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## **Nation and Migration: Going *Underground* in Japan**

Caroline Sy Hau

*This article focuses on a close reading of Rey Ventura's autobiographical narrative of his experience as an illegal migrant worker in Japan in order to unsettle the dominant paradigm of the overseas Filipino worker as hero(ine) and martyr. It examines the ways in which both the Philippine and Japanese states have acted as apparatuses of labor capture; the various discourses of nationness which inform the political construction of the OFW as "labor," "foreign," "illegal" and "depoliticized"; and the strategies of survival used by OFWs to negotiate with, and make claims on, the labor-sending and -receiving states.*

**KEYWORDS:** Overseas Filipino Workers, labor, state, everyday life, nationness, literary discourse

This article focuses on, and analyzes, a book-length nonfictional literary work that presents and critiques the discursive construction of the overseas Filipino worker (OFW) as *bagong bayani* in the sense of hero(ine) and martyr. This discursive paradigm, whether deployed by the state or by different sectors of society, seeks to integrate the OFW more closely into the "imagined community" (to use Benedict Anderson's term) that the OFWs' departure threatens to breach.<sup>1</sup> Through a close reading of Rey Ventura's *Underground in Japan* (1992), the autobiography of an "illegal" worker in Japan, this article unpacks the specific ways in which nation and migration are linked and problematized in literary discourse through the notion of the OFWs' "labor capacity."<sup>2</sup>

Although there have been a number of publications that feature OFW writing in the form of short stories, poems, letters, and essays

and a play (e.g. Mabanglo 1990; Layosa and Luminarias 1992a and 1992b; Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. 1994; Dormiendo 1995; Beltran 1996; Ballesteros 1999; Tirol 2000), Ventura's book is one of the first extended narratives to appear in print. It is notable as well for highlighting the experiences of male laborers in Japan, where female migrants form the majority, and for offering a male perspective in a female-dominated field of writing.

Ventura's book does not simply offer the "truth" about a Filipino's experience in Japan. Autobiographical narratives such as *Underground in Japan* remind us that there is a fundamental connection between memory and imagination, and that this connection is crucial for understanding the fact that the narrated self is neither some pre-existing entity that is simply retrieved by narration, but a self that is re-told and re-created and thereby transformed by narration. Identity is therefore an ethical project, and a characteristically unfinished one (Antze 1996, 12), since the very experience of being someone is bound up in narrative and involves a process of "emplotment," of braiding events from the past and present into stories with characters, plots, motives, actions, and situations (Ricoeur 1992, 140–41): "In effect, we are characters in a story we keep revising as our lives unfold" (Antze 1996, 6).

This article reads Ventura's autobiography as a text of "identity making," and discusses both the material conditions that enable Ventura to identify himself as an OFW as well as the ideological assumptions that shape, but sometimes also come up against, his identification as an OFW. It examines the way in which Ventura's ideas about OFWs are complicated by his own subject position as a middle-class intellectual who turns his back on the Philippine political underground and chooses to immerse himself in—while studying and eventually writing about—the Filipino labor underground in Japan.

It must be stated at the outset that although *Underground* repeatedly alludes to the situation of OFWs in Japan and elsewhere, it does not and cannot claim to be representative of OFW migrant experiences in general. Given the astoundingly variegated experiences of migrant Filipinos whose lives and labors are embedded in different migration regimes around the world, no text or even collection of texts can ever claim to represent *the* OFW experience. Indeed, the value of *Underground in Japan*

resides in the historical and material *specificity* of the conditions and life it chronicles. Ventura's detailed "insider" narrative of an ex-activist-turned-illegal manual laborer in a country that does not officially accept "unskilled workers" illuminates one specific OFW experience while simultaneously calling attention to the complex material, historical and ideological grounds within which, and against which, this experience takes shape.

Arguing that Ventura's book should be read as a specific account of OFW experience does not mean that the details of this particular experience do not have general implications. Ventura's book forcefully bears out the reality of global capitalism's restructuring of the nation-state to accommodate transnational production processes that demand flexible manufacturing systems and labor, the growing number of decentralized and informal economies, the increasing standardization of markets and patterns of consumption, the logic of the debt economy, and what Kenneth Surin (1995, 1185) calls the "inauguration of a new semiotics of value." Global capital now dominates, albeit unevenly, processes of production, circulation and consumption within and among nation-states, subsuming entire populations by "buying" the labor capacity of the workers. Furthermore, *Underground* bears witness to the fact that the developmentalist paradigm of export-orientation and import-dependence adopted by developing countries has created massive labor displacement and spurred migration not only from rural to urban areas, but from developing countries in the peripheral South to the developed countries in the metropolitan North as part of the new international division of labor. Finally, it attests to the fact that while global capitalism has encouraged the unrestricted circulation of capital across borders, labor flows continue to be subject to regulation by nation-states. There remains, in other words, a big discrepancy between the transnationalism of capital and the transnationalism of labor: "Migration is the last bastion of protectionism" (Battistella 1998, 15).

From Ventura's personal account can be gleaned the particular and contingent conditions under which OFWs are abstracted as labor power at the same time that OFWs come to be associated with money. In highlighting the profound ambivalence surrounding the OFW as labor and money, *Underground* reveals not merely the complicity of the state in transnational capitalism, but the complex interfaces between nations

and states, whether in the Philippines or in Japan or between Japan and the Philippines in uneven capitalist development. Moreover, it compels readers to consider the political implications of the crisis of the Left and the search for alternative modes of political struggle that can work to ameliorate the working conditions of OFWs.

This article explores the ways in which the complex interaction between state and nation—as mediated by the life, labor, and discourse of the OFW—can potentially lead to the redefinition of “the state” by exposing its reliance on the migrant labor it attempts to regulate, and asks how this redefinition might also force a careful reconsideration of nationness, the lived experience of nation and belonging to a national community, as well.

### Japan as a “Second America”?

“There is no Japanese Dream,” writes Ventura, “and yet Japan, for the Filipino, has become a second America. There is no Statue of Liberty in Yokohama—why should there be? A statue of the Yen would be more appropriate. We do not dream of becoming Japanese citizens—even for brides who achieve this, it is a secondary consideration. We do not imagine that we will settle here forever. We know that we will not be accepted, and anyway we cannot imagine submitting to the extreme discipline of Japanese life. Still, more and more, we see Japan as part of our future” (1992, 165).

Ventura invokes America and the so-called American dream in his discussion of his experiences as a migrant worker in Japan. Even the term TNT (*tago-ng-tago*, “always in hiding”) that he uses in his book to refer to the act of going “underground” in Japan was first applied to Filipino unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. Predating migration to Japan by almost eighty years, immigration to America has long been the historical and theoretical template from which the Filipino overseas experience is hewn.

And yet Ventura’s comparison also underscores important differences between Filipino migrant experiences in America and Japan. Even though the highest concentration of overseas Filipinos can still be found in the U.S. and remittances from America are substantial, the huge

increase in the number of overseas Filipino workers has changed the profile and public perception of overseas Filipinos.<sup>3</sup> In 1995, three years after the publication of *Underground in Japan*, there were an estimated 4.2 million OFWs, of which 2.4 million were documented and 1.8 million undocumented. That same year, there were an estimated 2.8 million emigrants, mainly in the U.S., Canada, Australia and Japan. (Fast Facts on Labor Migration 1999, 8)

Japan may count as the fourth leading country of immigration (mainly for Filipinas married to Japanese nationals), but the number of Filipino emigrants in Japan is relatively miniscule in comparison with those in North America, and most of the Filipinos—an estimated 157,000 in 2001 (Republic of Japan Statistics Bureau 2003)—who are based in Japan are counted as OFWs. Far more important is that most of them do not expect to settle down in Japan the way OFWs can and do in the U.S.—hence Ventura’s statement that there is no equivalent of the Statue of Liberty in Japan.

