

Kontra-Diskurso: Testimonial Narratives of Filipino Workers in a Foreign Company

Noel Christian A. Moratilla

St. Scholastica's College

ABSTRACT

As a genre, *testimonios* or testimonial narratives are not just transgressive of canonical literary aesthetics; they also serve as a tool for otherwise marginalized groups to expose, denounce, and negotiate their experiences of abjection and subordination. These narratives may constitute a counter-hegemonic project, if not an oppositional response, at least, to structures and relations sustained (often brutally) by the apparatus of state and capital. In this exploratory paper, I read the letters of abused workers as counternarratives that rub against mainstream discourse. In particular, I am using as primary materials the letters written by the Filipino workers of a foreign company which has been recognized and endorsed by state officials for its “contribution” to investment and job generation. Occluded, however, are the stories of abuse, exploitation, and repression among the workers, some of whom have met violent deaths in the workplace. These “little stories” become counternarratives vis-à-vis the positive, celebratory depiction of the company in official discourse, which bleaches the company of allegations concerning its anti-labor practices. The discussion revolves around how the letters as *testimonios* and as counternarratives exemplify discourses of resistance and solidarity, foregrounding the workers’ denunciation of the abuses committed by and within the company, while also highlighting the workers’ collective responses to these abuses.

Keywords: Testimonio, counternarratives, non-canonical literature, solidarity, resistance

INTRODUCTION: TESTIMONIOS AS COUNTERNARRATIVES

When told by the member of a traditionally marginalized group, a narrative assumes communal usage—or what one scholar calls an “absent polyphony of voices” (Beverly 75)—and becomes a praxis-oriented strategy for the marginalized to make known their experiences of exploitation and oppression. Such narrative interpellates the reader and enjoins him/her to take action, however limited, through a sense of

empathetic identification with the narrator. The testimonial narrative, or *testimonio* as it is called in Latin America, is one such narrative and it is now being recognized as a pedagogical tool of resistance against hegemonic institutions and discourses.

According to Odine de Guzman, testimonios may be oral histories, diaries, letters, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts (601). Testimonios share certain elements with autobiographical writing, but unlike the traditional autobiography which concerns itself mostly with personal accomplishments, the testimonio is written by someone from a marginalized sector of society (e.g., workers, peasants, women, LGBTs, homeless people). Given this seemingly egalitarian character, Beverly considers the testimonio the “popular-democratic” simulacrum of the epic narrative (33). Testimonial literature goes beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion that characterizes post/modern literary theories as it is not only “reading against the grain,” as it were, but “reading against literature itself.”

Testimonial writing likewise counters the traditional concept of history as a linear (itself ideologically tainted) narrative dealing with “big” events and “big” personages. History, in the context of testimonial literature, is reconfigured into a collage of individualized and collective representations of events, and which, therefore, do not have pretensions to objectivity and faithfulness to the “truth.” The social memories of a subaltern group are grafted onto the *testimonialista*’s (the narrator in a testimonio) retelling of his/her own experiences in order to expose, interrogate, and negotiate oppressive and repressive conditions that create and perpetuate subalternity. Therefore, neither truth value nor literary value should be the primary basis for judging the testimonio. Instead, it should be viewed as constitutive of the few strategies for subaltern groups to make themselves visible, an attempt at democratizing the discursive field. In the words of Henry Giroux, it is “blasting history open, rupturing its silences, highlighting its detours, acknowledging the events of its transmission” (“Cultural Studies” 68). Testimonial narratives magnify the specificity of otherness, blurring the epistemological and discursive barriers that serve the dominant and institutionalized politics of representation. Citing Jacques Ranciere, Rene Galindo asserts along this line that “political subjectivity produces a collectivity by making visible the invisibility of a people who operate in a liminal space of non-recognition” (382). The testimonio becomes a strategy to bring to the attention of a wider public the plight and struggles of these “invisible people” and, with a sense of urgency in most cases, demand assistance and intervention. Testimonios offer, if not themselves become, interstitial sites of alternative logics and resistance against the “mainstream” realities of social exclusion and asymmetrical relations of power, which cannot be “adequately expressed in the dominant forms of historical, ethnographic, or literary representation” (Beverly 549).

Memory is re/inscribed in every testimonio. However, it is a kind of memory that is not essentializing, not monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonous, and goes against sanctified and dominant truth claims that are sustained through hegemonic institutions and discourse formations. Memory has no sense of homogeneity because it is “criss-crossed by tensions and conflict manifested in what is remembered and what is forgotten” (Schild 234). Estelle Barrett also describes memory as a

receptacle (for the). . . accumulation of fragmentary knowledge that transgresses the law of the place by transferring what is remembered to the place or space of production. It is also a traversal of the different temporalities of the act of narration, its utterances and that of the speaker/listener’s experiences The insinuation of affect through memory intensifies processes of dissolution and realignment. (122)

It should be emphasized that the testimonio does not share the outright rejection of the “reality” of the past, which characterizes some strands of postmodernist or poststructuralist theorizing. To use the words of Calvin Schrag, the past in the context of testimonial writings, is reinvented into a “communicative praxis . . . imbued with an unavoidable polysemy and metaphoricity . . . a disclosure of patterns of sedimented perspectives and open horizons” (70).

