

Lives Lived in “Someone Else’s Hands”: Precarity and Profit-making of Migrants and Left-behind Children in the Philippines

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Abstract

In the labour brokerage state of systematic recruitment and export for the maximisation of labour, development, and profit, the Philippines continues to simultaneously fashion migrant workers as temporary, yet heroic and sacrificial. As the largest migrant-sending country in Southeast Asia and the third largest remittance recipient in Asia, the Philippines’ discourse of migrants as modern-day heroes and martyrs reveals the interplay of nationalist myths and cultural values, alongside the neoliberal favouring of finance and flexible labour, to craft filial migrants and celebrate mobile, capitalist subjects over migrants’ welfare and well-being. The article explores the contemporaneous institutionalisation of migrant labour and migrants’ institutionalised uncertainty lived every day to investigate how this profound precariousness in the Philippines is perpetuated historically to shape the resilience and realities of migrants and their left-behind children today. Drawing from news reports and films on migrant lives and ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippines, this article considers how the formation and deployment of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) turns from a focus on sustaining the nation to supporting migrant families and developing translocal communities. Through this examination, the paper seeks to uncover who profits and is indebted from the precarity created and sustained by the larger economic system built on transnational labour migration.

Keywords: migration, labour, precarity, resilience, children, Philippines

THE DUALISTIC CHARACTER OF PRECARIETY

ONE DAY IN 1995, masses of mourners swelled the main thoroughfare of San Pablo City in Laguna Province in the Philippines. Locals, tourists, and famous actors alike filled the street, weeping and praying as activists waved flags and banners bearing political messages from their respective people’s organisations (POs). These membership-based organisations of citizens come together, as Sonny Africa (2013) suggests, along class, gender, and/or geographic lines to advance their collective interests. On this particular day, members were present from POs such as Migrante International, which has national chapters advocating for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs); GABRIELA, a nationwide

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network of grassroots organisations addressing women’s issues; and BAYAN, or *Bagong Alyansang Makabayan*, a multisectoral umbrella organisation struggling for national liberation and democracy. From days of protest and demonstrations in the Philippines and across the world to the now pensive prayers and songs, news reporters and even film crews documented the sombre scene in which the coffin holding the body of an OFW was being carried through the crowds. The public funeral of Flor Contemplacion, a 42-year-old domestic helper who had worked and was executed on the seventeenth of March in Singapore under questionable conditions, drew more than 25,000 people (Carling 2005: 16).

This mobilisation of civil society and the temporary occupation of public space is evocative of the massive display of “People Power” that, less than a decade prior, demanded “the resignation of a president whose long rule was widely viewed as corrupt and dictatorial” (Hedman 2006: 1). The end of Ferdinand Marcos’ repressive, authoritarian rule and subsequent exile is attributed to the business, church, and professional associations that revived the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), a transnational organisation that collected funds among OFWs and USA sympathizers; dispatched thousands of Filipino volunteers to document and publicise electoral fraud and violence around the Philippine archipelago during the “snap” presidential elections of 1986; and rallied hundreds of thousands more in Metro Manila to peacefully demonstrate along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, or EDSA, as the super highway is commonly known (Hedman 2006: 1). The support of Flor and the revolution against Marcos both united people in much the same way as Pratt *et al.* (2017: 61) describes the gathering of people for a testimonial play on migrant labour in Metro Manila as the “bodily assertion of principles of equality through public assembly in the midst of precarity”. Yet, the latter brought people together out of a sense of optimism and freedom that could only come with democratic change, while the former brought people together in a state of bereavement, mourning the Philippine state’s inability to protect its own citizens.

The intertwining of these two figures—one considered a heroine and martyr, the other a villain—reveals the dualistic character of precarity. In Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider’s (2012: 5) call for critical thought and political action regarding contemporary neoliberalism via performance-based art, they describe precarity as “life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past”. They suggest that precarity “undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression”, challenging “‘progress’ and ‘development’ narratives on all levels” (Ridout and Schneider 2012: 5). In the Philippines, where the impoverished, malnourished, and unemployed belie the country’s apparent growth, progress, and development, their precariousness is what Laura Fantone (2007), in her study of generational changes in labour and power dynamics in Italy, would call a “life condition” in which old and new precarities intersect. Following Fantone (2007), I propose that Filipinos’ precarious life condition arises not only

from historical precedents set by the gendered and nationalist discourses of colonialism and postcolonialism, but also by contemporary neoliberal globalisation, such that precarity becomes experienced translocally.

In Ligaya Lindio-McGovern’s (2007: 16, 29) examination of the strategies used by GABRIELA and Migrante International to resist the neoliberal agenda, she found that neoliberal globalisation in the Philippines is characterised by policies that promote economic liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, financial capital investment, labour flexibilisation, and labour export. Together, these neoliberal policies contribute not only to “the creation of the pre-conditions for economic migration on which labor export feeds” (Lindio-McGovern 2007: 23) but also to the distinct feature of the Filipino precariat: “[O]ur workers perform precarious, insecure work, here and abroad” (Abao 2014) and, I would add, across the productive and reproductive realms in increasing numbers, such that these multi-sited, translocal patterns of work have impacted the economic, social, and personal well-being—that neoliberalism proposes to advance (Harvey 2005)—of both OFWs and their families, as will be detailed below. While Abao (2014) maintains that the Filipino precariat, unlike the precariat of the Western world, are “not (visibly) angry”, I argue that the public assembly of people for Flor and against Marcos is a testament to their visible anger. As I elaborate upon later in the article, these neoliberal policies are the impetus for the establishment of civil society organisations that provide new forms of support, outside of the extended family, for the precariat to channel their anger and other emotions in more productive ways.

