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## **Globalizing National Domesticity: Female Work and Representation in Contemporary Women's Films**

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# **Globalizing National Domesticity**

## **Female Work and Representation in Contemporary Women's Films**

Films on the overseas contract worker (OCW) feature diasporic working class women's experiences using the melodramatic genre and featuring iconic stars. The recent foregrounding of OCW characters in film represents not only the state's massive deployment of overseas contract work, specifically domestic jobs, for national development, but also a break in women's filmmaking. Many of the defining OCW films are directed by women who have sought to dehistoricize gains of earlier feminist filmmaking. The insidious popularity of OCW films caters to future and ongoing OCWs.

**KEYWORDS: OCW (OVERSEAS CONTRACT WORKER) · DOMESTIC WORK · FILM · MELODRAMA · POSTFEMINIST FILMMAKING**

The impetus for Philippine national development rests on the export of its laborers. This massive export, which continues to increase through the years, sustains Philippine development. As cultural artifacts of nationhood, films engage in a dialogue with and provide a critique of the economic and political impetus to national development. In this essay, I first map out the context of labor export in the Philippines, then proceed to analyze globalized domestic work that emplaces the overseas Filipina domestic worker as a central figure in national development. I then turn to the subgenre in film on the overseas contract worker (OCW) and locate its development within female and feminist filmmaking in the Philippines. Lastly, I discuss the female representation in the films of three younger-generation women directors in the Philippines—Rory Quintos, Olivia Lamasan, and Joyce Bernal—and how their films provide film audiences and citizens the cultural imaginary that mediates the national development project. What I intend to foreground in the centrality of the overseas Filipina domestic worker is her cultural politics that renders her as a partial citizen in the homeland and an absent one in the host land. This cultural politics informs film audiences of either their own present predicament or future possibility as both dispossessed transnational professionals and partial citizens, and of the impossibility of hope amid its intimate rendition in filmic melodrama.

### Philippine Labor Export

After India and Mexico, the Philippines is the third largest exporter of labor in the world. In some estimates, the Philippines is even a bigger labor-exporting nation than India, considered second in the world (Lan 2000, 2). In 1998 some 755,000 Filipinos went to work overseas, joining the seven million workers who were already abroad and helping remit some US\$7.5 billion to the country (San Juan 2000). The estimate of remittances for 2005 is a record-breaking US\$9 billion (National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada/SIKLAB 2005). As E. San Juan (2000) contends, “Since the seventies, Filipino bodies have been the No. 1 Filipino export, and their corpses (about five or six return in coffins daily) are becoming a serious item in the import ledger.” Every hour, some 100 migrant workers leave the country (National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada/SIKLAB 2005). In 1999 half of overseas Filipino migrant workers were in the Middle East (26.5 percent) and Asia (23.5 percent), 42 percent in North America, and 8 percent in

Europe (Lan 2000). Since the early 1990s, women comprised 55 percent of OCWs (Hochschild 2002). By 1994 women accounted for some 60 percent of Philippine OCWs (Barber 2000, 400). An estimated two-thirds of OCWs are involved in domestic work.

Female domestic work represents the Philippines’s niche in the global economy. In 1994 some 120 million people legally and illegally migrated from one country to another, representing 2 percent of the world’s population that became geographically mobile and culturally diasporic (Hochschild 2002). Some estimates put it at a high ratio of one migrant for every six persons, or a total of one billion migrant workers, with 13 million coming from Asia; females constitute 72 percent of the one billion (Women and the Economy 2006). A more recent estimate shows that some 800,000 women workers migrate each year, and the figure is gradually rising (Human Rights Watch 2004). Next to direct foreign investments, earnings from migrant workers from developing countries, which amounted to US\$7.2 billion in 2001, represented the second largest source of external revenue (ibid.). A *Migration News* report provides a more staggering estimate of total world remittances (the sum of workers’ remittances, compensation of employees, and migrants’ transfers)—at US\$70 billion in 1995, up from US\$2 billion in 1970 (Aguilar 2003, 152). The UN estimate for 2002 is US\$80 billion, already exceeding the total of foreign direct investments (Hwang 2004).

The national link of Philippine female work to the global and sexual division of labor is exemplary of developing nations’ link to global capitalism. In export-processing zones women account for up to 70 percent of the workforce in the electronics and garments industries, and thus similarly emplaced in the rudiments of paid domestic work; domestic work contracts represent as high as 70 percent of contracts in the international labor market; and some 20 million people—25 percent of whom are minors, 90 percent women, and 90 percent women from the Third World—are involved in the global sex industry, another sphere of paid domestic work (Rosca n.d.). An estimated 200,000 Filipinas are drawn into the global sex trade even as another 500,000 perform sex work within the nation-space, with nearly 100 percent coming from the underclass (ibid.). This figure represents a significant contribution to the estimated annual revenues of US\$7 to US\$12 billion from the global sex industry (ibid.). Furthermore, in Belgium, one out of every twenty Filipinas is a trafficked woman; in South Korea, Filipinas are increasingly becoming the overwhelming nationality in the domestic sex

trade (*ibid.*). Filipina bodies dominated the trade in mail-order brides in the 1980s.