This particular concern with memory and the past complicates and ambiguates attempts to categorize testimonial narratives as a genre. Hutchinson asserts that the testimonio should not be categorized on the basis of “esoteric, circular arrangements about taxonomical particulars,” as it is naturally “a protean and demotic form not yet subject to legislation by a normative literary establishment (and) any attempt to specify a generic definition for it . . . is at best provisional, and at most repressive” (4). The testimonio should instead be considered as a “mode of consciousness” in response to lived experiences of exclusion and disenfranchisement (Hutchinson 4). But I also hasten to add that testimonial narratives constitute a praxis-oriented discursive tactic that is anchored on the possibility of emancipation and transformation, laying stress on the “awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday foundations, and in so doing it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of the social processes” (Lather 52). In other words, in contrast to some strands of post-Marxist theorizing that seem to undermine agency, what can be recuperated in the writing—and the reading—of testimonial narratives is the role of agency in forging a language not just of critique and denunciation, but also of hope, possibility, and transformation (Giroux, Introduction xxvi). In rewriting/retelling experiences of abjection, a new subjectivity is said to be constructed, as the very act of writing on the part of the subaltern recreates them into “something else.” According to Pramod

Nayar, “This shift takes them outside and beyond the identity of victim into a self-conscious but other-conscious subject who, in the act of narrating her/his own story and also that of others constructs a whole new subjectivity” (1). The testimonio may be invoked as a fleshing out of what May and Powell call the Foucauldian “reversibility of discourses through resistance” wherein the “subjects of power can also be ‘agents’ who can strategically mobilize disjunctures in discourses . . . and open up the world of possibility in a world that seeks order through discipline and surveillance” (137). Testimonial writings and life histories as narrated by the marginalized affirm their ability to speak, a “motion of sociological imagination,” to borrow the words of C. Wright Mills, which should “enable its possessor to understand the historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (qtd. in Alleyne 12). Such writings articulate more than a symbolic response to the inherent complications of modernity, particularly the insulation of the individual in the midst of “impersonal processes and organizations” (Alleyne 12). Life histories implicate the “imaginative standpoint that will draw connections between the personal life/narrative on the one hand, and the social structures and historical processes on the other” (Alleyne 13).

Within this context, testimonial narratives assume the character of counternarratives since they challenge and interrogate “official” and “hegemonic” stories aimed at controlling public consciousness by propagating “a set of common cultural ideals” and bleach the institutions of colonialism/patriarchy/capitalism of their dark legacies (Giroux et al. 2). These counternarratives are “little stories of individuals and groups whose knowledges and histories have been marginalized, subjugated and forgotten in the telling of official narratives” (Giroux et al. 2). Such narratives broaden the range of texts that constitute the politics of representation—a universe of “different ethical, political, and aesthetic perspectives which are based on incommensurable premises—a heterogeneity of different moral language games” (Giroux et al. 3).

As intimated, these narratives exemplify one of the few pedagogical tools for the marginalized to make known their individual and shared experiences of subalternity. By pedagogy, I am referring to how the cultural sphere (and not just what happens inside the classroom) plays an important role in the teaching-learning process. Testimonios may pave the way for what Peter McLaren calls the “pedagogy of experience,” one that gives emphasis to “the link between the experience and the issue of language and representation” (42). Undermining the seemingly unproblematic character of traditional education, testimonios accentuate “affective struggles” that “cannot be conceptualized within the terms of theories of resistance, for their oppositional quality is constituted not in negatives but by . . . an

empowerment which energizes, and connects specific social movements, practices, and subject positions” (Grossberg qtd. in McLaren 45-46).

THE COMPANY AND ITS WORKERS

In the Philippines, the narratives of otherwise peripheralized groups may also be used as a way to deconstruct the dominant claims of security and progress in the shadow of capital by foregrounding the experiences of abuse and exploitation, such as those of the workers in a foreign company in the Philippines. For this article, I am using as materials the letters written by Filipino workers in a foreign company in the Philippines.

For obvious reasons, primarily the need to protect those concerned from further harassment, legal or otherwise, I am withholding the name of the company and the names of the Filipino workers, as well as the web sources from which I drew the information pertaining to the context. Suffice it to say for now that the company in question is engaged in shipbuilding and ship repair, and is considered as one of the biggest private employers in the country. According to web sources, it had an initial investment of more than half a billion dollars and, until 2011, had employed around 20,000 Filipino workers. For years, however, concerns have been raised with respect to its allegedly unfair labor practice, including “questionable” safety conditions, the Filipino workers’ maltreatment by their foreign superiors, lack of sanitation especially in the food served, and the rising cases of illegal dismissal. Most flagrant among these are stories that revolve around the inhumane treatment that the Filipino workers allegedly suffer in the hands of their foreign bosses.

