

Suffering that Counts: The Politics of Sacrifice in Philippine Labor Migration

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ABSTRACT

Sacrifice is a fraught concept that both describes and prescribes the fate-playing ventures of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Suffering on behalf of loved ones promises a better life in return; it is also used to serve very different discursive ends: as a state strategy to promote overseas work or as a rhetorical tactic to condemn the government's labor export policy. This paper tracks the trope of sacrifice in the state's and migrant activists' rhetoric and looks at how OFWs receive these meanings and respond to these discourses. The paper then examines Migrante International's campaign, *Zero Remittance Day*, as a complex political act of withholding that defies the state's remittance-centred strategy of migration-for-development.

Keywords: Sacrifice, *bagong bayani* (contemporary hero), labor export policy, remittances, Zero Remittance Day

INTRODUCTION

In her July 27, 2009 State of the Nation Address (SONA), former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo deployed the rhetoric of sacrifice to extol the contribution of overseas Filipino workers (OFW): "In times of hardships and relief, our overseas Filipinos have been making our country strong. The \$16 billion that they have sent last year is a record. I know that this is not a sacrifice joyfully borne. This is work where it can be found—in faraway places, among strangers with different cultures. It is lonely work, it is hard work" (Arroyo 2009).

Among the crowd of protestors outside the halls of Congress where Arroyo was delivering her speech, Filipino migrant activists overturned the imagery of sacrifice to criticize the Philippine government's overdependence on its labor migrants. In a statement released by Gary Martinez of Migrante, he states that: "Pegging OFWs as an economic edge is really simply making them 'economic sacrificial lambs.' Using the labor export policy as the cornerstone of its economic policy will intensify this bankrupt government's continuous pimping of its citizens as it desperately tries to avoid the inevitable sinking of the economy" (cited in Tan 2009).

Far from the fray of the president's speech and agitators' chants, Crisaldo was on his way to Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) to catch his Saudi-bound plane. In a *Philippine Daily Inquirer* article where OFWs are asked about their thoughts on the ongoing SONA, Crisaldo answers there is nothing the President can say, not her empty promises nor her praises of his heroism, that would stop him from pushing through with his plan to sneak into the war-torn country of Iraq for work. "If only [Arroyo] could provide full and decent employment, Filipinos will not leave their home," he continues (cited in Ubalde, 2009). This is especially true for Crisaldo and many others like him who would be and have been sacrificing life and limb just to earn money for their family: "They tell us not to go to Iraq because it's dangerous and we might be abducted or killed. But if we do stay, our families will die uneducated and hungry" (ibid).

These three narratives coming from the President, an activist, and an OFW map out the ways in which sacrifice is invoked to describe the same things about overseas work while, at the same time, serve very different discursive ends. There is an uncanny resemblance between how the state, its critics, and their subject deployed sacrifice in their rhetoric on migration. The state appreciates the sacrifice of millions of its citizens abroad by projecting their importance to the nation's developmental strategy while of course recognizing the nobility of their hardships and suffering for the sake of their family and country. This is something that migrant advocates reaffirm, if only to emphasize migrant workers' role in saving a bankrupt economy while also denouncing it as a form of victimhood to slam the present administration's labor export policy.

The inherent contradiction in this notion of sacrifice is not lost on OFWs like Crisaldo who can be very critical of the government for not being able to provide jobs at home, forcing them to leave their loved ones behind, but can, at the same time, typically grasp their departures as moral and heroic acts for their families' survival and flourishing. This self-understanding echoes both the discourse of the state that promotes labor exportation and that of the migrant activists that condemn it. Sacrifice allows OFWs like Crisaldo an idiom to both castigate the nation-state for the circumstances of their suffering but at the same time claim their suffering as their own crosses to bear. In this sense, OFWs can see themselves negotiating between two dominant scripts of sacrifice, being both victims and heroes in the globalized labor arena. How is it possible that the rhetoric of sacrifice can be used to critique the pitfalls of overseas work and at the same time champion the virtues of economic development without necessarily negating each of these claims?

This paper explores the affective dimension of Filipino labor migration by sketching out the ways in which the rhetoric of sacrifice figures as an affective

concept that shapes and sutures the contradictory politics of overseas work and development. In this paper, I analyze state documents, scholarly works, and activist writings on Philippines' labor export policy to show contending claims on migration-fordevelopment policy and its effects on migrants. I supplement an examination of these texts with select narratives of OFWs themselves and their left-behind families. I take these stories from popular media outlets and social media platforms to provide another dimension to the construction of sacrifice as a discourse. I particularly focused on interviews regarding their notions on the importance of remittances and the effects of the activists' campaign of *Zero Remittance Day*. Through the textual analyses of these various sources, I argue that sacrifice represents an aphoria in understanding the OFW phenomenon where claims and counter-claims of the nation-state and its people on their stakes on overseas work converge and diverge in problematic ways. Specifically, I investigate the tropes of sacrifice according to how the Philippine state uses its rhetoric to manage and maintain its economic relationship to their overseas workers. Then, I examine how migrant activists transform the discourse of sacrifice to politicize OFWs' transnational labor participation. Finally, I look at how OFWs receive and respond to both of these injunctions in scholarly accounts and mass media.

