

# THE “IDEAL” FEMALE MIGRANT AS A GRATEFUL AND UNCOMPLAINING: GENDERED COLONIAL IDEOLOGIES, PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION SESSIONS, AND THE #UNGRATEFUL FILIPINA

Ethel Tungohan

**ABSTRACT.** Filipinos have internalized colonial mindsets that equate the maintenance of “Filipino values” with adhering to gendered colonial ideologies. By using the examples of mandatory pre-departure orientation sessions (PDOS) and posts within transnational diasporic Filipino social networking sites, I show how discourses emerging from both the Philippine state and the diasporic Filipino community extol the virtues of the “grateful” and “uncomplaining” Filipina labour migrant. Ultimately, I argue that before the Filipino transnational migrant community can begin the process of decolonization, it is important to recognize how colonial ideologies themselves are deeply gendered.

The figure of the Filipino worker is ubiquitous globally. The Philippine government, as a labour brokerage state,<sup>1</sup> deliberately markets Filipinos as “workers of the world.”<sup>2</sup> According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA), there are Filipino workers in all the world’s global regions.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the Philippine government’s successes in placing its nationals in jobs abroad necessitates taking a critical Filipino studies approach that goes beyond economic rationales that see the Philippines as simply meeting the labor demands of receiving states, to one that considers the ongoing role of colonialism. Rodriguez, for instance, sees the Philippines as a “neocolonial state” that participates in “legal human trafficking” by facilitating the placement of workers in the

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1. Robyn Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

2. Beatriz Lorente, “The Making of the ‘Workers of the World’: Language and the Labor Brokerage State,” in *Language in Late Capitalism: Pride and Profit*, ed. Alexandre Duchene and Monica Heller (New York, NY and London, UK: Routledge, 2012), 185.

3. Philippine Overseas Employment Agency. “Philippine Overseas Employment Administration Deployed Overseas Filipino Workers by Country/Destination,” POEA OFW Statistics, 2016, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015-2016%20OES%202.pdf>.

United States, in US firms around the world, and in US military bases.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I examine how Filipina care work is placed at the bottom of Canada's neocolonial racialized labour hierarchy, alongside black and indigenous care workers.<sup>5</sup> That Canada primarily recruits Filipinos as temporary labor migrants to work in "low-skilled" industries—with no guaranteed pathways to Canadian citizenship—shows how the Canadian state devalues Filipino labor compared to white (European) labor. A decolonial analysis of Filipino labor migration thus reveals the enduring legacies of colonial arrangements: the Philippines is a "neocolonial labor brokerage state" that plays a direct role in ensuring that Filipino workers are continuously exported to rich countries.<sup>6</sup> Historically *and* today, Filipino labour has been used to meet rich countries' labour needs. The key difference between the export of Filipino labour to the United States in the early 20th century, when the Philippines was an American colony, and today is that despite being an independent republic, the Philippine state maintains its dependence on other countries through its adherence to neocolonial ideologies that see the value in labour brokerage. In short, today, the Philippine state is complicit in advancing neocolonial agendas.

What have been the effects of neocolonial labor brokerage on Filipino workers? Specifically, how have Filipino workers internalized colonial mindsets by believing that Filipinos *should be* uncomplaining migrant subjects? In asking these questions, I am referring to how some Filipino migrants have deeply internalized colonial ideologies

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4. Robyn Rodriguez, "Toward a Critical Filipino Studies Approach to Philippine Migration," in *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora*, eds. Martin Manalansan and Augusto Espiritu (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2016), 33.

5. Ethel Tungohan, "Global Care Chains and the Spectral Histories of Care Migration," *International Journal of Care and Caring* 4, no. 3 (2019): 239.

6. Rodriguez, "Toward a Critical Filipino Studies Approach," 52. Emphasis added.

Here, my understanding of the differences between colonialism, neocolonialism, and decolonialism is informed by Ben Herzog's analysis ("Anticolonialism, Decolonialism, Neocolonialism," in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. Immanuel Ness [Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell]). Herzog argues that these signify "an ideology, a historical moment, and a collective action" (523). Colonialism is the "direct political control of a society and its people by a foreign ruling state" (523). By extension, having a colonial mindset means adhering to colonial norms and values; in this paper, colonial mentalities explicitly refer to a belief in the superiority of Western norms and a concurrent disavowal of Filipino norms. As Fatima Castillo argues ("Consciousness, the Arena of Struggle Today: Response to 'Frantz Fanon and the Decolonial Turn to Psychology from Modern/Colonial Methods to the Decolonial' Attitude by Nelson Maldonado-Torres," *South African Journal of Psychology* 47, no. 4 [2017]), colonial mentalities among Filipinos rest on "the belief that the colonisers were racially and culturally superior, and the colonised inferior" (446). Neocolonialism refers to the contemporary perpetuation of colonial arrangements. When Rodriguez refers to how the Philippines is a "neocolonial labor brokerage state," she acknowledges that the Philippines is still dependent on rich, migrant-receiving states which extract goods (in this case, labor) for their advancement. Decolonialism thus refers to a rejection of colonialism (Herzog, "Anticolonialism," 524) through the dismantlement of colonial beliefs, institutions, and power structures. Adopting a decolonial mindset, as I argue in this paper, necessitates rejecting colonial mindsets that prioritize Western norms and that see the value of non-Western (i.e., Filipino) approaches.

such that they actively police members of their community to ensure that they remain compliant, docile migrant subjects. When fellow Filipina migrants dare to speak against labor abuse, these members react defensively and attempt to distance themselves. Ultimately, I argue in this paper that, in order to resist colonial mentalities, the Filipino transnational migrant community should understand how colonial ideologies are gendered, with Filipina migrants bearing the brunt of community vitriol.