Further, this article seeks to expand beyond previous work that isolated the experiences of migration and precarity to a singular condition, such as economic exclusion or exploitation, and to a singular place of origin or destination. Instead, this article endeavours to use the lens of translocality to further advance research on transnational migrant communities, showing that the identities, abilities, and mobilities of OFWs and their children shift over time and space (Alipio, Lu, and Yeoh 2015) and are informed by migrants’ everyday social practices and localised experiences (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). In doing so, I use the case and cinematic portrayal of Flor’s true-life story, employing semiotic analysis to evaluate the portrayal of children and migrants, and to denote conceptions of the left-behind family and themes associated with transnational migrant labour, such as sacrifice, guilt, love, pain, and uncertainty. In addition, the case of and film about Flor will be contextually analysed in relation to the broader context of the institutionalisation of labour migration and neoliberal globalisation, allowing for an examination of how these very public stories are locally constructed and perceived in the midst of growing awareness of global migrant rights and the so-called ‘social costs’ of migration. Moreover, in drawing upon critical discourse analysis of news reports and qualitative analysis of long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Flor’s hometown of San Pablo City, I explore the multiple dimensions, locations, and relations of the precarity and resiliency found in the

migrant stories and institutional narratives of OFWs and their left-behind children, activists and civil society organisations, and the Philippine state and migrant-receiving countries.

In tracing the contemporaneous institutionalisation of state-sponsored labour migration initiated by Marcos in the mid-1970s to what Bridget Anderson (2010) calls an ‘institutionalized uncertainty’ lived daily by migrants and their families, the following questions are raised: How does the precarious condition of OFWs reverberate translocally between the world of work abroad and the world of family life and care in the Philippines? How is the precarious condition of OFWs extended intergenerationally to and experienced by the children and families of OFWs? In the attempt to mitigate the negative qualities of precarity in work and family life, how do the translocal communities formed by an NGO resist or perpetuate the neoliberal agenda? In the translocal analysis of precarity and resistance in the Philippines, I contend that precarity’s dangerous and pervasive uncertainty simultaneously crafts filial and mobile, capitalist subjects as well as resilient children and families. Like the stories that will unfold here, precarity is life lived in “someone else’s hands” (Berlant 2011: 192). The next section details this kind of structural dependency, examining how life and work—indeed, the “need to survive”—is increasingly imagined as precarious and interdependent (Ridout and Schneider 2012: 5).

PEDDLING MIGRANT LABOUR AND PROTESTING PRECARIETY

On the 22nd death anniversary of Flor, Filipinos again took to the streets, this time to condemn the current government’s inability to address the perceived root causes of migration and to end widespread unemployment, homelessness, landlessness, and the lack of basic social services. Perhaps most importantly, they protested the government’s failure to end all forms of contractual employment (known as ‘endo’, or end-of-contract, in Filipino slang) with the enactment of the Department of Labor and Employment’s (DOLE) Department Order (DO) 174, which had passed the previous day (Migrante International 2017a). As a presidential candidate, Rodrigo Duterte promised that his administration would “[look] after the welfare of [overseas] Filipinos” (Corrales 2016). As President-elect, his incoming National Economic and Development Authority head, Ernesto Pernia, announced that the administration “want[s] to make overseas employment optional and not a necessity” by “creat[ing] more jobs ... in the local economy ... [such that] the motivation of ... [Filipinos] to go abroad will be diminished” (Manlupig 2016).

However, with the passage of DO 174, Migrante International (2017a), through its secretary-general, Mic Catuira, criticised Duterte and tried to hold him accountable, stating that “... for all his posturing and promises, [he] has not proven himself different from his predecessors when it comes to peddling

Filipinos’ cheap and docile labor to the global market”. Instead, Catuira claimed the following:

Now, with the passage of [DO 174], packaged as the government’s solution to workers’ problems, contractualization [or contractual employment] is legalized, aggravating the already rampant problem of labor flexibilization, depressed wages, and, ultimately, more massive unemployment ... [which] will result in the forced migration of millions more of our workers to seek employment abroad because of the desperation and the need to survive. (Migrante International 2017a)

With Duterte’s promises to Filipinos and OFWs betrayed by the new order, the contracting out of labour is not only regulated but also legalised and perpetuated institutionally, despite the protests of workers and the costs to workers’ rights and welfare (SENTRO 2017). As such, Filipino workers, like many of their other Asian counterparts, are entrenched in a labour market where they “labour largely under temporary, employer-tied contracts or in an undocumented or irregular manner” in which they are often variably vulnerable to uncertain, exploitative, risky, and life-threatening employment conditions (Piper *et al.* 2016: 1). For OFWs especially, Piper *et al.* (2016: 2) argues that “[p]recarity has become a dominant feature of the migration employment experience”.

As poignantly illustrated by the enduring case of Flor, migrant precarity rests on a “specific regulatory framework of migration ... as one founded on labour market segregation and in the absence of protective labour regulations” (Randolph 2015 as cited in Piper *et al.* 2016: 1). In Singapore, the need for cheap domestic helpers to look after children, the elderly, the disabled, and the household has significantly grown, from 5000 foreign women workers four decades ago to nearly 240,000 today (Hui 2017). It is in this labour market that Flor worked for seven years. However, in the last year of her contract in 1991, Flor found herself abandoned and unprotected after a visit to her friend, Delia Maga, who was also a Filipina domestic helper. On that day, Flor went to ask Delia if she could bring back a package to her own family in San Pablo City as is customary among *balikbayans*, or overseas Filipinos visiting or returning to the Philippines. However, on the day of Flor’s visit, two indisputable deaths occurred: Delia was found beaten and strangled while Delia’s young ward Nicolas, an epileptic, was discovered drowned. Flor was arrested and “reportedly coerced into a confessional without a lawyer present, after having been drugged and administered electric shocks” (Hilsdon 2000: 173). The Singaporean court thereby ruled that Flor committed the double murders, citing Delia’s supposed refusal to bring Flor’s package home with her as the reason (Guillermo 2000).

However, the Filipino perception of the case differs widely from the Singaporean perspective. The Filipino public generally believes that Flor was framed.