Subjected to harsh coercive and disciplinary treatment, the Filipino workers are reduced to “docile bodies,” to borrow from Michel Foucault, with their operations and actions strictly circumscribed and controlled. The workers are believed to suffer from oppression, harassment, and even confinement, enough to shatter the celebratory depiction of the company in particular and of the capitalist system in general, through the mainstream, legitimating/legitimate logic of the state. The disclosures of the workers’ lived experiences constitute stories of despair, suffering, and survival that run athwart suppositions about the well-trumpeted legacies of progress, industrialization, and the rule of capital. To confound it all, aside from the export of human resources, the state has relied heavily on the influx of foreign investors to address the perennial shortage of employment opportunities, enjoining the locals to readily fill the job vacancies. What the state and its apparati have glossed over and promoted, either directly or indirectly, are the complications that inevitably rise from these arrangements, which make the local workers susceptible to various forms of abuse.

To make matters worse, the incumbent president and his immediate predecessor, often depicted in mainstream media (especially those sympathetic to the incumbent) as opposite ends of the pole (i.e., good and evil, honest and corrupt, “straight path” and “crooked path”, respectively) share a common position as regards the foreign company in question through their complimentary pronouncements. Both presidents have expressed nothing but words of gratitude for the foreign company.

At the risk of being repetitious, these gestures only highlight further the company’s rather privileged position as a generator of jobs and revenues, as both presidents have apparently dismissed the “little stories” of exploitation involving hundreds of Filipino workers. Except for the relatively little space given to them in some of the major broadsheets about a year ago, these little stories are largely ignored by mainstream media and academia. But these stories constitute counter-articulations vis-à-vis the hegemonic assumptions about history, democracy, and society, including of course the presuppositions about the benefits of foreign investment to the country.

For this exploratory paper, I was able to gather around twenty (20) letters written by the Filipino workers themselves in which they recount their experiences of abuse and harassment in the hands of both their foreign and Filipino superiors. I was furnished with these narratives by a newly-established non-government organization (NGO) that documents the oppression of the Filipinos working in the said company, and has filed legal charges against those concerned despite the influence wielded by the company. For the paper, I deliberately left out the affidavits (mostly computer-encoded and written in English) because of possible questions as regards mediation, particularly the probable interference of a lawyer or legal counsel in the production of the documents.

My analysis is also informed by Henry Giroux’s concept of “public time,” which, unlike many strands of post-Marxist theorizing that undermine the significance of agency and social justice, underscores the role of educators, cultural workers, and others in strengthening public spaces and guarding against various forms of oppression. Giroux maintains:

Rather than encouraging a passive attitude towards power, the idea of public time demands forms of political agency based on a passion for self-governing, actions informed by critical judgment, and a commitment to linking social responsibility and social transformation. Public time legitimates those pedagogical practices that form the basis for a culture of questioning, one that provides the knowledge, skills, and social practices that encourage an opportunity for resistance and a proliferation of discourse. (*The Abandoned Generation* 9)

Public time, in other words, is an idea that acknowledges a politics of hope and possibility in the face of oppression and tyranny while also recognizing the multiplicity of logics and discourses: “Public time provides a conception of democracy that is never complete and determinate but constantly open to different understandings of the contingency of decisions, mechanisms of exclusions, and operations of power” (Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation* 9).

Implicated, therefore, in my reading of the letters is the processual merging of critique and possibility, a discourse of resistance and opposition which ties up the politics of denunciation with the politics of hope and affirmation.

Primarily, the paper revolves around the following questions: What concerns of the Filipino workers are foregrounded in the narratives? As counternarratives, how do these “little stories” illustrate opposition, resistance, and solidarity? How do these narratives instantiate Henry Giroux’s idea of public time which draws the connections between the need to interrogate dominant institutions and the discursive formations they legitimate on the one hand, and the demand for social justice and transformation on the other?

ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES

The Filipinos working in the company, like numerous others, are driven by financial inadequacy to seek employment far from home and inevitably find themselves on the receiving end of abuse, coercion, and harassment in the hands of their foreign bosses and/or their local sycophants. Given the scarcity of employment opportunities, with around 11 million jobless Filipinos according to recent surveys, many Filipinos are hesitant to leave their jobs and instead choose to endure different forms of abuse and exploitation (“2013 Philippine unemployment rate rises”).

A common thread that runs through many of the letters is the denunciation of a supposed “refresher” course that several workers were required to undergo and complete. Initially, the workers had been informed that the refresher sessions were meant to enhance their skills. Contrary to expectations, what happened was a “de-skilling” on the part of the workers, as they were required to carry out menial tasks, including cleaning the garbage in the area where the “refresher” sessions were held. A trained welder narrates his, as well as other workers’, subjection to a regimented, rather militaristic process:

May schedule kami ng pagpunta sa yarda upang maglinis ng mga . . . basura na hindi naman dapat na trabahuhin. . . . Kami ay pinaglalakad nang nakapila simula main gate hanggang sa destination namin. Pinapaikot sa amin (ang lugar) nang naglalakad

at nagpupulot ng basura. . . . At hanggang sa pag-uwi ay lakad pa rin umulan man o umaraw. . . . Pinagbubungkal po (kami) ng lupa, pinaglilinis ng mga kanal, at kung anu-ano pa na wala namang kaugnayan sa pinirmahan kong kontrata at trabaho. G.R.

