

ON SENTIMENTAL ORIENTALISTS, CHRISTIAN ZIONISTS, AND WORKING CLASS COSMOPOLITANS

Filipina Domestic Workers' Journeys to Israel and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: Within a global gendered economy based on an international division of labor, Filipina migrants have become nannies, maids, and caregivers in affluent homes in numerous Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Filipina migrants who seek employment as domestic workers abroad have been described as “classical” transmigrants who keep in touch with family members back home and commute between their countries of origin and their destinations. In this article — based on ethnographic research in Israel, Palestine, and the Philippines between 2003 and 2008 — the author argues that Filipina migrants are transnational in a much broader sense than commonly discussed in studies on migration: engaged in border-crossing journeys through a number of nation states, many Filipina migrants move *on and on* rather than *back and forth*. They do so within a global hierarchy of desirable destination countries, ranked according to the differences between nation-states with regard to salaries and the legal entitlements migrants can claim, the costs and risks migrants have to take in order to enter, and these countries' overall subjective and imaginative attractiveness. By migrating on, Filipina domestic workers acquire an intimate picture of the Middle East “backstage.” Some even become self-proclaimed Middle Eastern experts or politically active Christian Zionists or sentimental Orientalists, who, in spite of their Christianity, miss fasting on Yom Kippur or during Ramadan as they continue their journeys toward Western Europe and North America, where they have hopes of living and perhaps gaining citizenship.

Within a global gendered economy based on an international division of labor, Filipina migrants have become nannies, maids, and caregivers in affluent homes in numerous Asian and Middle Eastern countries.¹ Filipina migrants who seek

employment as domestic workers abroad have been described as classical trans-migrants who keep in touch with family members back home and commute between their countries of origin and their destinations. In this article — based on ethnographic research in Israel, Palestine, and the Philippines between 2003 and 2008 — I argue that Filipina migrants are transnational in a much broader sense than commonly discussed in (anthropological) studies on migration. My research shows that Filipina migrants are engaged in border-crossing journeys through a number of nation-states and that many of them move *on and on* rather than back and forth. They do so within a global hierarchy of desirable destination countries, ranked according to the differences between nation-states with regard to salaries and the legal entitlements migrants can claim, the costs and risks migrants have to take in order to enter, and these countries' overall subjective and imaginative attractiveness.

Within this global hierarchy, Israel holds a middle position, above most Asian and Middle Eastern destination countries, but clearly below Western Europe and North America. By overcoming multiple hardships and restrictive migration policies and border regimes, by intimately confronting culturally foreign practices as domestics in private homes in the Asian countries in which they once worked, and by collectively claiming rights and belonging to the country they currently inhabit (in religious communities, for example), Filipina migrants acquire an intimate and comparative picture of the Middle East “backstage.” They may even turn into Middle Eastern experts or become politically active Christian Zionists or sentimental Orientalists, who in spite of their Christianity express nostalgia for fasting on Yom Kippur or during Ramadan as they continue their journeys beyond the Middle East. As “working class cosmopolitans,” to borrow an expression from Pnina Werbner,² Filipina serial migrants, I argue, transcend the divide typically drawn in the literature between parochial migrants and bourgeois cosmopolitans. Following Stasiulis and Bakan's understanding of citizenship as a negotiated relationship between social actors and the state, Filipina migrants' moves can be seen as a way of negotiating political, economic, social, and legal rights across nation-states and on the global level.

Drawing from scholarly literature and statistical material, I first address the historical patterns of Philippine migration. On the basis of interviews with Filipina domestic workers in Israel, I then go on to describe the global routes that take many women from the Philippines to the Middle East and beyond. Taking into account their everyday and political practices as well as following their narratives, I describe Filipina domestic workers as women who throughout their stay in Israel and other Middle Eastern countries have acquired much cultural knowledge. They often adopt local practices and beliefs that allow them to symbolically “claim” the land collectively, through domestic work or as Christians who engage in missionary work or pilgrimages. As an example of this,

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1. See, for example, Constable 1997; Parreñas 2001a; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005.
 2. Werbner 1999.

I draw from research among a church group of Filipina born-again Christians in Israel, *Jesus Is Lord*.

Filipina Migrants' Routes to the Middle East and Beyond

Filipina domestic workers belong to an increasing number of female migrants who move from the so-called Third World to the centers of global capitalism in order to take jobs at the bottom of the social hierarchy within a highly gendered economy.³ The Philippines today is among the world's largest exporters of temporary contract labor, and Filipinos are living and working abroad in more than 190 nation states.⁴ Originally designed as a temporary measure by the Marcos regime in the early 1970s, the Philippine government's labor export policy became a permanent national development strategy during the global economic recession of the 1980s. Overseas employment has long been a major pillar of the Philippine economy.⁵ In spite of a change in state rhetoric after the execution of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic worker in Singapore — which led to much outrage in the Philippines and to international criticism — the Philippine government's labor export policy remains essentially intact.⁶