Women from various developing nations outnumber men in overseas 3D (dangerous, dirty, demeaning) jobs. Women from Sri Lanka comprise 84 percent and those from Indonesia 70 percent of OCWs (Migrant Forum in Asia 2000). As men and women in the global cities of postindustrial nations become better educated, earn higher wages, and are freed from mundane domestic work, “globalization’s high-end jobs breed low-paying jobs,” as Saskia Sassen has stressed (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 4), with some 30 to 40 percent of new jobs being considered as low-waged (Benn 2003). However, 77.8 percent of Filipina migrants are in the service occupations, such as domestic and entertainment work, which are deemed more vulnerable than the occupations of their male counterparts (Parreñas 2001). With shifts in global economic conditions that have created more demand for flexible (nonunionized, downsized, outsourced, contractual, home-work) labor, women’s labor is preferred as periodic employment in the types of work traditionally deemed feminine—domestic labor, nursing, sex work, and factory work in garments and electronics, among others—allows them time, albeit limited, to care for their families.

### **Globalized Domestic Work**

The term “Filipina” has become identical with the geoeconomic and geopolitical figure of the domestic worker in various host countries. It has become synonymous with maid and performer of domestic work in affluent and nouveau riche families in the global economy. Filipina denotes “maid” in Hong Kong and “nanny” in Canada, as well as in Taiwan and Italy (Barber 2000; Lan 2000; Ebron 2002). In Greece the new entry in a local dictionary set “Filipineza” (Filipina) as a “domestic servant; someone who performs nonessential auxiliary tasks” (Ebron 2002). Until public outcry stopped the distribution, Filipina action dolls—complete with a Philippine passport and work contract, and packaged in a box that poses the question to prospective buyers, “Won’t you please sign my work contract?”—were sold in Hong Kong (*ibid.*). As Filomeno Aguilar (2003, 140) states, “‘Filipina’ and ‘domestic work’ have become reducible and interchangeable.”

This configuration is emplaced in global geoeconomics and geopolitics. As global capitalism intensified and became the world dominant in the economic mode of production, a Keynesian shift (government as invisible

hand) in economic postwar restructuring resulted in Thatcherism and Reaganomics beginning in the 1970s, and in the confidence building of neoliberalism in the post-1997 global crisis management. The last fifty years represent a massive increase in women involved in paid domestic work, from 14 percent of mothers of children aged 6 years old and under in 1950 to 65 percent today (Hochschild 2002). This figure represents Filipinas and other Third World women engaged in domestic work as major conduits in what is termed as the “global care chain” or the “series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring” (*ibid.*).

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the decline in income disparities in Western Europe. Paid domestic work was dwindling with the wide entry of women in the formal labor force and with the technological innovations being massively introduced during the period, such as “the reinvention of the kitchen, the rise of home technologies, and the emergence of ‘eating out’ and other household labor-saving strategies” (Aguilar 2003, 145). Only in the colonies were “aristocratic pretensions,” including the hiring of male and female domestic workers, being maintained “even as hiring of servants in Europe itself was on a decline” (*ibid.*). Paid domestic work proliferated in postindustrial societies in the mid-1980s as menial jobs in the service industries, domestic services, and residual industrial activities were delegated to migrant workers. The postindustrialization of Europe, for example, created labor demands to sustain further the integration of its own female workforce, which in turn created the demand for Third World women to fill the void in domestic work. In the United Kingdom alone, the amount paid to domestic workers quadrupled from £1.1 billion in 1987 to £4.3 billion in 1996 (*ibid.*). In the U.S., the postwar upward trend—even when this was halted by a series of events in the 1970s (deindustrialization, the oil crisis, national inflation, the end of Vietnam War, and shifts in global trade)—restructured the national economy, created gaps that both diminished the number of the rising middle class and created an occupational structure that allowed for migrant workers to come in (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). By the 1980s and 1990s, the polarization of income in the U.S. further intensified, “setting the stage for further expansion of paid domestic work” (*ibid.*). In the U.S., there were 549,000 domestic workers in 1998, up by 9 percent from 1996 (Ehrenreich 2003). Domestic workers rode the wave of a new global capitalist dictum of outsourcing, “where labor is cheapest at the expense of the local workers” (Migrant Forum in Asia 2000).

