

sustaining life.¹⁷ Here then is our charge, the task that Padios admirably sets for us, and many scholars are answering her call. *A Nation on the Line* has unequivocally carved out a new path for Filipinx American and Philippine studies' engagement with science and technology studies. And if the recent interdisciplinary research on technological mediation being produced by scholars like Allan Punzalan Isaac, Anna Romina Guevarra, Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, Jonathan Corpus Ong, Cheryll Soriano, Cecilia Uy-Tioco, Emmanuel David, Stephanie Dimatulac Santos, Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza, Jason Vincent Cabañes, Earvin Charles Cabalquinto, and Karlynnne Ejercito is any indication of the sheer breadth of this new path, then we owe much to *A Nation on the Line*.

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Author's Response to Book Reviews

I really want to thank Eileen Lagman and Alden Sajor Marte-Wood for their deep engagement with *A Nation on the Line*. Their essays are generous, illuminating, and sharp. I'm flattered by their attention and their placement of my work alongside so many powerful Filipinx and Philippine Studies scholars, both established and emerging. Given my conversations with *Alon's* book review editor Antonio Tiongson, Jr. about how to make book reviews more useful and enjoyable, I thought I'd use this response essay to chart some of the routes I took toward the points Lagman and Marte-Wood write about in their essays. While I address the substance of their respective reviews, I also want to demystify some aspects of my research and writing process. I especially hope this is useful for people in the midst (or mire) of their research, whether a dissertation or a first book.

Lagman and Marte-Wood's respective essays strike me as having different styles of engagements with *A Nation on the Line*. Marte-Wood's analysis is like a massive earth digger excavating major theories and debates that form the groundwork for my book, and his knowledge of Marxist thought (and its lacunae) is intricate and powerful. In short, he does a lot of heavy lifting the book did not do! As many know, the methodological details we grapple with en route to our scholarship rarely make it into the final work, so it is a gift to have a scholar like Marte-Wood tease out such lines of thought.

17. *Ibid.*, 184–185.

I'm fascinated by the learning that goes into writing. I didn't know anything about autonomist Marxism until I started writing my dissertation, and somebody mentioned it to me during a dissertation writing workshop. Autonomist Marxism gave me the language to talk about immaterial labor, cognitive capitalism, and more. Yet I ultimately found it unaccountable to racialization and racialized gender, colonialism and colonial labor – but not for lack of effort (I tend to give theories the benefit of the doubt and thus the list of frameworks I tried on for this book is embarrassing.) Thank goodness, then, for Neferti Tadiar's work, and work on racial capitalism. And thank goodness for the work of Molly Benitez, former University of Maryland graduate student and now professor at Portland State University, who is writing an alternative genealogy of affect theory that centers the lived experiences and embodied theories of women of color.

Of course, Marte-Wood is not just excavating what was already there in *A Nation on the Line*. His essay articulates implications of the work for which I can't take full credit, implications he can see as a scholar of literature, Marxist literary criticism, and social reproduction theory. That's why this collaborative review process seems so fruitful. We need heavy lifting to sense the weight of the knowledge we have created – together. Marte-Wood's essay reminds us of what it means for the Philippines be a standpoint of critique. I want to stop and appreciate this as a profound methodological orientation. As scholars of Philippine and Filipinx Studies, we need not look for theories to apply to the Philippines but instead must articulate what the Philippines and Filipinx history, racialization, social formations, cultural productions and practices, and so on tell us that existing theories have not, cannot, and will not. One of the sections of my introduction is titled "The Philippines as a Site of Knowledge Production." Almost everything in it is something I had written or thought about for a while but struggled to put together for the introduction (it also took me a long time to figure out the difference between the introduction and much of the first two chapters). Yet the ideas I was dealing with looked different when I realized I was not merely cataloguing facts that a reader needed to know before reading the chapters, but I was articulating a standpoint of critique – of affective labor, of postindustrialism, of globalization. For me, this methodological move marked the shift between proving I had learned some things (as a dissertation is partly designed to do), to grappling with the implications of what I learned and how it might transform or at least challenge existing theory. I'm thankful for Marte-Wood for making this clear and doing this kind of work, too, through his study of Asian Anglophone and Asian American literature.

