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Fandom, Consumption, and Collectivity in the Philippine New Cinema: Nora and the Noranians

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# Women and the Media in Asia

## The Precarious Self

Edited by

**Youna Kim**

*American University of Paris, France*

palgrave  
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## Fandom, Consumption and Collectivity in the Philippine New Cinema: Nora and the Noranians

*Bliss Cua Lim*

National Artist Nick Joaquin called Nora Aunor the 'lowly *morenita* from Iriga', the dark-skinned, destitute provincial girl who rose to unparalleled prominence as the Philippines' first media-convergent superstar (de Manila, 1970: 6). The daughter of a train porter in Bicol province, Nora Aunor exploded into the nation's popular consciousness as an amateur singing contest champion on TV and radio at the end of the sixties. By 1970, at the age of 17, with 30 films and several music recordings to her credit, she crossed over from TV and music to a lucrative career as the nation's highest-paid film star (Zapanta, 1970: 42–44). Throughout the mid-seventies and eighties, Nora Aunor helmed her own film production company and took on critically acclaimed film roles in several canonical works of the Philippine New Cinema. Still professionally active today, Nora Aunor has been called 'the most accomplished trans-media star the Philippines has ever produced, spanning a career of four decades and counting' (Flores, 2000b: i), in music, TV, film and theatre.

The girl of meagre origins had been taunted with racist remarks in her childhood ('Nora *Negra*', other children called her), but she went on to forge a spectacular career that effectively 'broke the colour line in Philippine movies' (de Manila, 1970: 58). As I have argued elsewhere, Nora's superstardom in Philippine cinema's post-studio era is significant because she forced an unprecedented break with the Filipino film industry's reliance on mestizo/a stardom. Filipino film studios 'favored mestizas for principal roles because they approximated the Caucasian features of American icons' (Tiongson, 1992: 24). In the studio era, matinee idols were invariably mixed-race actors whose light skin and

European features allowed them to be packaged as local approximations of Hollywood stars. Mestizo/a stardom was a racialized politics of casting that enshrined tall, fair-skinned mixed-race performers with Euro-American features as the apex of physical beauty and cinematic glamour. In the Philippine popular imagination, the social location of the mestizo/a star is imagined as proximate to the white privilege of Spanish and American colonizers, the postcolonial elite and the physical appearance of Hollywood stars. More than a figure of race mixture, the mestizo/a star in Filipino cinema is also imagined as situated between the 'whiteness' of the Hollywood star or of the post/colonial elite, and the 'brown-ness' of lower-income urban audiences who comprise the bulk of the nation's filmgoers. The ascendancy of Nora, a 4 feet 11 inch 'Cinderella superstar' and a new 'brown beauty' [*kayumangging kaligatan*], issued a resounding challenge to the racial logic of mestizo/a stardom. (Lim, 2009: 318–327).

One of Nora's culturally significant feats, then, is her star persona's ability to refunction the previously abject ethnic figure of racialized and impoverished provincial girlhood into a figure of triumph (Tolentino, 2006: iii). The oft-repeated trope of Nora's rise from water vendor to transmedia superstar is a narrative condensation of how her superstardom managed to breach the expected limits of what could be achieved by women disenfranchised by class, ethnicity, provincialism, racialization and gender.

It has often been observed that Nora's mythology has not one but two protagonists: the individual star, Nora herself, and the collectivity of Noranian fans (De Guzman, 2005: viii; Flores, 2000b: 7). It is here that we glimpse a key dynamic of Nora's transmedia stardom. On the one hand, a rhetoric of exceptionalist individuation suffuses Nora's star mythology across several vectors. An icon of what a uniquely gifted and charismatic individual can accomplish in the face of poverty, discrimination and adversity, Nora is individuated – that is, singularized and set apart – from other similarly disenfranchised Filipinas by the heights and depths of her star biography. Her commercially profitable and critically acclaimed career in music, film, TV and theatre is a narrative of exceptional achievement punctuated by a leitmotif of suffering, as the star's struggles with financial insolvency, heartbreak, drug abuse and alcoholism individualize Nora as both triumphant and tragic. On-screen, Nora's racialized allure as the first dark-skinned superstar of Philippine cinema likewise individualized her, marking her as atypical amid the pantheon of fair-skinned mestizo/a movie idols who preceded her. On the other hand, such elements of individualization in Nora's

star persona are counterbalanced by the collectivity of her devoted Noranian fans, who were widely perceived as lower-class, feminized and dark-skinned, much like their idol. In that sense, Nora's exceptionally individualized countenance as the first 'brown beauty' to challenge the neo-colonial hold of mestizo/a stardom in Philippine cinema has simultaneously been read as a collective embodiment of her steadfast following.

One movie reporter, for example, synecdochized Nora's 'coffee-brown skin' as 'the colour of the skin of the majority of movie fans, from the *utusan* [housemaid], to the *lavandera* [washerwoman], and from the fish vendor to the grade school *titser* [teacher]' (Zapanta, 1970: 43). With its emphasis on low-income domestic or feminized work – such as housemaid, laundrywoman or market seller – the remark exemplifies the continuing prominence of poor rural and urban women among Nora's famously devoted popular audience. As Neferti Tadiar notes:

Nora Aunor's following might be seen as a form of 'class' and 'gender' inasmuch as a great many of her fans worked as domestic labour and, more importantly, inasmuch as Nora Aunor's identificatory trait was her personification of the *atsay* [maid], a figure embodying the combined racializing and sexualizing devaluations of menial labour and poor women. This is not to say that all of Nora Aunor's fans fit this dominant profile.

