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## **Practicing “Enlightened Capitalism”: “Fil–Am” Heroes, NGO Activism, and the Reconstitution of Class Difference in the Philippines**

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# **Practicing “Enlightened Capitalism” “Fil–Am” Heroes, NGO Activism, and the Reconstitution of Class Difference in the Philippines**

Drawing on original ethnographic research, this article focuses on the ways in which the Philippines-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Gawad Kalinga (GK) encourages diasporic Filipino volunteerism by reworking the nationalist discourse of heroism and deploying idioms of love and care. It examines volunteer receptions to GK's development approach and recruitment strategies. In so doing, this article analyzes not only the diaspora's role in GK's housing construction efforts and poverty alleviation projects, but also interrogates the implications of the underclass ideology buttressing and the neoliberal logic framing the organization's work with the poor.

**KEYWORDS: FILIPINO DIASPORA • DEVELOPMENT • NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS • NATIONALISM • POVERTY**

Larry wiped his forehead with the back of one hand, as a translucent white curtain swayed gently in the open window behind him. I looked on enviously from my computer through Skype—San Francisco was seasonably cool and foggy, and I longed for the Manila summer heat that causes sweat even when sitting still. With his other hand Larry gently adjusted a pair of plastic black eyeglass frames balanced on the tip of his nose. The glasses were the only familiar item from our initial encounter nearly a year prior in Singapore—his freshly shaven face had been replaced by a five o'clock shadow, and his crisp suit traded in for a plain white T-shirt. He recounted,

Here came GK who said, "There's a third way. Where you have your right wingers and you have your left-wingers, but we also have all of us in between . . . who believe in capitalism but we also believe in caring and sharing." And so, you know . . . that was what first attracted me to GK. Then . . . it became about being a Filipino . . . it became a labor of love. (Larry 2011)

Larry's account of his volunteerism with the Philippines-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Gawad Kalinga, or GK for short, exemplifies a pattern I have noticed with Filipino–American or "Fil–Am" respondents. Gawad Kalinga—"to provide care"—defines poverty as a "lack of caring and sharing" (Gawad Kalinga 2013). Longtime and San Francisco Bay Area-based volunteer Charles (2011) notes that GK frames its housing provisioning efforts to eligible poor Filipinos as "more than development" because it is building the nation through "loving the poor." The organization's activities epitomize the making of Philippine civil society post-Marcos, which in Michael Pinches's (2010, 284) words has been "modeled on and in the interests of the growing middle class, in alliance with that section of the business elite which has publicly sought to distance itself from patrimonial politics, advocating instead modernist principles of free market capitalism, meritocracy and legal-bureaucratic order."

When I first met Larry in 2010, we were in Singapore attending GK's "Gathering of Heroes," its annual conference aimed at garnering international financial support, particularly among members of the Filipino diaspora. We were both headed toward the same plenary session—"Raising a Generation of Heroes and Global Citizens"—when we realized that we were both Fil

Am. Larry remarked on my "invaluable presence" as a Filipina American and that we were "here to build a nation." A senior at the University of California (UC) Berkeley when we first met in Singapore, he had since then graduated and moved to the Philippines to volunteer full time with GK.

Since GK's 2006 launch of its campaign *Isang Milyong Bayani* (One Million Heroes), which labels prospective volunteers *mga bagong bayani* (new heroes),<sup>1</sup> members of the Filipino diaspora have flocked regularly to the Philippines to work with the organization. Once in the Philippines, volunteers frequently participate in what the NGO terms "GK Builds," also known as its housing construction efforts for its beneficiaries. Gawad Kalinga's "global army of nation builders," as it labels its volunteers, is not insignificant. The annual Bayani Challenge alone, which takes place over the course of a weekend, draws more than 100,000 volunteers each year.<sup>2</sup> The organization encourages volunteerism in other arenas as well, such as campus fundraising or internship participation, to lend one's expertise concerning issues addressed by GK such as health or education.

Many volunteers and staff members with whom I spoke have been quick to correct me. "It's more than just a housing project . . . the kicker is that it's a nation-building program," Ray (2011), a UC Berkeley student and regular volunteer, stresses. NGO advocates, staff, and volunteers alike emphasize that GK's free pastel-colored concrete houses are "really a means to an end." Poverty eradication is not the final goal; the organization's ultimate aim is to rebuild the country into a First-World nation, with its diaspora no longer stigmatized by other members of the global community as coming from a "second-class country," as GK staff member Manny (2012) put it, during our initial meeting in Quezon City. In this manner the poor have become the vehicles through which the country will emerge as "a First World Philippines by 2024" (Meloto 2012).

When Filipino and Filipino–American friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and undergraduate faculty mentors discovered in 2007 that I was going to pursue a PhD in anthropology, they enthusiastically directed me to GK as the focal point of my dissertation project. Comments like "They're going to save the Philippines" and "Meloto [the founder] is going to make the country great again" surfaced. These sentiments piqued my curiosity—charges that a local, homegrown NGO in the Philippines was going to change the face of the country, through what Meloto has termed "enlightened capitalism," intrigued me. Through housing GK has instilled

its “Asian model of development” that, Meloto (2010) explains, “carries a unique brand of the Filipino: *bayanihan* spirit.” Bayanihan is a Tagalog-derived idiom for mutual caring and sharing—and GK posits it as a national value. In a country where agrarian reform remains fraught, and struggles for land tenure and security are ongoing and frequently result in violent confrontations, where educational and employment opportunities are scarce and unevenly distributed, how does GK redistribute resources and create homes for the poor? What does the application of bayanihan to development look like? More specifically, how has GK rearticulated the concept within a neoliberal frame and, in so doing, what are the on-the-ground effects of its practices?