Human rights activists and labour leaders in the Philippines suggested that Flor had been “drugged and coerced into confessing and then (falsely) assured that pleading insanity would lead to clemency” (McKay 2012: 55). Many claimed Singaporean authorities dismissed evidence that Delia might have instead been killed by her employer when he found that his son had accidentally drowned. Still, the Singaporean court maintained that her treatment had been fair despite her nearly two-year detainment under Singapore’s Internal Security Act, and it handed down a guilty verdict and a sentence to death by hanging, although Flor had “entered a plea of insanity on advice from the Philippine Consul in Singapore in the hope that this would result in the commutation of her prison term” (Hilsdon 2000). Despite massive international rallies and protests, an attempt to re-open her case with new eyewitnesses, and a last-minute plea from then-President Fidel Ramos to former Singaporean President Ong Teng Cheong urging the stay of her execution, Flor was nonetheless executed and her body repatriated to the Philippines. In the aftermath, an exodus of abused Filipino migrant workers left Singapore, transported by an airlift provided by the Philippine government—a rescue that starkly contrasts with the lack of legal assistance provided to Flor by the Philippine Embassy and with the years of neglect of Flor’s prison detention by the Philippine government. The abundant precarity in Flor’s case and the injustice of her execution further catalysed a long period of public outrage among various church, human rights, feminist, and migration groups, who condemned the Philippine state’s failure to safeguard the rights of workers deemed crucial to the nation’s economic development and questioned the humanity of its state-sponsored policy of exporting labour.

Flor’s case illustrates that while the global economy has increasingly relied on historically and spatially specific mobilisations of fragmented, contingent labour in the past few decades, precarity is not only an effect of these transnational processes but, rather, reflects how it is translocally created, lived, and experienced both at home and abroad. Precarity, as *Migrante International* observed, is structurally bound in the lack of job opportunities available at home and in deficient human and labour rights and protections, all of which compel Filipinos like Flor to seek work abroad in their ‘need to survive’. In this context, Piper *et al.* (2016: 3) argue that precarity refers “to a ‘moment’ in late capitalism where the exploitation of migrant labour has become systemic, entailing generalisable conditions of uncertainty, disempowerment, vulnerability and insufficiency”. The inequalities, insecurities, and anxieties generated with that ‘moment’ have only been intensified and magnified, especially with today’s prevailing neoliberal logic. Yet, as Berlant (2011: 192) notes in her analysis of how precarity moves beyond the economic to encompass both the structural and affective environment: “[C]apitalist activity always induces destabilizing scenes of productive destruction—of resources and lives being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market”. For example, in her exploration of neoliberal biopolitics in the United States, Melinda Cooper (2008: 10) qualifies Foucault’s

critique of neoliberalism, arguing that its “operative emotions ... are neither interest nor rational expectations, but rather the essentially speculative but nonetheless productive movements of collective belief, faith, and apprehension”. These kinds of beliefs, faith, and emotions both enable Filipinos to work overseas *and* to expect “the state to maintain its provision of economic security and infrastructural solidity” (Berlant 2011: 193). Following the activist lead of Migrante International, the next section turns to tracing the expansion of the precarisation of migrant labour by asking the question: Who profits and is indebted from the precarity created and sustained by the larger economic system built on transnational labour migration?

PROFIT-MAKING AND THE PRECARITISATION OF MIGRANT LABOUR

To understand how precarity is historically structured in the Philippines, one must acknowledge that the broader literature around precarity and the precariat is “almost totally Northern-centric in its theoretical frames and its empirical reference points” (Munck 2013: 752). While this work largely takes Europe and its history of capitalist development and changing patterns of work as the backdrop for workers’ dispossession and disenchantment, there is little awareness that precarity has been the norm in the Global South (Kalleberg and Hewison 2013: 273). As Munck (2013: 752) argues, in the Global South “work has always-already been precarious”, as substantiated by the mass protests by workers against the state in places like China, where Tania Li notes that “the dispossessed do not go quietly” (2010: 72), or the Philippines, with the protests that occur on Flor’s death anniversary. As a result, the application of ‘Northern notions’ of precarity is not useful here. Instead, as Piper *et al.* (2016: 3) suggest: “[C]olonial and postcolonial ideologies have historically overshadowed the exercise of individual rights, and circumscribed civil and industrial rights” in the Global South. Precarity, then, can be seen as an extension of colonisation and postcolonisation. In the Philippines, precarious migrant labour has long been constitutive of the development of the country since the Spanish colonial period. However, the American colonisation of the country paved the way towards seeing Filipinos as a source of cheap labour abroad as sailors and workers on plantations, farms, and fisheries. The continued transnational labour migration of Filipinos, particularly during periods of economic stagnation and political instability, only increases this precarisation.

In the early 1970s, many Filipinos took the opportunity to escape Marcos’s oppressive martial law regime. Others willingly took part in his ‘manpower exchange programme’ formalised in Presidential Decree 442, also known as the 1974 Labor Code. This programme sought to alleviate unemployment through the temporary promotion, development, and regulation of overseas contract workers, or OCWs—the term used before ‘OFW’ came into wider usage. By

the time Marcos was deposed as president in 1986, ‘export-led development’ and the institutionalisation of the migration industry was well under way, such that his successors have continued to depend on the exportation and remittances of Filipinos to deal with foreign debt and to sustain the development and economic infrastructure of the country. Initially considered a temporary solution to the country’s ailing economy, labour export became permanent when Corazon ‘Cory’ Aquino ascended the presidency and the government began to officially sanction and support pro-overseas migration policies, programmes, and guidelines for the overseas deployment of workers. As the institutionalisation of migrant labour became more ingrained, the dominant profile of OFWs changed from males in both sea- and land-based fronts in the 1980s to women in service and technical work for more than two decades.