The first part discusses how the nation-state deploys its discourse of sacrifice in shaping the problematic relationship of OFWs to its nation-building projects. Here, I examine the trajectories of the state's discourse of sacrifice from its development of labor export policy down to its various other practices that promotes its labor export policy. The second part discusses scholarly accounts on how the state cultivated its rhetorical strategy on migration and sacrifice that rehearses historical and cultural notions of *bagong bayani* (new heroes) and social heroism. The third part examines how migrant activists refashion these ideals to describe and critique the compromised structural conditions OFWs endure in global labor markets. This section includes an analysis of migrant activists' political practices, particularly the campaign for "Zero Remittance Day," that demonstrate how they redefine and rethink what it means to suffer and sacrifice in the context of transnational labor. The last part discusses the various responses that such campaign generates among the OFWs themselves to tackle the potentialities and the limits of politicizing remittances as material forms of sacrifice. These responses from OFWs reveal the complex ways in which they negotiate, concede, and resist the various impositions of what their sacrifice means, while also opening up the political possibility of 'sacrificing sacrifice' by rethinking the confounded politics of their transnational labor participation.

STRATEGIES OF THE NATION-STATE

The Philippine state's discourse on sacrifice in labor migration emerged out of its difficult negotiation between counting on migrants and their economic contributions on the one hand and accounting for their wellbeing and interests on the other. The state's nation-building project is a tenuous one: it is dependent on OFW but is incapable of securing OFWs' welfare. This has been at the crux of various state strategies that shape and support labor export policy since its initiation by Ferdinand Marcos during the 1970s. Originally thought as a stop-gap remedy to deal with economic woes during Martial Law, labor migration has eventually become a permanent "solution" that has subjected more than ten percent of the Filipino population to precarious working and living conditions abroad.

While there has been a long history of outmigration in the country as a result of its enduring colonial and neocolonial relations with United States, it was only during Marcos' regime that the government sought to reorganize, institutionalize, and seek new markets for overseas work in Asia and Europe as part of the state agenda to stabilize economy. Marcos took advantage of the rising global demand for contractual workers in heavy industries and the service sector as a band-aid solution to the twin problems of domestic unemployment and inflation that plagued his regime (Villegas 1988). Two years into his Martial Law, he implemented the Labor Code of 1974 which established a more active role for the state in recruiting and deploying overseas contractual workers (OCWs) through its national commissions that will later on become the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) in 1982 (Nolledo 1992). Alongside systematizing deployments of warm body exports, the state invested in the economic returns from migrants by funneling OCWs' dollar remittances through Philippine banking system (Asis 1992). However, as welfare concerns mounted among overseas workers, the Welfare Fund was established in 1977 to schematize financial support for Filipinos abroad in crisis. The Fund would then become the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (Asis 2005). Marcos' labor export policy has set the stage for the rise of OCWs in the country, and would remain one of his legacies even after he was deposed by a popular mass movement in 1986.

It was only after a decade of implementing Marcos' labor export policy that his successor, Corazon Aquino, started reaping the economic rewards of the steady rise of overseas contractual work, which saw the increasing demand for female Filipino migrants to occupy care and domestic service abroad (Gonzales 1998; Eviota 1992). Aquino first used the term *bagong bayani* or "new national heroes" to refer to OCWs in her speech addressing Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong in 1988. In the following year, she declared December as the "Month for Overseas Filipinos" (which

will later on be transferred to June) and instituted the first annual presidential awards for “exemplary” OCWS named “Bagong Bayani Awards” (Guevarra 2003, 124). Aside from these practices that are still in place today, the following administrations of Fidel Ramos and Joseph Estrada even staged “heroes’ welcome” every Christmas during their terms, greeting the arrival of returning Filipino migrants at Ninoy Aquino International Airport with cash prizes and free plane tickets (Rodriguez 2002, 347). Ramos would even capitalize on *bagong bayani* rhetoric in the face of public protests after the execution of the domestic worker Flor Contemplacion in Singapore in the mid-1990s. Faced with a series of public demonstrations protesting the Philippine government’s gross negligence and abandonment of its own citizens in foreign hands, Ramos passed the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act or RA 8042, which intended to safeguard migrants’ welfare (Gancayco 1996). The state changed its honoring of OFWs from December to June as “Migrant Heroes Week” to coincide with the signing of this legislation. It also led Ramos to officially adopt the term overseas Filipino workers instead of overseas contract workers in state policies, effacing the uneasy preconditions of contract with a national identity “to give a nationalist inflection that befits new national heroes” (de Guzman 2003). *Bagong bayani* became an enduring label that succeeding regimes of Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III continued to use and exploit in their speeches in reference to overseas workers and their crucial economic contribution through foreign remittances.

The result of the Philippine state’s strategy of promoting overseas work through its *bagong bayani* discourse is evident in the number of Filipinos who have pinned their hopes on migration’s promises. To date, according to the Department of Labor and Employment, there are 12 million Filipinos working abroad. But this figure can rise up to 15 million if the undocumented and illegal migrants are included in the statistics, according to Migrante. These numbers translate to about one-fifth of the country’s labor force and the money they send back to their families account for 10 percent of the country’s GDP (Migrante 2013c). In 2014, OFW remittances hit an all-time high at almost \$27 billion (cited in Caraballo 2015), a figure that competes only with countries with the largest migrant populations like Mexico, China, and India. As early as 2006, “OFW remittance was five times more than foreign direct investment, 22 times higher than the Overseas Development Aid, and more than a half of the gross international reserves” (San Juan 2009, 100). This form of capital inflows not just spurs domestic consumption but also cushions the national economy from the economic shocks of global crises (like Asian financial crisis during late 90s).

