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Sacred Enchantment, Transnational Lives, and Diasporic Identity

Filipina Domestic Workers at St. John Catholic Cathedral in Kuala Lumpur

This article explores how influences from the homeland as well as notions of identity, class, and ethical behavior form the Filipino diasporic community. These notions are the filters migrants use to view and understand their relations with host citizens, religious leaders, and employers. By providing an ethnographic account of Filipino migrants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, this article explores the connection between transnational migration, diaspora, and religion, highlighting the migrants' exercise of agency, religiosity, and sociality as they construct and inscribe their identity.

KEYWORDS: TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION • DIASPORIC COMMUNITY • RELIGION • SACRED SPACE • FILIPINO IDENTITY

In central Kuala Lumpur, every Sunday from early morning to noontime a steady flow of Catholic faithful slowly make their way up the inclining road leading to St. John Cathedral. For the majority of the churchgoers Sunday mass means putting up for at least an hour of being crammed with other worshippers in a limited space. Mass attendees include a sizeable number of foreign lay faithful who come to worship and pray in the pockets of Christian spaces allowed, although with limited encouragement and support in Malaysia's predominantly Muslim society. Although most attendees leave moments after the priest's final blessing, migrant workers, especially Filipinos, linger. They converge earliest before the first mass and stay long after the noontime final mass. Filipinos, especially Filipina domestic workers, keep the St. John Cathedral grounds and its perimeters busy every Sunday.

Studying Diaspora and Lived Religion

The weekend gathering at St. John is not unique. A number of studies have noted Filipino migrants' attraction to church spaces in cities such as Paris (Fresnoza-Flot 2010), Hong Kong (Cheng 1996), and Rome (Tacoli 1999); as well as in countries like Israel (Liebelt 2011, 2010), Taiwan (Lan 2003), Italy (Magat 2007), Italy and Spain (Pe-Pua 2003), Singapore (Yeoh and Huang 1998), and New Zealand (Tondo 2010). The geographically mobile Filipino migrants, who display remarkable adaptability in various destinations, form among themselves small diasporic circles that are most visible in church spaces.

Filipino migrants dispersed in around 200 countries and territories have become one of the most visible labor diasporas in the world. According to Pnina Werbner (2005, 546), diaspora is "a historical location, not merely an abstract, metaphorical space." Migrant diasporic identity is simultaneously historically bound to its imagined home in the country of origin and its current spatial home in transnational space. Diasporic enclaves are thus "mnemonic places" that are "specifically designed and constructed to evoke memories, trigger identities, and embody histories" (Gieryn 2000, 481). Spatially Catholic churches have been the center of the geographical layout of Philippine lowland towns or municipalities. Socially the Catholic Church, through its rituals and sacramental ministry, provides the basis for Filipino kinship (familial, affinal, and *compadrazgo*) (Jocano 1998). Because of its spatial prominence in hometown landscapes

and its significant role in the structuring of social relations, the Catholic Church is the most familiar and recognizable homeland institution for most Filipinos. This observation holds especially true for Filipino transnational migrants, who intentionally seek out Catholic churches on Sundays while living overseas. In this sense the weekly convergence at St. John Cathedral is a symbolic performance of making present the absent homeland in their transnational lives.

Yet, despite the Filipino migrants' enchantment with church or what we may call sacred spaces such as that of St. John's, the role of religion in their lives overseas remains an underexplored subject in Philippine social sciences. Scholarly attention has been for the most part skewed toward examining the political, economic, and demographic implications of Filipino transnational migration—which is understandable given the contribution of migrant remittances to the Philippine economy (and the political and economic elites). In order to redress the imbalance in the discursive trajectories in the mainstream media and the academe, this article provides an ethnographic account of Filipino migrants in Kuala Lumpur and explores the connection between Filipino transnational migration, diaspora, and religion. This article thus draws attention to the migrants' exercise of agency, religiosity, and sociality, as they construct and inscribe Filipino identity overseas. To explore these issues I conducted fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur from July 2008 to January 2009. I also made annual trips to Kuala Lumpur from 2010 to 2013 for follow-up visits that coincided with a vacation, conference, a series of NGO workshops, scheduled medical treatment (for a pinched nerve), and a group tour of Thailand by bus.¹

Robert Orsi's (2003, 172) stance on lived religion provides the working definition followed in this study:

Religion is always religion-in-action, religion in-relationships between people, between the ways the world is and the way people imagine or want it to be. . . . Lived religion cannot be separated from other practices of everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on). Nor can sacred spaces be understood in isolation from the places where these things are done—workplaces, hospitals, law courts, homes, and streets . . . or from the relationships constructed around them.

Life therefore does not consist of alienated sections and structures, but of entangled parts and ruptures that connect and make up a meaningful existence. In this article religiosity includes this enmeshment of migrants' lives, such as the religious, historical, and cultural influences from the homeland as well as the notions of Filipino identity, class relations, and ethical behavior based on a shared humanity. These notions comprise the interpretive filter migrants use to view and understand their contentious spatial and corporeal relations with host citizens, religious leaders, and employers.

A diaspora "manifests itself in relations of difference" where it is "linked to but different from those among whom it has settled" and also "as powerfully linked to, but in some ways different from, the people in the homeland" (Tölölyan 2007, 650). Diaspora "space" may be grasped as a metaphor, a spatial attribute, and a process of identity distinction. Diasporic identities are made explicit through community gatherings where homeland memories are nostalgically remembered and affectively performed, but are also implicit in migrant notions of identity and humanity. The ethnography presented in this article shows how spatial contestations and experiences of domination are filtered in the Filipina domestic workers' imaginary of shared humanity or *kapwa-tao*.