The OFW is increasingly competing with the Filipino immigrant as the discursive paradigm for the overseas Filipino’s experience. Although the category of OFW is not homogeneous, and includes people who possess a wide range and variety of skills and expertise, education, and background, the OFW has characteristically been viewed as a “guest worker,” the terms of whose contract preclude the likelihood of permanent settlement abroad. Appearing as the “antithesis” of the Filipino-American *balikbayan*, the OFW is defined in terms not so much by his or her desire to return to the Philippines, but by the certainty of his or her return.<sup>4</sup>

The guarantee of eventual return to the Philippines, therefore, locates the OFW firmly within the Philippine national imaginary. At the same time, the revolving-door policies adopted by some states ensure that OFWs can only ever remain “aliens within the country of employment” who reside “outside of its national class structure” (Aguilar 1996a, 115). Unable to acquire citizenship elsewhere, OFWs are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse as they slip through the cracks of the legal system. In Japan, for example, unauthorized workers cannot enroll in the national health insurance program, and consequently have difficulty obtaining adequate healthcare due to the high cost of medication and

hospitalization. In *Underground in Japan*, Ventura tells of a Filipino prostitute named Ruby who refused to be hospitalized for tuberculosis (partly for fear of being arrested by immigration officials), and ended up relying on the help of her Filipino lover, as well as Japanese informal support groups.

Moreover, in countries like Japan or Saudi Arabia, linguistic and cultural barriers may also strengthen OFW perception of their alienation from the societies in which they live, thereby inflecting the word "Filipino" in the term "overseas Filipino worker." Filipinoness coalesces—as language, lifestyle, "mentality" and group belonging—in contrast and even opposition to "Singaporeans," "Japanese," "Taiwanese," "Arabs," and so on. This is exacerbated by popular beliefs in national distinctiveness in labor-receiving countries. In Japan, ideas of cultural if not racial homogeneity and "closed society" remain well-entrenched despite evidence of intermarriage among Japanese and Filipinos, and despite the fact that Japan itself, as Ian Buruma has pointed out, is "bred from Chinese, Korean, Mongolians and many indigenous aboriginal tribes" (*Afterword* in Ventura 1992, 192–93).

State policies also play an important role in "racializing" differences between workers and employers. In Japan, foreign workers are categorized and organized in terms of a racial hierarchy rather than by skills and qualifications: "Japanese view certain races and nationalities as being uniquely qualified for certain kinds of labor and they grant privileges and legal rights to workers on this basis" (Shipper 2002a, 41). Japanese-born Koreans and Chinese are seen as "special foreigners," while foreign-born Japanese (*nikkeijin*) are "almost Japanese"; both groups are entitled to work legally, and have workers' rights to medical insurance and legal mediation on labor-related problems. Filipinos and Thais occupy the middle of the spectrum: their looks, cultures, and "racial descent" are similar enough to the Chinese and Koreans to make them appear "less foreign" to the Japanese compared, say, to the "darker-skinned" Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Iranians. (Shipper 2002a, 46; 56) North Koreans and Chinese, for political reasons, are subject to closer surveillance than Southeast Asians. This racializing discourse partly shapes government policies that not only greatly affect the lives and

working conditions of the foreign workers, but also heightens these workers' sense of alienation from the larger society.

Fueled by the experience of alienation abroad, absence from the homeland<sup>5</sup> carries with it strong associations of enforced uprootedness and "reluctant" migration,<sup>6</sup> of exile and nostalgia, and, most of all, duty and sacrifice. Interviews with Filipina entertainers in Japan, for example, make much of the familial obligations underpinning the economic incentives for going abroad:

The desire to improve the daily lives of their families—husbands, children, parents, brothers and sisters—is a recurring theme echoed by almost every Filipino entertainer we interviewed and surveyed for this report. . . . Those of them who are married want to support their husbands who are still in school, are employed but with low salary, are employed on an irregular basis, or who are altogether unemployed. They wish for their young children a more stable today and a more secure tomorrow: regular meals and stable financial support to see them through school, through college, if possible. (Balleascas 1992, 24)

For these OFWs, going abroad in the quest to improve their lives and those of their loved ones in some sense means giving up the erstwhile comforts and security of home while exposing themselves to potential risks of exploitation, bodily harm, and even death. Everyday life becomes a relentless grind of labor and longing, of deferred happiness. Argues Vicente Rafael (2000, 210):

Subject to the daily pressures and exploitative demands of an alien working environment and taxed by their efforts to negotiate with or, more commonly, evade the apparatus of a state hostile or indifferent to their situation, OCWs often relate lives of loneliness, deprivation and abuse.

For Ventura at least, Japan must have seemed ideal because of its relative proximity to the Philippines, and because he himself had no intention of staying permanently in Japan. Taking advantage of a



“loophole” in Japanese immigration policies that allows male workers to enter the country as students, Ventura ended up in Kotobuki, Yokohama, which harbors the biggest and most well-known community of unauthorized Filipino labor migrants—among Filipinos whose class backgrounds he himself clearly did not share and from whom, in some instances in his book, he sought to distance himself.

Ventura’s life in Kotobuki is the centerpiece of his book, his membership in the labor underground the source of his legitimacy and authority as a writer who offers his readers an “insider’s account” of the “secret” world of unauthorized migrants. Touted as “a book about ordinary life conducted under the extraordinary conditions of exile and secrecy” (James Fenton, *Introduction* to Ventura 1992, xi), *Underground in Japan* contains vivid descriptions of Kotobuki—“a sanctuary for misfits” as “*kitanai*, *kusai*, *urusai* (dirty, smelly, noisy)” as Manila—as home to a community of unauthorized Filipino migrant workers among the 31,974 “overstaying” Filipinos in 1992 (14,935 of whom were men and 17,039 women) and what Ventura himself calls “the dregs of Japanese society” (12, 131, 137).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Ventura had a stake in acquiring the “credentials” that come with going underground. He entered Japan legally as a student, and as the “sample” subject of a putative story on migrant workers that a Japanese journalist named Akihiro and a photojournalist named Kazuo wanted to work on. A year into his stay, he was “fully initiated into a new underground, the colony we Filipinos were building in Japan” when he found work as one of the Standing Men (*tachimbo*), “day-laborers dependent on the casual system of hire” who gathered at an intersection in Kotobuki-cho at five o’clock in the morning and waited to be handpicked by a recruiter (*sacho*, literally “boss” or “manager”) for specific, temporary assignments (73, 25).<sup>8</sup> Ventura’s first job as a *tachimbo* consisted of shoveling fertilizer granules into the ribs of ships. Working from five in the morning to three in the afternoon netted him 25,000 yen or almost \$200 (Japanese workers received 10,000 yen more).

State-defined “illegal” migrant workers had to contend with the drudgery and long hours of labor, endure the insults and taunting of Japanese workers, and live in perpetual fear of being arrested and deported or, worse, humiliated. Ventura’s Kotobuki is peopled with

“misfits,” “the dregs of Japanese society,” whether Japanese or non-Japanese. Ex-prostitutes rub elbows with job recruiters. The Communists establish labor unions (for which membership unauthorized workers are ineligible) in Kotobuki and manage to avoid clashing with the *Yakuza* (Japanese gangster). The police and the *Mig-mig* (Filipino Kotobuki slang for immigration agents) play their parts in maintaining the “charade” of overlooking the presence of unauthorized migrant workers in their midst. The yakuza do much of the recruiting of “illegal” labor, especially Filipina entertainers who end up working for the sex trade. Ventura and other Filipinos resist the attempts by the Communist Party branch in Kotobuki to encourage the foreign workers to form a union that would represent their interests and fight for their rights. The book’s detailed accounts of Ventura’s encounters with Japanese “colleagues” in straitened circumstances, with the ferocious Yakuza, and sundry other “petty criminals and general losers” and “sordid individuals” (Buruma in Ventura, 191), reveals the seamier underbelly of Japanese prosperity.

Ventura’s social background in the Philippines informs his deep ambivalence toward, and often-contradictory perceptions of, the labor underground in Japan. Through his political leanings as a former activist, he comes to identify with these misfits and to count himself as one of them, even as his class position as a filmmaker and putative author distances him from his “subjects.” This ambivalence would eventually compel him to make the decision to go back to the Philippines.

### The OFW as “Sheer Labor Power”<sup>9</sup>

But what made Ventura stay on for more than a year despite his obvious misgivings and unhappiness about living as an illegal migrant worker? The answer to this lies in Ventura’s attitude toward labor. Being overseas and being Filipino for Ventura are bound up with being a worker. Vicente Rafael (2000) has theorized the OFW as “sheer labor power, supplementary formations to the imagined communities of their bosses.” Not only does the labor of the OFW contribute, often literally, to the “building” of the nation-state in which he or she works,

the very success of tiger economies such as Singapore is precisely dependent on the large pool of foreign labor. Importation of foreign workers to meet the labor shortages in particular sectors after the domestic reservoir of labor has dried up has long been an integral part of "economic development" in these labor-receiving countries (Abella 1989 quoted in Martin 1996, 5).