(Tadiar, 2004: 332)

Collectively referred to as 'Noranians', Nora's enduring fan following has since traversed the barriers of class, gender and place to include middle-class professionals, gay and straight men and overseas Filipino workers engaged in the transnational labour economy.<sup>1</sup> To the popular mind, however, Noranians are iconically the impoverished urban and provincial women who can recall the raucous heyday of her popularity in the early 1970s. Thus, while not being composed exclusively of older women from underprivileged social origins, the resonance of the 'Norianian' audience as a historical configuration of reception in Philippine popular culture arguably retains its predominantly gendered and generational quality (Tolentino, 1999: 6–7).

In what follows, I trace the broad contours of individual aspiration and self-imagining as well as collective, star-focused media consumption among Nora's predominantly female fans. The first section explores the new dynamics of star-fan relationships inaugurated by Noranian

fandom. Calling Nora 'the former water vendor who now peddles our hopes', one fan writes: 'Millions of Filipinos loved you because you embodied them [*kinatwan ninyo sila*]. Your triumph is the triumph of our impoverished fellow citizens.... If a water vendor could succeed, then so can every farmer, carpenter, manicurist, tailor, security guard, manual labourer, housemaid, overseas contract worker, prostitute, baker, janitor, fisherman, recycler, sidewalk vendor, midwife and laundrywoman.' (Bayron, 2005: 23). Such remarks exemplify the links between star embodiment and fan aspiration. Fandom has long been recognized as having both collective and individualizing aspects; fan letters, for example, express the 'fans' desire to emerge from anonymity, to create a concrete existence for themselves in relation to the star system' (Orgeron, 2003: 79). The individualizing aspects of aspirational self-imagining attempt to 'close the gap' between individual media performer and collective social audience through an array of cinematic and extra-cinematic identificatory practices (Stacey, 1991: 155) that hinge on a sense of mirroring and felt intimacies between Nora and Noranians. In particular, Nora's embodiment of undeserved suffering, both on- and off-screen, are paralleled by tropes of sacrificial consumption on the part of her most fervent fans.

The second section of this chapter closely considers *Bona* (directed by Lino Brocka, 1980) and *Himala* ([Miracle] (directed by Ishmael Bernal, 1982). In these two films, the Filipina superstar's collaboration with the premier directors of the New Cinema resulted in critical reflections on the limits of star worship. Cinematic allegories of Nora's relationship to her audiences, both films figure fans as self-abnegating female *alalay* [aides], and point off-screen to the dynamics of fan sacrifice, suffering, aspiration and political ambivalence in Nora's collective following.

The two 1980s Nora Aunor films explored in this chapter, *Bona* and *Himala*, are emblematic achievements of what has been called the New Cinema or the Second Golden Age of Philippine film – a period of artistic accomplishment beginning in 1975 (three years after Ferdinand Marcos' declaration of Martial Law) and ending in the February 1986 People Power Revolution that ousted Marcos from power. *Himala* models the accomplishments of two government institutions that crucially contributed to the emergence of New Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s: the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF) and the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP), the latter under the executive directorship of the dictator's eldest daughter, Imee Marcos (David, 1990: 1–17). Film historian Joel David suggests that part of the answer to the paradox of

Philippine New Cinema – why did cinematically accomplished, politically engaged films flourish during the repressive Marcos regime? – lies in the conditions of production and exhibition that these two institutions, the MMFF and the ECP, were able to provide (David, 1990: 1–17). This may explain why the works of the Philippine New Cinema often evinced a critical militancy and a defiance of state censorship in their content, yet relied on a certain degree of complicity with the Marcos administration in terms of their production and exhibition contexts. An early ECP production in which Nora both starred and served as creative consultant, *Himala* was seen as proof of the superstar's ties to the Marcos regime. Nora's involvement in the film was rumoured to have been influenced by the Marcos family's promise to 'overwrite' her outstanding tax debts (Flores, 2000b: 122).

The 1980s straddle two contentious political eras in the Philippines. First, the twilight of the Marcos regime (1965–1986), the 'strong man' administration that institutionalized what Neferti Tadiar calls the 'feminization of Philippine labour'; and second, the anti-Marcos movement that culminated in the 1986 EDSA Revolt or 'People Power' Revolution (EDSA is the acronym for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Metro Manila, where most of the demonstrations occurred). That popular uprising ushered in Corazon Aquino's presidential administration (1986–1992), which would preside over the 'nationalization of the domestic labour export industry'; the export of Filipinas engaged in domestic or sexual work comprise the overwhelming majority of Philippine migrant labour. Tadiar suggests that Nora's star persona – and most importantly, her massive Noranian following – energized certain aspects of Marcos' and Aquino's contending forces while remaining fundamentally 'tangential' to both. In other words, both before and after the 1980s, Nora and the Noranians were caught up in these political polarities but not reducible to them (Tadiar, 2004: 23–24). Accordingly, the final section of this study will explore the ambivalent politics of Noranian collectivity as it intersects with Nora's much-criticized endorsement of a series of corrupt political regimes in the Philippines, from the Marcos dictatorship to the Arroyo administration.

