

REVIEWS



Poverty of Stylized Irony in *Overseas* (Sung-a Yoon, 2019)

One of *Overseas*' opening scenes is a shot of water, specifically a house with a flooded driveway, the water both extending into and coming from the street. It's monsoon season. The neighborhood is made up of a few houses, a lot of trees, no pedestrians. It's probably a gated suburban community and, in the case of the Philippines, likely located in converted farmlands. The dominant voice of a woman instructor is heard giving instructions. Behind her is a group of young women, none probably no older than 40. They are wearing aprons and hairnets, semblance of a uniform. This is a training center preparing Filipina women to become domestic helpers abroad.

They speak Hiligaynon, my mother tongue—a language not even named in the film's IMDb page. Though this language is spoken in several provinces, my hunch tells me the place is in Iloilo, which was later confirmed in the end credits. The school is called *Prime Perfect Hands, Inc.*, located in the Jaro district of Iloilo City. This is an important detail, because viewers might assume this abstract place is simply “the Philippines.” However, Iloilo is specifically a largely rural province in the central part of the country, with a medium-sized capital city. This is a documentary about the institutionalization of labor export and it must be clarified that this phenomenon is a two-way process. Yes, low-income women with very limited job opportunities at home join the global care economy willingly, but private interests like training centers and employment agencies also deliberately go and reach out to these potential domestic helpers as well.

This dimension can't be sensed immediately based on Sung-a Yoon's documentary approach, which is a stylized slice of life—if not found footage—seemingly unintrusive recordings, subject musings instead of interviews, and varied fragmentary episodes that constitute a narrative. This frame also carries anonymity as a main thrust; places, institutions, and people are not named. You might catch a first name here and there, but these are not character studies. What is presented is an anonymous collective experience.

The house is probably the biggest subject of the film. Its sterile interiors speaking as much as the students about the global care economy. It is large and Western in design. Its size, of course, is also to cater to the trainees, and blends well in the affluent neighborhood. It is a pre-departure simulation itself, far removed from the living arrangements the women probably grew up in. To further delineate its alien nature, most parts are labeled; “garage,” “ironing area,” “wash area,” and more pedagogical terms like “kitchen laboratory” and “practice area.” The trainees also wear a tag, often with their names and the title “helper.”

There are more formal classrooms, with tables and white boards, but there are also casual discussions, like in an early scene in the house’s terrace. The instructor asks the women around her who has had former experience. Almost a third say they are trying to leave again, with a DH certification this time. They were deployed before, via another agency. They mention countries from the Middle East: Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, specifically Dubai, and more nearby places, dubbed “Asian tiger economies”: Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. All affluent countries, with more economic opportunities for respective local women populations, hence the need to import domestic help. None of them provide, nor have a system of, paths to residency. They just need their houses cleaned; they are not new citizens. The instructor reveals her know-how of diplomatic relations, in a teasing manner, along the lines of “How are you in Dubai that year when there was a travel ban¹ then? Don’t tell me you went in with a tourist visa?” Jokes are there to lighten the mood.

The highlight of the film is easily the several role-play sessions. The most animated scenes, these are spread out to keep lull moments at bay. The students have roles and lines, corresponding costumes, and even makeup. The scenes are acted out in specific rooms in the house, and are concluded with a synthesis by the instructor who may or may not be playing the role of the antagonistic employer. Some scenarios are how to ask for a vacation leave, what to do when the employer is not satisfied with your cleaning, and what to do in instances of miscommunication due to language barriers.

The women are fully conscious of the dramatic quality of the exercise, but highly violent and traumatic scenarios will still drive them to tears. The existence or development of a working script is evidence that these encounters are routinely unfolding and even documented. Most lines are in English, spoken with a heavy local accent; occasional Arabic or Chinese is thrown in for authenticity, and fully Hiligaynon sentences are there to drive home a point. Students with former

1. Haneen H. Dajani, “Ban on Filipino domestic workers looks set to be lifted as new agreement with UAE is signed.” *The National*, Sept. 12, 2017. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/ban-on-philipino-domestic-workers-looks-set-to-be-lifted-as-new-agreement-with-uae-is-signed-1.627932>

experiences will also reinforce that these do, and will, happen. If things do get out of hand, when emotional abuse crosses over to physical abuse, go to proper authorities. And even this last resort is problematic, exemplified in the workshop on how to deal with rape attempts.

The rape workshop starts with an actual enactment, both the roles of victim and aggressor are played by the women students. The aggressor goes on top of her classmate in the bed and tries to subdue her, while the victim resists verbally. Eventually the victim would grab a perfume bottle and use it like tear gas spray. The threat has been neutralized. At the white board, the instructor asks, what are other ways to get out of this scenario? She calls them “ways to counter act.” Sounds like a standard self-defense workshop: push back, twist the feet, hit the balls. There was laughter when “balls” was mentioned. One student said it should be the first thing to do. The instructor told them to settle down, be serious. The last option is “play along” and then figure a way out. If the women aren’t able to do any of the measures when rape does happen, they should go to proper authorities.

The following exchange brings to light the lopsided chain of accountability in migrant workers’ rights. One student says “call the police,” but the instructor says “no, go to your agency first.” The agency will do its best to resolve the matter, whatever that means. If that doesn’t work, go to the immigration authorities, presumably of the host country. Not even the Philippine embassy or consulate was mentioned. The final reminder is not to fight back violently, don’t grab a knife and kill the rapist. This is because you have a contract and a family at home. It’s another way of saying, “once you land in prison, you are on your own.” Considering the fears of the Philippine state has of rocking diplomatic relations or simple neglect, this is actually often the case.