In making this argument, I first assess how the Philippines, as a neocolonial labor brokerage state, encourages overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) to see themselves as colonial subjects whose needs should be subservient to their employers, to their families, and ultimately, to the Philippine state. Here, I reflect on the pre-departure orientation seminars (PDOS) I attended in July 2017 in Manila, Philippines. PDOS are mandatory for all OFWs who are required to present a certificate of completion at the airport proving that they completed the program.<sup>7</sup> The Philippine government's Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA) and other "licensed third-party providers" are responsible for providing PDOS for OFWs.<sup>8</sup> A sense of patriotic obligation toward the country is instilled among those attending. The sessions highlight that their primary objective in going abroad to work was to send remittances back to their families. Thus, they were expected not to draw negative attention to the community. I echo other scholars<sup>9</sup> in observing that PDOS are not intended to inform OFWs of their rights, but are used to create ideal migrant subjects who, as Polanco describes, are socialized into becoming "eager and compliant workers."<sup>10</sup> I add to their anal-

7. Pre-Orientation Departure Seminars, "PDOS Pre-Departure Orientation Session: Everything You Need to Know," *Pre-Orientation Departure Seminars*, 2018, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015-2016%20OES%202.pdf>.

8. PDOS are mandatory for all Philippine nationals going abroad as OFWs or as landed immigrants. While there are no exact figures for how many go through PDOS annually, OFWs and immigrants are required to present a certificate of completion at the airport proving that they completed the program (PDOS.ph, "Philippine Overseas Employment Administration Deployed Overseas Filipino Workers by Country/Destination," POEA OFW Statistics, 2018, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015-2016%20OES%202.pdf>). The Philippine government's Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA) and other "licensed third-party providers"—including employment and recruitment agencies, non-governmental organizations, and industry associations—are responsible for providing PDOS for OFWs (OWWA, "Overseas Workers Welfare Administration Development and Monitoring Unit," *PDOS Providers*, 2020, <https://owwa.gov.ph/index.php/programs-services/pdos/providers>). The Commission of Filipinos Overseas (CFOs) conducts PDOS for Filipino nationals who will be permanently immigrating abroad (PDOS.ph, "Philippine Overseas Employment Administration").

9. See, for instance, Geraldina Polanco, "Consent Behind the Counter: Aspiring Citizens and Labour Control Under Precarious (Im)Migration Schemes," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 8 (2016); Pauline Gardiner, "'Grateful' Subjects: Class and Capital at the Border in Philippine-Canada Migration," *Dialectical Anthropology* 37, no. 204 (2013); Robyn M. Rodriguez and Helen Schwenken, "Becoming a Migrant at Home: Subjectivation Processes in Migrant-Sending Countries Prior to Departure," *Population, Space, and Place* 19, no. 4 (2013).

10. Polanco, "Consent Behind the Counter," 1336.

ysis by suggesting that such constructions of ideal migrant subjects are gendered, with female migrant workers—as “biological reproducers of the nation”<sup>11</sup>—additionally expected to be virtuous. Neocolonial labour brokerage states like the Philippines perceive women as “the ideal migrant citizen subjects,” since they are “presumed to be more responsible and therefore are expected to remit their earnings on a regular basis.”<sup>12</sup> As such, PDOS reinforce gendered expectations.

I then look at the case study of the cyberbullying of Filipina immigrant Nora Valdez (a pseudonym to prevent further cyberbullying). Such cyber-bullying is a manifestation of patriarchal violence that is still endemic within the Filipino transnational migrant community. Transnational online social spaces are a way for diasporic communities to reinforce community values through the formation of bonds of solidarity with fellow migrants.<sup>13</sup> For the Filipino diaspora, various online spaces—which include but are not limited to Filipino newsgroups such as soc.culture.filipino (the longest running Filipino online community),<sup>14</sup> social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook,<sup>15</sup> and the comments sections of YouTube accounts of Filipino video-bloggers (vloggers) such as that of “Amanda,” a Filipina married to a white man<sup>16</sup>—are a way to construct a community of support among fellow forum participants. These spaces, in fact, can be a form of *pakikipagkapwa*, which involves the “development of trust through relationship-building.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, while such bonds of solidarity can be grounded in positive community values, such as generosity and helpfulness, these can also be used to amplify community censure. These spaces can also serve to amplify community anger and to distinguish “good” migrant-subjects (i.e., the online posters condemning Valdez) from the “bad” migrant-subjects (i.e., Valdez). Valdez’s disclosure of the difficulties she faced as a laid-off hotel worker angered the Filipino transnational migrant community so much that groups were mobilizing denouncing Valdez. Her interview struck a chord because she transgressed boundaries of how Filipina workers should act, thus eliciting the outrage of Filipino migrants who subscribe to heteropatriarchal colonial mindsets. In addition, the added layer of economic vulnerability, which has intensified during COVID, has meant that retreating into colonial mindsets that portray

11. Nira Yuval-Davis, “Gender and Nation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4 (1993).

12. Rodriguez and Schwenken, “Becoming a Migrant at Home,” 383.

13. Sara Marino, “Making Space, Making Place: Digital Togetherness and the Redefinition of Migrant Identities Online,” *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015).

