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Overseas Filipino Workers: The Making of an Asian-Pacific Diaspora

E. San Juan, Jr.

ABSTRACT

The accelerated migration of Filipino contract workers in the last two decades, comprising at least 10% of the total population, has distinguished the peripheral Philippine formation since the 1970s. Neoliberal globalization has interrupted its decolonizing process. Politically and culturally subordinate to U.S. hegemony, the Philippines remains an inchoate nation, its polity fragmented into ethnic communities. The exported labor of Filipino women and their treatment as serfs or quasi-slaves offers a laboratory for the critical analysis of the global market and its impact on poor countries. Collective resistance and self-reflection now characterize this emergent diaspora, unique in the history of the Asian-Pacific region. This provides an occasion to interrogate the orthodox theories of diaspora, nationalism, and immigration, especially in a time of the unprecedented financial crisis of global capitalism.

On average, 3,400 Filipinos leave daily for work abroad, over a million per year, to join the nearly ten million Filipinos (out of 90 million) already out of the Philippines, scattered around the world. It is the largest global diaspora of migrant labor next to Mexico, the highest per capita exporter of labor in Southeast Asia. By now, for many, this unprecedented daily occurrence of departures is a paltry news item. The facts when repeated sound now to be more a matter of bad taste or inept mannerism than a banality: of the ten million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), 75% of them are women, chiefly as domestics and semi-skilled contract workers, in 197 different countries. Over four million more leave, without proper/legal travel and work permits, for unknown destinations. About 3-5 coffins of these OFWs arrive at the Manila International Airport every day. Obviously, the reason is not for adventure or tourism, or even for an exciting, less constrained life. Frankly, it is for livelihood (any income-generating work, including “sex work”) and a materially improved future.

After a visit to the United Nations in 2006, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo met some OFWs at the Waldorf Astoria Towers in Manhattan, New York to thank them for their remittance. Almost every Filipino now knows that OFWs contribute more than enough to relieve the government of the onerous foreign debt payments to the World Bank/International Monetary Fund (WB/IMF) and financial consortiums. In 1998 alone, according to the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 755,000 Filipinos found work abroad, sending home a total of P7.5 billion; in the last three years, their annual remittance averaged \$5 billion. Throughout the 1990s, the average total of migrant workers is about a million a year; they remit over 5 percent of the national GNP, not counting the millions of pesos collected by the Philippine government in myriad taxes and fees. In 2004, OFWs sent \$8.5 billion, a sum equal to half of the country's national budget. In 2007, they sent \$14.45 billion and \$15.65 in 2008. For this they have been celebrated as "modern day heroes" by every president since the export of "warm bodies" was institutionalized as an official government policy. OFW earnings suffice to keep the Philippine economy afloat and support the luxury and privileges of less than 1 percent of the people, the Filipino oligarchy. It therefore helps reproduce a system of class inequality, sexism, racism, and national chauvinisms across the international hierarchy of core and peripheral nation-states.

It bears repeating that the Philippines today ranks as second to Mexico as a "sending country," with remittances topping those of Mexico and India, comprising over 10% of GDP. OFWs bring in more money than banana exports (the country is the world's third largest producer) or tourism. The processing fees collected from OFWs, as well as those obtained from bank transactions, amount to billions of pesos. In 2006, for example, the OFW remittance was five times more than foreign direct investment, 22 times higher than the total Overseas Development Aid, and over more than half of the gross international reserves. In sum, OFW remittance contributes to paying the foreign debt, heightens household consumerism, disintegrates families, and subsidizes the wasteful spending of the corrupt patrimonial elite. It is not invested in industrial or agricultural development. Clearly the Philippine government has earned the distinction of being the most migrant- and remittance-dependent ruling apparatus in the world, mainly by virtue of denying its citizens the right to decent employment at home.

Interviews with Filipinos in Lebanon, as well as in Israel and Iraq, have confirmed the bitter truth of their collective distress: many prefer to stay in their place of work at the mercy of gunfire and missiles rather than return to their homeland and die of slow starvation. We recall how Filipinos reacted when the Arroyo regime prohibited travel to Iraq on account of OFW Angelo de la Cruz's kidnapping—they said they would rather go to Iraq to work and be killed instantly rather than suffer a slow death by hunger in their beloved

Philippines. Lives of quiet desperation? Indeed the pathos of the OFW predicament is captured tersely by de la Cruz's response after his release by his kidnapers in July 2004: "They kept saying I was a hero...a symbol of the Philippines. To this day I keep wondering what it is I have become" (San Juan *Filipino Self-Determination* 20).

Meanwhile, OFWs' dead bodies land everyday at the Manila International Airport. According to Connie Bragas-Regalado, chair of Migrante International, at least fifteen "mysterious deaths" of these government "milking cows" (her term for OFWs) remain unsolved since 2002, with more harrowing anecdotes brewing in the wake of the U.S.-led war of "shock and awe." This relentless marketing of Filipino labor is an unprecedented phenomenon, rivaled only by the trade of African slaves in the previous centuries. Younger Filipinos are indeed disturbed by the reputation of the Filipina/o as ubiquitous maids or servants of the world. How did Filipinas/os come to find themselves scattered to the four corners of the earth and somehow forced to the position of selling their bodies, nay, their selfhoods? In general, what is the import and implication of this unprecedented traffic, this spectacle of millions of Filipinas/os in motion and in transit around the planet? How did the Philippines become a top-ranking sender of commodified bodies and a receiver of cadavers? Why are not enough decent jobs available for its citizens? How can we explain this collective misfortune?

HISTORICAL ORIENTATION

After three hundred years of Spanish colonialism, the Filipino people mounted a revolution for national liberation in 1898 and established the first constitutional Republic in Asia. But, the United States destroyed this revolutionary state in the Filipino-American War of 1899-1913, with 1.4 million Filipinos killed and the islands annexed as a US territorial possession up to 1946, when nominal independence was granted. The US conquest perpetuated the feudal landlord system by co-opting the propertied elite that, together with comprador/middlemen traders and new cadres of Americanized intelligentsia, served as the colonial, and later neocolonial, administrators of the conquered territory. The Philippines offered abundant natural and human resources, together with what US policy-makers originally desired: strategic military bases for trade with China and a geopolitical outpost in the Asian region. By 1946, thoroughly devastated by World War II, the Philippines emerged as a U.S. dependency, with its political, economic and military institutions controlled directly and indirectly by Washington. Up to today, the Philippine military operates as an appendage of the Pentagon, its logistics and war-games supervised by Washington via numerous treaties and executive agreements, as witnessed by ongoing joint U.S.-Philippines "Balikatan" war exercises, and the unconscionable

handling of the “Nicole” Subic Bay rape case. In 1980, Senator Jose Diokno summed up the US accomplishment: “When the Americans left, they left behind the same three basic problems [which they found in the country: widespread poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and social exploitation] and added two more: a totally dependent economy and a military situation so tied to the U.S. that decisions on war and peace, in fact, rest with the United States and not with the Filipino people” (4). In effect, the US exercised sovereignty over a neocolonial formation so thoroughly Americanized that its people today believe that moving to the U.S. metropole is the true fulfillment of their dreams and destiny.

With the Cold War unfolding in Indochina and the worsening of economic stagnation and lower rate of accumulation in the core capitalist countries by the seventies, the Marcos dictatorship took over the Philippines and deepened the underdevelopment of the country. Structural problems, such as unemployment, inflation, chronic balance of payments deficits, an expanding foreign debt, and sharpened social inequality are symptoms of the continuing stranglehold of U.S. imperialism. For over seventy years, the US established the legal and political framework that transformed the country into a raw-material exporting economy and a market for consumer goods, with a semi-feudal land system and a bureaucrat-comprador-landlord governing bloc subservient to U.S. dictates. There was never any progressive national-populist regime in the Philippines that could have initiated the beginning of industrialization as in Latin America and other postcolonial formations after World War II, as Samir Amin has observed. The import-substitution scheme briefly tried in the fifties and sixties quickly gave way to an export-oriented development plan at the behest of the WB/IMF. In the latter 70s, strict structural adjustment programs (SAP) to promote “free-market capitalism” (such as tourism, export-oriented light industries in Export Processing Zones, currency devaluation, etc.) imposed by the latter agencies and the state’s local technocrats plunged the country into crisis. Because of the severe deterioration in the lives of 80% of Filipinos, rising unemployment and serious foreign-debt problems, Marcos initiated the “warm body export”—the Labor Export Policy (LEP)—with Presidential Decree 442 in 1974. This was followed by the establishment of the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration in 1983 and the mandatory sending of remittances by OFWs through the Philippine banking system—a stop-gap remedy for a world-systemic symptom of the crisis in profit accumulation.