Traditionally viewed as vulnerable and desperate, migrant women were previously relegated to menial and low-paying, gender-specific jobs and poor working conditions, which limited upward mobility. This included precarious work in factories, entertainment, and the sex industry. Another categorisation saw Filipinas as possessing certain types of desirable characteristics, most notably as a nurturer, such that “the Filipina [emerges] as an icon of care” (Cruz 2011: 9), performing jobs that Western countries considered traditional ‘women’s work’ like domestic housework, nursing, and professional child and elderly care. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 293) characterise the latter type of work as the “*affective labor* of human contact and interaction”, promoting products that are “intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (emphasis in the original). Although this “labor in the bodily mode” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 293) can be said to follow the naturalised and historicised construction of women as reproducers (of life) and domestics (of the home), these types of jobs offer migrants an alternative to the oftentimes dangerous and precarious work mentioned above.

Consequently, as male and female migrants continue to increase in number and fill different labour sectors in the global economy, migration from the Philippines has resulted in different gendered flows and spatial migrations. Working as production plant workers, equipment operators, and ‘related labourers’ predominantly in countries in Western Asia or the Middle East, like Saudi Arabia, male OFWs have generally outnumbered female OFWs since 1993, except in 2006 and from 2014 to 2017 (see PSA 2001, 2018).² Yet, since 1995, female OFWs have dominated as ‘labourers and unskilled workers’ or in what is now classified as ‘elementary occupations’, performing primarily service work—such as domestic work, cleaning, and manufacturing labour—largely in Western Asia in countries like Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates in

²See also the various years of the Survey on Overseas Filipinos from the website of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), which is available at <https://psa.gov.ph/content/survey-overseas-filipinos-sof> (accessed 1 March 2019).

1993 and from 2005 to 2017, and then principally in East Asia, like Hong Kong, in the intervening years (see PSA 2001, 2018, 2019).³ Alongside the rise of female service work, remittances have continued to increase annually since 2002 (PIDS 2019), reaching \$29 billion Philippine pesos in 2018 (BSP 2019).

With the growth of OFW remittances and the stable number of women in the global workforce, Filipina migrants are undoubtedly playing a crucial role in sustaining domestic life both at home and abroad, the global economy, and the Philippine nation, demonstrating that they are part and parcel of the transnational “profit or revenue-making circuits” that are “developed on the backs of the truly disadvantaged” (Sassen 2000: 503). Furthermore, with the expansion of female service work being “a consequence of broader structural conditions”, the precaritisation of migrant labour is intensified (Sassen 2000: 503). As women’s labour become “significant sources for profit and government revenue enhancement” (Sassen 2000: 506), these ‘profit-makers’ are simultaneously seen as “extruded parts of the body politic” (Rafael 1997: 269). That is, these labouring women find themselves in highly feminised sectors and in a “common ground of precariousness”. It is subsequently in this “sorority” of feminised, precarious work where power struggles are contested and staged, as we see below in Flor’s case, and where the resources for the “reconsolidation of a national imaginary and the ‘economic assertion of nationalism’ can be [found]” (Tadiar 1997: 170).

THE HERALDING OF HEROES AND THE MAKING OF MARTYRS

It is, then, through the labour brokerage state of systematic recruitment and export for the maximisation of labour, development, and profit (Rodriguez 2010) that former President Cory Aquino first heralded OFWs as ‘*mga bagong bayani*’, or modern-day heroes, in a 1988 speech given to a group of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong (Maglipon 1993 as cited in Rafael 1997: 274). Praising them for their sacrifices not only for their families but also for the “forever grateful” Philippine state, Jean Encinas-Franco (2015: 61) notes that Cory Aquino “exhorted them to raise their head up high and be proud of their labor; no matter how menial it was ... and ensured them that the government would do its best in providing welfare”. However, in the ensuing reverence of these heroes, Flor worked in Singapore for seven years without adequate protection and rights but nevertheless was imbued with heroic virtue and sacrifice. At the end of director Joel Lamangan’s controversial but critically acclaimed 1995 film, *The Flor Contemplacion Story*, we see mourners take part in Flor’s funeral procession as we hear the voice of an attorney addressing them:

³Ibid.

She dedicated her whole life serving other people, her fellow Filipino and foreign brothers alike ... but her death was able to unite us all here rich or poor, powerful or not, servants like her, and employers ... But Flor's death has not gone to waste. For today, it has given us the inspiration to regain our lost hopes—for us to unite once again. Let's hold each other's hands and in one voice, let's shout so that the government could hear our plea and finally give us more jobs ... So that people like Flor ... won't be forced to leave [their] family and loved ones to work abroad ... towards [their] own risks and death.

Playing Flor in Lamangan's film, the legendary Philippine actress and recording artist Nora Aunor mirrored the bereavement of the global Filipino nation and evoked a kind of mourning, or *'pagluluksa'*, where she “enact[ed] the cultural process of transforming *awa* [pity] into *damay* [commiseration] or *pakikidalamhati* [the sharing of grief], and finally into *pakikiisa* [solidarity] ... refunction[ing] the commodification of grief into a virtue of collective action” (Flores 2000: 85 as cited in Lim 2012: 197). In the film, Aunor's powerful performance as Flor both reopens the wounds of trauma and tidily sutures them at the end, while in real-life, we know that this film comes at an extraordinary cost.

Forming a global public through a display of grief and anger, Filipinos organised mass demonstrations both at home and abroad, with OFWs protesting in front of Singaporean embassies around the world, united in their demand for fundamental changes to the treatment of migrant workers. Even Duterte, the former mayor of Davao, led city employees in burning a Singaporean flag (Shenon 1995). As diplomatic relations between the two countries deteriorated, Deirdre McKay (2012: 55) observes that Singaporeans were shocked at how Filipinos treated Flor after death, particularly since they considered her a criminal. While outrage over her death was considered understandable, they saw this as “primitive emotionalism and irrationalism” and regarded Filipinos as “manipulated, and their government subjected to mob rule” (Hilsdon 2000: 176). McKay (2012) importantly notes this disjuncture, questioning, though failing to answer: “How could Filipinos receive her as a martyr”? In this section, I turn to the historical conditions and cultural considerations that would transform a precarious migrant worker, like Flor, from a hero into a martyr.

