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The Migrant Worker as Disposable Body: Testimonial Narratives from a Nongovernment Organization

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ABSTRACT

Lived experiences of social marginality necessitate tactics that engage varied forms of exploitation, discrimination, and abuse. These include writing testimonial narratives, which Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) use to foreground their many-layered subalternity. Through labor export OFWs have become vulnerable to different kinds of oppression, including psychological trauma. This paper examines letters written by OFWs that have been culled from the archives of Kanlungan Foundation, a non-government organization concerned with the welfare of migrant workers. It analyzes the letters according to a two-pronged concept of resistance—one that fuses the discourse of critique with that of affirmation and hope. More specifically, this paper shows how the letters narrativize OFW experiences of victimization, and how such experiences dialectically create spaces for possible emancipation and fuel the search for collective justice.

Keywords: Testimonial narratives, testimonio, OFW, resistance

INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The positivist insistence on objectivity in research has been seriously challenged by (post)modern strategies that instead problematize "objective" data as social constructions whose meanings vary. When using narratives for research, one should bear in mind that "we are never dispassionate observers of behavior but are always heavily implicated in the construction of the narratives . . . that provide insight to the social reality that we inhabit" (Mumby 4). Narratives rescript the past, "making sense of the things that happened in light of subsequent events"— the "process of

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re-interpretation of events . . . as different parts of our pasts reveal themselves to hold increased importance, or to be void of meaning" (Andrews 95). In other words, a narrative should not be treated as mere textual reporting, but "rather as part of a complex and shifting terrain of meaning that makes up the social world" (Mumby 3).

The narrativization of shared experiences of abjection is communal. Disenfranchised and marginalized groups find in storytelling a critical tactic by which they can make their experiences of exploitation and oppression known. Such a narrativization encourages readers to take action through identification with the oppressed. One discourse that calls public attention to such experiences is the *testimonio* or the testimonial narrative. Originating in Latin America, the testimonio is increasingly recognized as a pedagogical and political tool of resistance against hegemonic discourses and institutions.

According to Giroux, testimony, which means "listening to the stories of others as part of a broader responsibility to engage the [present as an ethical response to the narratives of the past" (*Fugitive Cultures* 9), lies at the heart of cultural pedagogy. While society, traditionally and largely a stable totality, is called into question, testimonial narratives nevertheless allow people to create links with each other through empathy and collective ethos. In situations where "the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a society" (Mumby 5), the social can also exist to construct that impossible object. The contested character of society, together with the instability of discourse, (re)creates testimonial narratives to reveal these unsettling and unsettled tensions, while forging bonds based on collective experiences of despair, struggle, and hope. Ehrenhaus's observations are instructive:

> Voices of discourse compete, intersect, and contextualize each other. Authority no longer resides in individual leadership, but in the dominance of a particular symbolic, social formation that enables members of the interpretive community to create coherence from many voices. (80)

Unlike other genres, *testimonios* may take many forms—oral histories, diaries, letters, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts (De Guzman 601). There are at least two features that distinguish testimonio from other traditional literary categories: the purpose and the subject position of its author. As a genre, the testimonio is protean; it "moves between the private and the public, memory and history, the personal and political; between south and north, and different cultures; between an original context of performance and subsequent (re)performance" (Gready 138). To be

immersed in testimonios is to inhabit both the public and the private, "navigating by two sets of landmarks, trying to fathom two sets of codes, and two different, but interconnected cultures" (Feitlowitz 19).

Not everybody can write a testimonio; for it can only be produced from a certain subject position. Because it is written in the first person, the testimonio is often identified with the traditional autobiography. But while autobiographies are generally concerned with their writer's accomplishments and are largely individualistic, the testimonio is the "voice" of somebody from a traditionally marginalized group. As a genre, the testimonio goes against the grain of canonical literature and, by extension, of Western epistemology. In contrast with traditional literature, the production of testimonial writings is conditioned not by the problematic aesthetics of the canon but by the exigencies of their writers' social conditions. For De Guzman, testimonial literature is an example of "emergent literature," a term appropriated from Marxist scholar Raymond Williams's concept of "emergent culture." Emergent literature is a "non-traditional literature that uses the language of the common people, interrogates the feudal and patriarchal system of society, and takes as its form various modes such as radio, TV, and community theater" (De Guzman 605).

Because of the egalitarian character of testimonial literature, Beverly (33) calls it "the popular democratic" simulacrum of the "epic narrative." But unlike the epic narrative that glorifies heroic exploits, the testimonio surfaces the harsh realities of dispossession and disenfranchisement. It should be noted, therefore, that the testimonio goes beyond the modern or postmodern preoccupation with "reading literature against the grain" by "reading against literature" itself.

The emergence and eventual popularity of the testimonio in Latin America came on the heels of social upheavals, many of which were in response to shared experiences of colonialism, neocolonialism, and military rule. Ernesto "Che" Guevara's *Motorcycle Diaries*, a first-person account of his exposure to the harsh realities of life in Latin America, primarily poverty and exploitation, is considered a forerunner of the genre. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a windfall of testimonial literature, including those of Elvia Alvarado (1987); Rigoberta Menchu (1983); and Domitila Barrios de Chungara (1977).

