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*Artwork by Joel Chavez*

# Hidden Sacrifices: Narratives of Select Filipina Overseas Workers in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In my essay “Chasing Waves: Reflection on Southeast Asian Fisherfolk (2021a),” I already featured the less documented experience of the socially marginalized. My essay focused on the personal narratives of Bruneian fishermen of Kampor Ayer, Brunei Darussalam (2016); the fishermen of Mui Ne, Vietnam (2017); and the Intha of Myanmar (2018), with whom I had the fortunate chance to converse with. However, my personal travel experience in the three countries only gave voice to “non-Filipino workers.” That is why in this current essay, I will highlight the unique experience of the Filipinos themselves – in the form of migrant workers in Southeast Asia. I have interacted with and interviewed many *Overseas Filipino Workers* (OFWs) in Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific; even in other countries where Filipino tourists were unfamiliar or visited, surprisingly happen to have OFWs. With that, it is unsurprising why Filipinos are articulated as *globe-trotting people* (Perdon 2014) and *quasi-wandering people* (San Juan 2009) because of their prevalence in the discourse of the global diaspora. In this essay, I will feature the stories of personal experiences of select Filipina workers in Southeast Asia, specifically in Malaysia (2014), Singapore (2014), and Cambodia (2017), extracted from my travel narratives from 2014-2018.

**Keywords:** *socially marginalized, narratives, migrant workers, global diaspora, Filipina*

## INTRODUCTION

Considered as *Bagong Bayani* (new heroes), OFWs adhere to the spirit of the diaspora because of the promise of *ginhawa* (well-being) for their family and country. OFWs are viewed as the pillar of the national economy because of their efforts to supplement its shortcomings (Bansig and Marco 2015). It is estimated that there are

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<sup>1</sup> Translated and revised into English, see Axle Christien Tugano. 2021b, “Mga gunita ng aking paglalakbay (2014-2018): Naratibo ng Overseas Filipino Workers sa Timog Silangang Asya at Europa.” *Dalumat E-Journal* 7(2): 1-25. The original article contains other narratives of OFWs in Brunei Darussalam, but I only interviewed men here, while there is also a female OFWs in Madrid and Barcelona, Spain, yet it is in Europe.

already ten million Filipinos overseas, which makes the Philippines one of the countries (including Mexico) in the world with the largest percentage of workers being dispatched abroad (San Juan 2009). The 2020 data of the *Survey on Overseas Filipinos* recorded that 2.2 million OFWs are working in various parts of the world in 2019 (PSA 2020). Before the spread of COVID-19, the money imported by OFWs into our country hit 30 billion dollars (USD) or 1.56 trillion pesos (PHP) in 2019 (Fernandez et al. 2020). Still, they are among the sectors that have been severely affected by the pandemic. Nearly 639,000 lost their jobs, were deported and returned to the Philippines (SOTP, 2021). Therefore, it can be genuinely said that OFWs have become pillars of the Philippine economy solely because of their remittances, especially in the 1980s to 1990s that save the declining flow of the economy (Advincula-Lopez, 2005). During this time, the concept of *Filipino Diaspora* (Aguilar, 2015) started to be utilized to define the massive migration of Filipinos overseas. And yet, the motives behind the migration of Filipinos are evident. It is rooted in good jobs, high wages, and humanitarian benefits that they frequently fail to experience in the Philippines.

Working overseas was straightforwardly embraced by the current wave of Filipino workers. Perhaps, this condition was premediated by the state to be the fate of the Filipinos. According to Moratilla (2018a), the current discussion of the state on Filipino labour only revolves around the idea of how to dispatch potential Filipino workers overseas for the growth of its economy. Cabusao, in his *Another World is Possible* (2008), stresses the worsening labour discussion of the state. He states that the “transnational corporations under the control of the US elite are able to move across border to exploit the surplus labour of Asian women in the international colonies (Cabusao, 2008).” This includes migrant Filipinas who have often experienced abuses overseas. Filipinos were first encouraged to seek employment abroad in the early 1970s due to the oil and gas industry growth in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia (de Guzman, 1993; Tigno, 1998; Talampas, 1999; Pasadilla, 2011; Ybiernas, 2015; Yu, 2015). However, as the economies of the so-called “Tigers of East Asia” and some countries in the ASEAN region developed and emerged, the employment of Filipinos in its neighbouring nations escalated (Ybiernas, 2015). Until now, going overseas seemed like a promise, an inferred standard for one’s well-being. This resulted in various phenomena – *American Dream*, *European Dream*, which was then just a *Manila Dream* (especially for the provincials who seek comfort and strive to achieve their dreams in Manila).