This study on GK and those involved in its development efforts—such as impoverished Metro Manila residents, staff, and American-born Filipino volunteers—seeks to provide a lens through which the increasing global visibility, power, and actual workings and effects of NGOs can be understood. Globally NGOs play an increasingly significant role in development discourse and action as states have withdrawn their social safety nets, consistent with neoliberal arguments for “market solutions” (Ellwood 2001; Fadlalla 2008; Harvey 2005). As states cut off funding for social services and programs, NGOs and nonprofit agencies increasingly turn toward volunteer labor as well as wealthy and private donors—part of the wider occurrence of what development studies scholar Geoffrey Wood (1997; cf. Muchlebach 2012) labels “franchising the state.” GK’s activities thus reveal two deeply intertwined phenomena—the way that governments abdicate and NGOs assume responsibility for certain social realms, and how such groups enlist nationalist rhetoric in their attempts to garner support from affluent members of the Filipino diaspora.

A number of scholars have recognized the proliferation of NGOs over time, frequently emphasizing their new functions as well as their centrality to contemporary globalization processes (Cernea 1988; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Kamat 2003; Schuller 2009). Key insights of these studies include the manner in which NGOs reconstitute class and status differences, play an important part in nation-building efforts and development projects, and reflect a new form of governmentality. While NGOs range broadly, an overarching tendency is to assume that they necessarily produce positive outcomes. Many scholars have noted, on the contrary, that NGOs are capable of causing harm rather than good—often in spite of the best of

intentions (Fisher 1997; Gledhill 2006; Schuller 2012). For instance, John Gledhill notes how the rhetoric on empowerment and rights deployed by NGOs often both conceals and maintains structural inequities. Referring to the process of “NGOization” in Latin America, he points out,

Indeed, various kinds of new actors, in particular charitable foundations offering citizens cheap food, healthcare and locally manufactured pharmaceutical products, have emerged as vehicles for furthering the political ambitions of both established groups in the political class and emerging players from the ranks of the business community. (Gledhill 2006, 5)

In this light, this case study of GK contributes to the literature that examines the role of NGOs as governance institutions.

This intervention also builds on critical NGO scholarship in order to consider not only the on-the-ground workings of GK in various Metro Manila villages and its effects on housing and the lives of the poor with whom it works, but also another type of social actor—the diasporic volunteer. American volunteers and donors have become an important labor source in the Philippines as the government prioritizes debt repayment and infrastructure development over direct social services provisioning (Bello et al. 2005; cf. Clarke 1998; Silliman 1998). To attract potential volunteers, GK deploys nationalist notions of heroism that rely on particular constructions of the poor. In fact, this article is part of a larger ethnographic study on differing apprehensions of GK’s work as well as the ideological dimensions of its activities—how, in GK language, do we understand poverty in the Philippines? How does the NGO conceive the Philippine diaspora?

Many scholars have written about nation building (Anderson 1983; cf. Wimmer and Schiller 2003) and have provided critiques on the role of the diaspora in such projects (Chow 1993; Gopinath 1997, 2005). I argue, however, that diasporas have become an increasingly important resource (and conceptions of the nation an increasingly critical tool with which to harness diasporic support) as governments reduce spending on social service provisioning consistent with neoliberal arguments for “market solutions” (Ellwood 2001; Fadlalla 2008; Gledhill 2006; Harvey 2005). In attending to the role of the Filipino diaspora in GK’s Philippine housing construction and development projects I seek to bridge often separate social movements and

NGO scholarship to highlight emergent transnational flows and networks in our neoliberal economic present.

This article focuses on the ways in which GK encourages diasporic Filipino volunteerism by reworking the nationalist discourse of heroism. I call attention more broadly to the manner in which idioms of love and care (embedded in GK's heroism discourse) supplant a critique of structural inequalities, obfuscating the historical and political-economic realities from which present-day Philippine poverty has emerged. Here I examine volunteer reception to GK's recruitment strategies and its rendering of impoverished Filipinos. In so doing, I interrogate the underclass ideology<sup>3</sup> buttressing and the neoliberal logic framing the organization's work with the poor, and also analyze the diaspora's role in GK's development discourse and poverty alleviation projects.

## Methods

The observations and subsequent analyses in this article are drawn from twenty-nine months of deep immersion and ethnographic research—seventeen months (twelve months of which were continuous) among the diverse set of actors and processes sustaining the GK's development efforts among the Philippine poor in Metro Manila, and twelve months of continuous fieldwork among Filipino Americans who were raising funds and volunteering for GK in the US (specifically the San Francisco Bay Area). The majority of Filipino Americans with whom I spoke were second-generation immigrants.<sup>4</sup> They described themselves as having had an upper-middle-class upbringing, and at the time of the interview most were college students attending top-tier public or Ivy League colleges or universities. GK appears to recruit prospective volunteers from affluent institutions like UCLA, Stanford University, and UC Berkeley. At the time of my research GK had very little presence on campuses like San Jose State University and San Francisco State University despite their large Filipino/Filipino-American populations. Given the disproportionately second-generation sample of diasporic volunteers, I devote attention to the discussion of "transnational belonging."

The methods of this study consisted mainly of participant observation, semistructured interviews and life histories (in Tagalog, English, and Taglish), archival research, and material and discourse analyses. It also involved gathering municipal-, state-, and national-level demographic data provided by the Philippine National Housing Authority (NHA) and Statistics Office.

The interviewees, most of whom were identified through snowball sampling, included a wide range of individuals—from Filipino-American volunteers, staff, beneficiaries, and donors to poor Metro Manila residents who were *not* GK beneficiaries, urban poor activists and advocates, and local researchers and scholars of Philippine urban policy and development studies.

## Gawad Kalinga's Early Beginnings

Founded in 2003, GK emerged out of Couples for Christ (CFC), an international Catholic lay ecclesiastical community initiated in the Philippines and aimed at renewing and strengthening Christian life and values. The CFC began its work with the poor in Bagong Silang, a barangay or neighborhood in Caloocan City, which was the largest slum area in Metro Manila. The organization worked with young people deemed "at risk" or who had a history of juvenile delinquency. Shortly after CFC was founded, Antonio Meloto—fondly referred to as "Tito (Uncle) Tony" by his supporters—launched GK, spearheading the fundraising for and construction of the very first GK house. Villages comprised of rows upon rows of brightly colored concrete houses, framed by neatly trimmed bushes and flowers, have become GK's trademark.