There are some 153,000 Filipina amahs (doing both nanny and domestic functions) in Hong Kong (Cruz 2003). Of the estimated 150,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong in 1995, 130,000 were Filipinas (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Filipinas comprise the largest group of entrants under Canada's Care-giver Programme, 61 percent in 1992 and 75 percent in 1995; totaling about 30,000 in all, Filipinas represent about 70 percent of nannies working in rich neighborhoods (Barber 2000). More work illegally in major Canadian cities. Of the 8,000 domestic workers in British Columbia, Canada, Filipinas dominate at 93 percent. Of the 80,000 registered migrant domestic workers in Taiwan, over half comes from the Philippines (Lan 2000, 1). In 1996 a survey found that women comprised 83.3 percent of OCWs in Hong Kong, 77.1 percent in Singapore, and 78.3 percent in Italy (Parreñas 2001). English fluency and a college degree equip the Filipina with both linguistic and cultural advantage to compete in the global economy as English is becoming a major language of global capital and as college degrees become a kind of differentiating capital that privileges a Filipina from her Third World counterparts. In one study, a scholar reports that 80 percent of Filipina domestic workers she interviewed in Italy had a bachelor's degree, and had worked earlier in the homeland as teachers and nurses (Ebron 2002). Aguilar (2003, 149) writes that in Singapore Filipina domestic workers are ranked at the top, Sri Lankans at the bottom. In Malaysia a Filipina earns a monthly salary of RM 500, while an Indonesian can be hired to service a household for RM 300–330 (*ibid.*). The Filipina's competitiveness, itself based on colonial legacies and contemporary cultural history, becomes the benchmark in the social stratification of inequality among Third World women.

However, this competitiveness of the Filipina domestic worker is always already interpolated by various businesses, the host state, and the host household or enterprise where the case applies. Various businesses prey on the Filipina domestic worker and her meager wage. With some 3,000 Filipinos leaving the country daily to work abroad, travel agencies, airlines, caregiving enterprises, land developers, and the telecommunications industry target the wage of the migrant worker even before she or he leaves, during her work abroad, and even after her contractual work is over (Melencio 2008). Recruiters, for example, charge placement fees of between US\$1,200 to US\$1,500 to get a job in Hong Kong; if applicants cannot raise the amount, they are forced to sign a loan agreement, which deducts the charge, including interests, from their monthly wages (Hwang 2004). Following the model

of Singapore, where the monthly levy on its 70,000 domestic workers raked in S\$298.8 million in 1999, Hong Kong, amid the economic crisis, hoped to generate from its 240,000 foreign domestic workers an annual revenue of HK\$1.152 billion in a program that started in October 2003 (Aguilar 2003, 156). While nation-states can protect themselves from an economic crisis, foreign domestic workers remain vulnerable to it. During the height of the post-1997 economic crisis, Hong Kong employers pushed for a 5 percent wage cut in the salary of domestic workers; in South Korea 10,800 to 18,000 foreign workers were told to leave the country (Migrant Forum in Asia 2000). At the beck and call of household owners, the Filipina and her work are highly regimented, in most cases detailed to what she can and cannot do and in terms of a monitored work and sleeping schedule. According to a survey by the Asian Migrant Center, more than 75 percent of all domestic workers studied in Hong Kong worked more than fourteen hours a day, almost a third worked sixteen to seventeen hours a day, 4 percent more than eighteen hours a day, and only 3 percent worked less than eleven hours a day (Constable 2003). The Filipina domestic worker, like other migrant workers, has yet to be protected by the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families as only twelve countries, mostly those that export labor, have ratified the convention.

The Filipina domestic body has been referred to by Neferti Tadiar (2004a, 115) as the "DH-body" (domestic helper), that translates to labor commodities, "The coerced identification of domestic helpers' bodies, sexuality and labour-power is, however, not a structure characteristic solely of their gender constitution, but of their 'race' and class constitution as well, so that we might more accurately say that it is as disenfranchised women from a third world country that domestic helpers are appropriated body and labour." The complexity of the OCW figure is represented in filmic terms as a consequence of sacrifice for the family and nation, melodramatic romance, and aspirational work and location. Films as popular communication enable a complicit and divergent circuiting of the export of global national domesticity: erasing undercurrents of class and gender tensions to highlight the collective aspiration for a transnational identity, using star power to sell this aspiration and regulate the flow and circulation of prospective and ongoing OCWs.

## OCW Films and Women Directors

In the last ten years, Philippine cinema has been substantiated by the experience of globalized domestic work. *The Flor Contemplacion Story* (1995), a film dramatization of the celebrated case of the Filipina domestic worker who was tried and executed in Singapore, became the most commercially and critically acclaimed film in the recent period, hitting the P100-million box-office mark that was unheard of at the time. Flor Contemplacion's case was so politically contested that four film versions have been made revolving around her execution. Another film, *The Sarah Balabagan Story* (1997), dealt with the murder trial of an underage Filipina domestic worker in the Middle East whose defense from rape led to the stabbing of her employer. These films became part of a subgenre of Philippine melodrama that deals with the social anxiety of the female OCW. The OCW film was the female response to biographical movies typified by male heroism, which represent either the moral origin of politicians (used as part of election campaigns) or the rise and fall of Robin Hood type criminals.