## METHODOLOGY

This paper sets itself apart from the conventional qualitative and quantitative methodologies; by utilizing random sampling and statistical design. I consider this paper anecdotal, which is deemed a distinct and, for others, “unorthodox” way of writing research. A handful of my writings are centered on traveling (see, Tugano, 2021c; 2021d;

2021e; 2021f; 2022), working on its development towards intellectualization and emerging academic discourse.

Among various topics, I often encounter on my travels are stories behind the lives of OFWs. I coincidentally get to know and converse with them comfortably in numerous settings and situations. In some instances, this allows me to delve into their complexities. In this regard, I would like to emphasize that information written in this paper was not intentionally gathered through formal means (e.g., semi-structured interviews), in which interviews are conducted in preparation of both interviewer and interviewee in an agreed time and place. Instead, I regard it as *pakikipagkuwentuhan* as a means of gathering data. *Pakikipagkuwentuhan* or *pagtatanong-tanong*, the act of delivering a series of unconstrained questions to various people are well-defined and enriched in the field of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Santiago at Enriquez, 1982; de Vera, 1982; Orteza, 1997; Aquino, 2006).

Aside from *pakikipagkuwentuhan*, traveling confers value to *pagmamasid* (being wary of one's surroundings), *pag-oobserba* (the act of looking while discerning), and *patingin-tingin* or *pagsuruy-suroy* (the casual act of looking or surveying). Dagli offers an example through his thesis, *Pamamaybay sa Ilog Lagnas* (2013) on the concept of *pamamaybay* (like *pagmamasid*) while incorporating his orientation (interpretation) to study Mount Banahaw. In addition, Pama's paper on 'Ragpa kan Pagkaba'go (2014) integrated the Bicolano concept of *paagi-agi* or *padaan-daan* (act of passing by) as an alternative way of gathering data.

In this regard, I chose the method of *pakikipagkuwentuhan* and *pagmamasid* that the research aims to impart to its readers. Nevertheless, in its entirety, the information presented in this paper will never be considered as a representation or in itself the "absolute truth." In which nuances are inevitably present. It is challenging to near impossible to present absolute knowledge deriving from diverse sides, groups, and identities that are often integrated and drawn from the encounters of traveling. Thereby, the "voice of one" cannot be equated to the "voice of the majority." Even in research, one must be mindful of inferring hasty generalizations drawn from a limited degree of gathered data. In this sense, we can only "infer" such interpretations and conclusions from the subject population. Moreover, devise cross-validation from the subject population or sample through the methods of *pakikipagkuwentuhan*, existing literature, statistical findings, and the like.

### **Filipino Women Bodies: Nexus between identity and globalization**

The role of women in history transcends beyond working at home. Women have played a significant role in developing the Philippine labour force and economy. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women had various occupations such as sewing, cigarette making, selling,

teaching, and many more (Camagay, 1995, as cited in Tugano, 2017) despite having no law to protect their rights except the *Code of Commerce in 1885*. However, it must be noted that women's protection and rights in labour and business still depend on the power of their husbands (Taguiwalo, 2011). For these reasons, Marxism recognizes and enriches the importance and participation of women in labor. Similar to Marx and Lenin, Friedrich Engels stressed in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Engels, 1884, as cited in Taguiwalo, 2011) that there would never be a great social change without the participation of women.

The transition of their role in the economy can be seen in the 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, wherein women also worked overseas. With this, the concept of "Filipino Women Bodies" has been articulated in various meanings, *i.e.*, *DH-Body* (see, Tadiar, 1997); *Servants of Globalization* (see, Salazar Parreñas, 2003); *political subjects* (see, Onuki, 2007); *warm bodies* (see, San Juan, 2011), *disposable body* (see, Moratilla, 2018b), among others. In this idea, women's body as migrant workers has become the nexus between identity and globalization. At the level of "globalization," women OFWs are one of the victims of the hypocritical progress promised by the *Global North* in the form of *financial aid* (which Constantino [1988] has long criticized) in exchange for the exploitation of workers from the *Global South*. That is why for Bello, in his *Deglobalization: Ideas for a New World Economy* (2006), similar with E. San Juan's argument (1992), the concept of oppressive nationalism (see, Claudio, 2013, contrary to defensive nationalism or anti-colonial nationalism [see, Veric, 2020]) and alike, is violently fervent, for example, is the United States, in the process of how racism has become gendered, sexualized, and naturalized. These ruling nations have utilized their nationalism to subdue and suppress migrant workers from other countries. The racist U.S. President Donald Trump is a clear example, particularly how he tramples migrant workers in the United States, including Filipinos.

