



## Troubled Intimacies: Mediation and Migration in *Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano*

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ABSTRACT. Using the plays *Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano* as primary materials of study, this essay looks into mediation and migration as two social phenomena that implicate national subjects who are made part of multinational/transnational spaces as call center agents and domestic helpers. It focuses on mediation and migration as tropes that serve as springboards for understanding the dialectical relationship between the national and the global, as well as the attendant cultural, economic, and social intricacies and intimacies that this relationship engenders. Finally, it also evolves a discourse on intimacy—one that highlights affects, transformations, and power relations—from the interconnection and coexistence of the native and the foreign.

KEYWORDS. Philippine drama and theatre · globalization · migration · mediation · intimacy

### INTRODUCTION

The entrance and exit, mobility and fixity, integration and elimination of national subjects within multinational and transnational spaces are neither solitary nor private processes. As people move within the shrinking globe, which is made possible by the trappings of technology and humans' need to eke out a living and endure, they signify severance, distance, journey, linkage, and transformation. It is in this arc of reasoning that this paper intends to operate both as an inquiry into the motions and communications occurring in a globalization that incorporates "societies globally into a capitalist modernity" and that "has complicated further contradictions between and within societies" (Dirlik 2003, 275). This essay also analyzes a globalization that has intensified the encounters of human beings with and across modern societies, and has generated the "plausible appearance of new centers of economic and political powers . . . motions of people that scramble

boundaries, and the emergence of new, global institutional forms to deal with problems that transcend nations and regions” (Dirlik 2000, 8). Aiming to understand how globalization discourse accounts for changing configurations of the unities and fractures within social groups, this essay particularly begins with two social phenomena—mediation and migration—as well as the social, economic, and cultural factors they produce in the lives of subjects that constitute a lopsidedly globalizing world.

In Philippine contemporary theatre, Chris Martinez’s *Welcome to IntelStar* and Ricardo Saludo’s *The Silent Soprano* take mediated communication and mass migration as their major thematic concerns whose combined effects bolster what Arjun Appadurai calls the “work of the imagination as a constructive feature of modern subjectivity” (1996, 3). These plays present ways of looking at the continuities and ruptures generated by an electronic media that is fast becoming a transformative field of human interaction, on the one hand, and by a mass migration that opens diasporic public vistas in which modern subjectivities are conceived and destabilized in ever-renewing productions, on the other (ibid.). As the former deals with professional life in a call center agency in the Philippines and the latter with the struggle of a domestic-helper-turned-entertainer in Hong Kong, these plays trouble discourses about the coexistence of the local, the national, and the global. They present this coexistence through complex power relations, the spectacles of everyday practices, and the possible sites of multiple modernities that are subsumed by everyday struggles and capitalist practices. Moreover, these plays exemplify how, to appropriate the words of Appadurai, “electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination” (ibid., 4).

On the one hand, *Welcome to IntelStar* is set in the belly of telemarketing companies, where linguistic transformation is demanded from its local call center agents and where subject formation is almost always patterned after the notion of an out there, an elsewhere, and an idea of America. As the only theatre production and dramatic piece that exclusively tackles life in a call center institution (Tiatco 2014), this play portrays how experiences in call center companies are intimately mediated by technology, as well as by the racial dynamics between members of developed and developing countries. On the other hand, *The Silent Soprano* is situated in the circuit of overseas

contractual work, particularly in the industries of domestic labor and entertainment, where accumulating capital in the host country as a solution to poverty in the source country becomes the primary ethos.

Both plays illuminate the larger sociocultural and political position of the Philippines in global networks, as well as embody the crisis of contemporary Philippine migration and electronic mediation. Their form accords these plays the duration of time, the language, the aesthetic devices, and the expansive space to perform such social issues. As “the most ‘living’, sociable literary form, a point of intersection between study and society” (Eagleton 2006, 37–38), plays in general intersect with and develop an understanding of social phenomena happening at both the personal and the public levels. Plays urgently address the continuing processes, ramifications, and implications of Philippine mass migration and electronic mediation, even while they create a sociality of viewers who may or may not respond to the posturing that these plays initiate. Through their narrative and performative strategies, as well as their interest in global history, language, and the body as sites of negotiation and struggle (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996), plays like *Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano* engage the prevalence of national, global, transnational, and neo-imperial discourses with an awareness of the power dynamics that govern cultures, societies, and groups of people in developed and developing countries. To a certain degree, they contribute to the globalization of culture and politics, precisely because they, as Dan Rebelatto (2009) argues, prompt a critically discursive exemplification of the workings of globalization. Nadine Holdsworth (2010) states that as material, cultural, and social practices, plays have the tendency to implicate the nation and its moments of conflict through their formal properties and aesthetic pleasures, which stimulate incisive critiques about the histories, traditions, identities, authenticities, events and preoccupations, and notions of belongingness in the national fabric. Although this paper primarily focuses on play scripts and narratives more than any other theatrical elements, such as acting, music, lighting, costume, stage design, choreography, and direction, it still draws on the drama of theatre and the ways its plotlines, metaphors, and characterizations operate as an arsenal of experiences that can help us fathom the realities that run through our everyday lives.

Migration and mediation are evidently perceived in the practices of everyday Philippine life. They are made more visible by certain exigencies related but not limited to survival and employment. At

present, migration from the country has intensified through the years as “the [overseas contract workers] OCW phenomenon [has become] the undercurrent of the experience of the contemporary nation” (Tolentino 2006, 2). Exiting one’s native land to seek greener pastures elsewhere is relatively easy to accomplish, as the Philippine government acts as a labor broker (Rodriguez 2008), which continues to expand “the export of its citizens as a means to deal with unemployment and to secure needed foreign exchange from their remittances” (Sassen 2000, 519). Migration has become a developmental strategy on the part of the Philippine state to keep its economy afloat through the billions of dollars its migrant workers remit to the country year in and year out (Rodriguez 2008). With nearly 10 percent of its ninety million population serving as seafarers, domestic helpers, entertainers, caregivers, engineers, IT specialists, and teachers in almost 190 countries, the Philippines is indeed the biggest supplier of the world’s skilled and unskilled contract workers (Rodriguez 2010; Parreñas 2003, 2008; Guevarra 2010; Tyner 2004, 2008). The Philippine labor diaspora is regarded as the largest across the globe, while Filipino overseas workers have become the new labor aristocracy (Brooks and Simpson 2013) and the “quintessential servants of globalization” (Parreñas 2003, 1) to the degree that they sustain the manpower needed in wide-ranging industries and households around the world.

With overseas employment as a common and constant aspect of Philippine life, as well as “an economic and political safety valve” that rakes in remittances that “bolster a fundamentally flawed economy and divert attention to the ever growing disparities of wealth and power in the all encompassing capitalist system of relationship” (Schiller 1997, 166), the government refers to overseas contract workers (OCWs) as modern-day heroes or *bagong bayani*, a mystified discursive term that “has attempted to incorporate Filipino migrant contract workers as part, not only of the national imaginary but, of the polity as the state has extended special kinds of entitlements to them even when they are overseas” (Rodriguez 2002, 342). To put it differently, this term is supplied as a statist measure to secure the state’s most lucrative global product to date, to maintain an income for the government’s coffers, and to police Filipino laborers for the global economy (ibid., 349).

On the other hand, the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry in the Philippines is another major socioeconomic presence made possible by the nation-state’s partnerships with multinational companies. Today, the BPO industry not only contributes billions of

pesos to the government each year but also actively directs the professional lives of many Filipinos. This industry thrives in the country because of some key reasons, such as Filipinos' proficiency in American English, their comparatively neutral accent, and their affinity for American culture. The Philippines also has few competing industries for skilled workforce and gives higher tax incentives for foreign businesses (Esguerra and Balana 2010). An accommodating site for a variety of offshore services, the Philippines now has the second largest BPO industry in the world, next to India. At present, the Philippine government supports the expansion of BPOs in the country by providing them alternative sites beyond Metro Manila—such as Metro Laguna, Metro Cebu, and Metro Davao, among others—where they can operate effectively (Ho 2009). In this regard, the BPO industry, alongside other industries that capitalize on both people and technologies, such as film, television, and music, perpetuates the rhetoric of developmental modernization.

Given these geopolitical positions, national subjects negotiate with and are integrated in the global systems of power and transnational mechanisms of capital. In the era of globalization, they are compelled to move, mediate, and barter their identities and subjectivities as a possible measure to gain employment, earn money, and lead a better life. With these points of departure, this essay approaches mediation and migration as two social phenomena that include local/national subjects who figure in multinational/transnational spaces as domestic helpers/entertainers and call center agents, and who are transformed by their subject positions in the network of global labor relations. It focuses on mediation and migration as tropes that may serve as springboard for understanding the dialectical relationship between the local and the global, inclusive of its attendant cultural, economic, and social tensions and intimacies.