Labor acquires a heroic dimension precisely because of its productive nature, and affirms the creative power of the laboring subject. In fact, Marx considered labor the essence of being human. He argued that private property—the cornerstone of exchange relations in capitalism—is the product, and necessary consequence, of alienated labor in the sense that the "subjective essence" of private property—of private property "as activity for itself, *as subject*, *as person*—is *labor*" (Marx 1964, 128). Even money refers to human labor in the sense that commodities all have in common the fact that they are the products of human labor. While it is money, operating formally on the abstract principle of equivalence, which makes these products of human labor commensurable and exchangeable, labor is the "common substance" of all commodities (Hamacher 1999, 175).

Thus, the value of labor power derives from labor's capacity to *produce* value (Bottomore 1991, 297). The idea of labor power is intimately bound up with capitalist exchange in that it lends itself to being commodified. But unlike other commodities, labor power depends for its use on relations between the capitalist and the worker who sells his or her labor. These relations necessarily entail negotiations on the nature of work, the scope and intensity of work, the conditions under which it is undertaken and, of course, the "price" commanded by it (in the form of wages/salaries). Labor as commodity thus requires, as well as creates, the mediation of a whole set of social relations between buyer and seller. Negotiations and antagonisms between workers and capitalists—what Marxists would call class conflict and class struggle—"fundamentally structure the technical and social aspects of capitalist production" (Bottomore 1991, 297). Labor power operates on the basic premise of private property. The existence of a labor market assumes that a person has the "right" of private property to herself or himself. In other words, people may sell

their labor capacity only because they “own” themselves. The commodification of labor power originates in this notion of the human self as private property.<sup>10</sup> When a worker puts himself or herself on the market, he or she enters into a “contract” with the employer (or, in the case of OFWs, the recruiter or middleman), a contract that already specifies a specific exploitation of the worker’s labor power. Theoretically, the contract between worker and buyer of the labor commodity promotes the illusion of freedom and equality: the worker “freely” enters into the contract to sell his or her labor power to the buyer in exchange for a “wage.” He or she exercises this juridical “right” to enter into such a contract and sell his or her labor power as a subject of exchange.

In actuality, this juridical equality in exchange operates within the context of real and visible disparities in economic wealth. It is shored up by institutions such as courts, laws, and police. It is enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Philippine Constitution. In other words, specific political relations and state institutions work to create and maintain the conditions under which this juridical equality is asserted to allow the voluntary exchange between buyer and seller of labor.

The idea of “freedom” to sell labor may often work to obfuscate the exploitative quality of the exchange, but it may also, at times, call attention to the reality of inequalities between workers and capitalists and incite collective action among workers. Struggles between workers and capitalists over centuries have resulted in important advances for workers, including enfranchisement, improvement of working conditions, salary hikes, and the organizing of labor unions as bargaining tools with the state.

These advances, however, are unevenly spread across laboring populations. While trade union membership has shifted in the West toward white-collared workers in the public sector, and in information technology and knowledge-based private sectors, the “reserve army” has had to be called in from other parts of the globe, especially the Third World, to fill in the reservoir of flexible labor in these countries. Largely depoliticized through a combination of government policies, disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and control, and perceived “cultural differences,” foreign workers perform the “low-skill” or

“demeaning” labor necessary to sustain the high-powered economies of these countries often without benefit of protection and safeguarding of their welfare and rights.

Ventura compares tachimbos to prostitutes, viewing the expropriation of labor through the prism of women’s sexual exploitation:

The Standing Men are like prostitutes. Our customers are discriminating—they size us up. They like us young and strong, muscular but harmless-looking. They don’t like a *contrabida* face. They don’t want insolence. If you have long hair, it’s better to hide it under a cap, and it’s better to be clean-shaven—only the *oyabun* [Yakuza’s boss] is permitted a beard. It’s important to be seen standing. If you were sitting, that would mean you would just be loafing around on the *gemba*. (57)

In this comparison, the men display their “wares”—their bodies—and subject themselves to the daily “humiliations” (Ventura’s word) of being chosen by a *sacho*, in the same way the hostesses are picked by customers in bars. Ventura feels himself demeaned not so much by the kind of labor he engages in, but by the way in which he, as laborer, is treated. Here, the extraction of labor from labor power is reduced to its most basic component—selecting bodies from among a crowd of literally standing men on the basis of their able-bodied and non-threatening looks. This shatters the illusion of juridical equality presupposed by the contract between sellers and buyers of labor power and exposes the exploitative underside of this “free” exchange.

The opposition between “skilled” and “unskilled” labor is one of the disciplinary mechanisms that actively work to constrain and contain the foreign workers. The age of information technology and increased professionalization of work has widened the gap between so-called “skilled” and “unskilled” workers. In this dichotomy, “unskilled” work is stigmatized as mechanical, repetitive, automatic. Writes Walter Benjamin: “The unskilled worker is the one most deeply degraded by the drill of the machines. His work has been sealed off from experience; practice counts for nothing more” (1968, 176). In Japan,

“unskilled work” is synonymous with “3D” or “3K” work— jobs that are “dirty” (*kitanai*), “dangerous” (*kiiken*) and “demanding” (*kitsui*), jobs deemed temporary, inferior, and undesirable, and—when filled by “illegal” foreign workers—without guarantee of job security, employment benefits, or workers’ rights.

Characteristically, Ventura is ambivalent about manual labor. On the one hand, he chafes at the drudgery and indignity of it:

It was the routine and the discipline that I began to dread, the way it stretched out ahead, day after day: if not stevedoring— construction work, if not construction work—stevedoring. I hated the helmets and the safety shoes. I hated the way the sachos ordered us around. I hated counting up the daily humiliations of the Standing Men—and not only our humiliations as Filipinos, but those of our Japanese colleagues. And I hated the uncertainty. Arrest would be one thing—if you knew it was going to come. But I didn’t want someone grabbing me by the waistband while I was taking a pee. Not to be able to pack and say goodbye to my friends, to be whisked off unceremoniously into detention, even an hour in prison would be a dreadful humiliation. (156)

But, on the other hand, Ventura’s activist background has schooled him in Marxist conceptions of labor as productive and creative. The Marxist affirmation of the productivity and creativity of labor can potentially undercut the negative representation of OFW labor (notwithstanding the wide range of skills and qualifications that define it), as unskilled or low-skilled, as “demeaning” (Austria 2002, 7). The social productiveness of work can now question the dichotomies that separate “skilled” and “productive” work from work that is not seen as having high or adequately remunerated value, such as domestic labor, sex work, and construction. Ventura celebrates the deconstruction of labor by recalling the following incident during his last days in Japan:

I went back to work on the [*sic*] Saturday, to a building site which I had known since it was a wooded hill, and which was now an almost finished block of flats. We’d been involved at every stage. We cleared the ground, we dug the foundations, now we were

erecting scaffolding so that the building could be painted. It gave me a hidden pleasure, a secret delight, to see the thing so near completion. In my mind, I laid a cornerstone with the inscription: "The apartment complex rose with the aid of illegal foreign labor." (171–72)

### Demystifying the OFW

Apart from its empowerment of the OFW as laboring subject, Ventura's ethnography of the Filipino "underground" community in Kotobuki, Yokohama lends itself to being read as a refutation of the popular perception and state celebration of the one-dimensional OFW-as-hero(ine) and martyr (27–31).

More than his lively account of his adventures as a TNT, Ventura's thumbnail sketches of Kotobuki's Filipino residents and their everyday lives serve to demystify the narrowly one-dimensional image of the OFW. There is, first and foremost, the question of what kind of people end up working in Japan:

Indeed, it was generally true that it was the lower middle classes rather than the very poor who were drawn into the world of Kotobuki. It was only they who could raise the money for the initial payments—the papers and the air-tickets and the bribes. You could not really say that necessity had driven these people into the Japanese underground. They had gone not to make money but to make *more* money, not for their daily bread but for the finer things in life.