This is why the role of OFW women has become necessary in the so-called "globalization" of labour. The government began allowing women to leave the Philippines to work in the early 1980s (Encinas-Franco, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Most of them worked as domestic helpers and caregivers, while others entered the adult entertainment industry, especially in Japan (Kikuchi, 1999). In the past, women were always left behind in the Philippines whenever their husbands departed for overseas work. This was reflected in how the women were entrusted with rural tasks, animal husbandry and bestowed to be the pillars of the home while their counterparts struggled overseas (Lukasiewicz, 2011). However, the situation changed during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the employment of Filipinos overseas seemed to have become matriarchal (see, Sobritchea, 2005). In this case, women often leave their husbands behind to work abroad (Pe-Pua, 2015). The shift of roles

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2 From 2001 to 2010, an estimated 60% of emigrated population were women who often became helpers or caregivers overseas (Lan, 2003).

affects the “masculinity of men.” It reduces and sometimes loses the men’s masculinity, leading to a *virile partner*.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, we can look at the juxtaposition of labor among women and men in Filipino society. This supports the idea of Judith Butler (1999) that argues that “*gender is not a noun, it is performative*.” In addition, perhaps Emile Durkheim’s *Social Solidarity* (1972), which refers to the “*interdependence between individuals in a society*,” can also be linked in understanding the process of egalitarianism in Filipino labour in the context of globalization.

Regardless of being *Servants of Globalization* (Salazar Parreñas, 2003), how is it possible that women OFWs cultivate their identity from the perspective of others or outsiders? In an optimistic view, in East Asian and North American countries, Filipinas are known as nurses and caregivers due to their high quality of care (Lukasiewicz, 2011). Despite this, there is still an even greater percentage of the image of Filipina workers is damaged by negative impressions. Many stereotypes on Filipina workers have come out only in recent years. They are explicitly labelled in any media platforms (social media or newspapers) as *maids*, *tsimay*, *domestic helpers*, among others. A textbook, for example, used by Hong Kong schools, even in the content of exams, shows the generalized image of Filipinas as domestic helpers (Cayabyab, 2014).<sup>4</sup> Such news is not new because the “respected” Oxford dictionary initially trampled the image of Filipina workers overseas as maids in 1988. This happened during the administration of President Corazon Aquino, which reaped anger and criticism from Filipinos (Callo, 1988; Henneby et al., 2017). Filipinos, especially women, demanded that Aquino responds with a protest against racist labelling and discrimination against Filipina workers. This seemingly rhetorical view of women OFWs continued during the administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. During this period, Arroyo began to call the Filipina labour sector as *Supermaid*, resting on the idea that they were high-standard workers because of undergoing heavy training

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3 The *virile partner* is an indication of the masculinity of the male counterparts. This is legitimate because most men were initially involved in the workforce early in overseas labor. Pingol extends the understanding of the concept, explaining that left husbands/males in the Philippines have a greater responsibility to the families and homes left by females, especially on how the latter entered the labor struggle abroad (Pingol, 2000). It is viewed as an immense step towards the *feminization of labor*. The male loses power because their female counterpart earns more abroad, which causes the male to stay at home as house husbands who functions as both mother and father to the children (Pe-Pua, 2015).

4 A fill-in-the-blanks exercise can be seen in a textbook that asks the students to identify the work of different races in the world. Although there are six options to choose from (Japanese, Indian, British, Chinese, Korean, Filipino), only five will be answered. According to the teacher’s guidebook (answer key), the British is an English language teacher, the Japanese have sushi restaurants in Hong Kong, the Chinese live in Shanghai, the Indian is attending an international school, and the Filipino is a *katulong* or *maid/helper* (Cayabyab, 2014).

in the Philippines in preparation for abroad (see, Derain, 2008). The state's action was unbeneficial as it added complexity for Filipinos who wanted to travel overseas.