At first glance GK's housing provisioning efforts appeared redundant, as Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit ecumenical Christian ministry offering affordable housing to low-income families, was prominent in the Philippines during this period. However, GK distinguishes itself from the internationally renowned organization by requiring that housing beneficiaries participate in values formation training and emphasizing bayanihan as a unique approach to development. Moreover, volunteer activities constitute bayanihan as visitors from a range of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds and national allegiances cooperate with one another in the construction of a house or an entire village.

On numerous occasions I participated in construction efforts during which diasporic (primarily second-generation American) volunteers passed hollow concrete blocks to one another in slow succession. Standing underneath the hot sun, volunteers wore sneakers, shorts, and T-shirts, and donned heavy gloves as they performed manual labor for several hours at a time. They chatted among themselves as they worked, generally speaking in English. Although tired they seemed to enjoy their work. Neighborhood children frequently gathered around the visitors, smiling and eager to help; and volunteers

responded in Taglish, attempting to communicate with their young hosts. While some adult residents hung back, observing amusedly (or warily) from their front step, others joined the volunteers, either wearing *tsinelas* (thongs/flipflops) or barefoot.

Gawad Kalinga has been able to construe its activities as nation building in large part because it is a locally grown organization. After all, its founder is a Filipino from a self-described “low middle class” background. Charismatic, charming, and well connected, given his alumni membership at Ateneo de Manila University, Meloto has been able to quickly garner a considerable amount of support. In fact, since its inception, the affluent Philippine university, which is frequently matriculated by the sons and daughters of the Filipino elite, has been instrumental in shaping and arguably defining GK’s development model and approach to poverty alleviation.

Fr. Bienvenido Nebres SJ, who was the longest-serving president of Ateneo and currently is on the GK Board of Trustees, has staunchly advocated for the NGO. GK has a centrally located office on Ateneo’s Quezon City campus, and a significant number of its volunteers regularly hail from the university. A dean at the university during the martial law era, Nebres has called for pragmatism versus confrontation in approaches to poverty alleviation. He is arguably one of the most outspoken ideologues of GK. Luther B. Aquino, reporting for *The Guidon*, Ateneo’s school newspaper, conducted a 2011 interview with Nebres regarding the university’s commitment to close “the gap between rich and poor.” Aquino’s (2011) article cited Nebres, who contended that “macro solutions . . . trying to solve [problems] by changing the president, or by lobbying against Congress—are not going to work. And so, we began to look at things that were on the ground. We found, for example, that GK was quite effective in building communities.” That GK construes its nation-building activities as pragmatic rather than politically contentious is a significant draw for prospective donors and volunteers. GK staffer Roland (2012) explained that the NGO builds its credibility among members precisely by staying out of politics. And Rina (2012), a college student and GK fund-raiser based in the San Francisco Bay Area, proposed to me via our phone interview, “I sorta feel being not as political helps them reach more people.”

In addition to its appeal among the Philippine elite and middle class, as well as the relatively affluent diaspora, GK has secured support from a range of other sources—on its website it announces that former Philippine

president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo donated P30 million in 2002 to build 1,000 houses (Gawad Kalinga 2014d). Beyond Arroyo, the Philippine government has remained a longtime proponent of GK’s work. And since its inception the NGO has been inundated with donations from corporations; more recently in 2012 San Miguel Corporation, a Philippines food, beverage, and packaging company, donated US\$5.8 million to the NGO to assist rebuilding efforts after Tropical Storm Sendong (Kassab 2012). As of April 2014, “Gawad Kalinga is present in almost every province in the country, spread in over 2,000 communities and affecting 60,000 families,” thereby working toward its overarching goal to lift 5 million families out of poverty by 2024 (Gawad Kalinga 2014b).

As Arundhati Roy (2012) has observed, “There’s a lot of money in poverty, and a few Nobel Prizes, too.” In 2006 Meloto received the Magsaysay Award, the equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize in Asia, and in 2012 he was recognized as Social Entrepreneur of the World at the World Entrepreneurship Forum. These awards have been critical in legitimating GK’s work in the eyes of philanthropic foundations. In 2012 the Skoll Foundation awarded GK for its social entrepreneurship model and work with the poor (Gawad Kalinga 2014a).

The lynchpin or critical centerpiece of GK’s success, however, is its conception of and approach to poverty. Meloto developed housing as the core of GK’s approach to poverty eradication—not merely alleviation, as he and other GK staff emphasize—based on the notion that if people occupy an aesthetically pleasing built environment they would alter their behavior. As Gawad Kalinga (2014c) puts it on its website, “Poverty is a behavioral problem with economic consequences.” It continues,

The problem of poverty is not about a lack of money as much as it is a loss of human dignity. The poor may not have steady financial resources to support their basic needs but what permanently cripples them the most, disabling them from rising from poverty, is the loss of human dignity. Once stripped of their dignity—forced to live in conditions quite close to that of a pigpen, people start to live like pigs. It is then that standards of living decline, value systems crumble and chaos rules. Moreover, they lose their capacity to dream and work towards achieving their dreams. (ibid.)



At a fundraising event at Chicago's Inter-Continental Hotel in 2010 Meloto addressed a roomful of prospective Filipino–American donors most of whom were doctors, nurses, and other working professionals. He described his organization's work as transformative: "I am not an animal because I have colored houses and landscaped gardens."

The notion that environment plays a role in behavior parallels or overlaps wider urbanization efforts of the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) such as *Metro Gwapo* (handsome metropolitan) program, an Urban Facelift Project initiative that emphasizes beautification to counter much of the blight plaguing the urban landscape. Scholars of the Philippines, however, point out that aesthetic upgrades in attempts to ameliorate poverty have "Marcosian" or, more specifically, "Imeldific" origins (Pinches 1994; Shatkin 2009; Tadiar 2004). In this manner GK's housing provisioning efforts exhibit continuity from development projects spearheaded under the Marcos regime (1968–1986).