Testimonial literature concerns itself less with the faithful and accurate narration of events than with foregrounding collective memories. Grafted onto the *testimonialista*'s story are the social memories and abject experiences of a

marginalized group which do not report what really happened but expose and interrogate the conditions of oppression. The testimonio therefore makes the invisible visible—an attempt, as it were, to democratize the discursive field. The testimonio may very well constitute a response to Giroux's radical call for "blasting history open, rupturing its silences, highlighting its detours, acknowledging the events of its transmission." In this case, the position of otherness is highlighted by blurring the discursive and epistemological barriers that serve the dominant and institutionalized politics of representation ("Is There a Place" 68). *Testimonios* operate on alternative logics and resistant knowledges against dominant epistemologies that gloss over the reality of assymetrical relations of power—material, discursive, or otherwise. The testimonio is not engaged in an outright rejection of the past as is the case in certain strands of poststructural or postmodern theorizing. In the testimonio, the past is reconfigured into a "communicative praxis . . . imbued with an unavoidable polysemy and metaphoricity . . . a disclosure of patterns of sedimented perspectives and open horizons" (Schrag 70). Because of their oppositional character, testimonial narratives may also well exemplify counter-narratives from "individuals and groups whose knowledges and histories have been marginalized, subjugated and forgotten in the telling of official narratives" (Peters and Lankshear 2).

The social memory embedded in testimonial writing is not essentializing or monolithic but polyphonous and heterogeneous. After all, memory has no sense of homogeneity as it is "criss-crossed by tensions and conflict manifested in what is remembered and what is forgotten" (Schild 234). Similarly, Barrett describes memory as "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).

In contrast to certain strands of post-Marxist theorizing that give more importance to the language of critique than to the language of possibility, testimonial writings help recuperate the role of agency forged in the discourse of hope. The very act of retelling one's experiences of abuse, for example, reshapes the identity of the victim—a "shift" that, according to Nayar, reconfigures the victim "into a self-conscious but also other-conscious subject who, in the act of narrating her/his own story and also that of others, constructs a whole new subjectivity" (1). This, of course, hews closely to the Foucauldian tactic of resistance that employs the "reversibility of discourses" in which "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" (May and Powell 137).

GLOBALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS: LETTERS FROM KANLUNGAN FOUNDATION

Driven by the desire to seek the proverbial greener pastures abroad, Filipino overseas workers try to find employment in an increasingly globalized world. Equipped with "accredited" skills, they foray into foreign territory not so much to fulfill personal ambitions as to support their families back home.

Fajutagana and Reyes of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) claim that in 2015 alone, an average of more than 6,000 Filipinos left the country every day to work abroad ("Flor Contemplacion"). Migration has not only created the much-lamented brain drain, which is the "large outflow of skilled persons . . . which can adversely impact growth and development" (Abella v). It has also exposed the country's proverbial "new heroes" to "various psychosocial costs in their workplaces" such as "exposure to serious hazards to health and life, including sexual harassment and exploitation, rape, and sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS" (Pernia 20).

In many instances, Filipinos return to the country in heart-rending, if not infuriating, conditions: maimed if not disabled, traumatized if not mentally deranged. The less fortunate ones come home in boxes, dying under suspicious circumstances. Add to this the feelings of alienation and despair as they negotiate their lives as exiles, uprooted from their homeland. In spite of these stories of trauma and abjection, however, migration statistics continues to grow exponentially, primarily because of the lack of any concrete and clear-cut policy on the part of government to address unemployment in the country. Instead, the government promotes the deployment of more and more workers to other lands, thus aggravating the concerns over human capital flight. Despite the unrelenting promotion of labor export to prop up an otherwise sagging economy, the state has generally been remiss in protecting the rights of Filipinos working abroad.

One should read testimonial narratives of OWFWs within political, economic, and social structures that prompt Filipinos to leave the country and make them susceptible to abuse. In this case, the body—that is, the stigmatized and violated body of the OFW—becomes subject to the process of "intextuation" (De Corteau 186) or the conversion of the body into a signifier of state control and law.

Because of the growing concern for the welfare of overseas Filipino workers, some nongovernment organizations (NGOs) seek to help uplift their lives. Established in 1989, Kanlungan entertains the complaints of OFWs, including those who have already returned to the Philippines and are seeking justice or remuneration. It gives free counseling and legal services to victims of abuse and their families. Of late, Kanlungan has also engaged in organizing communities to familiarize past, present, and future OFWs with their rights as workers and with the legal remedies available to them if such rights are violated. Kanlungan also coordinates with certain government agencies, as well as with legislators in both houses of Congress, to pass and implement laws in the interest of migrant workers. They also call for "the development of the local economy as an alternative to overseas employment" (Kanlungan). The organization gathers letters written by the OFWs themselves or their loved ones that relate experiences of abuse and trauma, and/or express requests for assistance.

This paper sifts through the individual and collective concerns of OFWs that are articulated in such letters. I am guided by a framework of resistance appropriated from critical pedagogy—one that fuses the "discourses of critique and of possibility" (Giroux 2004 36). This means that while the narratives denounce the problematic relations of power that are sanctioned by disciplinary mechanisms, they also create spaces for transformative and emancipatory possibilities. I also build on the letters as counternarratives that question assumptions about history and progress. Conflating the personal with the political, these narratives address the challenges posed by, among other issues, neoliberalism and labor migration, while offering a discursive, praxis-oriented strategy to resist the excesses of power. For one thing, the testimonial narratives concretize a discourse of empathic solidarity that renders public and collective what are otherwise personal or individual concerns.

