

QUEERING THE GLOBAL FILIPINA BODY: CONQUESTED NATIONALISMS IN THE FILIPINA/O DIASPORA

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The second season of the TLC cable television show, *90 Day Fiancé*, introduced viewers to Daya, a pediatric nurse and a prospective bride from the Philippines, who travels to the United States for the first time on a K-1 visa (a “fiancé visa”) to visit Brett, a white American man who lives in Washington state. *90 Day Fiancé* offers a glimpse into the lives of binational couples who meet online....The audience shares in the tears and frustration experienced by Daya, as she faces rejection from Brett’s overprotective mother, who fears that Daya is only interested in Brett for his U.S. citizenship. Against all obstacles, Daya and Brett proceed to fall in love and get married during the course of her three-month stay in Washington. This drama plays out the familiar tropes of the global Filipina body with which U.S. consumers of popular culture are already familiar.¹ The figure of Daya, who is both a nurse and a prospective “mail order bride,” embodies two tropes of Filipinx transnationalism—the hardworking Filipina nurse who migrates to work abroad and the mail order bride who seeks an American man to marry for purposes of immigration.² The nurse and the mail order bride are examples of the “global Filipina body,” a term I

1. Since submitting the final manuscript of my book in 2019, the debate on the term “Filipinx” has evolved. Although I use “Filipina/o” in my book, I now shift between this term and “Filipinx” contextually, to reflect the growing use of “Filipinx” as a more gender-inclusive term.

2. I use the popular term “mail-order bride” to refer to women from the Global South who use online matchmaking websites to meet potential husbands. However, in doing so, I recognize the implicitly derogatory nature of such a term. I call attention to the problematic nature of global discourses about Filipina brides.

Steve Baron, “List of How Many Homes Each Cable Network Is in as of February 2015.” *TB by the numbers*, February 22, 2015. 2015. <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2015/02/22/list-of-how-many-homes-each-cable-network-is-in-as-of-february-2015/366230/>.

use to describe the gendered figures of Filipinx transnationalism that embody the forms of domestic, sexual, and affective labor that Filipinx workers provide for a global economy. Responding to global capital's need for devalued, flexible labor, the Philippine state has played a significant role in brokering a contemporary global labor diaspora of more than eight million Filipinx migrant workers.³ Although not all women, Filipinx workers perform gendered labor, working as nurses, maids, nannies, eldercare providers, housewives, and sex workers. Despite the diversity of the kinds of gendered transnational labor that Filipinas provide—from the domestic labor of maids to the sexual labor of sex workers—these distinct forms of labor are often collapsed in the generalized figure of the global Filipina body within both popular culture and Filipinx American cultural production.

The familiarity of U.S. audiences with the figure of the Filipina mail order bride on the television show *90 Day Fiancé* reflects the circulation of this figure within pop culture. For example, on an episode of the popular 1990s U.S. television sitcom *Frasier*, Frasier's father tells him that for "that amount of money, you could buy a Filipino wife." Over two decades later, if one were to Google the term "Filipina," dozens of mail order bride websites and news articles about migrant Filipina domestic workers in places such as Singapore and Saudi Arabia would appear onscreen. From the widespread representation of Filipinas on internet dating websites and films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, global Filipina bodies have been omnipresent figures within contemporary popular culture in the Global North since the 1990s.⁴ These multiple iterations of the global Filipina body circulate within U.S. pop culture, from the figure of the hyper-exploited Filipina overseas domestic laborer (whether a maid, nanny, or eldercare provider) to the figure of the Filipina sex worker/trafficked woman—a participant or victim (within the "traffic in women" discourse) of the international sex trade. From 1990s films to more recent cable reality shows, these examples demonstrate a dominant capitalist logic in which Filipina bodies are represented as sources of easily available sexual, domestic, and affective labor.

3. See Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/stockest/2009.pdf>. As of 2009, the population of the Philippines was approximately ninety-one million. For an excellent discussion of the role of the Philippine state in the brokering of Filipino migrant laborers, see Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Anna Romina Guevarra's study of the cultural logic of labor brokering in the Philippines in *Marketing Dreams, Manufacturing Heroes: The Transnational Labor Brokering of Filipino Workers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

4. Elliott, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; Nobile, *Closer to Home*. For a discussion of the representation of Filipina bodies on the internet, see Gonzalez and Rodriguez, "Filipina.com." For a discussion of the representation of transnational Filipina bodies, see Roland B. Tolentino, "Bodies, Letters, Catalogs: Filipinas in Transnational Space," in *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere*, edited by Shirley Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 43-68.