Over time GK has added other programs, such as its health initiative, as part of an attempt to approach development and poverty eradication in a more holistic manner. Social entrepreneurship initiatives have become increasingly integral to GK's role in helping the poor "reach their full potential" (Nelson 2012). At a panel on social innovation at the GK summit in Singapore, Meloto's son-in-law and the founder of Human Nature, Dylan Wilk (2010), addressed the audience, "[B]usiness is a more powerful source than the government to alleviate poverty." He continued that it is "not the government that will change [poverty] but business owners" (ibid.).

### **Situating GK: The Global and Philippine Contexts**

Recent sociological and anthropological works suggest that there is something unique about present global political-economic shifts characterized by neoliberal ideology (Di Leonardo 2008; Duggan 2004; Gill 2003; Giroux 2014; Ong 2006).

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade . . . State interventions in markets . . . must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory,

the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit. (Harvey 2005, 2)

While characteristics of neoliberalism had defined Marcos's early governing strategies, neoliberal policies became most prominent in the Philippines in 1972 after Marcos installed a dictatorship. "[T]he Philippines became a 'country of concentration' for World Bank funds," which "enabled [it] to survive without resolving fundamental political and economic inequalities" (Bello 1994, 15). As he took on more debt, Marcos compromised the country's sovereignty, a process continued by his successors as they hollowed out public services to become WTO-compliant, undermining protections for key sectors in the country (Bello 2008).

Incumbent Philippine Pres. Benigno Simeon "Noynoy" Aquino III has picked up where his predecessors left off, continuing to stimulate economic growth through commercial and foreign investment. Despite a significant increase in the GDP—7.8 percent (Ibon Foundation 2013)—researchers have noted record joblessness among the poor. An article in *The New York Times* related that "[t]he country's latest poverty data, released in April [2013], shows almost no improvement in the last six years" (Whaley 2013, B4). The most recent decade (2001–2010) is the worst in the history of recorded unemployment, and 25 percent of the country's population now goes abroad in search of work (Ibon Foundation 2012). The subsequent tightening of the housing market alongside commercial and foreign investment has only further exacerbated social inequalities through widespread processes of displacement and gentrification; record-high violent demolitions have accompanied levels of feverish condominium construction and urban restructuring.

### **Of Privatization and Pastels: Returning Hope to the Disenchanted**

It is GK upon which the Philippine government has come to rely to both relocate and rehouse the poor. Many scholars have shed light on how aspects of privatization, deregulation, and trade liberalization affect the function of nonprofit agencies and NGOs (Carrier and West 2009; Tsing 2005). NGOs have not only taken on new functions as states retreat from fundamental

social welfare provisioning but also gained authority over entire sectors (Cernea 1988). In response to my query concerning the percentage of the national budget allocated to socialized housing in the Philippines, a Manila-based project director working on World Bank-funded housing projects replied flatly, “Trick question” (Project Director 2012). In a meeting following up our email correspondence, I pressed the project director on her email response. She elaborated that socialized housing is not a government priority; rather, the state prefers to partner with NGOs to offset housing provisioning expenses. To date, GK remains *the* key affordable housing provider in the Philippines. At the second annual Asia-Pacific Housing Forum in 2009, which took place in Makati’s Dusit Thani Hotel, former Philippine vice-president and chairman of the NHA Noli de Castro (2009) extolled GK’s virtues, emphasizing its role not in housing development but rather in strengthening the nation. As Charles (2011), a UC Berkeley student, put it, “GK gives the Philippines a nationality.”

Additionally “GK really is hope,” sums up JR. Volunteers and staff members alike frequently cite “hope” as a central factor motivating their involvement with GK. “[I]t’s like you’re being instrumental to change and to showing people that there’s still hope in the Philippines, ‘cause especially for a lot of people in my generation there’s a lot of apathy and there’s a lot of hopelessness of where the country’s going,” maintains Gemma, a mid-twenties GK worker. Similarly for volunteers, especially Filipinos living abroad, “Gawad Kalinga offers them with hope and . . . that they can actually do something.” In exchange, GK has received significant financial support. According to Rich (2012), a full-time volunteer in his forties based in Washington DC, and with kids of his own who he hopes to get involved with GK, the “Hope Ball,” a single fundraising event spearheaded by a UCLA Filipino–American student group in 2010, garnered hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The widely held view among Filipino volunteers that GK offers its participants hope is tied to its status as an NGO. Most of my respondents—whether GK staff, beneficiaries, or volunteers—attribute failed poverty alleviation projects to widespread corruption in government. Volunteerism with GK “appeals because [people are] not working with the government,” suggests Alfred (2012). He adds, “I think some people would prefer to give to NGOs versus the government because they trust them.” This trust has been recognized in the selection of Meloto in 2010

by Readers Digest Asia as the Philippines’s “Most Trustworthy Filipino” (Gawad Kalinga 2014a). In turn this trust is founded on GK’s image as insulated from corruption, as Derek (2012), another longtime GK volunteer, expounds:

The corruption narrative in the Philippines is so strong . . . Filipinos in general . . . are alienated from government. There are few institutions that . . . stand for nation building, that embody this narrative of nation building. And the government as one institution that stands for that is, unfortunately, contaminated by this corruption narrative. So, Filipinos don’t trust government as much. And I think GK provides that alternative, an institutional anchor, an embodiment, a symbol for a collective identity that is not contaminated by the corruption narrative.

Gawad Kalinga has been effective in garnering the support of local elite and middle-class Filipinos as well as the country’s relatively affluent diaspora by offering what its longtime proponent, Father Nebres, might describe as a more “pragmatic” approach to development. Volunteers and donors alike praise GK’s immediate result and also recognize the ways in which the organization is truly “a friend of the government.” Dennis (2012), a staff member, describes GK’s development model as “one that lets people think they don’t deserve to live in these [impoverished] conditions but doesn’t agitate the government.” In this manner the NGO offers an alternative to the Alinsky model of social contestation in that it neither interrogates nor threatens elite class interests (cf. Carroll 1998; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Quimpo 2008).