In recent decades, migration flows from the Philippines became increasing feminized — contributing to the global feminization of migration — and major destination areas have changed. Thus, at least since the 1960s women have been playing an ever-increasing part in international migration flows and today comprise approximately half of migrants worldwide. The Philippines is no exception: while in 1975 over 70 percent of Filipino contract workers were male, the male–female ratio changed in the late 1980s. Ever since, approximately half of Filipino emigrants are female, even according to official statistics.⁷ In this process, Filipina migrants headed first toward domestic urban centers, especially the capital, Manila,⁸ and then, most especially after the adoption of a state labor export policy by the Marcos regime in 1972, they took up work as professionals or domestic workers in the United States,⁹ East and Southeast Asia, and the GCC

3. See, for example, Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Mills 2003.

4. While the Philippine government speaks of about 1.2 million documented “Overseas Filipino workers” (OFW) for 2006 (see <http://www.poea.gov.ph/html/statistics.html>; accessed 30 July 2008), NGOs generally speak of 8 million OFW. (See, for example, the website of Migrante International at <http://migrante.tripod.com/>; accessed 7 November 2007).

5. The central importance of remittances for domestic consumption and the Philippine currency is generally recognized (Mellyn 2003), a reality the Philippine Central Bank also acknowledges. In May 2007 the Philippine Central Bank announced that the remittances of OFW remained above the \$1 billion mark for the eleventh straight month (see *Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas Media Release*, 15 May 2007: <http://www.bsp.gov.ph/publications/media.asp?id=1574>; accessed 30 July 2008).

6. See, for example, Bello 2005, 11; Tyner 2004; on the Contemplacion case see Hilsdon 2000, 176f.

7. Gonzales 1998, 42f. For more recent data, see the statistics of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration at <http://www.poea.gov.ph/html/statistics.html>; accessed 15 September 2008.

8. Eviota 1992.

(Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. Now they migrate to practically every nation-state in the world.

According to statistics of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), about one-third of the newly hired and rehired land-based Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) worldwide sought employment in the Middle East annually from 1998 until 2003.¹⁰ Out of the fifteen Middle Eastern countries where Filipinos engaged in contract labor in 2003, the major destinations were Saudi Arabia (169,011 individuals); United Arab Emirates (49,164); Kuwait (26,225); Qatar (24,344); Bahrain (6,406); and Israel (5,094). These countries vary considerably in the legally and illegally charged sums migrants have to pay to recruiters in order to be employed, the salaries and labor rights migrants can claim, as well as the kinds of work they engage in and the lifestyles they can lead. As an example, the average broker's fee collected by Filipino and/or foreign recruiters from migrants to Israel was US\$4,256 in 2005,¹¹ while interviewees reported that it was US\$500 to \$1,000 for Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries. Salaries in the GCC countries were reported to range from US\$150 to \$400 in 2007, while at the same time legally recruited caregivers in Israel typically earned US\$500 to \$900.

Migrants take up work in the Middle East in spite of the rather bad image this region has as a destination for Filipina domestic workers, due at least in part to highly publicized cases like that of Sarah Balabagan, a 15-year old Filipina domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates, who in 1995 was sentenced to death for killing her employer, who had raped her.¹² On its website, the POEA describes Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in a gloomy tone, stating that "Kuwaitis treat their household workers as slaves," and listing maltreatment and "sexual harassments/abuses and rape cases" as problems workers commonly face.¹³ Even though Filipino domestic workers in Israel suffer many of the adversities listed for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia — delayed or unpaid salaries, maltreatment, rape, sexual harassment, and detention, for example — Israel remains a clearly favored destination within the Middle East because of the relatively high salaries workers can obtain there, its active recruitment of migrant caregivers for the sick and elderly, and its imagined attractiveness as the "Holy Land" for predominantly Christian Filipinos.¹⁴ Yet, the large fees Filipinos must pay to enter Israel deter many from taking up employment there. Those who do gain entry typi-

9. Choy 2003.

10. According to POEA statistics, 279,767 OFW entered the Middle East in 1998 (33.6 percent out of a total of 831,643), as compared to 285,564 in 2003 (33.0 percent out of 867,969). Source: <http://www.poea.gov.ph/html/statistics.html>; accessed 20 July 2008.

11. Kav LaOved 2006.

12. Due to an international outcry and the intervention of the Philippine government, which apparently wished no repetition of the "Contemplacion fiasco," Sarah Balabagan was later released (see Hilsdon 2000).

13. Source: <http://www.poea.gov.ph/Country/Kuwait.htm>; accessed 20 July 2008.

14. Liebelt 2007.

cally had to work elsewhere first in order to be able to afford the high entry fees, especially migrants from rural areas or from an “urban poor” background.¹⁵

During my research, I found that for many of those who managed to enter and be employed there, Israel soon became yet another “stepping stone country.” This was especially the case after Israel introduced a far-reaching deportation campaign in late 2002 that adversely affected Filipinos, the majority of whom had been made illegal by an exclusionary citizenship regime and a “binding arrangement” that ties workers’ legal status in the country to a specific employer.¹⁶ Accordingly, an increasing number of Filipino migrants prepared to leave Israel. They either returned to the Philippines or paid recruiters to arrange employment elsewhere, where they hoped they could earn more, be granted more encompassing rights, and eventually acquire citizenship in a Western nation.¹⁷

