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# **Taking Nanay to the Philippines: transnational circuits of affect**

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## **Taking *Nanay* to the Philippines: Transnational Circuits of Affect**

**Caleb Johnston and Geraldine Pratt**

### **Introduction**

16 November 2012. We were ushered into the Dean's office at the GT-Toyota Asian Cultural Center, a new multi-million dollar complex at the University of the Philippines Diliman in Manila. The Dean was running late but her two associates were available and welcoming. Introductions were formal and business cards were exchanged. In ice-breaking preliminaries, Professor Reuben Canete, responsible for cultural programming at the Center, told us about the migration of his family members to Vancouver 15 years ago. When Dean Carolyn Sobritchea arrived we learned that she was a former visiting professor at the University of British Columbia and that she possesses a keen interest in Vancouver; she spoke at length about the Philippine's special relationship with Canada. She presented us with her latest publication—*Health of Our Heroes*, a study aimed to assess and improve women migrant workers' access to sexual and reproductive health services and information. Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, the publication is both evidence and product of her long-term involvement within an extensive policy-making network in the Philippines and beyond. The atmosphere eased. Chocolate cake was served.

We were in Manila planning the tour of *Nanay*, a testimonial theatre play designed to stimulate public debate about Canada's Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP)—a labour visa program through which many Filipino women migrate each year to Canada to care for Canadian children and the elderly. Migrant workers admitted through this program must complete 24 months of live-in care work within 48 months to qualify to apply for an open visa and then permanent resident status in Canada. Their contract is with a single employer and they must live in that employer's home while registered in the LCP. Since the mid 1990s the majority coming through the program have been Filipina women, reflecting a long history

of American imperialism in the Philippines. Western education and English language instruction were central features of the U.S. ‘civilizing mission’ in the Philippines through the early decades of the twentieth century and have been key to the production of a vast migrant labour diaspora and culture of out-migration, first institutionalized by President Marcos in the 1970s as the Labor Export Policy (LEP) and expanded by subsequent administrations, in large part because of the significance of remittances for the Philippine economy (Guevarra; Rodriquez).

The numbers of Filipinas admitted to Canada through the LCP expanded exponentially through the 1990s and 2000s; from 2,684 in 2000 to 9,819 in 2009, with a high of 13,775 entries through the LCP in 2007 (Kelly, Park, de Leon and Priest). With the downturn in the economy, numbers dropped to 5882 in 2011 (Kelly) but the LCP remains a significant feature of Canada’s care strategy and has been a defining feature of Filipino migration to Canada: in 2009, for example, 49 percent of all Filipino immigrants to Canada came through the LCP (TIEDI). The program is thus embedded within a long history of transpacific movement between North America and the Philippines, a culture of out-migration and a political economy of labour export from the Philippines, a dense web of discourses about Filipinas’ capacity for care and sacrifice (Cruz), and a great need for high quality child and eldercare in Canada. The LCP is by no means the worst program of its kind; it is almost unique in the world among migration programs for domestic workers because of the opportunity it affords for permanent migration and family sponsorship. For all of these reasons the issues are complex and require full and nuanced public debate.

Documentary theatre seemed the right vehicle for staging this debate. It would allow us to bring individuals with different relationships to the issue into the same intimate space to hear and feel the issues from different perspectives. It would present ‘evidence’ that could not be discounted, embodied by professional actors so as to be felt as well as thought. It

would create an occasion for conversation between those who do not normally converse on an equal footing: Filipino domestic workers with Canadian employers, policy makers with grassroots activists, Filipino children with their Canadian teachers. At the time of conceiving the play we were not yet reading Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics and the potential of theatre as an emancipatory space but it now clear that our thinking is in line with his theorizing about theatre and politics (1999; 2004; 2009; 2010). We were hoping that our theatre piece could draw the audience close enough to different dimensions of the debate so as to scramble existing identifications and open a space for new ideas and political alignments.