Mediation and migration are seen as processes that have shattered simplistic conceptions of impermeable borders, as well as long-held monopolies of attachments to the nation-state. Electronic mass mediation and transnational mobilization are also perceived as crucial phenomena that transform the work of the imagination into “a cultural fact” imbricated in the arbitrations of nation-states across the globe (Appadurai 1996). What transformation transpires when the local/national subject enters the spaces of the multinational and the transnational? If the growing interest in transnationalism magnifies the current restructurings of capitalism, the reconfigurations of power,

relations and identities, and the reconceptualizations of the local, national, regional, and global (Schiller 1997), how then does it transform subjects who are (voluntarily or involuntarily) made part of its deterritorialized flows and networks? On the other hand, if multinationalism refers to the economic procedures of capital development and movement in national spaces (Tolentino 1996), how then does it function as a “common ground [that] is the scene of the International (community)” (Tadiar 2004, 7) and exploit the figure of the territorial nation-state and its local and national subjects?

This essay further speculates whether or not a discourse on intimacy can be developed from the coexistence of the native and the foreign in multinational and transnational spaces. In light of the foregoing, the initiative to look at plays through the lens of intimacy converses with and should be seen as part of the growing interest in affect studies in which ways people come together or are made to be together in what Kathleen Stewart calls “a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences” (2007, 1) are theorized. One of the major concerns of affect studies is to map out how things within everyday life happen in “impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*” (ibid.). According to Stewart, in her book *Ordinary Affects*, affects “move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds” and that their relevance “lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible” (ibid., 2-3). Stewart further teases out her conception of such discursive paradigm and spells out her faith in the transformative potential of such mode of critical thought:

Ordinary affects, then, are an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures. They are a kind of contact zone where the overdeterminations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place. To attend to ordinary affects is to trace how the potency of forces lies in their immanence to things that are both flight and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too. (ibid.)

It is significant to mention that Stewart’s formulation of affect gives premium on the “tangles of potential connections,” “coexisting forms of composition, habituation, and event,” “forms of power and

meaning [that] become circuits lodged in singularities,” and the “question of the intimate impacts of forces of circulation.” The running idea in all these phraseologies is that affect studies looks into but does not stop at one person’s feelings, as Stewart further argues, for it also accounts for bodies making an impact on others and engendering collective intensities, trajectories, and circuits. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2004) shares with Stewart the intention to analyze how emotions, as “feelings of bodily change” and as social and cultural practices, “make” and “shape” bodies as forms of action. Like Stewart who emphasizes the significance of the procedure of circulation, dispersal, and temporary residence of affects among collectivities and individualities, Ahmed also looks at emotions as critical parts of interpersonal relations between an “I” and a “We.” She offers a theory of “sociality of emotions” whereby emotions are seen as crucial in constructing the “very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (ibid., 10). She further posits that emotions deal with the instructive dynamics between movement and attachment, or what sets us into motion and what keeps us at rest. She writes: “What moves us, makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the ‘where’ of its inhabitation, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others” (ibid., 11).

In this study, the word “affect” is made specific in the nominated term “intimacy.” Intimacy is taken to mean as “the way bodies and objects meet and touch, that zone of contact and the formations they make” within the circumstances of affective labors, such as domestic, call center, and entertainment work. It also signifies a spatial proximity or adjacent connection, a demonstration of privacy (like the one that happens in private spheres), and the variety of contacts among peoples that may result in coalitions or alliances (Lowe 2006). It refers to an internal metamorphosis that happens between persons “who initially have nothing” and “those who have wealth and power” when they negotiate their penury and plenitude, to bridge or lessen the break in their social class and stature (Cannell 1999). In this regard, intimacy must not be restricted to the couple, to the collective of two, to bonds of blood, or to sexual encounters between or among individuals, as Lily Cho argues in a 2013 essay. Instead, it must be seen in light of the “determination of different approaches to ‘live with’ each other in a

condition of productive debate and intermingling” (Aschroft in Antwi et al. 2013, 2) and the “conditions of post-colonial exchanges, with inter- and intra-continental circuits of passionate politics, and to acts and interested networks of globalization” (Antwi et al. 2013, 2).

Derived from two phenomena that reorganize and disorganize territories, structures, and relationships, intimacy is seen as a retextualization of personal and interpersonal relations. Furthermore, an ideological framework such as intimacy reckons with the changing notions of familiarity, adjacency, affective and private ties, as well as with the forms of instrumentalization and co-optation it may suffer from social institutions. It is in the light of local and global contacts, the paradigms of capitalism and neoliberalism, and the attendant transformations these entail that an initial discourse of intimacy is explored as a form of subject-formation, a manifestation of “intimate publics” and “emotional geographies,” a mechanism of control, and a means to exploit dreams whose intensities sustain operations that capital propels and thrives on. In other words, this essay sees intimacy as generative of discourses on the entangled threads in the mediated and migratory lives of humans: one that deals with the “happy fictions” of upward mobility, success, and cosmopolitan citizenship brought about by travel and technology, on the one hand, and the “interruptive texts” about the various symbolic and structural violence that permeates, governs, and determines daily existence, on the other (Antwi et al. 2013).

### MIGRATION AND THE IDEA OF ELSEWHERE IN *WELCOME TO INTELSTAR* AND *THE SILENT SOPRANO*

*IntelStar* and *Silent Soprano* evolve their premises from two different domains. The former is located in a call center agency in the Philippines, while the latter is set in the entertainment industry in Hong Kong. What binds them together, however, is an aspired location that the plays’ main characters wish to be situated in, literally or figuratively. At one level, the idea of America pervades every call center agent’s mind in *IntelStar*. America is bread and butter, customer and boss. At another, the specter of the Philippine nation hounds *The Silent Soprano* in such a way that it is both home to Margie/Meimei and beneficiary of her earnings as a domestic helper/singer. From the beginning, the nation is an origin, a site of melody and malaise, and a destination to which this drama’s lead intends to return but momentarily cannot.



This paper uses these notions of place in relation to a migration that is not limited to the exportation of physical bodies abroad as seen in *Silent Soprano*. It also discusses how an idea of an “elsewhere” is constructed through a travel that technology and telecommunication facilitate as demonstrated in *IntelStar*. In both cases where migration and mediation show different but convergent movements of ideas and people, a certain dislocation is made in order to make other processes and practices of livelihood, identity making, and subject-construction possible. Seeing migration as the movement not only of corporeality but also of ideas and ambitions from a certain site to another gives more credence to the interconnectedness of countries and people across the world. This definition of migration complicates the dichotomy of the local and the transnational/global inasmuch as it connotes porous and fluid transfers, as well as problematizes the intercalation of migration and mediation. In this setup, the local enters a circulatory network of operations, where it assumes different social, economic, and political functions under the trappings of technology, capital and profit, and personal dreams and fantasies concerning “the good life.” Furthermore, resemanticizing migration illuminates how local subjects encroach on multinational/transnational sites, as well as how multinational/transnational institutions conversely make local subjects dream, fantasize, and perceive their “reality.”

### ***IntelStar* and the Sense of America**

A call center company specializing in US directory assistance, IntelStar Central Office is the play’s main setting, where the major character, Ma. Leonora Teresa Grabador-Bayot a.k.a. Ma’am Chelsea, works as a trainer to new call center agents. As this institution makes its employees aspire for authenticity in a language and culture perceived as not originally theirs, this office is a locus for the modern as well as a production house of incongruent dreams to the extent that it cultivates and capitalizes on these dreams amid “the gritty third world realities of hunger and squalor” (Tadiar 2004, 1–2). To appropriate Neferti Tadiar’s assertion about the Philippines’ position in the global network of power and capital in which it is subsumed: “[IntelStar] is a place of ironic contrasts and tragic contradictions . . . A third world place in first world drag” (ibid.). Such habitus is a community with “no sense of place,” which calls for “rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the

other” (Appadurai 1996, 29). Moreover, IntelStar serves as the breeding ground to the play’s sole speaker, who, in looking the part of “a typical well-scrubbed Makati middle-management yuppie [wearing] high-heeled patent leather shoes, smart-looking, Armani inspired suit and freshly manicured French-tipped nails” (Martinez 2006, 3), externalizes the market she serves, suggests the kind of social reality she aspires for, as well as magnifies the contradictions a Filipina like her carries. This multinational company has also provided women like Chelsea with work space only within its economic and cultural prerogatives and without allowing them to depart from their traditional roles and functions in society (Tolentino 1996).