Ventura's statement is confirmed by a number of studies. Rosario Ballescas, for example, notes that even though the Filipina entertainers she interviewed claimed that "there are no jobs in that Philippines" and that banning Filipinas from working as entertainers abroad would leave the "women...with nothing to do at home," many of the Filipina entertainers already had jobs before they left for Japan (1992, 25–26). Meanwhile, six out of ten Filipinos were already employed in the Philippines while applying for an overseas job in the mid-1990s (Torres 1996, 41). Ventura's observation echoes Manolo I. Abella's argument that

We know that those who leave the country are not the poorest of the poor. But we also know that they belong to lower and middle income groups whose new income levels would have in statistical terms pushed them up to the higher income brackets. This would leave the poorest of the poor relatively worse off but at the same time it means that a larger percentage of the population than before have improved their income positions. (Abella 1989, 8)

Uneven development in global terms means that low-income jobs in developed countries translates to better-paying jobs for workers from developing countries when compared to the salaries they earn in their own countries. This accounts for the outflow of labor from the Philippines even as people in the very lowest income group remain hard-pressed to improve their living conditions.

Ventura's book details how and where OFW earnings are spent. The "fruits" of illegal labor are displayed on Sundays in church, when Filipinos bedeck themselves with "gold chains, bracelets, rings, leather jackets, signature clothes both real and fake," most of which were purchased in flea markets (80). So-called Odori Boys devote a substantial portion of their free time to frequenting the eponymous flea market in Yokohama. Habits of thrift and conservation forced on Filipinos by straitened circumstances migrate with them to Japan, and fix their patterns of consumption in Koto. Consumption in this case ranges from buying expensive brand-name commodities to hoarding *gomi*, which literally means "garbage or rubbish," but in Kotobuki slang translates to "desirable rubbish," either bargained or scavenged. One of the Odori Boys' rooms resembles a "warehouse of junk, destined for his family back home"; another's "possessions were packed in assorted bundles, bags and suitcases, stacked away in shelves, ready for shipping, perhaps, and ready certainly for any emergency [for example, a raid by immigration officials]" (18, 15). Not only are the inhabitants of Koto considered the "dregs" of Japanese society, they literally absorb the detritus of that society, practicing a form of global recycling that transforms one's society's *gomi* into another's "status" symbol.

The Odori Boys could never get used to the way the Japanese threw things out, the way things lost their value. Back home, we



would find a use for everything. A family would never throw out, for instance, bottles or paper. Nor would it be given away for recycling. It would be sold to dealers in junk. There is no second-hand clothes market in the Philippines—a garment is passed from hand to hand until it ends up as a floorcloth or a doormat. No one would ever throw out a piece of cloth—it would feel like a sin. And so a flea market in which a pair of Levis could be bought for a few pounds or a shirt—“a long sleeve”—for fifty pence was a most remarkable thing. And the rooms of the Odori Boys—most of our rooms—were piled with neat parcels of bargains awaiting shipment back home. And people built their own Hi-Fi systems, Odori style, which they yearned to play freely at full volume—which they *did* play, sometimes, and got themselves thrown out of the house, or out of the country, for making too much noise. (80–81)

Ventura's book sets out to qualify, if not refute the conventional wisdom consecrated in writings about OFWs, that “the issue [is] one of simple economic need. The issue is economic, but it is not simple” (163).

Before I arrived in Koto I had the notion that life there was simply a matter of loneliness and exploitation, and the continual pressure to remit money home. This was the way it had been written up in dozens of articles about migrant workers. But the subjects of these articles didn't always resemble their portraits, as I was beginning to see. (19)

The Koto men may busy themselves with piling up stuff that are destined for “back home,” but they themselves have a far more ambiguous relation to “back home” than their goods. They congregate in church and the nearby McDonald's on Sunday mornings, and write letters home in the afternoon. These letters typically speak of “the melancholy of the day: complaints about the weather (which were true) and about the irregularity of work (which were not necessarily true, but which maintained a degree of privacy around the subject, i.e., how much the writer was earning); then came the advice, the delegation of authority and, most importantly in any married man's letter, the issues surrounding the rearing of children” (86).

These letters show, or more accurately, what these letters *do not say* is that surplus generated through labor does not automatically translate into the purposive activity of sending money home. Being less than forthcoming about the exact figures of their earnings allows these men to set the amount of remittances they want to send home while freeing up some of these earnings for their own use. The “extra money” usually disappears into bars and prostitution dens, into home parties and porno videos, but it may also underwrite the relationships created within the community, and feed these men’s “addict[ion] to their exile” (84).

Exile creates new social relationships even as it reformulates old ones. The men who are legally underground in Japan also form a social underground of sorts, far from their “legitimate” lives in the Philippines. Ventura states that, without exception, the men in Koto, even the married ones, have lovers. Given their own propensity for straying from the marital fold, they are, not surprisingly, suspicious of their wives’ comportment back home and often arrange to have their wives under surveillance by relatives. OFW earnings act as glue for keeping the family unit intact back home, even as they absorb the blow in the likelihood of a marital breakup.

Meanwhile they consoled themselves with the thought that they had the economic advantage—it was their wives who had everything to lose. Unlike husbands in the Philippines, who would normally hand over the whole wage packet to their wives and receive back an allowance, migrant workers sometimes remitted money to their own accounts and kept their wives on an allowance so that, just in case anything did go wrong, they would still have their nest-egg at the end. And in the meantime, every married man I knew, apart from one old man, was unfaithful one way or another to his wife, and some of the wives knew this and understood it. And sometimes in their letters the wives made the rules explicit: the husband might have a girlfriend, but he must never have a child by her. That was the One Commandment.

If money cements the family unit back home, it—or more properly, the lack thereof—can also loosen the familial bonds. Ventura mentions

a number of Koto men who are unable to or have stopped sending money home. Ruffino, a heavy drinker, has not sent money home in two years. Another, Rogelio, with a wife and three children, feels that "since he was far from home he reckoned he could do as he pleased" (22). Koto has a father and son who live together with their lovers, even though they have families back home. Still, another man kept house for his lover in Koto.

Living with the strictures of illegal migrant life in Japan nevertheless affords these men a means of escape, however temporary, from the debts and obligations that tie them to their personal networks in the Philippines:

...[T]he husbands might be faced with the knowledge that they had got used to Koto, with their live-in companion, no family, no relatives, none of the restrictions and obligations of barrio life. They had become addicted to their exile. Unfree by the rules of Japan, they had nevertheless found freedom from their own morality and culture. This was the charm of Koto, the lure. (84–85)

Ironically, the remittances which go toward improving the lives and social standing of these men and their families back home also generate spiraling expectations that may only increase the demand for further if not bigger remittances, and push these men into prolonging their years of "exile." This way, the Koto men are at once tethered to and sundered from "back home."

Furthermore, for Ventura at least, being in Japan heightens his sense of nationness. The so-called Filipino community in Japan is marked by the same cleavages of class, gender, ethnicity, religion and language dividing Philippine society. Kotobuki's Filipino gangs are organized according to their place of origins (the pioneering Bataan group, composed of seamen), religion (the cohesive Iglesia ni Kristo group), and even common past (the "Intruders in Japan," originally Muntinlupa inmates).

Ventura recounts numerous cases of Filipino recruiters and *sachos* fleecing and exploiting fellow Filipinos. A certain Mrs. Recto took \$2,500 from a family in exchange for arranging to find their son a job

in Japan. On arrival, the young man finds himself in Chiba doing construction work at the mercy of the Yakuza, with little compensation, and unable to remit any money. A Filipina takes pity on him, houses and feeds him before referring him to Kotobuki, but he dies a year later. Juan, a Filipino *sacho*, skims 2,000 yen from his compatriots' daily pay in order to pay for his expensive gifts to his lover.

Again, the question of money is crucial in constructing the plight of the OFW. The lure of money is said to blind people to all other considerations, including the nation. One of the Kotobuki men tells Ventura: "As soon as we get a chance for a fast buck, we sacrifice our countrymen for our own selfish interest" (52). Moreover, money itself has an ambivalent place in the nation.<sup>11</sup> It is both necessary for nation-building, and potentially threatening to the integrity of that nation. The OFW, by virtue of her identification with money (in the form of remittances), is contaminated by the same ambivalence about money and its relationship to the nation.

