



Filipino migrant stories and trauma in the transnational field



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ABSTRACT

We put to work recent efforts to decolonise trauma theory in the context of our experience of writing and performing in the Philippines our testimonial theatre play about Canada's Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP). The play, a collection of monologues based on verbatim scholarly research transcripts, was performed in Manila in November 2013 and October 2014, first as professional and then community theatre. We think through what it means to move a trauma narrative about family separation from Vancouver to Manila, both in terms of the reception of Canadian-based trauma and how it works in relation to traumas based in the Philippines. As a contribution to the geographies of trauma, we consider efforts to think what it would mean to decolonise trauma studies, and examine how trauma narratives gather other narratives as they travel, the politics of scholars from the Global North soliciting and circulating trauma narratives in the Global South, and the possibilities of building collective politics through individual stories of trauma.

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1. Arrival

We¹ arrived in Manila on the morning of November 8th, 2013, just as Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) was expected to hit. The schools were closed and the roads – usually clogged with traffic at 9 am – were eerily empty. The winds picked up velocity throughout the day. It turned out to be one of the strongest tropical cyclones on record, the most powerful typhoon ever to hit land and the deadliest in Philippine history: one approximation is that 6300 people died. UN officials estimate that over 11 million people were affected, with many left homeless. Colleagues at the University of Philippines (UP) Diliman campus in Manila were numb; many of the faculty members at their sister campus in UP – Visayas,

Tacloban – one of the areas most devastated by the typhoon – were presumed dead. Filipino friends and family in Canada, so many of whom come from the Visayas region, were desperate to receive information about their loved ones.

We were in Manila to stage our testimonial play about Filipino labour migration to Canada. We had developed the play from transcripts of interviews with Filipino migrant domestic workers, their children who reunite with them in Canada after many years of separation, nanny agents and Canadian families in need of commodified care. It had been performed in Vancouver and Berlin (see Pratt and Johnston, 2013; Johnston and Pratt, 2010). The play is based on research materials gathered in Canada and it is thus written from a Canadian location. It is meant to invite discussion about a range of challenging issues: the crisis of care in Canada; the politics, economics and ethics of the 'global care chain' through which women in the Global South leave their families to care for families in the Global North; and the challenges of family separation and reunification for Filipino families. The Filipino monologues run through a range of emotions: hope, frustration, despair, anger, despondency, pride; but the tone and substance dwells mostly within the more negative emotions and the trauma of indentured servitude and prolonged family separation.

As our landing into another scene of trauma in the Philippines suggests, the transport and reception of our play was no simple

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¹ This is a wandering 'we'. The research on which the play is based was done by Geraldine Pratt and the Philippine Women Centre of BC. The original script for the play was written by Caleb Johnston and Geraldine Pratt and the performance was developed in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre. Vanessa Banta began to work on the play as dramaturg when Johnston and Pratt took the play to Manila in November 2013, and then took on a more central role as collaborator when the script was taken up and developed by Migrante International from July through to October 2014. This last version of the play, translated to Tagalog by Vanessa Banta, was performed in Bagong Barrio Caloocan City in Metro Manila in October 2014.

matter (see also Johnston and Pratt, 2014). In this paper we examine several questions opened up by taking *Nanay* to Manila that sit within broader discussions of transnational memory and multidirectional trauma. We trace how the meaning of experiences that are framed as traumatic in Canada were received in the Philippines, and consider what it meant to put different experiences of suffering in different places into dialogue. We are interested in investigating whether and how trauma may serve as both a medium for exchange within and across different sites and scales and as a political response to the structural violence of global labour migration. In re-situating the play (and the issues that it raises) within the context of the Philippines, we examine how narratives collected and dispatched from Canada gathered other narratives within their transnational transmission. We address the politics of encountering in Manila intense and unforeseen stories of what could be framed as trauma, the ethical problematic of that witnessing, as well as the productive possibility those individual narratives offer for collective politics.

2. Deploying the trauma paradigm

The idiom of trauma emerged in the research upon which the play is based especially in relation to the stories told by children who have been separated from and reunited with their mothers in Canada. A number of those interviewed in Canada appear to show the classic symptoms and aetiology of trauma, namely the involuntary repetition of memories in flashbacks as a result of an encounter with danger when the subject is unprepared and psychic defences are down² (Pratt, 2012; for this interpretation of trauma see Caruth, 1996; Cheah, 2008; Luckhurst, 2008; Radstone, 2007). Cathy Caruth's influential reinterpretation of trauma, in which she stresses that traumatic events are fully evident "only in connection with another place, and in another time" (1996, 9) is itself geographical. Our reading of domestic workers' labour migration to Canada adds another layer of spatiality; the time-spaces of family separation are themselves sources of trauma. Framing children's (and in some cases mothers') experiences as trauma places emphasis on the depths of psychic upheaval and the extent to which families are ambushed by migration in a variety of ways.

