



God and Canada: Negotiations of selfhood and a sense of home and hope

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GOD AND CANADA: NEGOTIATIONS OF SELFHOOD AND A SENSE OF HOME AND HOPE

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*nasaan ang mga metapora ng aking bayan sa lugar na ito?*¹

- Journal entry, 15 January 2002

Montreal, Quebec, Canada²

In this essay, I ask how notions of home and identities are implicated in the shifting and changing global economic conditions. I argue that the self is one of the loci of cultural struggle in the ever-changing geography of globalization strategies. I then focus on how a Filipino caregiver in Montreal formulates her sense of selfhood and notions of home, describing briefly how some Filipinos in Montreal semiotically construct, consciously or not, their selfhood and sense of hope and home. Because this essay is an articulation of my interests as well, I also bring into the discussion my strategies of locating myself and the positioning of my itinerant identity. I explore three areas to illustrate the self as one of the vectors of this cultural struggle: 1) the production of identities and the circulation of the meanings of those identities; 2) the politics of representation of one's place and oneself, simultaneous with how others represent Filipinos in the interlocking networks of identity construction; and 3) the positioning of the self in the cultural struggle of mapping identities and places. I follow Clifford Geertz' interpretive approach to culture that is informed by thick description, the main aim of which is "not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them" (Geertz 2001, 351).

a short history of my place and myself,
or where am i in the places of my bayan?³

i was awed and bewildered by creation myths told to me by my elders during my childhood. everything about those tales was epic.

i was amazed by how the places of my *bayan* were borne out of the skirmishes between good and evil, or by the faulty utterances of our local communities' names committed by Spanish or American colonizers who came to our shores in their search for lost and fast-vanishing worlds. spun around those stories were tales of spirits lording over people who were afraid of incurring the ire of their *diwata* and *anito*. those were stories of friendship, too. a betrayal of the trust held among the people foreboded a tragedy, the consequences of which they had to dearly pay for.

everything about those stories seemed logical then, at least for me who had yet to slip from the slumber of my innocence.

when i entered grade school, the same creation myths were retold to me by my teachers. this time, however, the emphasis was on the moral of the stories. by the time i reached my 'age of reason,' i had come to recognize the non-sequiturs of everything that was in those stories. my mind started its gradual slide to science that had lured me to be more logical and rational.

i started to laugh at myths and legends. those laughter were to become slight insults that, later on, i would learn to hurl against my elders. i began to convince myself that they had taken me for a ride.

why did they ever tell me those cryptic stories of the origin of my country's places, i asked myself. to instill fear in my meek mind and heart? to sow terror in my childhood? to make me fear the massive darkness surrounding me? to convince me of the lies embedded in their superstitions? to force me to hold on to traditions and beliefs bereft of knowledge?

insults became curses. i started to curse my elders—silently. i started to curse my past—in a hush. i started to curse myself and my generation—indignantly. i joined the chorus of my generation cursing the stories of our elders—in silence and in bellow. we cursed all that *was* about them, and all that *is* about us.

i now look back at those stories because i now find in them a kind of sameness and similarity to the solitude of so many silenced lives. i now begin to search for the lost magic of those past hundred years and the other centennials of the tortured and deformed lives of the people of my country.

i am now reaching back to all the lost worlds of the myths i have cursed to atone for the sins i have committed against my elders. i now prefer to world my present with my forebears' narratives of creation. i now want to transpose the mysticism of those non-sequiturs into the logic of what i have been made to believe is my generation's rational present, to transform the mysticism of what i have been made to believe were mere mysticisms, to inhale my elders' logic of reasoning that, again, i have been made to understand were non-sequiturs.

i now want to slip away from the slumber of my ignorance.

but the curses that i have hurled against my forebears are now getting back at me, wandering like itinerant savages and beasts through the vast wilderness of my mind, gathering all the strength, anger, and violence they could muster to rebuke me for the cultural transgressions of my generation.

it is not my forebears' past that i have blasphemed. it is my present that i have profaned. i am now under the spell of my own curses.

i now regret that i have cursed my myths and my forebears who had touched with magic, with the magic of their reason, all that *was* in those tales, all that *is* in those myths.

nawawala na ang mga alamat. at kasabay ng pagkamatay ng mga diwata at anito ay ang unti-unti na ring pagkawala ng mga pook at lunan ng aming mga pangalan at pagkatao.

An autumn of negotiations

nasaan ang pangalan ng aking mga ninuno sa wikang ito?
(where in this language are the names of my elders?)

I came to Montreal close to the end of the autumn of 2001 to pursue a Ph.D. in Anthropology. I was at once confronted with the task of translating the soul of myself into English. I had to immediately negotiate the terms of the political covenant I had contracted with myself in the 1980s and the 1990s, which was to write only in Filipino, and, albeit with reluctance, to abandon my writing in English.

In the early 1980s, my covenant with myself was only confined to my creative writing. In the mid-1990s, I extended that vow of writing in Filipino to my other works in literary and film criticism, cultural studies, and essays in development work. Nonetheless, I still gave myself a little space for writing in English, and smidgens of Spanish and Kapampangan, the mother-tongue of my mother's lineage.

At the turn of the new millennium, I made another transaction with myself: I will not translate myself. I will leave the job of translating my work to anyone who finds interest in my work.

Between those years, I also promised myself to speak to Filipinos in Filipino on all occasions possible; and these included

not only everyday conversations but also my encounters in academe and in the other professions that I had for a living. To speak and to write in Filipino were conscious political decisions that I had made in a country where to use one's language is sometimes considered a curse. It was an ideological statement as I experienced and witnessed the history of my country where killing is more the preoccupation than writing.

But I am now writing in English.

I may be writing in English, but I am thinking in Filipino. I am, in effect, translating myself.

I feel that I am negating myself, because to translate is to re-inscribe new, often decontextualized, understandings of the new spaces and places of my selfhood.

I needed to negate myself, however, when I went to Montreal.

I was forced to negate myself in that city where my language resides in the most peripheral of the periphery. I was forced to break my political covenant with myself while I was in Montreal, a place that ironically prides itself on having diverse cultures translated as multiculturalism. I was forced to de-corporealize my language and de-word my soul in an academe where my language and my soul—the identities of my selfhood—will always be written and read in italics or enclosed in parentheses.

While negating myself, I was practically rewriting myself. I had hoped that rewriting myself would mean rewording my selfhood within the terms of my resituated self. In the process, I was re-worlding my world.⁴ In this sense, re-worlding, as another form of translation, may also mean re-inscribing new, often differently contextualized and reconfigured, understandings of the spaces and places of my selfhood.

A winter of negations and assertions

nasaan ang mga kuwento ng aking bayan sa paligid na ito?
(where are the stories of my bayan in this place?)

In December 2001, while forced to stay in an expensive 1½ apartment and desperately looking for an affordable but well-maintained unit, an advertisement on the December 21, 2001 issue of *infoRéal* (page 5) caught my attention:

A MAGICAL FILIPINA
or other caregiver can do
wonders for your home and family.
Call x x x.

Ironically, while writing this portion of this study, CBC's evening news program was broadcasting on national television that the Canadian government is reviewing its immigration regulations. The report showed one government official explaining that Canada is doing this to accommodate more skilled workers in the country (CBC News 2002).

In late November 2001, I had my first taste of Filipino food in Montreal in a Filipino restaurant on Victoria Street. Hanging on one side of the restaurant was a wooden image of the *tinikling*, which I learned in grade school is the national dance of the Philippines. The carved figures were of dancers in native Tagalog costumes. These days, however, no one dances the tinikling anymore, except in school presentations or cultural exhibitions showcasing the country's so-called customs and traditions.

