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The Filipino Diaspora

E. San Juan, Jr.

Now the largest cohort in the Asian American group, Filipinos have become the newest diasporic community in the whole world: 7 million Filipino migrant workers, mostly female domestic help, work in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Diasporic groups are historically defined not only by a homeland but also by a desire for eventual return and a collective identity centered on myths and memories of the homeland. The Filipino diaspora, however, is different. Since the homeland has been long colonized by Western powers (Spain, U.S.) and remains neocolonized despite formal or nominal independence, the Filipino identification is not with a fully defined nation but with regions, localities, and communities of languages and traditions. Where is the nation alluded to in passports and other identification papers? How do we conceive of this "Filipino" nation, given the preemptive impact of U.S. colonization and now, on top of the persistent neocolonizing pressure, the usurping force of globalized transnational capital?

According to orthodox immigration theory, "push" and "pull" factors combine to explain the phenomenon of Overseas Contract Workers. Do we resign ourselves to this easy schematic formulation? Poverty and injustice, to be sure, have driven most Filipinos to seek work abroad, sublimating the desire to return by remittances to their families; occasional visits and other means of communication defer the eventual homecoming. If the return is postponed, are modes of adaptation and temporary domicile in non-native grounds the alternatives?

The reality of "foreignness" cannot be eluded. Alienation, brutal treatment and racism prevent Filipinos' permanent resettlement in the "receiving societies," except where Filipino communities (as in the U.S. and Canada, for example) have been given legal access to citizenship

rights. Individuals, however, have to go through screening and tests. During political crisis in the Philippines, Filipino overseas workers mobilize themselves for support of local and nationwide resistance against imperial domination and local tyranny. Because the putative “Filipino” nation is in the process of formation in the neocolony and abroad, overseas Filipino workers have been considered transnationals or transmigrants—a paradoxical turn since the existence of the nation is problematic. This diaspora then confronts the central issue of racism and ethnic exclusion or inferiorization: can Filipino migrant labor mount resistance against globalized exploitation? Can the Filipino diaspora expose also the limits of liberal notions of citizenship? In what way can the Filipino diaspora serve as a paradigm for analyzing and critically unsettling the corporate globalization of labor and the reification of identities in the new millennium? The following reflections are offered as a heuristic point of departure for further inquiry into this unprecedented historic event.

Diaspora

I might begin by situating the Filipino diaspora within its Asian American configuration—since I am based here in the United States and my intervention proceeds from a concrete historic milieu. In David Palumbo-Liu’s substantial volume *Asian / American*, the concept of “diaspora” performs a strategic function. It probably endows the slash in the rubric “Asian/American” with an uncanny performative resonance. Palumbo-Liu contends that diaspora affords a space for the reinvention of identity free from naturalized categories but (if I may underscore here) not from borders, state apparatuses, and other worldly imperatives. Although remarking that the concept of diaspora as an “enabling fiction” affords us “the ideological purchase different articulations of the term allow,” Palumbo-Liu doesn’t—if I’m not mistaken—completely succumb to the rebarbative postcolonialist babble about contingency ruling over all. I want to quote a passage from his book that might frame or provide parameters for the random remarks I will make here apropos of the theme and discourse of Filipino diaspora:

“diaspora” does not consist in the *fact* of leaving Home, but in having that factuality available to representation *as such*—we come to “know” diaspora only as it is psychically identified in a narrative form that discloses the various ideological investments. . . . It is that narrative form that locates the representation of diaspora in its particular chronotope.