There are other geographies involved in the transmission and reception of trauma narratives. The transmission and reception of trauma narratives are uneven and thoroughly embedded within existing unequal geopolitical and other power relations, and only some narratives gain wide audiences and empathetic reception (Craps, 2014; Radstone, 2007; Whitlock, 2007). In Judith Butler's phrasing (2004), some lives (and traumas) are judged to be grievable, while others are not.

So too, being framed and heard within a global trauma discourse is not necessarily positive and carries with it certain risks. Familiar patterns of who tells and who receives stories of pain and trauma can reinscribe hierarchies of privilege and marginalisation: the privileged listen and empathize and the marginalised experience and tell (Pedwell, 2014). Calling on Naomi Klein's analysis of disaster capitalism, Jacquelyn Micieli-Voutsinas (2014; see also Perera, 2010) notes the ways in which trauma narratives can do the work of deepening opportunities for

privatisation and other neo-liberal reforms, with the effect of solidifying existing geopolitical hierarchies of privilege.

Trauma discourse potentially individualises and medicalises an issue and may focus attention on therapeutic outcomes rather than a political response to the structural issues that led to trauma. In the Palestinian context, Marshall (2014) argues that the risks associated with these tendencies are particularly acute. While a discourse about the traumatic effects of the occupation on Palestinian youth has served to justify international humanitarian solidarity, it also produces these youths as security risks, as "at risk and also risky" (283), as "threatened and also threatening" (285) and potentially perpetuates western stereotypes about the volatility and irrationality of Palestinians. Not only do humanitarian deployments of trauma discourse potentially universalise American psychiatric models (which Ethan Watter's refers to as "Americanizing the world's understanding of the human mind" (2010, 1)), in the context of Palestine, trauma discourse can be viewed as "a spatial strategy attempting to keep unruly subjects in their place" (283). The dangers of invoking trauma discourse seem differently but equally relevant in the context of the Philippines, where various psychological clichés (in this case about a distinctive Filipino psychology) have been invoked by U.S. scholars and others to tell a particular history of underdevelopment, one in which the role of US imperialism is largely absent (San Juan, 2006, 50). And finally, Rancière (2010) is critical of the way that discourses of trauma fit within what he frames as the ethical turn within contemporary politics, a turn that can be depoliticising insofar as it fixes attention on injuries of the past rather than on the promise and obligations of the future.

In the Canadian context, the urgency and seriousness associated with trauma discourse has seemed worth the risk and trauma discourse appears to hold the promise of politicising rather than depoliticising immigration policy. The Canadian state, and Canadians more generally, take pride in Canada's success as a welcoming multicultural nation of immigrants, as well as its role as world peacekeeper and alleviator of world suffering (Razack, 2004; Thobani, 2007). Circulating stories of global trauma that result from Canadian immigration policy disrupts this normative script of national goodness and Canada as haven from the world's disorder. As Jenny Edkins (2003) has argued, the political productivity of trauma lies precisely in its capacity to disrupt the smooth functioning of sovereign power in order to create opportunities for social and political change.

We brought the play to the Philippines as a way of putting stories collected in Canada into global circulation. Canadian immigration policy works in tandem with the Philippine Labour Export Policy, and the two need to be thought and critiqued together. So too Filipinos' migration to Canada is typically part of a transnational strategy, and the planning and wellbeing of Filipino immigrants to Canada is intimately interwoven with the planning and wellbeing of their families in the Philippines. It was during assessments with our community collaborators, the Philippine Women Centre, following the 2009 production of the play in Vancouver, that we were told that some of their members were motivated by the play to tell their stories differently to family members in the Philippines, and to be more explicit about the everyday, often hard-to-tell, traumas they experience as migrant workers in Canada. Live-in caregivers are often unwilling to tell, and their transnational families in the Philippines can be unwilling or unable to hear, about negative experiences in Canada. These experiences can be difficult to tell because of a reluctance to worry their families who are so far away and dependent on their remittances for their livelihood. Even when told to family members, their stories often are not heard, given the popular imaginary of Canada as a land of opportunity (Constable, 2013 Polanco, 2013).

² A reviewer reasonably asks for more details about this claim. For a fuller discussion see Pratt 2012, in which the Canadian claims are more fully substantiated. Although not many or even the majority of the youths that we interviewed displayed the symptoms of trauma, a number did over the course of our interviews and this was a paradigm that resonated with and has been taken up by community organisers at the Philippine Women Centre.

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