A few days before Christmas of that same year, I had a Christmas *salo-salo* (get-together) with three Filipino friends in a newly opened Filipino restaurant on Decarie Street. After dinner, I picked up from a magazine rack a December 2001 copy of a Montreal-based Filipino newspaper. It carried an article about the opening of another Filipino restaurant in Montreal.

What interested me was the writer's wish to have the restaurant recognized as a representative of Filipino culture:

Although there are approximately 80 countries represented in the Montreal restaurant guide, a Filipino restaurant has not been included yet. Perhaps, with the arrival of this new restaurant, there is a good chance that 'Bahay Kubo' can be included to be a representative of Philippine cuisine and that it can be chosen by non-Filipinos as well. (Ferry-Kharroubi 2001, 3)

In early January 2002, while flipping the pages of a weekly newspaper that prides itself as "Quebec's largest English weekly newspaper," I curiously checked its advertisement pages for anything about Filipinos, and chanced upon the following:

NANNIES
INTERNATIONAL
Filipina and other selected
nanny/housekeeper or
caregiver will assist you with
your home and family.
Call x x x.
(*The Suburban* 2002, A-20)

The three monthly Filipino newspapers in Montreal always carried several advertisements by job placement agencies on how to fast-track the immigration to Canada of 'loved ones' left in the Philippines. Another advertisement in a Canadian weekly magazine had a picture of a nude pole dancer whose face was blurred to conceal her identity. The text of the ad read:

Oriental beauty
International Girls, 18+:
Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, **Philipino**, Korean & many
more
Best wishes to all our clients!
VP \$300/hr
Hot \$200/hr
Outcalls x x x
(*Mirror* 2002, 59; emphasis mine)

What perplexed me most was what I discovered when I spent my New Year in Toronto in 2002. A friend, whom I had worked with in a non-governmental organization in the Philippines assisting small-scale fishers, told me that he had become a Canadian citizen. He admitted, however, that he feels neither like a 'real' Canadian nor thinks that he is one. The change of citizenship, he added, was purely for economic reasons. At that time, he was working in a factory near Toronto. I also met in my less than a week of stay in Toronto a number of Filipinos who had switched citizenships.

Every time I walked on the streets of Montreal, it was almost certain that I would run into a Filipino caregiver. The Plamondon area where I stayed during the first few months of my studies in Montreal is practically a community of Filipino caregivers, housekeepers, and factory workers. The Plamondon Metro (subway) is, in fact, a *tambayan* (marked or claimed territory) of a number of Filipino youths, most of them smoking cigarettes, and some, wearing hip hop clothes.

Moreover, John Ward (2002) reported in the *National Post*, a daily newspaper in Canada, that in 2001, "about 42% of the immigrants came from just five countries: China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Korea" (ibid., A5). Citing data from Statistics Canada, the report claimed that "after Chinese, the languages with the strongest growth between 1991 and 1996 were Punjabi, Arabic and Tagalog, a tongue spoken in the Philippines" (ibid.).

In those brief and transient encounters with Filipinos in Canada, I was faced with, and even almost threatened by, a multi-layered configuration of signs, symbols, representations, and images on the brink of imploding and exploding into a constellation of contradicting and contrary meanings. The threat was not an imagined one. It was real.

The most striking image that I sutured into all these instances was the death of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino domestic worker hanged in 1995 by the Singaporean government allegedly

for murdering a co-Filipina and the five-year-old Singaporean child she was babysitting. Her fate symbolized the ordeals of millions of Filipino overseas contract workers forced to look for jobs outside the country to provide their families with decent lives. The entire Philippine nation believed that there was a mistrial in Contemplacion's case. Her case also highlighted the other unreported or undocumented or mysterious deaths of thousands of Filipinos working as domestic helpers, caregivers, ship crewmen, construction workers, factory workers, and entertainers whose bodies came home in tightly sealed coffins. Contemplacion's case also brought to the fore the apathy of the Philippine government to the sufferings of its own people. Contemplacion's death galvanized a nation on the brink of collapsing.

How have such signs and designs reframed the world of Filipinos in Montreal? How have such symbols represented their community as Filipinos? What is their sense of home? How do such signs define, refine and, maybe, defile their notions of themselves, and their community? How have such images and imaging altered the history and historicity of their places and identities?

This first cluster of questions had provoked me to formulate more questions that, at first, seemed inchoate, questions which later on I was able to bundle together in sheaves.

Where am I, as an ethnographic self, in this cultural struggle of mapping the self? How do my articulations of location and dislocation relate to the representations of a sense of home as constructed and lived by Filipinos in Montreal and as articulated by the intricate network of globalization? What are the different sites of my self? Where is the self of myself in this social transaction? How do I, or where do I, re-world my world?

Are the separate notions of home that Filipinos in Montreal construct linked with the interlocking networks of capitalism? Or are these imaginaries consciously deterritorialized from the articulations of globalism?

Sheaf after sheaf of random questions had marked, at least for me, those chance encounters with Filipinos in Montreal. And the next days following those first few days of my winter in Montreal had been as beautiful and dangerous as the promises, provocations and threats posed by those sheaves of random questions.

It was while bundling all these sheaves of questions together when I met Ate Norma (not her real name), one of hundreds of Filipino caregivers working in Montreal. She was introduced to me in late January 2002 by another Filipina whom I had met in the Metro (subway) while I was on my way to a friend's house. In the Metro, I heard my language being spoken by a mother and her teen-aged daughter. The mother acknowledged my glance with a reluctant smile and so I approached them, introduced myself, and started a conversation. When the mother came to know that I was looking for a house, she told me about a Filipino caregiver who was looking for a housemate. I moved into Ate Norma's unit on Decarie Street on February 2002.

Itineraries of the self

*nakakapagod nang mabuhay sa loob ng mga saknong
o sa mga pagtatalang nakahilig.*
(i am dead tired of living enclosed in parentheses
or expressed in italics.)

My essay asserts the importance of the self in the study of identities and cultures. Following the premise that identities and cultures, even within specific territorial units, are neither homogeneous nor fixed, Martin Sökefeld (1999) stresses that the self is the starting point of knowing and understanding the multiplicity and plurality of identities, not just of one group, but of the individual as well. The self, sensed psychologically, physically, and socially, opens up itself to its own inner and outer selves, apart from, but very much a part of, an ordered 'other,' a distinguished other that has its own inner and outer selves (Napier 1992). The self, then, is no longer understood as a singular and single unit. The self is plural, and each

part of that plurality is deployed depending on the exigencies of social circumstances and the kind of power relations that come into play.

Our concept of self, thus, should always be understood in relational terms. To reify the self is to negate this relational constitution of the self. The identity of the self is produced in the nature of those relations and the self's situatedness in those relations. This is not to say, however, that the self is a repository of those relations and that situatedness alone. I do not negate the truism of this argument. I contend, however, that the self also reconstitutes the nature of those relations and the nature of the situatedness of those relations.

Not only is the self plural, relational, and situated because the sites of self-making are, likewise, plural. As the self is embedded in different historical and biographical points, the self is also subject to change over time (Holland 1997).

As individuals, groups, classes, ethnicities, and genders are ordered hierarchically and laterally, the self—as both constitutive of and constituting the spatial and temporal assignments and arrangements of societies—gains an agency not completely susceptible to the workings of dominant and peripheral ideologies. The self is neither a helpless victim nor a willing product of power relations. Although I do not deny the major influences of society's social forces in the constitution of the self, I argue that not everything about the self is capable of being wholly determined by these forces. The self, by itself, is also an agent of power that takes an active part in the reworking of the fields of power. It can be understood in its modes of articulating itself and this is where the narrative of the self comes to the fore.