In both real-life and on screen, the narrative of Flor's public pain and sacrifice is strikingly similar to the *pasyon*. Reynaldo Iletto (1979) describes the *pasyon* as a vernacular retelling of the Passion of Jesus Christ. However, the *pasyon* in the Philippines is not relegated only to readings and ritual performances of Jesus Christ's life, death, and his transcendent resurrection. Iletto argues that the *pasyon* “provide[s] lowland Philippine society with a language for articulating ... a coherent image of the world and their place in it” (1979: 11–12). For example, in San Pablo City, the main thoroughfare that united Flor's mourners and supporters winds its way to the mystical Mount Banahaw in neighbouring

Quezon Province, where the Rizalists have built monasteries and churches in the mountainside, worshipping the ‘first Filipino’, José Rizal—the Laguna-born national hero and martyr—as the Tagalog embodiment of Christ (Ileto 1982). Advocating for reform under Spanish colonialism, Rizal was imprisoned and executed for inciting rebellion and the Philippine Revolution. Rizal was subsequently “invested with a messianic aura” by his countrymen, likened to Christ, and deemed powerful and potent through his life of suffering and sacrifice (Rafael 1997: 275). Like Rizal, Benigno ‘Ninoy’ Aquino Jr. was also martyred. In opposing Marcos, Ninoy was celebrated; yet he was imprisoned during martial law and summarily assassinated upon his return to the Philippines from self-imposed exile in the United States, leading the masses to mobilise in the ‘People Power’ demonstrations that ousted Marcos from power (Rafael 1997: 275).

Like the male heroes and martyrs before her, Flor became “a symbol of the historical suffering of the Filipino people” (Carling 2005: 16). We see this analogy at work when Alice Guillermo (2000: 123) describes the scene in *The Flor Contemplacion Story* depicting the last moments before Flor’s death:

[W]ith [her] praying hands before her face ... we finally see her, her face is the pure image of suffering, the almost unseeing eyes surrounded by dark patches. As she walks down the long corridor with chained feet and chained hands praying the rosary, religion is her only and final consolation. The light from the end of the room where the gallows stand is like a ray that beckons and the darkness of death is transformed into the light of eternity.

Lamangan’s directorial emphasis on intercutting the images between the long walk to the gallows and the vigil outside the prison walls allows the voice-over from the praying mourners and supporters to lend the scene a solemn cadence, thus raising Flor’s execution to an event of religious significance. The camera’s attention on her gestures further expresses a sense of humanity’s capacity for transcendence. The public sacrifice of Flor, therefore, generated a powerful, even revolutionary and liberating, potential that could only be made possible, as asserted by Sarita See (2002: 174), through the ability to convert the symbolic value of a suffering Flor into an acceptance of pain that necessarily accompanies the struggle for a greater, communal good. In the actual media reports and editorials that followed Flor’s hanging, Flor was variously described as the “Flower of National Rage”, “The Martyr That is the Philippines”, and a “national saint” (Cheah 2006: 235).

Along with being likened to Christ by Philippine newspaper editorials, Flor was also compared to Ninoy, suggesting that Flor, the martyr, could also trigger another People Power revolution, this time against President Ramos’s government, through the transformation of grief into a vehicle for collective

action and political expression (Flores 2000). Yet, unlike Rizal and Ninoy, both of whom came from the privileged upper class, by virtue of the “nationalist ideal of the Filipina-as-housewife” (McKay 2012: 58) and her status as a provincial housewife turned OFW, it can be said that Flor further coalesced her presumed innocence and the public’s pity and outrage (Rafael 1997: 277–278). As Flor represented the millions of OFWs working abroad for the sake of their children and household, McKay (2012: 55) suggests that the public blame doled out to the Singaporean government, the Philippine state, and the receiving countries of OFWs is an expression of the “long-suppressed guilt of the middle classes and elites over the fate of migrants” who, while hailed as *bagong bayani* by Ninoy’s wife, Cory, were treated as temporary and disposable.

The transformation and translation of precarious and tortured bodies from Rizal to Flor into “salvific texts” (Ross 2008: 13) consequently highlights the attempt by Filipinos to understand what Vicente Rafael describes as:

[I]nnocent lives forced to undergo humiliation at the hands of alien forces; of unjustified deaths both shocking and public; of massive responses of pity and prayer that would, in mobilizing alternative communities of resistance, finally drive away the forces of oppression and pave the way for some kind of liberation. (Rafael 1997: 275–276)

Thus, in the “subjugation of life to the power of death”, as Achille Mbembe (2003: 39) details in the process of necropolitics, the making of Flor into a martyr “profoundly reconfigure[s] the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror”. That is, Flor’s martyrdom empowered the Filipino public to make collective demands that ultimately led the Ramos government to temporarily ban the deployment of domestic workers to Singapore, investigate the culpability and complicity of officials in her execution, force the resignations of the foreign and labour secretaries, establish a commission to reinvestigate her conviction, and enact Republic Act (RA) 8042, also known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995. RA 8042 attempted to re-evaluate the government’s entire overseas employment programme by shifting from the promotion of labour migration for economic growth and national development to the protection of the basic rights of OFWs, the enhancement of their welfare through closer attention to the ‘social costs’ of their migration, and the commitment to creating local employment opportunities that would remove the need for immigration.

The government’s new act, thereby, promised Filipino nationals and OFWs what they were unable to offer Flor. However, with overseas migration and remittances increasing each year, and with OFWs continuing to be unjustly imprisoned, abused, and exploited, the lines between Flor’s sacrifice and the supposed redemption gained with the new act are blurred. As Arman Hernando, spokesperson of Migrante International explains, the government fails to fully

follow through with the act’s institutionalisation of “higher standard[s] of protection and promotion for the welfare of migrant workers, their families, and overseas Filipinos in distress” (CWEARC 2017). He further stresses that “[t]he more revolting fact is that even after the death of Flor Contemplacion, the government unabatedly continued deploying the most vulnerable section of OFWs, the domestic helpers ...” (Migrante International 2017b). Here, the high vulnerability, dependency, and precarity of Filipina migrant workers is underscored, leading E. San Juan, Jr. (2009: 109) to point to a kind of “profit-making industry” in which “[t]he buying and selling of ‘third world’ bodies is a legacy of the unjust and unequal division of international labor in both productive and reproductive spheres” and across what Arlie Hochschild (2000) calls the “global care chain”.