A thirty-seven-year-old *morena* whose features are described as typically Pinay, Chelsea begins her monologue by welcoming the new entrants to one of the country’s biggest call center companies. She says: “It is a known fact, especially to those of you who’ve been to other call centers, that IntelStar gives one of the best compensation packages in the industry. Aside from regular salaries, bonuses are given to those who perform way beyond what is expected from them. So, I think you would agree with me if I tell you that you should give yourself a big, big, big round of applause. Come on! Let’s hear it!” (Martinez 2006, 4). Chelsea’s introduction foregrounds how fortunate her trainees are for making it to IntelStar, on the basis of the remuneration and benefits they will receive from the company. As Chelsea asks her audience to laud no one else but themselves, she is also asking them to enter symbolically the multinational space that she is at that point controlling. Chelsea turns out to be the bridge that links these hopeful employees to the tempting world of material accumulation, as well as the authorized point person who inaugurates the protocols of capital as necessary elements in the processes of what Tadiar calls the “hegemonic global present” (2004, 8).

Chelsea continues to inform the trainees about IntelStar’s singular vision of becoming the number one advanced directory assistance in the world. She says: “The success of this company does not rely on its technology or its database; its success depends on the kind of service each of us gives to our customers. When success is our only option, we must be in our mission” (Martinez 2006, 5). The rhetoric in which this “mission” is articulated is an inviting one as it is inclusive of and collaborative with clients whose needs are the commercial targets of IntelStar’s commercial intervention. It elides the exploitative functions of technology as employed in a corporatist setup such as IntelStar, as

well as emphasizes one's virtually interpersonal relations with others as the sole component of one's and their company's success. To put it differently, the call to be "one in their mission" and to provide "service" to their customers are humane mantras at the surface, as they suggest ethical and professional concern for others; but they, too, offer a romanticized view of human labor, one that fails to account for the exploitative rules, relations, and economies behind foreign employment. Despite being able to fabricate a make-believe affinity for others in the name of corporatist success, as well as to pave the way for "a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai 1996, 31), the rhetoric of oneness tempers, if not covers up, the subtle and blatant coercions that constitute corporate life.

When Chelsea tells the trainees to introduce themselves to foreign callers using a standardized syntax and an American-sounding name, she also establishes what Tadiar refers to as "a field of symbolically structured meaning that shapes and regulates desires" (2004, 9). The work of the imagination is maneuvered primarily by discarding Filipino-sounding names. This is Chelsea's—or the company's—initial promotion of an elsewhere. Only by changing their local-registering names to foreign ones can agents figure effectively in a multinational space, and thereby be able to move one degree closer to a fantasy of participating in a common imagined geography and history predicated largely on the idea of America. By retraining one's linguistic competence, which in itself may be viewed as an economic and ideological maneuver in "synchronizing and charting planetary time with global geopolitical space . . . [that] enables fantasy-productions practices to be business as usual" (*ibid.*, 20–21), one is promised participation in what is considered an "international community" or a "global network." In other words, this necessary stage in the whole process of conversion of the local into the global crystallizes the whole idea that the Philippines, through its labor, natural and social resources, its territory and its symbolic presence, has inestimably served its former colonizer and perennial master in this neocolonial world of global politics by way of responding to and guaranteeing the conditions promised by and premised upon the United States of America (*ibid.*). Chelsea further instructs:

It is mandatory that we have an American name here at IntelStar. Just imagine if I start all my calls using my real name. It would sound like this: "Hi this is Ma. Leonora Teresa Grabador-Bayot. City and State please?"

Our customer would suspect right away that we are not centrally located in the US. And that's a big, big no-no! They're not supposed to know that we are on the other side of the globe. I mean, what can be more Pinoy than Ma. Leonora Teresa—or Bayot for that matter. It's such a giveaway. Don't you think? So the first order of the day, I mean, of the night, is to choose your American name. (Martinez 2006, 6)

The act of concealing one's real name in favor of another may be seen as a migration of one subjectivity to another. By not revealing their local names and real location, agents are allowing themselves to converse efficiently with foreign customers. By changing their names within the confines of a telemarketing company, they are automatically made part of a distribution and circulation innate in a market economy that diminishes, if not totally represses, questions of race, ethnicity, and identity. To use Tadiar's argument about the kind of "fantasy-production" Filipinos are made to embody in the new global order, these call center agents are "all of a sudden imagining for themselves, creatively dreaming beyond [their] nation-bound imaginations (if not re-inventing them) and exerting that dreaming on the world in ways that [they] had never done before" (2004, 5). In being mandated to change their names into more American-sounding ones, call center agents are at once made to concur with a policy that washes off one feature of their social being, on the one hand, and that protects them from possible threats of racial discrimination, ethnic profiling, and class subjugation, on the other.

But what's in a name? To call center agents, a name may carry a whole lot of meaning: geography, race, ethnicity, and class. That a name can give a caller hints about the agent's background makes the compulsion to hide one's identity by altering his or her name stronger. In this industry, a name is like a ticket or a passport that one has to carry to be able to ferry across safely and successfully to the other shore. Although this paper does not argue that a name constitutes the totality of identity, the act of name-changing can expose certain symptoms and consequences of capitalism, globalization, and the continued subjection of members of developing nations. Although Chelsea and IntelStar do not highlight the underlying violence in assuming a pseudonym, this very silent act indicates imbalanced global conditions between and among countries. By concealing one's real and native-sounding name in exchange of a more American-sounding one, a call center agent is reduced to an essentialist blunder to the extent that she is confined to the cultural stereotypes that a "Filipino" nomenclature may activate in

the global market. The novelty of an American-sounding name, moreover, becomes the only way to experience mobility in call center work, to access this “globally competitive” social life and subject position, and to be part of this privatized opportunity of realizing one’s dreams and agency.

The play also provides the Accent Neutralization Program as another way of reifying the thought of America, within the confines of a telemarketing industry. Consisting of five weeks of training, modules of written and verbal exams, and recordings on how to speak with neutral American accent, the program aims to rework a call center agent’s locally inflected speech into one that may register as “standard American English.” It is premised on the notion that if one cannot be an American, at least one, through rigorous training, can sound like one. Chelsea says: “You see, if you can’t ‘be’ an American, you can always sound like one. And that’s enough” (Martinez 2006, 7). Registering like an American seems doable precisely because Filipinos are heavily exposed to Hollywood films, MTV, and shows like *Sesame Street*—a fact that Chelsea considers a “blessing” as it prefigures the “destiny [of the Philippine nation] to thrive in this business [of call centers]” (ibid.). Filipinos are easy targets of call center companies precisely because of their stereotypical knack for imitation, their perceived chameleonlike linguistic and cultural traits, and their affinity for “an American world they have never lost” (Appadurai 1996, 30).

If anything, the Accent Neutralization Program is a project that wishfully tries to efface the accent and nuance in a local subject’s speech. Any attempt to sound authentic is a journey and a conversion in itself on the local subject’s part. To become, and not be, an American is a delicate metamorphosis that evokes submission, conversion, and aspiration for another world and reality that, while not totally welcoming to strangers like Chelsea and other call center agents, may still give them the hopeful promise of a life lived in relative prosperity. The mimicry a call center agent does is indeed a very intimate instance, for it is a fusion of sorts that concerns two languages and two cultures.

In this linguistic shift, Chelsea becomes the figure against whom the trainees have to benchmark themselves. She is the image of the metamorphosed, the assimilated, and the developed. She is the erasure of the native, the success of the global, and the child of the transnational. She stands in as the body that has been “reconstituted in the respite of actual multinational work” and that has been drowned in material

consumption within and without the corporate sphere. As she says: “After five weeks, if you do good, you’ll be able to speak just like me. Isn’t that wonderful?” (Martinez 2006, 11). As the training progresses, Chelsea also happens to be the civilized modern as she is a creation of her company’s civilizing house rules on dress code, the usage of English, and the strict observance of punctuality. It is through the civilized façade that she projects that the promise of multinational work, as well as the utilization of the bodies of call center agents, can be understood as a significant part of First World modernity. In other words, Chelsea’s persona, rhetoric, and nonverbal cues embody the refurbished, mechanized, and globalized female body that multinational operations intend to make out of call center agents in specific and all members of its labor force in general. Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco contends: “In a way, Chelsea is asking the agents to act according to instrumentality as an important dimension of performing globally. The alignment of the market, production, and capital is an important undertaking in accessing the global” (2014, 71). The mechanization of individuals inside a call center agency calls to mind a corporate culture that devalues and dislodges difference. This process, which may be considered part of the globalization of culture, is not tantamount to an easy homogenization, as Appadurai strongly argues; but it surely uses a congeries of instruments of homogenization, such as advertising techniques, language hegemonies, and clothing styles, “that are absorbed into local and political and cultural economies” (1996, 42). Saskia Sassen further writes:

Corporate culture collapses differences, some minute, some sharp, among the different sociocultural contexts into one amorphous otherness, an otherness that has no place in the economy, that holds the low-wage jobs that are, supposedly, only marginally attached to the economy. It therewith reproduces the devaluing of those jobs and of those who hold the jobs . . . The corporate economy evicts these other economies and its workers from economic representation, and the corporate culture represents them as the other. What is not installed in a corporate center is devalued or will tend to be devalued. And what occupies the corporate building in noncorporate ways is made invisible. (2003, 175)

The part where Chelsea talks about discrepant times and time zones unveils at long last the reification of America. As Chelsea discusses the company’s adherence to American time, she is also clarifying who in the dynamics of the foreign and the native is the master and servant.