A narrative is always part of the self, for it is narrative that gives form to the experiences of the self. As experiences are transported to and transformed into narratives, our multiple and partial selves are given meaning. If those narratives resist the

dominant narratives of exploitation, colonization, and oppression, they become counter-narratives that challenge the status quo. In this case, the self, in the company of other selves, reasserts itself in the discursive construction of the world, in order to give sense to the relation of the self with the world (Ochs and Capps 1996). Narrating the self, in this instance, becomes an act of mediating the self (Holland 1997).

The following ethnography is a Filipino caregiver's narrative of her self.

An ethnographic encounter: Itineraries and articulations of Ate Norma's self ⁵

*nakapanlulumong umiyak nang walang luha,
nakakapagod lumangoy sa rumaragasang batis ng depresyon.*
(how painful to cry without shedding a tear,
how exhausting to swim in the hasty surge of depression.)

This section of my essay articulates what Barbara Tedlock (1991, 69) calls "the ethnographic encounter." This encounter weaves my own ethnography into that of Ate Norma. By following this ethnographic mode, I re-present her world as I likewise re-present my dialogic encounter with her. Undoubtedly, we are both situated in this narrative. We are transacting our own representations of ourselves.

Leaving home, coming 'home'

Ate Norma, at the time of the interview in 2002, was 58 years old. She arrived in Montreal in 1988 to work as a caregiver. Before she came to Montreal, she had worked for two years as a domestic helper in Singapore. In Montreal, she worked for two consecutive years for her first *amo* (employer) and then another ten months for her second *amo*. In 1992, her application for an immigrant status was granted by the Canadian government so months later, she flew back to the Philippines to spend time with her family. She returned to Montreal in 1994, worked for sixteen

months for her third amo, and another ten months, for her fourth amo. In 1995, she went back to the Philippines, not as a Filipino, but as a Canadian because her citizenship application had been approved that same year. *Canadian na ako, pero Filipino pa rin ako* (I am now a Canadian, but I am still a Filipino), she says. But she only spent a few weeks in the Philippines and flew back to Montreal to work for her fifth (i.e., for ten months) and sixth amo (i.e., for a year). In the same year, however, she was down with pneumonia for four months, found herself without a job, and was on welfare for a few months. *Mahirap magkasakit dito sa Canada, lalo na 'pag nag-iisa ka. Ikaw lang talagang mag-isa. Walang nag-aasikaso sa iyo. Kahit pagbili ng gamot, ikaw ang gagawa.* (It's hard to get sick here in Canada, especially when you are alone. No one looks after you but yourself. You have no one to run an errand for you, even to buy the medicines you need.) In 1999, she found another caregiving job, this time for an elderly who was suffering from depression and asthma. When I interviewed her, she had no idea when she could visit again her family and friends in the Philippines.

In 1998, she was back in the Philippines, bringing home a medium-sized (4 ft. by 2 ft.) *balikbayan* box. *Balikbayan* refers to Filipinos returning to the Philippines. In the 1970s, returning overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) from the Middle East brought home loads of *pasalubong* (give-away items) contained in such boxes. These items were mostly goods, clothes, television sets, Betamax player-recorders, audio components and other electronic items of the latest model. These boxes became so popular among Filipinos that it came to be called *balikbayan* boxes.

Konti lang ang nadala ko nu'ng umuwi ako non (I only managed to bring home a few items). These included a few T-shirts, grocery items like canned goods (sardines and corned beef), milk, toothpaste, and coffee. *Kahit gano'n lang 'yon, imported naman* (Those were imported items, anyway). Those give-away items were mostly for family members, but a few were also distributed among cousins and friends.

In a span of fourteen years as a caregiver in Montreal, she has worked for eight amo, all elderly Canadians: Anglophone, Francophone, and immigrant Jews and South Africans. And in between those years, she had gone back to the Philippines, with a different citizenship status: first, as a new Canadian immigrant; second, as a Canadian immigrant waiting for full Canadian citizenship; and third, as a full-fledged Canadian citizen.

Before deciding to work as a housekeeper and as a caregiver, Ate Norma kept a small *sari-sari* (retail) store in Quezon City. Originally from Zamboanga del Norte in Mindanao, she moved to the big city in 1967. Her husband contracts out small construction jobs. She says she decided to work outside the Philippines because their income was not enough to meet the needs of their family. *Ayaw mag-abroad ng asawa ko. Di ako na lang. 'Yun ang nakikita kong makakatulong sa amin.* (My husband didn't want to try his luck abroad, so I decided to do it myself. That was what I thought would help us.)

They have three children. Her eldest son, born in 1970, went to a vocational school after high school, and was working as a cook in a local inter-island shipping vessel at the time I interviewed Ate Norma. The second son, born in 1973, pursued nautical engineering but dropped out from school on his third year, and became a computer technician in Manila. The youngest daughter, born in 1976, stopped studying computer science in a university in Manila, and was attending a seminar for caregivers at the time of my interview with Ate Norma; she also had plans of going to Montreal.

Ate Norma hopes to bring all her children to Canada. She would also love to have her husband here, but he has no intentions of joining her. *Ayaw dito ng asawa ko; masyado raw malamig* (My husband doesn't like it here; he says the weather is too cold).

Ate Norma regularly sends money to her family in the Philippines. The amount varies between Cd\$500 and Cd\$1000

per month (about P20,000 to P40,000), depending on the financial needs of her family. She adds that she had to double her remittances because they were renovating their house in Quezon City.

Pero sa'n talaga ang bahay ninyo, I asked her. Her reply was quick, *di sa Pilipinas* (in the Philippines, of course).

A home of holy images

I call it my little chapel. At times, I refer to it as the house of the spirits.

Ate Norma's apartment has a wealth of Catholic religious icons adorning her entire place: framed and carved images, small and big statues, posters, photos, calendars and stickers. A sticker 'God bless our home' greets one at the door. Below the sticker is another small sticker of the El Shaddai Movement, one of the biggest Catholic religious movements in the Philippines whose membership is so extensive such that the group's influence extends to the political arena. Its leader, Brother Mike Velarde, was the religious adviser of former Philippine President Joseph Estrada who was forced to step down from office in January 2001 through what is now known as the second People Power. I will return to this topic in another section of this essay.

The hallway is decorated on one side with a framed black-and-white photo of a young Christ, titled 'Christ in the Temple.' Hanging beside it is a small wooden image of Christ attending to two children. Across these two images is another framed colored painting of Joseph and Mary looking solemnly at the new-born Christ. On the way to the kitchen is a framed colored painting of Christ, the Shepherd, and beside it hangs a colored painting of the face of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A corner of the hallway is adorned with a small statue of the Santo Niño flanked on both sides by two smaller statues of the Immaculate Conception and St. James. Also hanging on the walls are posters of bible scriptures, the prayer of St. Francis de Asisi, and the famous 'Footprints in the Sand.' The kitchen wall is decorated with a poster of 'The Last Supper.'

The fireplace in the sala is more an altar than a fireplace. On top of it stands a two-foot statue of the Virgin Mary. Also lined up on top are the following: a metal cross with the crucified Christ, a statue of the Santo Niño, a porcelain image of the Infant Jesus, two porcelain angels, and small-framed pictures each of the Holy Spirit in the image of a white dove, Joseph holding the Infant Jesus, and the Resurrected Christ.

I never asked her why she collects these images.

