dire constraints that seafarers face regardless of their attempts to make do in their homemaking practices. There

have been reports of seafarers suffering from mental stresses like depression in the course of their contract, and indeed, during the years of the pandemic, issues related to mental wellbeing were widely reported (Abila and Acejo 2021; Baygi et al 2021; ISWAN 2021; Lucas et al 2021; Pauksztat et al 2020; Qin et al 2021; Sliskovic 2020; Tang et al 2022). Concomitantly, regardless of the ubiquitous use of social media to keep their presence felt in their absence, strained relationships and dysfunctional families amongst seafarers are not uncommon.

The article does not endeavour, however, to romanticise the notion of home. Home which could mean warmth and security to many could also signify pain, tension and burden to others. In their study of Filipino seafarers stranded in the Philippines for months on end at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Banta and Pratt (2023) showed how being at home and failing to board a ship proved unnerving as it meant having no job and therefore no source of income to provide for their families. People at home need financial support and as such home is all about meeting and fulfilling obligations. Filipino seafarers who often play the role of family breadwinners feel the heat. Home is more than a happy place. It is also a reminder of one's responsibility or indeed unending burden. Being at home in this case, and the experience of home, became emotionally draining and stressful for these seafarers.

There are issues which have been touched tangentially in the article and need fuller consideration in future studies about homemaking practices at sea. For instance the elucidation of how Filipino seafarers perform their homemaking practices also points us to how what was supposed to be a hyper masculine environment like the ship, is in fact also a place where domestic labour is highly valued. As the creation and maintenance of home is oftentimes equated as a preserve of women (as men do paid labour outside the confines of

home), it also highlights the spatiatisation of gendered practices in daily life (McDowell 1999 cited in Bilecen 2017). Turning the ship into home afloat (Pagh 1996) where they seek "homescapes in the mixed land/seascape" (iii), Filipino seafarers perform domestic labour. This needs further consideration by researchers.

Another aspect which needs attention is how seafarers with varying perceptions of employment at sea – as a lifelong career or solely as source of income – would imagine home and perform homemaking practices differently. As some seafarers see themselves as working at sea until they retire, would they have a more engaged perception of life at sea and therefore develop a much variegated repertoire of homemaking practices compared to others? These are considerations that need to be tackled in the future. Lastly, although less than 2% of seafarers are women, it would be revealing to know if their ways of recreating home and notions of home differ from their male counterparts.

Conclusion

The mobilities of people nowadays are unprecedented in world history (Sheller and Hannam 2019; Urry 2007). Though we travel or are forced to travel for various reasons, one constant in our lives regardless of where we are is our hankering for place we call home and for place that will become home (Hammond 2004). People on the move bring with them ways and means to reconnect with their place of origins and Filipino seafarers are the same. Their experience, however, invites us to further reflect on our ideas of mobilities, **meaning-making** and home.

First, the experience of mobility is "inflected with continuous gestures of attachment" (Cancellieri 2017, 58) and the need to belong to specific places. **Mobility in this case is not just about being in a state of flux, but also about finding moorings in a sea of movement and change. Second, meaning-making compels us to better understand how workers deal with change and stressors in the workplace. Making at home at sea is an integral part of seafarer wellbeing. The accoutrements of home have to be replicated on board as a way to meaning-making in the ever-expanding non-place spaces of the ship. Meaning-making, however, could also instantiate risk-taking behaviour on the part of seafarers which could be detrimental to their health and wellbeing, for example, regular visits to brothels and similar establishments during shore leave.** Third, the idea of home at sea is more than an expression of national identity, an exercise of nostalgia or as a means to find comfort amidst modern day chaos. They are also, in the case of Filipino seafarers, intertwined with issues related to the more practical aspects self-preservation on board, and maintaining authority ashore.

By highlighting the ship as a non-place, the article hopes to contribute to the dialogue on the dynamic nature of places, and how places are moulded according to people's agency and intention. It is important to consider the nature of places where home is made and wellbeing is sought as a result of homemaking practices. Whilst indeed the places of emigration and immigration shape migrants' conception of home, and their connection to and imaginary of home, there are places where people feel more compelled to intensify the ethos for connection to the place of emigration. Given the nature of shipboard life, Filipino seafarers feel the need to be constantly connected to home in any way possible - the home that they have left behind temporarily - creating spaces of place in a non-place. The homemaking practices of Filipino seafarers allow for an empirically based grounding of our understanding

of how place and non-place manifest in our daily lives, and how social actors like seafarers could disrupt the perceived essences of place and non-place.

Ships carry with them the modalities of modernity, the power of the ever-expanding reach of globalisation. They carry goods from one place to another. **In search of meaning in an environment that contains mobilities (Markkula 2021a) and at the same time traps them in perpetual transit, Filipino seafarers find ways to "resist the material fixity of environments, tease them creatively and bend their functions" (Varley et al 2020, 9).** Ships are made to accommodate other representations and realities as well, including how within their restricted spaces, material and social manifestations of home could be realised. Notions of home come not from the ship but from the place seafarers left behind. Seafarers' daily struggle for wellbeing is their way of protecting themselves from any harm which then ensures their continuing employment and their relevance to the lives of people ashore.

Regardless of the contrasting views of home, the pandemic has made salient seafarers' never-ending need for a place they call home, and attachment to the feeling of being at home when at sea. Home at sea has its own limits, however, as this article shows. Nonetheless, homemaking practices at sea, in some ways, have helped them to weather the challenges of being in what Markkula (2021b) calls "mobile prisons". **Homemaking practices as a way to meaning-making at sea,** therefore, have never been more important and indispensable for seafarers. This makes for the continuing need for Filipino seafarers to make home at sea – no matter how, no matter when.

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[i] As per regulation mandated by the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006, the maximum continuous period that a seafarer should serve on board a merchant ship without leave is 11 months.

[ii] Filipino seafarers often speak about starting a business, constructing or renovating houses or some other financial commitments as "projects".

[iii] Gossiping is also one way wherein Filipino seafarers personalise their social relations on board. In most cases, social groups are formed based on the seafarer's ethnic affiliation (for example, Bisaya, Tagalog or Ilocano, amongst Filipino seafarers) and their workstations. In these select groups, they discuss issues related to work or individual quirks of fellow seafarers not belonging to the group.

[iv] Seafarers would usually bring with them a laptop, a tablet or a mobile phone, as a way to connect to their families and the wider world. Thus, though seafarers that I met and interacted with would not pin nude images of women on to the walls of their cabins, or keep adult magazines in their lockers or cabinets, I presumed, and some told me, that they were keeping nude images of women on their phones, or indeed adult videos on their gadgets.

[v] This happened in some Middle East airports/ports as relayed by some Filipino seafarers.

[vi] Whilst mobile phones are usually used to connect to families and friends, and as such the medium with which home is imagined from far away, they in themselves do not represent

home for many Filipino seafarer. Though most would have wallpapers of a photo of their family members, or themselves with their loved ones, mobile phones are treated for the function that they do, their use value, rather than a symbolic link to home.

[vii] Some seafarers shared stories about how inspections in some ports in Africa and Asia would involve port officials and port state authorities "going shopping." This means they often ask for goods which they could bring ashore once the inspection is done. Goods they usually cart away include chicken, bread, coffee, milk, bottles of wine, and condiments. Refusal to satisfy their "shopping" request could lead to "finding deficiencies" which then could lead to fines or worse, ship detention.

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