14. Emily Ignacio, *Building Diaspora: Filipino Community Formation on the Internet* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

15. Oren Golan and Deby Babis, “Towards Professionalism through Social Networks: Constructing an Occupational Community via Facebook Usage by Temporary Foreign Workers in the Philippines,” *Information, Communication and Society* 22, no. 9 (2019).

16. Earvin Cabalquinto and Cheryll Soriano, “Hey I like ur videos: Super Relate!': Locating Sisterhood in a Postcolonial Intimate Public on YouTube,” *Information, Communication, and Society* 23, no. 6 (2020).

17. Almond Aguila, “Social Media and the Renegotiation of Filipino Diasporic Identities,” (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2014), ii, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015-2016%20OES%202.pdf>.

Filipino workers as being good, docile, and hard-working becomes a way of coping for the Filipino transnational migrant community.

The arguments I offer are based only on participant observation of two PDOS and online Filipino diasporic spaces. Most of my analysis of the latter focused on one Filipino diasporic channel's YouTube video-blog, chosen because of the viral nature of this post. My analysis would be strengthened by more observations of PDOS sessions and other SNS. These limitations aside, I nevertheless hope that these provocations can prompt readers to reflect on the ongoing realities of gendered colonial mindsets. Ultimately, I argue that before the Filipino transnational migrant community can begin the process of decolonization, it is important to recognize how colonial ideologies themselves are deeply gendered.

### **The Philippine State's Complicity in Enforcing Gendered Norms through Pre-Departure Orientation Sessions (PDOS)**

A huge body of work addresses the issues facing Filipino Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). There are, for example, documentaries such as *Chains of Love*<sup>18</sup> and *Overseas*,<sup>19</sup> which examine how the Philippine government markets the idea of maternal love to compel employers abroad to hire Filipino women as care workers. These documentaries follow individual Filipina care workers in their journeys abroad. Researchers, too, have documented how OFWs experience labour migration, from recruitment, to working and living abroad, to reintegrating to their home communities after migration. Although these assorted research projects have varying focus, all of them ultimately point to how the entire labour migration process can contribute to OFWs' precariousness.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to such portrayals, OFWs' experiences of vulnerability are sometimes *valorized* by the Philippine government in its official portrayals of OFWs. In fact, the Philippine government socializes Filipino migrants into becoming ideal migrant subjects such that experiences of suffering become part of the experience of being saviors of the nation. It is actively involved in disseminating the perception that OFWs are "bagong bayanis" (new heroes) through public statements by politicians encouraging OFWs to see themselves as "the ambassadors of good will" who have a crucial responsibility to build the country's economy and promote a positive image of the Philippines.<sup>21</sup> Discourses surrounding OFWs as "bagong bayanis" (new heroes), as seen through analyses of

18. *Chains of Love*, directed by Marjie Meerman (Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2001).

19. *Overseas*, directed by Sung-A Yoon (La Hulpe, Belgium: Iota Productions, 2019).

20. Rhacel Parrenas, "Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labour," *Gender and Society* 14, no. 4 (2000); Anna R. Guevarra, "Managing 'Vulnerabilities' and 'Empowering' Migrant Filipina Workers: The Philippines' Overseas Employment Program," *Social Identities* 12, no. 5 (2006); Rodriguez and Schwenken, "Becoming a Migrant at Home"; Polanco, "Consent Behind the Counter."

21. Guevarra, "Managing 'Vulnerabilities,'" 257.

Philippine Senate hearings and news reports on labour migration, additionally mask the Philippine government's role as a labour brokerage state by portraying labour migration as an individual decision, thereby conveniently allowing the government not to take responsibility for OFWs' experiences of vulnerability.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, Rodriguez notes that the Philippine government socializes not just OFWs but uses the public school curriculum to encourage Filipino students to see themselves as new heroes.<sup>23</sup> She observes, for instance, that the slogan "'Taas-Noo, Kahit Kanino sa Buong Mundo Tayo ay Pilipino' ('Keep your head high in front of everyone in the whole world because we are Filipino')," found in public schools across the Philippines shows the Philippine state's "expectation that students will go on to other parts of the world and, additionally, it reminds these same students that wherever they may find themselves, they will always be Filipino."<sup>24</sup> Being a model Filipino requires abiding by a set of "Filipino" values wherever one goes.