To this day, women workers continue to assert their identity overseas. The conditions of the selected Filipina workers overseas, whom I have personally met and interviewed, will be discussed in the next sections. Three women volunteered to share their experiences during my travels in Southeast Asia. They came from Malaysia (2014), Singapore (2014), and Cambodia (2017). The story of OFWs is often as "general" as it is told; hence I think it is also important to highlight their specific narratives as an individual.

### **Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2014)**

Malaysia is one of the preferred places for Filipino overseas work because of the close cultural ties shared by the two countries (Moratilla, 2015). Malaysia also receives the largest number of migrants from Asia (Ybiernas, 2015; Miles et al., 2019). Malaysia was still an emerging country during the 1980s when the level of their tourism plummeted (Chheang, 2013), consequently resulting in an intense demand for labour. Filipinos (including Indonesians)<sup>5</sup> first worked in Malaysia (Ybiernas, 2015), serving as cleaners, nannies, and waitresses in restaurants and hotels. Some Filipinas fall victim to human trafficking in Malaysia, where they are initially promised to obtain decent jobs but receive obscene-related work and various physical and emotional abuses (Hilsdon & Giridharan, 2008).

In November 2014, I reached Malaysia. Malaysia was fourth with the largest number of Filipinos during that year, having 620,043 in population data (DFA, 2015). Out of the total number, 7,656 female workers while 7,888 were males. There are more men in Malaysia. However, in 2014, there were 1,170,000 female workers at the global level, while only 1,149,000 were men (PSA, 2015). I had the fortunate chance to converse with two OFWs residing in Malaysia: Rodelia Tapales and alias *Pinay K. L.* (confidential and as protection of her identity). Their testimonies manifest the hardships and adversities they overcame when they went to Malaysia. In the case of Rodelia Tapales, she has long served in Malaysia. Identical to other reasons, her overseas labour is entrenched familiarly

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<sup>5</sup> Philippine and Indonesian societies are alike in several instances. For example, countries in the Southeast Asian region, the Philippines and Indonesia equally contribute a significant number of migrant workers abroad. The Filipinos (OFWs) share the experience of the *tenaga kerja wanita* (Indonesian women workers), also known as *Pahlawan Devisa* (equivalent to "*Bagong Bayani*"), who have endured severe discrimination and abuse in foreign countries. The study of Setyawati (2013) compared the Indonesia Law No. 39, 2004 and the Republic Act No. 10022, laws that protect the rights of Indonesian and Filipino migrant workers overseas respectively. In comparison, the Philippine law is enhanced than the Indonesian because the latter fails to cover illegal workers abroad (Setyawati, 2013). This is the reason why Filipinos in the past helped Indonesian Erwiana Sulityansih who was abused by her boss (see, Picos, 2021).



for her children's future and the depressing quality of work in the Philippines. Despite this, she explained that the Filipino spirit and identity are still enormously alive in her consciousness even though she lived in Malaysia for almost two decades. She states:

I was in Malaysia in 1997, but I started being an OFW in 1982. I am a single mother, so I have to work hard. The closure of the garments factory in 1982 pushed me to emigrate. Now, I am a domestic helper here in Selangor. Regardless of my long stay, the Filipino heart is still active in my mind... I know that I am still a Filipino. Although I have been here for a long time, I never thought of living here for life. I love my own country, of course. In other ways too, it is great here because I have work and I can still earn despite my age. That is because, in the Philippines, there is an age limit (translation mine) (Tapales, 2014).

Her statement is undeniably true. In terms of salaries, the Filipinos in Malaysia earn far more than the Philippines. For example, the domestic worker usually makes 1,000 Ringgit (or 13,000 Pesos) per month (Tapales, 2014). Such reality is not yet reflected in the Philippines. The pay is equivalent to Salary Grade (SG-13) in our country, the salary of a graduate who has passed the Civil Service Examination. With this, it is complicated for those without degrees to acquire such wages in the Philippines, resulting in emigrating abroad to be housemaids or helpers. Rodelia's experience is improbable compared to Miss K.L. Aside from her illegal entry into Malaysia, she also suffered cruelty at the hands of foreigners.<sup>6</sup> While talking to Miss K.L. in Taman Wahyu, Kampung Batu, Kuala Lumpur, she told me her story. She shares:

My first slate abroad was when I served as a domestic helper in Muscat, Oman. There are times when my employer even tried to enter my room... My Arab employers were hurting me. I escaped. Let's not recall about that. Horrible things are no longer a concern... With God's mercy, I was fortunate again here in KL as a waitress at [restaurant name removed] to support my only child. I am the only one who provides for his needs. I thought I was okay here in Malaysia, but still. We must endure for us to live (translation mine) (Miss K.L., 2014).