Beginning with Marcos authoritarian rule up to the Arroyo regime today, the Philippines has been plagued by accelerated impoverishment of the people as a result of unemployment, declining wages, rising cost of living, and cut-backs in social services. Neoliberal policies known as the “Washington Consensus” maintained the cycle of crisis, rooted in the underlying iniquitous class

structure and the historical legacy of political, economic and military dependence on the U.S. These continue to provide the framework for the increased foreign penetration and control over the national economy, the unremitting dependence on raw material exports and (since the 1970s) of human resources, and the squandering of whatever capital was available through unbridled bureaucratic corruption and fascistic military excesses. Clearly the unemployment crisis is a direct outcome of the deteriorating manufacturing and agricultural sectors caused by the ruinous trade and investment policies since the 1980s. About 59 million Filipinos, two-thirds of the population, live on less than \$2 a day. “Free market” development schemes packaged with “trickle-down” modernizing gimmicks implemented by successive regimes after Marcos have precipitated mass hunger. Chronically low wages, salaries and incomes have been aggravated by inflation and the current global financial crisis. The U.S.-patronized oligarchic rule of compradors, landlords and bureaucrat-capitalists oversees the unrelieved immiseration of the countryside, systemic underdevelopment, and the commodification of Filipino labor for the world market. As Pauline Eadie has cogently demonstrated, the role of the Philippine state in perpetuating poverty and aggravating the exploitation of Filipino citizens cannot be discounted, no matter how weak or “failed” in its function as a mediator/receiver of destructive, supposedly neutral global market compulsion.

ABORTING MAROON FRONTIERS

As a point of departure for future inquiry, I would like to explore the character of the emerging Filipino diaspora. My orientation is that of a Filipino residing in the United States, with rhizomatic linkages to social movements in Philippine civil society. First, a definition of “diaspora:” “Diaspora,” according to Milton Esman, designates “a minority ethnic group of migrant origin which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin” (316). These communities are never assimilated into the host society and, in time, develop a diasporic consciousness that carries out a collective sharing of space with others. In the 1980s and 1990s, diaspora studies emerged as a revision of the traditional sociological approach to international migration and assimilation. Because of globalizing changes in the modes of transport and communications, diaspora communities appear to be able to sustain their own distinctive identities—and economic ties to their homelands. Accordingly, the static territorial nationalisms of the past have given way to a series of shifting or contested boundaries, engendering notions of transnational networks, “imagined communities,” “global ethnospaces,” etc. (Marshall 159) that emphasize the complexity, fluidity, and diversity of migrant identities and experiences.

Like ethnicity, diaspora fashioned by determinate historical causes has

tended to take on “the ‘natural’ appearance of an autonomous force, a ‘principle’ capable of determining the course of social action” (Comaroff 98). Like racism and nationalism, diaspora presents multiform physiognomies open to various interpretations and articulations. One sociologist argues that OFWs are revolutionizing Filipino society, pushing the political system “toward greater democracy, greater transparency and governance” (David 3), an incoherent judgment given the corruption and inequities attendant on this labor-export program acknowledged by everyone, including this sociologist.

Simply put, diaspora involves both fictional construct and material reality sutured together in a complex historical process. James Clifford’s notion of diaspora is characterized by: 1) dispersal from an originary habitat 2) myths and memories of the homeland 3) alienation in the host country 4) desire for eventual return 5) ongoing support for the homeland, and 6) a collective identity defined by relationship to the homeland (283-90). He upholds a decentered or multiply-decentered network and rejects teleologies of origin and return in favor of multiple transnational connections that provide a range of experiences to diasporic communities which in turn depend on the changing possibilities, obstacles, antagonisms, and connections in the host countries. Given the various histories of displacements, diaspora for Clifford serves as the site of contingency *par excellence*. He conceives of a “polythetic field of diasporic forms expressed in multiple discourses of travels, homes, memories, and transnational connections.” Conceiving of an “adaptive constellation of responses to dwelling-in-displacement” (286), Clifford posits the ideal of tribal cosmopolitanism shaped by travel, spiritual quest, trade, exploration, warfare, labor migrancy, and political alliances of all kinds. Can OFWs be conceived as tribal cosmopolitans in this fashion?

Globalization has proceeded to the extent that in our reconfigured landscapes—now grasped as liminal or interstitial—old boundaries have shifted and borders disappeared. Everyone has become transculturized due to Americanization or Disneyfication in actuality or in cyberspace. Transnationals or transmigrants materialize as mutations of expatriates, refugees, exiles, or nomadic travelers (such as Filipino “TNTs,” fugitive undocumented Filipinos). It is in this context of globalization, where ethnic conflicts and the universal commodification of human bodies co-exist in a compressed time-space of postmodernity, that we can examine the genealogy and physiognomy of this phenomenon called Filipino diaspora, the lived collective experience of OFWs. Like the words “hybridity,” “subaltern,” “transculturation,” and so on, the term “diaspora” has now become commonplace in polite conversations and genteel colloquia, often clustered with rubrics such as “genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced migration.” One indeed dreads to encounter in this context such buzzwords as “post-nation,” “alterity,” or ludic “*differance*” now overshadowed by “globalization” and everything prefixed with “trans-” and assorted “post-ali-

ties.” Diaspora becomes a particularizing universal, enacting a mimicry of itself, dispersing its members around in a kaleidoscope of simulations and simulacras borne by the flow of money, labor, and so on in the international commodity chain. At this juncture, one is compelled to ask: Has the world become a home for OFWs? I have encountered Filipinos in many parts of the world in the course of my research. Have I then stumbled onto some unheard-of enigmatic scandal as a “Filipino diaspora”? Or have I surreptitiously constructed this, dare I say, thick slice of “reality” and ongoing experience of about ten million Filipinos around the planet?

Lacking any dialectical critique of the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism that connect the Philippines and its peoples with the United States and the rest of the world, mainstream academic inquiries into the phenomenon of recent Filipino immigration and resettlement are, at best, disingenuous exercises in Eurocentric/white-supremacist apologetics. This is because they rely on concepts and methodologies that conceal unequal power relations—that is, relations of subordination and domination, marginalization, sexism, as well as national subalternity, and other forms of discrimination. I am not proposing here an economistic and deterministic approach, nor a historicist one with a monolithic Enlightenment metanarrative and essentialist agenda. What I want to stress is the centrality of commodified labor within the global political economy of commodity exchange. What is intriguing in this research field are the dynamics of symbolic violence in discourse and practice tied to the naturalization of social constructs and beliefs that are dramatized in the evolving narratives and figures of concretely determinate migrant lives.

It should be recalled that this unprecedented hemorrhage of Filipino labor-power issues from a diseased body politic, marked by the impoverishment of 75 % of the population, widespread corruption by the oligarchy, criminality, military/police atrocities, and the grass-roots insurgency (legal as well as underground) of peasants, women, youth, workers, and indigenous communities. The process of democratization which peaked in the February 1986 revolt against the Marcos dictatorship has been interrupted by military-police terrorism (extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, etc.) of the Arroyo regime, with the responsible parties enjoying impunity and official protection.

The network of the patriarchal family and semi-feudal civil society unravels when women from all sectors (75% of all OFWs) alienate their “free labor” in the world market. They are inserted into a quasi-feudal terrain within global capitalism. While the prime commodity remains labor-power, OFWs find themselves frozen between serfhood and colonizing petty bourgeois households. Except for the carceral condition of “hospitality” women overseen by gangsters, most Filipinas function as indentured servants in the Middle East, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other receiving countries which operate as parts of the transnationalized political economy of global capitalism. These

indentured cohorts are thus witnesses to the dismemberment of the evolving Filipino nation and the scattering of its traumatized fragments to various state-governed policed territories around the planet.

AGONY OF DERACINATION

Already by 2007, there were 9.2 million Filipino workers scattered in 197 countries, over 9% of the total labor force. Permanent OFWs are concentrated in North America and Australia, while those with work contracts or who are undocumented are dispersed in West Asia (Middle East), Europe, East and South Asia, and as sea-based workers (roughly 250,000). They work in service and industrial sectors, in households, for multinational and domestic firms, and in low-skilled and low-paid work. Most OFWs today (46.8%) are service workers: household or domestic helpers, maids or cleaners in commercial establishments, cooks, waiters, bartenders, caregivers and caretakers. Although most are professionals with college degrees, teachers, midwives, social workers, etc., they are generally underpaid by the standards of their host countries—a sociopolitical, not purely economic, outcome of core-periphery inequity. OFWs work in the most adverse conditions, with none or limited labor protections and social services otherwise accorded to nationals. The millions of undocumented workers suffer more with unscrupulous employers brutally exploiting their illegal status. Whether legal or undocumented, OFWs experience racism, discrimination, national chauvinism, and xenophobia; many are brutalized in isolated households and in the “entertainment” industry. They are deprived of food and humane lodging, harassed, beaten, raped, and killed. Meanwhile, the families left behind suffer from stresses and tensions in households lacking parental guidance; often, marriages break up, leaving derelict children vulnerable to the exigencies of a competitive, individualist-oriented environment.