Werbner (2005, 546) points out the "multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition . . . [that cut across] sectarian, gendered, or political groups" among migrants, even as they identify "themselves with the same diaspora." Resonating with Werbner's observation, Avtar Brah (1996, 184) looks at diasporas as "differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces" even as migrants construct a common identity. This view does not mean that a shared Filipino identity does not exist, but this identity is marked with multiplicities and divisions that span region, language, and class and is the object of spirited contestations by various stakeholders. Thus, even as it claims a common identity, the Filipino diasporic community in Kuala Lumpur remains a contested domain.

Filipino Migration to Malaysia

The World Bank (2012) puts the migrant population in Malaysia at 2,357,603 in 2010. About 1.9 million are registered migrant workers, who represent a high 21 percent of the country's workforce. By the end of 2011 there were at least 569,081 Filipinos in Malaysia, about 447,000 or 79 percent of whom were irregular migrants (CFO 2011). Undocumented Filipinos, mostly located in Sabah, form a significant part of the illegal migrants who

constitute an estimated 27 percent of the migrant population in Malaysia in 2010. In Kuala Lumpur there is a significant presence of Filipino skilled/professional migrants (architectural, structural, civil, and electronic engineers; information technology practitioners; medical professionals, and others). Nonetheless, Filipina domestic workers continue to comprise the majority of Filipino migrants and are the most visible in public spaces.

The visibility of the large population of foreign workers in Malaysia's public spaces regularly spurs public concern over its social impact in terms of "crime, housing, disease, family formation and permanent settlement" (Pillai 1999, 186). Asserting that it is not "soft" on illegal migration, the government demonstrates its political will through periodic crackdowns on illegal and undocumented foreign workers (the most recent in September 2013 and February 2014).² The Malaysian government has found it difficult to strike a balance between its economy's demand for foreign labor and the public concern over illegal migrants. As one of Southeast Asia's thriving industrial sites and tourist destinations and with most of its citizens eschewing low-paying service-oriented jobs, Malaysia's dependence on foreign labor continues. Despite regulations that tighten the flow of unskilled migrants and monitor illegal migration, the high demand for labor has made labor recruitment, both legal and illegal, a thriving industry. In addition Malaysia's porous territorial borders remain vulnerable to human trafficking criminal syndicates, which habitually find loopholes to transport migrants from poorer countries into Malaysia.

It is important to keep in mind that, while some parts of their narratives elicit images of migrant life that are far from ideal, Filipina domestic workers generally receive better pay than their Asian counterparts, such as Indonesians, Myanmarese, Sri Lankans, and Cambodians. They also enjoy one paid day off every week as required by the Philippine government in employment contracts (Chin 1997, 370). As such, Filipina domestic workers are most visible at the cathedral during their days off on Sundays.

Filipino Identity and Hospitality at St. John Cathedral

The regular Filipino gathering at St. John Cathedral began when a Christian brother started the ministry for migrants in the 1980s. The cathedral's location partially explains its popularity among migrants. It lies in central Kuala Lumpur, near the central bus and train stations as well as the Kota Raya mall, the hub for banking and packaging services, and Kuala Lumpur's "Old China Town," known for its colorful ambience and reasonably priced

commodities. The cathedral is a convenient place for Filipino migrants to hang out on Sundays.

The St. John Cathedral compound houses a number of buildings and spaces: the cathedral proper, where masses are held; the Blessed Virgin Mary's grotto; the archdiocesan pastoral center and its canteen; the parish rectory; and a limited number of parking spaces. Inside the pastoral center a sign bearing the words "Tahanang Pilipino" (Filipino Home) sits above the front office door. The Tahanang Pilipino, arguably the most successful Filipino organization in Kuala Lumpur, is an offshoot of the Filipino Migrant Ministry that was begun in 1985.³ Every Sunday the room is filled with the organization's members. James Tyner and Olaf Kuhlke (2000, 248) suggest that the popular reference to Tahanang Pilipino among migrant organizations indicates a pan-identity in the global Filipino diaspora: "There is a shared history and geography among all Philippine *pan*-migrants, whether they reside in Australia, Sweden, or Singapore. Hence, although individual members travel different paths to different destinations, they remain 'under one roof.'" The appropriation of Tahanang Pilipino by the organization in Kuala Lumpur indicates the centrality of the home as a symbolic representation of homeland familial and social relations among Filipinos; the home figures significantly in the engagement and activity among migrants in the diaspora.

The Tahanang Pilipino offers cheap Internet service facilities for migrants wanting to communicate with family and friends. Lunch is provided to members, each of whom contributes RM6.00 (about US\$1.80) a month for the lunch. Occasional Filipino visitors who need the hospitality are welcome. On Sundays at lunchtime, a pot of rice and various dishes are laid out on a table outside the office rooms.

Mimi, one of the original organizers of Tahanan, is married to a local and has lived in Malaysia for more than two decades. Already religiously inclined prior to her migration to Malaysia for work, she was drawn to St. John Cathedral and became even more religious as she felt the need to regularly express her being Catholic every Sunday. Her need for regular prayers drew her to visit the church and collaborate with the Christian brother who began the Filipino migrant ministry. Together with like-minded Filipinos, she organized Tahanang Pilipino. She explains:

We just wanted them (Filipinos) to have a place and community where everyone may come and be made to feel welcome. We wanted to make them feel the Filipino hospitality they know there in the Philippines here in Kuala Lumpur, so that they have friends to go to and approach when they are in need. (Mimi 2013)

For Mimi, providing a space for Filipino hospitality through commensality is part of Filipino identity. The connection of food to identity, social relations, systems, and structures is an important dimension of the diaspora. As Ghassan Hage's (1997) study of Lebanese migrants in Sydney highlights, food occupies a central role in the community's efforts at home making and sociality and in migrant memories of home, community solidarity, and identity in a foreign land. The ideological power food exhibits in the market comes from its essential association with home (ibid., 100–101).