### Closing the gap: Star-fan relationships and Noranian embodiment

Filipino film critics have long recognized that Nora forged a distinctively new relationship between stars and the national public (Landicho, 2005: 109). In retrospect, one strikingly new quality that emerged in the

audience dynamics of the Noranians is the shortening of the distance between the individual exceptionalism of the star and the collective aspirations of her fans. Scholarship on classic Hollywood cinema consistently demarcates identification as a key facet of spectatorship in the American studio era (Mulvey, 1989; Stacey, 1991). In contrast, Filipino film commentators in the late studio and early post-studio period (the 1960s and 1970s) consistently recognized that the Philippine star system of the studio era, in relying on the 'impossible' glamour of stars living in unrealizable social worlds, actually impeded identification among low-income movie-goers who comprised most of the popular audience (de Manila, 1965: 6–7). Mestizo/a stars were beautiful idols whose lives were impossible to achieve; their instantly recognizable distance from fans elicited worship and adoration, but precluded identification. In contrast, Nora is evoked again and again in relation to her capacity to arouse identification and aspirational self-imagining among her predominantly female following. A movie reporter describes an encounter between Nora and her female fans, witnessed at the star's home: 'Women of all shapes and sizes rushed up to meet her, called out her name repeatedly, reached for her hands.... Watching her with her fans, we partly understood why they were tenaciously loyal to her... Nora was their friend who just happens to be a star.' (de Guzman, 1970: 40).

In part, the ability of Nora's star persona to close the gap between star and fan, her intimation of an attainable proximity – or even kinship – with her own tribulations and successes, had to do with the capacity of Noranian embodiment to foster identification between actress and audience. The racial defiance of what I refer to as 'Norianan embodiment' inheres not only to Nora's own physical countenance but also pervades the sensational fascination with her atypical star body on the part of her massive fan following among the urban and rural poor. Remarkably atypical of previous mestiza screen goddesses, but unexceptionally typical of the ordinary moviegoer, Noranian embodiment amounted to an oppositional form of valuation. In loving their star, Noranian devotees were also explicitly championing *their own* heretofore devalorized external appearance against the neo-colonial conflation of beauty and whiteness – a solidarity mapped on the axes of racial, classed and gendered alliances (Lim, 2009: 323). The Noranians upheld the achievements of the dark one, La Aunor, who accomplished both a real and symbolic triumph against the neo-colonial racial logic that equates beauty with whiteness [*'maganda ang maputi'*] (Tiongson, 1979: 12).

### *Alalay and sacrificial consumption: Bona and Himala*

By the beginning of the 1980s, Nora had entered a period of considerable professional and personal difficulty. On the professional front, years of heavy smoking and alcoholism had taken their toll on her legendary singing voice, and she teetered on the verge of bankruptcy due to failed investments and untrustworthy business partners (Peñaflor, 1979: 24, 31). Her production company NV Productions had been established in 1972 to fulfil Nora's dream of becoming a 'serious artist and producer' (Almario, 1983: 142). By the mid-eighties, however, NV Productions, along with several other companies she had established at the height of her affluence, had folded, reportedly as a result of Nora's lack of oversight and the mismanagement of her businesses by trusted associates who aggrandized themselves while the star's own finances collapsed. Depressed by the failure of her marriage to actor Christopher De Leon, the deaths of close family members, and charges of tax delinquency – the Bureau of Internal Revenue ordered Nora to pay outstanding tax obligations amounting to 2.4 million pesos – Nora publicly admitted to having attempted suicide three times by the mid-eighties (Fernandez, 1980: 11; Villasana, 1985: 8, 35).

Confronted with a spate of personal and professional crises, Nora dreamed of making a film that would tell her own story, 'chronicle... her ascent from peddling drinking water in the railroad station of Iriga to undisputed superstardom in Philippine movies', as well as giving something back to the unwaveringly devoted 'public who ended up forgiving and loving her' despite her many well documented failings (Constantino, 1979: 29). In 1982, Nora made a film that arguably answers to that description, allegorizing Nora's life script with a surprisingly unblinking, unsentimental power. *Himala* was a virtuoso collaboration between Nora and two major talents in the Philippine New Cinema, director Ishmael Bernal and screenwriter Ricky Lee.

Regarded as one of the country's finest cinematic achievements in the 1980s, *Himala* was made under time constraints so that it could compete in the government-sponsored 1982 Metro Manila Film Festival, where it swept the awards for Best Film, Director and Actress. *Himala's* canonical position in Philippine film studies is partly due to Nora, who delivered a performance of such quiet forcefulness that it has been hailed as the finest performance of the period and of Philippine cinema itself (David, 1995: 58).

*Himala* is the story of Elsa (Nora Aunor), a 24-year-old domestic servant in a drought-stricken impoverished town, who claims to have seen



an apparition of the Virgin Mary during a solar eclipse. *Himala* follows Elsa's transformation from housemaid to faith healer, from wretched poverty to a brief, relatively lucrative and conspicuous sainthood. As a result of her growing fame as a faith healer, the little town commercializes, and Elsa herself is commodified (her blessed water is sold and her followers charge a fee for her healing). The film pivots around the demystification of her apparent miracles of faith healing, as a series of events undermine Elsa's claims to divinity: she and a female disciple are raped, and the sick begin to expire under her care. The narrative's central enigma – can Elsa truly perform miracles or is she a fraud? – is apparently answered by the film's final scene. In *Himala*'s famous climax, Elsa, who has hardly spoken throughout the film, tells thousands upon thousands of her stunned devotees that there are no miracles ('*Walang Himala!*'), that all events, from success to misfortune, are not God's making but our own (Illustration 9.1). Following her stunning disclosure, Elsa is shot through the heart by an unknown assassin, and her closest disciples proclaim her sainthood. *Himala*, then, may be read as a story