We have schedules for going to the yard to clean up the trash, which we are not supposed to do. We are forced to walk from the main gate all the way to our destination. We are compelled to walk around the area to pick up the garbage. We would again walk going home, regardless of the weather. We would dig, we would clean the drainages, we would perform jobs that really have nothing to do with the jobs that we had applied for.¹

Another worker reveals:

Nahihirapan na po ako sa ginagawa sa aming mga [nagre-refresh]. Ako ay nakatira sa —s. Malayo po ito kaya talo ako sa pamasaha at kailangang magising ng 4:30 ng umaga para maghanda sa pagpasok. Kung sa jobsite naman po kami magtatrabaho ay hirap naman sa trabaho dahil puro basura ang pinalilinis nila sa amin. Sobra na po ang ginagawa nila sa amin. Hirap na hirap na po ang aming mga kalooban. B.G.

I am really having a tough time with the kind of refresher training we are required to undergo. I live in —s which is far from my place of work. I have to spend much for transportation and I have to wake up as early as 4:30 in the morning. At the jobsite, the work is tiring because we are told to clean up the garbage. What they are doing to us is unbearable. We feel miserable.

But as expected, they had second thoughts about resigning from their jobs and leaving the company primarily because of the lack of job opportunities in the country. The following passages from two different letters share this apprehension. Because the very survival of their family depends considerably on their employment, the workers should not be faulted for staying on and enduring the training.

Kahit di ko alam kung bakit ako nag-refresh, dahil kailangan ko ng trabaho. . . and ito pa ako ngayon. Pero ang di ko matanggap, nag-training ako ng welder, at [ang “refresher” course] ay dapat pag-e-enhance sa pagwe-welding. Yung ginagawa ko ngayon ay wala man lamang natupad sa tunay na meaning ng refresh. — M.M.

Although I really don't know why I had to undergo the refresher training, I am still here because I need the job. What I cannot accept is that I was trained as

¹ All translations from hereon are provided by the author unless otherwise indicated.

a welder, and, therefore, it is my skills as a welder that should be enhanced through training. But what we're doing now is not the real meaning of refresher training.

*Tuloy pa rin ang pagpasok ko kahit hindi na makatao ang pagtrato sa amin sa loob.
... Hindi worker ang pagtrato sa amin kundi parang ... bilanggo.* G.R.

I still report for work despite the inhumane treatment. We are treated not as workers but as prisoners.

The foregoing passages show how the training that was supposed to enhance the workers' skills was reduced to a kind of disciplinary mechanism instead. Under the gaze of the company bosses, the workplace became a laboratory for panoptical tyranny and cruelty, and, concomitantly, to borrow from Foucault, the creation of docile bodies. Under the aegis of free-market fundamentalism, privatization, deregulation and contractualization of workers, such disciplinary practices become more and more common in the Philippines. As Giroux observes, "Through a range of visible and invisible mechanisms, an ever-expanding multitude of individuals and populations has been caught in a web of cruelty, dispossession, exclusion, and exploitation" (*Youth in Revolt* xxvii).

The workers were not just passively or mechanically following orders, nonetheless, and they knew that they were being subjected to illegal treatment. The following passage illustrates their keen awareness of the situation as shown in how the narrator teases out the meaning and purpose of the refresher course. Inscribed here is a sense of human agency, of "a mode of self-reflection and critical engagement rather than a surrender to a paralyzing and unchangeable fate" (Giroux, *Youth in Revolt* xix):

Ang tunay na kahulugan ng refresh ay itaas ulit ang kaalaman mo at para madagdagan at mapaangat pa ang iyong kaalaman, o iba pang training. M.M.

The true purpose of a refresher course is to enhance the knowledge and skills of workers.

And the same letter ends with the following rhetorical questions, again illustrating a sense of critical understanding and discernment that is informed by the actual experiences of abjection and injustice. The passage below, as well as the preceding ones, exemplifies how workers interrogate the logic of the "refresher" policy, not just because of the physically draining tasks assigned to them, but because the actual execution contradicts the original purpose of retraining:

Ito ba ang tunay na refresh—ang ipahiya? Ang tanggalan ng karapatan bilang isang worker? Ang pahirapang kumuha ng annual leave dahil kailangang may valid reason ka? Ano ba talaga ang refresh? M.M.

Is this the real meaning of the refresher course—to embarrass the workers? To violate their rights? To deprive them of the opportunity to file a leave of absence? What is the refresher course for?

Some letters assert that the so-called refresher course in question was nothing but a ruse, a mere pretext to force the workers to resign, to be stripped of their benefits, and, presumably, to be replaced with a new set of Filipino workers who would likely go through the same execrable, “de-humanizing” process of elimination:

Hindi ko malilimutan ang unang araw ko (sa refresher course) at ang araw na ito ang nagpaliit sa aking pagkatao. . . . Tinatakot na kaming lahat ni G— [Filipino] na ito na ang paraan upang kami ay matanggal sa trabaho. Lalo po akong nag-isip nang pumunta sa harapan si Mr. C— [isang foreigner] at sabihin sa aming lahat na: “You are here in the [refresher] course because we are forcing you to resign. So if I were you, you’d better go home.” . . . First time ko po makaranas na ganunin ng superior ko. At dun na po nag-umpisa ang mga pahirap sa amin. H.B.