The familiarity of the Filipina mail order bride character, Daya, to viewers of *90 Day Fiancé* reflects the broader material context of Filipina laboring bodies under neoliberalism. As a figure for the feminized position of the Philippines within a gendered international division of labor, the global Filipina body serves as a “geobody” for the Philippine nation’s status under contemporary neoliberal globalization. Philippine film studies scholar Roland Tolentino introduced the term “geobody” to describe how transnational figures such as the Filipina mail order bride stand in for the Philippine nation itself.⁵ Daya, the Filipina mail order bride on *90 Day Fiancé*, is a geobody for the Philippine nation. She corporealizes devalued and feminized Filipinx transnational labor. Within both global popular culture and Filipinx diasporic culture, the global Filipina body is a ubiquitous figure that signifies the subjection of Filipinx bodies to the gendered and racialized effects of neoliberal globalization. As such, the global Filipina body indexes broader debates about gendered migrant labor and embodiment in the context of globalization. Whether represented as a mail order bride, trafficked woman, or overseas contract worker, the figure of the global Filipina body makes evident the ways in which global capitalism

naturalizes exploited racialized and gendered labor. Each chapter of the book focuses on an example of the global Filipina body that circulates within Filipinx American cultural production, including the mail order bride, the Filipina sex worker/trafficked woman, the *balikbayan*, and the cyborg, a science fictional figure for a queer diasporic future.⁶ Each of these figures embodies the gendered and sexual politics of representing the Philippine nation within the Filipinx diasporic imagination.

Queering the Filipinx “Mail Order Bride”

In Chapter 3, I argue that the video/performance art project, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride*, by the Filipina American video and performance art ensemble the Mail Order Brides/M.O.B., reconfigures the discourse of Filipina mail order brides as abject figures. *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride* undermines the heteronormativity and masculinism of Filipina/o American cultural nationalism, while also

5. Tolentino, “Bodies, Letters, Catalogs.”

6. The term *balikbayan* combines the word *balik* (to return) with the word *bayan* (nation) to describe Filipina/os from the Global North (often the United States, Canada, and Australia) who return to the Philippines. In chapter 4 of my book, *Queering the Global Filipina Body*, I draw on Haraway’s foundational essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in the analysis of the science fictional video and performance art piece *Cosmic Blood*, by the Filipina and Colombian American artist Gigi Otálvaro-Hormillosa. I argue that the cyborg is a utopian figure for queer forms of diaspora beyond the heteronormativity and masculinism of the nation.

critiquing the homonationalism of LGBT cultural politics in the United States. *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride* is situated within a broader U.S. political context of queer neoliberalism, in which gay marriage is a sign of homonational belonging. A queer neoliberal logic commodifies the labor of transnational Filipina bodies, revealing the inherent racism of the mainstream LGBT movement's inability to address issues of race, migration, and labor.

My analysis of these gendered figures of Filipinx transnationalism reveals the essential contradiction that is at the heart of this project; on the one hand, *Queering the Global Filipina Body* critiques the heteronormativity and masculinism of diasporic nationalisms as they are reproduced within Filipinx American performance, film, video, and heritage language programs. On the *other* hand, in the context of the Filipinx diaspora, the Philippine nation continues to function as a sign of sovereignty and liberation from neoimperialism and neoliberal globalization. The fraught politics of the heteropatriarchal nation, transnational labor, and global capitalism coalesce within the constellation of figures of racialized, gendered Filipinx labor—the trafficked woman, the mail order bride, the domestic helper—that constitute the global Filipina body. The figure of the global Filipina body circulates within the political economic context of outward transnational labor migration from the Philippines.

The Fundamental Tension

On the one hand, *Queering the Global Filipina Body* critiques the heteronormativity and masculinism of diasporic nationalisms as they are reproduced within Filipinx American performance, film, video, and heritage language programs. On the other hand, in the context of the Filipinx diaspora, the Philippine nation continues to function as a sign of sovereignty and liberation from neoimperialism and neoliberal globalization. This project combines textual and visual analysis with ethnographic methods to examine both the representation of the global Filipina body within Filipinx American cultural production, as well as the social worlds in which these discourses circulate. *Queering the Global Filipina Body* presents an interdisciplinary, transnational feminist cultural studies analysis of the discursive production of the global Filipina body. The identification of the Philippine nation with sex work, both by the international sex industry and nationalist movements in the Philippines, incites broader nationalist anxieties about transnational capital's threat to the sovereignty of the heteropatriarchal nation.⁷ In the diasporic context, the exploitation of the global Filipina body signifies both the failure of