### Marketing Heroism and Nation Building

“Gawad Kalinga is good at marketing,” observes Larry (2011). “[It] wants their volunteers to feel like they’re heroes in their own right.” The discursive label of *bagong bayani* precedes GK’s approach to volunteer and donor recruitment. Reynaldo Ileto (1998, 247) has described conceptions of sacrifice and suffering that are prominent in Philippine history. And Vicente Rafael (1997, 12–13) has specifically traced the *bagong bayani* concept to Christian traditions and nineteenth-century narratives of Philippine national hero José Rizal’s execution.



In this vein, “it is not surprising that *bagong bayani* has now become a ubiquitous rhetoric prominent in government documents, programs and pronouncements” (Encinas-Franco 2013, 97). Ever since former Philippine president Corazon Aquino labeled out-migrant Filipino laborers “heroic” in 1988 (cf. Rodriguez 2002, 2010), the discourse has expanded beyond state usage—businesses have embraced the nationalist label as a means with which to market their products, from the “Bayani Salad” at “Go! Salads” restaurant in Metro Manila to GK’s very own iced tea, “Bayani Brew.”

Gawad Kalinga has inverted this nationalist discourse, applying the label to those traveling in the opposite direction—diasporic volunteers and donors. Nelson (2012), a GK values formation coordinator, conveys, “Where people are able to sacrifice for country, they have the beginnings of heroism.” In effect, the renunciation of First-World comforts by Fil Ams has come to indicate a sacrificial act. Offering little else in exchange for such a sacrifice, the organization recruits volunteers with the promise of heroism. Ray (2011), a second-generation immigrant and college student, explains,

[I]t’s very fashionable to be a hero, you know. We always joke that in Gawad Kalinga . . . you pose for a picture of you building a house before you actually build a house. Not the other way around. I think there’s nothing wrong about it, if you’re helping out . . . doing your part to help someone build their house . . . At least you can get a nice profile pic for your Facebook and have your friends and family see you help and be selfless.

Here Ray recognizes the performative aspect of volunteerism for him and many of his peers. Critical to volunteering is the demonstration of altruism to friends and family.

The prospect of becoming a hero is thus a significant draw for the majority of volunteers. Given GK’s definition of poverty as “a lack of caring and sharing,” the NGO charges prospective volunteers with caring for and sharing with the Philippine poor in attempts to uplift poor Filipinos’, and thus the nation’s, morale. Charles (2011) explains that GK instills in its participants the notion that “loving the poor is loving [the] country.” Ray (2011) elaborates, “What they market is that if you help build community for [the] poor, you’re building the nation.”

## Instilling Pride, Restoring Dignity, and Healing through Nation Building

At 7 A.M. on a weekday at the Katipunan Avenue Jollibee location I sat in a small booth with Nelson and his GK colleagues, listening to them describe their work with the NGO. “It’s not just a housing program but about *your* past,” nodded Nelson (2012), pursing his lips in my direction. His friend Bert (2012), a GK community organizer, chimed in,

[E]ventually, healing of relationships happen. The relationships on the ground, they are never forgotten. There are a lot of broken youth abroad. They do not value anymore their life—they do not feel love. But when they touch ground here in the Philippines, healing really happens. And eventually that is what nation building is all about.

Gawad Kalinga’s critique of imperialism that underlies its approach to nation building articulates well with first- and second-generation Filipino–American narratives of hopelessness, shame, guilt, and dislocation. Dino (2012), a GK area coordinator, explains that imperial and colonial authorities robbed Filipinos of their dignity and, in turn, bred a culture of dependency and subsequently fostered rampant impoverishment in the country. Roland (2012) puts it more bluntly, “The identity of the Filipino is the Other.” GK maintains that poverty has emerged and persisted in the Philippines because of the long history of imperialism and colonialism. In this sense, Filipinos have lost their way. Longtime volunteer Rich (2012) also connects the history of imperialism in the Philippines to the identity crisis experienced by Filipinos:

[F]or 300 years the Spanish kind of kicked [us] around. And then the Americans came in. They brought in capitalism but there was [sic] the rich and the poor. And then they were also kind of taking our resources. And then, after, of course, Rizal brought us a certain independence, Ninoy brought us a certain independence. You know, we started realizing, “Hey, we’re a people but there is a large span of years, over 300 years, 400 years, we just didn’t know who we are.”

In an interview Meloto (2012) had once stated pointedly to me,

I was born just four years after Independence . . . [F]or 350 years, we were a slave [sic] of other countries, from the Spaniards to the Americans to the Japanese. So I grew up in a generation that was just coming out of slavery: The Spaniards raised us to become laborers in the fields, the Americans raised us to be professionals and to become employees and to just become dependent on foreign brands.

Gawad Kalinga's nation building project thus is "to restore [one's] dignity as a Filipino." Meloto (ibid.) added,

[T]he conditioning of the Filipino is that he is second-class, that he is, you know, not white enough, that he is not tall enough . . . So right now the people want to bleach their skin, they want their noses fixed . . . we disagree with that kasi [because] we honor our design, we don't have to whiten our skin to feel beautiful. Because we have lost our soul as a people, after it was stolen from us for 350 years. We were raised inside the convent for 300 years, and fifty years in Hollywood, so we are the most confused people on the planet.

The GK founder's comments resonate with bourgeois nationalist Claro Recto, who, writes Patricio Abinales (2001, 199),

bemoaned the "aimless Americanization of our ways, customs and attitudes" that manifested itself in "swaggering brown would-be James Deans [and] any number of female teenagers [of whom] 90 percent . . . are crazy over Elvis Presley." An educational system that was "based on alien standards [and had] complete disregard of our idiosyncrasies and indigenous habits" sustained this "colonial mentality."

