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Panel on "Women Migrants in East and Southeast Asia 2"

"Enfranchisement and the Politics of Belonging:
The Case of Filipinas in Tokyo"

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The signing of Absentee Voting Bill into law in 2003 has marked a new chapter in the Philippines' political landscape with the entry of overseas Filipinos and Filipinas into the election process. This law is the realization of the constitutional mandate in 1987, which was put to place only in 2003 after a series of pushing and appeal for 15 years by the lobby groups both inside and outside the Philippine state. Its adoption is a result of the debate within the state over the most effective strategy to respond to the issue, and the applicable mechanisms of incorporation. Evidently, it is based on a premise that emigrant Filipinos/Filipinas will maintain ties with their 'homeland'.

In this paper, I will look into the discourses of state actors: government leaders and NGOs on the re-incorporation of overseas Filipinos/Filipinas through enfranchisement, and relate them with the varied political and social consciousness of Filipinas, particularly those who are married and have "permanent residence" visas, who I encountered and observed during the OAV (Overseas Absentee Voting) advocacy and registration campaigns in Tokyo. Not a few of NGOs and OAV campaign supporting groups have Filipina volunteers and staff who are already permanent residents due to marriage to a Japanese national. The Primer on the Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) Act of 2003 indicates that an immigrant or a permanent resident can vote. But what has taken her excitement out in exercising her right to vote?

This paper will also offer a criticism of discursive patriarchal ideologies in the construction of the nation-state: here, in the project of expanding Philippine electorate. It will discuss what determines allegiance (e.g. affidavit of return) and what makes it constraining particularly for married women to be potential voters.