The Ramos government and some studies of OFWs have tended to view the export of Filipino workers as a source of "shame and loss of pride and dignity to the Filipino nation" (Ballescas 1992, 115). More, this blame on the impugning of the nation's standing among other nations has often been laid at the doors of the OFWs. If their remittances, now considered "direct foreign aid" (Schoenberger 1994 cited in Rafael, 205), make them the new heroes of the Philippines, the "taint" of money also makes them vulnerable to charges of not being "nationalistic" enough.<sup>12</sup> OFWs are taken to task for making economic concerns paramount above all other considerations. Ballescas calls for rallying "the nation to convince and to overcome insistent elements in the entertainment industry and their supporters to give up their pretentious claim to nationalism and to family love and instead to honestly expose what they really stand for: pure business profits" (1992, 115).

This ambivalence spills over from its source in the Philippines and contaminates relations among Filipinos in Japan. Kotobuki is a ghetto for illegal Filipino and other foreign workers, each living in nationalized enclaves. Illegality becomes the badge of membership, and seals off Kotobuki from Filipinos who have legal visas. "You had to be *bona fide* illegal to be one of the group," writes Ventura (19). Kotobuki men resent

"legal" Filipinos for their freedom of movement, and spurn their company for fear that the latter might report them and have them deported.

Legal status itself creates social division and distance. The Philippine Women's League of Japan, composed of Filipinos married to Japanese nationals, roundly condemns illegal Filipinos, with the chairperson claiming that "majority of the illegal Filipino migrants are not innocent but willing victims of exploitation by both Filipino and Japanese recruiters" (Shipper 2002a, 48).

The starkness of exploitation as a fact of life among unauthorized migrant workers carries the stigma of "shame." This shame, moreover, is inflected as shame not just for oneself, but for one's nation. Ventura, in particular, is dogged by his sense of shame, but this sense of shame is refracted through images of exploited Filipinas. Attending a live sex show, he remarks:

But supposing the next girl on stage was the Filipina [whom he had met a few minutes before the show], it would be shameful, for myself and for my country, to see her publicly fucked, particularly if the man doing it was Filipino. Bino [his Filipino companion] didn't think that. Filipino or Japanese made no difference to him. But it made a difference to me, and it was obvious that the Filipina didn't like being seen at work by her compatriots. I tried to speak to her as we left, something that would dispel the embarrassment between us. But she didn't want to talk. She had already formed her own opinion of the kind of people we were. (112-13)

Ventura, when asked what he likes about Japan, admires the Japanese sense of nationalism, and, if by saying that, he implies that Filipinos were generally lacking in it back home, his experiences in Japan confirm the fact that one acquires a strong awareness of nation when one is abroad. One's idea of nation is now mediated by some other nation or nations, and the gaze of another nation. Ka Doroy, an old Filipino in Koto, gets upset at Ventura's Japanese friend Kazuo for taking and publishing pictures of Filipino illegal workers in an international magazine. Interestingly enough, what bothers Doroy is not

just that the magazine will be circulated in other countries, but that they will be seen especially in America!

Ventura is acutely aware of how individual actions lend themselves to being generalized as typical of specific nationalities, and how national stereotyping can have institutional repercussions. Primarily an "observer" of the community he writes about, and often maintaining an ethnographic distance from his "subjects" even though he counts himself as one of them, Ventura finds himself "forced into a situation of defending my people and their interests. Whenever these incidents [i.e., the stabbing incident in a Filipino bar] occurred, I would feel ashamed for my people. From the smallest provocations to the largest—cheating the laundry machine, using Filipino money on the train, shoplifting, changing fake dollars, robbery, street-brawling and stabbing—we were always giving grounds for our deportation" (120).

It does not help that, for a Japanese public that remains deeply divided over the issue of foreign migrant workers, instances of "criminality" serve to confirm the racist contention that increasing the number of foreigners will lead to a rise in crime rates (Kiyono 1992, 112). This tendency to derive "national" attributes from individual acts is confirmed by the rabid pronouncements of a Japanese Catholic priest, to the effect that "Filipinos are the kind of people who would do anything for money—prostitution, gun-running, robbery, kidnapping, drug-related crimes, etc. . . . Associating with them scares you that you will catch some sort of infectious disease" (Tyner 1997 quoted in Austria 2002, 14).

This is not to say that "shame" is uniformly experienced, nor does it carry the same moral weight in the minds of Filipinos. Anxieties about national loss of pride and dignity seem to particularly afflict educated Filipinos of the middle and upper class from different political spectrums whether abroad or in the Philippines, while some contract workers themselves do not necessarily perceive the diaspora in such moralistic—or even nationalistic—terms.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, "shame" which excoriates the exploitative conditions in the labor-receiving country can end up obscuring the exploitative relations back home. The situation of the OFWs, by virtue of what Filomeno Aguilar (1996b, 6) calls their "double liminality," casts a revealing light not just on the countries in

which they work, but the country they left behind, and not just these countries, but particularly their ruling elite.

### **The Hidden Agenda of the State and Capitalism**

Transnational migration may serve to create new forms of national imagining and Filipinoness different from—and potentially subversive of—dominant and elite constructions of nationalism (Aguilar 1996a, 127; 1996b, 8). What forms do the national imaginings and Filipinoness of OFWs take, and what are their political import? More specifically, what light do they shed on complex, if not fraught, interaction between nation and state, and how may they end up redefining the state and the nation?

The search for new forms of national imagining and belonging has its roots in two developments: the lack of legitimacy of elite-sponsored “official nationalism” which formed the bedrock of nation-building policies and made the state an external, minatory presence in Filipino everyday life; and the crisis in the revolutionary Left in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coupled with international and local media pronouncements on the “Triumph of Capitalism” and “Collapse of Communism,” which put into question the desirability of an alternative state.

Ventura’s book not only alludes to these developments, it makes these developments, particularly the crisis of the Left, the impelling motive behind Ventura’s decision to seek work abroad.

This was the second time I had been involved in an underground and it brought the same sense of paranoia. In the Philippines, during the Marcos years, large numbers of students were part of the resistance to the dictatorship. The degree of our involvement varied: it might be simply a matter of attending rallies and handing out leaflets; it might be candidate membership, or even full membership of the Communist Party. Between these extremes there was a multitude of legal, semi-legal or illegal groups to choose from, but the concept of legality fluctuated. Most of the demonstrations were technically illegal, but not *as* illegal as, for instance, taking up arms for the New People’s Army. (65)

Ventura was an activist and a filmmaker whose disillusionment with the "underground" in the Philippines came on the heels of his objections to the kind of "discipline" required of the committed, and to the way his documentary of the Mendiola massacre had been "injected" with the Party Line. Ventura's camera had captured scenes of the plainclothesmen wielding and using their guns even when the government denied that the police were armed. Viewing the footage, Ventura experiences a moment of "real terror, like a delayed shock," but this terror is soon replaced by "another feeling":

Somewhere in the background, at one remove, the Party line was being injected into the film. The peasants had to look like ordinary farmers with legitimate grievances, so a scene in which one of them was shown drawing a large hammer and sickle in chalk on the road was dropped. Jimmy Tadeo had to be shown in a good light, so a scene in which he treated the Minister like a child was also omitted. I watched all this happening, and wrote in my diary: "Someday, I am going to resign." (72)

Even though Ventura is a candidate member of the Communist Party at the time, he decides he will not accept full membership: "I couldn't take the responsibility, and I couldn't live under their discipline. If I was to make a film again, I would have to do it independently or with people who knew about film itself, not propagandists" (72). Reflecting on the funeral for the victims of the massacre, Ventura writes: "I was much more affected by the families' grief at the funeral. The peasants had their legitimate grievances, and had the right to demonstrate and not be killed for it. But behind these mass actions there was an unseen hand moving: that of the Party in its bid for power. The Party was never frank about this, except with those close to it. I didn't like the way people were being manipulated" (73).<sup>14</sup>

Ventura makes his disillusionment with the Left the direct reason for his decision to go abroad: "I wanted to get away from the Left, with its endless theoretical talk of exploited, oppressed masses. I wanted to experience the reality of labour, and if I made a bit of money thereby, so much the better" (166).