Gawad Kalinga's nationalist discourse framing its recruitment strategy reflects a repackaging of the radical nationalism of key Filipino figures in history (e.g., Renato Constantino and Jose Maria Sison, and their predecessor Claro Recto) for a conservative project. Abinales (ibid., 198) observes that "Recto's nationalism defined itself as the pride of a united Filipino 'race'

engaged in a glorious quest to make the nation a reality." However, it was Recto's student, Jose W. Diokno, who "was the most successful in blending analysis and pedagogy with nationalism's emotive side. Very few of the many postwar nationalists could evoke readers' and listeners' 'love of nation' as Diokno could" (ibid., 207). More similar to Diokno than to Recto and Sison, Meloto has utilized affect effectively in order to encourage diasporic (and especially youth) participation.

Certainly GK is not the first to exploit diasporic search for a sense of belonging. Consider the droves of Filipino Americans drawn to the similarly anti-imperialist rhetoric of Communist-allied organizations like Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (New Patriotic Alliance). What is distinct about GK, however, is that while it has clearly absorbed some Leftist strategies (e.g., anti-imperialist critiques and renditions of nationalism) it has been able nonetheless to insist upon its bipartisanship and neutrality. According to GK, then, nation building is about cultivating pride, finding one's identity, and loving the nation—none of which the organization deems "political."

Alfred, a recent Stanford graduate, underscores the extent to which GK targets Filipino Americans specifically for its projects. "[T]here's that search for identity . . . where GK taps into that." Larry (2011) explains that Filipino-American volunteers thus travel to the Philippines "to cope with not knowing who we are." The NGO therefore draws Filipino Americans not only by offering the possibility of knowing and belonging, but also by providing an alternative to the shame that many express. Katrina Mae Battad (2012), a US-born Filipina, narrates her personal transformation through volunteerism, attributing "falling in love with the Philippines" to GK.

Nine years ago when I saw the Philippines for the first time, I felt disgust instead of pride. I was a Filipino who did not grow up in the Philippines, and I was not at all pleased with what I saw—squatters, pollution, poverty and hot weather. When I visited other countries, I always left with a desire to visit these countries again. I felt no such sentiment for the Philippines. I wasn't proud of my heritage, and it reached a point where I even questioned why God made me Filipino.

By emphasizing to young Filipino Americans the importance of being proud of their Filipino heritage, GK has been able to supplant the shame and disconnectedness that many young people have expressed experiencing.

Meanwhile, as the NGO recognizes shame as a legacy of US imperialism—in order to draw prospective volunteers by offering an alternative—it does not explicitly acknowledge the racism and xenophobia many Filipinos experience in the US. Filipino–American respondents relate numerous experiences of exclusion and racism while growing up—and most narrate encounters with individuals who assumed they were foreign-born. As Lisa Lowe (1996, 5–6) writes, “[a] national memory haunts the conception of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before.” Drawing on Oscar Campomanes’s work, Yen Le Espiritu (1995, 1) puts it, “[T]he institutional invisibility of the Philippines and Filipino Americans is connected to the historical amnesia and self-erasure regarding the US colonization of the Philippines in particular and US imperialism in general.” Systematic exclusion from “full” citizenship and/or pervasive renderings of their perpetual foreignness in their country of origin have compelled Asians living in the US to look toward another “home” (Chun 2004; Zhou 2004; Zhou and Lee 2004).

Regarding the Philippines and its diaspora, Filomeno Aguilar brings to bear conceptions of “transnation” and “transnationalism” on contemporary Filipino migration to the US, as well as the experiences of their offspring. He suggests, “[T]he most important point about these children of immigrants is that they consciously cultivate an ethnic identity in order to fit into the multicultural USA. The crafting of difference is in pursuit of sameness” (Aguilar 2004, 109–10). Aguilar (*ibid.*, 110) continues, worth quoting in full,

To rediscover the Philippines in “decolonization” activities that aim to heal the social memories of immigrants does not mean liberating the parental country or even seeking a niche in it. Rather, quite instrumentally, it involves finding the post-colonial country in one’s heart in order to claim some legitimate space in the country of settlement. Reclaiming the parental country as the basis of ethnicity may eventually result in a range of transnational acts that directly link the ethnic youth to the parental homeland.

Hence, for many volunteers involvement with GK mitigates the difficulty they experienced growing up Filipino in the US. “I didn’t want to bring home friends because they would just see a dead pig,”<sup>5</sup> Alfred (2012) confides. “Growing up I didn’t want to associate [sic] with being Filipino,” recalls JR, another Filipino–American volunteer and recent college graduate living and working in Makati. And references to shame are not limited to second-generation Filipino Americans. Rich (2012) relates his struggle with identity through his thirties while living in the US. “I couldn’t say I was Filipino back then.” But, because of GK, he has “realized there’s no reason to be ashamed” (*ibid.*).

The organization thus appeals to volunteers by providing a counternarrative. Gawad Kalinga “relates messages you never hear [like] ‘Be proud to be Filipino,’” Alfred (2012) remarks. GK imparts to its prospective volunteers an alternative narrative that celebrates rather than denigrates their Filipinoness. “I don’t want my kids to be like me,” shares Derek (2012), an avid GK supporter and Filipino–American volunteer. “We should love to be Filipino, we should love that piece of us.” Derek (*ibid.*) credits GK for how he has “come to know [himself] as a Filipino,” elaborating,

I see people finding who they are [in GK]. It’s so funny, my kids are watching this—they love Disney—they’re watching this show about this kid who is Irish but doesn’t know he’s Irish, and then when he finds out he doesn’t want to tell people he’s Irish. It’s like the story of the Fil Am. He sees the wooden spoons and wooden forks on his wall, and he knows we eat different food. When I was a kid, I had a friend who is Irish and I noticed on the table there was no rice. When I got home and I asked my mom and I said, “Hey they didn’t have any rice for dinner.” And she said, “Well, not everyone eats rice.” And that’s when I realized I was Filipino. I was like six or something. Some people realize it, but they do not want to accept it. That’s what I hope and pray for the vision of the Fil Am. Okay, there’s always Filipinos in the Philippines but I can only answer for Fil Ams . . . we found our Filipinoness in the work.