I was able to gather around 20 letters of varying lengths from Kanlungan. To avoid legal complications, I am withholding the real names of authors, as well as the names of the countries where they worked. The analysis is divided according to thematic concerns. Part of the analysis dwells on the abuses—physical, psychological, sexual—that the OFWs experienced. I am likewise teasing out the theme of desperation and deception, which pertains to the actions that OFWs had to take in order to work abroad, such as dealing with unscrupulous recruitment agents. Another interesting theme tackles forms of intimidation and psychological trauma in the hands of their own families. Lastly, I discuss the theme of empathic solidarity

which, because of, or despite the OFW's experiences of abjection, configures transformative and emancipatory spaces in the search for collective justice.

ABUSES

Several letters contain distressful and unsettling accounts of the experiences of Filipino workers. They revolve around tropes of prison and confinement. Rendered immobile—manacled, tied, or locked up—several workers were abused by unscrupulous employers who saw them as virtual slaves to be cursed, slapped, jabbed, or kicked around as they pleased. To confound it all, some of them were denied any opportunity to communicate with the outside world, especially with their loved ones in the Philippines. The OFW's body is reconfigured into what Foucault calls the "docile body" that is subject to arbitrary modes of discipline and surveillance which allow for "the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which (assure) the constant subjection of its forces and (impose) upon them a relation of docility-utility" (137).

Ramona suffered considerable physical and psychological trauma. She, like countless others, did not think twice about leaving the Philippines in 2002 when a three-year contract to work abroad came. At first, her hosts showed kindness, but not long after, she was physically abused. In her letter, Ramona said, "Sinasampal po ako, pinupukpok po ako ng sangkalan sa ulo. Tinutusok po ako ng bread knife sa ulo." (I was often slapped, hit on the head with a chopping board. They would poke my head with a bread knife.) After several months, the abuse worsened, with Ramona sometimes finding herself in precarious, life-threatening situations: "Pagkaraan po ng ilang buwan hindi pa rin . . . nagbago kaya po naisipan kong mag run-away, nang pinukpok niya ako ng air freshener na naging dahilan ng pagputok ng noo ko." (After a few more months, the situation did not change so I decided to run away, especially after she/he smashed my head with a can of air freshener, which left a deep gash [literally, my forehead exploded].) Unfortunately, one of Ramona's attempts to escape resulted in a serious, near-fatal injury.

> Wala po akong ibang madaanan sa aking pagtakas kundi ang aming balkonahe, dahil lagi po niyang kinakandado ang pintuan sa tuwing siyay aalis, kaya naisipan kong magtali ng kumot sa aming balkonahe, sa takot ko po na madatnan ako ng amo ko . . . [D]ire-diretso po akong bumagsak at tumama po ang aking likod sa bakal—iyon po ang naging dahilan ng

> pagkakaopera ng aking likod. . . . Naoperahan po ako sa ospital ng mga madre noon din pong April 11, 2003. Tatlong linggo po ako sa ospital. Nag-stay po ako sa Philippine Embassy.
>
> (There was no way out except through the balcony because my master always locked the doors whenever he/she left. This, I thought of tying a blanket to the balcony, and because I was afraid my master would catch me. That was the reason why I had to undergo back surgery. I fell and my back struck a piece of metal. I was operated on in a hospital run by nuns on April 11, 2003. I spent three weeks in the hospital and stayed in the Philippine Embassy afterwards.)

But instead of expediting her return to the Philippines, the embassy, out of negligence, if not on purpose, allowed a Filipina representative to take Ramona to the host country's immigration office. There, Ramona was detained for about two weeks, during which she had a confrontation with her former employee.

Ramona was then told by immigration officials and agency personnel to return to work. But because of her back injury and worry that she might suffer more abuse, she declined. Nonetheless, Ramona was told to pay an amount that she could not afford: "Ang sabi po…bayaran ko raw po siya ng 1300 US dollar [.] Kung hindi ko raw po siya mababayaran, mag-stay daw po ako sa kulungan ng tatlong taon dahil daw po sa ginastos nila sa akin sa permit ko . . . at isa pa daw po yung insurance ko. (The agency told me to pay my employer 1300 US dollars. If I could not pay, I would stay in jail for three years, because of their expenses for my working permit and my insurance fees.) In mid-July 2003, Ramona was fortunately able to return to the Philippines, with nothing to bring home save for the clothes on her back and the painful memories of her troubled stay abroad: "[H]indi ko man lang naiuwi ang mga gamit ko at konting suweldo na naiwan ko sa aking amo." (I could not even bring home my things and the little salary I left with my employer.