I cannot forget the first day of the refresher course because on the same day, I felt so degraded. We were threatened by G— [a Filipino] that the refresher course was meant to kick us out of our jobs. This was somehow confirmed by Mr. C— [a foreigner] who told us, “You are here in the [refresher] course because we are forcing you to resign. So if I were you, you’d better go home.” It was my first time to be treated that way by a superior. And that was the start of our hardships.

Another trained welder who had qualified to be a deputy foreman was also perplexed when informed that he had to attend the refresher course. He could not defy the order, nonetheless, for fear of being terminated. On arriving at the gate of the area where the refresher classes were supposed to be held, he and the other workers immediately sensed that something was amiss. Immediately, the workers were subjected to outright abuse as if they were cattle to be led to the slaughterhouse:

Sa mismong gate pa lamang . . . ay pinapahiya na kami. Pinagsusuot kami ng vest na may nakatatak na “refresh.” Pinaglalakad kami nang halos 30 minuto hanggang sa lugar na aming pupuntahan. Sa tindi ng sikat ng araw, pinagpupulot kami ng mga basura, iba’t ibang klaseng basura. Pinaglilinis o pinagwawalis kami ng makakapal na alikabok. . . . Halos apat na buwan akong na-refresh at sa apat na buwan na yan ay ganito ang routine namin sa tuwing kami ay pinapupunta sa yarda. Pinagpupulot kami ng iba’t ibang klaseng basura, pinagbubunot ng damo sa bahay ng mga [dayuhan], pinagwawalis ng mga makakapal na alikabok na hindi angkop sa

aking skill bilang isang welder. At sadyang pinapahiya nila kami sa aming mga kapwa manggagawa para ako o kami ay mademoralisa [at] kusang-loob na mag-resign. Unidentified

Even while still at the gate . . . we were already humiliated. We were told to wear vests with the word “refresh” printed on them. We were required to walk for about 30 minutes until we reached our destination. Despite the intense heat of the sun, we cleaned up the garbage, different sorts of garbage. We had the refresher course for almost four months, and this was our routine whenever we went to the yard. We would pick up the trash and cut the grass at the houses of the foreigners. These are not part of my job as a welder. We were humiliated in the presence of fellow workers to demoralize us and compel us to resign.

There were also instances when the workers were browbeaten with trumped-up charges to silence them and eventually force them to leave the company for good. One letter reveals how the narrator, to his consternation, was dragged into a case of theft within the area, with the underage suspects insinuating that he was the mastermind. These incidents show that the company seems to be engaged in what Giroux has aptly called “a politics of disposability,” i.e., a politics that treats certain individuals and groups as “excess,” “waste,” and “expendable”—a practice that is unabashedly sanctioned and bolstered even by the state (Giroux, *Disposable Youth* 56).

Nang magkaroon ng nakawan sa labas ng training center, ang mga nahuling nagnakaw ng mga bakal ay mga bata na nasa edad katorse pababa. Laking gulat ko dahil isa ako sa itinuro ng mga bata na nag-utos daw sa kanila upang kunin ang nasabing bakal samantalang tulog ako nang oras na may nangyaring nakawan. Kaya nagkaroon ng imbestigasyon sa nasabing pangyayari, at pilit kaming pinaaamin . . . dahil sapat na daw ang statement ng mga bata para ako ay akusahan at makulong. Akin ding napag-alaman na kaya kami ang itinuro ng mga bata ay dahil tinuruan sila ni Mr. N.F. [Filipino] at pinangakuan na bibigyan sila ng pera pagkatapos ng investigation ayon na rin sa salaysay ng mga bata sa amin at ng kanilang ama. Unidentified

Some kids aged 14 and below were caught stealing some metal items from the training center. I was surprised when the kids claimed that I had ordered them to steal items from the center. I was actually asleep at the time that the incident supposedly happened. During the investigation, I was being forced . . . to confess to the crime. Someone claimed that the kids’ statement was enough to have me jailed. I later learned that the kids had actually been told by Mr. N.F. [a Filipino] to point at me as the mastermind in exchange for money. I learned about it from the kids and their father after the investigation.

The harassment and abuse of Filipino workers by their foreign bosses were, in many cases, not just verbal, but physical as well. One narrator relates how he was physically harmed by one of his foreign superiors when he asked for permission to file a leave of absence because of his child's health problems. In this instance, the logic of work and productivity overrides concern for the family.

May sakit ang aking anak at kailangan kong umuwi sa aking probinsya. Pinapirmahan ko po ito [leave form] sa aking [dayuhang] foreman. . . . Pero may kundisyon po siya. Bago niya pirmahan ang aking leave, kailangan ko daw pong pumasok ng Linggo. Sinabi ko na hindi ako makakapasok . . . dahil aabot sa walong oras ang biyahe pauwi pa lang. L.E.