PDOS reinforce the idea that Filipino OFWs are heroes who represent Philippine interests abroad. Contrary to the Philippines' Commission for Filipinos Overseas' description of PDOS as being geared towards addressing OFWs' "adjustment concerns" when working abroad,<sup>25</sup> the PDOS I attended in July 2017 show that these primarily serve to bolster colonial mindsets of Filipino workers as "ideal" migrant subjects. Such constructions are gendered. While both male and female migrants are expected to be compliant and are deemed "national ambassadors" who should not bring shame to the Philippines, female migrants face the additional burden of having to adhere to the expectation that they conduct themselves as "Maria Claras" (i.e., as chaste and obedient) when abroad. Maria Tanyag's research assessing the Philippine government's "strategic gendering" of its labour migration strategy through its deployment of Filipino identity as being irrevocably linked to service and care work, and its concurrent attempts to socialize OFWs into seeing themselves as "innate mothers," affirms the gendered dynamics that I witnessed.<sup>26</sup>

I was able to observe gendered contrasts in the PDOS I attended. As part of my larger project assessing the extent to which "sending states" like the Philippines and social justice organizations respond

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22. Jean Encinas-Franco, "The Language of Labor Export in Political Discourse: 'Modern-Day' Heroism and Constructions of Overseas Filipino Workers," *Philippine Political Science Journal* 34, no. 1 (2013).

23. Rodriguez, Robyn, "Migrant Heroes: Nationalism, Citizenship and the Politics of Filipino Migrant Labour," *Citizenship Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002).

24. Rodriguez, "Migrant Heroes," 347.

25. CFO.gov.ph, "2010 Summary of Major Accomplishments," *Commission on Filipinos Overseas* [https://cfo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/transparency\\_seal/2010accomplishment\\_report.pdf](https://cfo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/transparency_seal/2010accomplishment_report.pdf).

26. Maria Tanyag, "Invisible Labour, Invisible Bodies: How the Global Political Economy Affects Reproductive Freedom in the Philippines," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 1 (2017): 47-48.

to the needs of OFWs, I contacted different industry associations and NGOs to see whether I could attend their PDOS. I shared with them the goals of my larger study and mentioned that the results of this research will be used in academic articles. Out of the five groups that I contacted, two responded with an invitation for me to attend their PDOS. As part of the conditions for observing, I promised to watch quietly.

It was indeed fortunate that the two organizations that agreed to give me access to their PDOS served different populations of OFWs. Witnessing the differences in both sessions enabled me to make a gender comparison of how male versus female OFWs are constructed. The first session I attended was organized by a seafarers' organization and was geared towards preparing male OFWs to be seafarers abroad. In this session, the PDOS trainers introduced me to the room as a researcher from Canada and led me to a seat in the back where I could unobtrusively take notes. Although it was somewhat awkward for me to be identified as an academic observer, it was good that the PDOS trainers explained why I was there. Without this introduction, some people may have wondered whether I, too, was a seafarer and, if so, how I, as a woman, started working in this job. The second session I attended was organized by a migrants' rights NGO. Although this PDOS was not geared towards a specific audience, the majority of those attending were women bound for Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia as domestic workers. In this session, the PDOS trainers did not introduce me to the room, which allowed me to be unobtrusive.

It was clear when observing the sessions that there was a set curriculum created by the Philippine government that the PDOS trainers were following. Throughout both sessions, attempts were made to instill loyalty to the Philippine state. Before beginning each session, everyone sang the Philippine national anthem. Teachers used chants to boost OFWs' sense of collective loyalty to the nation. For example, Roy, the trainer in the seafarers' session, repeatedly deployed a question-and-answer rhetorical tactic where he would ask a question and the answer, which everyone in the room had to chant back, was always "Pilipino kami (we are Filipino!)." This answer was applied to questions ranging from appropriate reactions to racist behaviour against Filipinos abroad (e.g., "*ano ang iisipin natin pag may bumastos sa atin?*" / "what are we going to think when we encounter rude behaviour?") to risky social invitations (e.g., "*ano ang kailangan nating matandaan kung may magaalok sa atin na sumama sa iba't ibang bisyo?*" / "what do we need to remember when someone asks us to participate in bad behaviour such as drinking or doing drugs"?). Remembering that "we are Filipino" is intended to both instill in OFWs a sense of pride even amid racist encounters and to remind them to behave prudently when abroad.

Lessons on the importance of being loyal to the Philippine state were repeatedly imparted during the various modules that were part of the PDOS curriculum. A module on what to expect when departing from the Philippines included advice on proper attire, with Roy reminding OFWs to wear respectable clothing, to pack their belongings in a suit-

case (as opposed to a box), and to refrain from bringing “smelly” Filipino food. OFWs who were unable to do so risked damaging the reputation of Filipinos. A module on cultural adaptation emphasized that OFWs were renowned for being hard-working and respectful. Teachers in both sessions encouraged OFWs to address their employers as “sir” or “ma’am,” to convey respect, and emphasized Filipino attributes of *pakikisama* (the ability to get along) to show that the onus was on OFWs to ensure the maintenance of a cordial employment relationship. And while there was no official module on banking, teachers in both sessions accommodated a commercial banking representative’s visit during official class-time. Everyone was subsequently compelled to listen to a speech on the importance of opening a savings account, the various loans the banks could offer OFWs, and ways to send remittances. Class time was also allotted towards registering for a bank account.

These similarities notwithstanding, the two sessions, while roughly following the same curriculum, conveyed gendered double standards. The seafarers’ session, for instance, had an entire segment on sexual health. The module began with a video that acknowledged the loneliness that seafarers may feel, and the “temptations” that they may encounter when abroad, namely the temptations of using their wages on sex work. While the video itself judged seafarers who visited sex workers, and advised them to instead call their wives and girlfriends at home whenever they were lonely, I found it noteworthy that the video tied notions of “good” Filipino masculinity with responsible sexual behavior (i.e., through the use of condoms). Following the video, Roy discussed studies showing that HIV/AIDs and STD rates among seafarers were high and reiterated the message that “good” Filipino men took agency over their sexual health.