Recent OCW films, however, have turned toward the fictional story. Engineering this filmic shift are three contemporary women directors, the newest breed in Philippine cinema. Joyce Bernal, Rory Quintos, and Olivia Lamasan are three of thirteen female directors in the entire history of Philippine cinema. One characteristic of at least two of them is the prior experience as film artisans—Bernal is an editor and actress, Lamasan is a scriptwriter. All three specialize in female characters who are central in various forms of melodrama, especially the romantic melodrama and the female camp comedy (in Bernal's case). All three have also accepted exclusive contracts with ABS-CBN, the largest entertainment media corporation in the Philippines. They work in both film and television, specializing in the latter's daily melodrama series and *telefantaserye* (fantasy serials). With their substantial input in the shaping of programs and film outputs of the company, they have become gatekeepers of film production and television programming.

The three women directors represent the post-second golden age generation. The so-called second golden age included Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal, and women directors Laurice Guillen and Marilou Diaz-Abaya. This second golden age of Philippine cinema from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s yielded a body of films that showed aesthetic excellence despite limited budgets and commercialism, and that engaged in dialogue with the Marcos dictatorship. Free from the gritty realist politics of the second golden

age, the newer generation of directors has groped with other forms of substantiating the national experience in the post-Marcos, post-Brocka era.

Director Lino Brocka became the primary aesthetics engineer of the second golden age, with his films providing the bookend markers of the era—*Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (Manila in the Claws of Neon, 1976), considered as the opening film of the generation, and *Orapronobis* (Fight For Us, 1989), deemed as the age's closing film. Recognized as the most political of his generation of filmmakers, Brocka dialogued with and critiqued the Marcos dictatorship (1972–1986). Brocka proliferated images, characters, and narratives of poverty that had the dual effect of providing the antithesis of the Marcosian fascist dictum of “the true, the good, and the beautiful” and encapsulating Philippine-ness for international film audiences. Their deaths—Marcos in 1989 and Brocka in 1991—created a vacuum for newer representations of contestation of nationness and Philippine cinema. This void would be filled with the recognition of independent filmmaking only in the 2000s, with films that engaged again in issues of poverty but using more historically disenfranchised subaltern characters in neorealist take (a-day-in-the-life-of) in the film narratives.

The three women directors veered away from the overtly feminist agenda that helped define the second golden age—whether through films directed by women, such as Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Moral* (1982) and Laurice Guillen's *Salome* (1981), or through the sensitive portrayals of men and women in films by critically acclaimed male directors, primarily by Bernal in films like *Himala* (Miracle, 1981), *Relasyon* (Affair, 1982), *Broken Marriage* (1983), *Working Girls* (1984), and *Hinugot sa Langit* (Wrenched from Heaven, 1985). Bernal's legacy on female representation would be taken over by the next generation of directors, most prominent of which was Jose “Chito” Roño Jr. in films such as *Private Show* (1986), *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa* (Child, How Were You Made, 1998), and *Dekada '70* (The 1970s Decade, 2002). From the second golden age, along with the larger people's movement of the period, the women's agenda provided another level of critique of the Marcos dictatorship that harped, among others, on the sexual division of labor and national power, with Ferdinand Marcos “materially” transforming the modern nation and Imelda providing the “spiritual” justification for the fascist development.

Not having gained political consciousness and social bearing at the height of the Marcos dictatorship, the later generation of young women



directors opted to help define newer notions of women's films that focused not so much on works tackling overt social agenda as on the female individual's internalization of the social, whether tangential (in most romantic melodrama and camp films) or overt (in Quintos's *Anak* [Child, 2000] and Lamasan's *Milan* [2004], both dealing with the female domestic OCW). Interestingly, these women directors are also in the forefront of the largest film studio in the country, Star Cinema, and engaged from a primary position of mainstream commercial cinema. What then resulted is the yielding of the melodrama genre to its traditional domestic enclave, a working and reworking of sexual and gendered roles that succumb to largely domestic heterosexual closure—romantic and familial love—in the filmic ending.

### Globalized Domestic Work and Filmic Female Representation

In films by the three women directors, one substantiation of the national experience is the melodramatic mode, which harps on youthful heterosexual romance and motherhood. More instructional for this essay are the films that represent mothering and domestic work as newer instances of representing the OCW mode within the national experience. In this context, this section analyzes the demise of the feminist films—a preempted death, born but died young—and the leap toward an already postfeminist agenda in women's films, a kind of nostalgia for genres identifiable with women, in an age when labor is being feminized further to supply global demand.