She goes home to her unit only on Sundays. She usually arrives at nine in the morning, leaves some of her things at home, and goes to and stays in church practically the whole day. Upon returning home late in the afternoon, she gathers some of her things, and goes back to her amo's place where she stays for the rest of the week because her contract requires her to live with her amo. Technically, the likes of Ate Norma are called "live-in caregivers."

It was during those brief encounters on Sundays that I had managed to get to talk to her. Once, she spared me an hour of her time. After the interview, she invited me to join her organization's anniversary celebration that was up in two weeks. I accepted the invitation, although there was a bit of hesitation at the back of my mind because I had my biases against the El Shaddai Movement of which she was a part. The organization supported the Estrada presidency and remained loyal to him even at the height of his impeachment trial. I, on the other hand, was actively involved in organizations trying to oust the corrupt president. In January 2001, after losing hope on the impeachment trial that saw the machinations of political power favoring Estrada, the Filipino people trooped to EDSA, one of the main streets of Metro Manila and the site of the first People Power in 1986 when we ousted Ferdinand Marcos, the dictator, who ruled our lives for more than twenty years. In those historic days of January 2001, we had forced another corrupt president to step down from office.

I had no idea that the El Shaddai movement had gone international. It never occurred to me that I would take part in one of the organization's important activities in Montreal. All because of Ate Norma.

A morning of reluctance

It was a few minutes before ten when Ate Norma arrived home, an hour past our scheduled appointment. She had requested me to phone a cab, and in less than five minutes we were already on our way to the church. The Saturday morning sun betrayed the character of winter and the temperature that day was expected to rise to seventeen degrees Celsius above zero. It seemed like an anomalous winter.

From the side entrance of the church I could hear the voice of a man, forceful but not intimidating. From the lilt of his Tagalog and English, I surmised that he must be from the Visayas. Ate Norma and I hurriedly walked past the women receptionists and did not bother to sign our names on the list of guests and worshippers for the day. Some 100 people were already gathered in the hall, praying, some with hands raised, eyes closed. A cacophony of *hallelujahs* and *amens* filled the hall. After Ate Norma led me to a monobloc chair at the back row, she went straight to a room at the back of the hall.

I did not see her until after thirty minutes, sitting on the last row, opposite the column where I was. She was dressed in all white, similar to the clothes worn by the ushers. Once in a while, I would see her assisting churchgoers to their seats.

The whole day was practically a day of songs, praises, and worship. That day, she seemed to carry an aura of aloofness about her, similar to the kind of distance I had always felt whenever she sat down with me for an interview. That day, she approached me only three times. The first was during the covenant of peace in the

morning service; it was the first time in the two months of knowing each other that she shook my hands. The second time she approached me was in the afternoon, during the healing session. She tapped my back, and requested me to go in front of the congregation to get my share of the Lord's blessings through the pastors and lay workers who were administering the healing. The third time was when we were having our late afternoon lunch. She put on my plate a slice of rolled meat which she said she had prepared the night before particularly for that occasion.

An afternoon of revelations

"Lord, we are claiming today the miracle that you promised us." It was late in the afternoon when the healing session began. Immediately after the pastor shouted these lines in front of the crowd, the cacophony of *hallelujahs* and *amens* started to get louder. Sobs turned into wails, whispered cries became screams. I turned to Ate Norma who was on the other side of the hall, and saw her silently crying, both hands raised to the heavens—her right hand clasping a red bible, her left, holding a picture frame with the photos of each of her three children. These must be the photos of her children she once had promised to show me in one of my interviews. It was my first time to see her so seemingly helpless and vulnerable. Despite her moments of reluctance during all my interviews with her, I could sense that she was a strong-willed, tenacious person. All that was gone now, at least from the way I saw her.

The wailing was getting louder and louder. The pastor kept on invoking the Lord's promise of a miracle to this crowd of Filipinos. I can no longer remember the exact words of the pastor, just that seemed to be responding to the implorations of those before him: Filipinos expecting the approval of their immigration or citizenship papers, or the approval of the working visas of their loved ones in the Philippines, or the resolution of their immigration problems, or the increase in employment opportunities in Montreal. I wondered how the pastor seemed to know the prayer requests of his flock.

As I turned my gaze around the hall, the images that I saw sent shivers down my spine: a web of raised arms, a multitude of hands clutching wallets, passports, identification cards, immigration papers, folded documents I could not identify, shoulder bags, bibles. I felt a rush of inexplicable emotions, and my thoughts started to form chains of images. Those images were a contest of values: bibles and passports, rosaries and wallets, crucifixes and immigration papers. God and Canada. This last image gave me goose pimples.

I did not turn around to look for Ate Norma. In my mind flashed images of her apartment: the Virgin Mary, the Crucified Jesus, the Resurrected Christ, the smiling Santo Niño, the Immaculate Conception, angels, Bible verses, and framed prayers. Her apartment, which I fondly call *my* little chapel, embodied the twin images of hope and despair, love and sacrifice, leaving and coming home, and the simultaneous transience and permanence of what it meant to be a Filipino mother and wife with a family in the Philippines, and a Filipino-turned-Canadian 'mother' to a Canadian elderly in Montreal. It was not *my* house of spirits; rather, that house was *her* spirit of longing and belonging.

As my thoughts negotiated these images in the spaces of my mind, more images of overseas Filipino workers started to lodge themselves in the interstices of my brain. They came in droves, unannounced, almost like a thief in the night: Maricris Sioson, who was killed in Japan with a sword thrust through her vagina (Gabriela 2002, 1); a Filipina maid in Singapore, who was blinded by her employer because she forgot to hang some clothes in the wardrobe cabinet (Timson 1995, 3); another Filipina worker, who jumped off a Hong Kong building for fear of prosecution after having been found working a part-time job (*ibid.*, 3); a 17-year-old Filipina, who was lured to work in a restaurant in Hong Kong but sold to pimps for HK\$34,000 (*ibid.*, 3-4); Arnold Gawe, a 29-year-old Igorot, who went home in a box two months after his death in Taiwan due to a heart attack, his body found by his family to be robbed of internal organs (Latoza n.d., 1) (i.e., to disembowel

the dead is a taboo for the indigenous cultural community from where he came); 39-year-old Lolita Danor, who came home in a casket from Kuwait, her body bearing signs of torture: scratches on the face, contusions near the breast and swollen fingers (Latoza n.d., 2); and a train of images of familiar and unknown faces I had seen on television and in the papers. The images were endless.

There *was* so much pain in those images. There *is* so much grief and inhumanity in the language of those images.

A new history of my country, or where are they in the places of my bayan?

*sa bawat pagsulat, ang pakiramdam ko'y lagi akong nagbibigay ng pahimakas,
parang may tinatangal sa loob, ibinubuhos sa kuwento*
(i feel that each act of writing is like reciting an elegy,
like being robbed of something inside, everything spilled out in stories)

In the late 1990s, two OFWs returned everyday to the Philippines literally in a box. Six-hundred thirteen Filipino migrant workers, including 173 women, died in foreign countries in 2000, slightly lower than 1999's figure of 607 deaths (www.catholic.org). It was much higher in 1998: 678 OFWs returned home in coffins, their number leaping by twenty percent from the year before (PDI 1999). Reported causes of death include shipwreck, suicide, murder, road accidents, and 'mysterious circumstances' (ibid.).

There was not much change in the statistics during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In Singapore alone, for instance, Migrante, an alliance of overseas workers, reported that it has counted fifty-one cases of mysterious deaths since 2008 (Ellao 2010). At present, there are 125 OFWs in death row, eighty-five of the cases are drug-related (Migrante 2011).