There was no such session during the domestic workers’ PDOS. In fact, there were no references to domestic workers’ sexual needs. In contrast to the seafarers’ PDOS where the teacher equated “good” Filipino men as those who practiced safe sex, the domestic workers’ PDOS emphasized that “good” Filipinas were chaste. The only time sexuality was mentioned in the domestic workers’ PDOS was during the module on cultural adaptation. Specifically, Kay, the teacher, mentioned the importance of maintaining a “Maria Clara” demeanor when dealing with employers throughout OFWs’ time abroad. Being “Maria Clara” meant being chaste and quiet; OFWs had to act such that they never drew attention to themselves. Being “Maria Clara” also implied the necessity of deflecting male attention, particularly the attention of male employers. It was incumbent on OFWs to understand cultural “scripts” that denote female sexual availability lest their actions inadvertently elicit male attention. For example, Kay stated that showering daily was a signal to men from Saudi Arabia that they were ready for sex. She counseled that OFWs bound for Saudi should minimize the number of showers they take. While Kay did not mention why she was giving this advice, it was understood by everyone attending that the forced intimacy of live-in domestic work placed OFWs at risk of sexual violence.

What was less clear to me was why the solutions being offered to the “problem” of sexual violence rested on the individual OFW. Although the lack of viable legal options facing OFWs who are sexually abused may be the reason for why this PDOS focused on individual solutions, I was perplexed that the PDOS module did not include a resource list for OFWs who faced sexual violence. In fact, because this discussion took place within the larger context of cultural adaptation, it appeared as though the underlying message was really that OFWs’ behaviour could affect whether they faced sexual violence.

Indeed, throughout the module, the message that OFWs had to “adapt” to their employers’ ways was repeated ad nauseum. Admittedly, Kay recognized the frustrations that OFWs faced by addressing how many of the women in the room were professionals who only opted to become domestic workers to support their families. As a result, working as a domestic worker may at first feel demeaning. Kay also affirmed that many employers were rude, if not downright abusive. In response to their rudeness, she suggested that OFWs praise them verbally but curse them in their minds: “*sabihin ninyo, ‘thank you very much, ma’am,’ pagkatapos, bulungin ninyo na lang ‘putang ina mo!’*/Just say, ‘thank you very much ma’am,’ and afterwards, just whisper to yourselves, your mother is a whore!” This suggestion provoked much laughter. Kay then ended this module by stating that the sacrifices they will make abroad will later bear fruit when all of them return from their stints abroad as “doñas” or as rich women.

The module on OFWs’ rights and obligations also had gendered messages. Although both the seafarers’ and the domestic workers’ PDOS showed the same Philippine-government supplied flow chart that explained which government institution OFWs had to contact when facing specific problems, the lesson on OFWs’ obligations promoted gendered notions of ideal migrant subjects. “Ideal” male migrants sent their remittances to their families; while it was understood that they needed to “destress” (*magpasingaw*) and go out once in a while, they were expected to remember their obligations to their families and to their country. Ideal female migrants, in contrast, were also expected to send their remittances to their families, yet nothing was said about how domestic workers, like seafarers, may also want to destress and go out. Instead, Kay admonished OFWs who spent their earnings on material goods such as handbags and clothes and advised that they find activities that did not entail spending money, such as going to church. Their families—specifically their children—had to be their priority.

Male and female OFWs face gendered expectations. Although both were expected to get along with their employers by being obedient and industrious, more leeway is given to male OFWs than to female OFWs. Female OFWs, more so than male OFWs, are supposed to be self-sacrificing, with the needs of the collective always taking precedence over their own needs. They are also supposed to be inconspicuous. Female migrants who dare transgress these colonial ideals thus

face community sanctions, as we discuss in the case of Nora Valdez below.

## Grappling with the Spectre of Gendered Colonial Ideologies

Philippine labor migration flows are highly feminized. The latest Philippine Statistics Authority figures show that 56% of all OFWs are women, as compared to 44% of men.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that female OFWs are active in leadership positions within migrants' organizations seeking social justice for migrants. In my nearly fifteen years of immersion in Filipino transnational migrant communities, I saw women taking the helm in advocacy.

The prominent role that female migrants have assumed in organizing, however, stands at odds with deeply embedded, socially constructed gendered expectations. As I discussed in the previous section, such gendered expectations are so ingrained that the PDOS curriculum unquestioningly reflects gendered norms. In addition, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> when I venture outside progressive migrant spaces, I am surprised at how other organizations have shunned progressive, feminist values that encourage the active involvement of female migrants in favour of socially and politically conservative mindsets that place male leadership at the helm.

Coming to terms with the lasting influences of patriarchy within transnational migrant communities—even those where women outnumber men, as in the Filipino diaspora—helps contextualize the vitriolic reaction to Nora Valdez.