Moving On and On (rather than Back and Forth)

Much recent research on (transnational) migration has treated bidirectional moves of migrants, typically between a third world country of origin and a first world country of destination.¹⁸ By contrast the experiences and practices of migrants who move on and on rather than back and forth have received far less attention. One major exception is Aihwa Ong’s research on Chinese transnationalists, who, as she shows, migrate toward a multiplicity of geographical destinations. Ong shows how the transnationalists she writes about develop culturally infused norms of globality, move within global family networks, “playing off one nation-state regime against another, seeking tactical advantage — knowing that it is easier to become a citizen here rather than there, that there are more legal and political rights in country X than in country Y.”¹⁹

The following account will show that Filipina migrants similarly move between nation-states, seeking foreign passports, and sharing sophisticated knowledge of various national incorporation regimes, legal regulations, and

15. In Israel, the social and class background of Filipina migrants is rather diverse. This is arguably the outcome of both a relatively unregulated flow of Filipino migrants to Israel prior to 1995 and a direct effect of Israeli recruiting policies, which apparently do not ascribe too much importance to regional origin or educational attainment as a criterion for selection (Liebelt 2007).

16. Kemp and Rajimann 2000; Willen 2007. A similar restriction, the so-called kafala system, exists in Arabic-speaking countries that employ Filipino domestic workers. See the forthcoming articles by Constable and Hsia for similar restrictions in Hong Kong.

17. It has been stated that many female migrant workers in Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, or Malaysia are not interested in becoming citizens (Ong 2006, 214; Constable 2009). Yet, they apparently do want social and legal entitlements that in many cases come only with legal citizenship or permanent residency. Filipinos’ knowledge of the unavailability of these legal statuses and citizenship rights in Asia, so I was told in interviews with domestic workers in Israel, was one of the major reasons why many of them decided to migrate on, toward the “West,” where, they hoped, these rights would be easier to acquire.

18. Constable 1997; Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2001; Gmelch 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001a.

19. Ong 1993, quoted in Ong and Nonini 1997, 23.

strategies of playing these off against one another. Nonetheless, they lack some of the important resources of the economic elite Ong describes: Rather than collecting several passports and easily jetting off around the world, Filipina women — who are far less economically privileged than the Chinese transnationalists Ong writes about — typically labor hard and long in order to move around.

The findings of a questionnaire survey conducted during three one-day organized bus tours in Israel and Palestine that took place between September and December 2007 detail the number of serial migrants among Filipino workers and the routes they have traveled. Twenty-seven out of eighty-one survey respondents (33.3 percent) stated that they had worked abroad prior to entering Israel. Of these, seventeen had worked in one country; seven, in two other countries; and three, in three countries before coming to Israel. The most frequent destination countries mentioned in this context were Taiwan (ten cases), Hong Kong (seven cases), Singapore (five cases), Cyprus and Saudi Arabia (three cases each), as well as Kuwait and Dubai (two cases each). Moreover, most of the respondents dreamed of leaving Israel or had already made plans to do so in order to work elsewhere. Thus, more than half of the respondents (fifty-eight out of eighty-one, or 58.0 percent) stated that they thought about or planned to “continue to another country to work,” mentioning Canada in twenty-seven and Europe in six cases.

Among my interviewees in Israel, the life stories of Marietta, Romelyn, and Lyna illustrate best the global routes of many Filipina women and the complexity of their experiences.²⁰ Thus, Marietta, a college graduate from a middle-class family in Cebu (southern Philippines), left in 1985 to work in Abu Dhabi, where she was employed as a housekeeper and nanny in the ruling family’s household. She returned to the Philippines after her work contract expired and left shortly thereafter for Jordan, where — due to her knowledge of Arabic and the high status of her former employer — she was hired by a wealthy and high-ranking politician of Palestinian origin. After several years, Marietta was transferred to work with an extended relative of his in Ramallah (situated in the Palestinian West Bank, occupied by Israel). There, she lived in a luxurious villa close to the Muqataa, the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority, and took care of the family’s disabled son. On Sundays, her weekly day off, Marietta typically left for Jerusalem, where she was the president of a Filipino organization within a Roman Catholic parish church. After the outbreak of the second intifada in 2001, life in Ramallah and entry to Jerusalem became increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, Marietta continued to sneak into Jerusalem illegally alongside other Filipino and Palestinian workers. Later she managed to secure employment and living arrangements in Jerusalem, first as the live-in caregiver for an elderly (Jewish-Israeli) person, then as the housekeeper for a U.S. diplomat. In 2006, she left Israel in order to become a live-in domestic worker in the United States, following her only daughter there. She hoped that soon she would be able to secure permanent legal status in the United States and then be able to “bring over” her husband, who had followed her into Israel as a domestic

worker, but in the meantime had been forced back to the Philippines because of his illegal status in Israel.