The Tahanang Pilipino stands out as the most socially engaged among all the Filipino communities in Kuala Lumpur. Operating from its base at the pastoral center, it has initiated and successfully managed a weekend training program for migrants called CAPE (Capability Enhancement Program), which is facilitated by volunteers from migrants groups, NGOs, the Philippine embassy, and other local Catholics. The CAPE training classes are open to all migrant groups and offer a variety of courses on English, yoga, caregiving, touch therapy, the Bahasa Melayu language, blood screening, beauty culture, computers, guitar playing, and baking. The program offers a venue for migrant interethnic cooperation. Tahanan also actively supports the Malaysian civil society's campaign for better recognition of migrant rights in Malaysia. When Tenaganita, an NGO led by Dr. Irene Fernandez (2013),⁴ launched its campaign in 2008 to lobby the Malaysian parliament for the passage of a law that would grant one paid day off weekly to all domestic workers in Malaysia, the Tahanang Pilipino community participated in the program, which included cultural dances and songs that were staged for the assembled crowd of supporters from Malaysia's civil society.

Filipino Religiosity and Enchantment of Sacred Space

Inside the cathedral compound two popular icons generally draw the most number of devotees from the Sunday crowd: the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, located near the main entrance at the back of the cathedral, and the statue of Our Lady of Fatima,⁵ located in the left wing of the cathedral's

main altar. In front of Mary's icon the crowds thicken after each mass, although some pray there even during masses. Filipina domestic workers form part of the regular praying crowd. Devotees say their prayers quietly. Some prayers are obviously intense, as some devotees shed tears near the foot of the Virgin's image.

Although devotees perform their own private prayers, their devotion follows a pattern. As they approach the statue of the Virgin, devotees each light a candle and stay in front of the icon for a few minutes. Most devotees drop a coin or two in the donation box, before or after lighting the candles and praying. The ritual of lighting candles, touching the icons (when possible), and making the sign of the cross is not unlike those commonly performed in Philippine devotional shrines and churches. Devotional religious practices have remained in the Catholic world, even among those in highly industrialized and developed countries. With overseas migration, popular devotions have gone on a transnational journey, accompanying diasporic communities in overseas destinations such as the United States, Spain, and Italy (cf. Orsi 1985; Tweed 1997; Paerregard 2008). The Filipino devotional rituals performed in front of the icons in Kuala Lumpur conflate the Malaysian setting with those of Philippine devotional shrines. The ritual performance at the foot of the Virgin simultaneously transmits to Kuala Lumpur the Filipinas' national identity, their homeland Marian devotional practices, and their contextual needs as migrant domestic workers.

Mary is popularly referred to by Filipino Catholics as "Mama Mary" or *Mahal na Ina* (Beloved Mother). While popular devotions to Mary are not exclusive to Filipinos, Filipinos have been referred to as "a people enchanted with Mary" (Arevalo 2003; Astorga 2006).⁶ Among Filipina domestic workers the Blessed Virgin Mary and the rosary are respectively the most popular sacred icon and the most popular form of prayer. The predominance of Mary as the iconic symbol of a highly feminized diaspora in Malaysia may be seen as a metaphoric reference to the distant migrant home in the Philippines. It can also be a reflection of the state of the Filipina domestic worker, the absentee mother who cares for the children of working Malaysian mothers, a circumstance made even more poignant by the Filipina workers' state of homelessness in Malaysia. Not only have Filipina migrants left their homes and their families, they have also become "homeless" in a foreign land. This homelessness contrasts with Stuart Hall's (1995, 207) contention that the diaspora's perspective of identity "has many imagined 'homes' [and therefore no one, single, original homeland] and thus has many different

ways of 'being at home.'" The diaspora's multiplicity of homes may apply to middle-class professional Filipino migrants in Malaysia, but home making is not an option for Filipina domestic workers who have to live and care for nonrelatives in someone else's home, even if they are able to construct a "weekly home" in the cathedral.

In the back room of the pastoral center, after the first mass Filipina members of the Legion of Mary gather in prayer before a long rectangular table covered with a white tablecloth, upon which an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary is placed. The icon is decorated with candles and flowers and thus emphasizes the room's sacred ambience. The Legion of Mary, which meets every Sunday, was started by a Malaysian, but it has become a predominantly Filipino group. Sunday meetings start with the recitation of the rosary, followed by a discussion of members' concerns, and end in a meal where each member's packed lunch is laid out on the table to be shared with others. Like the Tahanang Pilipino, the Legion of Mary has claimed a space at the pastoral center for prayer and commensality for more than a decade.

Most Filipina domestic workers carry a rosary in their bag or purse, or wear it as a decorative necklace. Most of those I interviewed use the rosary not only for prayers but also as a form of protection from negative incidents. For them it is symbolic of God's power that wards off all forms of evil. This practice is similar to what F. Landa Jocano (1981) has observed among rural folk who use Christian prayers and rituals to induce a good harvest. As Jocano (ibid., 1) puts it, Christianity "appears to have been reworked to suit ways of local thinking, believing and doing things." Filipina domestic workers in Kuala Lumpur demonstrate the importance of the rosary as it unites their community in prayer and provides security amid the instabilities of their transnational lives.