Melodrama is a powerful ethos and genre in film because of its capacity to historically substantiate in the narrative the exploitation and oppression of women, gender and sexual stereotypes, and the crucial ending that can never bear the weight of the unfolding of the conditions of women's pain and anguish. Melodrama has the capacity to map out the conditions of the possible—that which oppresses women and, therefore, becoming the locus for liberatory transformation—in the lead female character's saga, which intertwines issues and discourses of the domestic and social, the private and public, the masculine and feminine, and the everyday and the historical, among others. While it has the capacity to map the discourse, it also blurs it in the process of retelling. However, especially in the hands of the studio industry, the blurring of boundaries eventually succumbs to the recapitulation and perpetuation of social lines, which also calls attention to the impossibility of a clean closure. The weight made to bear on the character and

narrative trajectory will never suffice for any clear ending. The studio's star system, or the centrality of highly paid actors reenacting iconic roles, further aggravates the possibility and containment of the melodramatic genre. Nora Aunor's performance, for example, in *The Flor Contemplacion Story* melded the star's own Cinderella iconic background with the biography of a tragic OCW heroine. Newer OCW films have also harped on studio stars portraying underclass domestic workers, but for an insidious political agenda: deglamorize the stars through domestic work, glamorize foreign lands and the migrant body's capacity to survive in these lands and earn for their family's upkeep. But in melodrama all endings are temporal, artificial, and performative, or an instance in which the character performs an overdetermined script, unable to contain the heavy baggage of the earlier exposition, connectivity, and development of scenes of oppression and exploitation.

By engaging in a postfeminist political project, the newer directors harp on an aesthetic of the star icon's centrality in the retelling of fantabulous stories of OCW life, saga, and history. What little is produced of Philippine feminist feature films, *Moral* for example, played on the ensemble acting to depict various positionalities of young women, their common linkages, and patriarchal oppression and individual redemption. In *Relasyon* and *Broken Marriage* the iconic star Vilma Santos was used precisely to depict the marginal figure of an empowered woman, struggling against the patriarchal imperatives of being a mistress or a wife but nonetheless caught in the double-tasking, middle-class modes of life amid the impending political crisis in the Marcos dictatorship. In postfeminist films, however, the political project is reconfigured from agency, relief, and redemption to an entrapment in the circuits of overseas work and the weakness of the domestic resolution to conquer all. Women's subjectivity is entrapped in the very choice of upward mobility: overseas contract work, long-distance family management, and a failure in the domestic resolution. The postfeminist OCW film cannot but choose to recycle women back into the forefront of overseas contract work as "floating bodies," or bodies that reside everywhere and nowhere. The reproduction and recycling of OCWs are doubly ensured through the mobilization of iconic stars' bodies to represent the global viability of the national development drive through overseas contract work.

Quintos's *Anak*, for example, tells the return of Josie, a mother, from contractual domestic work in Hong Kong. The happy return to the homeland in the chaotic opening scene at the airport provides an analog to the



Fig. 1. Vilma Santos as Josie in *Anak* (2000), opening airport scene

national condition, especially as this familiar familial scene is replicated in the entire periphery of the international airport (fig. 1). Airport regulations in Manila somehow preempted the present-day antiterrorism drive in U.S. airports as families and friends of departing passengers are not allowed to enter the airport's interiors to either send off or pick up their loved ones. Josie is greeted by various reactions from her three children. The eldest child, Carla, a troubled teenager, is coldest to her; the son, Michael, is unusually quiet; and the youngest, Daday, treats her as a stranger. Tensions begin to further unfold in the household as Carla is discovered taking drugs, engaging in casual sex, and not attending school any longer. Michael becomes more elusive. The two children harbor a resentment arising from their mother's inability to come home for their father's funeral. Josie could not leave and break her contract in Hong Kong. In a climactic scene, Carla retorts to her mother's confrontation, "Bakit ka pa kasi umuwi?" (Why did you ever have to come back?). Josie's attempt to put up a business failed, which drained her savings. She is devastated, tries to patch as much as she can in the family, and decides to leave for another round of work overseas. In the film's final scene, Josie, in a close-up shot, smiles as she walks past Hong Kong Central, the business district, on a Sunday (fig. 2). The camera tilts up showing Josie among other Filipina domestic workers in their usual Sunday takeover of the Central, engaging in both informal economic activities and camaraderie.



Fig. 2. The smiling Josie in the Hong Kong Central business district in *Anak* (2000)

In selecting one of the country's show-business superstars to act the role of the migrant domestic worker, the film was naturalizing the experience of the Filipina's globalized domestic work as source of both present-day pleasure and pain and, therefore, the possibility of a futuristic hope. Like the spectacle of the domestic worker's body that attracts both higher wage and social disdain for domestic chores, Vilma Santos's already spectacularized body in its filmic portrayal normalizes the experience of overseas domestic work, making it integral in the discussion of everyday national life. Santos's own spectacular body, in more recent times, has crossed over to the political where she has enjoyed popular support for the mayoralty of the industrial Lipa City in Batangas, south of Manila, to become governor of Batangas Province itself. In fact, she was already a city mayor when she did the film. What then transpired from her engagement in representing the domestic worker was the naturalization of the politics that transposed lesser known women's bodies in overseas work. Together with Claudine Barretto, who played her daughter, and one of the most bankable young stars in the ABS-CBN media conglomerate, Santos's working filmic and political body naturalized the complicit project of incorporating cinema and the state in representing the newer figure of Philippine globality. As a star and politician, sharing spectacle and use of the masses, Santos's drawing power was doubly induced. Along the lines of Tadiar's (2004b) analysis of Nora Aunor's



star power in *Himala*, Santos's mobilization of her star power can be read as a "non-heretical potential," submitting to an abstract order that is the state, and the very modality for experiencing the state's authority through film, and its pleasure principle of viewing. Santos simultaneously legitimized the demeaning work, even the contribution of domestic workers abroad, at the same time that she naturalized the politics inherent in the work—the substantial role of the Philippine nation-state in the proliferation of access to international domestic work and national female bodies.