Romelyn, the eldest of a family of farmers in the Mountain Province (northern Philippines), arrived in Israel in 2000, after having worked as a housekeeper and nanny in Hong Kong and Dubai for many years. In Dubai, a family of Palestinian migrants employed her as a nanny for their small child. After six years there, she returned to the Philippines, but soon thereafter left for Hong Kong, realizing that — having no children and being too old to get married, so she said — nothing kept her there. When her Filipino friends in Hong Kong applied for employment in Israel, she decided to join them. In 2006, she left Israel after the death of her employers — an elderly Jewish couple of Eastern European origin whom she had taken care of as a “live-in” for six years — and the expiration of her work permit. In contrast to many other domestic workers in Israel, who stay on illegally, Romelyn decided to return to the Philippines “voluntarily” (rather than risk being deported). She hoped that doing so would better her chances of being granted a “Schengen-visa”²¹ entry into Western Europe.

Lyna, the last of the women to be portrayed here, had been employed as a nurse in Libya and Saudi Arabia for many years prior to her move to Israel in 1996. In Israel Lyna was unable to practice her profession as a nurse; she worked instead as a live-in caregiver for several elderly persons in an old people’s home. Nevertheless, she claimed that she loved the country and she managed to stay there more than two years after her work permit expired in 2005. In December 2007, after several unsuccessful attempts to obtain a visa for the United States or Italy, she decided to return to the Philippines. In the meanwhile, she had “invested” in the college education of her daughter in nursing. Therefore, Lyna argued, even if she could not be hired in the United States, her daughter certainly could and she would then bring Lyna over later on.

While both Marietta and Lyna were married and — apart from their own efforts to move on — had initiated intergenerational migration projects (“investing” in the migration of their daughters to the United States, that is), many others who moved on and on, or wished to do so, were unmarried or separated single mothers. Often, they had relatives elsewhere abroad and had been in Israel for longer than those who were (still) planning to return to the Philippines. As in Romelyn’s case, and similar to what Nicole Constable has described for Filipina workers in Hong Kong, “home” has become an ambivalent category: they claim to miss it, but soon after they return they often leave again (to take up “just one more” labor contract), or they are not sure they really want to return at all, so they stay abroad.²² As Parreñas has pointed out, “[w]omen hesitate to go

20. The names of interview partners have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout this article.

21. Named after a small town in Luxembourg where in 1985 twenty-nine states (twenty-five European Union states as well as Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland) signed an agreement in order to facilitate free movement of persons within the area. A common Schengen-visa allows its holders freedom of travel within “Schengen-land.”

back home not just because of poverty.”²³ Rather, they stay abroad because migration — especially if it results in a permanent legal status in a Western nation-state — represents a move toward independence, a career. All the more so if the move away implies escaping the social control of an over-protective family, abusive husbands, and a life confined by traditional gender roles and expectations.

The Middle East according to Filipina Migrant Workers

In Israel, Lyna, Romelyn, Marietta, and other serial migrants frequently talked about their lives in other (Middle Eastern) countries, all reflecting their particular historical, economic, social, cultural, and religious orientations and circumstances. Most of all, they compared these situations with Israel and the countries they hoped to one day reach. Thus, Lyna told me:

I came to Israel also because I want to see the place of Jesus Christ. That’s why it’s also nice to change the country, non-Arab. And then, Israel is much better... The people — also in Libya, some are nice. But they are not modern. Like in Saudi [Arabia], I have to wear the *baya* [abaya], the black cloth. Then, when we go to the hospital, we have to be all covered... we have to work only in pants, no skirts. And they don’t want us to talk to boys, even Filipinos. In the hospital, we have uniforms, but outside we use the *baya*. As if we are Muslim. But here [in Israel], even though it is still the Middle East, [it is] modern. When I arrived, I was very surprised.

Like Lyna, most Filipina domestic workers who work in Israel came after earlier employment in other Middle Eastern countries (they “changed the country,” according to Lyna) and they all stressed the fact that Israel was more liberal and ostensibly more modern than the others. Those who worked as nannies, housekeepers, and helpers of employers they described as “good,” were quick to list the more positive aspects of work elsewhere, such as the fact that in contrast to Israel, employers in other Middle Eastern countries would finance annual vacations to the Philippines or give their Filipina nanny gold jewelry that parents typically receive for newborn children. As former nurses, caregivers, or housekeepers/nannies of families in Middle Eastern countries, Filipina migrants in Israel typically spoke Arabic, had tasted hummus,²⁴ and were familiar with Islam and the political views (on the Middle East conflict) of their former employers, colleagues, or patients. They often spoke about their experiences in the fashion of what could be called “sentimental Orientalism.” They claimed to “know” the Middle East inside out, judging it to be backward and unmodern, but at the same time they stressed its magic exoticism. Edward Said (1978) defined Orientalism as Western cultural discourse that viewed Arabs, Islam, and the Middle East from an assumed superior status. I found (Christian) Filipino representations of the “Orient” to be similarly prejudiced. Once in Israel, Filipinos encountered a comparable, yet significantly different reality: While Arabic

22. See, for example, Constable 1999.

23. Parreñas 2001b, 1140.

24. A spread made from mashed chickpeas, popular throughout the Middle Eastern world.

was helpful for learning Hebrew and hummus was still available — to put it in a starkly simplified way — the experiences, religious orientations, political views, and ethnic prejudices in Israel often contrasted sharply with what they had encountered elsewhere.