In discussing Valdez's case, my intention is not to provide a generalizable account of Filipina migrants' experiences with cyber-bullying, but rather to use this case study to show how the Filipino transnational migrant community can be prone to heteropatriarchal gendered mindsets. As noted by scholars such as Le Espiritu, Filipino migrant communities tend to impose heteropatriarchal values of chastity, compliance, and obedience on Filipina women as a way "to reaffirm to [the Filipino community's] self-worth in the face of colonial, racial, class and gendered subordination."<sup>29</sup> Women who violate these norms are thus deemed as bringing negative attention to an already subordinated and disempowered community and as being needlessly transgressive.

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27. "Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.2. Million," Philippine Statistics Authority, *Latest Release*, June 20, 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>.

28. Ethel Tungohan, "Equality and Recognition or Transformation and Dissent? Intersectionality and the Filipino Migrants Movement in Canada," in *Gendered Mobilizations, Intersectional Challenges*, ed. Celeste Montoya, Jill Irvine, and Sabine Lang (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

29. Yen Le Espiritu, "We Don't Sleep Around Like White Girls Do: Family, Culture, and Gender in Filipina American Lives," *Signs* 26, no. 2 (2001): 451.

This was exactly what happened to Valdez. Valdez, a unionized hotel worker who was laid off during COVID-19, was interviewed by a mainstream Canadian news channel on the challenges she and other hotel workers faced. Specifically, she asserted that the \$2,000 (CDN) that the Canadian government issued as part of the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was insufficient: “The living expenses in Vancouver alone is very expensive. From \$2,000 my rent is almost \$1,500; \$500 is what’s left for food and groceries. That’s nothing.”<sup>30</sup>

In her interview, she also mentioned that she was worried about her ability to send money to her family in the Philippines. She ended her interview by asking Canada’s federal government to consider the plight of workers like her, who do not know when they would be returning to work. Valdez’s disclosure immediately led to a backlash. Seemingly overnight, Facebook groups were formed denouncing Valdez. Having read some of the posts made in these groups, it was shocking to see the level of gendered violence leveled against Valdez, with some posters threatening her with rape. Yet other posters criticized Valdez’s physical appearance. Many of these Facebook posts and YouTube video-blogs (vlogs) threatening Valdez were later removed after users reported these posts for cyber-bullying. Although spatial limitations prohibit an in-depth analysis of many of the social media posts bullying Valdez, I focus on two posts to illustrate commonplace reactions to Valdez’s interview.

First is an online petition seeking Valdez’s deportation created by “Jonathan Cruz.” This petition which, for unexplained reasons, was sent to Philippine Airlines states, “we the FILIPINO PEOPLE who are now PERMANENT RESIDENT (sic) and CANADIAN CITIZEN (sic) are seeking the help of OUR FELLOW CANADIANS and FRIENDS to bring [Valdez] back to the Philippines.” Accompanying this petition is a photograph of Valdez, mouth wide open and looking fierce, speaking into a megaphone during her labour union’s strike in 2019. Within hours after it was posted, close to 2,000 people—many Filipino migrants outside Canada—signed the petition.

The intent of this petition was clearly not to deport Valdez. Rather, this petition was a way for the signatories as the “good” Filipinos to distance themselves from Valdez, who, as her angry photograph shows, was the “bad” Filipina. By identifying as Canadian permanent residents and citizens, and appealing to “fellow Canadians,” the signatories additionally show that their allegiance lies with the Canadian nation-state and to other (white) Canadians, and not to the Philippines—where “bad” Filipinos like Valdez should be sent—or to other Filipinos. The signatories sought proximity to Canadianness—and, by extension, to whiteness. Hence, the performative act of affixing their names on this petition serves the dual purpose of showing the signa-

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30. “Hotel Workers need ‘Long-Term’ Support Says Laid-Off Attendant,” *CBC News*, May 13, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1737608259820>