In 1979, after only five years of Marcos’ LEP, the Philippines graduated into the first rank of labor-exporting nations. The marketing of talent, muscle and training brought in \$1 billion foreign exchange. But at what cost? In Nov-Dec 1979, the Belgian police arrested and repatriated twenty Filipina women who were deceived by travel and recruiting agencies with the collusion of the Philippine bureaucracy. All were promised good jobs that were non-existent; seduced, they sold whatever property or possessions they had, incurred huge debts, and paid huge sums to venal officials and criminal recruiters—only to be arrested, or forced to accept humiliating jobs, prostitution, constant abuse and maltreatment. A Filipina migrant worker gave this testimony to the Permanent People’s Tribunal in 1980: most Filipina migrants work

ten or twelve hours a day, completely uninsured, at less than minimum pay with their airfare illegally deducted from their already meager pay by

their employer. This is how some Filipinas describe their work: ‘Sometimes I cannot bear to think about our conditions here. It is like being in prison. It is so lonely just being by myself. Just think how long the hours of work are. Besides having to do heavy work, there is no overtime pay. I am given the responsibility over their children. Sometimes I am ordered to clean the car or to garden or to decorate the house. So, I do not even get a full day off which I am supposed to be entitled to have. And it is so cold here in this small room.’ Another one said: “The food given is lacking. Sometimes, you are even insulted. If you are not strong your head will break and you might even think of committing suicide.”

This is all part of the nightmare: the hard work and the inner pain; the incomparable sadness; the separation from home and loved ones; the adjustment to a new culture and a new language; legal papers to worry about; anxiety about the police; the low and inadequate salary; the debts incurred to come and which have to be repaid. . . . The Filipino migrant workers have asked themselves: how long will it last? (Komite 105–06)

In 2006, Ramon Bultron of the Asia-Pacific Mission for Migrants surveyed the effects of the neoliberal restructuring of the labor market, in particular the “flexibilization” of work that eroded workers’ rights and enhanced slavery to unregulated free-market operations. He described the trainee system in Korea, the labor importation process in Hong Kong, and similar schemes to enhance exploitation of migrant labor in Taiwan, United Arab Emirates, Australia, and elsewhere. Labor flexibilization serves only to ensure low wages and long working hours; they erode mandatory labor standards, decrease social benefits and services, and eliminate democratic rights to form unions and engage in collective bargaining. In short, it promotes slavery to predatory global capital. Again, these are all symptoms of the logic of class and national inequality operating in a hierarchical world-system, not objective, neutral effects of a temporary dis-equilibrium of the free market due to illegitimate political and social interference.

The situation of Filipino migrant workers in the United States has been adequately explored in various studies. Grace Chang has explored the plight of Filipina caregivers, nurses, and nannies in North America. A recent write-up on the horrendous condition of smuggled Filipino caregivers in Los Angeles, California, may illustrate one form of modern slavery (Chang 134–6). Why do Filipinas easily succumb to labor traffickers? About 700,000 men, women and children are being trafficked to the U.S., but OFWs are quite unique in that the Filipino’s deeply colonized mentality/psyche privileges America as “the dream destination,” an intoxicating way out of poverty. Gendy Alimurung described the world of two Filipina indentured servants, “held against their will and forced to work for little or no pay” (23). Mary, a Filipino teacher,

worked as a live-in caregiver in a posh senior-care center in Sherman Oaks, California; when she was smuggled into the U.S. by Filipino traffickers, her passport was confiscated and she was told frankly that she would be a “prisoner” once she started working 24 hours/seven days a week. The nightmare scenarios of bondage or quarantined servitude began in October 2005 and ended when a neighbor helped another trafficked servant escape; they wound up in a shelter program run by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking. Since these caregivers are undocumented, they cannot press charges against their employers. In contrast, Nena Ruiz, a Filipino domestic servant with papers, sued a vice president of legal affairs for Sony Pictures Entertainment and his wife for enslaving her. “She worked 18 hours a day performing what one paper described as ‘strange household chores,’ which included microwaving chicken nuggets and cutting up bananas and pears for the couple’s dogs. Ruiz, meanwhile, was fed leftovers and slept in a dog bed” (Alimurung 25). Except for the fact that Ruiz was able to seek legal redress, her situation is replicated by her sister OFWs all over the world for the last three decades.

FROM NEOCOLONIAL SERFS TO MODERN SLAVES

Victimization of Filipinos by employers from Europe to the Middle East to Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan have been documented in detail since the seventies when the export of “warm bodies” started. The fates of Flor Contemplacion, Sarah Balabagan, Maricris Sioson, and others—several hundred OFWs languish today in jails in the Middle East, Taiwan, Malaysia, etc.—have become public scandals and occasions for mass indignation. Consequently, on April 8, 2009, the UN Committee for the Ratification of the Migrants Convention deleted the Philippines from the list of model states complying with the UN Convention mandating countries to protect the rights of their migrant citizens.

Amid the tide of barbarization attendant on the putative benefits of global capitalism—celebrated by such pundits as Thomas Friedman and other neo-conservative defenders of privatization, deregulation, and cutting of social services—we have witnessed a paradigm-shift among scholars studying the phenomenon of the Filipino diaspora. Critical intelligence has been hijacked to serve vulgar apologetics. For example, the employment of Filipina women as domestics or nannies to care for children, old people, the chronically infirm or disabled, and so on, has been lauded as altruistic care.

Generally, this exploitation of enslaved human labor-power eludes criticism because of its philanthropic facade. With most female domestics coming from impoverished, formerly colonized societies, we perceive that the traditional structure of global inequality among nation-states has something to do with this trend. This point cannot be over-emphasized: The buying and selling

of “third world” bodies is a legacy of the unjust and unequal division of international labor in both productive and reproductive spheres. This “global care chain,” as trendy sociologists would put it, is household work managed as a thoroughgoing profit-making industry. In *Global Woman*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild tried to contextualize the exploitation of third-world women in the new epoch of flexible globalized capitalism. But their picture missed one stark difference, a telling omission: the status/rank of the Philippines as a neocolonial dependency without power to enforce its sovereignty right and safeguard the welfare of OFWs.

The stark disparity is sharply delineated by Bridget Anderson in her penetrating critique, *Doing the Dirty Work?* Opposing scholars who streamline if not euphemistically glamorize the job of caring, Anderson exposes how domestics from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and other subaltern nations function as “legal slaves.” Anderson shows how this came about through the economic conquest of third-world societies by the profit-driven industrialized North. This has given the middle class of the First World “materialistic forms of power over them” (149). She deploys Orlando Patterson’s conceptual distinctions between the pre-modern personalistic idiom of power and the materialistic idiom of power under capitalism and defines the employer/domestic relation as a master/slave relation. The employer exercises both forms of power:

the materialistic because of the massive discrepancy in access to all kinds of material resources between the receiving state and the countries of origin of migrants and the personalistic because the worker is located in the employer’s home—and often dependent on her not just for her salary but for her food, water, accommodation and access to the basic amenities of life. The employer uses both of these idioms of power, and both idioms are given to employers and reinforced by the state. (6)

Viewed systemically, the neoliberal global structure enables the exploitation of poor countries by the rich ones, and the exploitation of the citizens of poor countries by citizens of the global North (either male or female) through immigration legislation, even criminalizing migrants who assert their human rights. Earlier, institutionally imposed norms of race, nationality, and gender served to naturalize the migrant worker’s subjugation, but in the new field of globalized capital, the lack of citizenship rights and the status of subordinated or inferiorized nationality/ethnicity both contribute to worsening the degradation of third-world women.

But there is something more pernicious that eludes the orthodox scholastic. What Anderson argues is that domestic work commodifies not only labor power—in classic political economy, labor power serves as the commodity that produces surplus-value (profit) not returned to or shared with the workers—but, more significantly, the personhood of the domestic. Indentured or com-

modified personhood is the key to understanding what globalization is really all about. Consequently, what needs to be factored in is not only an analysis of the labor-capital relation, but also the savage asymmetry of nation-states, of polities that hire these poor women and the polities that collude in this post-modern slave-trade. Economics signifies nothing without the global sociopolitical fabric in which it is historically woven. Brutalized migrant labor throughout the world thrives on the sharpening inequality of nation-states, particularly the intense impoverishment of “third world” societies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Race, national, and class forces operate together in determining the exchange-value (the price) of migrant labor. The reproduction of a homogeneous race (in Europe, North America, Japan, etc.) integral to the perpetuation of the unjust social order is connected with the historical development of nation-states, whether as imagined or as geopolitically defined locus. Historically, membership in the community was determined by race in its various modalities, a circumscription that is constantly being negotiated. It is in this racialized setting that European women’s positioning as citizen acquires crucial significance. This is the site where third-world domestics play a major role, as Anderson acutely underscores: “The fact that they are migrants is important: in order to participate *like men* women must have workers who will provide the same flexibility as wives, in particular working long hours and combining caring and domestic chores” (190). This is the nexus where we discern that care as labor is the domestic’s assignment, whereas the experience of care as emotion is the employer’s privilege. The distinction is fundamental and necessary in elucidating the axis of social reproduction rooted in socially productive praxis. Such a vital distinction speaks volumes about migrant domestic labor/care as the key sociopolitical factor that sustains the existing oppressive international division of labor. This key distinction undermines all claims that globalized capitalism has brought, and is bringing, freedom, prosperity, and egalitarian democracy to everyone.