This is clear in Romelyn's case. Romelyn frequently talked about the years she had worked in Dubai. She deeply missed the small child she had cared for, and she nostalgically recalled waking up with the muezzin's call to morning prayer, the relaxed lifestyle in the large, luxurious house of her employer, and what she described as the "exotic" and "magic" moments of religious or familial celebrations she had taken part in. In this family of Palestinian refugees from what became Israel in 1948, it was clear to her that Israel was created by "Zionist colonizers" who were responsible for Palestinian suffering and the ongoing tragedies of the Middle East conflict. As Romelyn told me, back then she shared this view without reflecting on it, since she said she "knew nothing about the history." When I interviewed her in Israel, Romelyn was employed by an elderly Jewish couple who had lost many family members in the Holocaust. Talking to them and experiencing their ongoing trauma of persecution during World War II (by comforting them when they awoke from nightmares, for example), gave Romelyn quite a different view on the political situation in Israel and the Middle East.

From her position as a domestic worker, more precisely a caregiver — first of a child, then of elderly persons — Romelyn, like other Filipino domestics, came to understand cultural practices, took part in the everyday routines, and had access to the intimate private spheres of the employers whose countries she worked in. It has to be emphasized here that domestic work — most especially caring — is affective labor, being deeply relational and typically implying emotional intensity between the caregiver and the person in need. Notwithstanding the typical problems that live-in domestic workers face — such as conflicts with extended family members, nonpayment of wages, or illegal confiscations of passports — I found that in situations of intimate encounters and continuous presence, Filipina caregivers developed intensive affective bonds and a great deal of knowledge and understanding of — if not the societies they worked in, then at least — the personal histories of their employers. Alongside their employers, some Filipino domestic workers fasted during Ramadan or on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. In religious households, they learned to cook kosher or halal food. In Israel, numerous Filipinos through their work with elderly immigrants came to understand Yiddish or Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) — languages of the Jewish diaspora that even their employers' children rarely knew.

Romelyn's case also draws attention to the change of political "frontlines" often experienced by Filipina domestic workers who were first employed in Muslim Middle Eastern countries and then in Israel. This often created (inner) tensions, moments of reflection, or a change of political views, as I was told. Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, Filipina women, from the position of structurally dependent domestic workers, generally refrained from taking sides too openly and avoided discussing politics altogether within the private confines of their workplaces. In spite of the sympathy and compassion with which she cared for her Israeli employers, Romelyn, for example, nevertheless felt that



Christmas in Bethlehem. Asian pilgrims celebrate Christmas in Shepherd's Field adjacent to Bethlehem, 25 December 2004. (Credit: All photographs by author.)

they were heavily, and negatively, prejudiced toward Palestinians or the “Arab World,” of whom they “knew nothing,” as she put it. Still, she preferred the neutral position of a listening learner to that of arguing with her employers.

This does not mean, however, that Filipino domestic workers generally refrain from taking sides, engaging in political debate and action, or using their knowledge as well as the social capital they gained along their migratory routes. A look at Filipino domestic workers’ religious communities in Israel makes this clear.

Domestic Workers for a (Global) Cause: Filipino Christians in the “Holy Land”

Even though live-in Filipino domestic workers in Israel are separated from one another in geographically dispersed households for six days a week, they are not as isolated, docile, or immobile as one might assume. A rich community life of Filipinos and other so-called “foreign workers” (Hebrew *’ovdim zarim*) has developed most especially in the southern neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, Israel’s large coastal city. There, Filipino migrants, most of whom are employed in the affluent and densely populated coastal strip around Tel Aviv, typically come together on their weekly day off, which in Israel generally stretches from Saturday night until Sunday night. Within the urban space of some specific southern Tel Aviv neighborhoods, a large infrastructure has developed that caters to migrants’ needs and itself employs numerous Filipinos, who succeeded in leaving

restrictive (yet state-sanctioned) live-in arrangements, typically by either getting married to an Israeli citizen or by giving birth in Israel.²⁵ In addition to internet cafes, laundromats, Asian food stores, karaoke bars, local newsstands with Filipino magazines, and shared weekend apartments, this infrastructure includes over a dozen independent churches established by Filipino migrants.

As the “Holy Land” of Christian believers worldwide, Israel and Palestine attract a large number of devoted Filipino Christians, among them many evangelicals, so-called born-again.²⁶ Thus, while Filipino domestic workers in Israel are predominantly Roman Catholic (attending local parish churches alongside mainly Arab Israelis), a large and arguably overrepresented number belongs to evangelical churches. This, I suggest, is due to the fact that (1) evangelical churches often proclaim pro-Israeli attitudes and emphasize the Jewish roots of Christianity — making Israel especially attractive as a destination country for born-again Christians, and (2) many Filipinos convert to evangelicalism in the course of the migration process. As typically tight-knit social groups, these evangelical churches function not only as a space of belonging for potentially lonely and vulnerable migrant women — in keeping with the dominant pattern in much of the literature on migrant churches²⁷ — but also serve as platforms for collective claims, supporting and organizing migrants’ global routes as a way of expanding their global mission.