Now, maybe you're wonderin' why do you have to know these things? Well, since we are a dedicated service company and since our customers are from the US, we should be there where they are not by actually travelling to the US but by putting ourselves in the right mindset. Right smack in the action. Knowing what time it is back there puts us in the proper frame of mind so we can serve them the best we can. We should be able to adjust to their time, to match their waking hours and energy, to be there with them. So, if you get a call from a New Yorker at 12 midnight here in Makati, you should talk to him like it's 11 AM in Manhattan. He should hear you smiling. You should be up and about, ready to serve him, able to answer all his questions. Because their time is your time now. (Martinez 2006, 13-14)

The entry is instructive for several reasons. First, it highlights servitude and sacrifice as forms of access to the lives of Americans. As providers of service, call center agents have to adjust their biological clocks in order to transact business with their foreign customers in the wee hours of the day or night. Indeed, call center agents are not only tied to the company that gives them employment; they, too, are beholden to an institution that is in itself beholden to a foreign market. Servitude of this kind brings to mind the order of things during colonial times, where locals were forced to remain at the disposal of their colonizers. To slave away in this technological manner, under these power adjustments that are contingent on geography and class dependence of one country on another, underscores the lingering presence of neocolonialism in these parts, and one's lack of viable options against falling into the lapse of this modern-day slavery under the guise of technological adeptness, linguistic imperialism, and global interconnectedness.

Second, the passage shows how the arbitrations of technology and telecommunication generate the illusion of short distance. When Chelsea talks about adjusting one's time just "to be there with them," she is in a sense figuratively bridging the physical and cultural divide between the Philippines and the USA. As she talks about the shortened proximity between Manhattan and Makati, as well as the affective tendencies that must be present in the interaction between Filipino call center agents and their American customers, Chelsea is in a way fortifying a make-believe affinity between the local and the global. Of course, this relationship is never mutually beneficial. Even if one party allows another to experience economic mileage and mobility, as well as realize a capacity to dream of other horizons of living and

survival, this connection between the global and the local is almost always tyrannical. This brand of companionship, a certain type of “being there,” demands alertness and expediency on the part of call center agents who, given their inferior role in these transactions, are at the mercy of their patrons who predominantly come from the more opulent end of the world. While it is true that technology and mediated communication can harness new forms of ties at the personal and professional level, they too may build more borders and magnify all the more geographical and class differences.

Third, the line “Because their time is your time now” speaks of a shared but not equal ownership of the temporal between the local and the global. What is happening in America must also happen in the Philippines. In such a multinational space, a conflation of identities and subjectivities between caller and operator is forged as soon as commerce commences. This compression of time, space, and identities spawns illusory togetherness and synchronicity, which sustain the “fantasy of an out there” in call center agencies. Arif Dirlik is of the mind that “[this asymmetry between the local and the global] requires also a sense of history, that what appears today as something of an exchange, in which both sides participate, may turn out to be less than an exchange because it is unequal exchange, because one side will see its life transformed by television while the other side will through the same television invade the world and create a new structural context for its operations” (1999, 177).

Fourth, it shows a metaphorical migration, so to speak, or a personal shift of subjectivity from the call center agents’ end. As they have to be in “the right mindset” and to be “right smack in the action,” call center agents have to fake who and where they are if only to deliver maximum efficacy. Inasmuch as a customer has to sense that the operator on the other end of the line is smiling, call center agents are required to feign intimacy, closeness, and familiarity. Placed under a market that survives through foreign customers, call centers have to be one with their callers; that is, they have to be in synch with their schedules, directives, and demands. This procedure of artificiality may be seen not only as a prerequisite for a successful transfer of service from operator to caller but also as an intimate modification of the local subject’s individuality and subjectivity as she operates in a multinational space.



### ***The Silent Soprano and the Phantom of the Nation***

Labor migration has long been a theme in Philippine drama and theatre. *The Silent Soprano* belongs to a tradition of plays that dramatically and theatrically represent the Filipino migrant worker as a sexualized, racialized, ethnicized, and stratified member of the international workforce. Other plays that address the migrant question are *Amah: Maid in Hong Kong* (1987), *Katas ng Saudi* (1987), *Konnichi Wa Pipipin* (1987), *Japayukisan* (1988), *In the Land of the Giants* (2007), *Karaoke Dreams* (2008), and *Care Divas* (2011). *The Silent Soprano* tackles the life of a Filipina *atsay*-turned-superstar and the dislocations she faces abroad, such as “partial citizenship, the pain of family separation, the experience of contradictory class mobility, and the feeling of social exclusion of nonbelonging in the migrant community” (Parreñas 2003, 12). In his analysis of the said play, Tiatco writes that nationalism characterizes the play’s discourse, as well as prevents it from engaging transnational and cosmopolitan aesthetics for Filipino migrant workers. *The Silent Soprano*, as well as the theatre company that staged it, imposes “a monolithic construction of identity and belonging” and elides the cultural and ideological contradictions that constitute one’s identity. By showing the maid as a singer in a foreign environment, the play also perpetuates the notion that Filipinos are good at imitating other cultural traits, behaviors, and talents, usually at the expense of their own identity and culture (Tiatco 2013). Furthermore, the musical drama brings into focus the specter of the Philippine nation that continuously haunts OCWs, who put their lives on the line for their families and relatives back in the homeland.

The text’s opening scene ushers in the dichotomous images of maids and employers performing their early morning routines and rituals. On the one hand, the maids acknowledge that had they not gotten into this job, they would probably remain stuck in a life of impoverishment back in their home country. On the other, the employers recognize the work from which they are relieved because of the presence of their housemaids. They say: “All set, all right, let’s go. We’re ready for the show. We’re fed, we’re dressed, we glow. With them all systems go. Here comes the sun. There goes the day. From insane Mongkok to holy Lantau, we work and play with unwrinkled brow. We can’t leave home without them” (Saludo 2008, 1). This song and dance number cuts to another scene, where one of the maids gets arrested for being reported of having a job that is not part of her contract. After this happens, all maids convene once again and sing:

“Against the law! A maid is a maid is a maid ONLY! Here you cannot do any sideline. Against the law! A maid is a maid is a maid ONLY!” (Saludo 2008, 4).

Insights about the plight of Filipina OCWs in general can be discerned from this juxtaposition of initial scenes. First, Filipinas leave the nation to seek comparatively high-paying jobs elsewhere. Second, as domestic helpers, Filipinas do a great service to their working middle-class masters by taking on the household chores to which they can no longer attend. Third, Filipinas are always under the threat of getting violated, evicted, and abused in unkind foreign spaces. And fourth, the subjectivities and bodies of Filipinas are owned by their foreign masters, and are not allowed to live freely in the host land. These contemplations are essential as they frame the conditions surrounding *The Silent Soprano*'s main character, the position of most OCWs abroad, and the location of the Philippine nation in transnational/global spaces.

The second scene shows Margie and her friend Chikka having a conversation about the former's sideline as a karaoke singer in Mongkok and as secretary to her boss Selina. Margie's active participation in side jobs is an example of what Saskia Sassen calls “circuits of counter-geographies of globalization,” for they are “directly or indirectly associated with some of the key programs and conditions that are at the heart of the global economy, but are circuits not typically represented or seen as connected to globalization, and often actually operate outside and in violation of laws and treaties” (2000, 523). Margie does these sidelines in stealth, so as not to be caught by Hong Kong authorities. In the course of their conversation, Margie also talks about her plans of going back to the Philippines, after six months in Hong Kong, to rejoin her band that plans to fly to Dubai, where they can make more money. One can sense at this point that Margie's subjectivity is formed by and caught up in migration and in the accumulation of capital.