From the Sacred to the Social: Church–Feria Connections

After the mass and prayers at the grotto and Fatima icons, the mass attendees and Marian devotees either proceed to the pastoral center to meet with friends or go outside the cathedral gate to buy food and then meet with friends. But whether or not the meal is bought or prepared beforehand, commensality among friends constitutes a part of their Sunday activity.

Spatially migrants move in a recognizable pattern, starting with the mass and moving on to prayers before Mary's icons and on to the Sunday meal, which is held either at the pastoral center (for members of the Tahanang

Pilipino and Legion of Mary) or the feria along the street's pedestrian lane outside the cathedral gate. The modal movement is from the sacred to the secular, a contiguous shift from one sphere to the other through fluid and porous boundaries. There is a noticeable similarity of these transnational practices to the homeland tradition of the fiesta-feria.

Like all cultural concepts, the fiesta and folk Christianity may be "unpacked" (Yengoyan 2004, 21). As described by Frank Lynch (2004c, 220) the town fiesta has two components, the fiesta proper and the feria. This notion is significant in the Filipino diaspora because the fiesta is the most popular homeland cultural performance that many Filipino communities, including those in Kuala Lumpur, seek to replicate overseas. Lynch's exploratory studies of the town fiesta (2004c), folk Catholicism (2004b), and class relations (2004a), although much critiqued for their seeming structural-functionalist approach, offer a rich semiotic device for understanding Filipino diasporic life. Lynch and also Jocano's pioneering and groundbreaking ethnographies respectively of the town fiesta and devotional religiosity in the lowland Philippines can be argued as commendable, even if not without flaws.⁷ The studies by Jocano (1981) and Lynch (2004b, 2004c) provide a framework for understanding Filipino religiosity and habitual convergence in sacred space.⁸ In the context of the Filipino diasporic discourse of homeland and transnational homing activities, their studies remain significant.

Lynch's descriptive account of the feria and Jocano's ethnography of folk Christianity provide important signposts in understanding Filipino migrants' transnational replication and translation of devotional religiosity and the feria in Kuala Lumpur. They help most especially in making sense of the solemn ritual performance among devotees of Mary's icon in the grotto and the pastoral center, and the festive atmosphere of the feria just a few meters outside of the cathedral gate. While the ambience at the pastoral center and its compound is jovial enough, it is even more so outside the premises. Around the perimeter of the front gate, merchants selling Filipino food and goods in makeshift stalls abound.

According to migrants' accounts, Filipinos were allowed and encouraged by the Christian brother to bring food to share and/or sell with and to each other at the pastoral center. The buying and selling, which started initially inside the church premises, especially in the center's canteen, continued for a number of years. However, a new parish leadership implemented some changes. The use of the pastoral canteen was rotated among different lay groups in the church community, which included the basic ecclesial

communities and migrants groups of Koreans, Nigerians, Vietnamese, and Myanmar. The rotation was undoubtedly a stop-gap solution to the growing space problem prevalent among various Catholic communities in Malaysia. While the rotation opened the use of the pastoral canteen to all parish organizations, groups had to wait for long periods for their turn. In the process Filipino migrants were gradually eased out of their weekly food sharing and selling at the pastoral center canteen. They soon relocated to the street sidewalks (pedestrian lanes) outside the cathedral gates. This relocation eventuated in the cathedral feria, a hastily assembled flea market of Filipino food and goods with a festive ambience, which then became a Sunday fixture at the cathedral gate and perimeter.

Because Filipino migrants in Malaysia are contract workers, there has been a fast turnover of diaspora membership, but this rate of turnover has not visibly affected the feria outside the gate. The Filipino foodway, with a fiesta-feria ambience catering to migrant longings for hometown food, is put up weekly by enterprising Filipinos and Malaysians who capitalize on diasporic homeland longings. Various studies of diasporic enclaves or hubs have established the way that food and foodways are central to the diasporic day-to-day experience and economy. Among Filipino migrants in Kuala Lumpur, this transformation of a Malaysian space into a Filipino hometown feria is crucial to their remembrance of home, family, social relations, and identity. Filipino food memorializes and provides access to the distant and absent homeland and social relations.

Contestations in Sacred Space: Discipline and Control in the Sanctuary

The weekly construction of Filipino spaces at the pastoral center and along the perimeter of St. John Cathedral, despite having been practiced for almost three decades, remains precarious and subject to the claims of other stakeholders. There is a perception, albeit among a few Malaysian Catholics, that the presence of migrants in the cathedral has caused some local Catholics, who feel uneasy about sharing space with foreign workers, to transfer to less populated parishes.

This negative perception of domestic workers in the cathedral is palpable in the narration of Sandy, who has been in Kuala Lumpur for fourteen years as a domestic worker for the same employer. Formerly a saleslady in Iloilo, she migrated overseas in order to help support her ailing father.⁹ She admits that she was not a good Catholic prior to working overseas but attributes her newfound Christian commitment to her kind Catholic Malaysian employer,

who allows her to attend the charismatic Life in the Spirit seminars and parish catechism classes: “I thank God for my boss. She has been very good to me” (Sandy 2008). With the encouragement of her employer, Sandy has helped facilitate the archdiocesan training program for migrant domestic workers. Despite a seemingly well-adjusted transnational life, however, unpleasant memories of some of Catholic Malaysians’ negative attitude toward domestic workers remain:

Some of them (Malaysians) are discriminating. They will look at you from head to foot, then, you hear them whisper to each other, “migrant woker” or “domestic helper.” Why, what is wrong with being a migrant worker or domestic helper? Don’t they see us as human beings? I am not saying all of them are like that, but many of them look down on others—they are really great snobs. (ibid.)