Like Ramona, Marietta also had to put up with unimaginable forms of abuse. In many instances, she was deprived of food. Hungry, sick, despondent, and weighed down by her experience, she even contemplated taking her own life: "Nagdecide akong magpakamatay na dahil hindi ko na kaya ang pagmaltrato nila sa akin. Pero naisip ko na mali ang gagawin ko na mamatay sa hindi ko bansa." (I thought of taking my own life because I couldn't bear how they were maltreating me. But I realized that it would be wrong to die in another country.) She went to her agency to request that

she be assigned to another employer. Fortunately, the request was granted, and the new employer proved to be more considerate, in the beginning at least. In no time, Marietta suffered horrendous forms of physical and emotional abuse: "Lahat bawal pati tawag galing sa Pilipinas. At nagkaroon pa ng kasulatan—pinapirma ako ng madam ko na konting mali ko lang ipapakulong ako." (Everything was prohibited, including phone calls from the Philippines. My madam even put it in writing—she had me sign that she'd put in prison even for small mistakes.) When she mustered enough courage, Marietta again consulted the agency and was subsequently placed under another employer. Nonetheless, Marietta went through more harrowing experiences: "Wala silang modo, walang pagkain, [kulang sa] tulog, puro lang trabaho tapos manyakis pa ang amo kong lalaki. Lagi siyang nagbabalak na pasukin ako sa kuwarto pero di natutuloy kasi nararamdaman ko." (They didn't have manners. I was deprived of food and sleep. All I did was work. My male employer was also a sex maniac. He would always try to enter my room but he could not because I sensed [his intentions].

Even working with a fellow Filipina in the same household did not seem to be a guarantee against abuse and harassment. Such was the case of Eliza and Tanya. According to Eliza, she was told upon arriving in the host country that she would work as a janitress in his employer's saloon. To her dismay, she was instructed to perform work other than what she had been told, rising as early as four in the morning to do household chores before starting her work in a saloon at 10 am. Eliza wrote: "Tiniis ko po iyon. Akala ko walang magiging problema." (I endured it all. I thought there would be no problem.) But when Eliza asked for her compensation so she could send money to her loved ones in the Philippines, her request was bluntly dismissed: "[T]inanong po niya ako, 'Why do you need money?' Sinagot ko po siya, 'Of course, I need money for my family and my children. That's why I work here.' Tapos sinagot niya ako, 'Khalas.'" (My employer asked, "Why do you need money? I answered, 'Of course, I need money for my family and my children. That's why I work here.' Then, s/he blurted out, 'Enough!'") When Eliza conveyed her concern to the agency, the employer got more furious and refused to turn in Eliza and Tanya to the agency: "[A]yaw po kami isoli sa agency. Kinuha ng amo ko ang cp ko. Sinira po niya ito, pati yung SIM card na kinuha niya. Ayaw nila nang may komunikasyon kami sa pamilya (namin)." (My employer refused to return us to the agency. He/She destroyed my cellphone and even confiscated my SIM card. S/He did not want us to have any communications with our families.)

When they finally had the chance, Eliza and Tanya fled the house and went to their agency where, not long after, they would have a violent confrontation with their employer. In full view of the agency's personnel, Eliza and Tanya were slapped and kicked by their male employer and his hangers-on. According to Eliza, the husband of the recruitment agency's owner jumped into the fray and also accosted them while they were being forcefully taken into a vehicle: "Pinitsarahan ako [ng asawa ng amo ko], ambang susuntukin, kaya natakot ako. Kinaladkad kami pasakay sa sasakyan ng amo ko." (The husband of the owner collared me and threatened to punch me, so I was frighthened. He dragged us into our employer's car.)

Working overseas is, of course, analogous to gambling, for in spite of a contract, there is no guarantee that a Filipino worker will only perform the job stipulated therein or, for that matter, be spared from harm. In many cases, the contract is reduced to a mere piece of paper since the employer in the host country will not honor it anyway. Such was the case of Roselyn who left the Philippines for the Middle East in February 2008. Just a day after her arrival, she realized early on how back-breaking the work would be. She wrote: "Inabot ako ng 2 months sa employer ko, grabe ang trabaho, halos 3 hours lang ang tulog ko, at hindi rin nasunod ang sinabi ng agency na sahod." (I spent about two months with my employer. The job was really strenuous and I only got three hours of sleep. Also, I was not given the salary promised by the agency.) Soon, Roselyn would complain not just about the work load but also about the physical abuse inflicted by her hosts. When she had the chance, Roselyn decided to escape: "Tumakas ako sa employer ko dahil hirap na ako sa trabaho at pagmamaltrato. Sinasabunutan, tinatadyakan, nginungudngod ako, minumura at lagi akong sinisigawan." (I decided to run away from my employer because I was so overworked and maltreated. My employer yanked my hair, I was kicked, and dragged mouth first across a surface, cursed, and screamed at.) When she called up her agency, Roselyn's pleadings for assistance and for shelter were flatly turned down. She even found herself sleeping on the streets and getting hungry. It was not expressed in her brief letter how or when Roselyn was able to come back to the Philippines.

Raw narratives such as these, bereft of the the circumlocution and euphemism of academic language, are more poignant than Said's ruminations on exile, "(that) unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" ("Reflections on Exile" 173). Filipino workers abroad have to come to grips not only with feelings of estrangement but also with actual situations that imperil their lives.