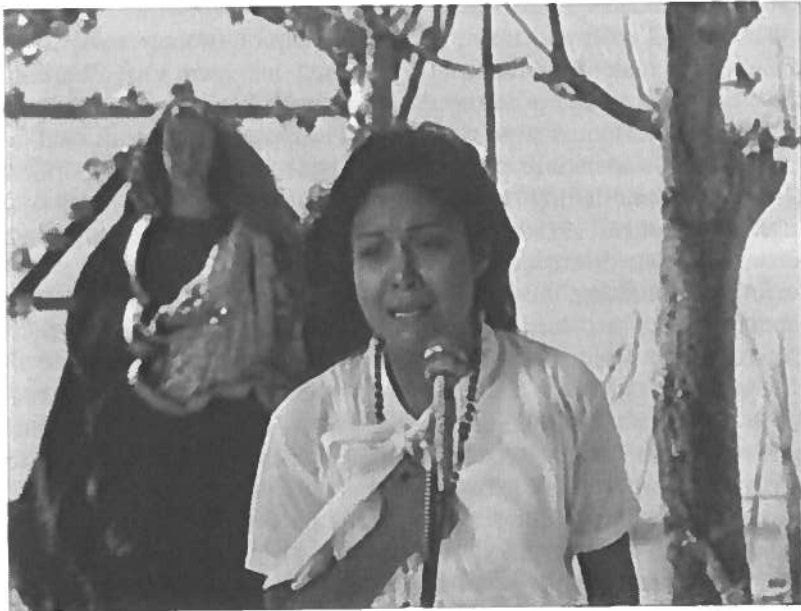


Illustration 9.1 Elsa (Nora Aunor) addresses her followers in the closing scene of *Himala* ([*Miracle*], directed by Ishmael Bernal, 1982)

about a star belatedly attempting to disabuse her fans of their misperceptions; its bleak ending suggests that such attempts at demystification will inevitably be contained and re-inscribed through cult devotion. *Himala*'s story of how a young woman of marginal social status comes to be hailed as a divinity can be read as a reflexive allegory thematizing Nora's own fandom, tracing the movement of devotion across various registers, from the onscreen narrative to the star's off-screen cult following (Lim, 2004: 61–67).

For viewers familiar with what has been called 'the height of Noramania' [*ruruk ng Noramania*] in the 1970s (de Guzman, 2005: 7), certain scenes in *Himala* elicit a shock of recognition, making the film a reflexive paradox – a highbrow New Cinema masterpiece that makes conscious allusion to the lowbrow, feminized mass audience of a phenomenally popular Filipina star. A growing multitude converges in and around the faith healer Elsa's tiny abode, hoping to experience a miracle. Such scenes recall one movie reporter's account of an 'excited sea of people', a group of about 500 fans who filled Nora's Valencia Street home to bursting; 'women and young girls who want to believe', longing to touch the superstar and kneeling at her feet. Watching Nora's effect on the Noranians, the journalist remarks, 'it is her smallness that overwhelms, her silence that drives the crowds wild' (Velarde, 1980: 8). This observation captures perfectly the tenor of several scenes in *Himala* in which the quiet faith healer exerts a magnetic effect on a riotous legion of devotees.

The film depicts the ardency and restlessness of the enormous crowds waiting for Elsa, and the attempts of a coterie of mostly female disciples to form a kind of 'cordon sanitaire' around her, echoing journalistic reports of how Nora's closest devotees or *alalay* [literally, aide or helper] strove to safeguard the superstar during public appearances (Kalaw, 1971: 28). In the fan anthology *Si Nora Aunor Sa Mga Noranian*, one woman – a former factory worker and member of the Federation of Nora Aunor Followers – describes herself as an overprotective *alalay* who, together with others in the star's staff, would form a circle around Nora, enabling the superstar to move through the teeming multitude of her fans relatively unscathed (dela Cruz, 2005: 61–62). Such accounts illuminate the off-screen referents of scenes in *Himala*, where *alalay* are prominent. In one subdued but memorable scene in *Himala*, Elsa is ministered to by a close-knit circle of her most ardent believers, all of whom are impoverished women: Chayong (Laura Centeno) a former schoolteacher; Sepa (Ama Quiambao), a housewife and mother of two; and Aling Saling (Vangie Labalan), Elsa's adoptive mother and a



Illustration 9.2 Elsa (centre) is ministered to by a close-knit circle of her most ardent female devotees, or *alalay*, in *Himala*

housemaid like herself (Illustration 9.2). Unfolding in a long take and framed at a distance by a static camera, the women get Elsa dressed to meet her growing throng of devotees. The scene alludes to Nora's oft-remarked retinue of *alalay*, fans admitted into the actress' inner circle, forming part of her entourage and entering formal or informal service in the star's employ. In particular, the characters Chayong and Sepa in *Himala* are on-screen analogues to diehard Noranian *alalay* who, according to numerous accounts, eschewed ties to boyfriends, husbands and family members and neglected their jobs to serve their star (Caceres, 2005: 34; Dela Cruz, 2005: 61–63; de Guzman, 2005: x).

This filmic depiction of fan sacrifice extends beyond the film's intertextual reference to Nora's off-screen retinue of *alalay*, enabling a consideration of the trope of 'sacrificial consumption' on the part of low-income Noranians. Nora's poorest fans frequently had to scrimp and save to afford the various media products that bore Nora's voice or visage – be it a film ticket, an audio recording, a movie magazine or a publicity photograph. Noranians skipped meals and walked to school or work to save up the requisite purchasing power for the star's various

commodities (Diaz, 2005: 76; Reyes, 2005: 184; Roxas, 2005: 187). Similarly, a homemaker and female member of the fan organization Grand Alliance for Nora Aunor Philippines (GANAP) recalls rising at dawn to cook and pack provisions for an all-day trip to an urban movie theatre to watch Nora's newest film. Once admitted into the cinema for the cost of a single ticket (tickets ensured admission but did not restrict the number of screenings), Nora's frugal fans would stay the whole day, repeatedly watching her films while consuming packed dishes of rice and viands and eschewing the additional cost of concessions (Salazar, 2005: 187–188). The conspicuously sacrificial character of star-focused Noranian consumption prompted one journalist to ask:

What does she possess that moves them to spend their hard-earned money on movie magazines and tabloids, on photos sold on sidewalks at 20 centavos each, on leis to offer her? What makes them abandon their studies and work, risk the ire of their parents and employers, brave the elements and travel great distances just to see her?