It is important to note in Sandy’s own account that only some Malaysians are discriminatory, while most are welcoming. Clearly the need to be seen as fellow human beings is strong.

Adding to the complexity of diaspora–host relations is the Filipino notion of personhood. Most Filipinos filter their experiences of domination and abuse through the Filipino notion of *kapwa-tao*. Victor Turner (1975) has noted that the semantic domain accompanies and gives cultural symbols meaningful distinctions. The Filipino language manifests a strong semantic orientation toward sociality and concern for other human beings. Virgilio Enriquez (1986, 11) defines *kapwa* as “the unity of the self and others” in contrast with the word’s equivalent in English, “other,” which implies an opposition to and separation from the self. For the Filipino the state of being human is shared with others in being *kapwa-tao*. Filipino cultural identity is also enmeshed in notions of personhood, which is seen in the common strand among Filipino migrant conversations and in their daily navigation to be respected as *kapwa-tao* in their workplaces, despite existing unequal power relations. The worst person for Filipinos is one who is *walang kapwa-tao* or one who has no respect for another human being (ibid., 15). Respect is measured through politeness and kindness. However, the diasporic state of “otherness” is a position of vulnerability that is susceptible to domination, control, and/or abuse, as demonstrated below.

A few members of the Legion of Mary claim that on many occasions

they have been at the receiving end of clerical rudeness. One such occasion occurred during my fieldwork. A priest entered the room as the group was preparing to start prayers and began to command them to leave, accompanied by shooing motions of his hands. This gesture, which in Filipino culture is never used on people, left most of the members of the group stunned and teary eyed. As they gathered Mary’s icon and their belongings, which consisted mostly of packed lunches, the priest momentarily left the room. One of them, Jasmine, turned to me saying, “That’s how he is . . . that’s how rude he is to us.”¹⁰ That’s how he rudely treats us here, as if we are not human beings. That’s how difficult our life is here.” The Filipino notion of mutual human respect demands that acceptance and respect be given even to those of unequal social role, status, or income (ibid., 16). Although this view is seemingly essentialist, it must be noted that *kapwa-tao*, like identity, is fluid. Its interpretation is always contextual. In this instance the cleric’s behavior can be seen in terms of existing power differentials and dualisms in the church, such as the polarities between clergy and lay, male and female. Demonstrated through words and gesture, this rude behavior is perceived by Filipina domestic workers as a failure to recognize and respect them as fellow humans. While priests are tasked to keep order in the sanctuary, they are also expected to be, first and foremost, shepherds and pastors who minister to their flock with compassion.¹¹

Some may argue that Catholics who are discriminatory, such as those mentioned by Sandy, may not be genuine Christians. Addressing a similar question, Fenella Cannell (2005, 349) states: “To the anthropologist, however, a ‘real Christian’ must mean anyone who seriously so describes him- or herself. To proceed otherwise is to pre-judge what the content of a religion might be on the basis of highly selective, and historically particular, canons of orthodoxy.” If there are gaps between the religious ideal and actual praxis, these gaps are not to be construed as taking anything from the professed faith of the contending parties. Other explanations may be explored, such as cross-cutting class and ethnonational identities and patriotic allegiances.

Cultural identity tends to be connected to a particular place (Hall 1995, 181) because it is the locus of human experience where identities are performed, constructed, inscribed, and contested. Thus a “person is ‘in place’ just as much as she or he is ‘in culture’” (Tilley 1994, 17–18). Empassioned “politics of identity” within particular boundaries (Massey 1995, 68) defines those who belong and those who do not (Jess and Massey

1995, 162). Some Malaysians' resistance to migrant presence in public domains such as the church brings to the surface deeply held notions of territorial ownership. The boundary between the local population and the "migrant other" assumes a spatial form of expression. The issue no longer emanates from the categorization of difference in terms of ethnicity and race, but from the notion of citizens' entitlement to and ownership of national spaces or domains, including church spaces (Ang 2001; Hage 1998). In this sense what becomes paramount is not the ideal of the faith but what Hage (1998) refers to as paranoid nationalism that provokes the construction of difference in the migrant "other."

Contestations in the Domestic Space: Domination and Abuse

The relations of power and discipline between employers and domestic workers are inscribed into the spatiality of social life in the domestic sphere (Soja 1989, 6). Most Legion of Mary members are generally wary of discriminatory Malaysians, but more so of seemingly agnostic employers. Mandy has been in Kuala Lumpur for a few years. Like most Filipino migrants, she migrated because of economic considerations and believed that prayers helped her find overseas work. Although a nominal Catholic in the Philippines, according to her own assessment she has become more reliant on prayer in Kuala Lumpur. She explains her weekly presence at the cathedral: "Once, my employer heard me pray before eating. She asked me why I thank God for my food when God is not the one giving me the food but her. My boss doesn't like me to pray so I cannot pray when she is around. That's why I come here to pray."

Malaysian employers exercise power and control in the domestic work spaces (which are also the living spaces of domestic workers) and determine what workers can and cannot do. Filipina and most foreign domestic workers navigate their way around the limited options made available to them by their employers. The power relation is also manifested spatially through the allocation of living areas in terms of quality and size. Domestic workers usually occupy the smallest space/room in the house or apartment. Some domestics just sleep in a folding bed or with the children of their employers. At all times they are expected to show deferential behavior toward employers, even in the face of verbal abuse. They have to stand up to serve the employers during meals and eat only after the family has completed the meal. Some employers, according to two workers I met at the airport departure area in

June 2013, demand additional services such as daily massages and weekly manicures. Seeking to understand the intimacy of domestic work and its implications on employers and workers, both Nicole Constable (1997) in Hong Kong and Pei-Chia Lan (2003) in Taiwan suggest that the weekly visits to diasporic spaces allow Filipina domestics to reclaim their agency, sociality, and even sexuality.