At the level of the household, it would be very hard to dispute the “relief” that the money routinely sent by OFWs bring not only to the local economy but also most especially to their kin back home. For many Filipino families, OFW remittances are

not just supplementary but the main income of the household. These remittances stimulate household spending, which in turn, infuses profit to local businesses that benefit the social and economic mobility of low-income migrant households. Aside from the private banks, remittance centers, and international couriers that facilitate remittance flows, the key sectors that have benefitted from OFW remittances and investments are education, real estate, property, and construction businesses. Many migrants also plan their returning *for good* in the future by investing their savings while they are still on 'tour of duty' in small to medium-scale businesses (Weekley 2006). The significance of OFW money to the Philippine economy has compelled scholars, especially researchers at the Asian Development Bank, to celebrate the money brought in by OFWs as "direct aid" to their families, fueling developmental "multipliers" in terms of educational and economic benefits to their relatives and communities back home (ADB 2013). Many recent scholarly works have examined the possibilities of migration in enacting structural changes or disruptions to traditional feudal ties and class relations at home (see David 2006; Aguilar 2014).

Several Filipino scholars of migration, however, remain skeptical of the developmental gains of overseas work and foreign exchange remittances, and some of these criticisms center around the "dependency syndrome" on both levels of national and household economies. On a national scale, scholars and advocates have pointed out that this path dependency has degrading effects on both local human resources (i.e. deskilling, 'brain drain,' and domestic job crisis) and basic industries (weakening of agricultural and manufacturing sectors) (Africa 2008). On the level of the household, migration critics are also challenging the sustainability of OFW remittances (as the majority of them are funneled into daily consumption) and even the dependency of left-behind families on them (as remittances may limit household productivity from non-migrant kin members) (Dimzon 2005). Finally, the 'multiplier effects' of OFWs on their family, community, and country most of the time present very contradictory manifestations as the promise of social and economic mobility of OFWs does not always restructure traditional gender and class relations in both home and host countries.

What remains to be arguably the most consistent and predominant counternarrative to migration and development are actual stories of the precarious and neglected lives, as revealed by non-government organizations catering to OFWs and migrant advocacy groups. According to Migrante, of the 6,029 Filipinos who leave the country daily to find work abroad, about three to five of them return to NAIA in coffins while 92 more are in death row (Migrante 2015). There are hundreds of cases of 'mysterious deaths,' thousands languishing in jails without legal assistance, while at least 25,000 OFWs are stranded in the Middle East alone, the region where most OFWs are concentrated (ibid.). According to a 2014 survey by a migrant

support organization in Hong Kong, the third top destination of Filipina migrants, 56 percent of approximately 4,000 cases ranging from verbal (58 percent), physical (18 percent) and sexual (6 percent) abuses are those filed by Filipina domestic workers (Mission for Migrant Workers 2014). These accounts of victimhood are powerful critiques because they do not just challenge the state's reliance on labor migration but also demand the state's accountability and responsibility that should accompany that dependency.

Beyond narratives of violence and vulnerability, there are also stories about survival, isolation, tensions, and pressures that OFWs face and withstand daily. These are often also used as indices of the the social cost of overseas work. Even narratives that depict success, of OFWs 'making it big' from their fate-playing ventures also say something about how highly contingent their sojourns are. All of these narratives that we hear Filipinos abroad and the many OFW stories that we encounter in mass media and popular culture form the larger tableau of economic and emotional possibilities from where OFWs measure the cost of their border crossings.

It is in this tableau of possibilities that the state's naming of *bagong bayani*, and its entailing notions of sacrifice and social heroism, becomes most powerful as a discourse because it does not just extol the virtues of leaving but also sets its expectations. Sacrifice in migration promises a better life without denying the risks and dangers. As a state discourse, it propels labor export policy as a developmental strategy even while it admits its costs and shortcomings. Sacrifice then is an important rhetoric that makes *bagong bayani* intelligible as a term for OFWs because of two reasons. First, it translates and raises the Filipino migrants' social goals of improving their lives and their families' into that of developing the nation. Second, it sutures the tension between the state's reliance on Filipino migrants' economic contributions while, at the same time, forsaking the OFWs' wellbeing.

THE SCRIPTS OF SACRIFICE

To understand how sacrifice and heroism came to acquire specific meanings in the OFW experience, we first examine how notions of heroism and sacrifice have been construed in the cultural interplay of religious ideals and the political history of Filipinos. Vicente Rafael (2000) asserts that Cory Aquino's invocation of "bagong bayani" to OFWs is a powerful discourse as it invokes and rehearses the same themes of social heroism in the field of overseas work. Rafael illustrates how the articulation of Filipino nationalism has always been tied to Rizal, a figure whose heroism is defined by his life of self-sacrifice and extreme agony rather than his revolutionary impulses, narratives that are reminiscent of populist themes

associated with Jesus Christ's passion (see also Ileta 1979). The idea of Rizal, "at once pathetic and prophetic," is recast in Ninoy's death in 1983 that toppled Marcos' regime (211). The affects that are generated by the martyrism of Rizal and Ninoy would then be feminized into the figure of the latter's widow, Corazon Aquino, whose power was "predicated on the logics of suffering and sacrifice," from which "the notion of pity rather than equal rights (is used) to legitimate claims to power and moral certainty" and whose "deference and subordination to an ultimately ineffable because transcendent source become the basis for worldly authority" (212).