The political economy of globalized migrant labor involves the dialectics of production and reproduction. Following an empiricist line of inquiry, Rha- cel Salazar Parrenas examines the racial and class dimensions of OFWs in what she quaintly terms “the international transfer of caretaking” in Rome and Los Angeles (113). While she calls attention to the gendered system of transnational capitalism, she downplays the racialist component and scarcely deals with subordination by nationality. This is because Parrenas construes “class” in a deterministic, economic fashion. Her focus on the “patriarchal nuclear household” displaces any criticism of the colonial/imperial extraction of surplus value from enslaved/neocolonized reproductive labor. Indeed, the fact of the caretakers’ national origin is erased, thus evading the issue of national oppression. The slavish condition of indentured reproductive labor scrutinized by

Anderson is not given proper weight. We need to examine how the dynamics of capital accumulation hinges on, and subtends, the sustained reproduction of iniquitous social relations and exploitative inter-state relations. Unlike the conventional immigration specialist, Anderson foregrounds social reproduction at the center of her inquiry, allowing her to demonstrate how gender, race, and nation are tightly interwoven into the mistress/domestic class relationship. In effect, the Filipina domestic is what enables European/North American bourgeois society and, by extension, the relatively prosperous societies of the Middle East and Asia to reproduce themselves and thus sustain capital accumulation with its horrendous consequences. This also allows the legitimacy of patriarchal control of the household and the state to evade feminist critique.

DIASPORA IN THE GLOBALIZING PROCESS

Postmodernist scholars posit the demise of the nation as an unquestioned assumption, almost a doctrinal point of departure for speculations on the nature of the globalization process. Are concepts such as the nation-state, national sovereignty, nationality, and their referents obsolete and devoid of use-value? Whatever the rumors about the demise of the nation-state, or the obsolescence of nationalism in the wake of September 11, 2001, agencies that assume its healthy existence are busy: not only the members of the United Nations, but also the metropolitan powers of the global North, with the United States as its military spearhead, have all reaffirmed their civilizing nationalism—disguised as humanitarian intervention—with a vengeance. We've seen the damage wrought by this well-intentioned humanitarianism in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and, now, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In this epoch of preemptive counter-terrorism, the local and the global find a meeting ground in the transactions among nation-states and diverse nationalities while global hegemony is negotiated among the metropolitan powers. Their instrumentalities—the World Trade Organization, NATO, IMF/WB, and financial consortia—are all exerting pressures on poor underdeveloped nations. They actualize the “collective imperialism” of the global North. Citizenship cards, passports, customs gatekeepers, and border patrols are still powerful regulatory agencies. With the denationalization of economies, the displaced communities of immigrants can now avail of the UN 1990 Convention. But given the power of the U.S. nation-state, Japan, and the European nation-states to dictate the terms of migrant employment, and the global circulation of capital (including flows of human capital), the Philippines cannot rescue millions of its own citizens from being maltreated, persecuted, harassed, beaten up, raped, jailed, and murdered. Violence enacted by the rich nation-states and their citizens hiring workers prevail as the chief control mechanism in regulating the labor-market for OFWs.

With WTO and finance capital in the saddle, the buying and selling of labor-power and its embodiment, personhood, moves center stage once more. What has not escaped the most pachydermous advocates of the “free market” gospel who have not been distracted by the carnage in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the rampant extrajudicial killings in the Philippines are the frequency and volume of labor migration. One cannot ignore the incessant flow of bodies of color (including mail-order brides, children, and the syndicated traffic in prostitutes and modern chattel-slaves) in consonance with the flight of labor-intensive industries to far-flung export-processing zones in Mexico, the Philippines, and other “free trade zones.” These market regularities defy Nietzschean concepts of contingency, ambivalence, and indeterminacy. Such bodies are, of course, not the performative parodists of Judith Butler in quest of pleasure or the aesthetically fashioned selves idealized by Foucault and the pragmatic patriot, Richard Rorty.

The Philippines is not exceptional in its role of providing a large reserve army of cheap labor to global capitalism. Other countries such as India, Mexico, Thailand, and other strapped “third-world” hinterlands also serve as reservoirs of relatively cheap labor power. About 200 million migrant workers from the underdeveloped zones of the periphery, what globalization experts call “the global South,” sent \$150 billion to their home countries—nearly twice what those poor nations received in terms of aid from the rich governments of the “North.” In 2004, Mexico enjoyed \$17 billion in remittances, a total equal to the value of its oil trade, while India received \$14 billion, an amount larger than the revenue earned by its flourishing software industry. But these funds are mainly spent on consumables; they are not used for large-scale investment or long-term job creation in local industry and agriculture. Those countries remain poor, without jobs and adequate social services for millions. Moreover, they are vulnerable to the punishing emergencies of a crises-prone system of accumulation, as proven by the cases of Somalia, the Philippines, and others hit by post-9/11 strictures on money-transferring and hiring. And so, despite this influx of wealth, according to World Policy scholars Benjamin Pauker and Michele Wucker, in exchange for those transfers, Mexico, the Philippines and other nations

pay an inestimable human cost, one that will become only more onerous with time . . . [Unless those nations concentrate their efforts in developing their own economies] remittances will continue to be part of the very reason workers leave in the first place: a vicious economic trap that condemns people to emigrate in order to survive, even as their exodus deprives home economies of the workforce that might make it possible for others to remain. (68–69)

Official evaluations of this labor marketing tend to stress its apparent benefit in

increasing household consumption and in solving fiscal and trade deficits while underplaying the exorbitant social costs—break-up of families, drugs, long-term dependence on labor-market funding, and other expenditures that erode sovereignty and the unquantifiable loss of “national integrity.”

Culture wars are being conducted by other means through the transport and exchange of bodies of color in the international bazaars. And the scaling of bodies proceeds according to corporeal differences (sex, race, age, physical capacity, etc.). Other diasporas—in addition to the historic ones of the Jews, Africans, Irish, etc.—are in the making. The editors of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* special issue on “diaspora and immigration” celebrate the political and cultural experiences of these nomadic cohorts who can “teach us how to think about our destiny and how to articulate the unity of science with the diversity of knowledge as we confront the politics of difference” (Mudimbe and Engel 6). Unity, diversity, politics of difference—the contours and direction of diasporas are conceived as the arena of conflict among disparate philosophical/ideological standpoints. Contesting the European discourse on modernity and pleading for the “inescapability and legitimate value of mutation, hybridity, and intermixture,” Paul Gilroy has drawn up the trope of the “Black Atlantic” on the basis of the “temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage” (Gilroy 223). Neither the Jewish nor the African diasporas can, of course, be held up as inviolable archetypes if we want to pursue an “infinite process of identity construction.” My interest here is historically focused: to inquire into how the specific geopolitical contingencies of the Filipino diaspora-in-the-making can problematize this axiomatic of multiple identity-creation in the context of “third world” principles of national emancipation, given the persistent neocolonial, not postcolonial, predicament of the Philippines today.

Postmodern cultural studies from the counterterrorizing North is now replicating McKinley’s gunboat policy of “Benevolent Assimilation” at the turn of the last century. Its missionary task is to discover how, without their knowing it, Filipina domestics are becoming cosmopolitans while working as maids (more exactly, domestic slaves), empowering themselves by devious tactics of evasion, accommodation, and coping or making-do. Obviously this task of naturalizing and normalizing servitude benefits the privileged few, the modern slave-masters. This is not due to a primordial irony in the nature of constructing their identity, which, according to Ernesto Laclau, “presupposes the constitutive split” between the content and the function of identification as such since they—like most post-Cartesian subjects—are “the empty places of an absent fullness” (36). Signifiers of lack, these women from poverty-stricken regions in the Philippines are presumably longing for a plenitude symbolized by a stable, prosperous homeland/family that is forever deferred if not evacuated. Yet these maids (euphemized as “domestics”) possess faculties of resourcefulness, stoic boldness, and inscrutable cunning. Despite this, it is

alleged that Western experts are needed for them to acquire self-reflexive agency, to know that their very presence in such lands as Kuwait, Milan, Los Angeles, Taipei, Singapore, and London and the cultural politics they spontaneously create are “complexly mediated and transformed by memory, fantasy and desire” (Hall 254). The time of alienated daily labor has so far annihilated the spaces of the body, home, community, and nation. The expenditure of a whole nation-people’s labor-power now confounds the narrative of individual progress in which the logic of capital and its metaphysics of rationality have been entrenched since the days of John Locke and Adam Smith.