In the past two or three decades, live human bodies have become the number one export of the Philippines, outstripping electronics, garments, agricultural products, and other traditional

exports (Timson 1995, 1). Estimates show that there are about 10 million Filipinos currently working abroad (Monterona 2010), and they are present in 193 countries (Sibal 2010). In 1996, average departures by OFWs were nearly 1,800 everyday (Kasama 1997, 2). Filipino workers continued to trek in droves such that by 2007, average daily departures were reported by POEA at 2,952 (Montenora 2010). Up to the present, these OFWs are employed in all sorts of work, and almost half of them are women (NSO 2010). Seventy-five percent of these OFWs are domestic workers, laborers (e.g., construction and factory workers), entertainers, and unskilled workers (NSO 2010).

The 1997 report of the Philippine Women Centre in Vancouver states that between 1982 and 1991, more than 30,000 Filipinos were legally admitted into Canada as domestic workers (Kasama 1997, 2). B. Atcheson (2001, 1) reports that wealthy Canadian employers and government officials hire Filipino housekeepers and caregivers, eighty-two percent of whom are women, under the government's Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) where Filipinos are required to live in their employer's home and under a temporary work status. Workers under the LCP are called on a 24-hour basis to do childcare, eldercare, home support, cooking, cleaning, and sometimes chauffeuring for wealthy Canadian families. Atcheson concludes that this situation creates the conditions of modern-day slavery in Canada. The LCP, Atcheson points out, "is far cheaper for the Canadian government than supporting a universal system of childcare or health care, and relieves pressure on the Canadian government for public services" (ibid., 2). It is ironic that "while middle and upper middle class women 'liberate' themselves from domestic work, it is on the backs of Third World women doing domestic work and other working class women who are denied a national daycare program" (ibid.,1).

In the mid-1990s, more than 2,000 OFWs were reported to be in overseas jails, twenty-six faced death penalties, two were beheaded in Saudi Arabia, one was hanged in Singapore, a

number had committed suicide, and thousands suffered from slavery and sexual abuse (Timson 1995, 1-2). The pattern is pretty much the same in the 2000s. In the Middle East, for example, Migrante receives “an average of 5 cases a day of abuses (physical, mental, and sexual), maltreatment, and other forms of labor malpractices” (Monterona 2010, par. 17). Twenty-three OFWs are on death row, twenty of them are in Saudi Arabia; six Filipinos were beheaded in Saudi Arabia (Monterona 2010). “At least 384 jailed OFWs . . . have already served their full sentences but remain incarcerated in different jails” (Manlapaz 2011). Currently, nearly 5,000 Filipinos languish in foreign jails, many of who confessed—reportedly after being tortured—to a crime they did not commit (Santos 2010). Surveying newspaper and internet reports, the list of suffering Filipino migrant workers is almost endless.

I dread the day when dead human bodies of Filipinos become the number one import of the Philippines.

Transacting identities, negotiating places: The self, relations of power, and the power of the self

at pagkatapos ng bawat akda ay ang panlulupaypay.
(and each prose is followed by a trail of failing strength.)

The Philippine government hails OFWs as the country’s modern-day heroes mainly because their remittances have kept the country’s economy afloat. In the 1990s, OFWs remitted to the Philippines an average of 7 to 9 million U.S. dollars (Gabriela 2002, 1). Their remittances from 2005 until 2009 were within the range of US\$10 to 18 billion (BSP n.d.). And in 2010, their remittance to the Philippines reached US\$18.76 billion, a little over ten percent (or US\$2.02 billion) of which came from Canada (BSP n.d.).

Images of OFWs, however, have been generally negative. In England, for instance, when an English says “I have a Filipina at

home,” what he or she means is “I have a servant at home” (Mercado 2001, 6). In Canada, if one says “I have a nanny at home,” it is close to saying “we have a Filipina at home.” I remember that in the mid-1990s we, in the Philippines, were enraged by a national newspaper report that the Oxford English Dictionary had as one among several definitions of ‘Filipina,’ a nanny or maid. While there is nothing wrong about being a nanny, it is the negative connotation of the word that injures our national imagination and feelings. Shiela Coronel (2005) points out that the maid in our national psyche is a second-class citizen. Thus, to be called a nation of nannies is “a slur on the national dignity,” particularly at a time when our “collective ego [is] already so bruised” (Coronel 2005). There was also a time when we were enraged by a news item which reported that some elevators in one Asian country had the following sign posted on the doors: ‘Dogs and Filipinos not allowed.’

I felt furious, and quite sad, about the advertisements I saw in some Montreal papers on ‘magical’ Filipina caregivers and nannies who can do wonders for Canadian families. I was deeply moved when a Montrealer once told me that Filipinos are good caregivers. The statement was definitely meant to be a compliment, but I felt the irony of that statement about the situation of our workers.

Every time I see a caregiver on the streets of Montreal attending to a foreigner’s child and every time I hear the stories of Ate Norma about how she looks after the welfare of her amo, I would wonder if she and other Filipinas like her would have preferred to shower their love and care on the children and families they had left in the Philippines. I would wonder what thoughts and memories of their families they have during their moments of solitude. I would wonder what they wonder about home.

“You export tenderness,” one McGill professor once told me in a casual conversation. She had a statement I cannot forget:

“But I’m sure that their children are longing for that tenderness back home in the Philippines,” or words to that effect. I fully agree with her.

Ate Norma does not plan to go ‘home’ yet. She keeps on using ‘home’ to refer to the Philippines even if she knows that she is now a Canadian. *Mas ligtas dito; mas maginhawa ang buhay. Kung ganito lang sa Pilipinas, hindi na ako aalis sa atin.* (It’s safer here, more comfortable. I would not have left the Philippines if we had this kind of life.)

Thirty-year-old Cynthia (not her real name), another Filipino caregiver who came to Montreal in March 2000, echoes Ate Norma’s sentiments: *Siyempre, lagi mo silang naiisip. Pero kailangang magtiyaga. Kung may ganito lang sa bansa natin, wala nang Pinoy na gustong umalis sa atin.* (Of course, you always think of them [her family]. But we need to sacrifice. If only we have this kind of life in the Philippines, no Filipino would ever want to leave home.)

Cynthia supports her family in Cebu City and in Montreal; she goes home during weekends to her sister’s place, also in the Plamondon area. Her sister, who does housekeeping in a hotel in Montreal, shares her dream: to get a Canadian citizenship in the future. Her three other sisters also plan to go to Canada some day. In fact, one of her sisters has been undergoing training in the Philippines as a caregiver.⁶

When I interviewed Cynthia, she and her sister had just packed two balikbayan boxes to be shipped to the Philippines by a Montreal-based Filipino delivery company. She enumerated to me the items contained in the two boxes: chocolates, coffee, creamer, tea, sandwich spread, shoes, T-shirts, sweat shirts, pants, perfume, knapsack, toys for nieces and nephews, and a box of hardware tools for her brother. Most of these items were bought during discount sales of department stores in the city, and collected over a period of three to four months.

Ang pinadadala namin, 'yung mga brand na wala sa atin (What we send are brands not available in our country). The items had already been tagged with names of specific family members while some unmarked items were for other relatives, friends, and neighbors. *Bahala na si Inay sa pag-distribute nito sa amin* (It's up to Inay to distribute these back home).

The Filipino balikbayan box serves as a system of kinship exchanges. In the Philippines, almost all kin members, friends, and neighbors expect a share from these balikbayan boxes. Because sharing these 'resources' is part of the community's symbolic gesture of unity, harmony, and solidarity, failure of family members to meet these expectations is viewed by kin and community members as a sign of arrogance, and may even mean, to some extent, a severing of emotional ties. Families of OFWs may be reprimanded by kin and friends in the form of jousts or jokes, insinuations, and even social mockery. Kin and community members have been more considerate recently, however. Expectations have become less than they used to be primarily due to economic hardships faced by OFWs and their families.