Aside from preparing for the antagonistic possibilities the living and working set up entails, it is also worth discussing the clashes of intimacies migrant domestic helpers face. There’s a role-play workshop wherein the child you are taking care of would rather spend time with you than his or her mother. The madam scolds the DH when she finds her child eating with her. The employer starts weaving a narrative that Filipino food has poison, with the function of making kids emotionally distant to their mothers. This is an old feminist conundrum that is still not resolved, or barely even recognized as such. In developed countries where women have more career opportunities, the need to hire migrant women to do their former domestic tasks problematizes this form of “empowerment.” The flipside also exists. These migrant women are now earning more, can call the shots, and provide a middle-class lifestyle, but when they do go home their own kids, looked after by extended family members, can barely recognize them. Is this “empowerment” as well? The Philippine state, dubbed by Robyn Rodriguez as a “labor broker,”² would argue “yes.”

2. See Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers*

This valorization of migrant workers as “Bagong Bayani” or “new heroes” is candidly interrogated by the students in the wash area, chatting while doing tasks. One of them argues, how can I be a hero when I just wanted my family to have a better life? What they really meant, another added, is that you’re a hero to the economy because of the money you send back. The Philippine state’s labor export policy was started during the Marcos regime, coinciding with the oil boom in the Middle East in the 70s and by an internal crisis at home. By sending workers abroad, you lessen the local unemployment rate and the remittances boost the GDP as well as the purchasing power of citizens. The national credit score improves, hence more borrowing from large financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF. The imposed structural adjustment programs then cripple social safety nets, or prevent the semblance of a welfare state from emerging.

After the Marcos regime was overthrown in the late 80s, succeeding presidents maintained and even further institutionalized the labor export cycle. There are now several government agencies facilitating the training and deployment of workers, at the moment largely female as the film attests. Beyond the “new heroes” rhetoric, they are mostly “milking cows” exposed to extreme precariousness. Joanna Demafelis’ name came up, a domestic helper whose body was found in a freezer hidden for more than a year after she was reported missing. Her employers, husband and wife, were arrested in 2018.³ After recounting the gruesome details of the beating and eventual murder, by someone who was in Kuwait around that time, she asks how the hell are migrant workers heroes if things like that happen to you?

This self-reflexivity is framed by the film as just another layer of irony, as the last few minutes show some of the students go through the final stages of the bureaucracy of departure. They undergo a medical exam, a mechanical psychological counseling session, and wait in line in an unidentified and crowded government office. The lobby of the said office is filled with sacks of documents, thousands of records of people leaving. They go home, riding a jeepney, passing a flooded street. They are exhausted, hopeful but apprehensive. A permanent state of people, mobile or made mobile, in a country whose leaders exert more effort in sending workers overseas rather than generating jobs at home.

I was expecting some concluding data to tie up the film, but there was none. An hour and a half of painful interactions, but *Overseas* chooses to remain nothing more beyond that. Now, after finishing it unflinchingly, it feels like masochistic viewing. I find this odd since the credits will mention several migrant organizations

Labor to the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

3. “Joanna Demafelis: Employers of Filipina maid found dead in freezer arrested,” *BBC News*, Feb. 24, 2018. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43177349>

Sung-a Yoon consulted, including progressive ones like *Migrante International*, which has been making direct calls to end labor export policy since the 1990s, but not even a watered down situation has been given. I wasn't expecting the film to point an accusing finger, but an opportunity to build networks of solidarity was regretfully lost. This is easily seen in the selected, largely formalist, reviews of the film. Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian*⁴ called it a "study of loneliness" while Thomas Flew from *Sight and Sound*⁵ described the documentary as observing "workers rehearse their art" in the workshop sessions.

Depicting the crevices of neoliberalism, not coupled with calls to action, can only get you so far. From there, it is a slippery slope towards exoticization. *Overseas* came out in 2019, and the pandemic has dealt extreme blows to migrants workers in the US,⁶ Canada,⁷ and Saudi Arabia,⁸ among other places. If this decades-long order isn't outrageous enough, maybe recent events has made it clear⁹ that these semi-invisible populations deserve a documentation beyond mere meditative irony.

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4. P. Bradshaw, "Overseas review—maids in training make haunting viewing," *The Guardian*, Nov. 24, 2020. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/nov/24/overseas-review-sung-a-yoon-maids-in-training>

5. T. Flew, "Overseas watches domestic workers rehearse their art," *Sight and Sound*, Nov. 26, 2020. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/overseas-sung-a-yoon-documentary-overseas-filipino-workers-training>

6. C. Shoichet, "Covid-19 is taking a devastating toll on Filipino American nurses," CNN, Dec. 11, 2020. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/24/health/filipino-nurse-deaths/index.html>

7. E. Alini, "Hit hard by COVID-19, Filipino Canadians grapple with added pressure to send money abroad," *Global News*, Aug. 30, 2020. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/hit-hard-by-covid-19-filipino-canadians-grapple-with-added-pressure-to-send-money-abroad/ar-BB18vZZA?parent-subcat=other>

8. K. Aguilar, "107 Filipinos in Saudi Arabia who died of COVID-19 to be buried there," *Inquirer*, June 22, 2020. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/188754/107-filipinos-in-saudi-arabia-who-died-of-covid-19-to-be-buried-there-envoy#ixzz6lLgFslso>

9. D. J. Esquerro, "370K overseas Filipinos sent home due to COVID-19 pandemic—OWWA" *Inquirer*, Dec. 17, 2020. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2021, from <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/192745/370k-overseas-filipinos-sent-home-due-to-covid-19-pandemic-owwa#ixzz6lLhMmocT>