My child was sick and I needed to go to the province. I asked my foreman [a foreigner] to sign my leave form. He said that he would sign it on the condition that I would come back the following Sunday. I told him that it was physically impossible since the trip would take around eight hours.

Instantiated in the succeeding event from the same narrative is the superior's abuse of authority, harassing the lowly Filipino worker both physically and emotionally. Notice also how the seemingly helpless worker was asking the burly foreigner not to hurt him, as if asking for dear life to be spared:

Bigla po siyang tumayo sa upuan at sinakal po niya ako. Sabi ko ay "Don't hurt me, sir. Terminate me but don't hurt me. My parents don't hurt me." Nang matapos po niya akong sakalin, kinuha niya po ang papel at isinampal sa mukha ko at hinamon niya ako ng suntukan sa labas. Kumuha po siya ng baseball bat at nagsuot ng helmet saka po siya lumabas [ng opisina]. . . . Pinilit niya po akong hilahin na naging dahilan ng pagkapunit ng aking damit at saka pagkasugat ng aking mga braso. L.E.

He stood up and put his hands around my neck. I said, "Don't hurt me, sir. Terminate me but don't hurt me. My parents don't hurt me." He then grabbed my leave form and slapped me with it. He also challenged me to fight him outside. He also grabbed a baseball bat, put a helmet on and stepped out of the office. He manhandled me, which caused a rip in my shirt and a wound on my arm.

When the same worker tried to seek redress for the injuries inflicted on him by the foreigner, he was told to go from one office to the next—the police station, the barangay hall, the labor office. Finally, he ended up in the Human Resource Department of the company where, to his discomfiture, he was made to affix his signature to a memorandum accusing him of abandoning work. The letter shows

that he remained adamant about seeking justice for himself, not minding the possible consequences of pitting oneself against an apparently influential corporate giant.

Umuwi na po ako ng bahay pagkatapos kong makuha yung xerox ng work abandonment na hindi alam kung ano ang gagawin dahil iniisip kong ako na ang nasaktan, ako pa ang nawalan ng trabaho. Kaya naghahanap ako ng mga taong makakatulong sa akin para mabigyang hustisya ang ginawa sa akin ng [dayuhan] at pagkakatanggal ko sa trabaho na alam kong kagagawan din ng [dayuhan]. . . . Ginawa ko ang salaysay na ito . . . upang humingi ng hustisya sa pananakit, panggigipit at ilegal na pagkakatanggal sa akin. L.E.

I went home after getting my photocopy of the document accusing me of work abandonment. I was confused and did not know what to do—I was the one who had been hurt but it was I who lost my job in the end. That's why I'm now looking for assistance. I demand justice for the harassment I suffered in the hands of the foreigner, and my expulsion from work. I wrote this narrative to ask for justice for my injury, harassment, and illegal termination.

Other cases of physical abuse put the workers in more life-threatening situations. One worker narrates how his foreign boss hurt him with a pencil grinder for reasons still unclear to him, again constitutive of the culture of violence and impunity in the workplace, with the foreign bosses occupying the position of advantage:

Noong June 8, 2009, 2:50 ng madaling araw habang ako ay nagtatrabaho, bigla niya [isang dayuhan] akong tinawag at paglapit ko bigla niya akong sinaksak ng pencil grinder. Susundan pa sana ito ng isa, buti na lang nakailag ako. Hindi lang isang beses [ang pananakit]. Noong una ay sinipa niya ako pero pinalampas ko lang. Pero nung pinangalawahan na niya, hindi na ako nag-atubiling ireklamo si M-. I.P.O.

On June 8, 2009, around 2:50 in the morning while I was working, he [a foreigner] called me. When I approached him, he hit me with a pencil grinder. He was about to hit me again, but I dodged the blow. It was not the only time that such an incident happened. He had kicked me before, but I did not complain. But when it happened again, I no longer hesitated to report Mr. M-.

After the incident, the same worker suffered from headaches presumably as a result of the physical harm inflicted on him by his boss:

Sanhi ng ginawang pananakit ni Mr. M— ay nakaramdam ako ng pananakit ng ulo at hilung-hilo ako at nilagnat din ako ng dalawang gabi [dahilan] upang ako ay magpamedico-legal. I.P.O.

Because of the physical harm inflicted by Mr. M—, I had headaches, dizziness, and a fever. This prompted me to undergo a medico-legal examination.

Their foreign bosses' proclivity for physical intimidation and abuse is writ large in another narrative, revealing that even a new recruit would not be exempted from harassment. Also shown here is the perpetrators' blatant disregard not just for human dignity and honor, but also for human life per se as the abuse endangered the very life of the victim. The harm resulted in internal injuries which had remained unchecked until the poor workers got the chance to go out of the compound. The narrator reveals:

Matindi ang dinanas kong hirap. Nariyan ang patakbuhan ka na may bitbit na bakal, ang murahin at hampasin ng kahoy sa ulo. Kahit may helmet ay dama ko ang lakas at pagkahilo. . . . Bago ako naging deputy ay hindi mabilang na batok, tadyak, mura at sigaw ang aking dinanas. At kahit na ako ay naging deputy ay ganoon pa rin. GJ.