The feminized heroism that the Cory's image upheld in her regime, whose political survival depends on submission and faith and where enduring life's miseries can be understood as sacrifice, is set against the experience of overseas work, which by this time has become increasingly dominated by women working as domestic helpers, nurses, caregivers, and sex workers all over the world. As Neferti Tadiar (2004) argues, in this feminization of migration, "it has been the DH, the invariably female domestic worker, who has served as the predominant figure of Filipino overseas contract workers" (114). The Filipina domestics' bodies, for Tadiar, become the female and feminized 'profile' of Philippine transnational labor, where the image of their suffering-bodies was transformed as sacrificing-bodies or "bodily-*beingsfor*-others" and have come to be conflated to the image of the nation-state's leader during those times (121). As a self-renunciating widow and mother, Cory's image represents the virtues that are required in the field of transnational labor, an arena that demands its participants to endure pain and affliction in their devotion not only to their family but also to the whole nation. Sacrifice provide the affects that shapes the gendered moral economy of the name *bagong bayani* for the OFWs: "By encoding OFWs as national heroes," the state "have sought to contain the anxieties attendant upon the flow of migrant labor, including the emotional distress over the separation of families and the everyday exploitation of migrants by labor contractors, travel agents and foreign employers" (Rafael, 212).

The idea of sacrifice in notions of heroism is clearly as much informed by nationalist history as it is produced out of the Catholic ideals that structure the ways Filipinos often understand their everyday lives, especially when dealing with crises and coming up with solutions. Filomeno Aguilar (1996) argues that "overseas employment is valued as a form of secular pilgrimage in a quest for economic bounty and life experience" (11). Usually, such quests are propelled by existing economic distress faced by migrants, their families, and close kin, conditions of suffering that OFWs aim to relieve through labor migration. This makes the choice of overseas work a devotion to a greater form of sacrifice, choosing to suffer in isolation and under vulnerable working conditions for the greater good of one's family and nation.

Julius Bautista (2013) focuses on religion to explore the relationship of sacrifice and martyrism to labor migration and nationalism. He discusses how the Philippine state's naming of OFWs as "new heroes" and its discourse of sacrifice are deeply embedded in the country's religious practice. He demonstrates the similarities in what motivates Filipinos to participate in both religious rituals and transnational labor. For him, the experience of ritual and overseas work invokes similar ideas and affects of sacrifice because both of these practices forge empathic relationships of verticality, taking away pain from Christ, and horizontality, relieving all forms of distress from others, usually one's family members.

In another essay, Bautista (2014) calls this "the economy of sacrifice: an ethos that seeks to perpetuate the inward flow of transnational capital through systematic and sustained development of productive economic agents" (3). But as opposed to Max Weber's "Protestant Ethic" that extolls the virtue of frugality as the engine of capitalist development in Western history, "the economy of sacrifice [among Filipino migrants] encourage the conspicuous partaking in the material rewards of sacrifice in this world" (ibid) such as the sending of and receiving of remittances and balikbayan boxes. OFW plights are important in this economy because while their suffering is "discursively packaged as the unfortunate but necessary costs of pursuing a greater good, the state's evocation of sentiments of pity and empathic solidarity with those who suffer further reiterates the nobility of their overseas deployment even when dangers of such occurrences recurring remain real" (4).

Sacrifice can thus be understood in terms of this religious-based dimension of being able to appreciate agony on behalf and for the sake of loved ones. This is precisely the virtue the state cultivates as an ideal form of heroism in the context of transnational labor participation: heroism that is no longer about "patriotic sentiments or even organic rootedness to the nation" but rather "the exilic engagement demonstrating one's ability to suffer" (Bautista 2013). For Bautista, the modern state plays a crucial role in defining social heroism and sacrifice by "cultivating a particular kind of suffering to the point where the state's ability to send-off their human labor is contingent upon them cultivating a certain idea of what it means to suffer" (ibid).

The strategy of naming OFWs as *bagong bayani* is then dynamic and productive precisely because the values, responsibilities, and obligations – themselves expressions and regimentations of ideas of sacrifice – that come with it need to be cultivated and developed through the nation-state's official discourses on nationalism and citizenship. If OFWs are going to be "true heroes," then they need to be a particular kind of hero imbued with specific qualities that would define their heroism. The particularities of this social heroism can be gleaned from

how the state thinks sacrifice should manifest and be enacted by migrants to be deserving of the title *bagong bayani*. By looking at how the *Bagong Bayani Awards* are defined, for example, Anna Romina Guevarra (2009) claims that the state's idea of social heroism specifies certain criteria of what counts as sacrifice, and in doing so, ultimately shapes and disciplines OFWs into not only selfless heroes but also flexible and docile workers. These specificities of heroism endow the state with the power to marshal migrant workers by "summoning a kind of nationalist spirit rooted in the belief of one's role in nation-building" (38). OFWs deserve the name heroes according to the state if they exhibit "a sense of responsibility ('regularly remits money to the Philippines through established banks'), good working behavior ('no derogatory record' and 'earned the trust and confidence of his/her employer or has received citations for outstanding service') and nationalism ('made significant contribution to the wellbeing of his/her countrymen')" (52). For Robyn Rodriguez (2002), the notions of sacrifice and heroism in the name *bagong bayani* do not just mold flexible, docile, and selfless laborers as representatives of "the Home of the Great Workers." They also forge loyalty and allegiance to the state through the discourse of official nationalism and citizenship. Since the state incorporates overseas Filipinos, specifically migrant contract workers, as nationals, they also instill particular values and ideas that support the official discourses on Filipino citizenship. As part of official nationalism, Filipino citizenship "disciplines overseas workers as particular kinds of citizens: citizens who pay their taxes, citizens who send their remittances to their families in the Philippines; citizens who are flexible laborers" (348).