(de Guzman, 1970: 37)

What is perhaps even more striking about a low-income audience's decision to forgo other needs or renounce their obligations to family and employers for their star is that Nora's media persona across the years increasingly shed its early character of escapist teenage froth in favour of an iconic embodiment of suffering – both in her melodramatic on-screen roles and the much-publicized travails of her off-screen biography. Why, then, did Noranians routinely make sacrifices in order to consume the spectacle of Nora in the grip of suffering?

Nicanor Tiongson mentions Nora in connection with a neo-colonial ideological value perpetuated by popular film and theatre. The idea that the oppressed are virtuous [*'mabuti ang inaapi'*] is a conceit that, in his view, enjoins audiences to adopt a passive acceptance of social injustice (Tiongson, 1979: 17). As several critics have noted, Nora incarnates the Filipino conception of suffering feminine virtue, the female martyr or *babaeng martir*. Scholars have drawn attention to the conception of sainthood exemplified by Nora even when she plays ostensibly secular, melodramatic film roles. She is repeatedly cast as a long-suffering woman who puts the needs and wishes of others before her own, the noble heroine of melodrama whose tribulation is all the more deeply felt by the audience because it is so unjust (Flores, 2000a: 94–95; Lim, 2004: 65–66; Tadiar, 2004: 227). Patrick Flores' discussion of the 'aesthetics of

sufferance' in the affective-political horizon of Noranian reception illuminates the collective resonance of Nora's personification of oppression and forbearance:

To suffer in film or to film sufferance is to reiterate the forces of popular, collective, and public sufferance in cinema as social space, and in doing so generates something new, disconfirms certain dominative modes, and makes the pain of sacrifice for redemption sufferable and necessary .... The term sufferance is favoured over suffering as it stresses the politics of overcoming a problematic site of pain in the same way that grievance reworks grief, or 'acting' processes the situation ....

Lexically, sufferance may mean 'the act or state of suffering', or the 'patience or endurance under suffering' .... The generative impulse of subjectivity emerges from subjection, rendering agents not solely compliant or complicity with power, but rather co-operators of its generation.

(Flores, 2000b: 5–6)

For Flores, cinematic sufferance never inheres only to the figure of the anguished protagonist in a fictional narrative. Rather, sufferance resonates off-screen and extra-diegetically as 'public sufferance in cinema as social space'. Beyond advocating the need to endure hardship, the Noranian aesthetics of sufferance may also take on a resistive, politically agentive function by exposing and refusing to uphold structures of domination and by taking on the affective labour of overcoming pain or acting upon grief. Suffering, Flores compellingly suggests, can be generative, redemptive and collective. For the Noranians, then, suffering is not borne solely by an individual. The peaks and valleys of Nora's 40-year career – her unprecedented rise and critical acclaim, offset by a litany of failed romances, struggles with addiction, and legal and financial difficulties – are intersubjectively lived and collectively remembered by her audience of Noranians, the 'faith community' that not only consumes Nora's performances across media platforms but also remembers what their star has achieved and endured (Flores, 2000b: 11).

The collective, politically and affectively agentive character of suffering for Noranians is explored further in the last section of this chapter. At this juncture, however, it is useful to juxtapose the thematizing of fan sacrifice in *Himala* alongside another of Nora's New Cinema collaborations, a film that explored the centrality of sufferance to star worship: *Bona*. Directed by Lino Brocka, perhaps the best-known film-maker of

the Philippine New Cinema, *Bona* was released in 1980 under the banner of Nora's own company NV Productions, with the star herself billed as executive producer, despite production delays due to the financial stresses caused by her unpaid tax obligations (Fernandez, 1980: 11, 14). The film was the Philippines' official entry to the Cannes Film Festival, and garnered Nora the prestigious Urian Award for Best Actress.

Whereas *Himala* exposes the religious devotion that underpins certain forms of fandom, *Bona* depicts fan desires carried to an extreme pitch of servility and exploitation. In *Himala*, the faith healer's aides or *alalay* – Chayong, Sepa and Aling Saling – play supporting roles; Elsa, the miracle worker-turned-superstar, is the film's central protagonist. In contrast, in *Bona*, the *alalay* takes central stage, with Nora playing the title character. *Himala* is about collective devotion to a charismatic female martyr; *Bona* is about a solitary female fan who renounces everything for an undeserving male movie extra Gardo (Phillip Salvador), with disastrous results (Illustration 9.3). Conventional translations of the term *alalay* as assistant, helper or aide (or even the looser interpretation of the term as a member of a star's entourage) fail to capture the menial, servile and feminine connotations that the word often evokes. Yet untenable forms of female exploitation and servitude are precisely at the heart of *Bona's* portrait of an *alalay*. *Bona* is the fan, who, in devoting herself to the unworthy bit-player Gardo is reduced to the status of an unpaid, emotionally abused and sexually available female domestic servant.



Illustration 9.3 Nora Aunor plays a movie fan in *Bona* (directed by Lino Brocka, 1980)

Referring to the presence of Nora's retinue of *alalay* on set while the actress was filming, a reporter wryly notes, 'research into Bona's character was needless on her part for she has known countless Bonas' (Parel, 1980: 32). In interviews, Nora has been critical of the demeaning connotation of the term *alalay*: 'Once my fans become close to me, I no longer treat them as fans. I treat them as friends.... In fact, I don't like calling them *alalay*.' (Stuart-Santiago, 1980: 32). *Bona* critiques the idea that becoming an obsessive *alalay* should be fandom's highest aspiration. Nora's 1980s New Cinema works suggest that there are more productive ways to channel fan aspirations, and warn against the co-optation of fan desires in the service of false promises (*Himala*) or self-destructive ends (*Bona*).