I suffered intensely. There were instances when you would be ordered to run while carrying items made of steel. You would sometimes be scolded or be hit on the head with a piece of wood. And although I was wearing a helmet, I still felt sick and dizzy. Before I became a deputy foreman, I had to endure countless times being hit on the neck, kicked, cursed, and shouted at. Even when I was already a deputy, I still had to go through it all.

Despite his transfer to a higher position, he, like the others, was made to undergo the refresher training. With mounting apprehension, he complied with the order lest he be terminated:

Alam kong panibagong pahirap na naman ang aking dadanasin. Napakaraming bawal at may mga batas na dapat sundin. Naranasan kong maglinis ng banyo, ibilad sa araw, magtabas ng damo sa loob ng training center. GJ.

I knew that my suffering was going to continue. There were so many prohibitions, and there were so many rules that we had to follow. I experienced cleaning the restroom, working under the sun for hours, cutting the grass within the training center.

In one letter, a woman worker reports a case of sexual harassment in the hands of her foreign superior, but also worth noting in her narrative is her attempt to fight back, to resist the advances of her boss, notwithstanding the very possibility of losing her job and presumably her contribution to the family's upkeep:

While welding, I felt someone touch my butt. When I removed my welding mask, I saw Mr. M— standing in the back of [sic] me saying, “Why you’re not working?” I then reacted and said angrily, “You no good, sexual harassment.” After arguing for about 5 minutes, he left and later after [sic] he came back smiling and was nice to me suddenly. G.S.

Such displays of violence are by no means isolated cases within what Henry Giroux calls a “culture of cruelty” that is promoted, whether directly or indirectly, by what seems to be a privileging of free-market fundamentalism over civil liberties. Giroux claims that the “unchecked power of corporations do more to crush democracy than to uplift society as a whole,” and such a society has not only given up on its “sense of morality and responsibility” but has also taken leave of its claim to “any possibility of a democratic future” (*Youth in Revolt* 103).

Not all of the letters are written individually. Collective grievances find expression in a letter written and signed by almost 60 workers in which they reveal how at times they were deprived of meal allowances for absence or suspension. Written in English, the letter projects a sense of exigency, forged in the discourse of solidarity and collective affirmation. In form and in content, public time presents itself here as a collective voice against the violence that seems to saturate the rule of capital—an attempt to subsume individual struggles into a collective, critical engagement.

In our experiences . . . once we are absent for one day or are given a suspension, our allowance for our meal is not given. . . . It is not right for us [sic] not to be given such meal allowances by the management . . . This is a very big [sic] proof of the violation of our labor rights given to [sic] us by the labor laws. [It is] also a violation of our human rights in general.

The workers have also suffered undue confinement, recalling Foucault’s problematization of the control of space as “disciplinary technology” for controlling the body. This technique, according to Foucault, involves “a meticulous assumption of responsibility for the body and the time (of a person), a regulation of his movements and behaviors by a system of authority and knowledge; . . . an autonomous administration of this power that is isolated both from the social body and from the judicial power in the strict sense” (qtd. in Dreyfus & Rabinow 130).

Relegated to carceral conditions, the workers were prohibited from going outside the compound to buy anything, and anybody caught doing so ran the risk of getting a memo or a suspension order, or ultimately getting booted out of work. Through ingenuity, one worker was able to go out, but after the discovery of his “violation,”

severe punishment was given him. Notice the draconian response made by the company for this supposed infringement, which is emblematic, I submit, of the harsh measures imposed by and within the *dispositifs* of capital against those bold enough to transgress its mechanistic logic:

Dahil hindi ko na kayang tiisin ang sakit ng ngipin ko at lagnat, nakapagdesisyon akong gumawa ng sarili kong hakbang upang makalabas para magpacheck-up at makabili ng gamut [sic]. . . . Lyon lang ang naisip kong paraan dahil kahit anong pagmamakaawa ko na lumabas . . . ay bale wala lang, hindi nila pinakikinggan. Naisip ko pong ilagay ang pangalan ko sa ibabaw ng kasamahan kong . . . may aprubadong gate pass. . . . Nakalabas ako . . . at nakapagpacheck-up. Nakabili din ako ng gamut [sic]. . . . Doon ko nalaman pagbalik ko na baka daw i-terminate ako sa ginawa ko. G.R.

Because I could no longer bear my toothache and fever, I decided to do things on my own if only to have a check-up and buy medicine. It was the only way I could think of because no matter how seriously I begged to be allowed to go out, my superiors would not listen. I then decided to put my name over a colleague's approved gate pass. I was able to go out. I was able to have my check-up and buy medicine. When I returned, I was informed that I might be terminated for what I had done.

And the poor worker got terminated indeed. Under duress, he was told to affix his signature to his termination papers just a few days after the incident. The narrative ends with the worker's iteration of protest against a blatant violation of his rights: "Hindi dumaan sa due process ang pagtanggap sa akin. (My expulsion did not go through the due process)."