An angry Selina interrupts Margie and Chikka's conversation. She berates Margie for hanging clothes in their bungalow, a practice Selina considers downright provincial and uncivilized. As the domestic helper expresses her incomprehension of her master's speech, Selina insultingly says: “There's nothing wrong with my accent. Maybe it's your ears that need fixing! You stupid Filipi. . . .” (Saludo 2008, 5). When the songwriter Ricky, Selina's partner and Margie's other boss, tries to stop the argument, Selina instantly states that they pay good money for Margie's services. This scene brings into focus the physical

and epistemic violence local subjects like Margie may get from their foreign bosses. When Selina reprimands Margie for hanging clothes in their bungalow and dismisses this, rather derogatorily, as a Filipino custom, she is in a way hinting at the binary between the global and the local, the center and the periphery, the developed and the developing. With the price placed on Margie's head, she is treated as a person with no subjectivity and is therefore diminished into a "corporeal object" or a "labor-commodity" who is "at the mercy and for the pleasure of those who [bought her] from the recruitment agency" (Tadiar 1997, 155). What this primary encounter between Selina and Margie certainly validates is Rolando Tolentino's claim that "[f]or most Filipinas, to be an overseas contract worker is to be in a triple bind: first as a foreigner, second as a woman in patriarchal societies, third as a woman working professions regarded as menial and even socially undesirable" (1996, 58).

As the second scene ends, Ricky and Selina get into a spat, which later on leads to the end of their partnership. Now that Selina is out of his life, Ricky loses the singer of his songs and becomes miserable in life. In a strange twist of events, however, he hears Margie singing from another room and discovers her maid's talent. Impressed and enchanted, Ricky immediately asks Margie to be the voice of his Canto-pop compositions. Just when star builder King George and playboy millionaire Stanley Chao are in search of a new discovery they may launch as the next Shanghai superstar, Margie's talent reaches the two top bosses through Ricky's help and initiative. However, as Ricky reveals the background of the person behind the voice, King George and Stanley Chao become hesitant with the idea of making "a domestic helper jump from vacuum cleaner to chart-topper" (Saludo 2008, 24). King George tells Ricky: "Your audience isn't blind. People choose who they want to hear! And you've heard what many Hong Kong people say about maids. So much resentment and contempt . . . A star singer should be larger than life, flawless, an icon of perfection, not an object of ridicule" (*ibid.*). In this articulation of superstardom that is dependent on capital, King George emphasizes that star talents like Margie, as "vehicles of the capacity to labor" (San Juan 1998, 138), cannot stand outside capitalism. They are traded as commodities whose values, to take an acerbic but accurate assertion by Epifanio San Juan Jr., "sustain the extravagant lifestyles of the oligarchic elites who . . . [have] historically served corporate interests and their drive for super profits" (*ibid.*).

Margie's stardom indeed does not happen without complications. For her to be a superstar, she first has to overhaul her looks and sever ties with her family and friends. "Goodbye to friends. You won't tell a soul about your new look. Not even your mother. No more shall you be the maid Margie, but MEIMEI THE SHANGHAI DIVA. Success will be yours but the rules mine" (Saludo 2008, 25), declares George. Margie has to look Chinese, for her to gain more fans and for her to be completely integrated in the organizational layers of commerce. By changing Margie's physical features as a Filipina and concealing her background as domestic helper, she is, to borrow Tolentino's argument about mail-order brides, "depersonalized, delegitimized, and denationalized of [her] personal and political origins" (1996, 59–60). To transform who and what Margie is for the sake of an international career is to definitely deny her of her racial and ethnic difference. Margie resists the idea at first: "Change my face? I'm sorry, sir, but what does face have to do with singing?" (Saludo 2008, 26). But on second thought, given her powerless position as domestic helper in Hong Kong and her impoverished family back home, she accedes to the terms and conditions to being a star. "I will be Chinese!" (ibid., 27), she surrenders.

Driven by forces that emerge within a social space propelled by the logic of capital accumulation and processes of differentiation, mediated by legacies of colonialism and the current dynamics of racialization and gendering (Rodriguez 2010), this physical makeover may be seen as a negation of the validity of a migrant worker's status to qualify for stardom in the Cantonese entertainment industry. In other words, this transformation renders invisible the imputed stereotypes associated with migrant workers—such as social pollutants, purveyors of degenerate cultural values, carriers of diseases, destroyers of social cohesion, spawners of criminality and sexual immorality, and thieves who steal jobs from locals (Aguilar 1999)—in order to make someone like Margie a commodity marketable for international spectacles and profiteering. In true capitalist fashion that tends to repress particularity to give way to what is more universally acceptable and profitable, the migrant worker has to undergo this transformation, which ultimately takes her away from the social, cultural, and legal status deemed inferior to citizens of her host country and her future audience. In the words of Filomeno Aguilar, "The labor migrants lose their individuality, subsumed by the society's stereotypical perception of them. With the separation of personal biography and temporality from meaningful

physical space while in the country of employment, the labor migrant finds the self in a sort of suspended state animation” (1999, 122–23). All of these transformations may be seen as effects of a dominant symbolic script that operates within the matrices of what Robyn Rodriguez tags as “hegemonic practices, technologies of governance and discourse of Othering” (2010, 6).

But even after her physical makeover into a Chinese-looking woman, Margie remains prohibited to be mobile. Her face may have changed, but her history and consciousness as a Filipina stay. In this regard, her managers have stopped her from mingling with other people, and in doing so, they have also reduced her to the function of a singer. Margie’s conversion into Meimei is founded on a profound bias against her Filipina physical features, on the one hand, and on a deep desire from her managers’ end for authenticity, on the other. The idea of having a Meimei is only possible through the effacement of Margie. A Canto-pop superstar can only advance from the silencing of a domestic helper. Finally, a refined global product is only feasible through the makeover of a laboring local body. With the help of King George and Stanley Chao, Margie is suddenly capable of transcending her status as a maid and of participating as a channel in the circuits of power.

Leave the past behind you  
 You’re a new girl  
 No one will recognize you  
 You’re a new girl  
 Many doors will open  
 You’re now part of the game  
 Let our magic touch you  
 And you will never be the same  
 (Saludo 2008, 27–28)

By the play’s second act, Margie has finally been accepted as Meimei. She has gained her own following, produced two golden CDs, staged successful concerts and music videos, and raked in millions of dollars. As Hong Kong’s sensational Silent Soprano, Margie invites attention from the mass media. The more elusive and evasive she is, the louder the people’s clamor becomes. As the mystery of the Silent Soprano generates curiosity that handily translates into huge profit, there are no plans to reveal Meimei’s identity. To King George, Meimei’s high market value is enough. “She sings our woes away.

There's nothing more to say for us to love her show. Our Silent Soprano. Meimei's Chinese, who cares from where? Her record's gold, her concerts sold. It's just the press who wants secrets told" (Saludo 2008, 32), says King George to the prying media.

Not long enough, Meimei feels the complications of fame and fortune. Disguise and deception are bogging her down. Without a relevant past, the "labor migrant has no status aside from that dictated by the labor process and the occupational category as perceived by the [members of the employing country]" (Aguilar 1999, 104). Although Meimei's career has helped her escape poverty, it has however only done so without a total departure from her marginalized position as a local/national subject in a foreign space. Tolentino is of the mind that such marginality may be viewed as the essence of transnationalism, "which is premised upon women's oppression, [and which reconstitutes] these traditional modes of oppression for [its] own economic and cultural prerogatives" (1996, 54-55). Many times removed from the legal state of affair in Hong Kong and from her home country, Meimei's seemingly certain future is really at the risk of collapse, precisely because of the transitory nature of her stardom that is dependent on a flimsy notion of place and power. Little by little, she feels exploited by the same global capitalist market that is giving her a comfortable life. She sings: "What good is wealth when you're alone imprisoned by a white faced lie? . . . Oh how I long for conversation with treasured family and friends. How I wish to tell them about my situation. But they won't recognize me now" (Saludo 2008, 34).

Although rescued from poverty through the allowance that foreign investment has given her, in exchange of her body and labor as a superstar performer, Meimei also recognizes that the opportunities she has in the whole network of transnational exploitation of which she is star and slave have exoticized and denied her specificities. Meimei's song contains the pains of a local subject in a transnational space. It carries her difficulty to escape the specter of the nation and to assimilate the native with the foreign. Margie still feels abused in spite of the fame and fortune she gets, precisely because of her distance not only from her family and friends but also from her old self. At this stage of her career, however, she can hardly resist these changes. Her contract and her obligation to her relatives back in the Philippines constrain her to do so. According to Tiatco, this field of instrumentality is framed within methodological nationalism, where "the body of the *bagong bayani* whose income in the foreign land is the key instrument in the economic survival of both her family and the motherland" (2013, 434).

In another scene with her confidante Chikka, Margie is reminded why she conceded to become Meimei in the first place. Chikka brings back the phantom of the nation, by referring to the material wealth that Meimei will be able to amass and the poverty she will be capable to resolve if she keeps her past hidden from the public. When she convinces Meimei to protect her contract with King George and Stanley Chao intact for the sake of her family in the homeland, Chikka alludes to an economic nationalism that pervades the state's pronouncements about Filipino migrant workers and the remittances they send back to the Philippines.