This spatiotemporal construct approximates a psychic experience particularly linked to material history. It is only after the diasporic comes into contact with the material history of its new location that a particular discourse is enabled that seeks to mark a distance, a relation, both within and outside that constellation of contingency. (1999, 355)

Like the words "hybridity," border crossing, ambivalence, subaltern, transculturation, and so on, the term "diaspora" has now become fashionable in academic conversations. A forthcoming conference at the University of Minnesota on "Race, Ethnicity, and Migration" lists as first of the topics one can engage with, "Diaspora and diasporic identities," followed by "Genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced migration..." One indeed dreads to encounter in this context such buzzwords as "intersection" and "otherness" and "difference" now overshadowed by "globalization" and "transnationalism." In fact I myself used the word "diaspora" as part of the title of my book *From Exile to Diaspora: Versions of the Filipino Experience in the United States* (1998b)—only to find that there is another book in the Amazon.com list by a certain Jonathan Okamura with a title longer than mine: *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: Transnational Relations, Identities, and Communities (Asian Americans, Reconceptualizing Culture, History)*. Does anyone know more echoes, simulacras or simulations of these titles?

Okamura argues that Filipinos should be conceived not as an ethnic minority in the United States but as a diaspora. Not because they are dispersed, as the Jews were from their original homeland by the Roman imperial legions; but because overseas Filipino communities have "significant transnational relations" or linkages to their homeland. Okamura states that "a diaspora is a transnational social construction, that is, it is transnational in scope and is socially constructed through the individual and collective actions of immigrants/migrants." Okamura explains how he became interested in "diaspora" as "an exciting concept to capture [Filipinos'] transnational relations with their homeland as evident in balikbayan returnee visits, the sending of remittances and consumer goods, and long-distance telecommunication." Based in Hawaii, Okamura met Filipinos all over the world—not only in Manila but also in Hong Kong, London, and Belau.

An Autobiographical Aside

Let me interject a personal note: I have lived in the U.S. for about 40 years now (the greater part of my life), with frequent visits to the Philippines without too many *balikbayan* boxes, unfortunately. And in

my various travels I have encountered Filipinos in many parts of the world. In the early eighties I was surprised to meet compatriots at the footsteps of the Post Office in Tripoli, Libya, and later on in the streets and squares of London, Edinburgh, Spain, Italy, Tokyo, Taiwan, and other places. Have I then stumbled onto some global enigmatic phenomenon known as a "Filipino diaspora"? Or have I socially and transnationally constructed this, dare I say, "reality" and ongoing experience of about 7 million Filipinos around the planet? Not to speak of millions of displaced indigenous peoples in the Philippines itself, an archipelago of 7,100 islands, "one of the world's most strategically important land masses," according to geographer George Demko.

For those not familiar with my other writings critical of postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches (San Juan 1996, 1998a), I want to state outright that I consider such views about the Filipino diaspora half-truths closer to rumor, if not sheer mystifications. Spurious distinctions about cognition and perception concerning ethnic identity will remain vacuous if they do not take into account the reality of imperial world-systemic changes. Lacking any dialectical historical analysis of the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism that connect the Philippines and its peoples with the United States and the rest of the world, conventional studies on Filipino immigration and resettlement are all falsifications, at best disingenuous exercises in chauvinist or white-supremacist apologetics. This is because they rely on concepts and methodologies that conceal unequal power relations—that is, relations of subordination and domination, racial exclusion, marginalization, sexism, gender inferiorization, as well as national subalternity and other forms of discrimination. Lest people be misled by academic gossip, I am not proposing here an economic and deterministic approach, nor a historicist one with a monolithic Enlightenment metanarrative, teleology, and essentialist or ethnocentric agenda. Far from it.

I might state at the outset a fact known to all observers: the annual remittance of billions of dollars by Filipino workers abroad suffices to keep the Philippine economy afloat and support the luxury and privileges of less than one percent of the people, the Filipino oligarchy. 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. In 1998 alone, according to the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 755,000 Filipinos found work abroad, sending home a total of ₱7.5 billion. Throughout the nineties,

the average total of migrant workers is about a million a year; they remit over five percent of the national GNP, not to mention the millions of pesos collected by the Philippine government in myriad taxes and fees. Hence these overseas cohorts are glorified as "*mga bagong bayani*" (modern heroes), according to Cory Aquino, the most famous of whom are Flor Contemplacion and Sarah Balabagan.