Interestingly, the workers suffered harassment and maltreatment not only from their foreign employees but also from the foreigners' local lackeys, such as their Filipino deputy foreman. Shown in the following passage is how a worker's seemingly innocuous joke elicited a violent response from a fellow Filipino in the workplace, which almost resulted in physical confrontation:

Kasalukuyan nag-uumpisa ang aming usapan tungkol sa trabaho nang bigkasin ni G— na ang basurang itinaon mo ay babalik din sa iyo. . . . Sumagot ako sa kanyang kung mukha akong basura, bakit mas guwapo ako sa kabayo? . . . Nang matapos ang pananghalian ay tinawag at bigla niya akong sinabihan at hinamon ng away. Hindi pa po nagtapos dun. Nang magsimula ulit ang lecture tungkol sa trabaho namin ay inulit niya ang paghahamon. Narinig po ng marami kong kasamahan. Sinabi niya na may oras raw ako sa kanya. B.J.

We were talking about work when G— said that the garbage we throw would come back to us. I told him that even if I looked like garbage, I still looked better than a horse. . . . After lunch, he called me and challenged me to a brawl. But it didn't end there. When the lecture resumed, he repeated the challenge. My co-workers heard it. He told me that I was in trouble.

Whether in the hands of the company's foreign bosses or in the hands of their local sycophants, these lived experiences of coercion and harassment paint a dreadful picture of the subjugation of labor by capitalist interests. In many cases, the rule of capital foments a culture of cruelty in/through which fundamental rights are transgressed with impunity. Under the rule of capital, time is ordered in such a way as to devote itself almost entirely to work and production, and any form of diversion is construed as remissness, defiance, or even insubordination for which severe punishment is meted out. Social theorist Brian Massumi cites the sinister process of "fluidification" to perpetuate the hegemony of capital: "The employed were more easily dismissed, retrained, or transferred; the un- and underemployed provided a pool of potential labor that could be dipped into as needed. Investments could more easily be shuffled from region to region or sector to sector" (Massumi 11). As testimonial narratives, the letters cited herein revolve around the notion of public time—one that does not only call attention to individual stories of victimization, but also assumes a critical stance vis-à-vis dominant social formations that make such experiences possible. Most importantly, by foregrounding shared responsibility and greater participation in the democratic process, public time is about imagining a better future characterized by employment opportunities free from the clutches of discrimination and exploitation.

CONCLUSION

I have presented letters written by Filipino workers in a foreign company as narratives foregrounding their lived experiences of oppression, as well as different forms of expressing dissent and resistance. The concerns of the workers are not simply private concerns; the critical reading of the letters as counternarratives suggests the imbrication of the private/personal and public/political spheres, especially because the letters reveal shared experiences of coercion, repression, and oppression. These narratives may even be allegorical in that they are emblematic of the complications that shape the dispositifs of capital, particularly the heightening of social inequalities which run athwart triumphalist claims about democratization in the shadow of modernity. The narratives in this paper represent one of the remaining strategies for the workers to make known those experiences especially in the face of the considerable influence (political and economic) wielded by a

more powerful adversary. It is my hope that other attempts can be undertaken to compile more workers' stories in other settings to accentuate further the contradictions and material relations that characterize the rule of capital and the asymmetrical arrangements that it promotes and sustains. Such endeavors, as pointed out earlier, should be treated as a praxis-oriented strategy to surface traditionally marginalized voices and, in the words of Foucault, insurrect subjugated knowledges that will challenge the dominant, exclusive knowledge of the status quo. Worth quoting, in this regard, are the insights of Calvin O. Schrag:

There is an ongoing process of constitution stitched into the praxis of shared projects and joint endeavors that guide the reflections of investigators and interpreters. This constitution of, by, and for praxis proceeds not via the legislation of a "mental act" representing mental contents, but rather by way of a communal and institutional reflection bearing the inscriptions of habits, skills, social practices which display their own insights and disclosures. (137)

However, critical reflections that simply unmask capital and reveal its excesses and defects may not suffice. This kind of discourse that merely critiques the workings of power and domination, according to Henry Giroux, is characteristic of what he calls the politics of despair. It is despair that permeates, quite ironically, both vulgar Marxism and strands of post-Marxist theorizing, which undermine individual and social agency, and the possibility of social transformation. This critical sensibility, embedded in an awareness of the realities of injustice and inequality, should be processually fused with the politics of hope. In other words, the (counter)narratives of marginality/subalternity, as exemplified by the letters of the workers, should not just highlight how we are always "fucked over" but, more importantly, should foreground projects that are radical, transformative, liberating, and even utopic.

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Noel Christian A. Moratilla <nomorat@yahoo.com> is currently on the faculty of St. Scholastica's College where he has handled courses in literature and communication. His current research interests include critical pedagogy, cultural studies and non-canonical/ resistance literature, and has presented papers on these areas in national and international conferences. Some of these papers have appeared in academic journals. At present, he is also engaged in research on the history of the teachers' movement while pursuing a PhD in Philippine Studies at UP Diliman where he also earned his MA in Language Education.