The force of this state injunction of sacrifice among migrant workers can be seen in how OFWs see themselves using and reinforcing the same idioms in the public sphere. In studying domestic workers magazines, for example, Rhacel Salazar Parrenas claims that while these publications forge bonds among the migrant community while serving as platforms to challenge stereotypes and prejudicial views against domestic workers across the globe, they also reinforce ideas of Filipino nationalism bounded by duty to family and the nation-state, which only perpetuates the state's discourse on sacrifice (Parrenas 2001). These forms of popular media often feature a fellow OFW reminding another to dutifully send money to his or her family back home, not to cause trouble at work or to be patient in the face of suffering, which in effect serves to affirm the social heroism and economic patriotism propagated by the state. Virtual communities of Filipino migrants, according to Emily Ignacio, are no different. Ignacio argues that newsrooms, e-groups and community blogs, while offering online spaces where people share their life experiences and provide emotional help for those in distress, also reinforce problematic notions on national identity social heroism and gender stereotypes among women abroad

(Ignacio 2005). Claire Kelly (2008) argues that print and cyberspace platforms “celebrate and promote only the particular aspects of national identity” that collude with “the state’s ideas of Filipino-ness,” characteristics that emphasize how one can become “an economic hero or a Great Filipino Worker” (38). As such, online platforms and community magazines often remind OFWs of their duties and responsibilities to their families and to the nation, while imploring them to do more. Such duties, as Kelly notes, “are apparently limitless. As the website ‘OFW Spotlight’ argues: ‘As an OFW, they have been doing a lot to help the Philippines, but they know they can still do more, Philippines need them now more than ever!’” (39).

Clearly, these studies reveal how prevalent the state discourse on sacrifice is even among Filipino migrants. That they have internalized such injunctions is not surprising, especially since their subjectivization is a product of the complex interplay of discursive formations that are not solely coming from the state but also embedded in the country’s nationalist history and its enduring cultural ideals. However, the internalization of sacrifice is never absolute. If the discourse of sacrifice is a product of the difficult negotiation of the state’s dependence on OFW’s economic heroism and also their incapacity to protect its own heroes, sacrifice for migrants also emerged as a way to understand their experiences in transnational contexts and to negotiate their claims to the nation-state that supposedly recognizes and rewards their miseries and pain. If sacrifice is the state’s way of managing and disciplining overseas Filipinos’ emotions in the service of the state’s interest, sacrifice can also conjure other affects that may exceed the state’s ideas on how and what to sacrifice to become heroes for the nation. As Epifanio San Juan Jr., claims, “such psychodynamic clusters of affects not only demarcate the boundaries of the imagination but also release energies that mutate into actions serving ultimately national-popular emancipatory projects” (2009, 118). In this light, I focus my analysis on how sacrifice can be rethought in other ways beyond what the state has deployed as a discourse. To this end, I turn to social practices by Filipino migrant activists that discharge these imaginative affects and energies in representing what sacrifice and sacrificing mean in the context of transnational labor. In the next section, I analyze representations of OFW sacrifice in Migrant’s “Zero Remittance Day” and how they demonstrate the complex binding and unbinding of the nationstate’s invocations of and the OFW’s investment in the affective economy of sacrifice.

SUBVERTING THE SCRIPT

The self-renunciation and martyrism of OFWs for a better life becomes tethered to the nation-state’s labor export policy and nation-building project. In the same way, the state’s call to sacrifice and social heroism for the nation is also caught up

with OFWs' self-understanding of the worth of their endeavors for their families abroad. It is in this difficult impasse that migrant Filipinos across the world attempt to find a political language to resignify new ways of thinking about the meaning of suffering and sacrifice. I now look at political projects and experimental protest actions that solidarity movements among OFWs enact to challenge the nation-state's dictum of warm body exportation.

There are many ways in which OFWs have been enacting small acts that resist the scripts of the dominant narrative of sacrifice as victimhood in labor migration. For example, Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan perform various covert and discreet resistances to stereotypes, discrimination, and social expectations assigned to them as foreign workers in these host countries. These tactics range from talking back, joking around, calling names, laughing at their employers behind their back, gossiping about their bosses, and using mastery of English to gain relative freedom or privilege and even assert their rights as individuals in their countries of employ (see Constable 1997; Chin 1998; Lan 2006; Yeoh and Huang 1998; and Ueno 2009).

During off days or in instances when fellow OFWs can meet up and congregate, these displays of agency are much more pronounced through various acts of taking control of their time and sacrificing the few moments that they have for rest days to help fellow OFWs. They take part in small and casual support groups among friends; volunteer in Church and non-profit organization; or become members and community organizers of mass organizations that assist and advocate fellow migrants in destination countries. These forms of personal sacrifices, existing outside the frames of passive suffering and self-renunciation of state's *bagong bayani* discourse, have given birth to a community of support network and political grassroot movements among Filipino migrants all over the world.