AGENCY UNBOUND?

Suffice it here to spell out the context of this transmigrancy, an evolving diaspora of neocolonials: the accelerated impoverishment of millions of Filipino peasants and workers, the extremely class-ruptured system (the Philippines as a neocolonial dependency of the US and the transnational corporate elite) managed by local compradors, landlords, and bureaucrat-capitalists who foster systematic emigration to relieve unemployment and defuse mass unrest, combined with the hyped-up attractions of Hong Kong and other newly industrializing countries, and so on—all these comprise the parameters for this ongoing process of the marketing of Filipina bodies. The convergence of complex global factors, both internal and external, residual and emergent, has been carefully delineated by numerous studies sponsored by IBON, GABRIELA, and other groups such as the Scalabrini Migration Center. We may cite, in particular, the studies on the devalorization of women’s labor in global cities, the shrinking status of sovereignty for peripheral nation-states, and the new saliency of human rights in a feminist analytic of the “New World Order.” In addition to the rampant pillage of the national treasury by the irredeemably corrupt oligarchy, the plunder of the economy by transnational capital has been worsened by the “structural conditionalities” imposed by the WB/IMF. Disaggregation of the economy has registered in the disintegration of ordinary Filipino lives (preponderant in rural areas and urban slums) due to forced migration because of lack of employment, recruiting appeals of governments and business agencies, and the dissolution of the homeland as psychic and physical anchorage in the vortex of the rapid depredation of finance capital.

In general, imperialism and the anarchy of the “free market” engender incongruities, nonsynchronies, and shifting subject-positions of the non-Western “Other” inscribed in the liminal space of subjugated territory. Capital accumulation is the matrix of unequal power between metropolis and colonies. The historical reality of uneven sociopolitical development in a US colonial and, later, neocolonial society like the Philippines is evident in the systematic Americanization of schooling, mass media, sports, music, religious

institutions, and diverse channels of mass communication. Backwardness now helps hi-tech corporate business. Since the 1970s, globalization has concentrated on the exploitation of local tastes and idioms for niche marketing while the impact of the Filipino diaspora in the huge flow of remittances from OFWs has accentuated the discrepancy between metropolitan wealth and neocolonial poverty, with the consumerist *habitus* made egregiously flagrant in the conspicuous consumption of OFWs returning from the Middle East, Europe, Hong Kong, Japan, and other workplaces loaded with *balikbayan* (returnee) boxes. Unbeknownst to observers of this commercialized “cargo cult,” remains of these workers arrive in Manila without too much fanfare, straight from the execution chambers of the Middle East and the morgues of Japan, Taiwan, and other sites of “foul play.”

Notwithstanding the massive research into the historical background of these “new heroes,” their plight remains shrouded in bureaucratic fatuities. A recent ethnographic account of the lives of Filipina domestics celebrates their newfound subjectivity within various disciplinary regimes. Deploying Foucault’s notion of “localized power,” the British anthropologist Nicole Constable seeks “to situate Filipina domestic workers *within* the field of power, not as equal players but as participants” (11). And how is their agency manifested? How else but in their ability to consume. Consider this spectacle: During their Sundays off, Filipina maids gather in certain places like the restaurants of the Central District in Hong Kong and demand prompt service or complain to the managers if they are not attended to properly. They also have the option of exercising agency at McDonald’s if they ask for extra condiments or napkins. Apart from these anecdotal examples, the fact that these maids were able to negotiate their way through a bewildering array of institutions in order to secure their jobs is testimony to what Constable calls “the subtler and more complex forms of power, discipline and resistance in their everyday lives” (202).

According to one commentator, this scholarly attempt to ferret out signs of tension or conflict in the routine lives of domestics obfuscates the larger context that defines the subordination of these women and the instrumentalities that reproduce their subjugation. In short, functionalism has refurbished neopositivism with a populist appeal. To put it another way, Constable shares Foucault’s dilemma of ascribing resistance to subjects while devaluing history as “meaningless kaleidoscopic changes of shape in discourse totalities” (Habermas 277). Nor is Constable alone in this quite trendy vocation. Donna Haraway, among others, had earlier urged the practitioners of cultural studies to abandon the politics of representation that allegedly objectifies and disempowers whatever it represents. She wants us to choose, instead, local struggles for strategic articulations that are always impermanent, precarious, and contingent. This precept forbids the critique of ideology—how can one distin-

guish truth from falsehood since there are only “truth effects” contrived by power? This populist and often demagogic stance promotes “a radical skepticism” (Brantlinger 102) that cannot discriminate truth-claims, nor establish a basis of consensus for sustained, organized political action.

The most flagrant erasure in Constable’s calculated inventory of OFW performance seems more serious. This is her discounting of the unequal relation between the Philippines and a global city like Hong Kong, a relation enabled by the continuing neocolonial domination of Filipinos by Western corporate interests led by the United States. However, this microphysics of learning how to survive performed by Filipino maids cannot exonerate the ethnographer from complicity with this mode of displacing causality (a technique of inversion also found in mainstream historians of the Philippines) and apologizing for the victims by oblique patronage. Delia D. Aguilar pronounces a felicitous verdict on this specimen of cultural studies, as follows: Constable’s work

makes a mockery of Filipina domestics’ predicament by fetishizing their pragmatic ‘make-do’ coping skills and trivializing their mobilizing activities. . . . Constable’s interest in the quotidian, because deprived of an explanatory framework that could raise essential questions about a hierarchically organized exploitative system, comes out as petty and patronizing under scrutiny (6),

in effect promoting and preserving OFW subservience to the status quo.

CONFIGURING OFW SINGULARITIES

At the beginning of this millennium, Filipinos have become the newest diasporic community in the whole world. United Nations statistics indicate that Filipinos make up the newest migrant assemblage in the world: close to ten million Filipino migrant workers (out of 90 million citizens), mostly female domestic help and semiskilled labor. They endure poorly paid employment under substandard conditions, with few or null rights, in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, North America, and elsewhere. It might be noted here that historically, diasporic groups are defined not only by a homeland but also by a desire for eventual return and a collective identity centered on myths and memories of the homeland. The Filipino diaspora, however, is different. Since the homeland has long been conquered and occupied by Western powers (Spain, United States) and remains colonized despite formal or nominal independence, the Filipino identification is not with a fully defined nation but with regions, localities, and communities of languages and traditions. Perceived as untutored, recalcitrant strangers, they are lumped with familiar aliens: Chinese, Mexicans, Japanese, Pacific Islanders, and so on. Newspaper reports have cited the

Philippines as the next target of the US government's global "crusade" against terrorism—tutelage by force. Where is the sovereign nation alluded to in passports, contracts, and other identification papers? How do we conceive of this "Filipino" nation or nationality, given the insidious impact of US disciplinary forces and now, on top of the persistent neocolonizing pressure, the usurping force of quantifying capital and its reductive cash-nexus?

According to orthodox immigration theory, "push" and "pull" factors combine to explain the phenomenon of overseas contract workers. Do we resign ourselves to this easy schematic formulation? Poverty and injustice, to be sure, have driven most Filipinos to seek work abroad, sublimating the desire to return by regular remittances to their families. Occasional visits and other means of communication defer the eventual homecoming. Alienation and isolation, brutal and racist treatment, and other dehumanized and degrading conditions prevent their permanent settlement in the "receiving" countries, except where they have been given legal access to obtaining citizenship status. If the return is postponed, are modes of adaptation and temporary domicile in non-native grounds the feasible alternatives for these expatriates (as they are fondly called by their compatriots in Manila)?

The reality of "foreignness," of "otherness," seems ineluctable. Alienation, insulting treatment, and racist violence prevent their permanent resettlement in the "receiving societies," except where Filipino communities (as in the US and Canada, for example) have been given opportunities to acquire citizenship rights. Individuals, however, have to go through abrasive screening and tests—more stringent now in this repressive quasi-fascist ethos. During political crises in the Philippines, OFWs mobilize themselves for support of local and nationwide resistance against imperial domination and local tyranny. Because the putative "Filipino" nation is in the process of formation in the neocolony and abroad, OFWs have been considered transnationals or transmigrants—a paradoxical turn since the existence of the nation is problematic or under interrogation, whereby the "trans" prefix becomes chimerical. This diaspora then faces the perennial hurdles of racism, ethnic exclusion, inferiorization via racial profiling, and physical attacks. Can Filipino migrant labor mount a collective resistance against globalized exploitation? Can the Filipino process of transition expose also the limits of genetic and/or procedural notions of citizenship? In what way can this hypothetical diaspora serve as a paradigm for analyzing and critically unsettling the corporate-led internationalization of the division of labor and the consolidation of reified ethnic categories as the global financial crisis unfolds?