There are also a disturbingly growing number of unfortunate OFWs who became victims of sexual abuse. One of them was June Rose. Although she had been promised that she would go to Japan, she wound up in a night club in another Asian country. The club was raided by authorities in the host country after a few days. But instead of being brought back to the Philippines, the women were made to languish in jail. June Rose wrote:

> Halos mawalan na kami ng pag-asa noon . . . dahil sa hirap na dinanas sa kulungan sa loob ng sampung araw. Hirap sa lahat ng bagay na 'di naming akalaing aming daranasin, tulad ng mahiga sa magaspang na semento na napakalamig, lamok at sikip ng walang kahit unan o kumot man lang, mga pagkaing di mo talaga masisikmurang kainin at ang kawalan ng tubig na maiinom man lamang. Sa loob ng sampung araw na iyon, di man lamang naming nakuhang magpalit ng kasuotan sapagkat di nila ito pinahihintulutan. (We almost ran out of hope because of the hardships we endured in prison for ten days. We found it all difficult to experience things we did not ever think we'd experience, such as lying down on rough and cold cement, the mosquitoes, the confined space without any pillow or blanket, the food that you could not even think of eating, and the lack of water to drink. For almost ten days, we could not even change clothes because they would not allow it.)

The feelings of profound frustration, hopelessness, and despair that June Rose and her fellow OFWs shared can be gleaned from the following passage: "Walang gabing lumipas na di kami umiyak at nanalangin na sana ay makabalik sa Pilipinas sapagkat ito na lamang ang kinukunan naming ng lakas ng loob ng mga panahong kami'y nasa ganoong kalagayan na walang ibang makita kundi ang sikat na lamang ng araw at dilim ng gabi na siya naming nagsisilbing orasan." (No evening passed when we would not cry and pray for a safe return to the Philippines because it was the only source of our strength in those conditions, where we had nothing to see except the sunlight and nightfall (literally, darkness of night), which served as our clock.)

There are letters revealing instances of sexual assault in the employer's house. Elizabeth left the Philippines in June 2009, hoping that she would be able to send money to her family in Nueva Ecija. Just a day after landing in the host country, she was told to perform menial tasks. She wrote, "One week na puro linis ang ginagawa ko." (For one week, I did nothing but clean.) And as if the grueling physical labor

were not traumatic enough, male employer attempted to rape her: "June 21 nang umalis ng bahay ang amo kong babae at time na yun din nang pinagtangkaan akong gahasain ng amo kong lalake. Takot at galit ang nararamdaman ko. Sabi ko sa sarili ko, "Diyos ko, tulungan mo po ako. Ibalik mo po ako sa pamilya ko." (My female employer left the house on June 21, and that was the time when my male employer attempted to rape me. I was overwhelmed with fear and anger. I prayed, "My God, help me. Let me go back to my family.)

The exercises of cruelty related above constitute what Zygmunt Bauman calls a "strategy of exclusion" that is meant to "vomit the stranger," in this case the poor OFW, who is banished or expelled "from the limits of the orderly world," if not destroyed physically (16). The abuse, torture, intimidation, and stigmatization experienced by workers reduce them into docile and disposable bodies, their human and labor rights flagrantly violated. Unfortunately, some narratives, like that of Ramona, suggest the failure of embassy officials to extend adequate assistance. A culture of cruelty is more pervasive than it seems. For as Arundhati Roy eloquently puts it:

> Today, it is not merely justice itself, but the idea of justice that is under attack. The assault on vulnerable, fragile sections of society is at once so complete, so cruel and so clever—all encompassing yet so specifically targeted, blatantly brutal and yet unbelievably insidious—that its sheer audacity has eroded our definition of justice. It has forced us to lower our sights, and curtail our expectations. (qtd. in Giroux, "Youth in Revolt" 77)

DESPERATION AND DECEPTION

Some of the narratives relate how the OFWs and/or their families resorted to desperate measures in order to work overseas, with no guarantee of safe employment. But such measures made them vulnerable to deceitful recruiters who put them in harm's way. What is lamentable is that some of these recruitment agents are also Filipinos who have no qualms about victimizing and placing their compatriots in life-threatening situations. The narrative of Sandy and her husband, a tricycle driver, illustrates the painful decisions that Filipinos have to make to secure a better future for their children, even if such decisions could compromise their liberty and well-being.

Though constantly hamstrung by financial difficulties, Sandy and her spouse made sure that their children could continue their schooling. She helped make ends meet by doing laundry for their neighbors and doing menial tasks in a slipper factory, but still the family often found themselves in dire straits. She wrote: "Madalas po kaming maputulan ng kuryente o di naman kaya lagi po kaming pinapalayas ng kahera ng aming bahay. Madalas po kaming delayed magbayad dahil inuutang lang po namin ang five-six na ibinabayad sa upa" (Our power supply was often disconnected, or our landlord always wanted to evict us. Our rent was often delayed because we relied on the 5-6 lending scheme [with high interest rates]).

Because of constant financial troubles, Sandy, like many others, contemplated on working overseas. She secured a passport, but found that getting employment proved more difficult than expected. She hopped from one POEA-accredited agency to another, but was turned off by placement fees. Not long after, a neighbor recommended a recruiter to Sandy who, out of desperation, promptly surrendered her passport to the recruiter. Sandy wrote: "Maganda po ang kanyang offer kaya di ako nagdalawang-isip na mag-apply noong araw din na iyon." (The offer was so good that I did not have second thoughts about applying on the same day.) Sandy also immediately sought medical clearance in order to complete her requirements: "Maghapon po ako doon [sa clinic], nangutang pa ako para sa pamasahe at pagkain." (I spent the whole day at the clinic. I borrowed money for transportation and food.)