In 2007 we began working on this project, which was developed in a multi-year collaboration that brought together geographers (Pratt and Johnston), professional Vancouver theatre artists, and community activists from the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia (PWC).<sup>1</sup> As documentary theatre, we translated scholarly research into theatre, which is to say, we transformed conventional social science interview transcripts into a verbatim script. Collected over the past fifteen years, we gleaned Pratt's research archive for compelling narratives that spoke to the complicated politics and ethical dilemmas of Canada's LCP. Taken from a series of interviews conducted with Filipino domestic workers, their children, as well as Canadian employers and nanny agents, we edited extracted transcripts into a number of testimonial monologues. In the summer of 2008, these were developed in a workshop led by Vancouver director Alex Ferguson at Chapel Arts, a former funeral home recently transformed into an arts centre in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

In January 2009, we carried out a three-week rehearsal and production process with a cast of professional actors and a full slate of designers and crew. *Nanay* premiered at Vancouver's 2009 PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, and later that same year, we toured the project to Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer Theatre as part of their *Your Nanny Hates You!*

Festival. We constructed *Nanay* as a site-responsive performance installation of monologues and other scenes, in which small audiences of fifteen are guided through a series of rooms where they encounter different characters with different relationships to the issues of care and need in Canada. Each and every performance of the play has moved seamlessly from performance into an hour-long facilitated public forum in which audience members are encouraged to examine their own entanglements, complacencies and complicities and to discuss the issues staged in the play. These forums have provided the setting for some remarkable conversations across substantial difference, especially in Vancouver where we were able to ensure that at least five Filipino domestic workers or their children were at each performance (for details see Pratt; Johnston and Pratt; Pratt and Johnston). We have turned to theatre to put disparate experiences of care and need into public dialogue; we have looked to harness the affective impact of theatre to put issues into greater visibility, to greater public effect.

Our experience of staging *Nanay* in Vancouver and Berlin stimulated our desire to take the play to the Philippines. Some of this can be expressed in the language of scholarly debate. Citing Nancy Fraser's argument that deliberations of justice are often misframed geographically and existing territorial arrangements (of nation states) exclude those who should be heard, we have argued for the opportunity that our play affords to recalibrate the scales of justice by generating transnational public dialogue and debate. Theories of global care and ethics also imply Canadians' obligation to understand the implications of the LCP from the perspective of those living in the Philippines; *Nanay* could help Canadians fulfill this obligation.

Our desire to take *Nanay* to the Philippines came from other sources as well, more heart than head. In assessments with our community collaborators after the Vancouver performances, domestic workers who participated in the play's design and performance said

that the play moved them to want to tell their stories differently to their families in the Philippines, to be more explicit about the everyday traumas that they experience under the LCP. Like many migrants, Filipina domestic workers often feel obliged to construct narratives for their families in the Philippines that accentuate their success in order to shelter themselves and their families from the pain of migration and family separation. *Nanay* tells nuanced but painful stories of coming to Canada; our hope is that it can shoulder some of the burden of circulating the stories and emotions that migrants have difficulty expressing themselves. We were equally spurred by a spirited post-performance talkback discussion in Berlin with several members of the Philippine embassy who attended the play. They told us: “And to the gentleman who has been asking that you must see that the social cost is so great, of course we do. Canada did not need to make this study or this play for us to know the problem that we have. It is everywhere [in the Philippines]. It is something that is even in the [news]papers and in countless studies. We knew before we came today that the problems and the social costs are stupendous... But these are things that we are already working towards solving.” The conversation spilled into the bar after the talkback and the embassy representatives were both engaging and dismissive –frustratingly and enticingly so, in ways that fueled our desire to push further and to insist on continuing the conversation in the Philippines.

But what does it mean to travel with the play and continue the conversation in the Philippines? For Canadians the play brought into presence an issue that many can comfortably ignore: this is Canada’s reliance on a type of indentured servitude to address national child and eldercare needs. In the Philippines most everyone has an intimate personal connection to the struggles of migration. Within the first hour of arriving in Manila on our planning trip in November 2012, our driver from the airport spoke about his own experiences as a migrant worker in Dubai, those of his relatives in Vancouver and his hopes that his

children might migrate to Canada through the LCP; we knew even then that we had entered into a radically different emotional and political landscape and began thinking about its implications for reshaping the script and production. Rather than a lack of feeling and visibility, in the Philippines migration is hyper visible and complex affects, which articulate as hope, fear, and sacrifice, circulate widely. And though so many we met in Manila had direct connections to Canada, it is facile to expect that the play will move easily or evenly across transnational space. We write at the start of a process of transnational translation, with the understanding that there is a geography to the circulation of affects and that different affects travel differently in different contexts, with different political effects. We use this as an opportunity to share some of our deliberations and present several scenes and strategies through which we hope to move *Nanay* into a new emotional, affective and political terrain. We will be returning to the Philippines in November 2013 to put them into practice through performances at PETA theatre in Manila.