Based in Los Angeles, Lora (2011) articulates via a phone interview a similar narrative: “I think I experienced self-hate” and that volunteering abroad “takes the pressure off of living here [in the US].” GK thus serves as a critical

point of departure from which diasporic—particularly second-generation immigrant—Filipino Americans reinvigorate or breathe new life into “the nation.” As Aguilar (2004, 115) puts it, “Members of the second generation who do not have any natal connection to the parental homeland but who have stepped onto ancestral soil, so to speak, have come to embody the haunting return of questions of national identity.”

The parents of many of my second-generation Filipino–American respondents were aghast at their children’s desire to travel to the Philippines; they had left the country in the first place so that their children would never have to know its poverty. “Ever since my parents left they don’t look back,” says Cherry (2012) softly. But GK relates to this segment of Filipinos living abroad that it provides *all* Filipinos living abroad—not just US-born Filipinos but also those Filipinos who were born in the Philippines—“a chance to share, help their home country, and challenge the idea of being un-nationalistic [for] leaving the country,” as Charles explicates. For Filipinos who were “forced to leave and find jobs abroad,” clarifies Alfred (2012), “now is [their] homecoming.” He reasons that those who left the Philippines during the height of the Marcos dictatorship “never had an opportunity because we were always under somebody; the Spanish, the US . . . this is [their] chance as Filipinos to rebuild the Philippines.”

### **Unequal Entitlements: Heroism for the Diaspora, Values Training for the Poor**

While staff and volunteers care and share their way to heroism and hopefulness, the poor and working-class recipients of GK’s activities must undergo a “values formation” training, entitled “Courage to Care,” to qualify for housing. In fitted denim capris pants, a Sponge Bob tank top, and a pair of gold tsinelas, Ester appeared much younger than her 41 years. Her long black hair grazed her lower back—she recently had it rebonded, a popular hair-straightening practice among women in the Philippines. After instructing her daughter from across the room to stir the spaghetti (to sell the following morning) Ester (2012) leaned in toward me,

Una, iyong ugali. Pag-uugali, tinatanggal iyon. Sa pagdadamit, sa pagsasalita, sa kapaligiran. Ang paglilinis ng bahay, ng paligid, pag-ayos ng sarili kasi ang mga tao dito dati walang pakialaman eh. So noong nandito na ang Gawad Kalinga nagustuhan namin. So sumunod

kami sa Gawad Kalinga. Noong nandoon na kami doon sa Gawad Kalinga, may meeting na. Inano na kami na kung ano ang mga policies sumunod kami sa policy. Kailangan sumunod ka para magkaroon ka ng bahay dito kasi ito awardee ito. Iyon yung dahil sumunod kami sa kanila, sa values formation, sa policy nila kaya kami may award. Ito iyong award na binigay sa amin, nagkaroon kami ng unit ng bahay sa Gawad Kalinga.

First, our bad habits were changed—of dressing, speaking, even of how we value our environment. Now we made it a habit to clean the house, the surroundings, and even maintained hygiene whereas before we didn’t care about these things. So when Gawad Kalinga came we welcomed it. We followed its policies. Gawad Kalinga required us to attend meetings at which they taught us their policies, which we obeyed. We needed to follow its policies so that we could avail of housing and be awarded a unit. This house was awarded to us because we followed Gawad Kalinga’s policy.

The intensive three-month training, which consists of a series of lectures and workshops on what constitutes appropriate behavior in a GK village, is a requirement that all beneficiaries must fulfill. “GK attracted me because it involved people in building . . . not just handouts,” notes Becky (2012), a freshman at UCLA. That GK’s requirements entail “correcting behavior” appeals to the majority of volunteers with whom I spoke. “What I think is really good is that in the values formation . . . there’s this whole component where it’s like you teach how to be a citizen. You basically tell people to get off their butts and go find a job,” reveals Lynn (2011), a student at Stanford University, during our meet-up in Palo Alto. Ken (2011), also at Stanford, lauds what he refers to as GK’s “7-step citizenship program,” where beneficiaries “have to go through a program to learn what it takes to be a good citizen and how to love your neighbors, and be a participating member of the society.” Such sentiments reflect and are consistent with GK’s emphasis on “building a culture of empowerment, not entitlement” (Gawad Kalinga 2012).

The ways in which many volunteers describe the organization’s requirements reveal the underclass ideology that undergirds the organization’s development efforts. Notions of poor productivity and the need for adequate participation in society reflect the commonly held belief among many

volunteers and staff members that the poor have become poor not because of wider structural obstacles (e.g., dearth of employment opportunities, failed agrarian reform) but because they are unproductive. GK thus provides the “roots of character formation,” relates David (2011), a Stanford alumnus. He adds, “People may blame the government but it’s about complacency.” Beneficiaries “really are lazy,” explicates Charles (2011). Volunteers and staff members alike thus praise the organization for intervening in the “certain behaviors” that are endemic in poverty. JR (2012) sums up the organization’s work with the poor: “[T]he goal is people helping themselves.” The “mindset” of GK is “to make the poor more productive,” he continues. “If you love your country you will be more productive.” The literature is replete with examples of the ways in which recipients of social welfare benefits must in fact exert significant time and labor in order to prove themselves worthy of care (Collins 2008; Piven and Cloward 1993).

In step with neoliberal ideology, then, the Philippine poor must achieve citizenship status through increased productivity (e.g., “go find a job”), whereas the predominantly and relatively affluent visitors become national heroes, honorary Filipinos, and global citizens by virtue of their mobility and sentimentality. Under these terms, care for the poor is conditional—they are rendered either deserving or undeserving. While GK attributes its behavioral regulatory regime to the provisioning of the poor with “middle-class aspirations,” the GK’s values formation training serves more as a disciplinary project than an instrument for the achievement of social equality. Michael Pinches (2010, 298; cf. Heller 1999, 52–72) writes,

[T]he civil society that has been celebrated since the overthrow of the Marcos regime might be viewed not only as an alternate realm of power apart from the state and for the people, but perhaps more tellingly, as a social, cultural and political expression of middle class identity. Differentiated from the political elite above, this identity has also been differentiated from the *masa* below who needed to be helped, uplifted, organized, led, educated, trained, conscientized, and liberating—who, in short, needed to be civilized.