Sandy was able to leave the Philippines in a few days, but her papers declared her a tourist, not a migrant worker. She tenaciously clung to her faith to allay her fears and the pain of leaving her children behind. She wrote: "Sabi ko na lang, "Diyos ko, huwag n'yo po ako pabayaan dahil di ko po alam kung tama o mali ang aking ginagawa. Ang importante po matupad nang konti ang pangarap ko sa mga anak ko . . . Iyak nang iyak ang mga anak ko nang umalis ako, lalo na po yung panganay ko, kaya napakabigat ng paa kong naglakad palabas ng bahay." (I prayed, "My God, please do not abandon me because I do not know if what I am doing is right or wrong. What is important is I do something for the future of my kids... My children were crying when I left, especially my eldest child. So my feet felt heavy as I walked out of the house.) Because of the irregularity of her status as a migrant, Sandy became vulnerable to abuse and was unable to seek assistance from authorities in the host country: "Doon na po nagsimula ang kalbaryo ko sa buhay." (That was when my sufferings [literally, calvary] began.)

Unscrupulous employment agents are also to blame for the fate of Priscila. Two recruiters who happened to be living in the same village visited Priscila in her

house and encouraged her to work overseas in exchange for PHP10,000. Because of her desire to work for her family, Priscila exhausted all means to have her migration papers processed: "Ang perang ibinigay ko [sa recruiters] ay halos inutang lang ng aking magulang at pati hanapbuhay namin na pagtitinda lamang ay nasira dahil sa paghahanap ng pera na ibibigay sa kanila." (My parents borrowed the money I gave to the recruiters, and even our business (a store) came to ruin just so that we could produce the money.) On reaching the host country, Priscila was told that she would be paid on a weekly basis. She wrote: "Pag nagwowork na daw kami sa pub at nagka-drinks every night sa customer, sa bawat isang linggo ay makukuha namin ang kita namin at hati daw kami ng agent namin…" (If we started working in the pub and had drinks with the customer every night, we woud get our share every week, and half of it would go to our agent…)

When she started working, however, Priscila realized that she had been deceived. Her wages, Priscilla was told, would be withheld until she had completely paid for the travel expenses, including the plane ticket, as well as for the board and lodging: "Dun namin nalaman na lahat ng gagawin namin ay bayad-utang lang lahat. Dun lang din namin nalaman na may bayad ang tirahan namin at pagkain—$100 per week. At ang agent ay pwersahan din ibinu-book ang babae sa customer para makabayad sa agent." (We found out that we worked only to pay our debts. We found out that we also had to pay for shelter and food—$100 per week. The agent was also forcing women to meet customers, so that he/she [the agent] could be paid.)

Priscila did not mince words about the responsibility of recruiters for the maltreatment she and the other Filipinos in the pub experienced: "Ang lahat ng sinabi ng recruiter ay puro kasinungalingan." (All the recruiter said were all lies.)

That not a few Filipinos fall prey to unscupulous recruitment and employment agents should be a cause of worry. First, such agents get paid for illicit transactions that oftentimes drain victims of their few assets. Many victims bite the bullet and resort to pawning or selling their property—houses, farm lands, etc.—just to realize their dream of going abroad. Second, recruiters put Filipino migrant workers in perilous situations. Without the proper documents, OFWs become susceptible to human trafficking in the host country; because of their irregular status, they find it difficult to look for immediate assistance. While the Philippines has satisfied the minimum requirements for addressing human trafficking, for which it was given a Tier 1 ranking in the 2016 and 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report, the problem has not been eliminated. According to the said document, "a significant number" of the 10 million Filipinos working overseas are prone to sex and labor trafficking, and

traffickers employ "unscrupulous recruitment practices that leave migrant workers vulnerable to trafficking, such as charging excessive fees and confiscating identity documents. Illicit recruiters use student, intern, and exchange program visas to circumvent the Philippine government and destination countries' regulatory frameworks for foreign workers" (US Department of State 2017). In a country that promotes overseas work given the inadequacy of local job opportunities, relatively low wages, and the dis-proportionately high cost of living, such abuses cannot be uncommon.

FAMILY AS AGENT OF TRAUMA

In some instances, workers cope not just with the possibility or the actuality of abuse in a foreign land; they also grapple with pressure from their own families who compel them to work overseas. Such was the dreadful experience of Marilyn who went to the Middle East. In June 2001, she met a certain Mina, a Filipina recruiter who promised to help her work abroad in exchange for PHP11,000. Eager to leave the Philippines, Marilyn borrowed money from friends and relatives. Upon payment, she was told that she could leave within three months. Unfortunately, Marilyn's domestic partner got her pregnant. But instead of showing pity and understanding, her family and her partner prodded her to sacrifice the baby in her womb. Marilyn wrote: "Pinapili ako [ng nanay ko] kung itutuloy ko ang pagbubuntis o aalis sa abroad. Kung tuloy ang pagbubuntis ko, [ang sabi ng boyfriend ko] magtiis daw ako na sa isang lingo, isang beses lang siya uuwi." (My mother made me choose between keeping the baby and going abroad. My boyfriend also told me that if I continued with my pregnancy, I had to endure the possibility that he would go home only once every week.) Eventually, Marilyn succumbed to the pressure. Even if it was against her conscience, she had an abortion: "Nagdecide ako na ipaabort kasi mahal ko ang kalive-in ko. Kaya din siguro ganon ang ginawa niya kasi nakita rin niya sa nanay ko kung paano ako pagsabihan na ilaglag ang binubuntis ko." (I decided to have the baby aborted because I loved my live-in partner. Maybe he did what he did because he also saw how my mother told me to have an abortion.)