Such abuses are conceived as *direct discrimination* (Ayub et al., 2016). Due to limited studies on Filipino migrants in Malaysia, which only revolved and focused around the Orthodox theory of *push and pull*, some topics were inverted towards this discourse. Studies about the illness of Filipino migrants in Malaysia have emerged. For instance, some emphasized the lower back pain of workers caused by overwork and abuse. To my recollection, this is also what Miss K.L. suffered when I conversed with her; because of her tight work schedule, from being a waitress in the morning to a masseuse in the

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6 She came to Malaysia at the request of her past Pakistani fiancée. Their relationship did not last long as her fiancée harmed her. She has not returned to the Philippines until now.



evening (Miss K.L., 2014). Miss K.L. is one of the illegal migrants in Kuala Lumpur. She said that it is difficult to live in her situation as it is a blessing that a day has passed without an inspection or arrest of violators. Whenever she hears from the authorities, Miss K.L. immediately goes into hiding. She added that, as much as possible, fellow Filipinos should be unaware of those like her who do not carry legal papers - for the reason that they will personally dispatch you to authorities. In her experience, she has been imprisoned twice but is only ransomed by his bosses and a few friends. In 2018, before I went to Myanmar, I planned to meet her again. Her manner of living has improved slightly due to her capacity to rent a large house with plenty of rooms. She leases every space to Filipinos who do not have legal papers. The rent from fellow Filipinos served as an extra income for Miss K.L. Unfortunately, while I was in Myanmar, she was imprisoned again for the third or fourth time for the same illegal offense.

Although the exact number of Filipinos experiencing direct discrimination in Malaysia is unlisted or even unknown, this testimony of a Filipina worker who experiences mistreatment, cruelty, and other forms of abuse from their employers is not new.

In 1995, the news on the execution of Flor Contemplacion in Singapore and Sarah Balabagan in the United Arab Emirates startled the nation; the latter was granted amnesty/parole (Law & Nadeau, 1999). The mistreatment of their employers caused the personal distress of the overseas female workers. In a similar plane, a discussion of OFW discrimination was also revealed in Moratilla's (2015) dissertation entitled *Counter-Discourse: Testimonial Narratives of Filipino Workers (1986-2012)*. He listed various case studies of OFWs employed in Lebanon, Qatar, Libya, Greece, Oman, Malaysia, Singapore, and Syria (Moratilla, 2015). The study shows that most OFWs were not fed and paid properly, beaten, and some even had their passports taken by their employers. With this, I can analogize the case of Miss K.L. of Malaysia to alias Rhianne (one of the OFWs in Moratilla's study), who was consuming her food from the trash and also suffered physical assault from her employer. Miss K.L. shares this experience during her first year in Kuala Lumpur.

To this day, Filipina workers continue to endure abuses from their employers in Malaysia. Two years after I arrived, an estimated 66,000 Filipinos worked in Malaysia. Most of them were maltreated and harmed (Nawal, 2016). A Filipina was repatriated to the Philippines from Malaysia because her Malaysian employer aggressively splashed her with boiling oil (Elemia, 2017; GMANO, 2017a). This essay wants to convey the testimonies of Filipinas overseas, exposing that they were not granted the proper attention to safeguard their safety, especially the identity imposed by the abusive foreigners. In addition, there is a necessity to intensify further the enforcement of laws and programs that aim to protect Filipino workers' safety overseas. As long as the Philippine government fails to provide a viable solution to these cases, it is as if we are proving that our image as Filipinos is true in the perception of the foreigners.

In 2016, I reached the East of Malaysia, where Sabah and Sandakan are found. During my visits to the Islands of Sapi, Manukan, and Mamutik in Sabah and Kinabatangan in Sandakan, I met many Filipinos. Most local occupations are boatmen, scuba divers, masseuses, and vendors. Most people on the island of Borneo (especially in Sabah) are Filipinos. They came from Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, and Palawan. However, I haven't spoken to any OFWs other than a bus conductor in Lawas, Sarawak - who is of Filipino blood but Malay in culture. As for me, I can no longer consider them as OFWs because they have inhabited there for a long time and will never return to the Philippines.