### **Worn Out Affects and Tired Debates**



Figure 1: A photograph taken for a full-length article published in the Georgia Straight that captures the tone of the domestic worker monologues. Photo by Caleb Johnston



It was Michiyo Yonenon-Reyes who first greeted us at our meeting with Dean Sobritchea. As an academic at the University of the Philippines, her work focuses on Filipino migration to Japan. But her knowledge of migration is intimate as well; members of her husband's family have settled in Toronto. In the Philippines, "migration", she noted, "is part of everyone's everyday life." As we presented the concept and intent behind the play, she picked up and ran with our desire to tell complicated, messy narratives about migration experiences. She spoke of a generalized fatigue within the Philippines about the ways that migration stories tend to be narrated: migrants portrayed either as victims of abuse and exploitation or as heroes of the nation (see also Gibson, Law, and McKay). The stories that need to be told to advance political debate, in her assessment, are the complicated, nuanced ones that neither celebrate nor condemn labour migration but convey the complexity of affective investments, attachments and outcomes.

We already had heard this concern in Canada but for somewhat different reasons. Martin Kinch, the dramaturge from the Vancouver Playwright's Theatre Centre with whom we worked in 2007-08 when writing the script leading up to the Vancouver production, was determined that we include testimonial material from a domestic worker who embodied a more positive experience of migrating to Canada as a live-in caregiver. His concern was not that audiences would be exhausted by stories of victimization; he argued that inclusion of a positive story would make *Nanay* more credible. If monologues from domestic workers told of only negative, exploitative experiences he felt that middle class Canadians could dismiss the play as biased and disengage.

Nevertheless, as difficult decisions were made in the Canadian production about which monologues would be kept and discarded, the more positive monologue was cut and the migration experiences of Filipino domestic workers and their families were told through the following five scenes: an ebullient monologue at the moment of leaving the Philippines in

which a domestic worker describes the economic pressures to leave the Philippines and her great optimism about overseas live-in domestic work; an angry monologue of exploitation within the LCP; sad tearful recorded accounts of domestic workers leaving their children in the Philippines; a largely depressed account of family separation and reunification from the perspective of a child who had been left behind and then reunited with her mother in Vancouver; and a replica of a domestic worker's cramped Canadian basement bedroom.<sup>2</sup> Neither hero nor pure victim, the affective range within these monologues and scenes nonetheless drifted towards the negative, the angry, the hopeless and the sad. Canadian audience members' reactions indicate their receptivity to this emotional range: "my son said that for him the one that impacted him the most was going into that bedroom because he felt it was so heavy"; "I felt a dreaded sense of hopelessness looking through the nanny's room"; "the little room was so very sad"; the Children's Choice Award determined that *Nanay* was the "Saddest" of the seventeen plays presented at the PuSh festival in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally liberal thinkers have had a great deal of faith in the capacity of stories of pain and suffering to create emotional proximity that can powerfully disrupt and transcend social and geographical distances. In his 1993 Oxford Amnesty Lecture, for instance, Richard Rorty argued for how essential the telling of and listening to sad stories has been for the emergence of a human rights culture that pushes the boundaries of who counts as fully human: "We pragmatists," he declared, "argue from the fact that the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories" (118-199). Sympathetic to Rorty's general point, feminists and others nonetheless have raised hard questions about the politics and geopolitics of empathy and spectacles of suffering. Rather than disrupting the status quo, familiar patterns of who tells and who receives stories of pain and suffering can re-inscribe hierarchies of privilege: the privileged listen and watch, the marginalized tell. The capacity to empathize with the

suffering subject is often taken as a hallmark feature of the liberal bourgeois subject, which simultaneously reinforces their sense of liberal goodness (e.g., Berlant; Pratt). On the other hand, third world women and other marginalized peoples are frequently staged as agent-less suffering victims who exist without the complex and contradictory subjectivities or emotional depth of the privileged (Chow; Mohanty; Spivak). As bell hook wrote of the representations of African Americans so many years ago: “Tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain” (152). Equally, transnational encounters run the risk of retracing long-standing neo-colonial trajectories; Lionnet and Shih, for instance, are critical of the ways that binaries of North/South persist in even critical postcolonial and transnational studies. Theories and practices of transnationalism, they argue, tend to focus on the most dominant and the most resistant in ways that simplify and essentialize subjectivity and power relations and foreclose possibilities for ethical transnational encounters and constructive political debate.