Abandoning her middle-class family to live with Gardo in the slums, Bona performs several uncompensated services for her movie idol, from cooking and keeping house to trailing along to the film set where she carries his bags, wipes his brow and stands ever at the ready to light his cigarette. Water forms a central motif in *Bona*: Bona's first significant encounter with Gardo involves his sharing her umbrella during a torrential downpour. Quickly adjusting to life with Gardo in the squatter colonies of Manila, Bona patiently waits in line with other slum residents at a communal tap and then carries heavy containers of water back to Gardo's shack, which lacks interior plumbing. Set in an era of pronounced water shortages in the urban capital of Manila, Bona's daily ritual of collecting and then heating water to prepare Gardo's bath becomes a conspicuous act of fan sacrifice, affording Gardo the everyday luxury of a hot bath under conditions where water is a scarce and precious resource (Illustration 9.4). An opportunistic womanizer, Gardo is oblivious to Bona's feelings and unappreciative of her labours. In the film's final scene, Bona boils water in preparation for Gardo's bath while he casually announces his plans to leave her to emigrate to the US in the company of a wealthy widow. Crushed by his cruel indifference and ostracized by her own family, Bona hurls scalding water at the selfish actor's body, refusing to suffer in silence any longer. With reference to this scene, one fan recalls:

I came out of the movie theatre in a daze. Nora played the role of Bona. My own life as a fan. Blindly believing in, but finally abandoned by, her idol. That's when I saw it: even the patient endurance of suffering has its limits [*ang pagtitiis ay may hangganan*]. It will come to a boil in the fire of deception and abandonment.

(Pascual, 2005: 159)



Illustration 9.4 In *Bona*, the eponymous heroine (Nora Aunor) bathes Gardo (Phillip Salvador)

As this response indicates, *Bona's* memorable depiction of fan exploitation and vengeance overtly encouraged Nora's followers to critically reflect on the possibly self-abnegating effects of fan devotion to movie idols. Though at first seeming to encourage the patient endurance of suffering [*pagtitiis*], *Bona* ends with the *alalay* acting in her own interests at last, struggling to refuse her subjection and overcome her oppressive circumstances. In this sense, *Bona* is a cinematic sister to *Elsa* in *Himala*, another 'empowered servant' whose example 'inspires... women to act on their own claims' (Tadiar, 2004: 239).

The capacity of Nora's on-screen and off-screen star persona to galvanize women's aspirations resurfaces frequently in fan accounts. One Filipina – a provincial fan who went on to become a pre-school teacher in Japan – credits Nora with inspiring her to study to support her family financially and to attain upward social mobility for herself (Long, 2005: 114–115). Another fan reveals that Nora's film *Merika* (dir. Gil Portes, 1984), about a Filipina nurse who migrates to the US to practise nursing, inspired her own dreams of becoming a nurse overseas (Mirandilla, 2005: 135). Such triumphalist accounts of women attaining their aspirations by swelling the ranks of diasporic Filipina workers – with women accounting for 75 per cent of the 10 million Filipino workers overseas by 2009 – have to be tempered, however, with the sobering reality that their search for a better life issues from a corrupt Philippine political and economic system that is unable to provide its citizens ample employment within the nation yet is overwhelmingly dependent

on the dollar remittances generated by the export of primarily Filipina labour (San Juan, 2009: 99). As Roland Tolentino points out, 'For most Filipinas, to be an overseas contract worker is to be in a triple bind: first as a foreigner, second as a women in patriarchal societies, third as a woman working in professions regarded as menial and even socially undesirable.' (Tolentino, 1996: 58).

### Political ambivalence and Noranian collectivity

While *Bona* and *Himala* are widely considered to be self-reflexive allusions to Nora's own persona and the devotion of Noranian audiences, most commentaries miss the significance of the fact that both films end with the star (Elsa) or actor (Gardo) destroyed at the hands of a fan. These films are less about star worship than the ambivalence of fan yearning, variously manifested as love, adulation, hope, disappointment and anger. Both films end by tempering exaggerated estimations of star power, instead recognizing the unruly power *in potentia* of Noranian collectivity, which may often contravene the declared wishes of the star herself.

Unmistakable parallels link the opening scene of *Bona* to the climactic conclusion of *Himala*. *Bona* opens with the January Catholic feast of the Black Nazarene, shot on location in Quiapo, the former commercial and cultural heart of Manila (Illustration 9.5). Brought to the Philippines in the seventeenth century via the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade, the



Illustration 9.5 *Bona* opens with a crowd scene at the Feast of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila

Black Nazarene is a life-sized image of a kneeling, dark-skinned Jesus that is reputed to be miraculous. By the 1920s, the image was attracting such large numbers of pilgrims that a commercial economy grew around its home, Quiapo Church. The January feast of the Black Christ has been called 'the day of the masses' and the 'greatest religious spectacle' in the Philippines, a dramatic admixture of commercial interest and religious fervour (de Manila, 1966: 67). Abandoned by the elite in the latter half of the twentieth century, the crowded Quiapo district then became identified with the majority of its tenants: low-income, working-class migrants from the provinces (Pamintuan, 2006: 2-7).