In summary, I offer the following propositions for further reflection and elaboration. My paramount thesis on the phenomenon of the Filipino dismemberment is this: Given that the Philippine habitat has never cohered as a genuinely independent nation—national autonomy continues to escape the

Filipino people in a neocolonial setup—Filipinos are dispersed from family or kinship webs in villages, towns, or provincial regions first, and loosely from an inchoate, even “refeudalized,” nation-state. This dispersal is primarily due to economic coercion and disenfranchisement under the retrogressive regime of comprador-bureaucratic (not welfare-state) capitalism articulated with tributary/semi-feudal institutions and practices. Migration is sometimes seen as an event-sequence offering the space of freedom to seek one’s fortune, experience the pleasure of adventure in libidinal games of resistance, sweetened by illusions of transcendence, so the origin to which one returns is not properly a nation-state but a village, a quasi-primordial community, kinship network, or even a ritual family/clan. In this context, the Philippine state-machinery (both sending and receiving states benefit from the brokerage transaction) is viewed in fact as a corrupt exploiter, not representative of the masses, a comprador agent of transnational corporations and Western powers.

What are the myths enabling a cathexis of the homeland as collective memory and project? They derive from assorted childhood reminiscences and folklore together with customary practices surrounding municipal and religious celebrations; at best, there may be signs of a residual affective tie to national heroes like Rizal, Bonifacio, and latter-day celebrities like singers, movie stars, athletes, and so on. Indigenous food, dances, and music can be acquired as commodities whose presence temporarily heals the trauma of removal; family reunification can resolve the psychic damage of loss of status or alienation. In short, rootedness in autochthonous habitat does not exert a commanding sway; it is experienced only as a nostalgic mood. Meanwhile, language, religion, kinship, the aura of family rituals, and common experiences in school or workplace function invariably as the organic bonds of community. Such psychodynamic clusters of affects demarcate the boundaries of the imagination but also release energies that mutate into actions serving ultimately national-popular emancipatory projects.

Alienation in the host country is what unites OFWs, a shared history of colonial and racial subordination, marginalization, and struggles for cultural survival through heterogeneous forms of resistance and political rebellion. This is what may replace the nonexistent nation/homeland, absent the political self-determination of the Filipino people. Years of union struggle, united-front agitation, educational campaigns, and political organizing in interethnic coalitions have blurred if not erased that stigma. Accomplishments in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s have provided nourishment for ethnic pride. However, compared to the Japanese or Asian Indians, Filipino Americans as a whole have not made it; the exceptions prove the rule. Andrew Cunanan (the serial killer who slew the famous Versace) is the specter that continues to haunt “melting pot” Filipino Americanists who continue to blabber about the “forgotten Filipino” in the hope of being awarded a share of the obsolescent wel-

fare-state pie. Dispossession of sovereignty leads to moral and ethical shipwreck, with the natives drifting rudderless, some fortuitously marooned in islands across the continents. Via strategies of communal preservation and versatile tactics of defining the locality of the community through negotiations and shifting compromises, the Filipino diaspora defers its return—unless and until there is a Filipino nation that they can identify with. This will continue in places where there is no hope of permanent resettlement as citizens or bona fide residents (as in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere). This is the disavowed terror of globalization.

Some Filipinos in their old age may desire eventual return only when they are economically secure. In general, Filipinos will not return permanently (except perhaps for burial) to the site of misery and oppression—to poverty, exploitation, humiliated status, despair, hunger, and lack of dignity. Of course, some are forcibly returned: damaged, deported, or dead. But OFWs would rather move their kin and parents to their place of employment, preferably in countries where family reunification is allowed, as in the United States, Italy, Canada, and so on, or even in places of suffering and humiliation, provided there is some hope or illusion of future improvement. Utopian longings can mislead but also reconfigure and redirect wayward travels, sojourns, and adventures.

Ongoing support for nationalist struggles at home is sporadic and intermittent during times of retrenchment and revitalized global apartheid. Do we see any mass protests and collective indignation here in the United States at the Visiting Forces Agreement, or the rapes of Filipinas by US soldiers? Was there any protest at the recent invasion (before and after 9/11) of the Philippines by several thousand US Marines in joint US-Philippines military exercises? Especially after September 11, 2001, and the Arroyo sycophancy to the Bush regime, the Philippines—considered by the US government as the harbor of homegrown “terrorists” like the Abu Sayyaf—may soon be transformed into the next “killing field” after Afghanistan.

During the Marcos dictatorship, the politicized generation of Filipino American youth in the United States was able to mobilize a large segment of the community to support the national-democratic mass struggles, including the armed combatants of the New People’s Army (led by the Communist Party of the Philippines), against US-supported authoritarian rule. Filipino nationalism blossomed in the late 1960s and 1970s but suffered attenuation when it was rechannelled to support the populist elitism of Aquino and Ramos, the lumpen populism of Estrada, and now the thoroughly corrupt Arroyo regime. The precarious balance of class forces at this conjuncture is subject to the shifts in political mobilization and calculation, hence the intervention of Filipino agencies with emancipatory goals and socialist principles is crucial and strategically necessary.

IDENTITY MATTERS

In this time of emergency, the Filipino collective identity is going through ordeals, undergoing the vicissitudes of metamorphosis and elaboration. The Filipino diasporic consciousness is an odd species, a singular genre: it is not obsessed with a physical return to roots or to land where common sacrifices (to echo Ernest Renan) are remembered and celebrated. It is gradually being tied more to a symbolic homeland indexed by kinship or particular traditions and communal practices that it tries to transplant abroad in diverse localities. So, in the moment of Babylonian captivity, dwelling in “Egypt” or its modern surrogates, building public spheres of solidarity to sustain identities outside the national time/space “in order to live inside, with a difference” may be the most viable route (or root) of Filipinos in motion—the collectivity in transit, although this is, given the possibility of differences becoming contradictions, subject to the revolutionary transformations enveloping the Philippine countryside and cities. It is susceptible also to other radical changes in the geopolitical rivalry of metropolitan powers based on nation-states. But it is not an open-ended “plural vision” subject to arbitrary contingencies. There is indeed deferral, postponement, or waiting—but history moves on in the battlefields of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao where a people’s war (with its Moro component) rooted in a durable revolutionary tradition rages on. This drama of a national-democratic revolution will not allow the Filipino diaspora and its progeny to slumber in the consumerist paradises of Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Milan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, or Sidney. It will certainly disturb the peace of those benefiting from the labor and sacrifices of OFWs who experience the repetition-compulsion of uneven development and suffer the recursive traumas of displacement and dispossession.

Caught in the cross-currents of global upheavals, I can only conclude with a very provisional and indeed temporizing epilogue—if I may beg leave from those Filipina bodies in nondescript boxes heading home. Let me begin with some elementary observations. Filipinos in the United States and elsewhere (given the still hegemonic Western dispensation amid allegations of its disappearance) are neither “Oriental” nor “Hispanic,” despite their looks and names; they are nascent citizens of a country in quest of genuine self-determination. They might be syncretic or hybrid subjects with suspect loyalties. They cannot be called fashionable “transnationals” or flexible transmigrants because of racialized, ascribed markers (physical appearance, accent, peculiar non-white folkways, and other group idiosyncrasies) that are needed to sustain and reproduce White supremacy in historically racialized polities. Anderson has cogently demonstrated how the international labor market consistently racializes the selling of Filipina selfhood; thus, not only gender and class but, more decisively, national identities articulated with immigrant status, inferiorized cul-

ture, and so on, are reproduced through the combined exploitation and oppression taking place in the employer's household. Slavery has become re-domesticated in the age of reconfigured mercantilism—the vampires of the past continue to haunt the cyber-domain of finance capital and its futurist hallucinations.

The trajectory of the Filipino diaspora remains unpredictable. Ultimately, the rebirth of Filipino agency in the era of global capitalism depends not only on the vicissitudes of social transformation in the US but, in a dialectical sense, on the fate of the struggle for autonomy and popular-democratic sovereignty in the Philippines. We find autonomous zones in Manila and in the provinces where *balikbayans* (returnees) still practice, though with increasing trepidation sometimes interrupted by fits of amnesia, the speech-acts and durable performances of *pakikibaka* (common struggle), *pakikiramay* (collective sharing), and *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (reciprocal esteem). Left untranslated, those phrases from the academic vernacular address a gradually vanishing audience. Indeed, the register of this discourse itself may just be a wayward apostrophe to a vanished dream world—a liberated homeland, a phantasmagoric refuge—evoking the utopias and archaic golden ages of myths and legends. Wherever it is, however, this locus of memories, hopes, and dreams will surely be inhabited by a new collectivity as befits a new objective reality to which Susan Buck-Morss, in her elegiac paean to the catastrophe that overtook mass utopia, alludes. She envisions a future distinguished by

the geographical mixing of people and things, global webs that disseminate meanings, electronic prostheses of the human body, new arrangements of the human sensorium. Such imaginings, freed from the constraints of bounded spaces and from the dictates of unilinear time, might dream of becoming, in Lenin's words, "as radical as reality itself" (278)

That future scenario was already approximated by Marx in his view that "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice" (Fischer 170).