The construction of the other is not entirely one way. Filipina domestic workers have their own brand of ethnocentrism that constructs the "foreign other." As Mandy was saying her piece, someone made a shushing sign while tilting her head toward a Malaysian local who happened to be in the room but out of earshot (the researcher's guide). Mandy looked at me pleadingly and said, "Please do not betray us, your own kind, to another race."¹² Mandy's appeal is to *lahi*, translatable as race or national identity, which is opposed to the foreign "other" who is a citizen of the host country. This appeal indicates the Filipinas' strong recourse to a shared national identity and unity in the face of instability and discrimination.

Migrant sites of convergence, such as that of St. John Cathedral, secure spaces for free expression. Mandy's comment about her non-Christian female employer exhibits an experience of "otherness," a wide divide between women as foreign domestics and their employers that cut across race, ethnicity, and class. In James Scott's (1990, 114) words: "Suffering from the same humiliations or . . . the same terms of subordination, they have a shared interest in jointly creating a discourse of dignity, of negation, and of justice . . . in concealing a social site apart from the domination where . . . a hidden transcript can be elaborated in comparative safety." Mandy also reminds me that as a Filipino I should not betray another Filipino to another race. Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner (1993, 1328) note that the "confrontation with the receiving society is capable not only of activating dormant feelings of nationality among immigrants but of creating such feelings where none existed before." In Mandy's case the common experience of marginality within the host society and even within the church contributes to her sense of not just a Filipino identity but racial identity (*lahi*). Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 167) proposition that "social identity is defined and asserted through difference" thus finds resonance in the Filipina domestic worker's process of identity construction and distinction from the host "other" even within the context of the church.

Another member of the Legion of Mary, Eva, has been in Kuala Lumpur

for more than a decade.¹³ Also a nominal Catholic prior to working overseas, Eva values praying with the group and usually stays at the cathedral from morning till night because, according to her, “The moment they (employers) see me, I am finished . . . they will order me (to do things) and make me work.” Finding rest from their week-long domestic work is not possible if they remained in their employers’ houses. Their place of prayer has also become their home for needed rest on Sundays.

However, their claim to their appropriated home and place of prayer in a foreign land is tenuous. There are weekends when the parish apportions the room to other users. When this is announced in advance, the Filipinas prepare an alternative activity in another venue. Once, for example, the Legion of Mary scheduled a pastoral visitation on a Sunday. The group went to the Sungai Buloh leper colony to visit Catholic residents and even non-Catholics who welcomed prayers. After the visit they shared a meal in the home of Susan, a former domestic worker married to a Chinese Malaysian who lived near the area (Susan was one of the organizers of the Legion of Mary in Kuala Lumpur as well as of its chapter in Sungai Buloh). However, it is not always possible to plan an alternative activity. When the parish withholds the space without prior notice, the Filipinas find themselves without a place to pray and rest. Some end up in the back part of the Kota Raya mall, sitting on the stairs or corridors and passing time with the hawkers who are unable to finish selling food in the feria.¹⁴

The spatiality of domination also occasionally includes physical abuse, as demonstrated by Gaddie’s case. Gaddie (2008) belongs to a farming family in Iloilo. Her husband died when their only daughter was three and a half years old. In that same year the crops in the farm failed. She moved to Laguna province to work and there met someone who had worked abroad and knew a recruitment agency for overseas workers. This was in 1994. The agency fee at that time was P28,000, equivalent to about US\$1,050 (at the exchange rate then of US\$1 to P27). This fee included provisions for passport processing, medical examinations, food, and taxi fare upon arrival in Malaysia. In return her contract paid her RM540 each month, or less than US\$200.¹⁵

Gaddie’s first employer in Malaysia lived in Johor Bahru. While her work was all right in the first year, things changed when her employer acquired a new house. The new family home had seven bedrooms. With three children and three dogs to care for, plus two cars, two living rooms, two dining halls, and two kitchens to clean, life became difficult for her. Her salary at the time they lived in a smaller house never increased despite her taking on

additional work load in the new and bigger residence. One time, when she could not finish the laundry early and while she was still hanging the clothes outside the house to dry, she saw her employer, Zadya, getting a branch from the guava tree. From experience, Gaddie knew that Zadya used a guava branch to hit her children, so she wondered what was happening. Finishing her task, she entered the house with Zadya following her. Zadya threw a pail of water on the kitchen floor she had just finished cleaning earlier and ordered her to clean it again. Gaddie refused. Her employer then hit her with the branch, and she shielded herself with her hands and arms. As the assault continued, she also hit back. She recounted, “Fortunately, even when during our scuffle I got hold of a knife, I had the presence of mind to throw it away. If not I will be in real trouble” (ibid.). Instead, using just her hands and arms as shields, even when it really hurt, she was able to prevent serious physical harm and was wise enough to seek medical treatment. Later Zadya terminated her contract. She asked Zadya to get her a plane ticket home but Zadya refused and told her to pay for her own ticket. She pointed out that she had not violated the terms of employment in the contract. Thus, if Zadya was terminating the contract without any valid reason, she should provide the return ticket. When Zadya threatened to report Gaddie to the police, Gaddie challenged her to do so. Gaddie was aware that she had bruises from the beating and a wound on her head, injuries which she requested the doctor, who treated her at the clinic right after the event, to record and certify. Zadya then bought her a ticket home. Six months later, this time working for a better employer, Gaddie returned to Malaysia, where she has since remained for more than a decade. She has been a regular Sunday churchgoer at the cathedral and rents out Filipino novels, magazines, and books at the feria.¹⁶

Gaddie’s case also shows that domination in the domestic space may progress into physical abuse. While this case is rare for Filipina domestic workers, it is quite common among other foreign domestic workers. The reported cases of physical abuse against Cambodians and Indonesians, for example, warranted the suspension by their respective governments of deploying domestic workers to Malaysia: Indonesia in 2009 and Cambodia in 2011. Indonesia ended its ban in 2012, while Cambodia has yet to do so. Discipline, control, domination, and abuse make diasporic enclaves necessary spaces where domestic workers can recuperate, enjoy trust, and receive acceptance and understanding.