Marilyn's induced abortion took its toll on her physical condition and she had to be hospitalized: "Na-confined ako sa . . . isang private hospital dahil sa public hospital sa Maynila walang tumatanggap sa akin. Kasi maraming tanong kung bakit ako nakunan? At bakit namaho? At ano ang ininom ko?" (I was confined in a private hospital because the public hospitals in Manila did not admit me. Because they had many

questions as to why I had a miscarriage, why did it [my vagina] smell, what [medicines] was I taking.) While family is generally cited as a source of comfort in trying moments, Marilyn's story paints a different picture. Her own family who caused her distress, illustrating the seemingly paradoxical character of family as a "phenomenon" that "grounds equally the meanings of love, safety, and euphoria" but also feelings of "alienation, violence, and despair" (Langellier and Peterson 55). Depicted here is the family as a contested sphere bearing the marks of social conflict.

The conflicted character of the family may also be inferred from the letter of Bela, who sought financial aid from Kanlungan. Bela's experience of working overseas had proven uneventful, but once home, her concerns were compounded by the treatment she received from her own family because of her lack of employment. She wrote: "Dumating na po kasi sa puntong dahil wala akong pera eh pinagtataguan na kami ng pagkain at anumang bagay na sila ang bumibili." (It came to a point when they would hide food from us and other items that they bought just because I did not have money.) As a result, Bela could not help expressing emotional pain for such treatment. In this case, according to Christopher Lasch, home serves not as the proverbial "haven in the heartless world" (qtd. in Langellier and Peterson 53), not as a refuge from the storm, but as an additional source of distress. Bela wrote: "Imbis na pamilya ang umaagapay dahil nadapa ako eh sila pa ang nagsusubsob sa pinagkadapaan ko." (Instead of supporting me because I came to misfortune (literally, I tripped), they themselves put me down further.)

EMPATHY AND SOLIDARITY

The OFWs' experiences of exploitation and oppression have brought about a sense of empathic solidarity among the victims and their loved ones. As the term itself suggests, empathic solidarity fuses two virtues: the understanding of another person's situation with collective consciousness and action (Heise 197). Some of the OFWs who were exploited and maltreated also found themselves witnessing their fellow OFWs' dehumanizing conditions and made modest efforts towards assisting them. As Margaret Randall (qtd. in Hutchinson) asserts, "The ideal witness is a 'communal being' who cannot set herself apart in terms of individuality" (42).

Sandy's stint as a domestic helper abroad proved physically and psychologically disastrous. Fortunately, she was able to come back home in November 2009. But her eagerness to return was prompted not by selfish motives but by a desire to help other Filipinos overseas. She expressed in her letter her fervent hope and resolve to help her compatriots in the country where she used to work, and even called for the prohibition of sending more Filipino workers to foreign countries if only to spare them from almost certain discrimination and abuse: "Ang layunin ko po sa aking pag-uwi ay magkaroon ng katarungan ang sinapit kong hirap at sinapit na hirap ng mga Pilipino [sa ibang bansa]... Sana maihinto ang pagpapadala ng Pilipina...dahil di nila alam ang sasapitin nila doon." (My goal in coming home is to obtain justice for the hardships that I and other Filipinos have gone through abroad. I hope that sending of Filipinas abroad would stop because they do not know what awaits them there.) Here, the trauma of victimization is fashioned into compassion and mercy, establishing real and ideal links between Sandy and other victims of trafficking. According to Veena Das,

> In the end one can say that while the ownership of one's pain rests only with oneself—so that no one speaking on behalf of the person in pain has a right to appropriate it for some other use (e.g. for knowledge,for justice, for creating a better society of the future)—there is a way, however, in which I may lend my body to register the pain of the other. The anthropological text may serve as a body of writing which lets the pain of the other happen to it. (572)

The narrative of June Rose's mother, Alicia, also attempts to articulate the anguish of her daughter and the other Filipinas working in a night club. Referring to other women's experiences illustrates a sense of collective identity and solidarity. Alicia wrote: "Sabi ng aking anak uuwi na raw sila dahil kundi raw sila uuwi ay mapapariwara sila. . . . Sila po doon ay umiiyak at nagmamakaawa na sa amin dahil hindi na raw nila kaya. Masasakit na raw ang kanilang katawan sa kalalamutak." (My daughter said that they wanted to go home or something unfortunate might happen to them. They were crying and begging for help because they could no longer take it all. They complained of body aches because of the rampant abuse.)

Another account—that of Lorna's—speaks volumes about the seriousness of human trafficking, whose unfortunate victims are mostly women. Lorna was taken to a night club upon her arrival in a neighboring country. There, she met fellow Filipinas

who had also been forced into sexual and physical slavery. Among those she encountered shortly after arriving was Gigi: "Nag-CR ako. Biglang pumasok si Gigi. Tinanong niya if taga-saan me doon sa Philippines. Doon na kami nag-usap tungkol sa trabaho. Iyak siya nang iyak. Sinabi niya lahat ng mga nangyari." (I went to the toilet. Gigi also went in. She asked me where I was from in the Philippines. There, we talked about work. She kept crying. She told me everything that had happened to her.) When police officers came one day to check on the club, the women were forced by bouncers into a cramped locker where they had the chance to exchange heart-rending stories about their horrendous experiences: "Nagkwentuhan... lahat ng mga babae doon tungkol sa mga experiences nila... Karamihan sa mga babae ay naranasan gahasain ni Boss Lim.... Sampung babae ang nagreklamo dahil sa masakit daw ang kanilang maselang parte (vagina). Iba sa kanila ay pinagda-drugs at pinaparusahan." (The women exchanged stories about their experiences. Many of the women were raped by Boss Lim. Ten of them complained of feeling pain in their sensitive parts. Some were being forced to take drugs and were punished.)