Homelessness and uprooting characterize the fate of millions today—political refugees, displaced persons, emigres and exiles, stateless nationalities, homeless and vagrant humans everywhere. Solidarity acquires a new temper. In the postmodern transnational restructuring of the globe after the demise of the Soviet Union, the Philippines has been compelled to experience a late-capitalist diaspora of its inhabitants. OFW, an unprecedented sociopolitical category (preponderantly female) transported to the markets of various nation-states, in particular the Middle East, is the new arena of hegemonic contestation. As I have noted earlier, OFWs remit billions of dollars—enough to keep

the neocolonial system afloat and the elite relatively safe in their gated luxury enclaves. Most of the migrant female Filipinos are modern slaves, at best indentured servants. They can be seen congregating in front of Rome's railway station, London parks, city squares in Hong Kong and Taipei, and other open public quarters of newly-industrialized societies. They are the plebeians and proles of the global cities.

Drawn from petty-bourgeois, peasant, and proletarian roots, OFWs are leveled by their conditions of work. Marginality of racialized contractual labor—the matrix of this inferiorized alterity—defines the identity of Filipino subalterns vis-a-vis the master-citizens. Meanwhile the metropole, also cognized as the putative space of flows (aside from labor-power, commodities as money, intellectual property, and so on), prohibits these foreigners from carving a locale for their sociality. For these deracinated populations, their nationality signifies their subalternity within the existing interstate hierarchy of nation-states (emasculated but not yet fungible nor defunct) while money (yen, petrodollars) permits them the aura of cosmopolitan status. The semblance is reinforced by the whole ideological apparatus of consumerism, the ironically betrayed promise of enjoying appearances. The commodity's promise of future bliss never materializes, remaining forever suspended in giant billboard advertisements, on TV and cinema screens, and in fantasies. Meanwhile, the almost but not yet globalized city of MetroManila exudes an illusion of consumerist affluence, sporting the postcolonial mirage of hybrid and syncretic spectacles in megamalls and quasi-Disneylands amid the ruin of fragmented families in squalid quarters, criminality, and other degrading symptoms of anomie. The OFW may be the most intriguing spectacle of this new millennium.

Articulated with this transnational flux of labor, the urban experience of Filipinos at home replicates and also parodies that of residents in the global metropolis: segregation, fissured communities, ethnic tensions, and so on. Whether conceived as machine or text, MetroManila becomes a carceral site for OFWs killing time while waiting for the next contract, the next passage of recruitment. It is also an inhospitable conduit for commodified bodies and other damaged goods of neocolonial production/reproduction. In their alienation and deprivation, our brothers and sisters in diaspora, “slaves” of uneven globalization, may constitute the negativity of the Other, the alterity of the permanent crisis of transnational capital. I don't mean a global or international proletarian vanguard, but simply a potentially destabilizing force—they act as the dangerous alien bacilli, eliciting fear and *ressentiment*—situated at the core of the precarious racist order. They also sometimes march under left-wing anti-imperialist slogans and socialist platforms. If the Other (of color) speaks, will the former “master” from the West listen?

What needs urgent critical attention today is the racial politics of the transnational blocs to which we have been utterly blind, obsessed as we have

been with “classism” as an attitudinal reflex, with the nuances of patron-client interaction, with *amor propio*, and so on. We have been victims of EuroAmerican racializing ideology and politics, but characteristically we ignore it and speak of our racism toward Moros, Igorots, Chinese, etc. Race and ethnicity have occupied center-stage in the politics of nationalist struggles in this post-Cold War era. OFWs need to inform themselves of the complex workings of racism and chauvinism subsumed in the paternalistic establishment pluralism of the industrialized states. On this hinges the crucial issue of national autonomy, pivoting around the question whether a dependent formation like the Philippines can uncouple or delink from the world-system in order to pursue a different, uniquely Filipino kind of non-competitive sustainable growth and a radically different kind of national project. Perhaps the trigger for a new mass mobilization can be the awareness of racial politics as a way to restage the national-democratic struggle in the new framework of neoliberal market discourse—unless there is an oppositional systemic challenge to the corporate interests. The prospect of radical social change beckons for further exploration, replete with detours, beguiling traps, and blind alleys. However, there are signs of the future germinating in current developments.

EXTRAPOLATING AGENDAS

Though emotionally powerful, racial/ethnic-based politics, like peasant-based insurrections, can only imagine the past, not project the shape of the future polity. The old paradigm of migrant labor exploited by global business remains valid for OFWs so long as the historical specificities of its indentured, slave-like quality are inscribed within this problematic. Gender, race, sexuality and other differentiating categories will continue to function as gears of the control mechanisms of a capitalist state regulating the sale/exchange of labor-power as commodities in the world market. No doubt market transactions are embedded in sociocultural contexts, as Ronald Munck reminds us; but I think the moral economy of the diasporic OFWs, while motivated by a principle of international solidarity, cannot be confined to the labor movement, or polymorphous social movements exemplified by the World Social Forum. It has a more radical, anti-imperialist edge founded on a long revolutionary tradition of fighting Spanish, American and Japanese colonialism and their legacies.

The signal events that transformed the globalizing process of exporting Filipino labor all occurred in 1995: the execution of Flor Contemplacion by the Singaporean government on March 17, 1995, and the conviction of Sarah Balabagan by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on June 6, 1995. Contemplacion was accused of killing a fellow OFW and a Singaporean child, but the Singaporean court ignored circumstances that clearly showed her innocence. What is more culpable is the failure of the Philippine government, as man-

dated by law, to aid this citizen with adequate legal and social assistance. Even the appeal of President Fidel Ramos to the Singaporean officials failed to stay or commute the death sentence. Domini M. Torrevillas, a respected journalist, comments: “Never in recent memory had the Philippine nation responded with collective anger to the hanging of a domestic helper. Rallies were held, the Singaporean flag was burned . . . The nation believed that Contemplacion was innocent, but that if she was indeed guilty, she was not given the best legal protection that the government should have provided her with” (47–48). As a result, President Ramos convened the Presidential Fact-Finding and Policy Advisory Commission for the Protection of Overseas Filipinos (also known as the Gancayco Commission). Its chief tasks were to inquire into the circumstances surrounding Contemplacion’s fate and also to investigate the plight of “other overseas workers similarly situated; and then to recommend safety nets and protective measures, policies, guidelines, legislative proposals” (Beltran and Rodriguez 70) to safeguard the welfare of all OFWs and Filipino nationals abroad. Its main recommendation was urgent: the government should immediately terminate the migration of OFWs to countries infamous for brutal treatment of domestics (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar) and women entertainers (Japan, Greece, Cyprus). It urged the gradual phase-out of the deployment of women as domestics.

Soon after Contemplacion was hanged, another OFW hit the news: On June 6, Sarah Balabagan, a 16-year old domestic in the UAE, was imprisoned for killing her employer who raped her. Public outrage, anger, and pity exploded. Demands were made that something should be done to save a poor child from death by musketry. Part of the 21,000 Filipina domestics in the UAE, Balabagan was a mere child driven by poverty to seek a job abroad; and that her imprisonment alone violated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Despite the UAE court’s admission that she was raped, Balabagan’s appeal resulted in her imprisonment for one year, 100 lashes, and blood money for the family of the rapist. The Court deemed Balabagan guilty of “abusing her right to self-defense,” the journalist Torrevillas recounts, because

she exceeded the limit when she stabbed her employer 34 times. The question is: how can a girl being raped observe the stabbing limit? . . . Sarah’s case demonstrates the helplessness of a Filipino woman litigant in a foreign country’s judicial court which has its own set of rulings. It is not easy accepting this difference. . . . Even Filipino Muslim lawyers who have studied the Shariah thoroughly questioned the way the wheels of justice turned against a girl child who was killed as she was defending her honor—an act that could probably have been condoned by the court had Sarah been an Emirate. (61–62)

While the government furnished lawyers, they were unable to modify the ver-

dict. A similar case comes to mind: Lorna Laroquel killed her abusive employer, a member of the Kuwaiti royal family, for which she was fined and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in Egypt beginning on Feb. 13, 1993. The London-based Anti-Slavery International was “horrified” by the UAE court verdict; its director said: “The very recruitment of a 15-year-old to be sent across the world to work violates international standards which prohibit slavery and trafficking” (qtd in Beltran and Rodriguez 65).