The narratives of Ate Norma and Cynthia reflect the social conditions that inform their identities. Their views of themselves reconstruct the selfhood of their identities as caregivers in Montreal. The reconstructed self of what it means to be a Filipino caregiver, however, is rendered into various discourses by other social forces. These discourses are embedded in newspaper advertisements, in patently racist signs on walls, and in the unintended racial undertones of sincere compliments from well-intentioned persons. Also, their narratives of selfhood are threatened by how most OFWs are treated by their employers, economic policies of the Philippine and foreign governments, and other global processes that reduce their identities to market commodities.

In effect, their identities as OFWs are *emplaced* in social categories that define the territoriality of their selves. Further, *where*

they are now also implies the kind of cultural logic that shapes the social morphology of societies and the social transactions between societies. And where they have been emplaced now, or have allowed themselves to be placed, is a cultural struggle that highlights the complex dynamic of ideology, discourse, place, self, and identity. Integral to this dynamics is the politics of representation.

Ate Norma may or may not subscribe to the political discourses of the El Shaddai Movement, the religious organization with which she is affiliated (I intentionally did not venture into knowing her views about this), but she nonetheless wholeheartedly believes in the sense of hope that this organization offers her. Others may argue that some form of 'false consciousness' informs her material condition. I contend that there is no such thing as 'false consciousness.' The self (i.e., in spite of all the contradictions that one deals with in his or her day-to-day transactions with human relationships) grants to the person, albeit unknowingly or unconsciously, a space or a place where the self is continuously reworked to produce an *identity* with which the self can *identify*. As I have argued earlier, the sites of self-making are plural (Holland 1997), and the self has an agency function not completely susceptible to the workings of dominant or peripheral ideologies. The self, as I have likewise mentioned earlier, is neither a helpless victim nor a willing product of the machinations of powerful social forces.

I maintain, nonetheless, that *that* same space where one negotiates the self is porous. It is a field of power, a space of contention, a place of exchange. A number of theorists have shown the fluidity, multiplicity, polyvalence and porosity of places and identities as they are located in the multi-layered and multi-scalar nodes of articulations of power (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Casey 1996; Pile and Thrift 1995; Duncan and Ley 1993; Keith and Pile 1993; and Barnes and Duncan 1992). They emphasize that a place, like the self, co-exists with other places outside its

own place. A place does not exist in a vacuum; it is connected with other places, and this connection contributes to the processing of that place. Derek Gregory (1994, 122) explains Anthony Giddens' notion of shifting territorialities by saying that "places are local condensations and distillations of tremulous global processes that travel through them and whose effects are reworked and inscribed within them," and that "it has become virtually impossible to make sense of what happens in a place without looking beyond the local horizons." Places are, therefore, relational, just as the self, as I have pointed out earlier, is relational.

Moreover, I do not exactly agree with Ate Norma's, Cynthia's, or the other Filipinos' narratives of home and selfhood. I am not inclined to reimagine the Philippines according to their representations of the lost tradition of the tinikling because I would rather reimagine the past in ways that make it more meaningful to my present struggles. Likewise, I do not have a faith as dedicated as theirs, because I do not place all my hopes in one God (I do not believe in a monolithically installed god; I firmly believe, though, in the humanity of people, the transience of being, and the sense of justice that comes along with that belief in humanity, no matter how abstract these terms may mean). My *pasalubong* are not as voluminous as theirs (although I also make it a point to bring home *pasalubong*, these are not in the scale of a *balikbayan* box). I definitely have no intentions of changing my citizenship because I know of no other place where I can be myself. I am also not too keen on being recognized by others for our food as I prefer that we be recognized in some other ways, but what those are, I have yet to discern. And, I do not agree with the choices we make for ourselves and the strategies we employ to make those choices, most of the time, an opinion afforded by what Filipinos in Canada often consider a range of options that are available to me.

One thing is certain, however. We all share the same culture, and that is the culture of oppression: from the work we are forced to face, to the language that we are required to use, to the inhumanity of our material existence in the Philippines. That is a culture we share.

This shared space, I think, is what constitutes our ‘otherness,’ an otherness that attempts to critique and confront the Eurocentric and Orientalist discourses of ‘the other’ (Said 1979), ‘the other’ which has been the object of cultural exhibitions (Corbey 1995), the rationale for the genocide of races in the nineteenth century (Bratlinger 1995), the subject of the dual strategy of military conquest and bio-ecological imperialism (Crosby 1988), the cultural justification of colonizing, subjugating and oppressing—silently—nations and peoples. I hope we can re-position that shared space within the frames of the cultural politics of difference that will free us from the theoretical guillotine and the debilitating social practices of the power-bloc (Hall 1990; Rosaldo 1988; Clifford 1994). This would be a move towards the dismantling of the logocentric, hegemonic, and totalizing conceptualization of identities (Rutherford 1990).

In this age of diaspora and connectivity, there may be no cultural home left to return to (Mathews 2000). Can we still go back to our places? Stuart Hall (1990, 232) says “we can’t literally go home again.” Where in the world is home then? Gordon Mathews (2000, 196) stresses that roots may be uprooted, and home may not be the sense of one’s particular ancestral past; but roots may be reimagined, home may now be a “node from which to access the globe.” In this sense, we imagine home within the global cultural supermarket.

I agree that the self is not only consumed by places. I agree that the self also consumes places, and that this consumption of place territorializes the identity of the self. Still, the persistent question remains: where is home? How do we constitute ourselves in that place we call home? Is where we are now a potential home? Is this potential home an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991)? Is it possible to transform our ‘imagined communities’ into reimagined communities, reimagined within our own terms?

Shall I be content with the formulation of our identity as always under the prism of the dynamics between national and global cultures, as Mathews (2000) claims it to be? The self and its cultural shaping, according to Mathews, are patterned by the global cultural

supermarket. The self and the identities of the produced self are either channeled or constrained by the forces that dominate this global cultural supermarket. What is produced eventually, he claims, is a market-based identity, and this formulation of the self is a market-mediated choice, making the sense of roots and home less necessary in the world.

I agree that many of the choices of OFWs may be market-mediated choices. But, certainly, this is not all there is in Ate Norma's or Cynthia's constitution of their selves, their construction of home, and the choices they make. Likewise, this is not all there is in the way we Filipinos in Montreal and the OFWs working in other countries mediate the totality of our identities, if ever such totality is possible.

Let me end this section by citing verbatim an e-mail message that I received in 2002 from someone I can no longer recall. This message is about an OFW, and though the story is meant to be a joke, I find so much darkness in its humor. It is about the poignant contradictions of hope and home, and how several selves of these hopes and homes are embedded in the circuit of globalization.

Registered nurse si Bebung sa L.A. Kasama niya ang kanyang ina na nagpagamot doon. Namatay ang ina nito. Dahil sa kamahalan ng pamasaha pabalik sa Pilipinas, nagtipid si Bebung. Pinauwi na lang niya ang kabaong ng kanyang ina na mag-isa.

Pagdating ng kabaong sa Pilipinas, napansin ng mga kapamilya niya na nakadikit ang mukha ng ina sa salamin ng ataul. Nagkomento tuloy ang isang anak, "Ay, naku! Tingnan mo 'yan...hindi sila marunong mag-ayos ng bangkay sa Amerika! Nakudrado tuloy ang mukha ng Inay."