One song buys three homes in old Bohol  
 Plus two haciendas with tenants and all  
 College degrees for brainy next of kin  
 From the best schools where just the rich get in  
 Fisher-Price toys and all the latest jeans  
 Everything but sharing her true story with friends.  
 (Saludo 2008, 36)

According to Tolentino, one's desire for consumer goods and one's dreams of modernity become the major stream in which mass migration flows. Moreover, as Aguilar interestingly states, the world of commodities is where the "ultimate balm to the hardships and trials of the economic exile" (1999, 126) may be found. What Chikka tries to do is temper Meimei's alienation and transform it into a source of pride for herself and for her family, who is now experiencing "an upward social mobility due to the economic bounty from labor migration" (*ibid.*, 113-14).

When Margie can no longer hold the pretense of being someone else, she asks Chikka to accompany her to Statue Square, where her former fellow domestic helpers gather for a day during their time off from work. There she can revert to being Filipino, without the prying gaze of their foreign masters. If anything, the Square is an important setting, for it is not only where OCWs share their dislocations with one another. It is also the site of forged alliances among the so-called servants of globalization. In Margie's case, in that scene at the park, she reveals herself to her former fellow domestic helpers. Unfortunately, as she is now as "white as marble with Chinese eyes and nose elevation," no one can identify her anymore.

Selina and Lex, a press member, also happen to be in the area, hunting down Margie/Meimei. As Chikka senses their presence, she

talks to other domestic helpers to block Selina and Lex, for Margie to be able to run away from media blitz. Selina and Lex get blocked, which causes the former to blurt out offensive and racist words to Filipino maids. Upon hearing these words, an angry Margie returns to the scene to confront Selina. While this is happening, Lex instructs the cameraman to document this encounter. Margie sings:

Who are you to berate  
 Our fellow men  
 Born with little in life but their toil  
 Who are you to dictate  
 How they should behave  
 Just because you were first on this soil  
 We are all but souls  
 Maneuvering the shoals  
 Of a world so far from heaven  
 (Saludo 2008, 39)

The news about the imbroglio reaches furious King George, who reminds Margie of her responsibility as a contract star. To avoid losing investment, Stanley Chao steps in and proposes the gimmickry of marrying Margie, so as to generate big news and thereby cover up the incident that previously happened at Statue Square.

Amid all these complexities, Ricky and Margie admit their affection for each other. As they embrace and kiss, King George however enters the scene, catches this moment, and immediately berates the two for their violation of the contract and for their planned escape. He threatens to reveal Meimei's identity and report her to immigration officers for deportation. Meimei boldly answers back: "Go ahead and expose me, George. I came to Hong Kong with one suitcase and honor, honesty and goodness. I won't stay if I lose these virtues" (Saludo 2008, 45). George goes to Chikka and commands her to convince her friend to stick to the contract. Chikka thinks of Meimei's mother, Aling Maria, who later on would fly in to Hong Kong from the Philippines to talk to her daughter. Aling Maria again sees her daughter and learns about her condition.

Surrendering the glamour, the fame, the lies, Margie bravely pursues her relationship with Ricky. George, Stanley Chao, and Selina are enraged by this turn of event, forcing them to stage a spectacle in front of the media out of the Silent Soprano's identity. In this grand



revelation, everything seems to collapse on Margie. Not long enough, policemen go to Ricky's place to keep him in their custody. Fans gather outside Ricky's place, with Margie, Aling Maria, and Chikka at the forefront, to protest against Ricky's arrest. And as all melodrama or "romance musical" (Tiatco 2013, 419) goes, the ending is a happy one as Meimei and Ricky become bigger stars now more than ever.

### THE HUMAN VOICE AS MEDIATION IN *WELCOME TO INTELSTAR* AND *THE SILENT SOPRANO*

Despite their different plotlines, spatialities, and temporalities, *Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano* intersect in the way they use the human voice as an affective medium necessary to human relationships, especially in the industries of entertainment and telemarketing. In *IntelStar*, Chelsea and her agents make a living out of their communicative transactions with Americans over the phone. As call center operators, they have to respond orally to the needs and wants of their customers, regardless of time or day. The timbre of their voices determines how pleasant and engaging they come across to foreign customers. In *The Silent Soprano*, on the other hand, Margie uses her golden voice to fulfill an obligation to her managers, fans, relatives, and nation. Her voice, which is a constitutive component of her laboring body, is one basis of her subject position in an international space. Furthermore, her singing voice is the medium in which she expresses her alienation, anguish, love for Ricky, and deep longing for the nation.

The human voice in both plays signifies a message, an occupation, a performance, a transformation, and an income. It is utilized to make a living, to go beyond the local, and to reach the global. It mediates a message, a story, a pain, and a paean.

This section of the essay looks at the human voice as a medium of and an element in the troubled interfaces of the national and the global. In search of the contradictions, the tensions, and inequalities contained in the very process of employing the human voice in virtual and real communication situations, this section begins a discourse on intimacy that speaks of the affects and the relations of native subjects with foreign subjects within international/global/transnational spaces. In the context of the plays, the voice is an "object-target" harnessed, disciplined, and made productive through "techniques of intervention" to facilitate economic, market-driven, and neoliberal operations, on the one hand, and to generate new ways of living and livelihood, on the

other. In each case, this essay argues that the voice is crucial in what Ben Anderson (2014) calls an “affective condition” of personal and collective lived experiences.

In the industry of telemarketing and human relations, the voice is redeployed under the apparatuses of discipline, security, and control, as well as imbricated in what Anderson calls “the working out of the neoliberal problem of how to organize life according to the market” (ibid., 40). On the one hand, it undergoes training, workshops, refinement, and modification. On the other, it is also a creation, a commodity, and a tool for commerce. In both instances, the voice is specifically tapped as a resource of surplus value from a life privatized, enclosed, and subsumed by corporatist setups. These aspects are inscribed in the monodrama *Welcome to IntelStar*, specifically when Chelsea attempts to shape the speech of her trainees and emphasizes the importance of an American-inflected voice and language. In this sense, one’s mechanism to speak is tempered within the confines of an institution, and thereby becomes an instrument of trade that espouses a global fantasy. By tempering the speech of her trainees and infusing it with American registers, Chelsea mediates their linguistic background and incorporates them in a global sphere where they may actively play a part. In this case, the urgency to temper one’s language and voice is indeed borne of the desire to belong.

However, if a pseudo-American voice may serve as a Filipino call center agent’s permit to enter a transnational space and access a global imaginary, the voice of a true American may instigate a demeaning encounter for local subjects. Chelsea shares an encounter with a livid caller, who denigrated her with a series of invectives when she could hardly locate a pizza chain’s address and number. After this heated incident with a client, Chelsea relates that she felt neither upset nor insulted. She rationalizes: “At the end of the day, it’s all just part of the job . . . It’s just a job. I shouldn’t get hurt and I shouldn’t take it personally. I mean, he doesn’t know me. He can’t even see me. How can he even hurt me when he’s on the other side of the planet? . . . If you ever get hurt, remember, they’re just words—words mean nothing” (Martinez 2006, 17).

Language becomes a tool that hurts and cancels out this very same hurt. By negating her emotions and resorting to reason, Chelsea dislodges her corporate subjectivity that has suffered abuse from the irate customer. According to Maria Rhodora Ancheta, “Here, indeed, ‘words mean nothing’ except as a babel of sounds that make it possible,

specifically, for an economic enterprise to succeed, and globally, for neo-colonial structures to be perpetuated in an Asian/Filipino context” (2011, 13). Indeed, by dismissing words as mere words and not bothering to attach herself to the insulting incident, Chelsea resorts to a flat feeling of impersonality, a feeling which is exploited to the hilt in the call center industry. To maintain this impersonality within the context of multinational companies and at the expense of one’s right to natural feelings of hurt and offense is to allow smooth “emotional engagement” to flow from the “global North” to the “global South,” as well as to contribute to what sociologists have called as the “global care chains” (Rodriguez 2010, 13). Within the context of IntelStar, not only does Chelsea give the company labor at a cheap price, but she also provides emotional labor that is assumed to be part of the service she fulfills.

This impersonality carries over to an experience with an old Filipino lady in San Diego, who dials 411 with the hope of being able to talk to a fellow Filipina on the other end of the line. As the woman hears Chelsea’s voice, she easily assumes home. She immediately tells Chelsea about her deep nostalgia for the Philippines, which she has not seen in the last twenty years. The lady says: “You are! You are a Pinay. It’s true what my *kumares* told me. Dial 411 and a Pinay will answer you. I can hear it in your voice. You are a Pinay. How is everything there?” (Martinez 2006, 17). In this scene, the human voice is employed first as a possible indicator of race and affinity, and second, as a potent means in creating linkages among local subjects across the world even in a multinational space such as the telemarketing industry. This scene between a Filipina operator and a Filipina caller is a heartrending moment that offers the possibility of transforming the industry, despite its capitalist nature, into a sphere tinged with sentimentality and affect.