*Underground in Japan* may be read as a demystification of key assumptions about the OFW phenomenon, but it can also be read as one person's account of his alienation from revolutionary politics.<sup>15</sup> This book, in detailing Ventura's "depoliticization" as a former leftist, came out in 1992 on the heels of the fall of the Berlin wall, the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., and the collapse of statist regimes in Eastern Europe, events which generated worldwide media proclamations of the "Collapse of Communism" and consequent "triumph" of global capitalism.

Decrying what he considers the Left's "endless theoretical talk of exploited, oppressed masses," Ventura seeks in the concrete experience of labor the validation of labor's productive capacity, its capacity to produce value and shape the material world in accordance with human aims.

In line with his aversion to "manipulation," he views the attentions of his Japanese contacts and sponsors as yet another set of manipulations:

Akihiro was keen to record the events [Ventura's turning himself in to the authorities]: for him, I was material, as I had been for Kazuo, the sample migrant worker in the sample surrender. And then there was Saburo, from the Japanese day-labourer's union, who was keen that my rights be respected. I was grateful, but dismayed at their attention. I didn't want to arrive with a delegation. My view was—the more I played dumb, the less I seemed to know about my rights (whatever they might be), the more lenient the authorities would be. (168–69)

It seems ironic that Ventura attempts to escape from the "manipulation" of the political underground only to end up in an economic underground that is subject to its own set of manipulations, all the more pernicious for being hidden. He withdraws from one type of alienation, only to plunge into another. For whatever else can be said of the life-affirming and productive capacity of labor power, its appropriation as labor takes place through a set of constraining mechanisms—institutional, legal, and ideological—that actively shore up the hidden agenda of global capitalism.

*Underground in Japan* is nothing if not an account of the way Filipino labor is constructed as “illegal” and “foreign” and “unskilled,” precisely in order to curb its potential political significance and power. Japanese state policies have effectively worked to control foreign labor by drawing on—and exploiting—the distinction between legal and illegal, and skilled and unskilled labor. The Revised Immigration Control and Refugee Act of 1990 makes it the state’s official policy to accept only “skilled” workers, consigning the so-called unskilled labor to the category of “illegal worker.” In the year 2000, a further revision in the law made unauthorized entry into Japan a “crime”; henceforth, “illegal” foreigners would be treated as “criminals” (Shipper 2002a, 53).

At the same time, the state unofficially turns a blind eye to Japanese companies or businesses that employ unauthorized foreign labor. It conducts periodic raids in response to public or media pressure. Living in secrecy and fear of deportation, “illegal” workers are also vulnerable to abuses by employers, such as nonpayment of wages, and lack of compensation for accidents. In 1990, the Ministry of Health and Welfare issued oral directions, which specified that no medical assistance and insurance coverage are to be extended to unauthorized workers.

After a year spent working as an illegal laborer, Ventura manages to save 150,000 yen, the equivalent of two weeks’ wages. Living in perpetual fear of being found out and deported, Ventura, with the support of his Japanese girlfriend Mayumi, decides to turn himself up to the authorities. He receives a big shock when his interrogator lays out a detailed map of Kotobuki:

He [the interrogator] produced and laid out under my nose, a highly detailed map of the neighborhood. Then, beginning with the tall labour Building, he pointed out all the landmarks of Koto. He knew everything! Right down to the position of the 24-hour convenience shop which abutted our building. And when I finally pointed to the building, he immediately knew its name.

I was shocked. Even though I had always suspected that we lived in Koto on sufferance, I hadn’t fully appreciated that when we thought we were hiding we were doing no such thing. All our efforts to live invisibly were nothing more than a charade in which the workers, the recruiters, the Mig-mig [immigration officials] and

the police all played their part. We lived in hiding. They pretended not to see us. When public opinion demanded, they made a token raid. For the rest of the time, we were a necessary evil. We thought we knew the ropes. *Whom did we think we were kidding?* (170–71)

Ventura is surprised to find out that the underground he has been a part of is no underground at all, because all this time the authorities already possess detailed knowledge of the whereabouts of the illegal migrant workers in Kotobuki. His experiences in Japan are an inversion of his experiences in the Philippines: whereas in the Philippines, he operated above ground but had links to the underground, in Japan, he operated underground but in fact had links to above ground. In fact, his surprise is further compounded by the surrealism of having the Japanese official in charge of processing his papers nonchalantly inform him that he is free to return to Japan in a year's time.

Ventura's illusion of escape is dashed by the cold water of state surveillance. Going underground in Koto—in other words, the strategy of hiding and evasion—becomes the very mechanism for fixing the unauthorized migrant worker's place in the Japanese social and economic hierarchy. Prevented by their status from freely mingling with Japanese, these workers also have no recourse to traditional political means of ameliorating their working and living conditions through formal negotiations with the state. Because of their illegal status, these workers cannot join Japanese labor unions. Their fear of deportation is the most effective mechanism for these workers' self-disciplining, for stifling their capacity for political resistance and negotiation.

When the Japanese Communist Party encourages the Filipino workers to organize, "pointing out among other things that it would enable them to help us more easily if there was one representative organization which could forward a set of demands or requests," Ventura—whose mistrust of the Japanese Communist Party is already sharpened by his disillusionment with the Left back home—responds:

But we were dubious. Nobody was talking in ambitious terms: there was no question of strikes or wage negotiations or a code of practice on work conditions or hours worked. Our illegal status

precluded any of that. But there were practical problems encountered everyday: people needed help leaving the country after they had been arrested, ticket had to be bought and belongings gathered up; when quarrels arose among ourselves, no mediating body; no way of sharing available work during times of scarcity; medical problems, had to go to outside organizations. (88)

It is not surprising that in Japan advocacy of illegal workers' rights and welfare, as well as organizing support groups for illegal workers such as the Union of Migrant Workers (which was founded in 2001 to help illegal foreign workers to recover salary or benefits owed them by employers), are in the hands of the Japanese rather than the foreign workers or their co-nationals (Shipper 2002b, 5; *International Herald Tribune* 2003, 6). For Filipinos, Christian NGOs have intervened in labor disputes and provided counseling and succor in cases of physical and sexual abuse of Filipinas (whether as wives or entertainers), and the NGO Kalabaw-no-kai has been at the forefront of demanding that the Japanese state protect the human rights of illegal workers (Pal 2000, 65).

It would not be accurate to view the Japanese state as a monolithic entity with a concerted policy on "illegal" labor. In fact, there is no coherent policy on unskilled/illegal labor. Relying on a system of "entry control" in order to deal with unskilled workers, the Japanese state in reality operates through four compartmentalized ministries which oversee the flow and control of foreign workers at various stages. The policies of these ministries may at times diverge or even conflict. The Ministry of Justice determines visa status categories and is responsible for overstaying foreigners. Concerned that the lower salaries of unauthorized workers will create a two-tiered labor market that will undermine labor standards in Japan, the Ministry of Labor invokes Article 3 of the Labor Standards Law guaranteeing protection of workers from discriminatory treatment, regardless of nationality or legal status. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has simplified its visa-application procedures at the same time that it is charged with ensuring entry control of unauthorized workers by conducting more rigorous examination of applications before issuing visas. The Ministry of Health

and Welfare, as already noted, has issued an oral directive making unauthorized workers ineligible for enrollment in the national medical health insurance program (Shipper 2002a, 58–60).

Kotobuki's Filipino community was in many ways created by the absence of a coherent policy on unauthorized foreign workers in Japan. One can argue that the unauthorized migrant worker is a "specter" haunting Japanese state and society.<sup>16</sup> He or she is an incarnation of the Japanese state's policy and practice or, more accurately, the incoherence of this state. Even as the Japanese state organizes the migrant's labor, it also depends on labor that it does not authorize. In this sense, at least, the state is both source and product of "illegal" labor.

At the same time, the unauthorized migrant worker's status and survival in Japan depend on his or her accommodation to the specific strictures on labor and labor policies of the state. "Illegal" workers live in the interstices of the Japanese state's piecemeal policies and look to each other for help and protection, relying on informal channels, and defining "their" community as distinct from other groups, other nationals. This Japan-based "Filipino" community and culture—informed by differences in class, religion, language, place of origins, gender, and legal status either carried over from the Philippines or created in Japan—becomes a wellspring of common sources of meaning and reference which may be distinct from the images and meanings attached to either OFWs or to "illegal" foreign workers being peddled by the Philippine or Japanese government and media.