Upang ayusin ang itsura ng bangkay, binuksan nila ang kabaong. Aba! May sulat na naka-staple sa dibdib

ng ina. Kinuha nila ito at binasa. Narito ang nilalaman ng liham mula kay Bebung:

Mahal kong Tatay at mga kapatid:

Pasensya na kayo at hindi ko nasamahan ang Nanay sa pag-uwi riyan sa Pilipinas dahil napakamahal ng pamasaha. Ang gastos ko pa lang sa kanya ay mahigit \$10,000 na. Ayoko nang isipin pa ang eksaktong halaga. Anyway, ipinadala ko kasama ni Nanay ang mga sumusunod...

Nasa likod ni Nanay ang dalawampu't apat na karne-norte at isang dosenang Spam. Ang Adidas na suot ni Nanay ay para kay Tatay. Ang limang pares ng de-goma ay nasa loob ng dalawang asul na Jansport na backpack na inuunan ni Nanay. Tig-iisa kayo.

Ang iba't ibang klase ng tsokolate at candy ay nasa puwetan ni Nanay. Para sa mga bata ito. Bahala na kayong magparte-parte. Sana'y hindi natunaw. Ang Pokemon stuffed toy na yapos-yapos ni Nanay ay para sa bunso ni Ate, gift ko sa first birthday ng bata. Ang itim na Esprit bag ay para kay Nene.

Ate, nasa loob ng bag ang pictures ni Inay, Japanese version ng Pokemon trading cards at stickers. Suot ni Nanay ang tatlong Ralph Lauren, apat na Gap at dalawang Old Navy t-shirts. Ang isa ay para kay Kuya at tig-iisa ang mga pamangkin ko. Maisusuot ninyo ang mga iyan sa fiesta.

Suot din ni Inay ang anim na panty hose at tatlong warmer para sa mga dalaga kong pamangkin. Isuot n'yo sa party. May isang dosenang NBA caps sa may paanan ni Nanay, para sa inyo, Itay, Kuya, Dikong, Tiyo Romy. Bigyan n'yo na rin ng tig-isa 'yung mga pamangkin ko at 'yong isa ay kay Pareng Tulume.

Ang tigdadalawang pares ng Nike wristband at knee caps na suot-suot din ni Nanay ay para sa mga anak mo, Diko, na nagbabasketball. Tigdadalawang ream ng Marlboro lights at Winston red ang nasa pagitan ng mga hita ni Nanay.

Apat na jar ng Skippy Peanut Butter, dalawang dishwashing liquid, isang Kiwi glass cleaner at tig-aanim na Colgate at Aqua Fresh ang nakasiksik sa kilikili ni Nanay. Hati-hati na kayo. Huwag mag-aagawan.

Isang dosenang Wonder bra (Victoria's Secret ata ang tatak), gustong-gusto ni Tiya Iskang society natin, suot-suot din ni Nanay. Alam kong inaasam-asam n'yo 'yan, Tiya. Anim na lipstick lang ang kasya sa bra. Ang Rolex na bilin-bilin mo, Tatay, suot-suot ni Nanay, nakatakip sa Nike na wristband. Kunin mo agad, Itay.

May isinisik akong zip-loc sa bunganga ni Inay na naglalaman ng \$759 dollars. Hindi na ako nakatakbo sa ATM. Puwede na siguro sa libing iyon.

Iyong tong na makokolekta, i-time deposit ninyo, Kuya, para 'pag namatay si Tatay, may pambili na ng ataul. Ang hikaw, singsing at kuwintas (na may nakakabit pang anim na nail cutter) na gustong-gusto mo, Ditse, ay suot-suot din ni Nanay. Kunin mo na rin agad, Ditse. Ibigay mo ang isang nail cutter kay Jay, bakla sa kanto.

Tanggalin ninyo ang bulak sa ilong ng Inay, may isiniksik akong tatlong diyamante sa bawat butas. Ibangon n'yo lang si Inay at tiyak na malalaglag na ang mga iyon. Konting alog lang siguro ng ulo.

Marami pa sana akong ipaglalagay, kaya lang, baka mag-excess, at si Nanay pa ang maiwan. Basta parte-parte kayo, Tatay, Kuya, Ate, Dikong, Ditse. Para sa

inyo lahat ito. Bahala na kayo kay Nanay. Pamimisahan ko na lang siya rito.

Balitaan ninyo na lang ako pagkatapos ng libing. Alam ni Ate ang email ko. Paki-double check ang lista kung walang nawala sa mga ipinadala ko.

Nagmamahal,
Bebeng

A spring of silence

ano ang nasa pagitan ng duyan at hukay?
ang buhay ba pagkatapos ng hukay ay tulad rin ng buhay bago ang duyan?
(what lies between the womb and the tomb?
is life after the tomb similar to life before the womb?)

We cannot deny the scope of globalization's voracious embrace of all aspects of our lives. Similarly, I am not disputing the capacity of the self to ideologically counter globalization's formulation of its identities and the placeness of its identities. What concerns me at this point is our seeming inescapability from the network of globalization. However, Arturo Escobar (2001) posits a reorientation of the way we view capitalism and modernity. He forwards Casey's disagreement with many scholars' preoccupation with space, and challenges us to construct and live the identities of our selves outside the confines of a singular capitalist discourse. "Do we even know," Escobar (*ibid.*, 155) asks, "how to look at social reality in ways that might allow us to detect elements of difference that are not reducible to the constructs of capitalism and modernity?"

The locality of place, Escobar argues, provides a way to demarcate one's locality and position away from the capitalist script of knowing and understanding identities, cultures and the world:

Place is central to issues of development, culture and the environment and is equally essential, on the other,

for imagining other contexts for thinking about the construction of politics, knowledge and identity. The erasure of place is a reflection of the asymmetry that exist(s) between the global and the local in much contemporary literature on globalization, in which the global is associated with space, capital, history and agency while the local, conversely, is linked to place, labor, and tradition – as well as with women, minorities, the poor, and, one might add, local cultures. (ibid., 155-156)

The politics of constructing identities, then, including the production of the self and the articulation of specific experiences, is located in place. Our selves are, in fact, “placelings” (ibid., 143).

This brings me back to my discussion of the politics of representation. The represented realities of our selves, as they are subjected to the interpellations of other social discourses, do not alone make the meaning of one’s world. Rather, it is how these realities are clothed in the world of discourse. It is how these realities are produced to give meaning to the world and time in which we live. It is “not about which [reality] is the most ‘truthful’ or ‘authentic’” but how reality is “part of a ‘social and political struggle for the production of meaning’” (Somekawa and Smith 1988, as cited by Cosgrove and Domosh 1993, 36). Truth, then, or the ethnographic truth to be more specific, is something that is constructed and tied to the politics of discourse (Jackson 1989).

All representations of the self, identity, places, and hope are always laced and loaded with ideology. In the end, all representations may hide or uncover where power lies and how that power operates. Representations may either maintain or subvert established meanings. Representations, thus, are not only about constructing selfhood, hope, and home: representations are constructions of the meanings of these categories.

I am aware that the identities that I have represented in this essay are what I would call 'our translated or transacted lives.' Ate Norma, Cynthia and other Filipinos in Montreal spoke to me about their lives in our own language, which I have presented in this essay in the idiom of another language. What is translated is not just the language of our conversations or the idioms of our gestures and activities; rather, it is the flesh and soul that constitute their identities. Their translated lives are what I have presented here, simultaneous with the translation of my own identity. In effect, this essay is all about a translated truth about our translated lives.