In her narrative, Lorna pays particular attention to the ordeal of a woman who seemed to have lost her mind because of the drugs that she was being forced to take. "Pilit kinakausap si P--- pero di pa rin nagsasalita. . . . Pina-take pala ng drugs si P---. Nag-ecstasy daw. Nong kinausap ni Boss na-overdrugs daw. Tapos pinagsusuntok sa bunganga. Nakita ko may dugong naglabasan sa bunganga niya." (They kept talking to P--- but she was not responding. They had been forcing her to take drugs. She had ecstasy. They said the boss talked to her. When Boss spoke to her, he said she had an overdose. Then she was hit repeatedly in the mouth. I saw blood gush out of her mouth.)

Lorna performs the dual role of victim and witness, creating a multilayering of the discourse, her narrative incorporating other women's stories of abuse and exclusion. Witnessing, in this regard, is no simple act because, as Cook notes, "to legitimize the testimony, and to insure its authenticity, the witness has to incorporate experience from the Other's experience. Witnesses thereby elect to become victims; this is an act of choice" (272).

A former domestic helper, Elizabeth, found herself physically abused by her hosts. Fortunately, she found the opportunity to escape and ended up staying at the Philippine Embassy. There she tried to come to grips with the memories of a depressing work experience and found her individual voice sublated into a collective discourse textured and nuanced by various forms of victimization and abuse.

> Puro Pilipino kasama ko. Ang saya kasi iba-ibang kuwento. Grabe! Ang daming experience ng nakaraan. May mga nagkasakit, muntik nang mabaliw, may mga bugbog-sarado, may mga kamag-anak na namatay sa (pangalan ng bansa) na di man lang nila nakita, may na-rape. Sobrang daming istorya ng buhay ang mga nalaman ko na akala ko sa TV lang mangyayari. True story pala . . . Marami kang matututunan sa mga tungkol sa buhay ng ibang tao, at ang pagiging OFW na malayo sa pamilya. Hirap at pagod. Dasal—iyan ang laging nasa isip ko. (I was with other Filipinos. It was comforting (literally, fun) to hear the different stories. *It was too much!* There were many past experiences shared. Some fell ill, some almost went crazy, some were badly beaten up, some did not even see relatives who died in [name of the country], some were raped. I learned so many life stories that I thought could only be seen on TV. But they were true stories! I learned from other people, from the experiences of being an OFW who is far from her family. It was all hard and exhausting. Prayer—this was what I always thought of.)

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I analyzed the letters of overseas Filipino workers as testimonios or testimonial narratives, which tell their experiences of subalternity and victimization. I discussed these letters according to thematic concerns. As testimonios, the letters constituted a counterarticulation, where one can hear the voice of affliction lamenting, "All is not well, all is not well," vis-á-vis the hegemonic view of labor export as a welcome consequence of an increasingly globalized world. In a country where self-sufficiency does not seem to be a priority, the role of migrant workers in propping up a generally languid economy cannot be overemphasized. Total OFW remittance reached 26.9 billion dollars in 2016 alone (De Vera). But the injustices these workers experience here and overseas should also be documented, made public, and adequately dealt with.

Notwithstanding the rising cases of exploitation against Filipino migrant workers, many of which are actually unreported and unsolved, Filipinos still seek work overseas. At present, there are approximately ten million Filipinos working abroad, or roughly ten percent of the country's population of one hundred million. This phenomenon of massive migration, has been called a diaspora, "a transnational network of places populated by dispersed political subjects that are connected by

ties of co-responsibility across boundaries of nations" (Milosevic et al. 1253), Filipino workers find themselves uprooted and dislocated.

There is no point romanticizing the label "OFW", however, because Filipino diasporic communities generally represent "marginalized constituencies" (Milosevic et al. 1254). Unlike the intellectual exile of Said, the Filipino migrant worker's subject position is not simply that of an outsider—"a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about present and future" (Said "Representations" 47). Working far from their families and home country does not only bring about bitterness and alienation. Their lives carry multi-layered discourses of anguish and survival. In many instances, the Filipino migrant worker's life is fraught with uncertainties and dangers.

But the letters are not entirely a jeremiad against the abuses to these poor workers. The longer letters, for example, do not simply foreground their experiences of abjection; they also convey, in the language of solidarity and *damayan,* a search for justice and the hope that better conditions could still be realized for themselves, for their loved ones, and for their fellow OFWs. Testimonial narratives, in other words, are not just always rueful lamentations defining the "warrior as cripple" and muzzling the "warrior as witness" (Ehrenhaus 89); they may also be read within a context of resistance that is anchored on individual and collective agency, countervailing oppression in its many forms, while keeping open the possibility of radical and emancipatory transformation.

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