However, this idea remains just that—a possibility. Given the protocols of IntelStar, Chelsea not only hides her Filipino identity from the old lady but also repudiates any possible link with her. This outright denial on Chelsea’s part is also a rejection of the Filipino caller’s self-identification as a *kababayan*. As Chelsea rejects anything Filipino, she too spoils “any possible patriotic amity that she and the Filipina immigrant caller could have shared” (Ancheta 2011, 15).

The play’s ending is a poignant scene of resignation and anomie to the degree that Chelsea, in a passive-aggressive manner, expresses her frustration, alienation, and disorientation over her work and workplace.

After training, Chelsea curses her job in Filipino, thus contradicting all the rules and standards as regards propriety and language use she has earlier set in front of her trainees. That she expresses her resignation in a Filipino expletive that may bastardize the sensitized nature of her corporate job and the modernity that it reeks of is an indication of Chelsea's return to or retrieval of her Filipino subjectivity that, in the context of IntelStar, is perpetually threatened. That Chelsea shifts her means of communication in the very premises of the company that mandates her to strictly employ the English language is a bold signal on her part to "break [away] from the linguistic tyranny of the elaborated code that she perpetuates in [her] lecture/monologue" (Ancheta 2011, 15). Moreover, that Chelsea says "*Tang-inang trabaho 'to. Madaling araw na, nag-i-Ingles pa rin ako*" (Martinez 2006, 19) is a sign of her self-reflective tendencies, tired and belated as they are, toward the absurdity of her subject position. That all these emotions are encapsulated in one vulgar and yet concise remark, and are delivered in a vocal tone that one can only speculate as unapologetically damning, is a mediation of Chelsea's long-repressed critique of the institution and the industry that she serves and services day in and day out. In the end, Chelsea is "made to succinctly take on the voice, and the reaction, of every Filipino who ends up working in this new globalized business" (Ancheta 2011, 16).

In this rupturing of what may be called "linguistic imperialism" in the call center agency, one may ask if Chelsea's gesture is an embodiment of a creative expression that breaks the tedium and tension of her job. One may further inquire about the potency of such ending whereby the final and strongest punch against a structurally corporatist environment is inscribed through means perceived as nationally or locally situated, such as the Filipino language, and through an outcry that enacts, reinforces, and contests inequalities in a multinational company such as IntelStar. Tiatco rejects other critics' claims that Chelsea's embodied act is agentive of social change, as this performance of exhaustion against an institution is individualistic and incapable of mobilizing a collective to subvert the power relations within the said call center company. It is only in her private time away from peers, all of whom are on the same exploitative boat as Chelsea anyway, that the head trainer cowardly deplores the industry to which she belongs, as well as tries to push herself out of the margins in which she has already been buried deep (Tiatco 2014).

If there is anything radical that this ultimate scene articulates with regard to fracturing the monolithic standard of such a multinational company, it would be the thoughtful reminder that within such seemingly totalizing habitus of commerce and global capital is what Nina Glick Schiller calls a “historical simultaneity of the global, transnational, and national” (1997, 161). In this regard, Chelsea’s eruption by way of “unprofessional behavior” and “crass language” may be a remainder and reminder of her inassimilable cultural differentiation, ethnic and national lines of demarcation, and differences in locality, region, and nation (Schiller 1997). This concluding moment also suggests the obduracy of the local or the national in the face of the global, as well as the dialectical relationship between the two that simply resists notions of alternative identities in which the global erases the local or the national in such a reductive, convenient fashion. No matter how late, Chelsea’s outburst shows how the unruly body and one’s slippery identity are difficult to contain or sublimate. Furthermore, it also jolts us to remember the perennial delays of technologies and apparatuses in fully assimilating, knowing, and targeting a “power that expresses itself from life, not only in work and language, but in bodies, affects, desires, sexuality” (Negri in Anderson 2012, 36).

In *The Silent Soprano*, on the other hand, Margie becomes the literal and metaphorical voice that mediates the experiences domestic helpers and entertainers like herself have in Hong Kong. At once the archetypal domestic worker of globalization and a Canto-pop superstar, Chelsea employs her voice and body to epitomize the suffering that laboring national subjects like her undertake. Her labor becomes a reflection of other people’s labor, while her voice sings of the contradictions that constitute her globally local and locally global subjectivity as superstar singer and domestic servant. As a maid, Margie’s voice is the source of her additional income. She moonlights as a karaoke singer in Mongkok, to shore up her earnings. As soon as Ricky discovers her singing prowess, Margie becomes known no longer for her skills in domestic chores but for her magnificent singing voice. Ricky, in fact, validates the truth and tenderness in Margie’s vocality, the kind that can make his music “soar to the sky and fly” (Saludo 2008, 13). In this sense, Margie’s voice becomes her legitimate ticket to alleviate her subject position in Hong Kong and to improve the lives of her family and friends in the Philippines.

Discovered for her singing talent and consequently signed up for King George and Stanley Chao’s company, Margie is catapulted to

stardom. Concomitantly, her voice gains currency and becomes a product *of* and *for* the global, the modern, and the commercial. Margie's voice sings a song about oneness and thereby articulates a liberal humanist desire to erase historical differences and ideological specificities in favor of a unified, oftentimes bourgeois, ideal of freedom and togetherness. This articulation rooted in a liberal philosophy narrates social and political emancipation through economic sufficiency, citizenship, and membership in the state, as well as civilization shaped by aesthetic education and national culture. All of these cases unify "particularity, difference, or locality through universal concepts of reason and community" (Lowe 2006, 192). The fantasy of a world in which differences are elided to give way to "faith, hope, and love" is an ideal and promising one, but it must also be understood, according to Tadiar (2004), within the bounds of the global material imaginary on which it is played out. Tadiar (2004) further argues that to cast dreams and fantasies through the invocation of autonomy and self-containment is to neglect the global structures of socio-politics from which our interpretations and representations of the world emerge and in which they play a constitutive part.

In a world gripped by hate  
 Hold me close and pray  
 We never let go—we are one  
 Through the violent haze  
 We shall find our way  
 We must never let go—we are one  
 Through blood, sweat and tears  
 Despair, doubt and fears  
 We will stay the course to heaven  
 Keep faith, have hope  
 And love one and all  
 We shall walk upright and tall  
 I am you and we are one  
 (Saludo 2008, 29)

In the entertainment industry, such message is customarily made to cater to a bigger audience. In Margie's case, this works and sells. Her fans speak volumes. Her voice, song, and physical appearance are well-received and well-loved. To fans, her voice sings their woes away. Inasmuch as her voice relays a sentiment and an ambition, it effectively captures an audience and a market.

Chelsea's voice also expresses the poverty that besets Margie's nation and fellowmen. Each song she sings is dedicated to her homeland. The sacrifice and servitude she does are contained in and projected through her songs. Indeed, her voice does not only croon her personal conversion and oppression as the Silent Soprano of Hong Kong; it also intimates the sad melodies of "the poor souls of [her] land" (Saludo 2008, 49).

In this sense, the voice carries the important dimensions of Margie: (1) her hardships as a domestic helper, (2) her frustrations and limitations as Meimei, and (3) her duties as a Filipina whose remittances keep her nation's and her family's present and future afloat. The voice also bears the incongruities of Margie's background as a female domestic helper that is marginalized by her subject position, and as a superstar in Hong Kong, who, despite her capacity to earn big money and be heard by many, remains silenced by a contract that continues to reify a notion of Chinese/Cantonese authenticity. As Margie moves from the spheres of the domestic to the public, her voice carries the traces of her bitter history of subservience and surrender. Finally, Margie's voice mediates a fantasy to be an active part of an international and global condition, for the sake of her family in the homeland more than for herself, which is at the surface made true by the apparatuses of King George's and Stanley Chao's global capital and power, but in reality failed and demoralized by these very same elements.

## A CONCLUSION BY WAY OF A DISCOURSE ON INTIMACY

*Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano* do not only exemplify the crisis of migration and mediation as social phenomena that are central to globalization but also demonstrate reflective tendencies toward the dynamics of the local, the national, and the global. In these plays, the native interacts and integrates with the foreign in multinational and transnational spaces, a moment that causes linguistic, social, and economic transformations as well as affective conditions.