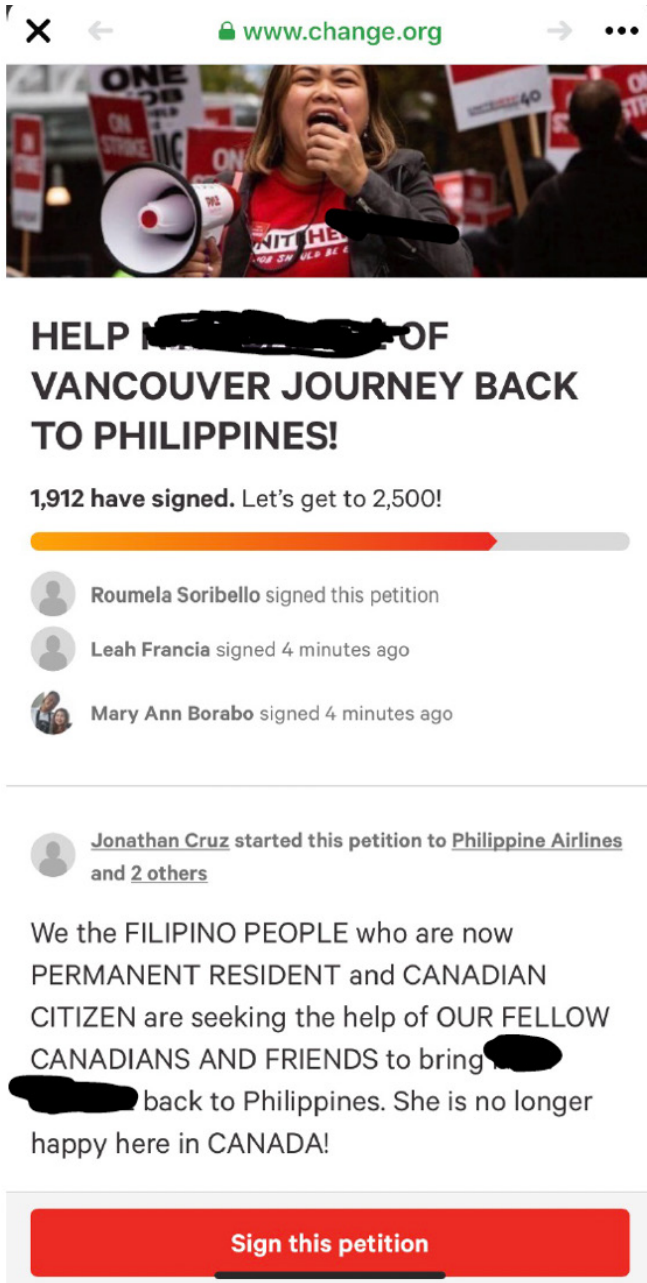


Figure 1. Petition Seeking “Ungrateful Filipina’s” Deportation<sup>31</sup>

tories’ condemnation of Valdez and establishing their loyalty and their gratitude to Canada.

31. Cruz, Jonathan, “Help Nora Valdez of Vancouver Journey Back to the Philippines,” *Change.org*, May 22, 2020.

The second social media post we examine uses the same tactic of differentiating “good” Filipinos from “bad” Filipinos. The vlog is by YouTube vlogger “Collette,” who identifies as a Filipina migrant living in Montreal. Her vlog is accompanied with the hashtag #UngratefulFilipina.<sup>32</sup> It shows Collette sharing the following thoughts while melancholic music is playing in the background:

*Ate, kung ako sa iyo, sana hindi na lang ikaw nagsalita ng ganyan. Unang una, isa kang Pilipino na nakatira dito sa Canada. Pangalawa, binigyan tayo ng pagkakataon na makapasok dito, maka-pagtrabaho, at mabigyan ng permanent residence! At pwede ka pang maging citizen. Ngayon, yung dalawang libo na sinabi mo na hindi pa sapat sa iyo, hindi ko alam kung bakit hindi pa sapat sa iyo. First, mag-isa ka lang sa buhay mo dito sa Canada...bakit ka uupa ng isang [apartment] ng \$1,500 kung mag-isa ka lang? Maraming room na pwede mong ma-rentahan...yung dalawang libo na binibigay parang ayuda sa mga nawalan ng trabaho, katulad ko, ay napakalaking tulong. Hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit mo pa sinabi yun. Nakakahiya! Alam mo kung bakit? Kaming mga Pilipino na nandito sa Canada, nagtitiis, pero hindi kami nagre-reklamo katulad mo, ate, sa ayuda na binibigay na dalawang libo...ang daming tao sa Pilipinas na pumipila pa para magkaroon ng ayuda ng two thousand pesos. So tama lahat ng sinabi nila. Shame on you, Ate. Nakakahiya. Hindi ko alam kung saan nangal-ing yung sinabi mo. Opinyon mo yan pero nakakahiya sa ibang Pilipino. Baka isipin ng ibang tao dito sa Canada na mukang pera ang mga Pilipino samantalang alam naman natin na hindi masyadong nagre-reklamo ang mga Pilipino pero hindi ko alam kung bakit ikaw, Ate, sobra ang reklamo mo. Nakakahiya talaga.*

Big sister, if I were you, I would just not have spoken. First, you are a Filipino living in Canada. Second, we were given the chance to enter Canada to work and to get permanent residence. We can even become Canadian citizens! Now, the two thousand dollars that you say is insufficient, I don't know why you say it is insufficient. First, you are by yourself here in Canada. Why are you renting an apartment that costs \$1,500 if you are by yourself? There are many other rooms that you can rent...the two thousand dollars that is given to help those who are laid off, like me, is a big help. I don't know why you said this. It's so shameful! You know why? Those of us who are Filipino here in Canada are sacrificing but, unlike you, we don't complain about the help given to us in the form of two thousand dollars. There are so many people in the Philippines who line up for help just

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32. Collette, “Ungrateful Filipina Interview in Vancouver, Canada,” YouTube Video, running time: 20 minutes, May 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob38mrfgn0>.

so they can have two thousand pesos. So everything everyone said [about you] is true. That is your opinion but it is so shameful for other Filipinos to hear you. Maybe people in Canada think that Filipinos just look like money even though we all know that Filipinos don't complain a lot so I don't know why you, Big Sister, keep complaining. It is very shameful.

Collette's points focused on Valdez's supposed ingratitude, greed, and selfishness in not thinking about how her actions negatively affected the Filipino community. In making these points, Collette's vlog echoes the points that many Filipino migrants have made against Valdez: that Valdez brought shame to the Filipino community by not being "grateful" for the opportunity to be in a country where she could get Canadian citizenship, that she was "biting the hand that fed her" by complaining about the funds that she received, and that she must have a lavish lifestyle if she could not make ends meet with \$2,000.