Kotobuki's "underclass" of Filipino men are by turns heroic and abject, exploited and exploiting, cruel and compassionate, violent and nurturing. They beat up Japanese who insult Filipinos, go after and sometimes kill each other, dote on their children and cheat on their wives, send money home or sometimes hoard the money for their own use. The material culture they create in Kotobuki which constitutes the environment of their everyday lives is not an "alien" aberration of Japanese society, but an indispensable if not central prop that connects them—and the Japanese whose society they contribute to building—to the larger network of transnational capital and labor. In view of Japan's decreasing and ageing population, Japan's labor market for foreign workers—in particular, for Filipino caregivers and nurses—will likely

expand rather than contract, and may perhaps lead to further revising of its immigration policy.<sup>17</sup> The survival of the Kotobuki community, the embedding of that community in Japan, is assured by the birth of the first Filipino baby.

### Critique and Resistance

Ventura's book shows how individual experience can have supra-individual implications, and what happens at the level of everyday life among communities reverberates globally. Everyday practices—contaminated by the state and its institutions and ideologies—have a resolutely political dimension because they are arenas for reproducing power relations even as they can be sites of resistance and reinvention. The OFWs have seized on the state's definition of "bagong bayani" to call attention to the state's dependence on their remittances, and to pressure the state to grant them the right to vote, and to abolish the taxation of their income. Here, "nation" becomes a reference point for forcing a rearticulation of new relations between citizens and state, even as the parameters of the nation are expanding beyond the borders of the territorial state.

The overseas Filipino workers' changing experience of the nation has other implications as well, not least of which is the kind of politics enabled by this new imagining.

Ventura's book calls attention to specific practices and lives that have been left out of the general narratives of OFWs. But the book's reliance on the narrative form to evoke the everyday lives of unauthorized migrant workers necessarily raises questions about the "transparency" of everyday life itself. As Ventura's book shows, while it is important to highlight the ways in which the everyday lives and practices of OFWs work to evade or circumvent if not resist forms of domination, this does not make everyday life automatically a realm for alternative practices and resistance. Everyday life is neither the exclusive realm of subversion nor the site of ideological submission (Highmore 2002, 5, 11, 38). It offers possibilities for experimentation and transformation, but it can also be the focus and object of institutional scrutiny and policing. It challenges accepted views of social

relationships and blurs the divide between public and private, even as it may often end up cementing these relationships and enforcing this divide.

This lack of transparency of everyday life as a domain of alternative practices and national imaginings raises the question of what kind of politics is possible when circumstances make it impossible to resort to traditional means of doing politics (such as labor unions). *Underground in Japan* reveals the combined state and institutional mechanisms on both sides of the national borders, which work to depoliticize the illegal worker. Far more tellingly, it views this depoliticization as the *outcome* of the crisis of the Philippine Left and, on a larger level, the so-called Collapse of Communism. Repudiating the public nature of revolutionary politics, Ventura retreats into private life. His book maps the trajectory of his flight from historical responsibility, and from the “discipline” of revolutionary work. Ventura makes much of objecting to the “manipulation” by the Philippine Communist Party of his documentary. Ironically, he throws off the hidden hand of the Party by fleeing directly into the hidden hand of capitalism. Flight to freedom is as illusory as the freedom to labor.

Moreover, for a filmmaker, Ventura seems unaware of the contexts in which political battles are waged. Critical of the way the government covered up its foot soldiers’ role in inciting the massacre at Mendiola, Ventura similarly takes the Communist Party to task for dissembling its intention to capture the state and its provocative role in the demonstration. Yet Ventura seems unaware of the fact that filmic representation makes sense only because it is already embedded in a field of meanings. To see farmers waving the Communist flag is not simply to attest to some of these farmers’ politics, but to call forth a battery of associations about “Communism.” If Communist propaganda is behind the selective manipulation of the film footage on the Mendiola massacre, this propaganda is conditioned by, and is itself a response to, public perceptions already shaped by anti-Communist propaganda fomented by media and government. Ventura’s concern with showing things as they “are” glosses over the fact that “truth” is an interpretive battlefield in which one side attempts to secure its version of events as the “true” account. Ventura does not take into account the assumptions behind his own opinions—his frustration at the

"identical answers" given by the NPA soldiers to his queries about why they joined the movement; his criticism of the way the revolutionary movement had "robbed" the young combatants of their childhood; his contention that "barrios would be better off without the NPA" because village people now lived in fear of both the NPA and the government soldiers who were sure to take their anger and frustration at the NPA out on the people; and that the Party was using mass actions "in its bid for power."

Ventura's criticisms are revealing of his own perspective and expectations of life. His aversion to the "discipline," responsibilities, and sacrifices required of revolutionary work fuels his desire for escape, for a break away from the movement. In Japan, he, too, tires of the "discipline" required of manual labor and the humiliations to which laborers are routinely subjected. When asked if he wanted his country to be like Japan, he replies that he just wants his country "to be a better Philippines" (131). If what passes for common sense may end up securing the status quo, what can be done to change the status quo? Is refusal of work—the power of "desertion and exodus" now touted as a means for subverting the "Empire" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 210–18)—an act of resistance/subversion, a way of deflecting power without necessarily leaving its clutches, or the primary means of maintaining the system of flexible, nomadic labor? Given the fact that structures of labor control make it more difficult for laborers—especially non-citizens—to rely on traditional political means of negotiating or bargaining with the state, is the repudiation of collective action in favor of individual choice an alternative political practice, or is it the necessary component of the new sociopolitical relationships which seek to maximize the appropriation of flexible, mobile labor?

There is reason enough to be cautious about the uses to which the rhetoric of sacrifice, responsibility and discipline has been put: the Philippine state invokes the principles of sacrifice, responsibility, and discipline to induce OFWs to continue remitting their earnings back to the Philippines. This rhetoric has defined the parameters of OFW too narrowly and obscured the complexity of OFW everyday life and responses.



But ironically, the vision of transforming society does require self-sacrifice as an essential component of its realization. Arguing that self-sacrifice is not *the* only way OFWs have chosen to live is not the same as arguing that OFWs haven't sacrificed at all. Neither does this argument justify the conclusion that self-sacrifice is not essential to the goal not just of imagining a better life, but also of actualizing it. Discipline, responsibility, and sacrifice may work to resign people to their hardship, but it also has an emancipatory aspect to it. Ventura's evasion of discipline and responsibility emphasizes their oppressive dimensions, while ultimately denying their emancipatory potential.

Finally, Ventura's desire to escape from manipulation elides the role "manipulation" plays in the writing of his story. Ventura himself resorts to a kind of manipulation in crafting his narrative about his stint in Japan, highlighting the cases of those workers who do not remit money as opposed to those who regularly do, devoting more spaces to recounting episodes of violence and mayhem rather than the uneventful everyday, and contributing character sketches of "interesting" or noteworthy people. Ventura may be wary of the distortions of "propaganda," but his own work suffers from a kind of ideological naivete. Ideology is a much-maligned term for a system of beliefs, assumptions or preconceptions that inform a text—usually applied to someone else's work. And there is nothing more ideological than the idea that one's writing is free of ideology.

## Conclusion

In a world where the embrace between capital and labor, between state and society is tight, and the borders between these terms are more porous than is popularly supposed, it would take more than a distrust of manipulation to posit an alternative, new sociopolitical and national imaginary in the future. The discourse of human rights, posited and deployed as an alternative if not challenge to state-based and territory-based notions of sovereignty and citizenship, is an important ideological resource which can be used to pressure states into ameliorating the working and living conditions of workers, but its political efficacy has often been vitiated by the fact that there exists as yet no international

organization with real executory force and enforcement capability. Transnational networks, whether companies or progressive movements or the United Nations itself, lack the mass base and full institutional political backing to place themselves beyond the reach of nation-states; instead, they are forced to work with the state, negotiating (sometimes with some popular support) to influence or modify the formulation and implementation of its policies (Colás 1994, 533). There is as yet no worldwide or even regional federation capable of commanding loyalty and allegiance on a scale that would supersede the efficacy of the nation-state in implementing economic and political, let alone environmental and social, policies. The need for alternative forms of activist struggle remains an imperative, given that "escape" from the oppressive capitalist system cannot be made without bringing about socioeconomic and political transformations within and across national boundaries, without actually changing the state itself.