*Bona's* exposition introduces Nora's character as a devotee of the Black Nazarene, one of the many thousands who crowd around the Quiapo saint because its touch is said to heal the sick. The scene abruptly cuts to a shot of Bona's face on the sidelines of a movie set, clearly drawing an analogy between religious and cinematic devotion. Paralleling *Bona's* opening scene, the closing sequence of *Himala* likewise highlights the religious resonances of star worship: Elsa's cruciform corpse is carried aloft by a grief-stricken multitude, establishing Nora's character as another dark-skinned Christ figure, albeit a feminine one (Illustration 9.6). Shot in Northern Ilocos with a cast of 3000



Illustration 9.6 *Himala* depicts Elsa as a kind of female Christ



extras, the scene in which the audience responds to Elsa's death with a frenzy of despair and violence has the pronounced character of a rural insurrection.

During Nora's heyday as a 1970s teen star, the throng of fans gathered around her prompted an observer to joke that the country was ripe for revolution, since a widespread uprising would doubtless take hold if Nora, the country's reigning superstar, were ever assassinated (de Guzman, 1970: 36). This is the very speculation that the end of *Himala* entertains in 1982, directly acknowledged by lines of dialogue in which a town official warns the mayor that the masses of Elsa's congregation were likely to spark a revolution.

Nora's meteoric rise in the early seventies coincided with an era of pronounced political unrest in the Philippines, as militant student leaders and other leftist groups led a series of demonstrations against the Marcos dictatorship. These were the very protests that provoked the declaration of Martial Law in 1972. The disenfranchised legion of Noranians that gathered whenever the superstar was scheduled to make an appearance was often compared to a nascent protest movement in size and scale. A writer for the *Weekly Graphic* complained, however, of the apolitical character of Noranian collectivity in the early 1970s:

Nora Aunor...today commands the biggest and most formidable unarmed force in the Philippines. Her fans remain silent over the fascism of the state, but have epileptic fits of fury whenever an unfavourable remark is uttered about their idol.

(Guerrero, 1971: 10)

As the journalist's impatient remark reveals, the young transmedia superstar and her following seemed indifferent to the radical political climate of the times. I would argue, however, that the conspicuously classed, gendered and racialized valences of Noranian embodiment had unmistakable nationalist and populist resonances. Noranians were well known, for example, to fiercely refute racist, elitist or misogynistic slurs hurled against Nora by her detractors; such fan behaviour discloses an espousal of anti-hegemonic values (Demafeliz, 2005: 66). Aware that Nora embodied the popular youth as much as the student leaders of the First Quarter Storm represented the radicalism of that era, the Marcos regime sought to cultivate Nora's support as early as 1971. During a resurgence of student protests, first lady Imelda Marcos summoned Nora to Malacañang Palace. Flattered but wary, Nora declined the Marcos' invitation to live in the palace and continue her studies alongside the

Marcos children, saying only that accepting such offers might be tricky [*'mahirap nang tanggapin'*] (Kalaw, 1971: 29).

Scholars have posited that the resistive or oppositional tendencies of Noranian collectivity were realized in the 1980s and 1990s. Having produced and starred in one of the first mainstream Filipino films to be critical of the presence of US military bases in the Philippines (*Minsa'y isang gamu-gamu* [Once a Moth], directed by Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara, 1976), Nora is credited with her ability to 'coordinate collective sentiment' in a growing anti-imperialist, anti-base movement that culminated in the protests of 1990–1991 (Flores, 2000b: 237). It has also been suggested that Noranian collectivity 'prefigured the event of People Power' – a wave of non-violent demonstrations that deposed the authoritarian Marcos regime in February 1986 (Tadiar, 2004: 226). In 1995, Nora played the title role of an oppressed overseas Filipina worker in *The Flor Contemplacion Story* (directed Joel Lamangan), a film that broke domestic box-office records in recounting the Singaporean government's execution of Flor Contemplacion for murders that the Filipino public believed her innocent of. Provoking widespread protests against the Philippine government's failure to provide Contemplacion with requisite legal and social support, Contemplacion's story exposed the Philippine government's unwitting collusion with wealthier nations where overseas Filipina workers often experience abuse and death (San Juan, 2009: 123–124). For Flores, Nora's performance is a cinematic coordination of 'mourning, or *pagluluksa*, for Flor Contemplacion...enacting the cultural process of transforming *awa* [pity] into *damay* [commiseration] or *pakikidalamhati* [sharing of grief], and finally into *pakikiisa* [solidarity]'. Nora's film, Flores argues, 'refunctions the commodification of grief into a virtue of collective action' (Flores, 2000a: 85).

Such politically progressive expressions of Noranian collectivity notwithstanding, Nora herself has been repeatedly supportive of a series of corrupt and repressive presidential regimes. Nora cast her lot with the Marcos government in the 1986 snap presidential elections, angering and profoundly alienating her previously devoted Noranian following (Flores, 2000a: 88; Tadiar, 2004: 233). Two weeks before Marcos was ousted from power, the Tagalog weekly *Liwayway* reported with shocked disapproval that Nora was campaigning for Marcos. It was rumoured that Nora had been paid seven million pesos for her support of the dictatorship (Villasana, 1986: 34). Though Nora drew harsh criticism for her pro-Marcos stance, she also sheltered and inspired fans who had been brutalized by the regime for supporting Corazon

Aquino and the anti-Marcos opposition (Guy, 2005: 104; Pascual, 2005: 153–159). A decade later, Nora threw her support behind the successful campaign of then-vice-president Joseph Estrada, who would be elected to the presidency in 1998 but ousted over allegations of corruption in 2001. A co-founder of the Noranian fan organization GANAP recalls serving as Nora's emissary to Estrada during his vice-presidency, planning the involvement of Noranians in a 1997 charter-change rally. (Charter-change movements to revise the 1986 Philippine Constitution have been criticized for cynically attempting to extend term limits, thus allowing current officials to remain in power.) The fan recounts what is most likely an inappropriate act on the part of a public official. Vice-president Estrada is described as gifting the leaders of Nora's fan club with wristwatches in appreciation (or inducement) of Noranian support (Polistico, 2005: 169), recalling the corrupt practice of *paghahakot* [inducing the poor to show up at political rallies by offering money, food and transportation, or intimidating them into attending via threats of violence]. Most recently, Nora supported the presidential candidacy of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who emphasized her physical resemblance to Nora during her successful but controversial 2004 electoral campaign. Rumours circulated that Nora had been paid six million pesos in return for her endorsement of Arroyo (Flores, 2008: 125). An unsuccessful impeachment case was subsequently filed against President Arroyo in 2005 over allegations of electoral fraud in the sensational 'Hello Garci' case. In 2011, over a year after the end of her presidency, Arroyo was arrested for alleged electoral sabotage.