These "circuits of resistances" have emerged from OFWs' complex struggles against conditions of oppression and "circuits of power and commodification" set forth by both labor-sending and labor-receiving states (Lindio-McGovern 2012, 23). As such, the kind of activism that migrant groups espouse is transnational in nature (Hsia 2010) as seen in accounts of Filipino grassroots migrant movements creating alliances with other nationalities, including the host countries' local workers union, to address the problems of global migration on a transnational framework (Constable 2010).

The formation of transnational alliances among migrant groups of different nationalities have been crucial in the global and local campaigns for human rights, labor rights, and the fight against exclusionary laws and policies that discriminate migrant workers in the host countries. In as much as these political demonstrations

of Filipino migrant groups in solidarity with other nationalities serve as platforms to resist the receiving state's policies and rally around universally acceptable standards on human rights and fair labor laws and practices, they are also used to decry Philippine state's abandonment and gross negligence of their welfare. These migrant rallies and political campaigns demonstrate that their home government is as much culpable as the receiving state in perpetuating the structural conditions of migrants' suffering as a result of economic disenfranchisement, social exclusion, labor abuse, and physical violence.

The other side of transnationalism in the progressive Filipino grassroots migrant movement is the existence of alliances among OFWs across the world. These organizations have been instrumental in pushing the Philippine government to act on the many cases of abuse and human rights violations among OFWs such as Flor Contemplacion, Sarah Balabagan, Angelo dela Cruz, Mary Jane Veloso, et al. Political interventions and struggles of progressive Filipino migrant groups against the nation-state agenda have also produced greater political enfranchisement for Filipino migrants, as seen in deposing Estrada in 2001, the passing of the Overseas Absentee Voting Act in 2003, and migrants' participation as party-list nominees and representatives in 2007 and 2013 elections, etc. (Rodriguez 2010). Filipino migrant activists have staged protests in front of Philippine embassies and consular offices to defy 'state exactions' from additional bureaucratic taxes and processes that serve less to protect migrants' interests than to fatten government coffers (Rodriguez 2010, 33–34). Moreover, they also hold mass demonstrations abroad to show their solidarity for Filipino activists at home in light of national issues and problems.

Migrante International is one of the transnational grassroots migrant organizations that have been leading these political campaigns in the past three decades. It is the umbrella network that links the local chapters based in the Philippines and in various countries in Asia Pacific, Middle East, Europe, and North America where there is a high concentration of Filipino im/migrants and OFWs. One of the important political campaigns of late that Migrante leads along with other Filipino migrant organizations across the world is the Zero Remittance Day: "a symbolic protest and political exercise for Filipino im/migrants from different parts of the world to collectively show their outrage and frustration against the Philippine government" (Migrante 2013a) The importance of the rise of transnational migrant formations like Migrante and their political campaigns are important because they provide ways to challenge, not only the complex impositions of global capital, but also the colluding state discourses that relies on rhetoric of sacrifice and social heroism. It is important to analyze these social practices as they offer a way to rethink ideas of sacrifice by using its very material and economic form as remittances.

Zero Remittance Day (ZRD) is Migrante's way of politicizing this form of heroic contribution as leverage against the state. In this campaign, Migrante enjoins all OFWs to hold back sending money to their families for one whole day. Ideally, the campaign aims to synchronize disruption in the economic flow of foreign exchange in the country for one day as a collective expression of migrants' resistance against the Philippine state's labor export policy and other national issues. It is an experimentation to find a platform where migrant laborers can exercise bargaining power to resist the nation-state, a version of a workers' strike for overseas workers, except that it is their wage (or remains thereof) that they withhold rather than their productive labor power. Defiance is not aimed at capitalist owners but the nation-state that brokered their exportation as sheer labor power to other countries.

The drive to defer remitting money for OFWs has only been previously used four times in the past: twice during Arroyo's term to protest against the opening of the Global Forum on Migration and Development in Manila on October 29, 2008; the planned charter change through constitutional assembly on July 26, 2009; and twice during Benigno Aquino III's term to condemn the pork barrel scandal on September 19, 2013 and the proposed random inspection and opening of *balikbayan boxes* by the Bureau of Customs. These events marked the range of migrant activists' resistance against not only the local politics of patronage and corruption but also the transnational bodies and its policies that direct Philippine government's labor export program. In enjoining other OFWs not to send money back home for one day, the migrants symbolically articulate their refusal to be part of a system that not only produces the structural conditions that force them to leave the country but also abets corruption in the Philippine bureaucracy. By doing this, they also reclaim the act of sending the fruits of their hard work and sacrifices as a political tool: "The power to send or not to send remittances rests on Filipino im/migrants and OFWs alone. By not remitting for one day, Filipinos all over the world will harness their economic power and take a stand against corruption, patronage politics and social injustice" (Migrante 2013b).

It is interesting how the Arroyo and Benigno Aquino's administrations who have both been targets of this particular protest action employ two conflicting rhetorical approaches to to the ZRD campaign. During Arroyo's time, calls to withhold remittances were seen as economic disruption and Migrante was accused of economic sabotage (Monterona 2008). Aquino's administration, on the other hand, dismissed the economic effects of the campaign and maintained that it did not harm the government. Instead, they warned that it was "the families of OFWs who would bear the brunt when only a small group wanted the remittances to stop for one day" (Valente 2013). These two approaches reveal the state's contending discourses on managing the state's script of sacrifice against the economic and political fissures shored up by militant migrants' political actions.