Ventura has argued that the experience of "unfreedom" in Japan might afford some form of relaxation of, if not escape from, the strictures and obligations of Philippine life. At the same time, the world of Kotobuki reproduces many of the social divisions that striate Philippine society. Ventura shows as well how the disciplinary regime of global capitalism shapes everyday life right down to the most banal and repetitive gestures without reducing the workers to passive objects of capital. But *Underground* shows as well how evasion of the strictures of the state may also be part and parcel of—and end up reinforcing—the state's construction of a semi-public, semi-legal "underground" and of the worker as "illegal," "alien," and "unskilled," forestalling collective political action through its resolute atomization of the worker. At the same time, conditions of illegality also lay the basis for a community of laboring Filipinos who take root in Japan and force a redefining of Japanese society that puts into doubt its much-vaunted racial homogeneity and exposes the incoherence of Japanese state policy and practice and its dependence on the labor it proscribes. The community of unauthorized migrant workers may heighten as well the sense of Filipino nationness and force its own redefinition and reinvention "back home."

## Notes

I would like to thank Jun Aguilar and Takashi Shiraishi, whose careful reading and invaluable comments and suggestions have greatly enriched this article.

1. It should be noted that the idea of the OFW as *bagong bayani*, though frequently articulated, may not necessarily be embraced by the OFWs or other Filipinos themselves. But while most migrant workers do not, in everyday life, invest this state-sponsored label with deep meaning or significance, it deeply informs their attempts at literary representation as well as their efforts to speak to and negotiate with the state, thereby underscoring the weight exerted by this particular idea on public and civil discourse. See the poems discussed in de Guzman (2003).

2. I use the word "illegal," as opposed to the term "unauthorized," throughout this article to highlight the fact that illegality is itself defined by the state, and its use therefore foregrounds the preeminent role of the state in constructing and circumscribing the unauthorized migrant worker. To a certain extent, the export of labor is merely an extension of the state's extractive capacities. In fact, the very concept of the state is inseparable from the "process of capture of flows of all kinds, populations, commodities or commerce, money or capital" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 386). Brokering, and more recently managing and regulating labor, are but some of the many forms—apart from "traditional" ones such as land rents, profits, and taxes—taken by the state's capture of economic flows.

3. The fact that the United States is the leading source-country of remittances does not necessarily mean that U.S.-based Filipinos contribute the largest amount of remittances. A good number of the world's major banks have headquarters in the U.S. that process transactions from subsidiary banks. Thus, remittances by migrant workers from countries outside the U.S. may still be recorded as coming from the U.S. Based on Department of Foreign Affairs estimates, there were at least 1,613,298 Filipinos in America in 1999. The figures do not include TNTs. Saudi Arabia came second with 650,000; Japan third with 267,995. The total estimated number of overseas Filipinos in the Americas and Trust Territories was 1,778,065, followed by 1,187,566 in Asia and the Pacific region, 958,696 in the Middle East, 533,650 in Europe, and 23,957 in Africa. OFW remittances from America were estimated at US\$3.961 billion, compared to \$171 million from Hong Kong, \$130 million from the United Kingdom, and \$107 million from Japan. The total amount of remittances from Asia adds up to \$401 million (*Fast Facts on Labor Migration*, 7–8, 20).

4. The following discussion was inspired by, and is deeply indebted to, Ruben Salvador Austria's important research and critique (2002, 7).

5. For a discussion of how the Philippines is coded as "*Inangbayan*" (Mother-Nation) and how the nationalist-cum-familial trope is grasped through the body of the "martyred" domestic worker Flor Contemplacion, see Tolentino (2001, 1–3).

6. See, for example, the title of Laguidao's "The Filipino as Reluctant Migrant" (1988).

7. See Table 1 (Director General for Immigration 2003). In 2002, the number of overstaying Filipinos dropped to an estimated 29,649, of whom 10,456 were men and 19,193 were women. In the 1990s, the total number peaked in 1998 at 42,608 (15,489 men and 27,119 women). Figures provided by the Philippine Embassy (1991) in Japan are much higher: in 1990, out of 141,937 Filipinos in Japan, almost half or 70,428 were overstayers. In 1990, 1793 males and 3233 women were deported. Compare the figures to, say, 1960, when there were only 390 registered Filipinos in Japan. Between 1975–90, the Philippines was a major labor supplier to Japan, with a net inflow of 116,696 or 18.4 percent of the total net flow of 633,706. Out of 1,075,317 registered foreigners in Japan in 1990, Filipinos constituted 4.5 percent of the total foreign registrants (Ballecas 1993, 42). For a historical overview of Filipino presence in Japan before the inauguration of the labor export program, see Jose 2002.

8. In 1990, Filipinos constituted 28 percent of the total population of foreign male workers in the construction industry in Japan, and 32 percent of factory workers. As for Filipinos in the illegal work force, men constituted less than 10 percent in the first half of the 1980s, and 77 percent in 1991. That same year, 2983 Filipinos out of a total of 32,908 foreign illegal workers were detained (Kiyono 1992, 108, 109). By 1991, the total number of deported Filipinos stood at 29,620, ranking third after Thailand and Korea. Of these, 13,850 were male and 15,770 were female (Kariura 1992, 121). In 1992, there were 1.28 million registered foreigners in Japan. That year, 68,000 foreigners were deported and 290,000 were overstayers. In 1990, the Ministry of Labor estimated that there were 280,000 illegal or “disguised” foreign employees (Lie 1994).

9. I owe this important formulation to Rafael 2000.

10. Meghnad Desai argues that Marx viewed the idea of restricting the buying and selling of any commodity, including labor-power, as “premature and Romantic” (212).

11. This ambivalent relation between money and nation is most visibly figured by the body of the Chinese (see Hau 1999; 2000, 133–76).

12. Benito M. Vergara, Jr., in his fine discussion of the different perceptions of Filipinos in America and elsewhere, points out that the specific geopolitical location of Filipinos abroad colors the reception of overseas Filipinos back in the Philippines: “[T]he pull of money . . . is seen to go against the strictures of nationhood and an untainted Filipinoness. . . . The paradox here is that it is precisely money, thought to be antithetical to loyalty to the nation, which itself provides the catalyst for heroism undertaken for the nation’s sake. The quest for money, amidst the privations of other lands, can make heroes of the OCWs. The acquisition of money does not taint equally. Its corrupting power lies in the seeming singularity of the United States to evoke such betrayed feelings among the ‘nationalistic’ middle classes who have been left behind” (1996, 86).

13. See Aguilar’s brilliant dissection in 1996a, 104.

14. Ventura, for example, speaks of his "exposure"—his sojourn among young guerrillas in Sierra Madre as part of his political education—in highly negative terms: the young guerrillas, he felt, were being deprived of their childhoods, and the barrios "would be better off without the NPA. They had been poor, but at least they had not been living in fear" (68). Compare Ventura's account to Luis H. Francia's more positive experience of "exposure": "My trip to the Cagayan Valley Zona, for all its dangers—perhaps because of them—had reinforced the romantic notion of armed struggle: the arduous trek in jungle and mountain, the sleepless nights, the brutalization of the innocent by soldiers, the near-encounters. It was a heady mix. On the battlefield, the results were immediate: the guerrillas either won or lost against those whom they had branded as lackeys of the ruling class. Such romantic notions of revolution and its harbingers, the guerrillas, form part of the enduring myth of utopian change. The frontliners had grasped a simple truth, however: that the whole aim of fighting was to go beyond fighting, and that the battle for people's minds and hearts never ceased. Those who were actually fighting were impatient with those who, from a distance, were full of advice and concern, armchair revolutionaries, who were referred to sarcastically as 'steak commandos'" (Francia 2001, 103–4).

15. Interestingly enough, the word "Hapon" (Japanese)—a linguistic holdover from World War II—now reappears in the Philippine left's political lingo as a term for the Filipino enemy, the military.

16. According to Jacques Derrida (1994, 6), the specter "is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit."

17. See section 3-2-4 of the "Interim Report" 2002.

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