One of these groups in Israel is the full-gospel Jesus Is Lord (JIL) movement. JIL was founded in 1978 in the Philippines.²⁸ In Israel, the movement developed as a bible study group of Filipino domestic workers during the second half of the 1990s. Today, it has nine places of worship in Israel, with its main church located in Tel Aviv’s large central bus station, a major meeting place for Filipino domestic workers. Here, church activists distribute flyers among Filipinos inviting them to join the church. Each weekend the Filipina pastors — all of whom engage in domestic work throughout the week — welcome newcomers during the Saturday night and Sunday morning church services.

Within the church administrative structure, JIL-Israel is part of JIL-Europe, whose center is situated in Milan, Italy, which also has large concentrations of Filipino domestic workers. Jesus Is Lord has established churches and conversion centers in practically every country where Filipinos are employed in large numbers. Through the on-migration of church members, these different locations are frequently connected by strong personal as well as institutional social ties. Thus, many Filipina domestic workers who attend the church services in

25. In Israel, single parents of minor children are normally not deported in spite of their illegality, due to protection under international law (see Hammer 1999).

26. According to the 2000 census, 92.5 percent of the Philippine population is Christian. Of these, an estimated 80.9 percent belong to the Roman Catholic Church (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rp.html>; accessed 20 July 2008).

27. Karagiannis and Glick-Schiller 2006.

28. Wourms 1992.

Tel Aviv were once part of JIL or similar Filipino evangelical congregations and bible study groups in Hong Kong, Dubai, and Malaysia.

Congregation members who leave Israel for Western Europe and North America or who return home to the Philippines typically enjoy high status within church communities due to their being former residents of the Holy Land, speakers of Hebrew, and “experts” in Jewish practices and religion, which are appreciated as “authentic roots” within evangelical Christianity. As globally oriented missionary Filipino Christians, they are thus integrated into a large global network of believers, within which those who were employed in Israel turn into — to borrow an expression from Rebeca Raijman and Adriana Kemp on Latin American migrants in Israel — “Ambassadors of Zion.”²⁹ In Israel itself, those with experience in Arabic-speaking countries become crucial within the congregation’s aim to spread their mission among Palestinians, arguing that if they become Christian, peace will reign in the Middle East. Thus, JIL Israel hopes to be able to “conquer” Gaza City in the near future (that is, establish a congregation there). Within the narrative of Filipino believing Christians, domestic work — most especially the caring for and serving of Jews — the people of God, as is typically emphasized in this context — becomes much more than an economically rewarding job, but a spiritually rewarding act agreeable to God. Entering the intimate sphere of private homes as domestic workers also gives them the opportunity, so they hope, to spread the mission “one by one.” Thus, Filipino evangelical Christians frequently told me that they tried to “share the Word” with their (Jewish) employers and often took the fact that these joined them in watching Christian TV channels as a sign of approval or even missionary success. The six days of domestic work, for which they are legally recruited to work in Israel — so preachers and members of the congregation frequently proclaim — are nothing but a “sideline.” Their major purpose, they say, is to be in the Holy Land and reach out to the Jews.

This can be illustrated by a speech of Marissa Albert, a well-known Filipina preacher among evangelical Filipinos in Israel. Speaking to a crowd of more than one hundred Filipino JIL congregants, who for this regular, quarter-annual meeting had gathered from all over Israel in a (“worshipping”) tent on the top of Jerusalem’s Mount of Olives, she said:

Prepare the way for the King by having a people who know how to move in those kingdom places.... And the Lord said, “When there’s already Israel, I will send Filipino caregivers to Israel!” [*laughter from the audience, shouts: “Amen!”*] Alleluia! [*Thunderous applause, more shouts: “Amen!”*] If there’s already Israel, He said, I will give them tents of meeting on the Mount of Olives! [*Applause; shouts: “Amen!”*] Praise the Lord! [*switches to Tagalog*] They’re only one race but it’s they I will use to bring the word of God to the whole of Asia! [*Applause; shouts: “Amen!” switches back to English*] Praise the Lord and the God of Israel. That’s how important we are to God.... We are written in the Bible! [*Applause; shouts: Amen!*]

29. Raijman and Kemp 2004, 176f.



Mount of Olives, Jerusalem. Filipinos posing for the camera during a pilgrimage to the Mount of Olives, 30 December 2008.

Alleluia! [*in Tagalog:*] Do you want to see that? [*in English:*] You want that verse? Okay, we'll look for it very quickly [*in Tagalog*] because those verses are really exciting. [*In English*] Read Deuteronomy 16: 13–16, also Deuteronomy 31:10–13. It's specified there, “aliens, maidservants, menservants.” We're listed in the Bible! Alleluia! [*shouts:* “Amen!”] Then maidservants, menservants, aliens who live in Jerusalem, Israel, the Holy City. — That's us! We were not even born yet [when] we were already written in...! Alleluia!³⁰

In Pastor Albert's preaching, Filipinos become a chosen people, those who as “aliens” and “maidservants” have the mission to bring “the word of God to the whole of Asia.” From the Mount of Olives, overlooking the lit-up Temple Mount within the old city of Jerusalem, Pastor Albert continued to explain that an agreement, which Israelis and Palestinians were about to make and which would lead to the division of Jerusalem and the land promised by God to the Jews, was “wrong.” Moreover, she announced the meeting of several Philippine senators with Filipino Christian representatives in Israel in the following month, which all Filipinos in Israel were invited to attend.