As this brief encapsulation of Nora's ambivalent political involvements reveals, Nora has both channelled anti-hegemonic collective sentiment and aided traditional politicians' cynical attempts to capture the support of her enormous populist fan base. Whether true or false, persistent rumours that the habitually cash-strapped star accepted lavish payments in return for her endorsement of corrupt regimes underscores the degree to which she was widely perceived to be manipulating her famously self-sacrificing Noranian base for selfish personal gain.

Nestor De Guzman notes that the Noranian response to the star's various political missteps has been measured. In general most fans regret Nora's questionable political partisanship, but some forgive it and even admire her ability to take a politically unpopular stand. Nonetheless, Noranians have voiced a wish that Nora stop endorsing or campaigning for politicians so as not to be tainted by them. For the fans, 'Nora's reign will last longer than that of politicians, who come and

go' (de Guzman, 2005: xiii). Implicit in this championing of Nora's lasting cultural – rather than political – legacy is also a canny disarticulation of Nora's unquestionable significance as a media star from her tainted track record in Philippine politics. Noranian star worship, however, stops short of compliance with the star's political endorsements, the cynicism of which has been recognized. Like the devotees and *alalay* who contravene the star's wishes in *Himala* and *Bona*, instead electing to act on their own behalf, Noranian fans have historically not always voted in compliance with Nora's directives. Crucially, Nora vis-à-vis the Noranians must be recognized as linked but autonomous social agents.

Although political administrations that wooed Nora to curry favour with the Noranians attempted to interpellate the latter as a potential electoral voting bloc, the Noranians appear to have self-identified as an organized consumer bloc, not as a political force doing their star's bidding. In the early 1970s, Nora's product endorsements sparked supply shortages, with Nora's famous advertising campaign for Dial soap credited with stimulating product demands that far outpaced marketing predictions (Quirino, 1971: 45). Despite their meagre financial resources as individuals, the Noranians were well aware of the immense consumer power that they wielded as a collective, and were willing to bring this power to bear on campaigns that by turns affirmed or defended Nora's career. In the late 1980s, learning that the channel RPN-9 planned to cancel Nora's TV show *Superstar*, the Noranians mounted a national campaign and collected more than a million signatures in support of the show, which first aired in 1975 (Arce, 2005: 21). *Superstar* moved to another broadcast station in 1990 and went on to become the longest-running variety show in Philippine TV history, spanning a period of 22 years. Noranian consumption patterns, however, did not translate into electoral obeisance to Nora's reactionary political endorsements. Flores writes that Nora was 'almost lynched during the EDSA Revolution' for supporting the Marcos dictatorship during the 1986 snap presidential election (Flores, 2000a: 88–89).

Across the highs and lows of Nora's career, the Noranians reversed the conventional star-fan dynamic by functioning as Nora's would-be redeemer, with the fans frequently offering to rescue the star from her own legendary fiscal imprudence. Recalling their success in raising funds for the National Mental Hospital in 1978 during the '*Mamera Para Kay Nora* [A Penny for Nora]' campaign, the Noranians repeatedly offered to salvage their star from professional or financial crisis by mounting fundraising campaigns in the 1980s, either by raising enough to produce her TV show themselves, or by collecting the millions of pesos

needed to settle Nora's crippling tax debts. To her credit, Nora declined these generous Noranian initiatives on her behalf, doubtless aware that most of her fans were poor rural and urban folk whose participation in such large-scale fundraising campaigns would amount to a nationwide act of collective sacrifice (Arce, 2005: 20–21; Fernandez, 1980: 11; Lo, 1984: 14).

What is perhaps surprising, then, is that Nora selflessly refused to take advantage of Noranian offers for fiscal rescue while reportedly trying to manipulate their political sympathies in exchange for personal financial gain at other junctures of her career. Such vacillation recalls the political ambivalence of both the Philippine New Cinema itself – a movement that often articulated opposition to the Marcos regime while remaining reliant on the filmic institutions it had established – and the heterogeneous political charge of Noranian consumption and collectivity.

## Note

1. See in particular, *Si Nora Aunor Sa Mga Noranian* (2005), a groundbreaking anthology of fan writing edited by Nestor De Guzman. Consisting primarily of contributions from Noranians active in three fan clubs, the anthology showcases the multi-generational range of the Noranian following, with authors ranging in age from 22 to 71 years old at the time of publication. Recollections by women and gay men are prominent in the collection. The Federation of Nora Aunor Followers was established in 1980 and gathered under a single umbrella institution various fan groups active in the 1970s, including many veteran Noranians who were already grandmothers by the time the anthology was published; the eldest Federation member at the time was a 94-year-old female fan. The other two fan groups that contributed to the anthology were the Grand Alliance for Nora Aunor Philippines (GANAP), established in 1990 and known for its charitable and philanthropic projects; and the US-based International Circle of Online Noranians (ICON), founded in 2000, with a network of more than 600 members by 2005.

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