The intensity of the Filipino transnational migrant community's focus on Valdez can perhaps be explained by considering the economic devastation wrought by COVID-19. Many Filipino workers struggling financially might be afraid that employers who heard Valdez's interview may think that all Filipino workers were "like Valdez" and thus refuse to hire them. Moreover, because the pandemic has put negative attention on the Filipino community for purportedly spreading COVID-19—as in the case of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Cargill meatpacking plant, which mostly employs Filipino workers—perhaps Valdez's interview brought more unwanted attention to the community.

Yet, the Filipino transnational migrant community's response to Valdez was disproportionate to her perceived "transgressions." Had Valdez been a man, would she have been cyberbullied in the same way? Men would likely not have faced similar threats of sexual violence like Valdez had.

In addition, the disdain that migrants like Collette expressed towards Valdez's lifestyle, as seen for example in Collette's observation that Valdez should instead have rented a room rather than an entire apartment, shows that women are expected to sacrifice more. Collette's statements, in fact, reminded me of the gendered contrasts in the PDOS I attended, with teachers accepting that male migrants needed to occasionally blow off steam (*magpasingaw*) without concurrently acknowledging that female migrants have the same needs.

In sum, Valdez's experiences with cyberbullying show that the Filipino transnational migrant community still retains heteropatriarchal colonial mindsets. Because Valdez dared to voice her needs publicly, she transgressed gendered norms mandating that female migrants should be "Maria Claras" who are docile, quiet, and unassertive.

## Conclusion

Undoing the hold that gendered colonial mentalities have wrought on the transnational Filipino migrant community is difficult when these mentalities are so deeply embedded in people's belief systems. That Philippine government institutions and programs such as the PDOS perpetuate these mindsets shows just how much of an influence these continue to exert. It is therefore unsurprising when some Filipino migrants themselves adhere to these mentalities.

In fact, the larger question of *how* to get rid of colonial mentalities is one that many Filipinx scholars from various academic disciplines have addressed. There are philosophers, like Jeremiah Reyes,<sup>33</sup> who argue for a decolonial recuperation of Filipino "virtue ethics" that prioritize values such as "kapwa" (or "shared self") and "loob" (or "relational will") along with its attendant values such as "kagandahang loob" (as seen through "someone who has an affective concern for others and the willingness to help them in their time of need) and "utang na loob" (or "debt of will"). There are others, such as psychologists E.J.R. David<sup>34</sup> and Kevin Nadal,<sup>35</sup> whose body of work have persuasively called for psychologists to encourage their clients to go through internal decolonization. And finally, there are Education professors such as Patria Espiritu Halagao<sup>36</sup> and Roland Sintos Coloma<sup>37</sup> whose works call for decolonizing approaches that critique imperialism and that centre Filipino American histories.

For my part, I consider these efforts at decolonization ground-breaking. I also believe, however, that it is important to support individual and institutional attempts to overcome colonial mentalities *and also* to support social movements' efforts to eliminate colonial mentalities and overturn oppressive neocolonial structures. For instance, there were countless counter-mobilization efforts in support of Valdez. There were multiple webinars calling for the Filipino community to have difficult conversations about the community's complicity in perpetuating gendered and classist colonial ideologies. Activists such as those who are part of Migrante-Canada intervened in everyday online discussions of Valdez, reminding everyone that Valdez was not "the enemy" and that perhaps Filipino migrants were scapegoating Valdez for their ongoing experiences of economic strife. Moreover, these interventions highlight the ongoing nature of gendered violence that

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33. Jeremiah Reyes, "Loob and Kapwa: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics," *Asian Philosophy*, 25, no. 2 (2015).

34. E.J.R. David, *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups* (New York, NY: Springer, 2013).

35. Kevin Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2011).

36. Patricia Espiritu Halagao, "Liberating Filipino Americans through Decolonizing Curriculum," *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 13, no. 4 (2010).

37. Roland Sintos Coloma, "Putting Queer to Work: Examining Empire and Education," in *Postcolonial Challenges to Education*, ed. Roland Sintos Coloma (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008).

female migrants face; they note for the Filipino transnational migrant community to truly become progressive, it is crucial to question the persistence of gender and class hierarchies. These discussions have been paired with conversations about anti-black racism in the community, with protests against the murder of George Floyd in the United States and Regina Korchinsky-Paquet in Canada motivating activists in the Filipino diaspora to be self-reflexive on the ways the Filipino community perpetuates harmful ideas. When paired with campaigns to find alternatives to labour migration, to defund the police, and to abolish neoliberal institutions—all of which are calls that various migrant organizations and their allies have taken up<sup>38</sup>—then it becomes clear that decolonization takes place in multiple fronts.

While decolonization is clearly an on-going and lifelong process, and one that may never fully be complete, the ability to make space for these conversations is to me a sign of a willingness among transnational Filipino migrants to look internally at its mindsets and actions. The creation of discourses countering colonial mentalities that have led Valdez to be bullied and the continued establishment of alternate sources of knowledge to PDOS, as in the case of Migrante “schools,” gives me hope.

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38. Ethel Tungohan, “Intersectionality and Social Justice: Assessing Activists’ Use of Intersectionality through Grassroots Migrant Organizations in Canada,” *Politics, Groups and Identities* 4 no. 3 (2016).