As Filipino Christians experienced that night, their engagement in a church community made them part of a global movement, a movement — so they are

30. Transcript from Pastor Albert's sermon on 22 September 2007.

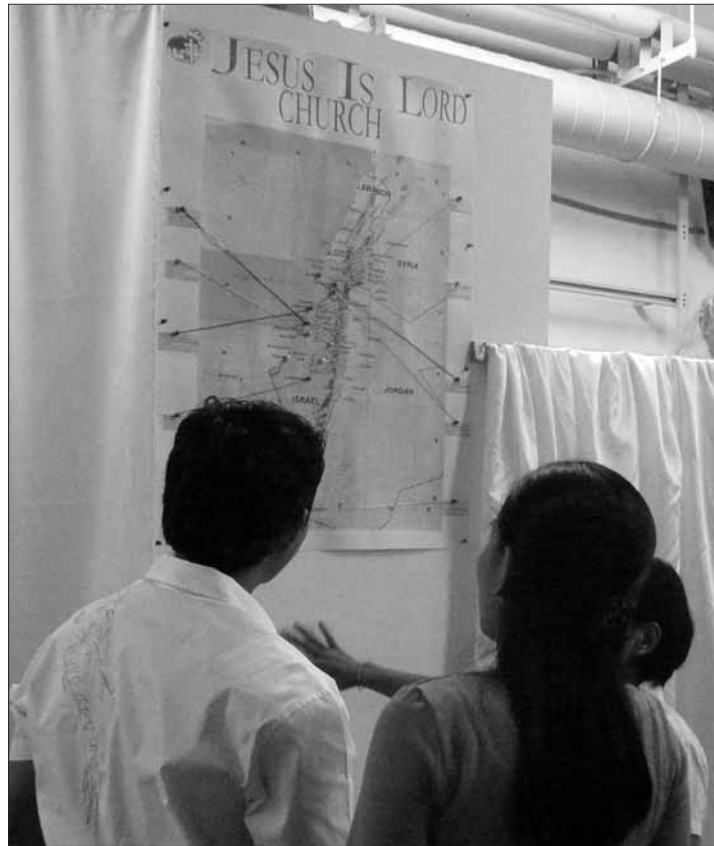
being told by Christian activist leaders such as Pastor Albert — that was continually growing and would come to change the face of Asia, the Middle East, and the world. By giving their tithes, that is 10 percent of their monthly salaries, to the church, Filipino Christians actively support this movement. By studying in the training seminars offered in the ministry, many manage to rise within its hierarchy and during their time in Israel turn into missionaries, preachers, or even “certified” pastors. As globally mobile domestic workers, who in many cases “know” both the so-called Arab World and the Holy Land from inside out, they form an important part in this movement’s global mission, as especially honored cultural brokers back in the Philippines or in other destination countries.

Finally, communities of belief such as JIL give Filipino domestic workers a chance to become publicly visible and active groups. During pilgrimages, large gatherings or worshipping events like the one I have described, they come to experience the Holy Land by physically relating to, praying at, and claiming the land as Christians and Filipinos. Within these groups, migrants develop practices, strategies, and narratives that contradict societal stereotypes and processes of social, economic, and political exclusion in Israel. There they not only formulate claims of political and social inclusion, but re-narrate the hardships of domestic work into a position of power. By working in the confinement of Israeli/Middle Eastern private homes, Filipino domestic workers may be largely physically excluded from public visibility and space, yet they are changing Israeli society by raising the children of their employers or sharing “the Word” with the elderly. Due to their marginalized legal, economic, and social status, they need to do so from “below” and “beneath” public visibility. Christian Filipinos’ narrative of this hidden power functions to restore dignity and social recognition, which their social status as women, domestic workers, and foreigners from an apparently poor country within more affluent ones often denies them.

Filipino Working Class Cosmopolitans in Search of Greener Pastures

In their niche in the international division of labor, Filipina migrants move predominantly as domestic workers. Through their employment in the private sphere, often as caregivers, they acquire intimate and affective knowledge about the societies and cultures in which they work. As they move on to other destination countries, from Muslim/Arab countries to Israel, for example, they acquire a more differentiated picture of the Middle East, as in the case of Romelyn, or they move toward a more ideologically motivated activism, as in the case of evangelical born-again Christians. In either situation, through their knowledge and understanding, migrant women become highly esteemed cultural brokers within the migrant community or, so first research impressions on the topic have shown, as they return to the Philippines. In contrast to those who stay behind, migrants may develop a “plural vision,” as Nicole Constable, drawing from Edward Said’s work on exiled people, has analyzed it in regards

31. Constable 1999, 224.



JIL map of Israel/Palestine: Map of Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories in the Jesus Is Lord church in Tel Aviv, Israel. The needles mark actual and intended sites of JIL congregations, November 2007.

to Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong.³¹ They are, it can be argued, “working class cosmopolitans.”

