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**Catherine Ceniza-Choy,**  
**Empire of Care**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Catherine Ceniza-Choy, **Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History**. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003. 257 pages

There is some contemporary relevance to this well-written overview of the lives of Filipina nurses in the United States. Recently, one of the country's top tabloids drew fire for deriding as a "sell-out" the graduate who topped the 2004 medical board exam because he intends to apply for a nursing position in New York City. The passionate responses to the editorial from overseas Filipinos indicate how Catherine Ceniza-Choy's argument still resonates strongly today—that the Filipina nursing experience in the U.S. is inextricably tied to our colonial experience and the demands of American capitalism.

The tabloid's editors would have found powerful ammunition in Ceniza-Choy's book to counter condemnations that their nationalist self-righteousness was misplaced and their moral superiority dubious, given their standing in this highly inequitable society. Linking colonialism to capital to better understand the unceasing flow of nurses to the U.S., and the racism and exploitation they are experiencing there, could have silenced those critics or, in the case of Dr. Elmer Reyes Jacinto, cause him to rethink his decision. Ceniza-Choy's implicit criticism of this historic and economic knot could have clinched the nationalist cause. Alas, only a few in media read books these days and, running out of any

convincing ripostes, the tabloid inevitably lost the debate and some of its credibility.

The construction of the medical establishment by the Americans was motivated as much by their desire to ensure that they were adequately protected from the daunting challenges of living a life in the tropics, as by their plan to modernize the political economy in the name of benevolent assimilation. The nurse's education was directed toward nurturing the expatriate population and developing professions vital to the modernization of health care and the broader goal of nation-building. There was no question as to which experience should serve as the guidepost for the training program—the origins of nursing might be European (often the Crimean War is cited as its origin), but the American version was the more advanced prototype because it was democratic (in principle, any man or woman, regardless of class, can be a nurse) and better equipped (thanks to advances in medical technology at the turn of the twentieth century).

Ceniza-Choy describes four major waves of this exodus: first was in the colonial period, when individual nurses were sent to train in the U.S. so they could then return to the Philippines to assist American nurses in running hospitals and promote nursing education. The second wave occurred in the immediate postwar period when, under an exchange visitors program, Filipina nurses were embedded in different American hospitals to hone their skills. The third wave came during the Kennedy years, when a relaxation of American immigration laws led to a dramatic rise in nurses' immigration. Finally, the latest wave was in 1989, when the American Congress passed the Immigration Nursing Relief Act to open further the doors for foreign nurses and help alleviate personnel shortages in many hospitals. In these last two waves, it was not simply individuals but also batches—often the majority of a graduating class—who left. Filipino entrepreneurs, American labor recruiters, travel agents, and the airlines were more than happy to respond to this demand. The profits were high and the (wo)manpower supply seemingly limitless.

Many nurses ended up not returning; the pay and lifestyle were simply too attractive compared to what awaited them in the Philippines. Citing extensively from her interviews of nurses from the third and

fourth waves (which included her aunt and many of her friends), Ceniza-Choy looks at the justifications given by her respondents for staying. She also narrates how these nurses adjusted to what is good and nightmarish in American society. The stories are worth reading and readable because the prose avoids the dense incomprehension often characteristic of postcolonial scholarship in the identity-stricken American academe.

The last section of the book discusses the murder in 1996 of eight student nurses, including two Filipinas, by the deranged Richard Speck and his successful prosecution based on the testimony of the Filipina Corazon Amurao; and the trial and persecution of nurses Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez on charges that they had caused the death of thirty-five patients in a veteran's hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan between July and August 1975. Ceniza-Choy compares how the American media orientalized these nurses, creating racist caricatures that persist to this day. She also uses these cases as a way of reminding both Asian-Americans and Filipino migrants (like Dr. Jacinto) of what to expect when they get to America. One gets a whiff of an attempt, perhaps unintended or unconscious, to firm up the bond between Filipino-Americans and Filipinos.

This is a path-breaking work, although I cannot fully agree with Vicente Rafael's description of it as a "milestone in Asian American and American studies." There are still questions left unanswered and analyses still demanding more elaboration.

Two are worth citing here: One, it may be true that colonialism and capitalism had combined to attract Filipina nurses and keep them comfortably ensconced in America (compared to being in the Philippines). But one can also argue that the decision to stay represented just one more example of the failures of the American colonial project to prepare Filipinos for independence (even Theodore Roosevelt realized this when he became president). American officials could not convince many to go back and participate in the construction of a state that would, in due time, be handed over to Filipino politicians. The nurses, like any other Filipino, were astute observers of the voracity and unreliability of their leaders. They knew of these under Quezon's autocratic rule; they were aware of them when the dictator Marcos pro-

moted the export of Filipino labor. And today, their successors remain alert to these horrific habits, as they watch a bunch of clowns in Congress and the Executive branch send us into the economic abyss. One may score political points by “blaming imperialism” for the exodus of Filipina nurses, but one cannot absolve the Filipinos who claim to be our leaders. Two: what of those who decided to go back—those professionals whom nationalists and nativists praise to high heavens?

Ceniza-Choy is silent on these *balikbayans* simply because they are marginal to Filipino-American history. But flows of people are not just a one-way process. The book itself acknowledges some nurses did go home. In ignoring this group—admittedly a miniscule but nevertheless important cluster—the book misses an opportunity to overcome a deep-rooted provincialism in American studies by deploying the powerful lens of comparative historical inquiry.

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Alberto S. Florentino (ed.), **The Essential Arcellana**. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2002. 161 pages.

In the Philippines, where many literary works—even those authored by major writers and especially those published before the Second World War—remain uncollected in newspapers and magazines stored in select libraries and private collections, samplers or readers are vital. They are building blocks from which a national canon is constructed and a conduit by which a literary tradition is passed down to future generations of writers and readers.

In the case of Philippine literature in English, there is probably nobody more prolific at making samplers than Alberto S. Florentino, who since the 1960s has been preserving and disseminating the works of major Filipino writers in compact and generally affordable forms, and