This is an unprecedented and mind-boggling phenomenon. Over one thousand concerned Filipino American students made this the central topic of the 1997 FIND CONFERENCE at SUNY Binghamton where I was a keynote speaker. These concerned youth were bothered by the reputation of the Filipino as the "domestic help" or servant of the world. How did Filipinos come to find themselves dispersed and scattered to the four corners of the earth? What are we doing about it? In general, what is the meaning and import of this unprecedented traffic, Filipinos in motion and in transit around the planet?

Retrospective Marginalia

Let me refresh readers' memory with some textbook commonplaces. Some compatriots in the United States, eager to preempt the Pilgrims in New England, cite the fugitive "Manillamen" of the seventeenth century who escaped from the galleon trade, fled their Spanish masters in Mexico, and found their way to Louisiana, as one of the first Filipino Americans. But their settlement disappeared quickly in a few years, blown away by fortune and ill winds. There was no significant group of inhabitants from the Philippine Islands in the North American continent or anywhere else—except for a few student enclaves in Spain in the latter half of the nineteenth century—until the annexation and colonization of the Philippines by the United States in 1898 as part of the spoils of the Spanish-American War.

With the exclusion of Chinese and Japanese workers by various immigration laws from 1882 to 1924, the recruitment of Filipino labor for the Hawaii plantations began in earnest in 1907 and continued without letup until 1935, when immigration was cut to fifty a year. From the twenties to the thirties, Filipino contract labor in the U.S. totalled about half a million. Most of these workers eventually settled in the U.S. mainland rather than return to their native villages. If there is a collective trauma or primal scenario of loss to which postcolonial scholars and cultural critics would gesture, it would be nothing else but the destruction of the institutions of Filipino sovereignty estab-

lished by the Philippine revolution of 1896–1898, the suppression of Filipino revolutionary bodies by the United States military forces, in the Philippine–American War (1899–1903) that cost over a million lives. We are still living with the legacy of this defeat and occupation, this time in a neocolonial consumerist dependency.

There was no real Filipino diaspora before the Marcos dictatorship in the seventies and eighties. It was only after the utter devastation of the Philippines in World War II, and the worsening of economic and political conditions in the neocolonial setup from the late sixties to the present, that Filipinos began to leave in droves. During the Marcos martial law regime, the functionality of Overseas Contract Workers was constructed and/or discovered by the elite and its hegemonic patrons as a response to both local and global conditions. From the Aquino to the Estrada regime, OCW productivity serves to keep the rotten system afloat. Overseas Filipino Workers is now a category of citizens in the Philippines and in so-called “receiving” societies like Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Middle Eastern kingdoms, and assorted European states—including Yugoslavia.

It is now a banal truism that globalization has facilitated the mobility of goods, services, information, ideas, and of course people—and maybe assorted cyborgs. The postmodernist anthropologist James Clifford has invented the idea of contemporary travelling cultures—a version of the cargo cults—borne by nomadic or diasporic intellectuals. Globalization has proceeded to the extent that in our reconfigured landscapes, according to the experts in liminality and interstitial spaces, boundaries have shifted, borders disappeared, and everyone has become transculturized. Americanization, or Disneyfication, has spread physically and in cyberspace. There is also the parachuting transnationals or transmigrants that Aihwa Ong has described, as well as mutations of expatriates, refugees, and exiles—including our own Filipino TNTs (an indigenized form of hide-and-seek, according to some wits), our Filipinized version of “undocumented aliens.”

Given these transformations, the reality and idea of the nation, of national sovereignty, have become the subject of theoretical speculation. Linked to that are concepts of identity and their attendant politics of difference, notions of citizenship, nationality, cosmopolitanism, belonging, human rights, and so on. It is in this milieu of globalization, where ethnic conflicts and universal commodification coexist in a compressed time-space locus within the postmodern dispensation (Harvey 1989), that we should pose the question of the Filipino diaspora.