Claiming a Weekly Feria Space

The Filipino feria's claim to space outside the cathedral is also tenuous. There has been a protracted "battle" waged by the Malaysian police against the illegal feria hawkers on Sundays. The most extensive and well-known raid happened in 1994, when the Malaysian police rounded up about a thousand Filipina domestic workers both outside and inside the cathedral. The police justified the raid as a measure to "stop Filipinas from operating hawker stalls without business licenses and from prostituting themselves" (cited in Chin 1997, 364). This view of Filipina workers is related to a popular suspicion among Malaysians that migrant enclaves are spaces where immoral transactions occur. This stereotype has also often affected relations between employers and workers, with some employers using it as a pretext to increase their control and monitoring of their foreign domestics. The idea is to prevent female workers from meeting male workers and other domestics who may "pollute" them or teach them bad habits. Ironically this view is also shared by some Filipina workers who hang out in the church. Some of the regular churchgoers contrast themselves against those who hang out in secular spaces such as the Kota Raya mall. They see their church involvement as a buffer against *tukso* (temptation) to indulge in sexual entanglements or, worse, prostitution. Some claim that a significant number of Filipina domestic workers have become *pokpok* (prostitutes) out of economic desperation.

The 1994 raid occurred on a Palm Sunday, which in the church liturgical calendar is a major feast day that draws larger than usual crowds of churchgoers. That the raid occurred on this day indicated that it was possibly premeditated by the police and the paramilitary group RELA to catch a large number of foreign workers.¹⁷ The action drew objections from the Catholic Church, which saw it as an unwarranted attempt to harass the migrants and the church itself. That a majority of the Filipinas arrested were documented and legal migrants, save for a handful, caused some embarrassment among government officials who apologized, but it also resulted in the expulsion of the journalist who reported the event (cf. Chin 1997, 364; Gurowitz 2000, 868). The 1994 raid affected another Filipino religious organization, the Kuala Lumpur chapter of El Shaddai,¹⁸ which at that time was based at the cathedral. The group moved their prayer meetings to the St. Anthony parish farther from the cathedral because, according to one member, the raid was "traumatizing" even for those migrants who had legal documents. During

my fieldwork, one such raid occurred but was limited to the hawkers in the feria. No one inside the cathedral compound was questioned or detained. A Filipina food hawker, Jenny, returning to her place after the raid, explained: "It's because Tony Blair is there attending Mass, so many policemen came early in the morning to clear the road and arrest the hawkers."¹⁹ We all ran away. But now that the raid is over and it's clear, we are here again."

Gaddie (2008)²⁰ describes how one of the hawkers collects from each stall "protection money" that is given to those with contacts in the local police force. In return a warning is given ahead of time before the raid to allow them to escape fines and detention.²¹ In this sense the construction of the feria is also enmeshed in reciprocal relations between locals and enterprising hawkers. These relations also reveal the Filipina workers' and hawkers' awareness of how Malaysian local politics affects their universe as foreign workers and of the layers of relations that allow the continued existence of the Filipino feria outside the church.

Since the 1969 race riots Malaysia has been relatively peaceful. But like in most majority-minority relations, tensions remain between the Islamic majority and the minority religions. Starting in the 1970s non-Muslim religious communities have experienced increasing difficulties in their requests for space for their growing population of believers in most parts of the country (Lee 1988, 411). Acquisition of new religious spaces for the minority is highly contested and takes decades to materialize, such as the Church of Divine Mercy in Shah Alam.²² Because Christian churches are finding it more difficult to accommodate the increasing population of local and migrant faithful, some have resorted to renting shops and houses for their worship services (ibid.). Thus contested spaces of the Filipino diasporic communities are enmeshed within Malaysia's context as an Islamic country with a majority Muslim-Malay population and its contentious relationship with ethnic and religious minorities.

Conclusion

Spaces are defined by the human activity performed (or not performed) in them and transformed into places by those engaged in meaning-making activities. In this sense human beings inscribe their identity and character onto space to make and claim it as their own. Filipino diasporic communities have claimed spaces in Kuala Lumpur, albeit on a weekend basis. Their convergence at St. John Catholic Cathedral demonstrates how Filipino

religiosity is lived, performed transnationally, and inscribed in overseas sacred spaces.

The domestic workers are vulnerable to spatial and corporeal domination and control, and even physical abuse, such as in the isolated case of Gaddie. Diasporic spaces are thus constructed to create safe havens of interaction and rest. Migrant diasporic spaces challenge the existing boundaries set by the church, state, and employers. Notwithstanding the isolated cases of discriminatory treatment by Malaysian Catholics, employers, and clerics, Filipina domestic workers continue their hometown activities in the pastoral center. Despite sporadic raids by the police, the feria has survived for three decades, even when migrant participants have remained fluid and transient.