After all, the Philippines tends to benefit from all the hardships of OCWs. The steady increase in foreign exchange remittances is a reliable source of income, especially as the national economy is suffering from its worst fiscal crisis. With little resources to finance government spending, Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, like her predecessors, has cultivated the OCW phenomenon. The US\$8 billion annual remittance is about 45 percent of the 2005 national budget of P957.56 billion, or 41 percent of the national deficit of US\$3.2 billion for the same year. While other exports like electronics and garments are also dollar earners, the export of labor is more reliable than the undependable demand for traditional exports. The demand for electronics and garments can also decrease with the less competitive advantage of Philippine laborers doing 3D work, or the lack of research in and upgrade of industrial export commodities. In sustaining the government, OCWs also sustain massive corruption, as some 30 percent of the government's budget is lost due to rampant graft and corruption (PCTC n.d.). Furthermore, OCW earnings support the government's debt servicing as some 30 percent is drained from the national budget to support foreign debt repayments.

Thus the film's ending scene exalts the OCW as both resplendent and abject, at the level of both individual and collective entities. The nation's expenses are shouldered by the individuals who are made to personalize the social baggage. In some sense, Quintos's film is a heroic rendering not only of the domestic worker but also of the ethos of personalization and internalization of the social baggage. Made to bear the weight of the national development experience, the OCW figure is milked for all its potential to take on the nation's obligations and excesses, including foreign borrowings, pork barrels, and corruption. It is a patriotic film, geared toward servicing the national development project.

The film's focus on the implications of absentee mothering on the part of the Filipina domestic worker is also legitimized in the process of natural-

izing the normativity of the absence of state preventive intervention. Despite all the troubles in the transnationalized home with the transborder mother/domestic worker absenting herself from physically realizing her feminine role, she has no recourse—given the continued bankruptcy of the nation-state—but to persevere and repeat the cycle of her overseas work. Thus the domestic worker is a partial citizen in her homeland and an absent citizen doing domestic work in the host land. The hierarchy in women's reproductive work, or what has been termed as the "international division of reproductive labor" that allows for a three-tier transfer of reproductive labor ("first, among middle- and upper-class women in receiving countries; second, migrant Filipina domestic workers; and third, Filipina domestic workers in the Philippines who are too poor to migrate"), remains ungrounded in the film even as such layers of transnational mothering become inimical to overseas domestic work (Parreñas 2003, 72). The tensions are poised—the daughter questioning her mother's return and absence, Josie questioning the injustice of being able to care for the children of her foreign employer and not her own—yet goes unchallenged in the film. Such tensions are real, as various studies on absentee mothering of overseas domestic workers indicate. Yet the film is silent on both the maternalism of the employer—which, as Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) argues, "is an important mechanism of employer power"—and the "social reproduction and new regimes of inequality" brought about by "transnational motherhood." Just as the nation-state is unquestioned in the film, so too does the dimension of transnational politics, which transposes local domestic workers and mothers overseas, remain uninterrogated. As such, when the nation-state heralds OCWs as *bagong bayani* (new heroes), it does so without any reference to historical and contemporary cultural politics that foreground placelessness—why they are there instead of here—yet does not interrogate such movement.

What films undertake through the use of the rudiments of visual culture is an intimate relationship between characters and audience. Such intimacy furthers the already ongoing "internationalization of intimacy" in overseas domestic work (Rotkirch 2001). This includes childcare and the "false kinship" between employer and domestic worker, seen for instance through "gifting" (passing of old clothes and items to the worker by the employer). However, through the star system that purports to represent the ordinary drama of the new cultural figure in the national experience—the overseas domestic worker—the intimacy is doubly constructed as artifice. In

Lamasan's *Milan*, the domestic worker is portrayed by Claudine Barretto, the leading young film and television contract star of ABS-CBN, who is paired with Piolo Pascual, the most commercially successful young male star of the same outfit, who portrays an illegal worker in Italy.

*Milan* dramatizes the melodramatic romance of an odd young couple (fig. 3). Barretto's character is that of a loud-talking street-smart domestic worker in Milan, fashionably dressed and able to converse in Italian. Pascual's character is that of an unsuccessful engineer in the Philippines who tries his luck to work overseas, crossing the Swiss Alps to enter Italy illegally. The two meet and the relationship becomes initially romantic, only to succumb to tensions of the male character's inadequacy in dealing with his limitations and the female character's inability to fully comprehend the tensions. In the end, the two characters overcome all odds and decide to remain in Milan (fig. 4).