As we met with academics and theatre artists in Manila the reasons for exploring complex and contradictory feelings and affects multiplied beyond this generalized (albeit extremely important) critique of hegemonic western white representations of marginalized and/or non-western people. In one of our first meetings with Dennis Gupa, a theatre director and dramaturge based at the University of the Philippines Los Banos, he said quite simply that he would not tell these stories: “Life is hard. We know suffering.” One way of thinking about this statement is to recognize that different affects and emotions are normalized in different places. In Canada, suffering is not assumed to be the norm and – rightly or wrongly – there is national pride in Canada’s success as a multicultural nation and its role as alleviator of world suffering (Razack). There are different registers of normalcy in the Philippines as compared to Canada and a theatre piece that simply reproduces the norm does nothing to

disrupt it. In the Canadian context (where “we alleviate the world’s suffering”), stories of suffering as a result of Canadian immigration policy are genuinely disruptive. In a context where “we know suffering” a theatre piece about Filipina suffering may reproduce norms rather than disrupt them. Given the normalization of different affects and emotions in different places, productive disruption will happen differently in different places.

We need also to consider that in the Philippines stories of victimization in Canada are not necessarily arresting or welcome stories, for three reasons. First, many people who we met there told stories of raw physical, sometimes life threatening abuse in nearby countries – a brother-in-law who narrowly escaped being raped in Dubai, the body of a domestic worker returned from Mongolia without her heart.<sup>4</sup> Arlie Hochschild has coined the term ‘global heart transplant’ to describe the affection that migrant domestic workers develop for children that they care for when they work overseas in countries such as Canada. Relative to the actual removal of bodily organs, this metaphorical heart transplant seems relatively benign (see also Kittay). The monologue of poor treatment under the LCP and the small basement bedroom that evoked such emotions of sadness and pity in Vancouver may be received very differently in Manila. Second, and related, Canada is imagined as a place to escape from suffering. It is a dream destination for many Filipino migrant domestic workers because of the unusual opportunity the LCP affords to migrate permanently. Whereas middle-class Canadians seem to have a voracious appetite for stories of victimization of others (especially ones that reinforce rather than disturb their sense of goodness), narratives of suffering in Canada are unlikely to be as compelling or as popular in the Philippines. They close off a fantasized route of escape. Third, we are keen to invite family members of domestic workers in Canada to attend the play and associated public forum. These family members may not be willing or able to hear stories of difficulties in Canada. Our role – as white middle class Canadians -- inducing shame and worry in family members who benefit from the remittances sent to them

by loved ones working as domestic workers in Canada is an ethical situation that demands careful consideration.

For our project, we have the desire and responsibility to anticipate and engage possible blockages to affective engagement with *Nanay* and the issues that it attempts to raise, and to consider how certain emotions such as shame may circulate in problematic ways that cause pain and close down in other ways productive areas of affective engagement and public discussion. The blockages to and the circulation of feelings likely work differently in different contexts. Liberal assumptions about universal or shared emotions miss the possibility that sadness or pain, for instance, emerge and take shape differently within specific contexts. Discourses of suffering and empathy may not work in universal ways and may be more or less possible and/or politically productive in some situations rather than others. In her discussion of a transnational politics of empathy, Carolyn Pedwell poses a series of challenging questions: What is empathy? What does it do? Who does it serve? What are its risks? How might it be otherwise? How might empathy be rethought, not as a remedy to injustice but as a space of mediation, not only as a structure of feeling but as a means of feeling structural relations? The answers, she argues, are likely to vary in different times and contexts.