If Marte-Wood's thoughts on "the shifting coordinates of the global knowledge economy" feels tectonic in its scale of attention, then Lagman's analysis works more like a soil sifter, carefully combing the terrain of the book. She reveals possibilities in Filipino call center workers that index new analytic ground the book could not reach, but I find exciting and important. Near the end of her wonderfully

comprehensive description of *A Nation on the Line*, for example, Lagman recalls my observation that, while undergoing language lessons for the job, workers engaged in what she describes aptly as “language play.” Lagman’s observation gestures to the layered and intricate history of Filipino English, which she describes as “alive, evolving, and creative....a site of vitality” that might signal “some kind of futurity outside the constraints of capital and colonial recall.” I was thrilled when Lagman took this turn, because I am both intrigued by what “alternative futurities for Philippine nationhood” could mean and because her questions speak broadly, to my mind, of the limits of ideology critique.

Ideology critique, at least in the ways I have learned it, is diagnostic work: we read for symptoms of capitalism, colonialism, and racisms, or we point out the signs of phobias and antagonisms that constrain and harm us. This is vital work, the heart of critical theory as a practice of liberation. When I wrote the parts of *A Nation on the Line* about the centrality of the English language in call center work, I was primarily concerned with connecting the ideologies of English as instantiated during U.S. colonization and the ideologies of English as developed with neoliberal globalization. For a while, I struggled to understand what it meant for Filipinos to refer to Philippine English as already a global language, not a derivative of American English. These questions informed the book, leaving little methodological energy for considering what might fall away from these ideological systems – moments such as the one Lagman points out, when one otherwise very quiet call center trainee refers to himself as “007,” and everyone in the training class laughed, including me.

So, how do we escape the trap of ideology critique? I don’t believe it’s by talking about agency or resistance, although *A Nation on the Line* does this. I describe workers negotiating the circumstances of their everyday lives, and I speak in the conclusion about emerging unionization efforts. But I think the search for what Lagman describes as “alternate temporalities or spatial affiliations that make up Philippine nationhood” harbors great promise if we don’t read “alternatives” as yet another type of agency or resistance (which, to bring back Marte-Wood, might well be “subsumed” by capital and colonialism) but as rogue imaginative practices that always and already slip through the cracks of ideological terrain. Indeed, lately, I’ve been interested in a different view of power, a view of power as reactive, counterrevolutionary. I see this in the work of Manu Karuka, Roderick Ferguson, Lisa Lowe, Hossein Ayazi. Their work shows us historically specific forms of rebellion that power is organized to resist but can never escape.

Similar to the way Filipinx and Philippine Studies scholars define the Philippines as a site of critique, we might also continue to understand Filipino workers, migrants, learners, and so on, as generating forms of life that global capital tries to but cannot capture, that continuously belies the illogics of race. Furthermore, at the end

of her review, Lagman asks “If American English and other practices of routinized work are not the aspects of labor that are engaging to Filipino workers, then what labor animates Filipino capacities, energies, and intellectual abilities?” To extend Lagman’s own analysis – and to gesture toward new research I’m doing on the Manila Carnival – we might also ask what *play* animates these capacities, energies, and abilities, as well. (For a great book that considers this question in the context of play, see Christopher Patterson’s *Open World Empire*.)

I’ll close this essay by observing that both Lagman and Marte-Wood are very generous with their compliments about the ethnographic work on which the book is based. It’s exciting to see, too, that Lagman is an English literature scholar who studies and engages ethnography. My thoughts on the method have transformed since then, in ways that inform my creative work, too. A sequel to *A Nation on the Line* might attend more to questions of knowledge and knowledge production, asking deeper questions about ethnography as a colonial form of knowledge and, perhaps, its connection to the twenty-first century knowledge economy which the Philippine nation-state has aspired to join. I have no idea where that thought is going but the personal growth I experienced writing this book made me not afraid unspool loose threads of thought in a public venue!

Four years out from the book’s publication, and with the help of my stellar students at Williams, I am more focused on what it means to decolonize ethnography. Is knowledge still the goal? If so, whose knowledge? If not, what then? I want to mention two modes of engagement around these questions. Again, the heavy lifting: ethnography for the purpose of collective struggle, where people are not objects of social science research but its very subjects, as in Valerie-Francisco’s work with transnational Filipinx migrants. And again, the fine-tuned foraging: ethnographic work as connected to what Allan Punzalan Isaac calls new ways of making sense of time, including labortime. Such approaches make me excited to see what our labors as Filipinx and Philippine Studies scholars will sift out and lift up from the language, technology, work, performance, and bodies that become us.

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In conversation with Jan Padios, author of *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines*, recipient of the 2020 Association for Asian American Studies Book Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Social Sciences

The following conversation took place on January 25, 2022, covering a wide range of topics and issues. One strand of the conversation