7. Tadiar discusses the relationship between the "selling of women" and the selling of national sovereignty in Philippine nationalism. See Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 72.

the heteropatriarchal nation under global capital and the racialization of an international division of labor. As Neferti Tadiar has argued, the figure of the Filipina sex worker signals the shift in the Philippine economy to export-oriented industrialization and tourism, showing how “prostituted women thus became the symptoms of the crisis of the nation.”⁸ The figure of the Filipina sex worker/trafficked woman exemplifies the subordination of the Philippine nation within an international division of labor, highlighting the Philippine economy’s reliance on remittances from Filipinx workers abroad.

The Failure of the Nation to Maintain the Heteropatriarchal Family

The global Filipina body also signifies the failure of the heteropatriarchal family to retain a traditional gendered division of labor—a rupture of conventional forms of gendered domesticity (in which women provide domestic and sexual labor only for their husbands, not for clients outside the home). Here, the cohesiveness of the national body as a heteropatriarchal unit is threatened by the “prostitution” of feminized transnational labor migration. Philippine popular discourses echo this anxiety that Filipina women’s migration abroad causes the breakdown of the nuclear family; popular and scholarly narratives portray the challenges of transnational parenting and the plight of unemployed men whose wives are working abroad. Within both Philippine popular culture as well as scholarship on transnational Filipinx labor—from the popular Philippine film, *Anak*, to ethnographic research describing the effects of labor migration on the children left behind—the deterioration of the heteronormative nuclear family has been a highly visible discourse.⁹ Nationalist anxieties about the maintenance of the heteronormative family unit persist within Philippine popular culture precisely because transnational labor migration destabilizes the gendered and sexual politics of the nation.

Queering the Nation

The global Filipina body signifies the failure of the heteropatriarchal family to retain a traditional gendered division of labor—a rupture of conventional forms of gendered domesticity. I use the term “queer” to refer to the way in which the diaspora, and transnational labor more specifically, requires a re-negotiation of the gendered and sexual politics of the nation. The figure of the global Filipina body also has the potential to “queer” the Philippine

8. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 72.

9. See Quintos, *Anak*; Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

nation-state. By this I mean that the figure of the global Filipina body, and the transnational labor that she represents, highlights the impotence of the heteropatriarchal Philippine state to provide for and protect its citizens, and reveals the porosity that the diaspora introduces into the boundaries of the nation-state. The Filipina trafficked woman/sex worker corporealizes the gendered and sexual anxieties of the Philippine nation, as her body signifies the gendered subordination of the Philippines to an international division of labor. Thus, transnational labor functions to “queer” the Philippine nation, not only because the diaspora has the potential to disrupt the politics of nationalism, but because transnational labor unsettles the very heteropatriarchy of the nation itself.¹⁰ The gendered and sexualized labor provided by the global Filipina body—within the homes, bedrooms, and brothels of the global North—can not be contained within the heteronormative family of the Philippine nation.

The queering of the global Filipina body also introduces a shift within the field of queer studies to an analysis of racialized, transnational labor within queer cultural politics. The global Filipina body represents a double and multidirectional queering, of both the heteropatriarchal nation as well as the field of queer studies. More specifically, this project presents a queer analysis of the politics of diasporic nationalisms within Filipinx American cultural production and heritage language programs. I examine how Filipinx American tropes of the Philippine nation can encompass a queer and feminist imagining of the Filipinx diaspora. The historical role of the Philippines within the U.S. imperial imagination and the influence of U.S. capital in shaping contemporary notions of Philippine national identity inform this book’s focus on Filipinx American cultural production. I use a queer diasporic approach to analyze the politics of nationalism in the Filipinx diaspora from a Filipinx American feminist and queer perspective. In doing so, this project integrates transnational feminist analyses of globalized, gendered labor with a critique of mainstream LGBT politics in the US. Ultimately, *Queering the Global Filipina Body* asks, how we can envision forms of belonging beyond the familial model of the nation, even as we hold on to the liberatory potential of popular nationalist movements as vehicles of struggle against U.S. neoimperialism and capitalist globalization?

10. I use the term “heteropatriarchy of the nation” to refer to the ways in which the nation as both a mode of belonging and an organizing principle for the state tends to reproduce and enforce heteronormative and patriarchal norms of gender, sexuality, and family.