Arroyo's approach of admonishing the campaign as economic destabilization is problematic because ZRD calls are not sustained political campaigns for economic control that would merit calling it sabotage. Moreover, in treating the campaign as an economic threat, the state also exposes its overdependence on foreign exchange remittances, something that Aquino's administration attempted to deny in its rhetorical strategy. Unlike his predecessor, Aquino's approach not only belittles the campaign by dispelling its supposed disruptive economic effects but, more importantly, domesticates the political act of deferring remittances by making it look like an economic relation that solely involves the migrants and their families.

In this attempt, the state aims to control the political dimension of the campaign by making it, ultimately, an issue about the individual OFW's "personal decision." By doing so, the state also tries to manage ZRD by encouraging Filipino migrants to be responsible and dutiful family members and to think long and hard which kind of sacrifice they are willing to sacrifice: "We leave it to the personal decision of the OFWs because only they know the financial needs of their families here. We trust that they will be responsible in deciding on this on this, especially if the family is concerned" (Porcalla 2013).

While contradictory, the contending reactions to ZRD are both of interest. Arroyo may be right in looking at it as an economic disruption; which is also why, for Aquino to say that the call to withhold remittances does not affect his government may be misleading. As Francis Calpotura, founder and executive director of the Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action, estimates that "about \$23 billion (USD) went through the Central Bank of the Philippines in 2012 alone. If that withholding of remittances happened around the world, if you took \$23 billion and [divided] that by 365 days, then you would get about \$63 million for each day on the average" (cited in Keeley 2013). But there is, of course, some truth in Aquino's statements that is not as economically disruptive as previous administration claimed it to be since it can never really be sustained for more than a day. Remittances will be sent one way or another, if not on that day, maybe a day before or after.

But even if the remittance flows continue after the campaign, the very fact that a possibility of an economic disruption to networks of remittance centers, Philippine banks and Central Bank of the Philippines can be initiated, synchronized and worked up by Filipino migrants all over the world even just for one day is already making a concrete statement against the state. And the Philippine state's overreaction to or discrediting of ZRD campaigns opens up a progressive dimension in OFW sacrifice as a political statement.

In the ZRD protest last August 28, 2015, for example, Migrants gained considerable support compared to their previous three calls for no remittances because this

time, the campaign responded to an issue close to home for OFWs. The proposed random opening of *balikbayan boxes* generated indignation from many OFWs suspecting the Customs, long-been mired in issues of corruption, of ‘desecrating’ the gifts that they painstakingly saved up for, boxed, and sent to their loved ones back home. Emboldened by countless personal videos uploaded by OFWs decrying this perceived sacrilege of OFW keepsakes, Migrante proceeded with the ZRD protest, despite the government backing out from the said proposal. The results of the campaign can be seen in testaments of several remittance centers in Manila detailing how payout transactions during that day decreased by 15 to 50 percent and also from the pictures that Migrante circulated in social media showing vacant facades of ordinarily-busy remittance centers in Macau, Qatar, and London (Romero 2015).

Even with proof of the campaign’s relative success, its disruptive effects on the national economy are yet to be seen and proven. After all, the remittance flows will continue precisely because OFWs will still send their hard-earned money to their families back home. However, ZRD’s aims exceed economic calculations as it functions politically at its core as a symbolic campaign that puts into question the limits of how far OFWs are willing to sacrifice in order to make a political stand. The act of not remitting for a day is “an important impulse that migrants are still trying to get their footing on, finding how to have a significant and profound political impact that’s commensurate with their economic clout” (cited in Keeley 2013).

By calling attention to the logic of their sacrifice in the form of remittance as something that they can actively use, even in that temporal act of deferral, they also transform its possibilities and exhorts fellow OFWs to rethink what it stands for, not only for their families back home but also for the nation-state that depends on it. As a campaign that pushes forth counterclaims about migration and development by highlighting the symbolic value of remittances, ZRD’s success does not rely on how much money can be withheld by a day but how much critical conversations can be generated among migrants and their families who are really the stakeholders in such a political action.

SACRIFICING SACRIFICE

The responses that the latest ZRD campaign has stirred expose the cruel entanglements of migrants’ obligations to their family and to the nation-state. Consistent with their reaction two years ago, Aquino’s administration downplayed the campaign’s actual effects on the economy while reasserting that it would be OFW families who would suffer. This seemingly benign response, however, reveals

a far more cruel approach because it clarifies what, in the end, OFW sacrifices actually mean. The state's position that ZRD has negligible effects not only unwittingly challenges its own discourse of the economic heroism of the *bagong bayani* but also discloses the fact that OFWs' ventures abroad are borne out of necessity and are primarily a matter of familial obligation, warning migrants that it is the families they leave behind who will bear the consequences of their political action. The Philippine state, after all, even if it does not admit it, is only 'free riding' on the 'goodness' of OFWs to their families as part of its nation-building project.