Sacred communion and secular fun are connected in the Filipino migrant homeland imaginary. The two most common activities among different Filipino groups, prayer and the sharing of a Sunday meal, are contiguous parts of a migrant's Sunday, when the communion of the Eucharist flows into the commensality of a Filipino meal. The ambience of the fiesta appears to be a significant source of small-group identification and social relations, indicating the fiesta as an important semiotic device in understanding Filipino diasporic home-making activities and performance. A continuing meaningful discourse on the historical and contemporary configuration of homeland practices and traditions is thus crucial to Filipino transnational and diaspora studies. It is both urgent and necessary for social science scholars to pursue such a discourse.

Culture is "spatialized" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 3). The need to express a distinct identity, spirituality, and culture necessitates enclaves for performance and inscription. The Filipino attraction to sacred space, as demonstrated by their weekly convergence at the cathedral, comes from historically shaped and deeply held religiosity and metonymic longing for the sacred, which migrants continue to perform in their contemporary lives in a transnational manner. The Filipino migrants' regular presence at St. John Cathedral, along with their continuing practice of Marian popular devotions, indicates the importance of religion—in this case, Catholic Christianity—in Filipino transnational migration and diasporic life. More things have yet to be uncovered: Filipino transnational performance of identity, like culture, still needs to be unpacked in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity. Nonetheless this study has shown that the continuing Filipino gatherings on Sundays at the St. John Cathedral demonstrate the spatial inscription of Filipino diasporic identity and offer other ways beyond the

political economic discourse of understanding Filipino transnational migration.

Notes

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- 1 The author spent three months in Kuala Lumpur from Nov. 2010 to Feb. 2011 for shoulder therapy, a month in 2011 and a month in 2012, and three months in 2013 (Apr. to May, and two weeks in Sept.).
- 2 In Sept. 2013 foreign migrants in Kota Raya were rounded up indiscriminately. Verification of documents followed later. In Feb. 2014 accusations of human rights violations by the Malaysian government against Filipinos who were rounded up during the raids were raised, but have since been declared as baseless by Pres. Benigno Simeon Aquino III, ahead of a scheduled official visit to Kuala Lumpur on 27 Feb. 2014.
- 3 The author was present during Tahanang Pilipino's twenty-eighth anniversary celebration held on 13 Jan. 2013.
- 4 Dr. Irene Fernandez passed away on 1 Apr. 2014. Migrant NGOs mourned the passing away of a staunch human and migrant rights activist in Malaysia.
- 5 The Marian title refers to the places of reported appearances in Lourdes and Fatima.
- 6 The notion of the Philippines as a Catholic nation is also a problematic essentialism, as it denies the plurality of ethnoreligious identities of, notably, Muslim-Filipinos, Buddhist-Filipinos, and indigenous Filipinos.
- 7 Rosaldo (1989, 77) referred to lowland Filipinos as peoples "without a culture."
- 8 It is unfortunate that almost three decades after Lynch's and Jocano's preliminary exploration of the fiesta and folk Christianity, no extended discussion has significantly developed on the two subjects. However there are two tangential studies: Cannell's (1995) ethnography of the Bicolanos' devotion to *Amang Hinulid* and Ness's (1992) ethnography of the *Tinderas Sinulog* dancers.
- 9 Sandy's initial motivation for migration was familial, to provide medical care for an ailing father; thus, Malaysia's predominantly Islamic population was not a consideration.
- 10 The actual transcript reads: "*Ganyan siya kabastos sa amin.*" *Bastos* also means discourteous, uncouth, impertinent, and base and could refer to an immoral language or act.
- 11 Pope Francis has identified clericalism (which according to him makes the clergy "self referential rather than missionary") as the modern-day ailment of the Catholic Church (Landry 2013). For the new pope, sanctuary order and doctrinal discipline come second to the compassion and joy of the Gospel.
- 12 I assured Mandy and her friends that my assistant works in a church-connected NGO that promotes the welfare of women and migrants, dispelling their apprehensions.
- 13 Eva, who hails from the Visayas, has a daughter, Terry, who, after completing a diploma course financed by Eva, came to Kuala Lumpur to also work as a domestic. This is not uncommon as Filipinos rely on social networks to explore work opportunities overseas.

- 14 Kota Raya has been a regular place for police migrant raids. Filipina domestic workers recognize the risk, but go there anyway for important transactions such as remitting money and sending packages to their homes in the Philippines. Some hawkers, unable to finish selling at the feria, continue to sell at Kota Raya, although not openly, as selling by unauthorized hawkers is prohibited in the mall.
- 15 Gaddie (and all other migrants under contract with this recruiting agency) would have to work for around six months to recoup the agency fee. In cases of abuse and exploitation, newly recruited migrants are silenced into obedience, for fear of not being able to recover the amount, which is mostly raised through high-interest loans and spent on migration-related expenses.
- 16 Her new employers offered better terms and additional benefits: one month bonus annually and, in case of unused vacations, the monetary equivalent of fifteen days' salary, plus half the cost of a roundtrip airfare of a major airline for her return to her home province. She supported the education of a sibling and the child of another sibling while providing for her only daughter, and was able to build a house through salary advances.
- 17 Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia (Volunteers of Malaysian People) is a paramilitary group, tasked to assist police in enforcing order and to arrest and detain illegal migrants.
- 18 El Shaddai is a popular, Philippine-based, lay charismatic church organization.
- 19 Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, it turned out, was indeed at the mass.
- 20 Gaddie was previously cited for her experience of physical abuse.
- 21 Gaddie's anecdotal account is similar to those I heard about hawkers in Divisoria, Manila.
- 22 For more information on this church, see Church of Divine Mercy [n.d.].

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