Accordingly, the labouring and belaboured bodies of Filipina migrants, who work for multiple generational households, represent survival, sacrifice, and solidarity amidst hegemonic powers, class exploitation, and gendered oppression. As described elsewhere (Alipio 2013a), Laura, aged 30 at the time of my fieldwork, is an example of these migrant martyr mothers and the intergenerational precarity of migrant labour.⁴ After experiencing domestic violence by her husband and his drug addiction, Laura chose to escape the abuse and leave her four young sons behind by going abroad like her OFW mother, who had left her at the age of seven. After working in France for three years as a domestic helper, she had just returned to the Philippines only to reveal that she wanted to migrate again, admitting that she was tempted by the PHP 100,000 (approximately | USD 2,000) monthly income she made abroad and the future opportunities it affords. While the labour migration would mean leaving behind her children again, it is a sacrifice she is ready to make, saying that she has many dreams not for herself, but rather for her children: “When I was a child, my dream was to have a good home ... I don’t want my children to experience the hardships of life”. Yet, the dream of providing a better life for her children was thwarted by her husband, who recklessly used the remittances she sent home to partake in what many left-behind women of the community I worked in call “A-S-B”, which is shorthand for “*Alak-Sugal-Babae*” or “wine, gambling, and women”. As I have argued, Filipina migrants, therefore, do not necessarily migrate out of free choice. Instead, they struggle transnationally, moving from one form of abuse to another, from the intergenerational poverty and gendered oppression faced at home to the intergenerational precarity of migrant labour (Alipio 2013a: 111).

Sassen (2000: 506) uses the notion of the “feminization of survival” to refer to the fact that “households and whole communities are increasingly dependent on women for their survival”. To move the analysis beyond the structural precaritisation of and profit-making from migrant labour, I emphasise the shift from the exploitation and survival embedded in the formation and deployment of OFWs

⁴Pseudonyms are used for informants throughout the article in order to protect their privacy.

to the resilience enacted across a wide range of actors from individual migrants, left-behind children, transnational families, and translocal communities. This section has used the specific case of Flor's transformation from a heroine in pain to a martyr invested with hope to underscore both the individual and collective lived experiences of precarity resulting from the historical, cultural, "political and institutional contexts in which the production of precarity occurs" (Waite 2009: 421). The next section further seeks to construct a holistic analysis of precarity that understands it as more than a life condition or a fixed state but, rather, as a process that crosses the boundaries of and connects the economic (the world of work abroad) and the social (the world of family life and care in the Philippines) in intergenerationally extending precarity, such as hindering "sustained access to the resources essential to the full development of one's life" (Precarias a la Deriva 2004) to the children left behind.

FROM PRECARIOUS TO RESILIENT CHILDHOODS

When Flor's family found out about her plight and impending execution through public radio in early March, her children immediately flew to Singapore at the expense of the local mayor to say their goodbyes (Hilsdon 2000). It was reported that Flor and her twin sons, 15-year-old Joel and Jon-Jon, "did not recognize each other at first in Changi prison as Flor had left home when they were seven years old" (Hilsdon 2000), and having last seen them in 1989, her daughter Russel was now 17 years old (and pregnant) while her older son, Sandrex, was 21. In *The Flor Contemplacion Story*, Lamangan employed a cast comprising some of the Philippines' most renowned actors and even hired Flor's twin boys, although not her older children. The twins reportedly received PHP 100,000 each for their film roles, while the family was paid two million pesos (approximately USD 40,000) by Viva Films for the story rights (Cinco 2011). As the twins re-enacted events during their mother's imprisonment, execution, and burial, the film simultaneously capitalised on their resilience and authenticity to generate both revenue and public awareness of the "social costs" of migration and the intimate suffering of children left behind.

Reduced mainly to sombre faces and postures in the film, the twins were devoid of an oral "language of bereavement" except when corroborating the "goodness" of their father, Efren, when interviewed by a news reporter (Cannell 1999). Consequently, the twins had only their bodies to articulate their grief and loss (See 2002). In their last meeting with their mother in Singapore, the day before she was hanged, the film reduces their unspoken sorrow to camera close-ups as they try to touch each other, hands pressed against the glass panel that divided them in the jail (Guillermo 2000: 112). In the final scenes of the film when Flor's family file to see her before she is lowered into a grave, the

audience hears chants of “Long live Flor!” alongside her haunting voice, responding to the cold rejection of a final request to hold her children for the last time:

They could kill me, but they could never take away my dignity ... If [I] ... go back to our country cold and dead ... Please wrap your arms around me and embrace me tightly so you could feel my love that I wasn’t able to make you feel before.

Her final statement in the film points first to what Rick Bonus (2000: 8) claims, after hearing stories of Filipino immigration to the United States, is the “shaping force of state-instituted laws, global economies and media representation” that have “turned Filipinos into racialized and gendered laborers and service workers to fuel the economy”. As such, Bonus (2000: 8) argues that Filipinos were considered “dispensable” or “unimportant” yet “necessary workers” who, he believes, “deserve, but do not receive, dignity and equal access to the fruits of their labor”. Flor’s final statement, therefore, resists the “taking away” of her dignity and, reveals the social and emotional struggles that many transnational migrant families and left-behind children face. Through the cinematic portrayal of Flor and her children’s sufferings, the precaritisation of migrant labour across generations is palpable. For Flor, her work-cum-nightmare prevented her from being with her children and seeing how the “fruits of her labour” could have become realised in the development of her children and even grandchildren. In turn, Flor’s children were confronted with a reunion after the protracted absence of their mother, virtually growing up without her. In this section, I examine how institutionalised precarity cuts across the lifeworlds of generations within migrant families to the children left behind. Through examining how they encounter this precarity, I argue that their resilient childhoods are a result of the resources provided by civil society organisations, who have stepped in for absent migrant parents and insufficient government services to help children resist and even overturn this trenchant condition of their lives.