### **Singapore (2014)**

In the same month, I also crossed Singapore on a train from Sentral Kuala Lumpur to the Woodlands in Singapore. The Strait of Johor (*Selat Tebrau*) connects the two countries. Before entering Singapore, it initially took about three hours at the border. I witnessed the immersed busyness of the border as every migrant and tourist entering and exiting the two countries is strictly inspected. This is the first time I have experienced land border crossing, which led me to agree with Tagliacozzo (2007) that the borders within Southeast Asia are porous. With this permeable nature, the flow of migration, the products, ideas, and other modes of interaction between Malaysia and Singapore is complex to control. Singapore is considered a favoured destination by most workers from South Asia and the ASEAN region. On the one hand, Sri Lankans and Indians are the first working minorities in South Asia in Singapore (Paul, 2018). On the other hand, it is also visited by workers in Southeast Asia such as Thais, Burmese, Indonesians, and Filipinos (Yeoh & Huang, 1998; Wang et al., 2018), but the larger percentage of women workers come from Indonesia and the Philippines (Paul, 2018). Apart from easy access and close geographical location to the Philippines, the opportunities for migrant workers in Singapore are immense, with high wages and great benefits (SOFW, n.d). It is estimated that 170,000 to 180,000 Filipinos work in Singapore, where 60% are professionals while 40% belong to the domestic helpers' sector (Nabil et al., n.d; Sibal & Foo, 2016; Torres, 2017). In the year of my arrival, a total of 9,280 Filipino men and 20,184 Filipino women works in Singapore (PSA, 2015).

It is evident why a large population of Asian migrant workers prefer Singapore. After Great Britain's loss of power and during the early stages of its independence as a nation in 1959, Singapore faced internal dilemmas such as labor shortages, depressed level of economy, among others (Soon-Beng & Chew, 1995). In reaction, the country cohered to its linkages with different world countries. One of its advances was the self-influx of migrant workers from the *Global South* (Fillinger et al., 2017). In this way, Singapore foresees its economic emergence and labour force. As it progresses in the following decades, the inflow of migrants also continues to increase immensely. Unlike other countries, the cases of abuses, discrimination, and marginalization are low, proving why most Filipinos favour Singapore (Asistio, 2014). However, it is also necessary to

stress the case of Flor Contemplacion at the hands of the Singaporean government. She was executed on March 17, 1995, for the murder of Nicholas Huang and the Filipino housemaid Delia Maga (Reincke, 1997). This case resulted in a wave of sympathy from Filipino migrants in Singapore. Regardless of this, the conflict between the two countries seems to have been absolved over time, manifested in the continuous flow of Filipino workers in Singapore.

During my travels in Singapore, I always encountered Filipinos. Apart from Lucky Plaza Mall, one of the concentrations of Filipinos in Singapore, I have seen many Filipinos in places like Bukit Panjang, Punggol, Tanah Merah, and Kembangan. They usually crowd collectively every Sunday (the day-off of Filipina workers). Although I had informal conversations with them, most Filipinas shared that they often stay around Marina Bay, Botanical Garden, Sentosa Beach, where they ate and drank and sometimes played karaoke at the house of a Filipino friend. I also chanced at the famous Jollibee in Paya Lebar, a space where most Filipinos dine (Tugano, 2021g). Interestingly, there is a brief period when a domestic helper can relax and unwind through her usual salary of 700 dollars (SGD) or 26,000 pesos (PHP). Some take their children on vacation in Singapore instead of going home to the Philippines. In this regard, I was also given a good opportunity to formally interview Marites Asistio, an OFW in Singapore. Similar to the OFWs I converse with within Malaysia, her statements also reflect the struggle and venture in a foreign land. Experiences of loneliness, homesickness, and cultural renewal are common. However, in such cases, the large population of Filipinos in Singapore greatly benefits. The gathering and socializing with fellow Filipinos serve as a comfort zone for Filipinos distant from their families. This is the personal narrative of Marites. She worked as a nanny in Tampines, Pulau Ujong, near Bedok and Paya Lebar. In our conversations, she mentioned:

I've only been here for a year. I have no choice. My salary here is triple compared to the regular income there in the Philippines. I have to work hard for my children to study. I feel homesick sometimes, but I have a lot of Pinay friends here on weekends. There are many Pinays here, especially in Lucky Plaza Mall. I send money and sometimes buy food and household items there. Somehow, I cannot forget that I am still in the Philippines. I still feel the Philippines (translation mine) (Asistio, 2014).