In effect, GK’s work with the poor has been a tool through and with which the country’s middle class has secured a social status distinct from that of the local elite and working poor (ibid., cf. Seki 2012).

Humanitarianism thus becomes “the only strategy for eliminating poverty and suffering [which] also reproduces a colonialist narrative of modernity and progress within which the privileged/West is compassionate and agentive and the ‘third world’ is only helpless” (Fadlalla 2008, 227). Diasporic helpers’ privileged status affords them security—Filipino Americans are always important, cared for, and needed. Al (2011), a Filipino–American college student and volunteer, remarks, “[W]hen you say, you engage people in this idea that you are a millennial hero, you’re an agent, there’s an agency in that. And people feel that even if I can’t speak the language, even if I can’t locate the Philippines on a map, that my everyday existence is contributing positively towards someone else who’s in need.” Despite assertions by staff members and volunteers alike that GK works with the poor “not just to feel good,” actions convey otherwise. Al (2011) elaborates, “I mean it used to be that, like, the Peace Corps, you would go and do something, right? But now you really don’t have to. Now you just drop something off. You can click, you can ‘Like’ on Facebook . . . and be a global citizen in some effect, you know?”

Sara Ahmed (2004, 22) points out, “[C]haritable discourses of compassion more broadly show us that stories of pain involve complex relations of power.” Recalling a volunteer trip to a GK site, JR (2012) reminisces, “I really believe in the power of presence, like ‘cause the power of presence really makes a difference in other people’s lives. I remember . . . I really just, I really remember being touched especially by this one who, you know, kept following me around. It’s like as if he, you know, care about the people visiting them. And really appreciate it.” Al (2011) relays that “belief in them [the poor] helps them [the poor] go on.” Thus “[c]harity becomes a prerogative of a meritocracy guided by neutrality, humanity, and good conscience to save the poor and to help overcome their unfortunate suffering” (Fadlalla 2008, 214). While prospective GK beneficiaries must exert significant effort to prove themselves deserving of housing, the verbs referenced above by volunteers to depict their involvement with GK (to exist, to be present, to believe in the poor) connote a kind of effortlessness. Affect replaces action but only for the privileged. One must be able to afford to do nothing.



## Conclusion: Critiques and Limitations of GK's "Enlightened Capitalism"

In spite of overwhelming support for GK's emphasis on self-help as a solution to poverty, some student volunteers strongly disagree, as they draw parallels between GK's work and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism in the Philippines. Volunteer Ray (2011) expresses concern:

[F]or me it's mind boggling because for me it's very colonial . . . you're kind of imposing your values onto another, you know, it's as if the values of the GK beneficiaries are inferior to yours, and who says that your values are better . . . I mean, I've seen the values formation like . . . I feel like it's very colonial because you're teaching people that are already mature, they have kids. I feel that if they have been given the same opportunity as I have, these people are not going to be poor. The reason that they're poor is not directly linked to what they did growing up . . . It comes out to be that we need these [sic] values formation program because your poverty or your being poor has something to do with your values. And if you just followed our values, the values that Gawad Kalinga espouses, then it will be a way for you guys to move out of poverty or rise out of poverty. Me, personally, I don't buy it.

Helen (2011), a UC San Diego student, mocks GK: "This is GK. Praise us . . . We are saviors of the Philippines."

This article thus suggests that the underclass ideology underlying GK's heroism discourse specifically, and humanitarianism discourse generally, has widespread implications for subject formation, reconfiguring conceptions of citizenship where diasporic helpers are afforded honorary Filipino citizenship while poor and working-class Filipinos are depicted as citizens-in-training. Key social scientists have long recognized how processes of global neoliberal economic restructuring reshape conceptions of citizenship among various populations (Collins 2008; Hyatt 2001; Ong 2006; Sassen 1998), foretelling "a reworking of democracy in ways that coalesce with global capital interests" (Kamat 2003, 65). Aihwa Ong (2006, 16) points out that "components formerly tied to citizenship—rights, entitlements, as well as nation and territoriality are becoming disarticulated" and replaced by "governing strategies that promote an

economic logic in defining, evaluating, and protecting certain categories of subjects and not others."

In conclusion, Gawad Kalinga's deployment of the nationalist discourse of heroism to garner the free labor and support of the Filipino diaspora is certainly impressive. Through volunteerism with GK, second-generation Filipino Americans have been able to realize or recover a sense of belonging, self-love, and pride. But equally impressive (albeit much more disconcerting) is the extent to which GK's attention to poverty as a reflection or outcome of one's individual failures not only renders the poor of the Philippines as objects upon which the relatively affluent Fil-Am volunteers can fixate and uplift, but also redirects attention away from global trade policies, governmental upward redistribution, the history of patrimonial politics, and elite class and oligarchic interests. This "process of deep neoliberalization" (Gledhill 2006) threatens to jettison the liberating potential of transnational and diasporic solidarity networks that form in response to increasing immiseration in our global neoliberal economic present.

## Notes

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- 1 Gawad Kalinga has adopted the discourse of *bagong bayani* (new hero) from the Philippine state, which has used this language to praise Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). This point is elaborated further in a different section of this article.
- 2 This reflects aggregate volunteer data; disaggregate data are not currently available. A further breakdown in terms of volunteers from outside the Philippines versus those from the Philippines may be available in the organization's first Impact Assessment Study, which is scheduled for release in 2014.
- 3 Underclass ideology refers to the discourse that blames the poor for their impoverishment, distracting from the political-economic production of poverty (Di Leonardo 1998, 72).
- 4 The term "second-generation" typically refers "to those born to immigrant parents in the host country. The second-generation is distinguished from the 1.5ers because their entire life experience is through the lens of a life lived in the host country" (Aparicio 2006, 14). For the purposes of this study, however, no distinction is made between the 1.5ers and the second-generations; on the contrary, second-generations here include Filipino immigrants' children born in the US and Filipinos who arrived in the US as children.
- 5 Alfred is referring to *litson* or *lechon*, a popular Filipino roasted pork dish.



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