As we plan to take the play to the Philippines, we are keen that the play engenders nuanced debate rather than sloganeering at the extremes: migrants are heroes, migrants are victims, the LCP is good, the LCP is bad. And so we are re-examining our script in preparation for its translation into a new emotional and political landscape. As one aspect of this we have reinserted the more positive migration story that was earlier discarded to facilitate a more emotionally ambiguous exchange. This is a story of a self-scripted go-getter, who extols the virtues of her entrepreneurial individualism while telling a larger tale of community suffering and capitalist uneven development, who speaks of loneliness and

homesickness in the language of personal triumph. She is unsettling: hard not to simultaneously admire and argue against; she is difficult to ignore.

### **Performing Jovy**

[My name is Jovy] I'm from Laloma, Quezon City, the hometown of the famous *lechon*!

[Before leaving to Canada] I graduated [with a] Bachelor of Science in Mathematics in the Polytech University of the Philippines and I was able to get a job in... BPI, one of the biggest banks in Manila.

I went to Makati and readied my resume. I had 10 resumes. My first stop was BPI. When I had my screening, they already gave me the schedule for exams, and I made it. I came in the next day. They sent me for an interview and I made it! The next day I was already hired! I didn't have time to distribute my resume. It's a waste of resume and picture! I wanted to get a job that was prestigious. It was a bank, right? *Ayun ang*, prestigious job back then.

The job is very good... [but] when I got married and I got 2 kids, then it's a different story altogether: milk, diapers, vaccinations, and all that. You receive your pay and that's it—the money is just enough. There is no savings. And pretty soon, my kids are going to school, right? What are our options? It's to go abroad. But how? So I heard about this Live-In Caregiver [Program from a newspaper ad.] They said that after 2 years you can get your family. So I took the training.

[To tell you the truth, originally] ... I don't want to go anywhere because *masaya ang buhay ko sa*. I am happy in the Philippines... I have a good job, I have good friends, my family is there, so that's it. It was only when, sort of, the necessity of money came that I decided that this was the only option. But I don't want to go to the] Middle East or Singapore or Hong Kong because I have [heard] lots of stories from... domestic helper[s]. They just

work there for ten years, 15 years, 20 years, until the kids grow up and then they grow old and they're still working there as domestic helper[s]. [Me], I don't mind working as a domestic helper but only for such a time. I know once *ma-establish, ko ano man yung kung* goal, because I know once I establish my goal, I can move [on]. I [was] willing to put my [office] career aside for as long as I have a goal and I have something to look forward to. [My husband and I] dreamed about this.

[How many years was I separated from my kids?] Four years. When I started in 2003, [how we communicated], it's all phone cards! Oh my gosh. I should've been a millionaire by now if I saved all that money. Everyday, *siguro*, maybe ten dollars. It's an everyday thing. Those are the days when I still don't have my own PC... [Finally] I got my own computer. So it's the internet now. Webcam. Everyday *din yon*, we webcam! There are even times that the webcam is turned on and [the kids] just about. It is me who... listens to what they are doing... When I get homesick I just listen to the little noises they make, what conversations they are having, when the kids are playing even if the camera is not focused on them—I could still hear what they are doing around the house... That's all. I just listen.

After the 24<sup>th</sup> months [of work in the LCP in Canada I] immediately applied for my Permanent Residency, and I got my open visa. So it means I'm no longer restricted to the caregiver job. [At] the same time, the papers [for my family]—the embassy [in Manila] is already working on [them]... All in all, [I was separated from my family] for four years. [After the LCP]... then that's the time that I got two jobs, three jobs. It's pretty good earning but my body is worn out and tired... [But] I wasn't disappointed. I was content because... I found a job at a carpet manufacturer and it is like a Filipino family... Oh, we are really happy. So... [it's like] my future is being designed so that I won't get shocked when I am done with the LCP.

[At this business] little by little Filipinos are being employed! The Caucasians are the minority because [the bosses] like the Filipino work ethic... It's like they saw that it's harmonious. How come the Filipinos are always happy, do not complain, [and are] fast learners? So then they looked for more Filipinos! So now we're all Filipinos there including the warehouse.

[When I was in the LCP, my employers] knew... my plan. I told them after the 24 months... "I will not work for you anymore as a caregiver". [Now I have] office work in a cargo service facility. I was sent there to teach the cargo system—the computer system. It's so happy... I'm okay here, but [is] there something more[?]. I am being prepared for the next step... It's like everything is falling into place. Thank God!