Noting the vulnerability occurring in OFW families and children left behind and responding to the execution of Flor, a group of migrant returnees, respected community and religious leaders, social workers, social entrepreneurs, and academics formed the NGO Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative, Inc. (hereafter referred to as ‘Atikha’). Formally established in 1996 with its headquarters in Flor’s hometown of San Pablo City and another branch located in the municipality of Mabini in neighbouring Batangas Province, Atikha initially responded to the social problems engendered by migrant precarity through the provision of psychosocial interventions in the community and self-help groups among the children of OFWs. Atikha later added a range of economic, educational, health, legal, and social services as part of a comprehensive reintegration programme for returning migrant workers and their families (see Alipio 2013b). Renowned in the country for being the first so-called “one stop centre” for

OFWs and their families as well as other sectors of the community, Atikha's programmes and services can be considered an alternative both to the inadequate governmental welfare services available and to the neoliberal agenda of overseas migration. For instance, through training sessions in entrepreneurship and a variety of vocational job skills, workshops on financial management, and programmes in social enterprise in which coconut crops are used as a viable source of income, Atikha seemingly encourages a notion of domesticity by creating jobs at home; fostering livelihood opportunities for OFWs, non-OFWs, and migrant returnees; and promoting the economic development of families and local communities. Atikha has also been instrumental in the establishment of a children's association, called Batang Atikha Savers Club ('Youth Savers Club'), or BASC for short, which provides the children of OFWs and other members of the community with a money-savings mobilisation programme, along with counselling, life skills trainings, and orientations on issues such as migration, financial literacy, and gender-based violence awareness (see Alipio 2013a, 2015). By equipping children with practical life strategies and tools, Atikha (2019a) aims to empower young people in a similar way to adults in which work at home and abroad can be redefined and respected, and workers can be given value and dignity. In encouraging children to reimagine and embody new life possibilities, Atikha shows that the intergenerational nature and "life condition" of precarity can be potentially overturned, as illustrated by the coloured drawings made by Serena, a 12-year-old child I came to know while volunteering at BASC.

Her series of self-portraits was especially striking. One was drawn with the head split crosswise and hair sprouting out of the void while the torso and lower body were left unfinished. Another portrait depicted a square-shaped head with the hair all drawn to one side and a purple-coloured heart on the chest. In the last portrait, the heart shape was repeated but in the form of a necklace, and the head, face, and body were more lifelike, round, and well-proportioned, complete with moles and eyes looking straight ahead. In interpreting these self-portraits, it was evident that Serena was presenting a transformation of sorts. Abandoned as a baby by her biological parents but taken in by a local family, she lived in the care of her adopted grandmother, aunt, and uncle while her father worked as an OFW in Paris, France, and her mother lived in other accommodations. Serena's knowledge of the world around her is shaped by what she sees or does not see in her home life—she is acutely aware of the absence of both her parents, the lack of attention given to her by her immediate caregivers as there were other dependents in the household also needing their care, as well as the scarcity of financial and material resources. With her frustration and sadness evident in her first two self-portraits, Atikha believes that OFW children, like Serena, are the most vulnerable to the physical separation from their migrant parent, suffering psychologically from the lack of parental care and affection, and turning to "deviant" ways, such as drugs and alcohol, boyfriends and girlfriends, and their *barkada* (same-age peer group) to express

their anger and discontent and to seek solace (see Dizon-Anoñuevo and Anoñuevo 2002).

Faced with not only the structural lack of security, but also the physical and emotional absence of her OFW father, adopted mother, biological parents, and to a degree, her caregiver relatives, Serena undoubtedly experienced a precarious and “unequal childhood”, to use Annette Lareau’s (2003) term, seemingly unable to navigate through the various circumstances of her life. Deemed a “problem child” by her family for having too many boyfriends at such a young age and for “escaping”, or sneaking away from home to visit them, she was found one day hanging out with a group of older men, leading her family to remove her from school for a year and seek the help of Atikha. It was arranged that she would volunteer daily at the organisation, an arrangement at first resisted by Serena as she found herself subject to a different kind of surveillance, but after a period, she welcomed the change as she no longer found herself becoming bored and getting in trouble whenever she stayed home. With time, and as her third self-portrait conveys, she became more resilient, and even disciplined and enthusiastic in the programmes at Atikha, becoming excited about studying and eventually working, and returned to school.

Like Serena, other members of the over 1500-strong BASC “used to be care-free”; now they have learned to “understand the value of discipline” (Atikha 2019a, 2019b). In explaining the establishment of the club, a child member explained: “We realized that we could do a lot [more] to show our appreciation for our parents’ work and sacrifices” (Atikha 2019a). As one of Laura’s sons explained to me, the club’s activities made him realise how hard his mother’s life was in France and made him appreciative of all the things his mother provided for him and his siblings. Because of his mother’s sacrifice, he states: “I learned how to save and at the same time, I became disciplined in my spending”. In addition to his savings practice, as an older member of the club, he has been instrumental in recruiting new members and is subsequently seen as being invested in developing his local community. Through BASC, Atikha is seemingly preparing its members to become filial children and even ‘good workers’ as their migrant parents have been. This disciplining of children, like Serena and Laura’s son, is in line with the Philippine state’s instrumentalisation of the migrant hero trope, which is further exemplified by their practice of awards. Those who routinely save part of the remittances or allowances given to them by their OFW or non-OFW parents are acknowledged for their work and given an award for being Modelong Batang Atikha, or model youth savers, a translocal practice that was previously reserved for adults through the annual Bagong Bayani award, which is awarded by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to those OFWs who are considered the most outstanding (see Alipio 2015).