Instead of pronouncing here my *obiter dicta* on this topic, I would like to engage readers briefly with questions on the historical and ideological specificity of the Filipino diaspora. One way of doing this is by interrogating certain themes and notions presented by James Clifford in his essay on "Diaspora" (in *Current Anthropology* 1994). I offer the following "talking points" for exchange. Clifford dissents from Safran in proposing "an ideal type" of diaspora based on the Jewish paradigm. The main features of this ideal type are: 1) dispersal from an originary habitat, 2) myths and memories of the homeland, 3) alienation in the host country, 4) desire for eventual return, 5) ongoing support for the homeland, and 6) a collective identity defined by the relationship to the homeland. Responding to the globalization process I mentioned earlier, Clifford espouses a decentered or multiply-centered diaspora network. He rejects teleologies of origin and return because he perceives multiple transnational connections that provide a range of experiences to diasporic communities; these experiences depend on the changing possibilities, the obstacles, openings, antagonisms, and connections in the host countries.

Given the various histories of displacements none of which coincide, diaspora is for Clifford the site of contingency *par excellence*. He envisages a "polythetic field of diasporic forms" articulating multiple discourses of travels, homes, memories, and transnational connections. Clifford conceives of diaspora as a "loosely coherent, adaptive constellation of responses to dwelling-in-displacement." Hence, his ideal is that of a tribal cosmopolitanism, a modern version of the old cosmopolitanism of tribal groups shaped by travel, spiritual quest, trade, exploration, warfare, labor migrancy, and political alliances of all kinds. Can Filipinos be conceived of as tribal cosmopolitans in that context?

Filipino Diaspora

Let us examine the Filipino genre of diaspora, its tendencies and idiosyncracies. My first thesis is this: Given that the Philippine homeland or habitat has never cohered as a genuinely independent nation—national autonomy continues to escape the nation-people in a neocolonial formation—Filipinos are dispersed from family or kinship webs in villages, towns or provincial regions first, and loosely from a neocolonized (some say "refeudalized") nation-state. This dispersal is primarily due to economic coercion under the retrogressive regime of

comprador-bureaucratic (not welfare-state) capitalism; migration is seen as freedom to seek one's fortune, experience the pleasure of adventure, libidinal games of resistance, etc. So the origin to which one returns is not a nation or nation-state but a village, town, or kinship network; the state is viewed in fact as a corrupt exploiter, not representative of the masses, a comprador agent of transnational corporations and Western (specifically U.S.) powers.

Second thesis: What are the myths and memories of the homeland? They derive from assorted childhood memories and folklore together with customary practices of folk and religious celebrations; at best, there may be signs of a residual affective tie to national heroes like Rizal, Bonifacio, and latter-day celebrities like singers, movie stars, athletes, and so on. Indigenous food, dances, and music can be acquired as commodities whose presence temporarily heals the trauma of removal; family reunification can resolve the psychic damage of loss of status or alienation. In short, rootedness in autochthonous habitat or soil does not exert a commanding influence, or it exists as a faint nostalgic trace. Meanwhile, language, religion, kinship, family rituals, and common experiences in school or work-place function invariably as the organic bonds of community.

Third thesis: Alienation in the host country is what unites Filipinos, a shared history of colonial and racial subordination, marginalization, and struggles for cultural survival through hybrid forms of resistance and political rebellion. This is what may replace the non-existent nation/homeland, absent the liberation of the Filipino nation. In the thirties, Carlos Bulosan once observed that "it is a crime to be a Filipino in America." Years of struggle in inter-ethnic coalitions, of union organizing, have blurred if not erased that stigma. Accomplishments in the civil rights struggles of the sixties have provided nourishment for ethnic pride. And, on the other side, impulses of assimilationism via the "model minority" umbrella have aroused a passion for neoliberal multiculturalism. But compared to the Japanese or Indian Americans, Filipino Americans as a whole have not made it; the exceptions prove the rule. Andrew Cunanan is the specter that continues to haunt "melting pot" Filipino Americanists who continue to blabber about the "forgotten Filipino" in the hope of being awarded a share of the obsolescent welfare-state pie.