[I came to Canada because] you have a lot of opportunities when you grow up, you can have everything you want when you have a job. [My 9 year old daughter], she wants to design clothes. That's good. If you excel in that you can have your own business. I told her [this is the land of opportunities!] There's nothing impossible here. [It was easy for me to find a job right after the LCP because I am a] go-getter... Despite the circumstances... I never lose hope. [It's just] a matter of mind conditioning. If I say I can do it. I can do it. You know. It's a combination of personality plus your experience, plus your confidence... That's what I learned.

[Do] you know how many people from the Philippines get disappointed when they get here[?] They can't do what their true job is. It's hard to adjust. Me, I'm really sure that I will face difficulties. I prepare my heart for that. I actually put my pride aside. Because if one just has blind hopes, things won't happen that way. You'll get disappointed. When you get disappointed, you go very, very low. You're lonely... you cry. What will happen to you? That's why so many of us caregivers who are first timers going aboard, [end up] going back [to the Philippines].



We learned about those cases. There are *a lot*. Either they commit suicide here from being so depressed or go crazy [or] return after eight months. [Or] it's almost at the end of their 24-month term and [they] couldn't make it and so went back. It's like, why? Almost 24 months and you quit? Types like that. If you're not strong here [points to head] and you're not strong here [points to heart], you'll have a hard time. [Crosses herself]

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Jovy is negotiating between discontinuous frames of meaning and affect, only some of which are anchored in experiences of suffering. She tells her story with great energy and optimism but she nonetheless tells an incoherent story that moves between emotional registers. Furthermore, as we work with this monologue for the Manila production we are returning more and more of it to Tagalog and Taglish, to the mixture of the languages used in the original interview (some of which was translated for research purposes and Vancouver production). It was the Filipino-Canadian actor who workshopped the monologue with us in Vancouver, Lissa Neptuno, who drew attention to way in which Jovy's mode of storytelling changes as she moves in and out of Tagalog, English and Taglish. Her mode of storytelling is very different in English and she is more likely to use English, for instance, when she answers a question as 'a research subject'. We are hoping that the violence of colonialism and western knowledge production can be opened up and explored through a careful scripting of the movement between languages and modes of story telling. In other words, there may be ways of communicating affective relations in the form as much as content of the story, and in ways that leave the contradictory range of emotions in tension and in play.

## Feeling for the Employers



Figure 2: Employers an audience can love to hate. Photo by Caleb Johnston

There is second track of monologues in *Nanay*: these involve Canadian employers and a Canadian nanny agent. In the Canadian production, staging these monologues was a source of much disagreement and debate. What did we want audience members to feel about and towards Canadians who hire Filipino domestic workers: empathy, disdain, hostility, moral superiority or some mixture of unsettled emotions? Further, the middle-class employers were interviewed in very different circumstances than were the domestic workers (the former interviewed in their homes by a university researcher, the latter at the Philippine Women Centre in the context of activist research). Did their research interview transcripts and script give the director and actors enough to work with to find a complicated emotional range? We eventually created three scenes. One was developed from an interview with a couple that hired first a Filipina and then a European nanny. Their dialogue, in which they express a sense of self-congratulatory paternalism towards the first and then make invidious

comparisons between the Filipina and European nanny, lends itself to satire and the dialogue was staged in Vancouver to exaggerate their racism and privilege through casting, costumes, setting and actors' demeanor. A second scene was created from two separate interviews with Canadian women who were trying to cope with finding home care for their children within the existing Canadian labour supply of mostly young and older women caregivers, almost all undependable in the short or long term. Their experiences of hiring and firing or being let down by these workers thread in and out of each other, and the staged 'dialogue' is an exhausting repetition of stories of stress and frustration. Unable to find an interview within the existing research transcripts with someone who had actually hired a Filipina nanny that elicited empathy, we interviewed a close friend who told of her experiences hiring a Filipina live-in caregiver for her mother, who had had a stroke and has advanced Parkinson's disease; this was worked up as a third employer scene.

Response in a community forum held by Filipino-Canadian community collaborators after the Vancouver performances suggest that it was the second scene that created the most emotional connections for at least some Filipino audience members. A Filipino Canadian activist, himself the father of two young children, spoke of "being surprised to like parts that I didn't think I would like, in particular the two women in the kitchen. I don't know why it resonated so much but I think it was really seeing the Canadian issues collide with the Filipino community's issues. As two mothers – I guess they were single moms, I'm not sure – but just talking about their difficulty finding childcare as a family. My reaction was really surprising to me." Finding this ground for empathy seems like an important step in shifting the focus away from identity politics and from good and bad employers to more complicated and nuanced discussions of Canada's 'care crisis' and towards building strands of solidarity among those who otherwise see themselves on opposite sides of this issue. It might create the means towards different attachments and for coming together in new ways.