What becomes of this intimate portrait of romantic love is emplaced in the very notion of domesticity. Domestic work that provides the possibilities and limits to the couple's love is resolved through a romantic closure of domestic union. Even with a social disdain for domestic work, the audience is pedagogically trained to accept such work as integral in the fashioning of conflict, development, and resolution. Domestic work, after all,



Fig. 3. Claudine Barretto and Piolo Pascual as the couple in *Milan* (2004)

remains work of the “maid” (*alila, utusan, atsay, katulong, katiwala*) within the nation-space, done mostly by the young undereducated underclass from the provinces. Yet in film there is no pejorative connotation to domestic work. What is being transposed in the filmic narrative, combined with a touristy feel for an unknown land like Milan, is a mystification of domestic work as something adverse but not unnatural in the order of transnational experiences.

Barretto again lends her star power to represent the OCW figure in film. Her own track record in film and television—coming into her own terms, outside the shadow of an older, more popular sister (Gretchen Barretto), then overpassing her sister's success in the present trail of carefully crafted projects and successes—encapsulates the shifting younger trend among OCWs. Younger women are already being emplaced in the circuits of overseas multinational work. With the ABS-CBN's stewardship of her career, and the bankable draw of melodramatic OCW films crafted by the media giant, Barretto becomes both the locus of lower-class aspirational drive of young women seeking employment abroad, and the main figure in the business and state transformation of young women's body into a viable Philippine commodity. After all, the after-effect of ABS-CBN's cultural commodities, after its consumption in the country, is its export to Philippine diasporic



Fig. 4. The couple overcoming odds in *Milan* (2004)

population, many of whom are the women themselves represented in Barretto. The Filipino Channel, ABS-CBN's cable network, is lodged in locations steep with an overseas Filipino population, showing *telenovelas* (television melodrama series) and films that star, among others, Barretto and Pascual, and other stars of the network. It is not unusual, too, that OCW films are also premiered and screened in major international sites of Philippine labor, in glitzy orchestration of the stars' presence and coverage in gala shows. What becomes insidious is the trajectory of OCW films, using bankable icons, which make the stars, films, and media giant both culturally sensitive to the OCW needs while profiting from the media's showcase of the OCW figure. Even in distant shores, the OCW becomes the target of the media's marketing drive that is not so isolated from the state's own continuous disciplining and surveillance mechanism of OCWs for its own economic and political (in absentee voting, for example) drives.

What *Milan* creates as absent are the intertwining cultural identities that simultaneously define and negate the Filipina overseas domestic worker—Filipina and Third World, migrant, contractual, domestic worker: as Filipina and Third World, she carries with her the historical forces of both colonial and neocolonial experiences; as migrant, her status as outsider inside the belly of a former colonizing power becomes prominent; as contractual, her reproduction of the nostalgia for the homeland via periodic returns and departures is the psychical drive; and as domestic worker, her menial and oftentimes invisible tasks in the 3D service industries in First World sites construct her identity in the postindustrial society. All four identities earmark for the Filipina her emplacement and attempt to locate herself—including her family's—in the circuits of the global and sexual division of labor, the gaps created by intensified global capitalist development especially in the First World, and the similar intensified underdevelopment of her homeland. These categories define her cultural politics as a woman.

While intellectual recuperation of domestic work has emplaced domesticity in a productive engagement with individual agency, economic empowerment, and social capital, among others, what still remains a stark historical fact is the emplacement, if not entrenchment, of domestic work as hard yet invisible labor, a lowly 24/7 variant of global sacrificial work. While films glamorize global domestic work, these also nominalize work as business-as-usual, the only thing secured in the globalization of the family and their retelling of romance. The rhythm of domesticity is punctuated by sites of



Fig. 5. Ruffa Mae Quinto in *Booba* (2001)

resistance, but, when measured up with the matrix of global and sexual division of labor, gestures of subversion hardly become subversive. The rhetorical power becomes entangled with the state's own fantasy production, an official construct that overdetermines the OCWs' space of labor and sacrifice, and sites of temporal relief and release. The subversive acts implicated by newer scholars of domestic work call to the fore both the demeaning and de-meaning, or its transposition in another temporal site, nature of domestic work—that it is not so demeaning after all.