Through strategies of community preservation and other schemes of defining the locality of the community in historical contexts of displacement, the Filipino diaspora defers its return—unless and until

there is a Filipino nation that they can identify with. This will continue in places where there is no hope of permanent resettlement as citizens or bonafide residents (as in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere).

Fourth thesis: Some Filipinos in their old age may desire eventual return only when they are economically secure. In general, Filipinos will not return to the site of misery and oppression—to poverty, exploitation, humiliated status, unemployment, hunger, and lack of dignity. OCWs would rather move their kin and parents to their place of employment in countries where family reunification is allowed: in the United States, Italy, Canada, and so on. Or even in places of suffering provided there is some hope or illusion of future improvement.

Fifth thesis: Ongoing support for nationalist struggles at home is sporadic and intermittent. Do we see any mass protests and collective indignation here at the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), for example, and the recent invasion of the country by several thousand U.S. Marines? During the Marcos dictatorship, the politicized generation of Filipino Americans was able to mobilize a large segment of the community to support democratic mass struggles, including the armed resistance, against the U.S.-Marcos authoritarian rule. Filipino nationalism blossomed in the late sixties and seventies, but suffered attenuation when it got rechannelled to support the populist elitism of Aquino and Ramos, and now the lumpen populism of Estrada. This aspect is subject to political organization and calculation; hence, the intervention of Filipino agencies with emancipatory goals and national democratic principles is crucial and strategically necessary.

Sixth thesis: In this time of emergency, the Filipino collective identity is in crisis and in a stage of formation and elaboration. The Filipino diasporic consciousness is an odd species, a singular genre: it is not obsessed with a physical return to roots or to land where common sacrifices are remembered and celebrated. It is tied more to a symbolic homeland indexed by kinship or particularistic traditions which it tries to reconstitute in diverse localities. So, in the moment of Babylonian captivity, dwelling in "Egypt" or its modern surrogates, building public spheres of solidarity to sustain identities outside the national time/space "in order to live inside, with a difference" may be the most viable route (or root) of Filipinos in motion—the collectivity in transit, although this is subject to the revolutionary transformations emerging in the Philippine countryside and cities and other radical changes in the geopolitical rivalry of metropolitan powers. There is indeed defer-

ral, postponement, or waiting—but history moves on in the battlefields of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao where a people's war rooted in a durable revolutionary tradition rages on. This drama of a national-democratic revolution will not allow the Filipino diaspora to slumber in the consumerist paradises of Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, or Seattle. It will certainly disturb the peace of those benefiting from the labor and sacrifices of Overseas Filipino Workers who experience the repetition-compulsion of globalized trade and endure the recursive trauma of displacement and dispossession.

Finally, a very provisional and indeed temporizing epilogue—if I may beg leave from those Filipina bodies (at least five a day arrive at the Manila International Airport) in coffins heading home: Filipinos in the United States (and elsewhere, given the still hegemonic Western dispensation)—if I may quote the concluding lines of my article in the cyberspace on Filipino Americans—are neither “oriental” nor “hispanic,” despite their looks and names. They might be syncretic or hybrid subjects with suspect loyalties. They cannot be called fashionable “transnationals” because of racialized, ascribed markers (physical appearance, accent, peculiar non-white folkways) that are needed to sustain and reproduce Eurocentric white supremacy every day. Ultimately, Filipino agency in the era of global capitalism depends not only on the vicissitudes of social transformation in the U.S. but, in a dialectical sense, on the fate of the struggle for autonomy and popular-democratic sovereignty in the Philippines where balikbayans still practice, though with increasing trepidation interrupted by fits of amnesia, the speech-acts and durable performances of *pakikibaka*, *pakikiramay*, at *pakikipagkapwa-tao*.

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