When we began discussions about *Nanay* in Manila we assumed that the employer scenes would be of less interest to audiences there. We were very quickly told otherwise and this has prompted us to think carefully about whether and how these scenes will need to be reworked as well. In the first instance, we want to counter the misconception that Canada “is heaven” by including a monologue of a nanny agent that was not treated as a separate scene in the Vancouver production. This is a difficult monologue to listen to because the agent is so explicitly and brutally racist in the distinctions that he makes between European and Filipino domestic workers. For instance: “You ask other people; they’ll tell you the same thing about Filipinos. Depends what you’re looking for, what you want. My personal view, if you have a baby and you want someone to lick your home clean: Filipino girl. Go for that. If you have kids 3, 4 years of age, and you want interaction, you want them to go to the park, arts and crafts, do things, you’re better off with a European.” Presenting this monologue in the Philippines runs the risk of subjecting Filipino to Canadian-based hate speech. On balance, we have decided that this shockingly overt racism – located in a verbatim monologue -- brings the issue of systemic racism in Canada into the public conversation in difficult but important ways. It disrupts naïve fantasies of Canada as a space of hope and opportunity to create space for other animating fantasies of the good life, including ones in which staying in the Philippines is a viable life choice. Closing off fantasies of Canada as ‘heaven’ might open room for -- and even force -- a more probing discussion of the Philippine Labour Export Policy and its associated culture of out-migration.

As we rethink the play we are attempting to disrupt other aspects of the play that were reductive and arguably replay western-centric logics. In the first instance, we have recast one Filipino-Canadian actor who played a domestic worker in the Vancouver and Berlin productions as an employer and have auditioned and hired actors in the Philippines for the domestic worker roles. It is a simple point perhaps but in retrospect it is worth examining

how easily we cast Filipino-Canadians in the role of victimised domestic worker<sup>5</sup> and how commonsensical it seemed to cast white Canadians as employers. More and more sponsorship through the LCP involves Filipino-Canadian families as employers and casting a Filipino-Canadian actor as an employer complicates (in a way that is actually more accurate) the racialisation of employers and employees in Canada and opens up for discussion the complex class dynamics within many transnational Filipino families. This will also involve pulling out and working with aspects of the script that receded in the Canadian production. For instance in the third monologue about eldercare, the Canadian employer comments that her Filipino domestic worker was in the first instance “invited to come from the Philippines to stay with her husband’s family and take care of his grandparents.” The audience is told that: “One of them had Alzheimer’s. She took care of them 24 hours a day 7 days a week. For 2 years. And it seems they never gave her any relief at all. And they didn’t give her any pay. So she’d basically never worked before in Canada except for taking care of her husband’s grandparents.” This prompted virtually no commentary or discussion in Canada for reasons that we failed to investigate. But it should cause discussion and commentary because the heavy reliance on the LCP among Filipino families increasingly draws the attention of Canadian policy makers and points to complicated relations within Filipino families in Canada and transnationally. Eliciting a fulsome discussion about the way the LCP functions within Filipino families from the perspective of the Philippines could be a significant contribution to public debate in Canada and likely in the Philippines as well.

### **Politics, Theatre and Affect**

Throughout *Nanay* we have turned to theatre as a vehicle for circulating affect in unpredictable ways; we have sought to stage a range of affective tonalities—sadness, hope, fear, frustration— in order to push audiences to feel the issues differently, to enter into risky

public conversations, and to prompt them to take (even in some small way) action within their everyday lives. “[L]ive performance provides a place”, argues Jill Dolan, in her search for hope at the theatre, “where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can be described or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.” She calls these moments of affective intensity among audience members ‘utopian performatives’ and she especially treasures those in which audience members feel allied with each other and grasp the potential of “how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences” (21).