Advocates of the campaign like CBCP's Episcopal Commission on Migrant and Itinerant People chair Ruperto Santos share this sad truth even as they appeal for government's compassion. In his emotional appeal to the Aquino administration not to dismiss OFWs' message in ZRD, Bishop Santos highlights how this political act is in itself a difficult thing to do as it asks OFWs to sacrifice the very people to whom they are sacrificing for: "The call for no remittance among OFWs is already a hard thing to do, and it will hurt the people who are supposed to receive money from them. We all know that they are working abroad to be able to give and offer a good life for their families. But they are still doing this if only to make a statement that we should not ignore them. Let us not hurt them anymore. Let us not give them anymore burdens" (cited in Abuel and Jacinto, 2015).

The limits of the ZRD campaign and its harsh reality are affirmed by some of the statements and reactions of several OFWs and their families who resist or are hesitant to join Migrante's calls. Some rejected this kind of militant politics, while others were simply uninformed about the issue. But there were also many who, while sympathetic and supportive of its political message, did not participate because they could not and would not let their families suffer (Ruiz 2013). In an interview in a popular news program, *TV Patrol*, a wife of a welder in Jeddah still claimed the money her husband sent from a remittance center in Quezon City during ZRD because, as she said, "It is important for him not to join the call and send the allowance today because I need it to budget our daily expenses as we are putting five kids to school" (Tacolog 2015). In some of the comments about this report posted on the social media, many professed their support but still remitted money that day because the campaign coincided with their once-a-month day off as workers in the Middle East. If they joined the call, their families would suffer for a long time without receiving their remittances (Salvador 2015). There were also those like one hotel staff member in Norway who in a forum defended her decision to still send money despite the campaign because there were actual risks to her family: "Don't tell me that I don't fight for our issues! I have to because my father has kidney stones and needs to be admitted for surgery that day. You know how it is in our country, you need to pay first before they help you! I am offended by what

people from Customs are doing, but what can I do? I will not let my father die just because of that!" (Bautista 2015).

Such responses reflected realities on the ground that migrant activists have to take into account in order to challenge the notion of sacrifice: that familial obligations far outweigh any political or cultural claims about why most OFWs migrate, revealing the extent to which they were willing to sacrifice to make a political statement. This makes the project of radicalizing sacrifice a particularly fraught and complex problem, something that signifies how OFWs' stakes in their own family's security and development are necessarily tethered to the nation-state's own nation-building project, even though the nation-state has, time and again, failed to deliver its side of the bargain. At the same time, making the state accountable for these failures by withholding OFW's economic contributions would require them to put on line the people for whom they are working and suffering abroad in the first place.

However, the campaign's fundamental limitation as a viable political technique for migrants also opens up possibilities in working out novel forms of resistance and mapping out new political projects for OFWs. Zero Remittance Day is, after all, an experiment that demonstrates, even as it challenges, the dependence of both the OFWs and the Philippine state on the promises of migration-led development. It is a political act that reveals the cruel dimension of sacrifice, a protest that in challenging the state's warm body exportation also demands subverting and even forsaking the very reason why most Filipino migrants suffer – their families. Nonetheless, the act of sacrificing sacrifice is always a negotiation, a difficult working out and working through of the logic that is imposed upon it. It might not thoroughly change things but it does bring to the table ideas from which migrants can challenge what forms of suffering counts and what kinds of sacrifice matters in their ventures in transnational labor. Forms of political actions and social practices like this critically read sacrifice and resignify its material form in remittances as a possible tool to claim and participate in nationalist politics in the Philippines. It brings in different ideas of how to enact sacrifice and social heroism through militant action and imaginative protest. In this sense, sacrifice ceases to be just a selfless offering extolled by the state as social and economic heroism but a form of reclaiming and assertion that exceeds the Philippine state's intentions.

In this paper, I attempt to unpack ideas on sacrifice by studying how the nation-state, OFW activists, and OFWs themselves make use of contending discourses to describe and prescribe the worth of one's stakes in transnational labor. My aim is to investigate the affective dimension that ties and animates the relationship of Filipino migrants to the nation-state through the invocations to sacrifice. Sacrifice is an important affective idiom that the Philippine state uses to support its tenuous

nation-building project that is dependent on its labor export policy. Yet it is also crucial in how OFWs come to a self-understanding of what their ventures abroad mean for themselves and their families. By looking into how sacrifice as an affective economy reveals the OFWs' and the nation-state's "cruel attachment" (to borrow Laurent Berlant's [2011] term) to each other through wagering on migration's promises, I analyse how the Philippine state, migrant activists, and OFWs represent, sustain, and subvert the dominant script of what it means to suffer and sacrifice in the field of overseas work.

The aphoria in the understanding and practice of sacrifice reside in the fraught binding of the claims of both the OFWs and the Philippine state on its discursive meanings, particularly in its attempts to explain why overseas workers must suffer in the name of their family and their nation. On the other hand, unhinging the OFWs' stakes on their own sacrifices away from the state's discourse through political acts also demands a forbidding form of responsibility that puts on line those whom their sacrifices are intended for. However, this impulse to work out and rethink sacrifice through acts of migrant activism are necessary as it opens up the possibility of reclaiming the value of their sacrifice as a leverage for their political claims against the nation-state. Although this protest action may not express the determinate negation of what sacrifice means for many migrant Filipinos, they provide opportunities for them to negotiate and work out their own signifying practices to give name, identity, and sensation to the struggle of defining what sacrifice should mean against the state's invocation to just suffer and accept suffering for the sake of their family and the nation.

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