Pnina Werbner coined the expression “working class cosmopolitanism” in 1999 in an article on transnational Pakistani Sufis. Werbner argued against the divide typically drawn in the scholarly literature between parochial migrants and bourgeois cosmopolitans. Werbner’s term also criticized the lumping together of migrants, refugees, and tourists in Ulf Hannerz’s work and Hannerz’s failure to analyze class formations. One might argue, of course, that Filipina migrants are not working class subjects at all. Like the college graduates Marietta, Romelyn, and Lyna, many migrants are of middle-class background, and invest in small businesses or else acquire economic, social, and cultural capital that deeply effect processes of class formation in the Philippines. Upon migration, though, they often experience what Parreñas calls a “contradictory class mobility,”³² that is, engagement in socially devalued low-wage labor as workers, in spite of their typically high educational attainments and middle-class status “back home.” Moreover, within global capitalism’s international division of la-

32. Parreñas 2001a, 3.

bor, Filipina migrant domestic workers are part of a relatively new and highly gendered global-proletariat-in-the-making, whose subject, as Pessar and Mahler put it, “tends to be female, a person of color, and a resident in the Third World.”³³

In Werbner’s definition, cosmopolitanism is not an absence of belonging, but the possibility of belonging to (and, one might add, through local knowledge, claiming) more than one cultural location simultaneously.³⁴ Moreover, it is a willingness to engage with the Other. Given this definition, I argue, Filipina migrant workers who practice serial migration clearly develop cosmopolitan subjectivities. As the normative debate on a new cosmopolitanism shows,³⁵ the notion often functions to evoke promises of personal autonomy beyond individualization on the one hand and restrictive communitarian arrangements on the other, as well as of a cosmopolitan morality as opposed to ethno-nationalism and racism. The account of Filipina migrants’ forms of a longed-for belonging to, understanding of, or claim to other cultural locations nevertheless points to the fact that cosmopolitanism may also (and simply) be a (business) strategy: for the successful business person trained in intercultural communication jetting off around the globe as well as for Filipino domestic workers largely excluded from social, economic, and cultural belonging and citizenship in the centers of global capitalism — in the case of Filipino domestic worker Christian activists claiming to “know” the people they wish to convert. Understood in this complexity and based on ethnographic material, the notion of working class cosmopolitanism, I argue, fosters an understanding of transnational (migrant) subjectivities beyond both an ascription of victimhood and an uncritical celebration of cosmopolitanism.

Concluding Remarks

As North America and Western Europe — typically the ultimate dream destinations for Filipina domestic workers — adopt ever-stricter border controls, legal regulations, and requirements for entry and acquisition of citizenship rights, Filipinas’ global movements take on an increasingly dangerous, time-consuming, and cost-intensive form. Due to the practical impossibility of entering the European Union, the United States, or Canada straight from the Philippines, most Filipinos are forced to follow global routes through a number of nation-states, in order to reach the most desirable destinations. Lyna, who was described as having worked in Libya and Saudi Arabia before going to Israel, told me in 2005 about her recent interview at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, where she

33. Pessar and Mahler 2003, 837.

34. Werbner 1999, 34.

35. Rapport and Stade 2007; Werbner 2008.

36. Personal interview with Lyna, 13 June 2005.

37. Lorenzo et al., for example, quote a report by the Philippines Hospital Association, according to which an estimated 80 percent of all public-sector doctors in 2004 were currently training or had already re-trained to become nurses (2007, 1410).

38. Stasiulis and Bakan 2005.

had applied for a visa: “I told them: ‘Only I will just see America, to fulfill my dream.’ Because that’s why I chose to be a nurse, to fulfill my dream, to see America.”³⁶ This not only illustrates what has been called Filipinos’ “education for travel” — one of the most blatant examples of which is doctors in the Philippines who return to college in order to take up nursing, because Filipino nurses are more sought after in the global market³⁷ — but also hints at the immense importance of the imaginative factors of migration. Thus, destination countries are ordered along a global hierarchy of desirability, within which Israel as the “Holy Land” for Filipino Christians is more desirable than most Asian and Middle Eastern destinations, though less so than Western Europe and North America, where Filipinos hope to achieve economic success and Western citizenship rights. Through their moves toward the global North, Filipina domestic workers thus actively “negotiate citizenship.”³⁸ Apart from doing so in the country they currently inhabit — as Stasiulis and Bakan have shown for domestic workers in Canada — at least some of them also do so on a global scale, by migrating on and on, rather than back and forth. Transnationally organized institutions like church groups often play a crucial role in fostering and organizing migrants’ global routes, as the example of the evangelical Jesus Is Lord group in Israel has shown. As cross-culturally informed, politically engaged, or zealously religious women rather than mere victims of global capitalism, Filipina domestic workers are part of an ever-growing global-proletariat-in-the-making, trying to both make sense of their marginalized position, and striving to overcome it.

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