Balabagan’s case sparked a worldwide show of indignation by Filipinos and their allies. The UAE finally rescinded the death sentence due to fear of a walkout by approximately 75,000 OFWs which could have paralyzed the country. Organizations like GABRIELA Network USA, Kalayaan (in UK), INTERCEDE (in Canada), and others began to agitate and advocate for Filipina and other migrant workers in different countries. One example may be cited here: the project of the Campaign for Migrant Domestic Worker Rights (based in Washington DC) to monitor and end abuses of migrant domestic workers employed in the private homes of diplomats and officials of the World Bank, the IMF, the United Nations and other international agencies. This Campaign involved a coalition of lawyers, social service providers, and unions, as well as human rights, ethnic, and religious organizations—a model for future united-front mobilization of OFWs of which MI is a notable offspring.

The Contemplacion/Balabagan cases catalyzed a process of self-reflection and national criticism in the Philippines and among OFWs. Numerous civil-society associations sprang up or took on new life; eventually, they combined into two networks that cooperated in representing OFWs in the 1995 Fourth UN Global Conference on Women in Beijing, China: Women Overseas Workers NGO Network, and the Philippine Migrants’ Rights Watch. One of the priority positions on the agenda of the Philippine delegation is the demand that migrant women workers “should be protected from violence, discrimination, and exploitation, and their human rights should be respected,” urging governments to sign and ratify the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families” (Beltran and Rodriguez 116). The Philippine Migrants’ Rights Watch has proven vigilant in its critique of the neoliberal logic of the government’s Migrant Workers Act of 1995 which rationalized the LEP as one based on the worker-foreign employee contract instead of being an interstate transaction, thus ignoring the dire socioeconomic conditions (lack of jobs, social services, etc.) in the country and exonerating the parasitic recruiting agencies promoted and encouraged by the State.

The most active group in mobilizing OFWs is Migrante International (MI), an international alliance of Filipino migrant organizations around the world. Together with groups such as the International Migrants Alliance, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, IBON Foundation, BAYAN, and count-

less church-based groups, it challenged the intergovernment-directed 2008 Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) held in Manila, Philippines. The GFMD hyped migration as a tool of national development, whereas, in truth—MI countered—displaced peoples, migrants and refugees are all victims of exploitation and oppression by monopoly capitalism and its neoliberal strategy of privatization and deregulation. They are symptoms of persistent underdevelopment caused by transnational corporations maximizing profit from intensified exploitation of land, natural resources, and human capital in subordinated or neocolonized countries such as the Philippines.

During the 10th Sessions of the UN Committee on Migrant Workers in April 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland, MI publicized the Arroyo regime's violation of OFW rights and its non-compliance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers. Assisted by Migrante Europe, Grace Punongbayan's intervention highlighted the cases of an unjustly executed Filipina in Saudi Arabia, death-row inmates in Jeddah, runaway OFWs in the Middle East, consular neglect of OFWs in need of assistance, and numerous cases of forced slavery. In the past, MI has criticized the Philippine government's indifference to the plight of OFWs on death row (forty one, as of March 2009), in prison, or stranded. Bragas-Regalado, MI chairperson, protested the government's negligence: "In spite of an approximately \$8 billion OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) fund, a DFA budget for OFW repatriation and Arroyo's pronouncements about the repatriation of OFWs in 'trouble spots,' stranded Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon and elsewhere are largely ignored" (Makilan). One key complaint is that the OWWA fund, which has extorted P19 billion annually from OFWs who cannot leave without being certified by the government, has not spent a single cent for migrant welfare; instead, it has been illegally raided by the Executive Office with impunity.

In a forum on "Migrant Rights Protection, Not Labor Exportation," Gary Martinex, the current chair of MI, remarked on how the 1995 Act intended to prevent another *Contemplacion* in the future has produced its opposite: the increase of OFWs on death row in the Middle East and elsewhere, and 29 "mysterious" cases of slain OFWs. He protested the systematic exaction of massive amounts of fees from OFWs (each OFW pays around P17,665), totaling P53 million every day, P19 billion annually. With the daily remittances of \$30 million, the government collects \$2 billion from documentary stamps alone. Despite these huge revenues, the Arroyo administration and its predecessors have not only abandoned distressed OFWs but have colluded with predatory recruiters and foreign governments in depriving OFWs of their hard-earned wages and punishing those who fled from brutal sexual and physical abuse. In effect, the government has flouted or mocked its own 1995 Act (RA 8042) which states that "The existence of the overseas employment pro-

gram rests solely on the assurance that the dignity and fundamental human rights and freedoms of the Filipino citizens shall not, at any time, be compromised or violated” (Olea 2).

Last June 7, celebrated as “Migrant’s Day,” a united front composed of MI together with dozens of NGOs and church-based groups organized rallies in Manila and other cities to inform the public of the plight of OFWs and protest government inefficiency and neglect. This front mobilized OFWs in the Middle East, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Italy, and all over Europe and North America. These actions mobilized Filipinos and the citizens of their host countries to agitate on behalf of not only migrants and refugees, but also of all Filipinos oppressed by the Arroyo regime. The rallies also denounced U.S. diplomatic and coercive interventions (covert action, low-intensity warfare) against the Filipino people’s struggle for self-determination, social justice and equality—an ongoing project substantively legitimized in the March 2007 verdict of the Permanent People’s Tribunal. This united-front praxis exemplifies a cumulative strategy of winning hegemony via the praxis of historic blocs.

Since my primary intent here is to offer theoretical propositions on the nature of the Filipino diasporic subject and its capacity for transformative agency, I will hazard to conclude with large generalizations and even some utopian foreshadowing. By virtue of its insertion into transitional conjunctures—from Spanish pre-industrial colonialism to U.S. monopoly-capitalist domination—the Filipino diasporic subject is essentially a historic bloc of diverse forces. Inscribed within the socio-historical context sketched broadly earlier, this bloc/subject is necessarily contradictory, a product of uneven and combined development. Its trajectory may be inferred from the layered dimension of its social rootedness in a semi-feudal, comprador-sponsored, bureaucratic formation and its exposure to the dictates of the neoliberal market. Such dictates, as we’ve noted earlier, ushered this neocolonized subject-bloc to situations of indentured servitude, serfhood, or virtual slavery (as witnessed by Balabagan’s ordeal and the fate of “entertainers” owned by criminal syndicates). One may speculate that this collective subject manifests a constructive negativity as it struggles to free itself from quasi-feudal bondage and from slave-like confinement. Given the uneven, disaggregated process of diasporic contracts suffered by OFWs—a removal first from a semi-feudal, tributary formation to a capitalist regime that commodifies their personhoods—the struggle of this bloc (OFWs and their allies) will have to undergo a popular-democratic phase: regaining migrant-workers’ liberties as persons with natural rights (as defined by the UN Charter, UN Convention on Migrants, etc.). After all, their cause is fundamental: to regain their right of livelihood expropriated by a minority privileged elite. But this stage coalesces with the struggle to assert the right to collective self-determination and representation, either as a national/popular bloc or political community defined by common principles

and goals. This assertion is the struggle for popular-democratic hegemony in the Philippines and wherever overseas Filipinos live.

Uneven and combined development distinguishes this struggle. Two contradictory impulses are unified in this project of countering imperial hegemony: the separatist one of national independence and the integrationist one of unity with universal secular progress/world socialist revolution. This process of engagement would be historically contingent on the fluctuating crisis of global capitalism. Essentially, Filipino dislocation on both levels—as a people colonized by US imperial power, and as a quasi-nation subordinated to global capital, in the process of uneven development—constitutes the horizon of its project of affirming its identity as a historic bloc of progressive forces. This bloc will play its role as a revolutionary protagonist in the political terrain of a united front against disciplinary neoliberalism in an era when US hegemony (political and military) is yielding to a multipolar global arrangement. Filipino nationalism thereby acquires critical universality as part of the global anti-capitalist trend.

Perhaps the Filipino people, claiming their sovereign right to a historically specific position in the civilizational arena, would then become equal, active participants in a worldwide coalition of forces against monopoly finance capital and its local agents, be they labor recruiters; neocolonized bureaucratic states; financial consortiums; or transnational institutions like the IMF/WB, WTO, or even a supra-national entity like the UN controlled by wealthy industrialized elites. Only in this process of active solidarity with other subordinated or excluded peoples will OFWs, given their creative integrity and commitment to self-determination, be able to transcend their diasporic fate in a truly borderless world without classes, races, or nationalities. We envisage germinating from the combined ideas and practices of OFW struggles an alternative, feasible world without the blight of class exploitation and gendered oppression.

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