We hold Dolan’s hopefulness in tension with Rancière’s skepticism towards the ideal of theatre as a space of communal feeling; he finds hope in the possibilities it affords for active disagreement and for redistributing the senses so as to feel, hear, and see the world differently. Attunement takes shape as politics for Rancière, when participants engage and attach outside and beyond their existing social identities; this is the difference, for Rancière, between the political and politics. In the Vancouver production, *Nanay* was self-consciously created as an intercultural space in which those who are positioned very differently in relation to the LCP were brought into discussion and possible disagreement. We endeavored to produce spaces for middle class Canadians to hear the emotions of migrant women coming through the LCP, of long periods of family separation, of familial responsibility, and in doing so, prompt audiences to reflect on their own unconscious complacencies in a system that exploits so-called Third World women. We also worked hard to create a space for Filipino audiences to hear the emotions of Canadian families—the deep frustration of women struggling to secure childcare and the desperation of those labouring to care for their ailing parents. We wanted everyone to feel –really feel -- that something is genuinely awry in the world and to be sufficiently distanced from their default social identities to open possibilities

for new solidarities, new political attachments, new ideas and new life trajectories and aspirations.

Lauren Berlant argues that the contemporary moment is one of impasse in which new idioms of politics and public attachment are needed. Existing practices of politics and attachment function as a mode of ‘cruel optimism’ insofar as they are obstacles to rather than a means towards fulfilling the wants and desires that bring forth that political engagement or attachment. We need, she argues, to detach “from the life-destructive forms of the normative political world” (229) and to pay close attention to art (and other) forms and practices that provide “atmospheres and spaces in which movement happens through persons” often as “a space of abeyance,” “a habituation without edges, a soft impasse” (230). We argue here and elsewhere (Pratt) that theatre can work formally as this kind of space of abeyance, a temporary suspension from everyday life, in which new relations can come into being. In line with Rancière, it can be a space to model a different, more vulnerable and egalitarian mode of relating to dissimilar others. It might also create a time-space to “slow things down and to gather things up, to find things out and to wonder and ponder. ‘What is going on.’” (Berlant 2008, 5). If, as Berlant claims, politics is always in the first instance affective, the affective engagements and atmospherics created through and within theatrical performance open opportunities for new ways of relating and contemplating new practices of politics.

We are reasonably familiar with the lines of political debate and the forms in which social identities and politics have got stuck in Canada; we are less certain of this in the Philippines and of how *Nanay* can do the work of politics there. Rather than the LCP the focus of debate will likely be the LEP, the other end of the ‘care chain’ and migration process. One thing is clear: in order for the play to do the work of politics in the Philippines we need to be attentive to the context and to a radically different political and emotional terrain where most everyone shares an intimate knowledge of migration. With the help of

colleagues there we have been pushed to begin to reshape and re-contextualize *Nanay* to open opportunities for domestic workers in Canada to narrate their experiences differently to family members, to disrupt notions of Canada as a haven, and to prompt a public dialogue that moves beyond dualistic representations of overseas workers as either purely the victims of structural violence, or conversely, as the saviours of the nation and the Philippines as a culture in which temporary labour migration is taken as the norm.

We continue the process of thinking through this translation. Here, we have presented several strategies through which we are reshaping *Nanay* as the project engages the possibilities of a transnational circulation of affects. We are conscious of being in a kind of soft impasse in which our movement can only happen through persons, that is a close engagement with others who are positioned in the world differently than ourselves.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> We co-write the script and the work was produced through Caleb's performing arts society: see <http://www.urban-crawl.com/nanay/>.

<sup>2</sup> For full scripts of the first two monologues see Johnston and Pratt.

<sup>3</sup> The first statement comes from a forum held within the Filipino community after the Vancouver performances; the second from audience surveys.

<sup>4</sup> <http://witnesshr.blogspot.ca/2013/04/philippines-government-is-biggest-human.html>

<sup>5</sup> When representatives of the Philippine Embassy attended the play in Berlin they angered the Filipino-Canadian actors because, in conversation after the talkback, they seemed to systematically disqualify these Filipino-Canadians as Filipinos. (One was told: 'your accent doesn't sound Filipino', another: 'you don't look Filipino, you look Chinese.')

At the time we interpreted this as a power play to discredit the critical message of the play. From the vantage point of the Philippines, such an interpretation seriously misreads and trivializes relations and tensions between and among diasporic and national Filipinos.



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