The statement manifests the spirit and identity of Filipinos in Singapore. Singapore seems to be an extension of the Philippines because of the number of Filipinos who collectively meet during their day-offs. Some even hold mass in the Filipino language because almost all Catholics in Singapore are Filipinos (Lara, 2018). Concurring the statement of Marites, an intersection can be seen within the spaces of Lucky Plaza Mall, a convergence of the identities of Filipino workers and the foreign spaces of Lucky Plaza Mall. Within these spaces, Filipinos transact and interact with fellow Filipinos. They subconsciously regard Lucky Plaza not as a mall but rather as a homeland (Navarro & Tatel,

2012). In my recollection, the Lucky Plaza building is built with four or five floors, replete with Filipino establishments such as restaurants, remittance centers, plane ticket shops, parlors, Filipino banks, watch stores, and many more. In fact, a few stalls belong to Filipinos inside the mall, but most are still Chinese-owned (Asistio, 2014). In a comprehensive study by Navarro and Tatel (2012), they articulated the landscape of the mall. The “Filipinized” mall was formed and perceived in the foreign country. Within the mall spaces, the character of Filipinos as noisy, talkative, and fun-loving was markedly manifested, things that Singaporeans avoid and dislike about Filipinos (Navarro & Tatel, 2012). However, the misunderstanding of Singaporeans is that the spaces of the mall complement the self-indulgence of resident Filipino workers behind the hard work and loneliness they handle in a foreign space. Such a phenomenon is a form of cosmopolitanism that presents the process of how cultural capital has changed the lifestyle of OFW women, largely different from the experienced way of life in the Philippines (Yeoh & Soco, 2014). Aside from cosmopolitanism, the collectivity of Filipinos in Singapore also demonstrates that the sense of belongingness is, at times, not only rooted in the country of origin, but also in the form of plurilocal (Tsujimoto, 2016) or the intersection between homeland and abroad or the faculty to adapt in another country.

It can be inferred that Marites still insists on her identity as a Filipino. She anchors on Filipino spaces on foreign spaces, searching for a way to grasp further the spirit and essence of being Filipino and momentarily escape familial and national desolation.

### **Kep, Cambodia (2017)**

Unlike the countries above, Filipino workers seldom visit Cambodia. Considering the nation’s low economy, I anticipated the possibility of a low percentage of Filipinos in the country. If any, it is less compared to other countries. Usually Cambodians were the ones who emigrated for overseas work. Data suggests that Cambodians often depart to Malaysia for domestic jobs; Thailand for its agricultural industry, South Korea for its construction and factory vocations, similar to Filipino overseas destinations (TAF, 2011; Holliday, 2012). However, the case of Cambodian workers was complicated. Contrary to the Filipinos, it is intricate for Cambodians to be accepted or find work overseas.

Many illegal Cambodian migrants go abroad, especially to Thailand. This resulted in strict restrictions, punishing any undocumented Cambodian worker who enters Thailand (Sok Udom, 2019). Cambodians also experience discrimination from Thais. In some cases, they are more willing to accept Lao and Burmese workers because they learn Thai faster than Cambodians (Walsh & Ty, 2011). Most Cambodian workers are also underpaid, convincing them to return to their country or transfer to other affluent countries in Asia.

Even though Cambodia is one of the underdeveloped Asian countries, Filipinos still work there. An estimated 6,000 Filipinos reside in Cambodia, wherein 600 are in

hiding (TNT) due to various reasons such as pawned passports and financial pressures (GMANO, 2017b). In my second visit to Cambodia in 2017, the working population of Filipinos is 8,186 males and 3,976 females; the latter is dispersed across Indonesia, Brunei, and Cambodia (PSA, 2018). On the other hand, registered Filipino workers are employed in professional jobs (e.g., managers) in Phnom Penh. Domestic working is unpopular in Cambodia (Avendaño, 2012). The country experiences a degradation in the local employment rate, further stressing its low influx of migrant workers. According to Ybiernas (2015), it is surprisingly that more migrant workers enter Cambodia compared to its citizens working in other ASEAN member countries; this means that Cambodia, a country with a “developing economy,” is a net importer of migrant workers.