As much as this essay recognizes that the abovementioned transformations allude to the themes of hybridity, mimicry, appropriation, and adaptation, all of which are ever ubiquitous in discourses on the call center and entertainment industries, instances of intimacy however are this section's major concern. What discourse on intimacy can develop from mediation and migration as seen in the two examined plays? And how is it employed, controlled, and made

productive in the disciplining forces of environments such as call center agencies, migrant domestic spaces, and the entertainment industry? If intimacy may mean re-texturing interpersonal ties (Antwi et al. 2013), and if it may be seen as a significant component in the constitution of life and living, then what role does it play in systems where neoliberal policies try to govern every human being and determine which life is valued or not and how? And how does intimacy among strangers and citizens, across sex, gender, race, and class, signify not the traditional notion of sexual encounters but cohabitations of human beings under specific affective or afflictive conditions without totalizing tensions, contradictions, and differences?

First, intimacy within the frame of migration primarily shows the miniaturization of the globe, a juncture in the era of globalization that accords people from different countries and nationalities the opportunity to move from one place to another, principally for employment and survival, and to interact with one another. This intimacy stems from the fact that boundaries of the nation have already been fractured and that their scope and range have been broadened, if not dissolved, thus allowing its people to bring their social, political, cultural, and economic realities and histories elsewhere. Putting the notion of intimacy side by side with the migratory movements occurring at present does not only help underline the incongruities in the relationship of the local and the global but also retools ways of receiving this relationship. This paper is not proposing an intimacy that homogenizes nor totalizes the plural into the singular; instead, it underscores the multiple and various formations that intersect with one another. Thus, this diasporic intimacy does not “universally include the entire globe, but instead are composed of fragmented, multiple connections that emerge from historically specific conditions” (Parreñas and Siu 2007, 7). Parreñas and Siu argue that these diasporic coexistences, consciousness, and identifications may be “a strategy of resistance, though . . . [they] may not always have a progressive agenda” (2007, 10).

Unfortunately, in both plays, the intimate cohabitation of the native and the foreign is diminished by oppressions, powerlessness, economic nationalism, and the denial of otherness. The proximities of Margie/Meimei to her bosses, as well as of Chelsea to her clients, reveal the “intimacies of empire” (Stoler in Antwi et al., 2013, 3) and the affective labors that express inequities among countries. They further indicate that globalization has produced intimacies from “regimes of



inequality” (Rodríguez 2010, 2) and has activated scripts of subjugation and the “legacies of a colonial order” (ibid., 3) through dehumanizing market conditions and state policies that carry out varied impacts in individual and collective lives. Although globalization has shrunk the world into a “global village” and instigated intimate interfaces among people, it has only done so in ways that circulate and reproduce everything into a prospective “economic factor” that may contribute to “development” (Anderson 2012). On this account, the cases of Meimei/Margie and Chelsea are telling instances in which the market becomes the gauge for one’s participation and “interpersonal affective relations” in “a society subject to the dynamic of production” (ibid., 39). It indeed seems that the strong capacities of intimacy to affect and be affected—to bolster a “tangle of potential connections” in the words of Stewart (2007)—are somehow diminished by the kind of capitalist logic behind such exploitative setups. Within Margie/Meimei’s and Chelsea’s respective circumstances, there may be connection between or among people only to the degree that they have certain roles and responsibilities to fulfill and not affective relations to maintain. That said, intimacy or affect is corrupted and co-opted, so to speak, not only to constitute psychic and social life but also to define the surfaces and boundaries that make business and capital work.

Second, intimacy within the context of mediation presents the role of technology in creating a “virtual imagined community,” where people know and interact with one another on the basis of their online presences. By being able to experience virtually what other people in different parts of the globe experience, or to participate actively in the activities of others on the Net, people are able to forge a common consciousness of togetherness. In one click and commentary, one view and visit, intimacy across cultures may be formed. People can suddenly dream other people’s dreams, and almost everyone can aspire to be like anyone else. In *IntelStar*, this intimacy manifests in Chelsea’s directive to master a language whose cultural nuances may slip or stay on the call center agents’ tongues, but the mastery of which may provide them a job and sustain their daily and lifetime survival. Chelsea’s civilizing rules may also show an intimacy that brings into focus the reconstitution of the local subject’s native identity as it enters the call center industry. On the other hand, *The Silent Soprano* shows a discourse on intimacy through the transformation of Margie into Meimei, a process that involves the domestic-helper-turned-diva to assume a Chinese persona and sing Cantonese songs with incredible genuineness and poignancy.

Although Margie initially takes all of these changes against her volition, the gesture of saving her family from destitution pushes her to take the route that may be repressive on the one hand but financially rewarding on the other.

In understanding these reconfigurations, one may learn from anthropologist Fenella Cannell who studies, in her masterful work on power and intimacy in the province of Bicol, how transvestite contestants of amateur singing contests choreograph into their performances influences from Western pop performers and Tagalog singers. She writes: "Each performance is a personal transformation, and a shift in language" (1999, 211). Transposed on to the plight of call center agents and domestic helpers, Cannell's remark may also suggest that such performances rendered by Chelsea and Margie/Meimei are beyond private makeovers. When the lead characters of *Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano* work in transnational/global spaces, they do so with a mindset that concerns a nation, a family, a group, a recipient. This makes any form of labor a poignant allusion to someone else.

Intimacy, therefore, concerns the tropes of servitude and suffering in multinational and transnational spheres. Emerging from affective industries such as telemarketing and migrant labor, intimacy intensifies in the face of a recipient, an addressee, a muse, a caller, and a customer. The person who serves or suffers has a greater possibility of getting deeper into her job when she thinks of a person or a group whom she would be able to redeem from something, somewhere, or someone through all this. By showing the productive potential of the suffering of call center agents and migrant workers, for instance, this intimacy shows how life, in the words of Ben Anderson, may depend on and exceed the interventions that order and control it (2012). As site and source of passions and emotions, intimacy further suggests the potentialities of life that are endlessly being formed amid even the most restrictive circumstances.

Moreover, intimacy is a potential aperture to an understanding of a connection between the native and the foreign that admits the transnational/global as a phenomenon of the contemporary, as an aesthetic, as a mode of thinking, without fully abandoning and frustrating what is deemed national or local. A discourse on intimacy addresses the fleeting fixities, the constantly uprooted identities, and the unsettled subjectivities—all of which are necessary obstinacies troubling any tendency to reify the past and deny the present the promises of a future that is not predetermined and not readily possessed—in this age of multimedia and diasporas.

It is on this note that this essay goes back to *Welcome to IntelStar* and *The Silent Soprano*, two plays whose main leads, Chelsea and Margie, are at once intimate with their nation and with a globalization that subsumes them. Lying between locality and globalization, they are “incipiently denationalized” subjects for good or for ill. At one point, they recognize their subject positions in foreign spaces and consciously sense the benefit that comes with it. At another, they also undergo physical, epistemic, and symbolic violence and bear the brunt of abjection, commodification, and instrumentalization. These two disparate but not totally divergent conditions of the call center trainer Chelsea and the domestic helper/singer Margie/Meimei are not only simple consequences of transnational mediation and global migration but also outcomes of a problematic national situation that requires or coerces people to move their status, with agony or not, as local subjects to global citizens of the world.

While these complexities in the lives of local subjects are played up, co-opted, or capitalized in both spheres of the national and the foreign, a more complex reality also has to be faced and problematized, if only to confuse, so to speak, the monolithic and homogeneous view of globalization, as well as to perplex the dichotomy of the local and the global. As a concluding note, this essay turns to the last scene in *The Silent Soprano*, where Aling Maria, Chikka, Filipina maids, and Margie’s Filipino and foreign fans circle around Ricky and Margie to protect them from the police. This penultimate part presages a prospect not of a world bereft of contradictions and irregularities, nor of a cosmopolitan conviviality that fuses difference and sameness or simply assumes a community amid diversity. Instead, it points to a kind of solidarity in the diaspora, which has established alliances that do not forget to commemorate the painful and hopeful histories of local subjects who are constantly moving from one place to another. It further suggests that, despite the fundamentally fractal cultural and social forms in today’s world (Appadurai, 1996), the overlaps and resemblances in our plural lives provide possibilities for interpersonal relations that go beyond boundaries, structures, and regularities. This solidarity—this “collective identification” (Parreñas and Siu 2007, 10) that coexists in the diaspora—also highlights Geraldine Pratt’s argument that emotions “are resources around which communities can organize, to make claims in a public domain” and that they may provide “deep—enduringly painful—reservoirs for political mobilizing” (2012, xxx). Furthermore, these contacts illustrate that power, discipline, and

control can never be complete, precisely because of intimate connections that interrupt dominant logics of social practice and manifest creative ways of living on the edge of things. Although the play's ending lacks a cogent clarification on the capacity of Margie to rise above her dislocations, as well as the radical edge to validate the potential of a global coalition, the promise holds and holds true: somewhere in the world are local and foreign subjects moving and staying, socializing and mingling, exploiting and exchanging experiences, maintaining and rupturing the status quo, in dynamically changing spaces, places, and times that are historically contingent on various imaginaries and intimacies. ❀

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