While these economic practices and the awarding of model, capitalist subjects exposes, on the one hand, BASC’s construction of “educated children

who save, and ‘saving’ children who can be educated” (Alipio 2015: 248) and juxtaposes, on the other hand, a “politics of rescue” (Abu-Lughod 2013), children are nevertheless able to resist precarious childhoods to embody resilient, morally responsible, and even entrepreneurial ones (see Alipio forthcoming). Through the drawing of portraits and the saving of money, children can articulate their experiences of migration and better understand the experiences of their migrant parents. In participating in the club’s various activities and the annual BASC Congress, an annual celebration and gathering of members from the Southern Tagalog region (see Alipio 2015), children are able to transcend the precarity they face every day, much like those who came together to protest for Flor and protest against Marcos simply by assembling and, as Judith Butler describes, “exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field” (2015: 11 cited in Pratt *et al.* 2017: 61). As Pratt *et al.* (2017: 61) explains: “In the neoliberal ethos that individualizes responsibility and celebrates the entrepreneurial self, public assembly [as Butler (2015: 16) claims] is a disruptive ‘assertion of plural existence’”. BASC, therefore, importantly provides a public space for children to be children—that is, to be around peers with similar backgrounds—all while engaging in child-centred activities and learning that they have the resources and skills to disrupt the “repetition of precarity across generations” (Pratt *et al.* 2017: 67). Yet, at the same time, BASC also reveals the potential social reproduction of precarity.

Amidst the structural lack of financial security and the cultural imperative of filial piety, notably performed through acts of *utang na loob* (figuratively, ‘debt of gratitude’ or, literally, ‘debt of the inside’), many children expressed to me that their participation in BASC was connected to their desire to assist their families. For example, Lilibeth revealed that she joined to save money so that her savings could grow, and she would not have to rely on her family for financial support. With two siblings working abroad in Qatar and Dubai, Lilibeth understood that saving money was vital for her future, especially if she wants to also go abroad in the future. Despite her desire to save, she rarely participated in other BASC activities, citing the lack of money for transportation and food, a common reason given by many children and families in home and school visits around various communities as to their absence from or declining of participation in Atikha’s programmes and services. Thus, the intergenerational nature of precarity notably limits the efficacy and reach of Atikha and BASC as further evidenced by the young people who inspired their inception. Constrained by their undoubtedly precarious childhoods, these children—Flor’s sons—could not be “saved”. Instead, they continued to struggle despite donations given to them by public supporters and the government at the time of their mother’s death, such as a PHP 120,000 (approximately USD 2,300) scholarship awarded to them by then-President Ramos (Hilsdon 2000: 176) and the money received from the filming of their mother’s story. In 2005, the three sons of Flor, who had

been working as tricycle drivers, were arrested in their family home in a ‘shabu’ (or methamphetamine) buy-bust operation carried out by local city police and antidrug agents and sentenced to life imprisonment for selling the illegal drug in 2011. Denying involvement, yet claiming they were having a hard time providing for their families’ financial needs, they now joined Flor’s husband, Efren, and his live-in partner, who had been jailed since 2008 for drug pushing (Cinco 2011).

THE THREAT OF UNCERTAIN FUTURES AND THE PROMISE OF POSSIBILITY

In stories told, recorded, enacted, and drawn, we have witnessed the structural and cultural, spatial and temporal scope of the precaritisation of migrant labour. Through a recounting of Flor’s life story and tragedy, the intergenerational risks stemming from transnational migration resonate with the ontology of threat that Brian Massumi (2010: 53) ponders in terms of early-2000s American politics. He writes: “Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over There is always a reminder of uncertainty”. It is this threat of uncertain futures and the threat of having no money, or not enough money, that variably propels people to migrate; the Philippine state to institutionally exploit migrant labour; citizens and people’s organisations to protest and demonstrate against the resulting precarious conditions; everyday Filipinos, politicians, and the media to herald national heroes and make martyrs of those who struggle and sacrifice; children to value and productively use migrant contributions; and those young people to decline participation in programmes and services that could potentially counteract their vulnerability to intergenerational precarity.

In deconstructing the discursive trope of the migrant hero and martyr, we see how political powers and even NGOs govern through precarity, instilling precariousness with historical and intergenerational dimensions, which contrasts with the supposed disposability and temporariness of migrant labour. Through essentialising gendered and cultural notions of women and children in dominant state discourse or through institutional programmes, they are seemingly equated to particular forms of labour, such as the care work of domestic helpers, like Flor and Laura, and to filial children, like Laura’s left-behind son. Consequently, the double-edge trope entrenches the precariousness of labour while, at the same time, engendering a promise in the possibility of a future devoid of precarity and generating a social space for resistance, resilience, and reflection by migrants and their families. Here, Atikha appears to dismiss that lives are lived in “someone else’s hands” and, instead, encourages children to embody agency, responsibility, and discipline. However, with rising numbers of OFWs and OFW families threatening to uphold this trope, the hope of freedom from

precarity is still intertwined with the neoliberal ethos of cultivating an empowered worker and entrepreneurial self in which individualised responsibility runs counter to the Filipino emphasis on giving back to the translocal community that sustains them.

As Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein (2006: 28) found in their study of mobility across China, the flows of “bodily” culture created by translocality can be seen as “producing palimpsests, in which local practices are overwritten by imported ones, creating new layerings and a more complex bodily experience for all” (see also Manalansan IV and Espiritu 2016). Some children in BASC draw inspiration from the labour and remittance practices they see from their OFW family members to rework their understandings of migration and to discipline their financial and filial responsibilities. With these new bodily experiences, they strategically use resources and resiliency to grow as individuals and to contribute in positive ways to their own translocal families and communities. Others, meanwhile, regress, like the sons of Flor, who are unable to transcend the precarious structural and historical conditions of their lives and seem only to function to survive. The stories of the migrants and left-behind children of San Pablo City poignantly illustrate the unequal experiences of precarity and resilience that reverberate between the world of work and the world of family life and care. For the children of OFW parents, then, transnational migration is a contradictory process that is at once necessary, yet precarious and even perilous, threatening to ruin or possibly redeem the ‘fruits of one’s labour’.

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