There is an absence of direct discrimination or marginalization towards Filipino workers in Cambodia. The intimacy of both countries is particularly reflected in the support offered by some Filipinos workers to Cambodians in the latter’s recovery from extreme poverty caused by past conflicts (Avendaño, 2012).<sup>7</sup> The locals highly regard resident Filipino workers, especially Filipino medical doctors. Cambodia endures a deficiency in medical personnel, with a saddening ratio of one doctor for every 5,000 patients (Avendaño, 2012). Unlike other discussed countries, Filipinos in Cambodia have a unique approach to pronouncing our Filipino identity, affected by the absence of discrimination and marginalization.

Filipinos have re-introduced our identity by practicing native tradition, customs, and culture. My trip in 2017 initiated the opportunity to talk to OFWs in Cambodia. I headed to Kep, a province about 100 miles [160 km] from Phnom Penh, and later visited the beach of Krong Kep, known as one of the beautiful seas in Cambodia. I spoke with Anabelle Bernardo, a Filipino worker in Cambodia in the same province. Anabelle worked for three years as a hotel receptionist in Kep, Cambodia. She initially came from Luang Prabang Laos, before she decided to resettle in Cambodia. Despite her lengthy stay overseas, underlined by the domination of foreign cultures, Anabelle retained and conserved her native identity. She shared with me these significant passages:

In 2014, I was already here in Kep. I used to work in Luang Prabang. At first, I had difficulty adapting because the culture was so different. That’s what I thought. Of course, no matter where you are in the country, you will adjust to their culture. But just because you are in another country, it does not mean that you will forget your own culture. In fact, I introduce our identity in my office... especially since we are the only two Filipinos there; note that this is a province, unlike Phnom Penh. Honestly, we have traditions that are very similar to theirs (translation mine) (Bernardo, 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> Some Filipinos refuse to work in Cambodia because of the low salary (see Spitzer & Piper, 2014).

Anabelle was able to introduce the identity of the Filipinos through sharing and empathizing with its fellow Asians. In connection with this, the introduction of Filipino culture in Cambodia continuous to be highlighted. In 2019, academics held a program in Phnom Penh to commemorate the National Heritage Month. They gathered Filipinos in Cambodia, where they were taught about the history of Indigenous Filipinos and even the writing and reading of *baybayin* (DFA, 2019). The program was an apparent attempt to remind the Filipinos in Cambodia to remain linked to the culture of their national origins, also functioning elevate the image and morality of Filipinos in a foreign land. With this, the reality of overseas workers can be articulated. Transcending overseas labour, it manifests that some Filipinos working outside of the country continuously maintain to assert and practice, even share, the Filipino culture, which attests to their unwounded bond with their homeland.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The narratives of select OFW women from different Southeast Asian countries reflect the discourse that Filipino overseas workers function an immense role in exposing Filipino identity abroad. In this vein, I suggest an academic effort for travelers to explore and document Filipinos' unique experiences, stories, and struggles overseas. Although the narratives are possibly common or repetitive, I still consider that within the passages are aspects or factors that require scholarly scrutinization and theoretical attention. Such activities and research undertakings will advance and underline the importance of *Diaspora Studies* in Filipino history and contribute to the nation.

In traveling, it is necessary to confer value on documenting the experience, not only of oneself but also of others. In this regard, the paper focuses on Filipino women migrant workers overseas. It is best to emphasize the prominent theologian de Mesa (2017) as he introduced the concepts of *magandang karanasan* (good experience) and *di-magandang karanasan* (bad experience). The former conveys hope, while the latter stands for caution or warning (de Mesa, 2017). The narratives of OFWs and their struggle for the people can be regarded as a good experience. Meanwhile, the bad experience symbolizes the marginalization and discrimination they undergo in other countries.

In addition to enriching memories, the experiences caused by subjects and circumstances deliver a series of lessons accumulated and inculcated in the past, the present, and the future (de Mesa, 2017). Experiences drawn from oneself can be used to extend and correct future pursuits. Whether a person said experiences have been good or not, meaningful or deemed senseless, unique or not, it cannot be denied that it has an impact on oneself and their existence.

## RESEARCH ETHICS

The respondents from Malaysia, Singapore, and Cambodia were aware that they would be a part of these researches, although I let Miss K.L. be anonymous to protect the confidentiality of her life.

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