What has also been engineered for women's films, especially by Joyce Bernal, is the female camp comedy, with the heroine struggling in similar exacerbated conditions of the homeland. What Bernal undertakes is the comedic turn using the same wellspring of melodrama, and the construction of the figure of ultrasexy yet ultradimwitted female character as heroine. In films such as *Masikip sa Dibdib* (Tight in the Chest, a reference to her sizeable breasts, 2004), *Super B* (a superheroine, 2002), and *Booba* (a play on "bobo" or dumb, 2001), all starring Ruffa Mae Quinto (known for her sexy attributes and her difficulty in spoken English), the heroine's narrative punch line is derived by playing on her innocence and ignorance with the overtly sexual scenes in which she entangles herself (fig. 5). She becomes the trespassing subject in sex-oriented films, allowing her to move through the same

space of sexuality through comedy not through overt sex scenes. However, the similar signification of women's body spectacularized in sex films is what makes Quinto equally objectified as the women in sex-oriented films.

In postfeminist filmmaking, such films done by women emphasize the excess of female sexuality and domestic work, becoming the basis for a lot of comedic punch and twists. The campy superheroine character, especially in Quinto's iconic physiognomy and star status, attempts to create a mockery of the patriarchal order that impedes women, especially like Quinto, to take on such films as passage for her own mobility. What it undertakes is a self-reflexive yet obviously still patriarchal-constituting operation, invested on the female sexualized body and the matching stereotypical dimwitted slide. Women like Quinto purposively use their bodies for singular means that translates farce into a self-mockery of women. Such has been the downside of postfeminist filmmaking in the Philippines.

A columnist writes that the difference between more senior female director Diaz-Abaya and the latter generation of female directors, such as Bernal and Lamasan, is that Diaz-Abaya started "as an espouser of feminist stances regarding men's brutish treatment of women and the joys of female bonding," then moved on to become "more universal in her interests . . . and also less mainstream and more subjectively venturesome in her choice of subject matter for her movies" (Torre 2000). Lamasan is "where Abaya was a decade ago, working on important themes rather than on spontaneous and relatively unstructured human experience," and Bernal, being "the new kid in town," is "becoming known for her brisk, visual, mod way of telling a film story" (ibid.). While the columnist gives a sweeping overview that privileges the free-flowing realities of less politically themed films, he elides the question of politics that intervenes in the placement of women filmmakers and their female representations. Like scholars of local film studies, even popular film criticism fails to articulate both a political and a feminist agenda in filmmaking.

## Conclusion

Caroline Hau (2004, 4) has mentioned that "the transnationalization of production has resulted in the decontextualization of labor," which is the succinct description of the ensuing export of national domesticity. What becomes of the Filipina's globalized domestic work is a transnational departure for the host land and the remittance of her hard-earned wage to the

homeland. As Barber (2000, 399) states, "Philippine gendered labor migration and its diaspora have become the primary means for servicing Philippine indebtedness; they have also created new conditions and spaces for the reworking of Philippine class, gender, and cultural identities." What then occurs is the return of her capital via the nation's debt repayment to the host land, and the depositing of her earnings through token infrastructuring of the homeland, that which is not drained by graft and corruption. As the host and home nation-states restrict the Filipina domestic worker's access to political citizenship, the Filipina OCW attempts to circumvent the matrix of power—chain migration not through recruitment agencies but through prearranged employment in Italy of Filipina family members in the Philippines (Hefti 1997), or linguistic supremacy in English of domestic workers over their Taiwanese employers (Lan 2000), or reterritorialization of Hong Kong space by Filipina domestics during their days off (Constantino 2004). However, such subversive acts need to be contextualized in a social politics that is interrogative of everyday and historical engagements with the transnationalized national experience of development.

It may be concluded that the Philippines's biggest export is female labor. Female labor then translates to the new consumer, and new earmarking of official citizenship claims. Female labor is intimately rendered in film as a natural occurrence in the transnational experience of contemporary nationhood and as part of the global chain of care and the realization of the Philippine niche in the global economy. Melodrama echoes the centrality of the family unit, the sacrificing mode of the OCW character, the reiterative scope of overseas contract work, and the spectacularization of domestic work. Iconic stars act out OCW characters, invigorating the reproduceability of OCW in audiences—themselves potential OCWs—witnessing their future foretold and unfolding. Filmic representation of women in melodrama is in dialogue with the official experience of the nation-state, echoing and humanizing its rhetoric for the contemporary audience—the prospective OCWs among them—and already constraining their access to citizenship. Jonathan Beller (2006, 173) aptly states the transformation of the sex worker in film, which can also be read as the OCW in film, "In being taken as image, *Cura-cha* [i.e., the sex worker, or in our case, the OCW figure] sees the world as images and is also the vehicle for our seeing. She is the apparatus, that is, the technology, and the social relations embedded therein, through which we see." The Philippine state's export of global domesticity—using Filipina



bodies—is complicit with the business drive of large media corporations, and their incorporation of women filmmakers in the outlandish projects of configuring the OCW figure in the filmic imagination of ongoing and aspiring OCW audiences worldwide.

## Note

*Snapshots from Anak and Milan, both produced by Star Cinema Productions, and Booba, produced by RS Productions, were captured from DVD copies owned by the author. Permission for the use of snapshots from Anak and Milan granted by Star Cinema Productions and its managing director, Malou N. Santos, is gratefully acknowledged.*

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