In this essay, I positioned myself on the issue of identity and representation. It is my awareness of this position and positionality on the discursive construction of the self and identity, of the production and circulation of meanings, that have defined for me the 'truth' of my ethnographic encounters. As Stuart Hall (1990, 222) succinctly puts it:

We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context,' *positioned*.

In the end, it is my interest that I pursued in this essay. All cultural texts, in whatever form they are expressed, are not really about persons, groups, things or histories. Nor are they about the overall theme of those texts. Rather, the text, as Suvin (1988) points out, is an articulation of the interests of the one doing the representation. Such narrative, the narrative of interests, is re-articulated by the receiver of those narratives, and that set of receiver includes the author of the narrative as well. This dialogue creates a re-articulation of those interests. Suvin makes me aware of the range of possibilities in representing neither myself nor my informants' selves but my interests as I attempt to articulate and transact the representations of my human relationships.

By opening up my ethnographic self, I am paving the way for the interrogation of my represented self to the selves of my readers.

I hope that this process can bring about the production of spaces, places and, homes of alliances of selves and identities towards a kind of hope or salvation that justifies our search for justice in the present. And I am willingly putting my ethnographic self on the line, for “not to participate in this discourse is to decline power, to court oppression” (Cosgrove and Domosh 1993, 37).

I would have preferred to be less academic in my transactions with theory. For theory and the practice of theorizing have a way of numbing the creative senses in me, in us. They also have a way of spiriting away the humanity of the perplexities they posit.

But theory and the practice of theorizing also have a way of bringing to the fore the creative senses in me, in us. They also have a way of spiriting away the inhumanity of the same perplexities they posit.

By placing and moving ourselves in such theoretical and theorizing itineraries, we may, hopefully, displease and displace, and in the process replace, the agonizing and debilitating theoretical gymnastics and lechery of the ever-cunning power bloc.

Of myths and justice, or where are we in the new stories of the places of our bayan?

*nasaan ang mga metapora ng aking bayan sa lugar na ito?
hindi ako iniinwanan ng mga metapora ng aking bayan saan man ako
naroroon.*

(where are the metaphors of my bayan in this place?
the metaphors of my bayan never cease to haunt me wherever I am.)

Before I left the Philippines for Montreal in 2001, a friend advised me to “pick up a handful of the earth of home,”⁷ carry it with me on my trip, and scatter it in the garden of my first home in Canada or in any pot of soil in my first apartment. This, she said, will not only remind me of home, but will ensure me of home’s

company. But the fears and phobia of humanity in the aftermath of 9/11 prevented me from carrying a handful of my 'earth of home,' worried that airport authorities would not believe, nor would care to understand, my faith in the fable of a handful of earth from home.

I never had the audacity to carry a handful of the earth of my home, all because of the scripted fears that the politically powerful had planned for our generation. I tolerated and even permitted the lies of the world to efface a part of myself. All because of my scripted silence.

I never imagined that I could allow myself to conspire, in fearful silence, with the debilitating suspicions and threats of the purveyors of fears and death. But it also dawned on me that my elders' myths and legends are my most potent weapons against all the organized terrors of the powerful.

There are myths that detain us in the prisons of our oppressors, and there are myths that tell us which truths are preferred under the contingencies of our present struggles. The challenge is to know the difference between myths or stories of oppression and myths or stories of social justice. To know the difference between them is to untangle the power hidden in those myths, to know how power is hidden in those stories, to know how that power can be unleashed to make a difference in the stories of our contemporary lives, and to make use of that power to make the stories of the recreation of our bayan and the reworlding of the world of our identities more meaningful and closer to the world we are redreaming. The language and form in which we express those myths and stories may, perhaps, no longer matter. What matter is towards what end those stories are made more real and relevant.

I want to speak in metaphors, for that is how my elders spoke of my country. I want to speak in the language of my ancestors, but their idioms have been erased by our colonial histories that have informed much of what we have been and what we are now. I want

to chant the epic of our struggles, but our colonizers have snatched from our legends and mythologies the power they contain.

Maybe we can start chanting the new epics of our present. Perhaps, we can create new metaphors that speak of our present's turmoil. I am moved to rethink my dearly held shibboleths about culture. Nevertheless, I am certain of one thing, and let me paraphrase Jonathan Kozol (1967, 86) to describe this certainty: Too much is wrong. And too deep are the wrongs. And a large part of these wrongs is the silence.

I realized that culture is, above all, about social relationships. In the case of migrant workers, caregivers, and domestic helpers, it is about the silencing of their lives. It is also about me as a student, teacher, researcher, and 'development' worker. It is about how we silence other people's lives, or how we allow ourselves to collude with such silencing and silences. It is also about the silences of our own lives.

It is all about our silenced lives.

Why is there too deep a silence about the wrongs of society? How has such silence come about? How has that silence prolonged the turmoil of individuals and members of communities?

How has that silence remained so ensconced in its place that to challenge it has come to mean courting tragedy? What has made that silence morbidly silent?

In those rare (or were they numerous?) instances of inviting disaster, how was such silence challenged? Who initiated the move, and who were threatened by such provocations? What social energies were deployed and used up to strategize or legitimize acts and spaces of resistance, and deception alike?

Further, when does silence break free from its silence? And what breakthroughs does that breaking free achieve? What, and whose, voices are heard in the breaking down and breakdown of silence?

Again, sheaf after sheaf of random questions had interrogated the silence of so many summers and rains, the new autumns, winters and springs of my life and the lives of the many who had been wronged by centuries of silence.

And those same sheaves of questions continue to interrogate the terribly uncomfortable silence of so many wrongs. Those same sheaves of questions are attempts to bring life back to life.

It is good, in fact desirable, to come up with sheaves of answers to those clusters of questions. But to be comfortable with those answers is again an invitation to the comforts of silence.

At the moment, I am inclined to believe that it is not enough to have answers, no matter how I prefer the truths of those answers. It is in bundling new sheaves of questions that we can tear to shreds the chilling comforts of silence and the discomfiting decadence of our silenced lives.

but i will always carry in my heart the humble knowledge of my elders and the humble abode of my home, in deep silence.

i will always cloak the flesh of my humanity with the luminescent spirit of my elders and my generation, in quiet resistance to all the glaring incandescence and noisy cadence of all the terrors of life that lacerate the soul and agonize the conscience of peoples.

we, who come to claim a stake on the world,⁸ will always remember the legends and myths that animate and fortify the collective heroes of our anonymous revolutions.

Notes

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- 1 I refuse to translate this line into English. I maintain the words in their lower-case spelling and in italics to signify their position in the geography of political discourse.
- 2 All the literary entries that serve as subtitles to various sections of this essay are excerpts from my journal entries that I wrote between December 2001 and March 2002.
- 3 In this section of the essay, I have intentionally written the lines and sentences in lower case and left some Filipino words unitalicized. I hope to illustrate the simultaneity of identities, the polyvalence of discourses, and the interplay of power through this textual design that I am employing in this essay.

- 4 I derived my use of the phrase “re-worlding my world” from Spivak’s (1988) phrase “worlding the world.”
- 5 This sketch about the life of Ate Norma as a caregiver in Montreal is culled from several formal interviews and short conversations I had with her, usually every Sunday, from February to March 2002.
- 6 This short description of Cynthia’s life story was from a formal interview I had with her on 10 March 2002.
- 7 I borrowed the phrase “pick up a handful of the earth of home” from Carlos Bulosan’s poem “Homecoming.”
- 8 I derive the phrase “we, who come to claim a stake on the world” from a line in Bulosan’s poem titled “To My Countrymen”: “Because I came to claim a stake on the world” (Bulosan 1983, 115).

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